

It was too late to protect  
my heart, she's had it  
all along...



*Connected by  
Stars*

Book Two in  
The Connected  
Series



Sophia Belle

# Connected by Stars

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*Book Two in The Connected Series*

# **Sophia Belle**

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# Also by Sophia Belle

The Connected Series

[Connected by Souls](#)

*To my three beautiful children, never settle for anything less  
than fireworks*

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# Blurb

*It's too late to protect my heart, she's had it all along.*

*Bella*

I've been in love with my older brother's best friend my whole life. I've hidden my emotions from everyone I love, waiting for him to look at me the way he does in my dreams. His dimpled grin is given out like candy to every girl who's lucky enough to get one night with him because that's all that he gives. Until one night, I let my guard down, and he sees how I truly feel. I see something briefly flash in his eyes that I've longed to see. Would one night be enough, or deep down, has he been waiting for me, too?

*Maverick*

I've been fiercely protective of her for as long as I can remember, keeping guys away that I knew didn't deserve her. I told myself it was my job to protect my younger sister and her best friend. I've shoved down any thoughts of her and buried myself in other women where it was safer because none of them could shatter my heart like she could. My walls start to crack when I catch a glimpse of the desire in her eyes. She

holds all the power now, and I'm helpless as I realize it's too late to protect my heart, she's had it all along.

# Playlist



Not Like I'm in Love with You- Lauren Weintraub  
...Ready for It? - Taylor Swift  
Curiosity - Bryce Savage  
You've Created a Monster - Bohnes  
All Of The Girls You Loved Before - Taylor Swift  
Dandelions - Ruth B.  
Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money) - Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money  
Dangerous Woman - Ariana Grande  
Good Day - Acoustic, Jake Scott  
Always Vibin' - Kash'd Out  
Dangerous Hands - Austin Giorgio  
Perfect - Ed Sheeran  
Photography - Ed Sheeran  
October: Written in the Stars - Tim Myers  
This - Megan McKenna  
Earned It (Fifty Shades of Grey) - The Weekend  
Blue Eyed Constellation - Max McNown  
everything everywhere always - elijah woods  
Lose Control - Teddy Swims

Spotify link - [spoti.fi/3S0WmHw](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3S0WmHw)



*You don't find love, it finds you. It's got a little bit to do with destiny, fate, and what's written in the stars.*

— Anais Nin

# Chapter One

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## Bella

PUTTING THE LENS CAP ON MY SONY, I SET THE CAMERA DOWN on my lap. This is my favorite time on the beach when everyone is still at home getting up for the day. I'm one of the few out here as I take in the endless ocean view. I arrived here at dark, just before sunrise, and it still takes my breath away to see it go from dark to light with beautiful colors filling the sky. I'll never stop being in awe every time I see it.

I shade my eyes and see Maverick paddle back in for the day. Since I was little, I've been filming him and my brother surf. My brother, Noah, only does it occasionally now, but it's part of Maverick's soul. He doesn't feel whole if he's not in the water surfing. The ocean calls him just like my camera calls me.

I got my first camera at ten, and I've been addicted ever since. My passion has turned into a career over the past couple of years. Since I started filming for Maverick's surf shop, word has gotten out around our small town, and I've picked up several more clients that I shoot on a regular basis for their social media platforms.

My brother is one of my biggest clients as a best-selling author, but since he wants to remain anonymous, I have to keep quiet that I work for him. He has me take care of all his social media accounts and any advertising he needs for his books. I've learned to get creative with shooting the reels because he doesn't want to be in them. His books have a lot of spice in the love scenes, and the bottom line is sex sells. I do a lot of romantic yet sexy footage that the girls love.

You would be amazed how much girls love a mysterious man. Give them an ab shot that makes you want to run your hands along the six-pack, and they can envision whoever they want to. I've talked Maverick into doing a few video shoots for me, keeping his face out of it, and they always go viral. It's hard to keep a secret in a small town like this, but so far, no one has figured out that their local handyman, Noah Bennett, is on the NY Times bestsellers list.

Maverick stands up in the shallow water, and with his board under his arm, he starts to walk to me. I put my sunglasses on to hide my eyes. If God has one favorite in this world, it would be Mav. I've known him my whole life, and I still haven't found one flaw in that perfect body of his.

He walks up to me, grinning, and shakes his head to get some of the water out. His dark blond hair is longer, coming to just below his chin. He likes to be able to pull it into a low bun when he's working on something and doesn't want it to get in the way. The sun and saltwater have given him golden streaks in his hair that most girls pay hundreds of dollars for at the salon.

He anchors his surfboard in the sand and plops down beside me. "Did you get some good footage? The waves were firing today." He grabs a bottle of water and chugs it. I watch his throat move as he drinks. Water slides down his neck, and I want to catch it with my tongue, knowing it would be a delicious mixture of salt and him. I don't know what he tastes like, but I'm sure even the most desirable dessert couldn't compare. "Hello? Earth to Bell?"

I jerk my eyes back up to his. Emerald-green eyes stare back at me in amusement. "Sorry." I adjust my sunglasses, making sure he can't see my eyes. "I was distracted and thinking about work. Yeah, I got some amazing footage. Your fan club is going to love it." I roll my eyes behind my sunglasses at the girls who comment below his videos. If I see one more *marry me, I'm in love*—I'm going to puke.

"Fan club?" He grins that award-winning smile at me, showing off his dimples. Damn, those dimples. "I can't help that the ladies like what they see. The comments help with the



views, which in turn helps with sales. I've almost doubled my monthly sales since you started filming. Hiring you was the best idea ever." He nudges his shoulder to mine.

"I know it was. I'm damn good at what I do."

"Yes, you are. That's why I hired the best." He winks at me, and my stomach does a little flip.

He gets up and holds out his hand. I put my camera down and place my hand in his as he pulls me up, causing me to lose my balance in the sand. His hand goes to my waist to steady me.

"Watch the sand. I know it can get in the way." He teases me as his eyes dance with laughter.

"Very funny. You should take your comedy act on the road." I feel his hands still on my waist, causing heat to course through my body. I look up at him and see something flash briefly in his eyes. Before I can figure it out, he breaks eye contact and steps away, leaving my skin hot where his hands had been. He runs a hand through his hair and avoids my eye contact.

"I should head back and shower. I open today, and I've got a lot of inventory to go through." He starts to put his things back in his bag. I bend down to put my camera away and grab my beach bag. He shakes out the beach towel before handing it to me.

"Thanks. I'll download the footage today and work on the edits this afternoon." I watch him grab his board as we walk back to our vehicles.

"Sounds good." He straps his board on top of his black four-door Jeep Wrangler that is parked next to mine. I bought his old Jeep Wrangler from him last year when he upgraded his. Mine is a white two-door, and I named her Pearl. The white glitters in the sun at the right angle, and the color reminds me of an ocean pearl. I told Mav he could keep the name Roxy for his new one. I can't help but get stripper pole images in my head when I hear it. I automatically want to say,

Foxy Roxy. He says it's after the girl's surf brand, but I'm not sure I believe that's the reason.

"Is Luna working today after school?" I set my bags in my passenger seat and turn to him. Luna's my younger sister and helps Mav at the store when she doesn't have dance class. She begged him to give her a job in exchange for a surfboard she really wants. When she's not dancing and in school, she tags along with Noah and Mav when they surf. Dance is her first love, but surfing comes in a close second. In a way, they both are a form of art and beautiful to watch.

I tried surfing, and after being pulled under and feeling like I had a near-death experience, I've stuck to just filming it on the beach. I'll do the occasional longboard or boogie board on the smaller wave days, which is a lot of fun, but I'll leave the bigger waves to them. I prefer not to feel like I'm being tossed and turned into the black abyss.

"She's coming in after school today." He finishes strapping his board and turns to me. "She's about saved up for her board, so I'm going to have to bribe her with something else to keep her coming in." He laughs. "She's a hard worker and really helps me out."

"I'm sure you won't have to bribe her with much. I think she enjoys working there just as much as you do. Her surf want list is probably a mile long, so you may have her until she graduates high school."

"Let's hope so." He grins at me before opening his driver's door. "Thanks again for filming today. Call me when you get the edits done. I can't wait to see them." He waves goodbye and pulls out of the parking lot.

Sighing, I watch him go and get in my Jeep.

I drive through town with the top down, letting the wind blow through my hair. It's a beautiful March day, not a cloud in the sky. The temperature is already getting warm as the sun heats my skin. I've lived in Florida my whole life and wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I've traveled some for my work, getting odd jobs here and there, but I always look forward to coming home.

I pull up to my apartment, which I share with my best friend, Sophia. Our moms are best friends and were pregnant together with us, just like they were with Noah and Maverick. I always tell her we were best friends in the womb, connecting to each other even then. We've been inseparable since before we could walk.

I see her sitting at the kitchen island, drinking coffee when I walk in. We both love to decorate, so we've had fun getting our apartment just the way we like. It's an airy, beachy feel with lots of white and light blue colors. We have wooden floors throughout with an open kitchen-living room concept. A huge plush white sectional sits along the back wall with soft blue pillows and throws facing a TV that Noah and Maverick helped mount for us. We both love to read and have books lining shelves in various areas around the place.

She looks up at me and smiles when she sees me. "How did the filming go?" Sophia and I couldn't look more different. While I have blond hair and blue eyes, Sophia has long black hair and beautiful green eyes. She's stunning with her 5'8 frame and toned legs that go on for days. She will make someone very happy one day.

I'm not too far behind her at 5'7, and with my mom owning a yoga studio in town, we both are very fit and lean. We have the guys lining up for us in the small town, but no one has made us feel that *it* factor. We both date a lot, but we've made a pact to never settle. We want the hot, passionate love that you read about in my brother's books. He's recently found it, and we refuse to settle for less.

"It went great. The waves were firing just like Mav said they would be. You know how he studies the weather patterns and currents. I swear he was a merman in another life with the way he can sense the waves." I set my bags down on the table and walk to the coffee pot to get some caffeine in me.

"Yeah, he's been able to do that since he was little." She laughs.

"How's the grading coming along?" I point to the papers in front of her. Sophia is a second-grade teacher at our local

elementary school in Crystal Isles. It's the same one we all went to when we were little. Luna left not too long ago and is now at the middle school in seventh grade this year.

"I'm almost done. Luckily, it's just second grade, so it's not like I'm grading essays and term papers on a Sunday morning."

"God, could you imagine yourself being a high school teacher? The boys would literally sit there with hard-ons during the whole class." I bust out laughing at the image.

"Oh, my God. They're so horny at that age, it would be awful." She laughs with me. "I always wished I had a hot teacher in college so we could have one of those hot scandalous affairs, but now that I'm the teacher, it's a completely different vibe."

"Mmmmm, the college professor-student thing is a hot fantasy, but I totally get your point being on the other side of it. Younger guys are not our thing. Best to stick with the cute second graders where it's safe."

"Speaking of school," her eyes light up with excitement, "do you remember how much I really wanted kindergarten when I first started teaching, and there were no spots open?"

"Oh my God! You got in, didn't you?"

"I did! They just sent me an email saying a spot has opened up, and it's mine if I want it. I'm going to be a kindergarten teacher next year!" She squeals, and I get up to crush her in a hug.

"I'm so happy for you! I know this has been your dream since you were little."

"You should have been here when I opened the email. We may have gotten our first noise complaint because I'm pretty sure I screamed," she says, laughing.

I wave my hand and dismiss the idea. "Our neighbors love us, and I'm sure they are used to our noise by now." I look at her, beaming with pride. "My best friend is a kindergarten teacher."

“You know how much I love kids, especially that age. They’re so cute and adorable with the things they say. I have all these ideas running through my head, and just the thought of teaching these kids how to read and introducing them to all the books I know they will love.” She gets a dreamy look in her eyes and smiles. “I can’t wait to have one of my own. Down the road, though,” she laughs.

“You’ll make a great mom someday. But I agree, let’s put the kids on hold for a while, at least until you meet Mr. Perfect.” I grin at her above my coffee cup rim.

“Definitely, but if I don’t find Mr. Perfect before I turn thirty, I’m picking him out of a catalog and having a baby with him that way.”

“Maybe they can give us a two-for-one deal?” We bust out laughing. “Can you imagine us asking if they do a BOGO deal on sperm?” Tears fall down my face as I shake with laughter.

“I’ll keep an eye out for coupons, just in case.” We are laughing so hard she can hardly get the words out.

Calming down, I wipe my eyes. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Same.” She smiles at me.

I let her get back to grading and take my camera gear back to my office. We live in a small apartment complex in town and got lucky with our three bedrooms. It’s on the ground level, and our patio has a view of the canal out back. We have a community dock that we can walk to, and most days, you can see a dolphin or manatee swimming by.

I let Sophia have the master bedroom and bathroom in exchange for the smaller bedroom and office. With me working from home, it’s nice to have a quiet place to work.

I get the memory card from my camera and load the footage onto my MacBook Pro. Images of Maverick appear on the screen. I scan through the videos and still shots that I captured. It’s very hard to take a bad picture of him. I don’t even think it’s possible, so I have a ton of footage to work with.

I look through some of the videos to make sure I captured all of his best waves and smile when I see one of him in the air. He's going to love that one.

I get them all uploaded and spend the next hour sorting through the ones I want to edit into reels and photography stills. I stop on one of him that I took. He didn't see me take this one off to the side. He's at the water's edge, looking out at the waves and studying them. I zoomed in on his face and captured the intensity and longing in his beautiful green eyes. You can see his love for the ocean and surfing by the way he looks at the water. I reach out and touch the screen, tracing the lines of his face. I remove my hand and sigh.

I hold my biggest secret close to my heart, and it's killing me the older I get. I think of Sophia and my brother, Noah. Maverick's not only my best friend's older brother but he's been Noah's best friend since birth. What would they do if they knew? I'm the only one who knows that I've been secretly in love with Maverick Alexander Lane my entire life, and my biggest fear is that I'll never feel with anybody the way I feel when I'm around him.

# Chapter Two

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## Maverick

SLIDING THE KEY INTO THE DOOR, I WALK INTO *LANE'S SURF Shack* and turn on the lights. Every time I walk in here, I feel a sense of accomplishment. When my dad told me he wanted to pass it on to me, I jumped at the chance. I've had ideas in my head for a while now on what I wanted to do with the place, and so far, everything has gone according to plan. The business is growing, and I couldn't be happier.

I press my code into the security system and head to the back room. I don't open until ten on Sundays, so I have an hour to go through the new inventory and get some of it tagged and put on the shelves.

My dad opened this store when he and my mom were first married. I practically grew up here. He would let Noah and I come to work with him during the summers to work off new surfboards we had our eyes on. I knew one day I wanted it to be mine.

Over the past year, with Bell's help, we've grown on social media and have doubled our customer base. My end goal is to have a couple more stores along the East Coast and expand the name. With the success Bell is having with her videos, my dream may happen sooner than I thought. Whenever I see her work, I'm in awe of what she can capture and put together in a final edit.

Lately, things have been off between us, and it frustrates the hell out of me. We argue now more than we ever have. I know I'm mostly to blame, but I can't help it. That girl gets under my skin like no other. When I see her with guys that I

know don't deserve her, it's like a burning anger that I can't ignore and usually ends with me saying something and her getting pissed at me for interfering. It's a vicious cycle that I don't know how to break.

Pushing thoughts of her out of my mind, I try to focus on what needs to be done before I open. I make a cup of coffee and open one of the boxes that came in yesterday. I start entering items into the database so when Luna comes in, she can put them out for the customers. Weekends are usually busy for us, with families visiting the beach and tourists checking out the local businesses, so I want to make sure and get these new items out today.

I pick up one of the hats with our new logo and smile. This new company I found is doing a really great job on the printing. Bell is going to love the new design. Without thinking, I set one aside to give to her later. I know she loves to shade her face when she's filming out in the sun. I log the t-shirts next and have the box almost empty when I hear the front door open.

"Hey, Mav, it's just me. Dad just dropped me off." Luna comes walking in the back room with two smoothies in her hand. "I stopped to get a smoothie before coming here, and your mom made one for you, too," she grins and hands me the drink.

"Thanks, Lunabug," I smile back at her and take the smoothie. Even though she's Noah and Bell's younger sister, she's always been like one to me, too. Nothing could have surprised me more than when Noah told me his mom was pregnant and he was becoming a brother again at sixteen. With such an age gap, she is doted on by everyone and has probably heard more than she needed to, growing up with two older teenagers in the house. Noah and I taught her to surf at a young age, and she's been addicted ever since.

"How were the waves today? I really wanted to go, but Ava slept over last night, and we stayed up way too late watching movies. We watched this really scary one that freaked us out so bad that we couldn't sleep for hours when it



was over. Don't tell Mom, though, 'cause we probably weren't supposed to watch it."

She gives me a serious face, and I try not to smile. With her brunette hair and green eyes, she looks nothing like Bell, but I can see the similarities. I remember Bell and Sophia doing the same thing at her age.

"I promise not to say a word." I put a hand over my heart and try to look serious.

"Good, because we plan on watching part two next weekend at Ava's house."

"Why would you want to watch the second one if the first one scared you so bad," I ask, laughing.

"Cause it's fun, duh." She laughs and takes a drink of her smoothie. "Is this all the new inventory?"

"Yeah, it just came in yesterday. I'm about done entering it into the system if you want to start hanging up the shirts out front and putting the hats on the rack. I'll open up the shop and get the register going before finishing up back here."

"Sounds good." She takes a handful of the shirts and some hangers and brings them up front with her.

I take a drink of my smoothie and smile. Damn, my mom can make a good one. My mom owns Down to Earth Smoothies in town, so in a way, I've had the best of both worlds. My dad had all the cool surf gear, and my mom had the smoothies and ice cream. As a kid, it doesn't get better than that.

I walk to the front and make sure the open sign is lit before turning on the computer and getting the register going. Glancing at my watch, I see it's almost ten. I'm here all day today, but we close early on Sundays. I'm going to try to get out of here on time tonight so I can swing by Noah's parents' house for dinner. They have a family dinner every Sunday, and I pop over when I can, especially if his mom, Sage, is making my favorite meal. I can never resist her enchiladas.

"Your mom still planning on enchiladas tonight?" I look over at Luna and see her busy displaying the hats.

“She is. Are you coming? I know they’re your fave. Noah and Emma will be there too.”

“I’m planning on it. You know I can’t resist your mom’s enchiladas and Noah’s margaritas.” Noah can make a damn good margarita.

“Good. Tonight is Uno night, too, so be prepared to get your butt kicked.” She grins at me and puts a shirt on a hanger.

“You wish. I’ve been playing Uno longer than you, so you might want to practice after work before I get there.”

“Whatever. It’s not the years that matter but the person’s skill.”

“Well, luckily, I have both.” I tug on one of her braids as I go by.

“Ha Ha.” She rolls her eyes at me and tries not to smile. I laugh as I head back to finish up the inventory.

The rest of the morning passes by quickly. We get swamped during lunch hour, and by the time Jax, Luna’s dad, comes to pick her up at two, it’s settled down enough for me to grab something to eat. I put a sign on the door letting customers know I’ll be back in twenty and lock up before crossing the street to the deli.

I love working in the downtown area of our small town. Everything is within walking distance. My mom’s smoothie place and Noah’s mom’s yoga studio, BellaLuna, are a few streets over. That’s actually how they met. My mom came in to take a class, and she and Sage were instant friends. They even timed having kids together so we would grow up close. I guess they got lucky with having two boys first and then two girls.

I walk into the deli and smile when I recognize the owner, Miss Mary, behind the counter.

“Why, Miss Mary, I do believe you get prettier every time I see you.” The seventy-year-old blushes and swats her hand at me.

“Maverick, you sure know how to make an old lady feel better. How are you, dear? Business going good?”

“I’m doing good. Business has been busy all day. I snuck over here as soon as I could to get one of your chicken wraps.”

“You want your usual on it?” She asks, grabbing the wrap and piling on the grilled chicken.

“There’s no other way to have it,” I grin at her. “So, how have you been? When are you going to retire so you and Mr. Anderson can chill on the beach all day and drink pina coladas?”

“You know I can’t get that man to slow down. He loves this place, so as long as he’s working here, I’ll be by his side like I’ve always been.”

I swear the Andersons have been here since my parents were little. It’s sweet, though, how they’re still together and love this place so much.

“Tell him I said hi when you see him.”

“I will. He ran home to get something and will be back soon. How is Noah and Emma’s wedding planning going along? I hear they’re getting married soon. Your mom and Sage must be in heaven with all this planning.” She rolls up the wrap and puts it in a bag for me.

“You would think they were professional wedding planners with all the binders and folders they have.” Laughing, I take the bag she hands me. Even though they want a small, intimate wedding, they decided on a bigger reception so a lot of people from town could be there. “You should be getting your invite to the reception soon, and you better make sure to save me a dance.” I wink at her and follow her over to the register.

“I’m sure your dance card will be filled. One of these days, I’ll be dancing at your wedding.” I grab a protein bar and a bag of chips for her to ring up with my wrap.

“Don’t hold your breath.” I laugh and swipe my card to pay for the order.

“Your girl is out there. Just follow your heart, and it will lead you to her.” She hands me my receipt as thoughts of a blue-eyed beauty enter my mind. Where the hell did that come

from? I tell Miss Mary goodbye and walk back to my store. It's only because I've been fighting with her lately, and she's on my mind. That's got to be why Bell entered my mind. I dismiss the thought and sit down to eat my lunch before it gets busy again.

\* \* \*

I PULL up to Noah's parents' house a little after six. I had a rush of customers in the late afternoon before closing and made a few big sales, so I'm in a really good mood and excited to relax with a margarita and some good Mexican food. I grab the hat for Bell before going inside. Nala and Hurley come running over to greet me.

Hurley is Sage and Jax's golden retriever and Nala's dad. Nala belongs to Noah, and unlike Hurley, this golden is a ball of energy, but I love her to death. Bending down, I scratch behind their ears. "Hey, you two, having fun playing?" I get rewarded with kisses from them both before they bound off to play again. Laughing, I stand up and walk over to the kitchen.

Noah's making margaritas at the kitchen island. Perfect timing. I slap Noah on the back as I walk up behind him. "Hey man, how's my almost-married friend doing? God, I still can't believe one of us will be married soon."

Noah turns his head and grins. "Well, believe it. May can't come soon enough. I thought you would show up tonight, so I brought extras." He hands me a glass, and I take a sip.

"Mmmm. So good. Where is everyone?" I look around at the deserted kitchen.

"Everyone's outback already. Mom has the enchiladas in the oven now, so we're just relaxing by the pool. I came in to make a second batch. We got here early to go over some wedding planning. I would happily marry Emma in my sweats in the living room, but I want to make this day special for her. I know it's going to be tough without her parents here."

"Yeah, that's going to be rough. We'll all be there for her, though, and make this the best damn wedding our small town has ever seen."

“I’m glad the wedding is small and intimate, but the reception will be talked about in this small town for years to come.” He laughs and clinks his glass with mine.

“Damn, straight it will. I love that you’re having it at a hotel on the beach, so I can just ride my drunk ass up the elevator to my room after it’s over.”

“That’s the plan for all our guests,” he laughs. “They just renovated the whole hotel, and it’s beautiful inside. Most locals will probably Uber home, but we love the idea of having a suite upstairs to go to before we leave for our honeymoon the next day. It will be easy for the out-of-town guests, too.”

I help him load the drinks on the tray. “Have you decided where you’re going on your honeymoon?”

“We just booked our flights and resort stay last night.” He grins at me like a kid on Christmas. “Two weeks in the Maldives. Wait until you see this place. We have a whole little hut to ourselves right on the water. There are even some see-through spots on the floor to see the fish swim by. I can’t wait.”

“You guys will have a blast. I can’t wait to see the video footage and pictures.” I open the door for Noah as we go outside to the deck. I see everyone on the outdoor couch and smile. This has always been my second family, and I love them like my own. Sage gets up to hug me.

“Mav, I’m glad you came. I knew if *I bake it, he will come.*” She says, laughing.

I hug her back and laugh. “You know the way to my heart.”

“Have a seat, Maverick. We were talking about the wedding party and the pairing up.” Mimi gives me a smile and gestures toward the empty seat by Bell. Noah’s grandparents, Mimi and Papaw, added an apartment above Sage and Jax’s garage. Both are in their seventies, but you would never know it. Mimi takes a drink from the tray and hands one to Papaw before taking her own.

Emma comes over, and I pick her up in a hug. “Hey, beautiful. How’s my favorite girl doing?” I couldn’t be happier for Noah when he found Emma. I’ve never seen a stronger connection than the two of them have. I still like to tease her about how I tried to hit on her before I knew who she was to Noah. Plus, I know it gets under Noah’s skin a little, which makes it fun.

Noah rolls his eyes, and I laugh as I set Emma down. “Hi Mav. I’m glad you came tonight since you’re in the wedding party too.” She sits beside Noah and curls against him as he hugs her tight.

“I’m not *just* in the wedding party. I have the most important part being best man and all.” I grin at Noah and take a seat next to Bell. Her vanilla shampoo hits my senses, and I take a deep breath.

“I see that my mom’s enchiladas lured you to us tonight,” Bell says, sipping her margarita.

“They did. How did the clips turn out.?” I look into her blue eyes and ignore the way my stomach starts to feel funny.

“I got some really good ones. I’ll show you after dinner. You’re going to love them. Is that the new hats?” She points to the hat I’m holding.

I look down and realize I’m still holding it. “Yeah, they came in yesterday. This one is for you. I know you love to wear them while you film. I thought you would love the new design.” I hand it to her.

“Thanks. I love it. These are going to go fast on social media. I’ll have to take some pictures and post them later this week to promote it.” She puts the hat on and turns to me. “How does it look?”

My mouth goes dry, and my stomach does that damn little flip again, seeing her in a hat with my logo design. What the hell is wrong with me today? “It, uh, looks good. It suits you.”

Bell could wear a garbage bag and still look amazing. I take a sip of my drink to try and alleviate the dryness. She looks at me with those ocean blues like she’s trying to figure

out what I'm thinking. I break eye contact with her and see Emma looking at us with a smile on her face. Feeling uncomfortable, I take another sip. At this rate, I'll be drunk by the time we play cards.

“So, before you arrived, Maverick, we were discussing the wedding party. We have you and Skye as the best man and maid of honor, and then Noah has Cole and his cousin James as the other two groomsmen. I have Bella and Sophia as my two bridesmaids.”

Emma pauses to take a sip of her drink. “At the wedding, we'll do the traditional order where you will walk back down the aisle with Skye once the ceremony is done, but I wanted to switch it up at the reception for the bridal party dance. Skye and Cole will be dancing, James and Sophia, and then I'm having you and Bella dance together.” She smiles at Bell and I.

“Okay,” I say slowly. I look at her, grinning at me, and try to figure out what is going on in that head of hers. “It's your wedding, so just tell me what to do. I guess it makes sense because Skye and Cole are married.” I look over at Bell, and she's studying Emma as well. It's not just me, then. She feels something is up, too.

“Exactly. It's because they're married.” She beams at the both of us. “Have you guys thought about your dates? Will you be bringing anyone?” Shit, I guess with all the wedding planning and work, I haven't thought about me having to find a date.

“Are you asking Alex, Bella? He seems like a nice guy and is very into you?” Her mom asks her.

I hear Bell sigh next to me. “No, he wanted more, and I'm just not feeling it. I wouldn't want to lead him on.”

“So Alex finally got too boring for you?” I can't help but smile. “Never saw that one coming.” Amusement fills my eyes as she turns to look at me.

“At least he had more than two brain cells, which is more than you usually end up with.”

“Oh, they definitely have more than two brain cells. They choose me, don’t they?” I laugh as she rolls her eyes at me.

“That’s debatable,” she mumbles, causing me to laugh harder. She turns to look at Emma. “I’ll find a date before the wedding. I’m not going alone, that’s for sure.”

A knot forms in my gut about putting up with some random guy oogling Bell all night. “I’ll find one, too, I guess.” Weddings can be tricky. I’ll have to find the right girl who won’t get all sappy and clingy with me. I don’t want her to get crazy ideas in her head and start envisioning our wedding. I shudder, remembering Haley from my cousin James’ wedding.

“You’re thinking about Haley, aren’t you?” I look over at Bell, and she’s trying not to laugh.

“I still have nightmares about that reception. It didn’t help that she caught the bouquet. It was like I had a second shadow draped over me all night long. I could barely take a piss without her wanting to come in the bathroom with me.”

Bell’s laughter rings out, and I can’t help but laugh too. “Yeah, my date was no better that night. He got wasted and couldn’t keep his hands off of me. I finally called him an Uber and left him on the sidewalk to fend for himself.”

“I remember. Who do you think shoved his drunk ass in the car? He might have hit his head rather hard going in. Oops.”

“You didn’t.” Her eyes go wide as she covers her mouth to stifle her laugh.

“He was an asshole and deserved it.” I shrug my shoulders. I don’t know what upset me more that night, the fact that this guy thought it was okay to put his hands on Bell like that or the fact that she didn’t see what an asshole he was from the very beginning. She’s always been too nice and tries to see the good in everyone, but I know ninety percent of the guys only want one thing from her. I lose my mind when I see her with guys and can smell their bullshit a mile away.

“You said something to him, too, didn’t you?” She tilts her head and peers at me from beneath her long lashes.



I look around and see everyone talking in small groups, not paying attention to Bell and I's conversation. I know she gets pretty upset with me when I interfere, and I'm debating on telling her the truth. I don't want her getting mad at me again in front of everyone. I look at her and gauge her mood. She doesn't seem angry. She seems more... grateful or surprised? I can never tell what she's thinking. She hides her emotions too well from me.

"I might have said something along the lines of *If you ever contact Bell again, that bump on the head that you're moaning about will be the least of your worries.*"

She giggles, and it's the best sound ever. I release the breath I was holding, knowing she's not mad at me. "Now it all makes sense why he never contacted me again. Just so you know, I would have handled him again if he did reach out." She lifts her eyebrows at me.

"I have no doubt about that." I lift my hands up and grin.

"Thank you, though, for having my back," she says softly.

I stare into those blues, and my mind goes blank. I blink to try and remember what we were talking about. I break eye contact and run a hand through my hair, trying to gather my thoughts. "I, uh, I'll always have your back. You know that." I sneak a glance at her again and, for a brief moment, get a glimpse of something in her eyes that makes my pulse race and my body get aroused. It's gone before I can figure it out, but my body clearly remembers. What the fuck. I shift uncomfortably in my seat and look anywhere but at the one sitting next to me.

"Everyone ready to eat?" Sage asks, getting up. "My timer just went off, so dinner's done." Thank fuck, I'm saved by the bell, literally. I get up with everyone and try not to appear as confused and rattled as I feel. What did I just see behind those blues? And, more importantly, why did my body respond to it?

## Chapter Three

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### Bella

I GLANCE NERVOUSLY AT MAVERICK AS WE SIT DOWN. HE'S across from me, and I can tell he's looking anywhere but at me. I let my guard down. I couldn't help it. Normally, when he interferes with my dating, it pisses me off. I know deep down the real reason it pisses me off is because I know he's right about all of these guys not being the one for me. I get even more pissed off because he's the reason why. None of these guys make me feel even the tiniest amount of desire compared to how I feel when Maverick steps into a room.

When he told me what he said to Trevor, my date, I couldn't help but feel like he did it for a different reason other than the usual overbearing, protective older brother vibe that he gives off. I could sense the anger, but it felt...different. I felt...possessiveness from him. My body instantly became aroused, and I let the desire show briefly in my eyes. I know he saw it. I can tell by the way he looked shocked and then uncomfortable. What I can't tell is if that is a good sign or a bad one.

I take the enchilada plate from Mav, and our fingers brush. Heat zaps my body, and our eyes briefly meet before he looks away and quickly removes his hand. Great, now it's going to be awkward between us. Way to go, Bella. I've hidden my feelings for years, and one slip-up ruins it all. Maybe it's best this way. He will run and distance himself from me, and I'll get over him in time. At least, that's what I've been telling myself for years.

“How’s your book coming along, Emma?” I need to focus on something other than the green-eyed sex god sitting across from me.

Her eyes light up at the mention of her book. “It’s almost finished. I just need to find the right illustrator to bring it to life. Noah’s been helping me a lot with all the self-publishing stuff.” She looks over at Noah with love shining in her eyes. He smiles at her with a look that I yearn for. I want what they have. A passion and love so powerful it consumes you and sets your soul on fire. I sigh. I think I’ve been reading way too much of my brother’s romance books. Not everyone gets their happy ending. I glance at Maverick and see him watching me. He quickly looks away and busies himself with eating.

“I can’t wait to see it all put together. Sophia is going to put copies in her classroom for the students. She’s excited that you agreed to do a book signing for the kids and read for them one day,” I say, taking a bite of food.

“Agreed? Well, that’s one way to put it. She basically told me I have to even though I don’t have the book done. I can’t even think that far ahead. It’s still so surreal that I’m actually doing this.” She gives a small laugh.

“She’s just excited for you and believes in you. We all do. She probably wants you first for a book signing so she can brag about it.” I laugh and take a sip of my drink.

“It’s going to be a best seller—I know it.” Noah squeezes her hand and grins at her.

“Thank you guys for believing in me.” Her eyes fill with tears. “I’m sorry.” She dabs her eyes with her napkin. “I’ve been such a mess lately and cry at a drop of a hat. I’m just so damn happy.”

“You deserve all this happiness, Emma, and more,” my dad says, smiling at her. “Enjoy it, sweetie.”

Nodding, Emma wipes her eyes again while Noah whispers something in her ear, causing her to blush and laugh.

“I can’t believe only five weeks are left before the wedding. Skye and Cole, come in next week, right? For dress

shopping and tux fitting?” Mimi asks Emma.

“They’ll be here Wednesday until Sunday. The girls and I are on a mission to find both a wedding dress and bridesmaid dresses in that time. I know it’s cutting it short, but Skye and Cole already took so much time off to be with me during the accident and then again for the wedding, so we’re trying to cram in shopping and bachelorette and bachelor parties in four days.” She says, laughing. “I know I could have dress-shopped right away, but I can’t imagine not doing it with Skye. I’ll find the right dress. I can feel it.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want to do a quick flight to Vegas or somewhere fun like Barbados for your bachelor party?” Maverick asks Noah. “Golfing and a bonfire doesn’t seem like a grand send-off to married life.”

“We’re sure,” Noah says, laughing. “We decided we just want to spend the day doing something fun with our best friends and then meet up later for a bonfire. Nothing too crazy. I have no interest in sitting in some sleazy strip club looking at women who are not remotely close to what I have beside me.” Emma blushes up at Noah.

“Not everyone likes tits shoved in their face,” I say, looking at Maverick. I glance at Luna, forgetting she’s here, and see her talking to Papaw, thankfully.

“Well, that would depend on what tits are in my face.” He gives me a heated glare. He’s definitely annoyed at something. Feeling my irritation rise, I start to respond, but Emma cuts in.

“I, for one, am looking forward to bottomless mimosas with the girls at brunch and then a relaxing day at the spa.” I break my eye contact with Maverick and look at Emma. It’s hard not to smile at her excitement.

“I’m looking forward to it too. I need a day to clear my head and relax. I’ll be in heaven after bottomless mimosas and a good massage.”

“I’m excited about the bonfire too. Noah’s already collecting firewood for it.” She laughs. “It will be fun to have both parties end the night together. I can’t imagine celebrating

any other way than having all the people that mean the most to me in one place.”

“I’m looking forward to it too, Em.” Maverick’s eyes go soft as he smiles at her. “I think having everyone there together is a great idea.” His eyes light up with an idea. “Hey, maybe you should do the lap dance then. You could give Noah a little show for his bachelor party.”

Emma starts laughing, and Noah cuts in. “Oh, she’ll be giving me a show, alright, but it will be for my eyes only after everyone has left. There’s no way she’s wearing what I have in mind for anyone else to see.”

Emma’s face goes bright red as something unspoken flashes between them. I start to get all hot and bothered, just feeling the sexual energy between them.

“Fair enough,” Maverick says, laughing. “It was worth a try.”

Maverick loves to say things to get under Noah’s skin. They’ve always had this banter between them, even when we were little. I know deep down, though, that Maverick is as loyal as they come, even if he does come off as some man-whore type. He’s slept with a ton of women, I have no doubt about that, but he’s always respectful and never leads anyone on. The girls that sleep with him know where he stands from the beginning. I can’t say I blame them. One night with Maverick would be better than nothing at all. Unfortunately, I’ve been put in the *little sister* category and can’t seem to find my way out.

I HELP Mom clear the plates after everyone is done eating. Emma helps as we load the dishwasher while Noah gets the table ready for cards. I put the last dish in the dishwasher before heading to the bathroom before the game starts. I want to freshen up my hair and lipgloss. I walk down the hall, glancing at my phone to see how my latest reel is doing for Maverick and smack right into hard muscles, dropping my phone.

“Woah.” Maverick catches me before I fall. Grabbing his biceps to steady myself, I savor the feel of him beneath my

fingertips.

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.” I look up and see him staring intently at me. His hands searing into my skin from the contact. He’s so close I can smell his coconut and saltwater smell. He’s always smelled like the ocean to me. My eyes search his for any clue as to what he’s thinking.

For one brief moment, I let myself pretend he’s mine and that we snuck off to kiss. I glance at his soft lips and want more than anything to taste them. I bite my lip to stop the moan. I look back up at him, and my breath hitches at the heated stare I’m met with.

“Don’t,” he says quietly. His eyes going a darker green.

I blink, trying to bring myself back to the present.

“Don’t what?” I whisper.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

My heart starts to beat out of my chest. “Don’t look at you like what?”

“Like you want more.”

I feel my defenses coming back up to protect my heart. “The only thing I want is for you to move so I can go to the bathroom.” I remove my hands from his arms, and he lets go of me. I bend down to pick up my phone, blinking back the tears that start to form. Standing up, I brush past him. He grabs my arm, but I don’t turn around. He can’t see me cry, not like this.

“Bell, shit, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Just go, please. I know where I stand. You’ve made it very clear.” I walk to the bathroom and close the door. I lean my head against it, holding back the tears.

“Fuck.” I hear him say in a frustrated voice before he walks away.

Why did I let myself think for one second that he might feel the same? I let him see my desire for him, and he quickly

shut it down. I'm such an idiot. He's got girls jumping on him everywhere he goes. He doesn't want or need me. To him, I'm just the annoying *little sister* who has a crush on him now.

I walk to the sink and try to blink back the tears so no one can tell I'm upset. How am I going to finish out the night now? After what happened, I can't sit beside him for another two hours. Maybe I should go. I dab my eyes with a tissue and reapply my lip gloss, trying not to look like my heart just took a beating again. I've hidden my emotions before, and I can do it again.

I take off the hat I'm still wearing and finger-comb my blond waves. I'll wear the hat while filming, but right now, I'm not in the mood to have anything reminding me of Maverick on my body. Finishing up, I walk back out, ready to make up an excuse about needing to go home and work.

I see Noah in the kitchen making another batch of drinks. He looks up at me and smiles.

"There you are. I'm almost done making another batch. Mav had to leave. He said something about having to work early in the morning but that he would see you on Wednesday for your usual meeting and see the new footage then."

"Okay. Sounds good." I take the drink he hands me. Maverick left. He didn't want to face me any more than I wanted to face him. I sigh and take a drink. Wednesday is going to be unbearable. How will I ever look him in the face again now that he knows I feel that way about him?

"Ready for Uno?" Noah picks up the tray, and I follow him, helping him with the door.

"Can't wait." I lie. At least I can drown my sorrows in tequila tonight. I take another sip before sitting down at the table with my family.

# Chapter Four

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## Maverick

I LEAVE NOAH'S PARENTS' HOUSE AND HEAD STRAIGHT TO THE bar. I turn the air up in my jeep, hoping to calm this heat inside me. My thoughts race inside my mind about what happened this evening. I wasn't imagining the look in her eyes the first time on the couch. I thought I saw the desire in them, but there was no mistaking the heat in her eyes in the hallway.

She wants me—there's no denying that. If she were anybody else, I would have pushed her against the wall and taken that lip she bit and devoured it. But she's Bell. Noah's fucking little sister. She's not a one-night stand and deserves better. She may think she wants me, but I'm no good for her. I can't give her what she needs.

I rub the ache in my chest. I hurt her by telling her not to look at me that way. I know she took it as a rejection, but the truth is, in that moment, I wanted her just as much, maybe even more. It's better this way. If she thinks I don't want her, she can move on and find someone who can give her more than a night. I've never been able to give a girl more than that, and it's served me well. We both get what we want. No attachments, no commitments, and no chance of anyone getting hurt.

Why, then, does my heart fucking hurt so much right now? I rub the ache again and push any thoughts out of my head. I need an escape tonight to forget about her. I'll feel better in the morning, and by Wednesday, she'll be over it. We can forget it ever happened.



I turn off the engine and head inside a bar outside of town. Usually, if I go outside of our small town, there's a better chance of finding someone new I don't know. I walk inside and look around. It's not very packed on Sundays, but it will only take one to erase my thoughts of her. I spot a few blonds in the corner but dismiss that right away. They're too similar in looks. I need someone that won't remind me of her. I see a pretty brunette by herself at the bar. Perfect.

I make my way over and grin at her, making sure to show her my dimples, knowing girls can't resist them.

"Is this seat taken?" I ask, pointing to the stool next to her.

She looks up and smiles at me. She takes me in, and I can tell she likes what she sees.

"No, it's all yours. I have to warn you, though, I'm not very good company tonight. I just came here to drown my sorrows." She nods at her drink.

"Now, why would a beautiful girl like you need to drown your sorrows?" I sit down and signal the bartender over.

"I just found out my boyfriend cheated on me."

"What an asshole."

She laughs and takes a drink. "Exactly, what an asshole."

The bartender comes over, and I order her another drink and get a beer for me.

"Well, tonight is your lucky night because I'm here to cheer you up." I take a sip of the beer that the bartender set in front of me.

"Is that so? And how do you propose to do that?" Her eyes roam my body before meeting mine, the hunger in them evident. This is going to be easier than I thought. She won't even need the small talk. I decide to go the blunt route.

"Since I don't do relationships, there's no worry about getting hurt with me. The only thing you'll be worrying about is how many times can your body actually survive an orgasm."

Her lips part, and her eyes go a darker shade of blue. Why does she have to have blue eyes? I immediately push the thought out of my head.

“They do say that the quickest way to get over someone is to be under someone else.” She runs her finger over the rim of her drink.

“Exactly. You need to forget about the asshole for one night, and I can help with that. It’s as simple as that.”

“What did you have in mind.”

I stand up and throw some money on the bar for our drinks.

“Follow me.” I hold my hand out to her, and she hesitates slightly before she takes it. I try not to let myself think about the fact that her touch does nothing for me.

We go outside, and she’s already running her hands along my stomach. Not wanting to wait any longer to ease this ache in my chest, I pull her to the side of the building.

“Let’s start here.” It’s deserted on this side of the building, and we’re hidden in the shadows. Her back hits the side of the building as her hands go under my shirt, touching my stomach. She moans as her hands explore my abs. Her touch feels all wrong.

She brings her hands up and threads them in my hair, bringing my mouth to hers. Her tongue quickly finds mine as she hungrily kisses me. I hear her moan again. I go on automatic and kiss her back, trying to find the spark I felt earlier at dinner. Her hands go to the front of my pants, rubbing her hands against me. She breaks the kiss to look at me.

“What’s wrong?” She asks, looking confused.

“What do you mean?” I try and kiss her again, but she turns her head.

“You’re not even hard yet. With all that talk in there, I expected you to be ready to *make me forget*, remember?”

“This has never happened before.” I shake my head and try to will myself to get aroused with her. “Just give me a second.” I kiss her again and put her leg around me, hoping that the contact will spark something in me. I kiss her neck, and a light floral scent hits me. Vanilla smells better—my mind screams at me. I lift my head and back away. I must look crazy with the confused look on my face. Frustrated, I run a hand over my face to try and compose my emotions.

She fixes her dress and gives me a pity smile. I don’t want the fucking pity smile. I’ve done this a million times and know I’m fucking good at it.

“Whatever it is that made you come here, you really need to figure it out. I wanted to forget tonight, but whatever you’re trying to forget by being with me has a stronger hold on you than you think. I hope you figure it out.” She gives me a small smile before walking away.

I stare after her, unable to process what just happened. I’ve never had trouble getting hard. I’ve basically been a walking hard-on since I was twelve. Not once have I ever *not* been able to please a woman. What the hell has Bell done to me? One glimpse at the desire in her eyes, and now I’m ruined for other women? I close my eyes and only see her. I can smell her vanilla shampoo and remember how badly I wanted to take her bottom lip from her teeth and suck it. I start getting hard and open my eyes, glancing down.

“Now you want to wake up? Seriously? Where were you when I needed you two minutes ago?” I get my keys out of my pocket and walk to my Jeep. This can’t be happening to me. I start the engine and pull out of the parking lot. I’ve been reduced to cold showers. I’ve got to find a way to push through this and get her out of my head. Surely, this was a one-time thing. A lot happened today, and I haven’t processed it yet. I just need a good night’s sleep, and I’ll be back in the game before I know it. I rub the ache in my chest again and ignore the tiny part of me that’s curious about wanting more.

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BY WEDNESDAY MORNING, I've talked myself into thinking it's all in my head, and the whole thing on Sunday got thrown out of proportion. Bell's meeting me soon to go over her latest footage and shoot some of the new items. We have our meetings every Wednesday morning before the store opens so that we won't be interrupted. I haven't seen her in two days, and I'm sure everything is going to go back to normal. I probably imagined the whole thing anyway, and I overreacted.

I turn on the lights and walk to the back room to make some coffee. I have the next three days off while Cole and Skye are here, so I have a lot of work to get done before our dinner tonight. I'm looking forward to relaxing with the guys and having fun this weekend.

I pour two mugs of coffee and add the creamer she likes when I hear the front door open. I wipe my hands on my boardies, feeling nervous all of a sudden. I've been alone with her a million times before. Today is no different. I take a deep breath and walk to my desk, setting the coffee down.

I hear her come back, and I glance up at her. She's wearing cutoff shorts with a t-shirt from my shop. She has it tied, showing off her toned abs and her belly button piercing. I swallow hard and meet her eyes. She's got her no-nonsense look on her face. I try and read her and see no trace of what I saw last Sunday.

"Hi, I made us some coffee." I point to my desk. She looks over at my desk before looking back at me.

"Thanks. Let me set up my laptop, and I'll show you what I came up with." She walks over, sits behind my desk like she always does, and starts to load the images and videos. Taking a sip of her coffee, she focuses on the screen. I guess we're back to the way things were before. This is what I wanted. I should be happy. Instead, disappointment weaves its way in, leaving me with an uneasy feeling.

I go and stand behind her so I can see the screen. I sip my coffee as she shows me the first clip. She filmed me running to the water just as the sun is coming up. I smile as I watch how she puts my board maneuvers to the music.

“These are great,” I say, leaning over her to get a better look. “You got it!” I grin and point to the air I did. She turns to me and smiles at my excitement. God, I love seeing her happy.

“I told you I would capture it if you did one while I was there.” She laughs, and just like that, we’re back to normal. She shows me the rest of the videos she edited, along with the stills. Taking a sip of her coffee, she pulls her long hair to the side, giving me a clear view of her slender neck. I’m so close at this angle that I can smell the vanilla with just a hint of coconut that invaded my senses last night as I lay in bed. A scent I’ve come to crave.

All it would take is for me to turn my head slightly, and I could taste her. She turns her head at the exact moment, and I can feel her breath on my face. I can hear her breathing increase, but her eyes give nothing away. I feel myself go hard and force myself to look away, breaking the eye contact. I stand up and get some distance between us to clear my head.

I rub the back of my neck to ease the tension. “These are really good Bell. They should get some good views for the business. You’re good at writing captions, so go ahead and post them this week. I’m going to get the front ready to open. The new inventory is all set up and displayed, so when you want to film and take some pictures, it’s ready for you.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll be out in a second.” She shuts down her laptop and begins to get her camera gear out.

Needing some air, I go up front and unlock the front door before stepping outside. I take deep breaths, breathing in the salty air and willing my body to relax. It’s not like I’ve never noticed Bell before. We grew up together, and I watched her grow into the beautiful woman she is today. I just never *let* myself go there. She’s Noah’s little sister and has always been this perfect, untouchable girl in my eyes.

Besides, Noah knows me and my past. He would kill me if I slept with her, and I can’t do that to her. Her heart would get involved, and I can’t risk my friendship with Noah and his family. I just have to ride out this attraction and pray it goes away.

Taking one last deep breath, I go back inside and see her filming in the back corner. She's bent over to get a certain angle on the merchandise, and that perfect ass is just begging me to touch it. Why can't she be in baggy joggers instead of shorts that make her tanned legs look so damn good? I've seen her in joggers, though, too, and it wouldn't matter.

I sigh and walk to the register to get it ready. Thankfully, a customer comes in, and I can focus on someone else. I look him over as he walks my way. He must be around my age. He's got blond hair and is around my height and build. He's what you picture every lifeguard on the East Coast to look like. He smiles at me and shows me a perfect set of teeth.

"Hey, man. This place is great." He looks around and takes in all the merchandise. "I'm looking for a new board and heard this is the place to go."

"Thanks. How did you hear about us?" I see him look past me and smile. I follow his stare and see Bell still bent over, taking more shots.

I move to block his view. "Um," he glances back at me. "I came across your social media page and saw your new board inventory."

"It's this way." I move him away from Bell toward the boards along the wall. "Anything in particular that you're looking for? Short, long?" I glance at him, and he's still focused on Bell. Feeling my irritation rise, I clear my throat. He looks back at me.

"Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I was asking what you were looking for?"

"I need a short board."

"Okay, that would be these over here." I point to the selection we have and hear the door open again. "I'll be right back. Take a look at what we have, and let me know if you have any questions. We have leashes and traction pads on that wall there." I gesture to my right.

"Sounds good. Thanks." He starts to look through the boards, and I head up front to greet the next customer.

I finish ringing up the last of the crowd that came in when I hear Bell laugh. Frowning, I put the items in the bag and do my best to smile at the couple in front of me before they leave the store. I look back and see the lifeguard dude talking to Bell. She puts her hand on his arm and laughs at something he says. Jealousy hits me like a freight train, throwing me off guard. Trying to reign in my emotions, I walk to them and turn to this David Hasselhoff wannabee.

“Did you find the board you wanted?” I come off a little harsher than I wanted because he’s still a customer, but I don’t care at this point.

Mr. Blondie turns to look at me with a surprised look on his face. “Uh, yeah. I found the one I need. Bell was just telling me about some surf spots I have to try out around this area.” He grins at Bell, and she smiles back at him.

He called her Bell. Everyone calls her Bella, but *me*. I fist my hands at my side before I do something stupid like throw him out of my store.

“Did she now.” I look at Bell and give her a death stare. She blinks, surprised, before she puts her armor on and crosses her arms over her chest, giving me an equally effective stare.

“I did. Logan is new in town, so I thought I would help him out.” She narrows her eyes at me, daring me to say something.

I clamp my teeth so hard my jaw hurts. “Logan, is it?” I slowly turn my head to look at him.

“Yeah. Look, I didn’t mean to step on any toes. If you guys are together, I’m sorry. I just assumed she was single.”

“We are *not* together nor ever will be. Trust me, *that* was made *perfectly* clear.” She glares at me before looking at Logan again. “He’s just my brother’s best friend and likes to play the older brother role.”

Logan breaks out into a smile. “Oh, cool. You had me worried for a bit. I was looking forward to asking you out.” She giggles before he turns to look at me. “I get it, man. I have two younger sisters, too, and I would do the same thing.”

I turn and match the heated glare coming from Bell. She's pissed at me for interfering again. Damn, this woman is infuriating. I lose all control with her. I break the stare and turn to Logan again. "Let's get that board for you. We wouldn't want to keep you from your day." I need him to leave before I do anything else to piss her off. I walk him over to the boards while he picks the one he wants.

"It's cool. I'm having way more fun here." He winks at Bell, and I want to punch him.

"Do you need a leash and traction pad?" I ask, hurrying him along.

"Just a traction pad. I have plenty of leashes at home." He picks out a traction pad and follows me to the counter. I ring him up before he swipes his card.

Turning to Bell, he grins. "So how about that date? I could take you out to dinner, and you could show me around town. I don't know this area very much. I usually hang out north of here."

"That sounds like fun." She smiles at him, and my stomach forms a knot.

"Perfect. Here, put your number in, and I'll call you later to make plans." He hands her his phone, and she enters her number before handing it back to him.

"It's not a fake number, is it?" He raises his eyebrows at her.

"No, it's real, I swear." She laughs.

"I'm going to trust you on this," he grins. I hand him his traction pads and receipt. "Thanks. I didn't catch your name."

It's because I didn't give it to you, dumbass. I can feel Bell's eyes on me, daring me to be mean again. I sigh, "Mav, my name is Mav."

"Nice to meet you, Mav." He walks to the door and turns. "Bye Bell. I'll call you later. And don't worry, Mav. I'll take good care of her. You have nothing to worry about." He walks



outside, and I will my heartbeat to slow down. My hands are gripping the counter so hard they are starting to ache.

I turn to look at Bell, and she gives me an icy look. She walks over to her camera on the shelf and roughly snatches it before going into the back room. I follow her and watch her shove her things in her bag. Shit, she's more pissed than I thought.

“Look, I was just trying...”

“Don't,” she says, giving me a heated stare. “You don't have the right to get in my business anymore. You made it clear on Sunday where I stand, so you don't have any say on who I date. You don't want me looking at you, fine. Then, let me look somewhere else and try to find what I'm looking for. I won't have you overstep your bounds anymore, Maverick. I'm twenty-four fucking years old. I'm not the *little* sister you once knew growing up. I'm a grown-ass woman, and I can decide for myself who I want to spend time with. Stay the hell out of my business. Go find one of your fan girls to fuck and leave me the hell alone.”

She brushes past me and storms out front. I stand there, unable to move or grasp what just happened. Before I can form a thought, I hear the front door open and close. Shit. I slump down in my desk chair and put my head in my hands. She's right. I have no right to interfere. I told her not to look my way. This is what I wanted, and I have to find a way to let it go. More than anything, I want her to be happy. Could *I* ever be happy seeing her with someone else? I groan into my hands and wish I knew how to dig myself out of this shithole that I've gotten myself into.

# Chapter Five

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## Bella

I GRIP THE WHEEL TIGHTLY AND BLINK BACK MY FRUSTRATED tears as I drive back to my apartment. Who the hell does he think he is? I'm tired of him acting like he owns some part of me, and I'm his to protect. It's gotten out of hand this past year, and I'm sick of it.

I roll down my jeep window and try to calm myself down, letting the fresh air blow through my hair. I didn't even want to go today and face him after Sunday. I felt humiliated and stupid that he saw a glimpse of my feelings towards him and completely shut it down. I take my filming business seriously, though, so I put my personal emotions aside and talked myself into going. It had taken a lot to mask my feelings and pretend that nothing happened on Sunday.

I should get an Oscar for my performance, especially when he leaned over me, and all I wanted to do was run my tongue along his bottom lip. Just his scent gets me so aroused I have to press my thighs together to stop the ache.

And then there's Logan. A perfectly nice, good-looking guy that any girl would love to be asked out by, and I felt nothing. Zero, nada. I agreed to go on a date with him because I'm hoping something will spark inside me. Maverick's presence is very distracting, so I'm praying that with him not next to me, I can concentrate on Logan and see if there's something there I can work on. I do need a date for the wedding, and Logan seems to be a good option. I inwardly groan at the thought of spending a whole evening watching Mav and his latest fling at the reception.

Pulling up to my apartment, I grab my camera gear and MacBook and go inside. Sophia looks up from her laptop when I walk in and grimaces at the look on my face.

“Oh, God, what did Mav do this time? You look like you could kill someone right now.”

“Don’t tempt me.” I set my things down on the counter and pour a glass of water.

She closes her laptop and gives me a concerned look. “Talk to me.”

I blow out an exasperated breath. I can’t tell her all of it. I don’t want her to know about me being in love with her brother, especially now that it won’t be going any further. We share everything, and it kills me to keep this secret, but I just can’t get the words to pass my lips. I’ve tried many times to tell her, and now there’s no point.

“I told him off today. Everything was fine, and we had our usual meeting. Afterward, he got busy with customers, and I started filming some of the new inventory. A cute guy walked in, and Maverick basically peed on me like some dog marking his territory when he had no right to do it. I’m so tired of his big brother bullshit, and I let him have it.”

“God, I’m so sorry. I know he’s been protective of us since we were little, but it’s gotten worse with you over the last couple of years. Do you want me to talk to him?”

“No, I handled it. Hopefully, I got my point across this time.”

“Good for you. He needs to know you’re perfectly capable of making your own decisions on who you want to date.”

“Exactly what I told him, but with a few other choice words.” I give her a small smile, and she laughs.

“Well, if he does it again, I’ll be adding my own. So, about this cute guy. How cute are we talking?” She grins at me and winks.

“Very cute. His name is Logan, and he just moved a little north of here. He’s blond, blue-eyed, great body, funny...” I

shrug my shoulders and take a drink of water.

“So why aren’t you jumping up and down right now? He sounds exactly like your type.”

Because he’s not *him*. “I don’t know. I just want to meet someone and have there be fireworks, you know? I want to feel like my body is on fire when we touch. I laid my hand on his arm and felt nothing. Maybe there’s something wrong with me.”

“There is nothing wrong with you. You know what you want, and you’ve set your standards high. Maybe too high, though? Give him a chance and at least see if the spark happens later. Sometimes it takes longer.”

“Yeah, I guess. I gave him my number, so we’ll see. I need a date to the wedding regardless, and he seems like he could be a lot of fun.”

“Well, there you go. Your wedding date may have landed right in your lap.”

“Who are you planning on taking? What’s his name? Garrett?”

“God, no. The last date with him was awful. He makes this weird noise when he chews, and it drives me crazy.”

Laughing, I grin at her. “And you think I’m picky?”

“Ok, so we both are, but that’s good. We deserve the fireworks and someone we can’t keep our hands off of.”

“Cheers to that.” I hold up my water and clink her coffee mug.

“I’ll probably just take Frankie from work. He’s a ton of fun and gay, so I won’t have to worry about someone groping me all night long.”

“Oh, I love Frankie! At least I’ll have someone fun to hang out with if my date turns out to be a bore.”

“That’s the plan. I want us to have a good time and enjoy ourselves. What time is dinner tonight?”

“Seven. Noah and Emma pick up Skye and Cole from the airport at two. I’m glad it’s spring break, and you already have the time off. It’s going to be busy the next few days. I really hope Emma finds her dress tomorrow. I want everything to be perfect for her. She deserves to have the most magical day.”

“I think they’re so in love that they could get married right now under a beach umbrella, and they’ll still think it’s magical. But yeah, I agree. We will make this day special for her. You’re getting a sister,” she says excitedly.

“*We* are getting a sister. You’ve always been mine, you know that.”

I see her eyes get teary. Nodding, she hugs me. “*We* are getting a sister. I’m so freaking excited for them. This is going to be the best wedding ever. Until ours, of course.”

Laughing, I hug her tight. I’ve dreamt of my wedding day since I was a little girl, but the one person I imagined standing up there with me is the one man I can never have.

\* \* \*

I LOOK in the mirror and smooth down my baby blue dress. I turn and admire the way it hugs my curves. I took the time to curl my hair in loose curls and pulled my sides loosely back into a cute braid. Sitting on my bed, I slip my taupe high heels on. Sophia and I are meeting Noah, Emma, Cole, and Skye for dinner at Driftwoods tonight. Maverick will be there as well, and I refuse to let him ruin my fun. My brother is getting married, and I want to enjoy every minute of it.

Our cousin James is flying in tonight and will be joining the guys tomorrow for their tux shopping. We all grew up together, and even though he moved away to North Carolina for work, we’re all still very close. His wife, Sadie, and their new baby will be coming too, and I’m excited to see her again and finally meet their baby girl, Harper.

“Bella, you ready?” Sophia asks, walking into my room and securing her bracelet. “Maverick offered to pick us up and be our DD tonight.” She glances up at me and grins. “Damn girl, you look hot tonight.”

Laughing, I stand up and grab my small clutch. “Thanks, I could say the same about you. That dress looks amazing on you.” Sophia’s long dark hair is loosely curled down her back, and her dark green dress shows off her toned body. She’s wearing gold heels to tie it all together.

“I’m so glad you talked me into these heels. I love the gold, and it goes with everything.” She looks down and admires them.

“I told you. Plus, we wear the same size, so I knew I could borrow them if you bought them.” I laugh and follow her out the door.

“That’s the best part when we shop. We’re the same size in clothes and shoes. It’s like we have a double wardrobe. When we get married, we’ll have to live close enough to each other so we can walk to each other’s closets.” She laughs and grabs her purse and phone.

“Definitely,” I grin. Maverick walks in, and I quickly wipe the grin off my face. He’s dressed in dark jeans and a dark grey dress shirt. He has the sleeves rolled up a bit and the first couple of buttons undone, exposing his tanned skin underneath. His hair is loose today, and I squeeze my hand shut, fighting the urge to run my hands through the silky waves. He meets my gaze, and my heart thumps hard in my chest. I see him swallow as he looks at me before breaking eye contact.

“You girls look beautiful,” he says, turning his head and smiling at Sophia.

“Thank you. You look handsome tonight, too, Mav. I love the new shirt.” Sophia hugs her brother and then pulls back, giving him a stern look. “You owe her an apology, Maverick Alexander. Make this right so we can all have a good time tonight. I’ll meet you guys in the jeep.” Before I can tell her to get back here, she’s out the door, leaving us alone. I glance at Maverick, and he looks very uncomfortable. I hear him sigh before his green eyes meet. I see the turmoil in them, and I lose some of my anger. He’s really upset over this.

“I’m sorry, Bell. You’re right. I shouldn’t have acted that way to what’s his name.” I narrow my eyes at him. “I mean Logan. I have no right to interfere like that. I’ve been a mess all day thinking about how I upset you. Can you forgive me?” He gives me a small smile showing those dimples, and I feel my walls go down.

“I forgive you.” I try not to smile but can’t help it. “I just don’t understand why you do it. You don’t get on Sophia this much when she talks to guys. Why me? You’ve been like this for months, years even.”

He rubs the back of his neck like it’s tight. “I wish I knew. All I know is that I don’t like it.”

“You don’t like it? That’s your answer?” I blink at him in surprise.

“Yeah, I don’t like it. It drives me completely mad when a guy tries to get with you.”

“Why, though?” I ask, needing an answer from him to try and understand.

“When I figure that out, you’ll be the first to know.” He mutters under his breath. “We better get going, or we’ll be late. Are we good?”

I study him, hoping to see something, anything, to what he is feeling. I still don’t understand what’s happening, but I guess that makes two of us. “We’re good.”

“Good.” He opens the door and gestures with his hand. “After you.”

“You drive me crazy most of the time, you know that?” I laugh and shake my head.

“I could say the same about you,” he murmurs. I walk by him, and he bends down to whisper in my ear.

“You really do look beautiful tonight.” His breath warms my skin and sends shivers down my body. I look up and meet his eyes, catching a glimpse of something that I’ve longed to see for so many years. My breath catches in my throat, and he quickly looks away before I can question it further.

“Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.” I try to see if I can see it again, but he won’t make eye contact with me. Sighing, I walk outside and hear him shut the door behind me. Taking a deep breath, I try and steady my nerves. I know what I saw. I couldn’t have imagined it. I’d know that look anywhere because it’s the same one I hide from him, so he won’t know how badly I want him. Could he feel the same and is trying to hide it from me? Could I have been wrong all this time? Is his attitude toward me and other guys because he’s jealous and not just being a protective older brother? Based on our earlier conversation, I don’t think he even realizes that it’s true.

He opens the door for me, and I climb into the front seat and buckle myself in.

“You guys good now?” Sophia asks from the back seat.

Maverick laughs and starts the engine. “Yeah, we’re good. I apologized for being an ass.” He gives me a wink.

“Thank you. Now we can all have fun this weekend. I’m so excited!”

I tune out Sophia as she talks about this weekend. I’m so wrapped up in my thoughts to concentrate on what she’s saying. When did he start noticing me? Should I have made a move sooner? Why hasn’t he made a move? I bite my bottom lip deep in thought as these questions go through my mind. I glance at Maverick, and he’s looking at me. His eyes go to my lips before returning to the road. I see him grip the steering wheel tighter.

Hmmmm. Wanting to test something, I slowly cross my legs, letting the hem of my dress ride up my thigh. I see him glance down at my legs before shooting up to the road again. His hands flex on the steering wheel as he grips it tighter. He’s fighting it too. I don’t know why he made me feel it was one-sided on Sunday night, but from his body language right now, we are on even playing fields and want the same thing. My heart beats against my chest at the realization.

“Bell, did you hear me?” Sophia taps my shoulder.



I turn around and look at her. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“I was just asking you what dresses you think she has in mind for us. I’m really hoping our bridesmaid dresses will be something sexy and chic.”

“Emma has great taste. I’m sure we’ll be happy with what she picks out. She already told us she wants our opinions too. I can’t wait to see her try on dresses.”

“She’s going to be such a beautiful bride,” Sophia sighs.

“Do you guys know what you’re doing for tuxes color-wise?” I ask Maverick.

He glances at me before turning back to the road. “I think Noah and Emma decided on the traditional black tux look.”

“I love the black and white look. Very classy and elegant. Maybe our dresses will be black too.” I look out the window as we pull up to Driftwoods.

Walking into the restaurant, I sneak a peek at Maverick. We’re going to be spending a lot of time together in the next few days. I have a feeling things are about to get quite interesting.

# Chapter Six

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## Maverick

I HOLD THE DOOR OPEN FOR SOPHIA AND BELL AS WE WALK into the restaurant. Driftwood is on the outskirts of town and is known for its upscale menu and drinks. I've only been here a handful of times when my mom wants our family to go on her birthday or other special occasions. It's more of a date atmosphere, so I stay clear of the place. The hostess leads us back to the far corner, and we see everyone else already at the table.

"You're here!" Emma beams at us as they all get up to give us hugs.

"Hey Cole, it's good to see you again. You too, Skye. You're looking beautiful as always." I give them both hugs.

"It's good to see you again, Mav. You're looking handsome as ever," Skye grins up at me.

"How was the flight?" I ask Cole while Bell and Sophia excitedly hug Skye.

"Good man. I love that it's an easy direct flight. Excited about golf on Friday? We're so going to kick Noah and James' ass."

"Hell yeah, we are. I've had to listen to him brag over and over about how he beat you last time, so this is payback time."

"I'm sure he forgot to mention the fact that he had to get me wasted in order for him to beat me." Cole laughs as I find an empty seat next to him and sit down.

"He definitely left that part out," I chuckle.

“I left it out because it doesn’t matter. Drunk or not, I still would have beat you,” Noah chimes in, grinning.

“We’ll see about that,” Cole says, laughing.

Sophia sits across from me, leaving Bell to sit on my other side. Her scent hits me as she takes a seat. My dick instantly reacts, and I shift uncomfortably in my seat. I need to find a way to push these feelings in the back of my mind. I don’t know when I started letting myself look at Noah’s sister differently, but now that I have, I can’t think of anything else.

I feel like it’s always been there in the back of my mind, but I’ve refused to let myself go there. It doesn’t matter, though—nothing can happen. I’m not letting anything ruin Noah and Emma’s special day. And Noah finding out I want to bury myself deep in his sister more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life would not be a good talk to have before his big day. I just need to ride this out until after the wedding, and then I can figure out what the hell is going on and what to do about it.

The waiter comes by to take our drink order, and Noah orders some appetizers for the table. I stick with beer since I’m driving, but really wish I could order a double bourbon right about now to take the edge off of being next to her. That dress she’s wearing is going to be the death of me tonight. She’s close enough to me that I can see straight down her low-cut dress at those perfect round breasts. I shift again in my chair to try and get comfortable.

“So, I talked to Rusty’s, and they’ll have all the catering ready and delivered to your house when we get back from our golf game for the bonfire. You guys won’t have to lift a finger. I also got s’more supplies at the store the other day for Emma.” I grin at Emma as her eyes light up.

“I told you that you didn’t have to do all that. I could have grilled something for everyone.” Noah says, looking at me.

“I’m the best man. It’s my job to be in charge of the bachelor party. Skye and I agreed that we would take care of everything.”

“That’s right. You guys just have to show up. Mav and I have it all under control.” Skye grins at me and gives me a wink.

“What are you guys planning?” Emma narrows her eyes at us and looks at the both of us.

“Don’t you worry your gorgeous head about it. We’ve got this.” I look at Skye and grin.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Emma says under her breath.

“Just remember we said no strippers,” Noah looks at me. “I swear if one of your *friends* shows up and tries to give me a lap dance, she’s going in the pool. And you...”he points to Skye. “No men in thongs trying to stick their junk in my fiancé’s face. My junk is the only thing that needs to be close to those pretty lips.” Everyone busts out laughing.

I hold up my hands. “I swear, no strippers. Geez, give me some credit. I wouldn’t disrespect your wishes.”

Noah’s eyes soften. “Yeah, I know. Thanks, both of you, for working so hard on this. It really means a lot to Emma and me.”

“Of course, man. We’re happy to do it.”

“Mav and I have had fun planning this together. He’s had some great ideas.” Skye looks at me, and we both start laughing.

“Oh God, they’re definitely up to something. Getting those two together to plan a party might not be the best idea we had.” I hear Emma say to Noah, which makes everyone laugh harder.

The waiter comes back with our drinks and appetizers and I give him my order as he goes around the table. We dig into the appetizers and pass them around. I hear Bell softly moan, and I glance at her. Her eyes are closed as she chews the lobster bite. I watch, mesmerized, as her tongue comes out to swipe her bottom lip. Her eyes start to open, and I quickly look away. I see Emma with a smile on her face as she looks at me. She gives me a small wink and goes back to eating. Did I

give something away? God, I don't need her on me about this before I can figure things out. She tells Noah everything.

I take a bite of the lobster and almost moan myself. Damn, that's good. Maybe I should come here more often. If I had the right company, it could be fun. My mind wanders to what it would be like to take Bell here and have her all to myself. I could watch her eat like that all night long.

I take a sip of my beer and try to focus on what my friends are saying. I notice the girls are sharing a bottle of wine, and it's going fast. Sophia and Bell are giggling at something Emma said, and I smile. I'm glad I drove them tonight so they could have fun. The last time Sophia and Bell took an Uber, the driver hit on them. They blew it off and laughed, but I don't trust them alone with strangers. The driver probably wondered why all his reviews got shitty after that. He's lucky that's all I did to him.

The meals come out, and the girls order more wine. I take a bite of my food and *do* moan this time. The steak melts in my mouth. Bell stills next to me and meets my eyes.

"Steak good?" She glances down at my mouth, and I try not to smile, knowing her thoughts are mirroring mine.

"Yeah, really good. How's your salmon?"

"It's orgasmic," she says softly, and I choke on the water I was sipping.

"You good over there?" Noah asks me from across the table.

"Water just went down the wrong way." I cough and take another sip. Bell giggles next to me, and I frown at her, causing her to giggle more. Her phone vibrates on the table, and she ignores it. I glance down and see a text message from Logan come through. *Does dinner on Sunday night work for you?* It buzzes again, and I can't help but look. *I can't stop thinking about you.*

I feel my blood begin to boil, and I grip my beer before taking a sip.

“You got a text message from Logan.” I try to keep my voice even.

“What? Oh, thanks. I didn’t hear it vibrate.” She glances down at it and reads it before setting it back down.

“Are you going to say yes?” I ask, looking down at my food, unable to stop myself from asking.

She glances at me, knowing I read it, and tries to gauge my reaction. “I haven’t decided yet. Do you want me to go?” She asks quietly so no one can hear.

I know what I should say. I should tell her to say yes. That he seems like a nice guy, and she needs to find someone who can give her what she wants, but I can’t get the words to come out.

“No.” I take another sip of water and avoid her eye contact.

She looks back at her food and pushes it around on her plate. “No? And you’re not going to tell me why are you because you don’t know yourself.” She throws my words back at me.

“I just know that I don’t like it,” I ground out through my clenched jaw. I sigh, not knowing what else to say. She lifts the phone back up and sends a text back. I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking her what she said.

“Who are you texting over there?” Sophia asks, filling up her wine glass before doing the same with Bell’s.

“Logan asked me out to dinner on Sunday.” She takes a big sip of her wine.

“Oooh, the cute guy from yesterday? You told him yes, right? He would make the perfect date for the wedding. You’ve got to give him a chance, Bell.”

Wedding date? I glance at Bell to see her reaction. She’s got her walls up again, and I can’t tell what she’s thinking.

“I told him yes. He seems really nice, and it’s refreshing to have someone that knows what he wants and goes after it.” Her jab at me goes straight to my heart, making it ache again. I

know what I fucking want—I just can't have it. I shouldn't let myself want it. I know what he fucking wants too, and it makes me want to throw her over my shoulder right now and claim her as mine.

“Yay! I'm so glad you said yes. You never know. He could be the one that can give you what you've been looking for.” Sophia grins at her and toasts her wine glass in the air.

Bell gives her a small smile. “Yeah, maybe, you never know.”

“Now you just have to find a date, Mav. I'm sure you can find a fan girl around here to say yes. Just don't ask Haley again.” Sophia starts laughing and takes another sip of wine.

“Very funny,” I mutter under my breath. “Who are you taking, Miss *one-act comedy show*?”

“I'm taking Frankie from work. I just want to have a good time and not worry about hands on me all night.”

“Why don't you have his partner take Bell? I'm sure the four of you would have a blast.” I ask, hoping she will like the idea and I won't have to see her with Logan all night long.

“Oh no, Bella needs hands on her. She needs to let loose and have some fun with the new hottie,” Sophia giggles.

I grind my teeth and keep my mouth shut. The last thing I need to do is cause a scene. I shove some food in my mouth to resist the temptation of saying anything. I force it down, barely tasting it anymore.

“I'll be right back. I'm going to head to the bathroom.” I throw my napkin on the table and leave. I need some air and to compose myself. I go into the bathroom and take deep, calming breaths. Pacing the floor, I try and get myself under control. My head is one big fucked up mess right now. I have so many thoughts running through my head, and I can't make sense of anything. I run a hand through my hair in frustration and open the door to find Emma standing there. Great. I really don't need this right now.

“Are you ok?” She gives me a concerned look and meets my eyes.

“Yeah, I’m great. I just had to use the bathroom.” I lie and avoid her eye contact.

“You can talk to me, you know. I’ve seen the way you two look at each other. I noticed it the first time I met you both. How long have you had feelings for Bella?”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about. She’s like a sister to me, that’s all.” I shove my hands in my pocket and try to play it off like what she says isn’t too close to home.

“You can lie to yourself all you want, Maverick. Hell, I did the same thing with Noah until I was brave enough to face it. All these feelings can be scary—trust me, I know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks. We should head back to the table before Noah thinks I’m making out with you in the bathroom.” I give her a small smile and try and change the subject with humor.

“I’ll let you change the subject this time because I know you’re struggling with your feelings, and we do have to get back, but I’m here if you ever need to talk. I understand what you’re going through and can maybe help you shed some light on what you’re feeling.”

“Yeah, okay.” She starts to walk away. “Emma, wait.” She turns to look at me. “Can you maybe keep this between us? I don’t want to get Noah involved just yet. I have some things to work out on my own first. He has enough on his plate with the wedding.”

“My lips are sealed. When you do figure this whole thing out, I hope you know that all Noah would ever want is for you to be happy. Same thing he wants for Bella.”

I nod, unable to speak. She walks back to the table, and I follow her before sitting back down and trying to enjoy the rest of my meal.

AFTER WE ALL say our goodbyes, I walk the girls back to my jeep. They drank more than I realized. Sophia and Bell have their arms around each other, and Bell giggles at something Sophia whispers into her ear.



I open the door for Sophia and help her into the back. Bell tries to get in the front and stumbles in her heels. I barely catch her before she falls. My hand goes around her waist as she lands against me.

“Could you maybe not be so stubborn and wait for me next time?” I say in her ear as her back is pressed against me. She shifts a little bit, and I bite back a moan.

“Sorry,” she breathes. “I thought I could get up. It’s this short dress and heels. Why did you have to get a lift on this thing anyway?”

I know I should let go, but she feels so good in my arms. “It’s only lifted a little bit.” I chuckle softly in her ear. “Let me help you up this time.” I grab her waist to steady her and help her into the jeep. Her dress rides up and gives me a perfect view of that tight ass. One more inch, and I would be able to see everything. My hands linger on her before I reluctantly let her go.

“Thanks,” she whispers.

“No problem,” I manage to get out. I shut the door and get in the driver’s side. Sophia is on her phone looking at something and missed the whole exchange. Thank God. She would have probably seen this huge ass boner I have from a mile away. I need to get them home and take a cold shower. This night has been torture. I don’t think I’ve been so hard for anyone this much in one night, and we barely have touched.

I pull up to the drive a little while later and glance over at Bell. She fell asleep a few minutes ago while Sophia and I were talking.

“Mav, can you carry Bella in? She had trouble sleeping last night, and I don’t want to wake her.”

“Why did she have trouble sleeping?” I look back at Sophia.

“She just said she had a lot on her mind.” Sophia gets out and closes the door softly.

I make sure Bell isn’t against the door before I get out and walk over to get her. I carefully lift her, and she snuggles up

against me and sighs. My heart skips a beat as I breathe her in. I carry her to her room and gently lay her down. She looks so beautiful it makes my chest ache. I brush her hair back and let my hand linger on her soft skin, tracing the lines of her face. I can hear Sophia coming down the hall, and I quickly pull my hand away and stand up.

“Thanks, Mav. I got it from here. I’ll get her dress off and make sure she’s good.”

“Yeah, okay. No problem. I’ll see you Friday then at the bonfire.” I look at Bell one last time before I tear my gaze away and make myself walk away. I make the short drive home, which is basically on the other side of their building.

We live in the same apartment complex. It was fun when Noah lived with me, and we could drunk-walk home on game nights. I downsized to a one-bedroom when he moved out but stayed in the same building. I like being close to the girls and being there if they need me.

I walk into my apartment, and for the first time in my life, I feel alone and wish I had someone I was coming home to. I grab a beer from the fridge and sink into my black leather couch, laying my head back. I close my eyes, and all I can see is her.

Sighing, I take a long drink. Usually, when I’m feeling like this, I head to the bar and drown myself in someone, so I don’t have to think, but the thought of touching someone else doesn’t appeal to me. The someone I want to touch is a few doors down and sleeping like an angel. An angel I have no business touching. Groaning, I get up and head to the shower, *a very cold shower*, and hope to God I can get through these next few weeks leading up to the wedding.

# Chapter Seven

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## Bella

I OPEN MY EYES TO SUNLIGHT FILTERING IN AND SQUINT against the brightness. My head hurts, and my mouth feels like the Sahara Desert. I groan and throw the covers over my head. How much did I drink last night? I remember dinner and then walking with Sophia to Mav's jeep.

Memories come rushing back of me, falling and landing in Maverick's arms. I remember how much I wanted to press my backside into him. God, I didn't rub myself against him, did I? Shit, I can't remember. I do remember him getting turned on by it, though. I smile and do a little happy dance under the covers. I felt him pressing up against me and could feel how aroused he was. If Sophia hadn't been in the jeep, I would have probably flung myself at him whether he had his feelings figured out or not.

How did I get in bed, though? I don't even remember falling asleep. I throw back the covers and notice I'm dressed in a t-shirt. I look and see my dress on the floor beside my bed. Puzzled, I get up in search of some water and coffee, in that order. Running a hand through my bed hair, I go to the kitchen and see Sophia eating a bagel.

"Morning sleeping beauty." She grins at me and takes a sip of her coffee.

"When did I fall asleep last night? I don't even remember going to bed?" I walk to the fridge to get some water. Chugging it, I set it down and look at her.

“You were out cold,” she says, laughing. “I guess the last few nights of not sleeping well caught up with you. I had Mav carry you in, and I undressed you when he left. How do you feel this morning?”

I’m relieved it wasn’t Maverick that undressed me. I wouldn’t want that opportunity wasted because I was snoring away. “I feel pretty good, actually. I’m just thirsty, and my head hurts a bit, but the water will help with that. Thanks for taking care of me last night.”

“Anytime. I left you some coffee over there if you want some.” She points to the coffee maker on our white marble counter.

“Thanks.” I walk over and pour a cup. “How was Maverick when he left?” I ask casually, stirring my creamer in.

“He seemed fine. Why?”

“No reason. I thought he may be upset with me again about Logan texting during dinner.”

“He better not be upset with that. He promised you he would stay out of it. He was really sweet carrying you in, and he made sure you were comfortable before he left. I don’t think he’s mad at you.”

I smile, thinking of him tucking me in. “Good. I wouldn’t want anything to ruin this weekend. We have only four weeks until the wedding.”

“Nothing is going to ruin this wedding. It’s going to be perfect. So what are you and Logan doing Sunday night?”

Crap, I forgot I texted him back last night with a yes. “I’m not sure. I haven’t checked my phone since last night.” I walk down the hall and get it from my nightstand before returning to the kitchen and checking my messages. “He said he’s looking forward to dinner and so glad I didn’t give him a fake number.” I laugh at our inside joke and read the rest. “He wants to take me to dinner around seven but said I can choose because he doesn’t know the area very well.” I look up at her. “What should I say?”

“How about Rusty’s? It’s casual but not too romantic. Are you meeting him there?”

“Yes.” I like to drive separately for the first date in case it goes horribly wrong. I don’t like feeling trapped that I can’t leave if I want to. “Rusty’s is a good idea.” I send over a quick text. He immediately responds back. “He says that’s perfect, and he will meet me there at seven.” It dings again. “And that he can’t wait to see me again.”

“Awe, that’s so sweet. He sounds really nice.”

“Yeah, he does.” I give her a small smile and try to be as excited as she looks. Who knows, the spark may be there. I only met him briefly, so maybe I need to get to know him better. At least he’s making the effort to date me. I push thoughts of green eyes and dimples out of my head and smile at Sophia. “Let’s get our showers and get ready. It’s dress shopping day!”

“Yay! Hopefully, they offer us champagne like those fancy places we see on TV.”

“Let’s hope so. If not, we’ll bring our own bottle.”

“Great idea!” Sophia finishes the rest of her coffee before going to her bathroom to get ready.

Taking my mug with me, I glance at my phone again as if looking at it will make a text message appear. Just because I know he wants me doesn’t mean he will start texting me like I’m his girlfriend. Maverick doesn’t do girlfriends or sappy text messages. Sighing, I set my phone on the bathroom sink and step under the hot spray. Would I even be happy with someone that doesn’t commit? I’ve always said that one night would be enough if he ever looked my way, but will it be?

\* \* \*

GIDDY ON CHAMPAGNE, Sophia, Skye, and I sit on the couches with my mom, Sage, Mimi, and Luna. Emma has tried on about ten dresses, and so far, nothing seems right. She walks out with another one on, and we all gasp. It’s a mermaid-style dress, and the bodice has two thin straps before going to a deep V down her chest. The dress hugs her curves and has a

vintage lace overlay down the entire dress, ending in a flare at the bottom. The back is open down to the top of her behind.

“This is the one,” I whisper. Tears forming in my eyes. I look over at Skye, and she’s crying too.

“You look so beautiful, Emma.” Skye snuffles and wipes her eyes.

Emma looks in the mirror and starts to cry. My mom walks over to her and brushes her hair back. She whispers something in her ear and hugs her. Emma nods and smiles through her tears. Placing the matching veil on her head, my mom smooths it out over her hair and beams at her.

Emma looks at us and smiles. “I guess I found my dress.” She laughs. We all jump up to hug her and become a sobbing mess.

“Noah will pass out when he sees you in this dress. You are such a vision, Emma,” Mimi says, hugging her.

“Thanks, Mimi.” Wiping her tears away, Emma looks at us. “Okay, now it’s my turn to sit back and relax while my girls try on dresses. Let me get out of this dress. Have my champagne ready for me when I get out,” she laughs over her shoulder as she walks back to the dressing room.

“We’re on it,” Skye says, wiping her eyes.

We pick out about five dresses each to try on. Emma wants to go with black dresses, and I couldn’t be happier. It’s something we can all wear out again to a fancy dinner.

My mom helps Luna pick out a couple of styles she will like for her junior bridesmaid dress as we take our selections to the dressing room. Emma’s uncle and grandparents are flying in for the wedding with a few of her cousins, and Evie, her uncle’s three-year-old granddaughter, is the flower girl. They picked out her adorable white dress online and have already sent Emma pictures of how cute it is on her.

The first one we try on is a simple strap dress that goes to the floor. All three of us look in the mirror, and everyone agrees it’s too plain and needs a little something extra. The second and third don’t go much better. I slip the fourth on and

smile. It's similar to Emma's with the thin straps and deep V down the front with the open back. It has a long slit up the side, showing off one leg. It's elegant, and I feel super sexy. Maverick enters my mind at the thought of him seeing me for the first time in this.

We step out together, and all of us have grins on our faces. Loving that they feel the same, we turn to Emma, and she's beaming. "I hope you all love this one as much as I do. You all look gorgeous." She wipes her eyes again and laughs.

I turn to look at Sophia and Skye, and we can't stop grinning. "I'm never taking this dress off," Sophia whispers. "I feel like an elegant but sexy panther on the prowl."

Skye and I laugh. "I agree. I can't wait to see Cole's face when he sees me in this.

"Do you like it, Bella?" Emma asks me softly.

"I love it." I grin at Emma. "It's just what I imagined."

"Yay! Now, let's get Luna's picked out. Sage, have you found anything you like yet? They have a lot of dresses here that the mother of the groom could wear." A sad look passes across her face before she blinks back the tears and smiles at my mom.

"I would love to try on dresses for you, Emma." She squeezes her hand and smiles. I know this has to be hard for Emma without her mom here. I swallow the lump in my throat. I can't imagine shopping for wedding dresses without my mom.

"Mimi and Maya, you better join in on the fun. Dresses for everyone today!" I cheer and make Emma laugh. Emma may not have her mom physically in the room with her, but I hope she's feeling all the love surrounding her today from us and her mom. If we can ease her heartache just a little bit, we will.

\* \* \*

"I SHOULDN'T HAVE EATEN that last sushi," I groan. "I've got a bridesmaid dress to fit into, and I feel like I just ate the whole ocean."

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Emma laughs. “Just do extra yoga this week, and you’ll be fine.”

“Sushi is so addicting. I’m with Bella. I can down some sushi like no other.” Sophia takes a sip of her martini.

After dress shopping, we went to our favorite sushi place to celebrate everyone finding a dress they love.

“I think this calls for a cheer. We not only found dresses today but shoes and accessories.” We all hold up our glasses, “to a successful shopping day!” I cheer. Clinking glasses, we take a sip and grin.

“Tomorrow’s a big day, girls. Are you ready to head out?” Sage asks us.

“Are you, Mimi, and Maya sure you don’t want to come to the bachelorette party?” Emma asks them.

“We’re sure honey. I know Luna’s too young, and we’re too old. You need to be with people your own age for this one.” My mom pats Emma’s hand.

“Plus, my son helped plan it, and there’s no telling how crazy it will get.” Maya starts laughing, and Emma groans.

“Good thing I was helping him and keeping him in line. Did you know you can actually rent tigers?” Skye asks, looking around the table.

“Oh my God,” Emma says wide-eyed. “Please don’t tell me there will be any form of wild animals tomorrow night.”

“I shut that one down right away. Don’t worry.” Skye puts her arm around Emma and squeezes her.

“It’s going to be fine. You heard Maverick last night. He said he would respect your wishes. He loves you and Noah and wouldn’t do anything you wouldn’t like.” I take the last sip and finish my martini.

“You’re right. It’s going to be fun.”

“That’s the spirit,” Skye says, giving Emma a loud kiss on the cheek.



We get up to leave and say our goodbyes before Sophia and I head to my jeep. Spa day starts at eleven tomorrow, and the boys are teeing off at the same time.

Surely Maverick doesn't have something too crazy planned, does he? You never know with him. That boy is always full of surprises.

# Chapter Eight

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## Maverick

I DRIVE THE GOLF CART BEHIND JAMES AND NOAH AS WE HEAD to the main building to return the golf carts. It was a close game, but Cole and I have bragging rights now.

“I’m going to rub this in Noah’s face for the next four months as payback for what I’ve had to listen to every time we talk on the phone.” Cole laughs and takes a drink of his beer.

“He has it coming to him,” I agree. “So hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. It’s been on my mind lately.” I don’t know if it’s all the beer we have drank, but I feel the need to talk to someone.

“Fire away. You can ask me anything.”

“So you’ve dated Skye since senior year of high school?”

“Yep. Emma was the one who set us up. She was dating my best friend at the time, and arranged a blind date with the four of us.” He smiles at the memory.

“Do you ever regret settling down so early and not being able to explore other options?”

“Other options? As in other girls?”

“Yeah, I mean. You’ve been with one girl since you were eighteen. Doesn’t being with one person for your whole life scare you?”

“I slept around with other girls before Skye, but once I met her, I knew I didn’t want anyone else.”

“But what if, down the road, you’re not enough for her? What if she leaves you after all this time and rips your heart out?”

“Geez, man, way to think of the worst-case scenario. Relationships are a two-way street. I could easily do the same to her, but we love and trust one another, *not* to hurt each other. She’s my person, just like Emma is Noah’s. It’s scary to feel so deeply for someone, but it’ll be worth taking the chance on. Are we talking about someone in particular here?” Cole looks at me and grins.

“I’m just curious and trying to figure some things out,” I answer, avoiding the question.

“You know...” he says, studying me for a second. “I wasn’t as single as long as you, but after a while, sleeping around gets pretty lonely. Having someone to come home to and spend your nights with is nice. Sometimes putting your heart out there and going for what you want can end up being the best thing that could ever happen to you.”

“What if there’s too much at stake if I mess up and it falls apart?” I ask him quietly. I couldn’t lose Noah and his family if this goes south. Hell, I can’t imagine not having Bell’s friendship in my life either if something were to happen. She’s one of my best friends too. There are so many people I care about who will be involved, and I don’t know if I can live up to it and be the guy she deserves.

“I’ve only known you for a short time, but I can tell you that you have so many people around you who love you. If things did fall apart for some reason, then I know for a fact your family and friends would still be there to support you no matter what.”

We pull up to the main building and park the golf cart. “Thanks for the talk, Cole.”

“Anytime. It’s not like you can talk to Noah about it, with it being his sister and all.”

He laughs at my wide-eyed expression. “How did you...”

“I figured it out the night we all went to Roxy’s. You gripped that beer bottle so tight I thought it would bust in your hand. When I saw it was because Bella was dancing with another guy, I put two and two together. There’s a fine line between wanting to protect her and being jealous. You didn’t blink an eye when Sophia danced with a guy.”

“Well shit, does everyone know but me? Emma cornered me by the bathrooms Wednesday night at Driftwoods.”

Laughing, Cole shakes his head. “Don’t worry. I haven’t said anything to Skye, and I’m guessing Emma hasn’t said anything to Noah because you’re still alive.”

“Very funny. I’m not saying or doing anything until after the wedding. Noah has too much on his plate now, and I don’t want to ruin anything. Plus, I’m not sure what I’m feeling or what I’m going to do about it. All these feelings snuck up on me like they were buried deep, and the wall just crashed down, letting them in all at once.”

“Bottom line, Noah wants you and Bell to be happy. If being together makes you both happy, he’ll get used to the idea. Man, would I love to be in the room for that conversation.”

“Yeah, I’m not looking forward to that talk if things move forward between us. I would also have to tell my sister and Noah’s dad. Can you see why this has me so fucked up in the head?”

“I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes.” He laughs as I try and knock his hat off. “Let me ask you this. Is she worth going through these uncomfortable conversations for?”

I think of Bell, and I don’t hesitate. “Yeah, she’s worth it.”

“Sounds like you found your person.” He grins at me and throws his arm over my shoulder as we walk up to Noah and James.

The four of us pile into the Uber and head to Noah’s house. We’re going to shower and change there before the girls return from the spa.

We walk into his house, and Noah gasps. “What the hell?”

Boob and penis balloons fill every corner of the downstairs, and more are on the deck out back. James and Cole start laughing as we wade through matching streamers that are hanging down. “You can’t have a bachelor and bachelorette party without at least one boob or penis decoration,” I tell Noah.

“One? You filled the whole damn place with tits and dicks. What are those?” He points to the cupcakes.

“They’re cupcakes with dicks and tits on them. Pretty cool, huh? I can’t believe you can just call someone and order a cupcake with a big penis on it. She told me they’re very popular.”

Cole and James are laughing their asses off in the corner.

Cole reaches for something in a bowl and walks over to Noah. “I think it’s only right that the losers today have to wear this all night.” He puts a lighted flashing penis necklace around his neck before doing the same with James.

“We are not wearing these,” James says, looking at Cole. “Can we at least get the boob ones?”

“Nope,” I say. “Winners get to choose.”

Cole fist-bumps me and laughs. “This is better than a trophy.”

“Way better.” I agree.

“I’m going to go take a shower. You guys should do the same before the girls get here,” he mumbles before walking away. I laugh when he swats a penis balloon out of his face on the way to the stairs.

“I’ll be back soon. I’m going to run next door to Emma’s and shower.” Cole goes out the back door to take the beach to Emma’s.

“James, you can use the bathroom in the hall right there. I’ll go upstairs and use that one.”

“Sounds good.” He gets his things and heads to the bathroom.

I look around and grin. Mom and Sage did a great job decorating. I'll have to remember to thank them again for helping me out. I glance at my watch. The food will arrive in an hour, and the girls should be back soon to change and get ready. I grab my things and run upstairs to shower.

A SHORT TIME LATER, I step out of the shower. Rubbing my hair with a towel, I walk out to the spare bedroom and hear Bell gasp as I look up and stop, unable to move.

She's standing in a pink lacy bra and matching thong. The lace is so sheer I can see her nipples through it. I feel myself get hard as I meet her blue eyes staring into mine. Her eyes drop and roam my body. There's no mistaking the hunger in them. I realize I still have the towel in my hand and just let Bell know how much I want her right now.

I put the towel around my waist, and disappointment flashes across her face. If I weren't so shell-shocked from seeing her half naked, I probably would have laughed, but right now, I'm using all my willpower to stay put. The only thing my body wants to do is take her thong off with my teeth and taste her.

"Sorry. I didn't know you were in here." She picks up her dress and quickly steps into it. Does she ever wear anything I don't imagine myself ripping off her later? She's wearing a pale pink dress that fits her in all the right places with a cut-out under her breast, showing off her tan skin. She's struggling with the zipper in the back. Sighing, I walk toward her, willing myself to behave.

"Here, let me help," I say softly. She turns around and moves her hair to the side. I close my eyes and try to steady my breathing. I'm almost afraid to touch her. The pull to her is more than I can bear, and I don't know if I'm strong enough to fight it. Opening my eyes, I slowly pull the zipper up before forcing myself to back away.

"Thanks," she whispers.

"No problem." I clear my throat and busy myself with getting my clothes ready.

“Maverick?” I turn and see the questions in her eyes, and I know she wants answers to what is going on between us. Answers I don’t know that I can give.

“We can’t do this now, Bell,” I force myself to say. “It’s Noah’s house, and if he found me in here with you, it would ruin his night. They deserve a good party tonight.”

“You’re right.” She looks away from me. “I’ll see you downstairs,” she says softly before walking away.

I sit on the bed and let out a long breath I’m holding. I’m two seconds away from saying fuck it and throwing my best friend’s sister on the bed, burying myself deep inside her in his own house. I’m headed straight to hell for that one. Sighing, I get up and quickly dress. I’m going to need a lot of booze tonight to make me forget what I just saw under that dress.

## Chapter Nine

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### Bella

I SHUT THE DOOR TO THE BEDROOM AND LEAN AGAINST IT, trying to come to terms with what just happened. Good lord, that man is built. I press my thighs together and can feel the wetness between my legs.

After that, there is no denying he wants me. I saw the want in his eyes just as much as I saw how swollen and ready he was for me. I can see why girls beg him for another night and get attached. I could never get enough of what I saw and how it made me feel.

I take in a shaky breath and walk downstairs. The girls and I got back from the spa feeling all relaxed and ready to have a good time tonight, and now I'm a ball of sexual tension and frustration. Sighing, I head straight for the drinks and pour myself a glass of chilled white wine.

"There you are. Have you seen Mav? The guys were looking for him?" Sophia pours herself a glass of white and takes a sip.

"No, he must be upstairs in one of the spare bedrooms getting ready." I feel bad lying, but it's not something I can talk about now. Not until I know where it's going.

"Oh, there he is." I turn to where she is looking as Maverick walks over to us and grabs a bottle of bourbon. He pours a double and takes a sip.

"Rough day?" Sophia says, laughing and eyeing the bourbon. "I thought you guys won."



“We did. I just have a lot on my mind right now and need to take the edge off.” He glances at me before quickly looking at Sophia.

“Don’t worry about tonight. Everything looks great. Emma thought the balloons and cupcakes were hilarious. The bottomless mimosas might have something to do with that, but she seems happy and excited.”

He smiles. “I’m glad she loves it. Our moms did a great job.”

“My mom helped with this?” I look around and laugh. “I bet they had a blast setting this up.”

“I’m sure they did. We’re probably one wine bottle short, too,” he jokes.

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Sophia giggles.

The caterers come in, and Maverick sets his glass down to show them where the food goes. A few more people arrive, and I recognize a couple of guys that Noah and Maverick went to high school with that they have kept in contact over the years. They must have brought their girlfriends or wives with them because there are some girls I don’t recognize.

I see Emma talking to Sadie, James’ wife, in the corner. I’m glad she was able to come with us today. Harper was teething yesterday and was fussy, so Sadie skipped out on the dress shopping. James’ parents were able to watch her today, so they both could make it.

“Well, if it isn’t Noah’s little sister all grown up. You look amazing, Bella.” I smile when I see Eric walking over. He used to be over a lot with Maverick during high school, and he was always so sweet to me. He gives me a hug and grins at me.

“Eric, I haven’t seen you in forever. Where have you been hiding?”

“Well, I was away at school for a while in California studying law and ended up staying there longer than I thought. I recently moved back last year and work for a firm near

Miami. I drove up for the weekend. There was no way I was missing Noah's bachelor party."

"Eric, I see you made the drive up." I hear Mav say. I glance behind me and see him standing there.

"Mav, how have you been, man? It's been way too long."

"I'm doing good. Business is great, so I can't complain."

"Can you believe how grown up Bella is now? I should have been paying more attention to her back in the day than you dickheads." Eric looks at me and winks.

I look at Mav and see his jaw tighten. He would always get on me about being so nice to Eric back then. He never did like the fact that Eric was always talking to me when he would come over. I was only thirteen at the time, but I only talked to Eric because I knew Mav would pay attention to me if I did. I liked it when he got protective over me. It's when I started dating that it got worse to the point that I started getting annoyed with him.

"She was only thirteen at the time. She was jailbait when you turned eighteen."

"Don't worry, you and Noah made it perfectly clear she was off limits. Especially you. I still remember that punch you threw me."

"Wait, what? Maverick hit you? Why?" I look at Maverick and then Eric. I'm shocked that I'm just hearing about this.

"I may have said something inappropriate about you. Which, looking back, I shouldn't have, but I was seventeen and a dumbass. Mav let me know it, too." Eric laughs and takes a drink of his beer.

He hit Eric because of me? "How inappropriate was it?" I ask, raising my eyebrows at Eric.

"You don't want to know. Let's just say he had no business talking about you that way when you were only thirteen. Or ever really." Mav glares at Eric.

Laughing, Eric looks at the two of us. "You know, I'm surprised you guys were never together. The way Mav was so

protective about you and would knock out anyone wanting to try something with you, it's almost as if he was jealous. I always thought one day he would make you his. Guess I was wrong." He shrugs his shoulders and smiles at someone across the room. "I'm going to go say hi to Andrew. It was nice talking to you again, Bella. Maybe we could have another conversation later by the bonfire?"

"Maybe," I murmur, my mind too occupied by the fact that Maverick has kept guys away from me my whole life.

"Cool." He nods at Maverick and heads over to talk to Andrew.

I cross my arms and look at Maverick. He shifts uncomfortably and meets my eyes.

"How long have you been keeping guys away from me?"

His mouth quirks up, fighting a smile. "Probably since you could walk."

"Oh my God, you have got to be kidding me."

"Hey, there were a few that I didn't mind."

"You mean, the gay ones that didn't know it yet or the ones that were so freaking scared to try anything with me." I laugh, remembering all my awkward high school dates.

"What? They seemed like nice guys who wouldn't hurt you." He tries to look innocent and fails when he starts laughing.

"You are unbelievable, you know that?" I should be mad, but for some reason, it makes me all warm and giddy inside to know he could have been jealous.

"I just don't ever want you to get hurt. Guys want one thing with girls who are as beautiful as you." He meets my eyes, and I see him struggling with his emotions.

Without thinking, I let my frustration with him get the better of me. "Not everyone is like you, Maverick. There are a lot of guys out there that want more than one fuck from me."

He flinches like I slapped him, and I immediately regret what I said. I know Maverick isn't a bad guy. He likes to sleep around, yes, but not to get what he wants and hurt the girl.

"Is that what you think? That I just want to fuck you to get what I want, then move on to the next girl?" He quietly asks me, his green eyes filled with hurt.

"No, I don't think that. I'm sorry. I regretted saying it the moment I said it. I'm just so confused and don't know what to think."

"That makes two of us." He looks away and takes a long sip of bourbon. Skye calls everyone over to get a plate of food. "We better go eat while it's hot. Skye was in charge of the food, and I think she ordered one of everything from the caterers." He gives a small laugh to lighten the mood.

"I'll be over in a second. I'm going to get some more wine." He looks at me before nodding and walking away to the table.

I feel bad for what I said. I know I hurt him, and I didn't mean it. Well, not technically. I know we have sexual chemistry, but I've never let myself think past having just one night with Maverick. Would I be like all the other girls and be a one-night stand? I know he would never intentionally hurt me, but could my heart handle just one night? Would he ever want more?

I fill my plate and make my way to the back deck to eat. I sit down next to Emma, and she pulls me in for a hug.

"This is so much fun. Maverick and Skye did an amazing job. This shrimp is to die for." She takes another bite of the grilled shrimp.

"They really did." I take a bite of the shrimp and moan. "You're right. This is amazing," I laugh.

"Told you." She takes another bite and grins. "So, Sophia told me you have a hot date on Sunday."

"I do. We met on Wednesday when I was filming for Maverick. He seems nice."

“You don’t sound very excited about it,” she laughs.

“I don’t know,” I sigh. “There’s just something missing. I want what you and Noah have. I want the fireworks and the passion. Maybe it just takes time, and I’ll feel something on the date after I get to know him better.”

“You’ll have that, Bella. Have fun on your date on Sunday, but don’t try and force things if it’s not there. You deserve it all, so don’t settle. If I learned anything, it’s that life’s too short, and you have to go after what you want. Hang onto that love for as long as you’re given.”

“You’re right. I’ve told myself I would never settle, and I’m not about to start now. I’ll see how Sunday goes. I owe it to myself and him to see if there’s anything more worth pursuing.”

Noah comes up behind her and snuggles her neck. She blushes at something he whispers in her ear. Laughing, she turns to me, her eyes bright with love. “I’ll be right back. I need to help Noah with something.”

I’m sure she does. Laughing, I wave them away. “Just don’t be too long. We’ll be starting the bonfire soon.”

“Oh, trust me, this won’t take long.” Noah looks at Emma, and a pang of envy hits me. What I wouldn’t give to have someone look at me like that and feel the same way. At least someone is getting what they want tonight. He takes her hand, and she giggles as they sneak away.

\* \* \*

NOAH THROWS another log on the fire. I dig my feet in the sand and relax back in my chair. I’ve had way too much wine, but I don’t care. It feels good to be this relaxed and not have a care in the world.

Sophia giggles and plops down next to me, almost falling over in her chair. It’s a good thing we’re sharing a bed tonight in Noah’s spare room. We’ll crawl upstairs if we have to.

Laughing, I help Sophia fix her tilted chair in the sand, almost knocking me over, which causes us to laugh even

harder.

“This night has been so much fun. I just talked to Skye. We’re in for a treat in a second,” she whispers.

“What do you mean? They didn’t get strippers, did they? Noah’s going to flip.”

“No, not strippers, but we do get to enjoy some half-naked men.”

“I don’t understand.” Just then, Maverick and Skye come out carrying leis and flower head wreaths for everyone. Skye bends down and puts a flower wreath on my head, giving me a sloppy drunk kiss on the cheek. Laughing, she moves on to the next person and does the same. I notice Maverick giving Emma a lei before kissing her cheek. Emma grins at him, obviously excited to see what is next.

Maverick puts a lei around Sophia, and she laughs when he blows a raspberry on her cheek. Bending down in front of me, he slowly puts the lei around my neck. His eyes never leave mine as he pulls my hair out from my lei so my curls are lying perfectly against it.

Leaning forward, my breath hitches as I feel his soft lips touch my cheek. I can feel his warm breath as he lingers before pulling away. His eyes are a little glossy from drinking, but there’s no mistaking the desire in them. I see him swallow hard before he breaks eye contact and goes to the next person.

Trying not to pant in front of everyone, I touch the lei around my neck and smile. They’re real flowers. I take a deep inhale of their fragrant floral, hoping the scent will distract me from the coconut and ocean smell that just consumed me.

Hawaiian music starts to play through the speakers, and we all turn to see people coming down the steps to the beach. There are five beautiful Hawaiian girls wearing grass skirts and flower bikini tops. Behind them are five gorgeous guys wearing some type of sarong with small flower leis around their huge biceps. Each one is carrying a torch.

“Oh my God, they’re gorgeous. Look at the size of their arms. And the sarongs. Do you think they’re naked under

there?” Sophia peers at them and tilts her head like she’s trying to see through the small fabric.

“I have no clue. But you’re right. They’re gorgeous. All of them. Look at the abs on those girls.”

“You look just like that. What are you talking about.” She laughs and gets excited when they get in position in front of everyone. Maverick and Skye get two chairs for Noah and Emma so they can be in front. Emma laughs as Noah pulls her on his lap, dismissing the other chair.

We watch in awe as the music changes, and they light the torches they are holding on either side. The girls hula dance while the guys throw and catch the lighted torches in the air. We clap our hands as one guy juggles three torches, the flames so close to his hands that I have no clue how he doesn’t get burnt. When the performance is over, we all cheer. The girls come over and pull us from our seats to teach us some basic hula dancing.

Laughing, I move my hips to the music and let the rhythm take over. I close my eyes and feel my body sway and move as if it knows exactly what to do. Smiling, I open my eyes and see Maverick staring at me from across the fire. His eyes are dark and full of heat. I hold his eye contact and continue to move, loving the feel of his eyes on me.

My body gets hot and flushed as I feel him undress me with his eyes. I move my hand over my stomach before bringing it back up over my breasts. I watch his eyes get heavy-lidded as he peers at me from under his long lashes. I feel like the sexiest girl in the room dancing for him like this.

When the music ends, I slowly come back to my surroundings. I see Sophia talking to one of the fire dancers and giggling at something he says. The dancers say goodbye and leave, giving Emma and Noah their congratulations before they go. Emma runs and jumps in Maverick’s arms as Noah hugs Skye.

“That was amazing! Thank you so much for everything tonight. I couldn’t imagine a better party for us.” Maverick laughs as she squeezes him tight.

“I’m glad you liked it. You still get your half-naked men at your bachelorette party, and Noah still got half-naked girls at his bachelor party. It’s just a much more classier way of doing it.”

“Way better than strippers,” she laughs. She walks over to hug Skye as Noah hugs Maverick.

“Thanks, brother. You guys made this night so memorable for us. It was just what we wanted.” Noah pulls back from the hug and beams at Maverick.

“Anything for you guys. I enjoyed the show just as much as you. Maybe more.” He briefly meets my eyes before looking away. “I’m glad you didn’t go the Vegas route. You were right. This was better.”

“Wow, turning down strippers *and* gambling. There may be hope for you yet.” Noah laughs.

“Yeah, I guess I’m just full of surprises lately.”

SOPHIA HANDS me a refill of wine as we settle around the fire. My blood is humming with alcohol, making me want to be brave when I know I shouldn’t. Everyone has left except the seven of us.

Emma and Noah are across the fire from me, snuggling on a chair together, and Skye is leaning back against Cole on a blanket. All of this pent-up sexual tension I’m feeling is putting me on edge. I’ve never felt this sexually aroused in my life. Maverick gets up and tells Noah he’s going to get more firewood. I glance at Sophia and see her making a s’more.

“I’ll be right back. I have to use the bathroom.” She nods and gets back to putting her marshmallow on the stick. I head for the stairs and turn around to see if anyone is watching before I bypass them and go under the deck, where the firewood is stacked in the back. I see Maverick setting logs aside to take back to the fire. He stills when he sees me.

“Need some help?” He looks at me warily as I walk up to him. He searches my face and must see what I’m feeling because his eyes narrow.

“What are you up to?”



“I just..” I stop, not knowing what to say. I reach out and put my hand on his heart and feel it beating wildly beneath his t-shirt. He closes his eyes as if in pain. “Why are you fighting this so hard? We’re two adults who want the same thing.”

He opens his eyes, and I can see the fear in them. “I can’t mess this up. You and your family mean too much to me. You deserve more than what I can give you right now, and I don’t even know if I am capable of doing more. I won’t take the chance of hurting you.”

“I’m a big girl. I can handle it.” I step closer and see him fighting it. “Please,” I whisper as my eyes start to shut and my lips part.

“You are playing with fire here, Bell,” he says in a low warning voice.

“I’m ready to be burned.”

“Fuck,” I hear him say seconds before his fingers dig in my hair and his lips crash into mine. He backs me up, and my back hits the wooden posts as he lifts me up. My legs circle his waist as I come in contact with sheer hardness.

I moan as his tongue explores mine. He taste just as good as I knew he would, but nothing prepared me for the sensations I would feel. A deep throbbing between my legs has me moaning again as I press myself against him.

I hear him growl as his hands find my ass, digging into my skin and holding me tightly against his hardness. He bites my lower lip before sucking hard. I thread my fingers through his beautiful hair and hang on tight as he invokes sensations in my body I never thought possible.

He pulls back and breathes hard as he grasps my face in his hands.

“This can’t happen again, Bell. Not when I haven’t figured shit out. I would rather die than ever hurt you. Noah’s my best friend, and I can’t just fuck his sister because I want to. I won’t do that to you.”

“Wait, what?” I ask him, hurt and confusion clearly evident on my face. “I can handle it. No one has to know.” I

hate the desperation in my voice, but I've waited so long for this moment, and I just want him to take this ache away. I want to know what he can show me, what he can make me feel.

"I've never done more, Bell. I don't know if I can," he softly admits.

"We don't have to have it all figured out right away. I know you would never intentionally hurt me. I trust you."

"That's the problem. I don't trust myself. I just need time to figure some things out. I won't put you in the category of all the other women I've been with. You deserve better than just a quick fuck to satisfy our needs."

"I have a date on Sunday. I can't just put my life on hold while you figure things out." I feel like I've been waiting forever for him, and I'm so freaking tired of waiting.

"I know. And it's not fair to you to wait for me while I get my shit together. Noah's wedding's coming up, and we can't do anything until then. I don't know how he'll react, and I won't take the chance that it will ruin this moment for him." He slowly releases me, and I immediately feel the emptiness that it brings when I'm not touching him.

He brushes my hair back, and I stare at him, unsure what to say. I'm trying to process what just happened.

"Go on your date Sunday. Despite what I feel for Logan, he seems like a nice guy who has his shit together."

"Are you serious right now? You really want me to go on a date with Logan? That's really what you want?" I ask, my anger and frustration getting the better of me.

"Of course, I don't want it, but I can't give you the answers you need right now. It's not fair to you to wait on me for something I'm not even sure I should let myself want. It's not like we can go to this wedding as dates, anyway. He may be a good option for you." His eyes plead with mine to understand.

"And what if I have a good time Sunday and Logan turns out to be what I want?"

I see him harden at the thought. “I guess that’s the chance I have to take.” He turns and starts to pick up the firewood.

I stare at his back, unblinking, trying to wrap my head around the fact that he wants me to give Logan a chance and take him to the wedding. Does he already have a date? Is that what he’s trying to tell me? I break my stare, slowly turn around, and walk away. He wants me to have a date for the wedding—then I’ll get a date for the damn wedding. Let’s see how he feels when I’m in another man’s arms.

# Chapter Ten

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## Maverick

I WATCH HER WALK AWAY, AND I FEEL LIKE THE SHITTIEST person on the planet. Every part of me wants to run after her and tell her not to go on the date Sunday—to ask her to wait for me to come to terms with what I’m feeling, but I can’t have her wait for something that I’m not sure I’ll be able to give her.

I take a jagged breath and run my fingers through my hair in frustration. My body is still on fire from her touch, and I can taste her on my lips. It’s better than anything I’ve ever had or experienced. Her body fit perfectly against mine, and I could have kissed her like that forever. I pick up the firewood, needing to do something to stop these thoughts.

When I return to the bonfire, I see Skye and Cole stacking the chairs and putting the trash in bags. Sophia is putting sand over the fire. I go over to help and don’t see Bell anywhere.

“Where did everyone go?” I grab a chair and fold it before stacking it with the others.

“Noah and Emma headed upstairs to bed,” Skye turns to look at me. “We told them we would handle the cleanup. Bell said she had a headache and was going to go sleep it off.” I resist the urge to go and check on her because I don’t think I have it in me to walk away this time if she asks me to stay.

Sophia picks up empty wine bottles and sticks them in the garbage bag. “This was a really fun party. You guys did an awesome job.” Sophia smiles at Skye and me.

“It was a team effort. The fire dancers were a hit. I’m so glad we went with them over the tigers.” Skye looks at me and laughs.

“Tigers are still cool, but I’m glad we went with the fire dancers, too. It seemed like the safer route.” I grin at Skye as I finish stacking the chairs. The girls grab the trash bags as Cole and I put the chairs back under the stairs.

We quickly clean the back deck and head inside. The caterers came back to get all their dishes and put the leftovers in the fridge, so there’s not much to clean up.

I turn to Cole and Skye. “You guys go get some sleep. Sophia and I can finish up here before I go.” We say our goodbyes, and they leave to walk back to Emma’s house.

“You’re not staying here?” Sophia asks after they’re gone. “You’ve had too much to drink to drive home.”

“I know that. I’m going to catch an Uber to Joe’s. I’m not in the mood to sleep yet.”

“Which is code for *I’m going to go find someone to hook up with.*” She rolls her eyes at me.

That’s not my plan, but I let her think what she wants. I can’t sleep here tonight with Bell sleeping so close to me. I don’t trust myself not to go to her, and I don’t want to go home to an empty apartment right now. The space has been feeling lonely lately, and I don’t like it.

“One of these days, you’re going to get tired of one-night stands and will want more.”

Her words hit too close to home. I may already be there. “I think we’re good here.” I change the subject and look around to see if we missed anything. “Thanks for helping with cleanup.” I pull out my phone and order an Uber.

“Be safe tonight. Call me if you need me.” She gives me a hug. “Love you.”

“I’ll be safe. Love you too.” Yawning, Sophia goes up the stairs to get in bed with Bell. Jealously hits me straight in the gut.

I turn off the lights and lock the door behind me as I wait for my ride. I glance at my phone and see it's after one. Joe's is open until three, but the crowd shouldn't be bad this late at night. Hopefully, I can find a table in the corner and not be bothered while I drink her out of my system.

I TAKE another sip of bourbon and can tell my head is getting fuzzy. There are just a few people here at Joe's, so I'm able to sulk in the dark corner and be by myself. I can't get that kiss out of my head, no matter how much I drink. I take another sip and hear a familiar voice.

"We meet again." I look up and try to focus on the girl in front of me. At first, I have trouble placing her, and then I remember it's the pretty brunette from the other night. Groaning, I put my head in my hands.

"If you're here to tease me about one of the most embarrassing moments of my life, I'm not really in the mood."

Laughing, she sits down. "I'm not here to tease you. It happens."

"Well, it doesn't happen to me." I take another sip of bourbon, and she eyes my drink.

"I take it you still haven't dealt with your problem yet."

"Thanks for the observation, captain obvious."

She laughs again, and I give her a small smile. She seems like a sweet girl.

"I'm a really good listener if you want to talk." She takes a sip of her water.

"I made out with my best friend's younger sister tonight." I blurt out.

"Wow, okay. I didn't see that one coming. So are you sitting here drowning your sorrows because you regret it?"

I shake my head. "I don't regret it. That makes me feel even worse. Noah's my best friend and knows what I'm like. He knows my past with women. If he knew I wanted his sister, he would kill me."

“Does she want you?”

Images of her blue eyes filled with longing appear in my head, making my heart beat fast against my chest. “I think she’s wanted me for a long time, but I refused to acknowledge it. It was safer for her if I didn’t let myself look at her that way. She was good at hiding her feelings from me, but now that I can see them, I know they’re deeper than what she’s let on,” I admit to her softly.

“And you don’t think you can do deeper?”

I shake my head and look at the glass in my hand. “For the first time, I want to. If I mess this up, though, a lot of people are going to get hurt. And then there’s the whole wedding thing. Noah’s getting married in less than a month. Even if I wanted to be with her, I couldn’t spring it on him right before his wedding. So here I am, drinking her out of my head and praying I can get past these next weeks so I can figure out what comes next.”

She blows out a long breath. “Did you tell her all of this? Does she know that you’re thinking about trying with her?”

I take another long sip and welcome the burn. *I’m ready to get burned, she says.* I shake the thought away. “Not exactly. I told her the kiss couldn’t happen again and that I needed time to figure some things out. I let her know she deserved more than just a fuck from me.” I look at her and lift the side of my lips in an attempt at a smile. “No offense.”

“None taken,” she laughs. “I’m actually really glad it didn’t happen that night with us. I wasn’t in the right headspace, and it was so unlike me. I don’t do one-night stands. I guess I was just so hurt by my ex-boyfriend that I wanted to be reckless and forget for one night. So I’m thankful that your parts didn’t work.”

“Glad to be *not* of service,” I say dryly. “My parts work just fine, by the way. Just to clarify that again.”

“I’m sure they do.” Her eyes dance with amusement. “So what did she say when you told her all that?”

“She told me that we could work things out as we go. That no one needs to know right now until we do. I can’t sneak around behind Noah’s back for the next month. I wouldn’t be able to look him in the eye.” I look down at the table. “So I told her to go on the date she has planned this Sunday with some lifeguard-looking wannabe and to maybe ask him to be her date for the wedding.”

“You did what? You told her to go on a date? Why would you do that?” She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Because I didn’t want her to have to wait for me while I get my shit together. He seems like a nice guy, and for once, I’m trying not to stand in the way. He can give her what I can’t right now. Besides, she needs a date for the wedding, and I obviously can’t take her.”

“Jesus, men are so stubborn and just plain idiots sometimes. Have you ever stopped to consider that by saying that she’s taking it as a personal hit? She’s seen you take home beautiful women for years, and when she’s finally vulnerable enough to let you know that she likes you, you shut her down. How do you think she feels that you will sleep with all these women but not her? She’s probably wondering what they have that she doesn’t.”

Does she really think that? “But I told her she deserves more than the other girls I’ve been with.”

“Yeah, but then you told her to go date someone else. She obviously doesn’t care about your past, so why should you? She sees something in you and trusts you. You need to start believing in yourself and know that you have what it takes to make her happy.”

I think about what she just said, the alcohol making it hard to concentrate. I’ve never had a problem not believing in myself. Hell, my ego is probably too big when it comes to women. Bell is different, though, she’s...well, she’s Bell. With her, I get so unsure of myself and start questioning everything.

“So what do I do now?” I look at her across the table.



“You communicate with her. Tell her what you’re thinking, what you’re afraid of. Get on the same page with what you expect,” she says softly. I start to smile at her, and she looks at me curiously. “What’s the smile for?”

“I just realized I’ve been pouring out my problems to you, and I don’t even know your name.”

“Sara,” she says, smiling. “And you are?”

“Maverick, but most call me Mav.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mav.”

“You too, Sara.” I get an idea and sit up straight. “So this might be a crazy idea to you and way too weird for you to say yes, but I need a date for the wedding. I was really dreading taking someone who would be hanging all over me all night, and most girls get the wrong ideas at weddings and start to get stars in their eyes. You would be perfect, though. You know the situation and won’t expect anything from me. Plus, I could really use someone to distract me from seeing Bell dance with whoever she brings.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t want to get in the middle of a triangle mess.”

“Please. You wouldn’t get in the middle, I promise. I’m telling Bell everything after the wedding is over, and if anything, she’ll be happy that you came with me.”

She studies me, lost in thought, while she decides what to do. After a moment, she says, “Okay, I’ll go with you. On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“There’s a work party that I have to go to next weekend. My ex will be there with the girl he cheated on me with. I need a hot date to shove in his face for the night.”

“Hot date, huh?” I ask, trying to hide my smile.

“Oh, please, we both know you’re hot. Will you do it?”

“Your ex won’t know what hit him,” I grin. “I’m in.”

“We’re quite the pair, aren’t we,” she laughs.

“I’m glad I ran into you tonight, and I’m glad we didn’t sleep together so it’s not messy between us. Your ex is an idiot, you know. You’re going to make someone very happy someday.”

“Yeah, I guess the saying is true. Sometimes, you have to kiss a lot of frogs to find your prince.”

“Are you calling me a frog?” I raise my eyebrows at her, and she laughs.

“Well, you’re not my prince, so technically, you are a frog. But you are the nicest, hottest frog out of all the frogs I’ve kissed if that makes you feel better. Bell is a very lucky girl.”

“I’m starting to think that I’m the lucky one. Let’s just hope I don’t turn out to be one of her frogs.”

“With your stubbornness and protectiveness over the years toward her, she would have gotten rid of you a long time ago if you were a frog. You’re her prince—I just know it.” Her eyes light up with excitement and have a dreamy look in them.

“Ok, Cinderella. I better call it a night before you start singing about love.” I down the rest of my drink and smile.

“How are you getting home?” She frowns and looks at my empty glass.

“Uber.” I start to pull out my phone.

“I can take you home. I was here with some girlfriends and was about to leave when I spotted you. I only had two glasses of wine earlier and have had water since, so I’m good.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to put you out.”

“It’s no trouble. We’re friends, right?”

“Yeah, we’re friends. Thanks for the ride, buddy.” I get up and sway a bit. She laughs and grabs my arm.

“Ok, *buddy*, let’s get you home.”

# Chapter Eleven

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## Bella

I WAKE UP ALONE IN BED. GLANCING AT MY CLOCK, I SEE IT'S almost ten. I tossed and turned most of the night, getting little sleep, so it's no wonder why I slept in. Sophia must already be downstairs with everyone. I'm not looking forward to seeing Maverick this morning. I don't want to face him right now after what happened last night. It went from the hottest kiss I've ever had to him denying me anything more and telling me to go after Logan.

I pull back the covers and use the bathroom. Pulling out my toothbrush from my bag, I brush my teeth and comb my hair before going downstairs. Emma's pulling bacon out of the oven, and Sophia's at the stove making pancakes. They both smile at me as I walk over to them.

"Hey, sleepy head. I hope you're feeling better. Sophia said you had a headache last night." Emma looks at me with a concerned look on her face.

I had a headache, alright, a 6'3 pain in my ass type of headache. "Yeah, I must have had too much wine. I'm feeling better today. Is there anything I can help with?"

Sophia flips over the pancakes before turning to me. "I think we have everything covered. Skye went to get some strawberries next door for the pancakes, and Noah and Cole are relaxing by the pool. Maverick should be over at some point."

"He didn't spend the night?" I ask, surprised. There's no way he could have driven home. We all had way too much to

drink last night.

“No, he took an Uber to a bar after we cleaned up last night. You know him. He probably went to hook up with somebody.”

I sit down suddenly, feeling sick to my stomach. He hooked up with someone last night? Nausea starts to roll in, and I close my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Emma asks, coming over to me and feeling my forehead. “You look pale. I hope you aren’t coming down with something. Let me get you some water.”

I take the glass of water she hands me and take a long sip. “Thanks. I guess I had more to drink than I thought last night. It’s probably just a small hangover. I’m sure I’ll feel better after I eat something.” The thought of food makes my stomach roll even more.

Emma studies me for a minute before turning to Sophia. “We really don’t know for sure if Maverick hooked up with anyone. He could have just had a drink or two at the bar and then went home. We shouldn’t assume anything.” She looks back at me again and gives me a small smile.

She knows I’m upset about it. She asked me a few months back if there was something between Maverick and me. I denied it, but I know she’s been watching us the last couple of months, probably trying to see if she’s right. I guess I’m not good at hiding things like I thought I was.

I give Emma a small smile. “Sophia’s probably right. We all know how Mav is. It’s not likely he’ll ever change.”

Skye comes in, and I help her cut up the strawberries, needing something to do. I get the plates down, and we carry the food to the back deck.

“Hey, sis, you’re up.” Noah grins at me as I come over to sit down.

“I couldn’t sleep last night, so I must have been more tired than I thought. Did you guys have fun last night?”

“We did. Emma was so happy with how it turned out. I admit, I got a little scared at dinner the other night when Mav and Skye were laughing together, but they did a great job.”

“You guys deserve it. I can’t believe you’ll be married soon. Before you know it, you’ll be starting a family.”

“One thing at a time, but yeah, I’m excited for it all.” He looks at me closely. “Is everything okay? You seem a little down this morning.”

“I’m good. I’m probably still tired.” I don’t want him to worry about me or dig deeper into anything. All he needs to be focused on right now is his wedding.

Noah looks up behind me and smiles. Maverick walks in wearing sunglasses and takes the open seat next to me at the table, setting his phone on the table.

“Rough night?” Cole asks, laughing at Maverick.

“You could say that. My head hurts like a mother fucker.” He pours some orange juice and takes a big swallow.

“How was Joe’s?” Sophia asks.

“Fine. I just had one too many bourbons.”

I avoid looking at him and concentrate on putting food on my plate. I stick with one pancake and strawberries. I don’t think my stomach could handle the bacon grease right now.

Everyone eats while we discuss what the plans are for today. Skye and Cole leave in the morning, so today is their last full day here. We planned on taking the jet skis out and boating, but with the sky looking the way it is, we may have to be indoors.

Since everyone is exhausted from the last two days, we decide to hang out here by the pool until the rain comes and go from there. What I really want is to curl up in my bed by myself so I can be alone with my feelings, but I know I need to stay and socialize before Skye and Cole leave.

Maverick’s phone dings on the table next to Sophia, and she glances down.

“Oooh, what have we here? Sara says you left your ID in her car last night and wants to know if she should drop it off at your house later.” My stomach drops as I grip the fork in my hand. Sophia laughs as Maverick tries to take the phone away from her. Another message comes through. “Holy shit! She also said she’s looking forward to the wedding and thanked you again for going with her next weekend.”

I drop my fork, and it loudly clatters on my plate. Everyone turns to look at me. “Sorry, it slipped,” I mumble. I take a drink of orange juice, hoping my hands aren’t visibly shaking.

“Give me the damn phone.” He takes it and throws it back on the table. “So much for privacy around here.” He glares at Sophia.

“Where are you going next weekend?” I turn to look at Sophia, willing her to stop. I don’t want to know any details.

“She has a work party and asked me to go last night,” he sighs.

“She must be pretty special. You usually don’t do dates, and now you have two on your calendar after only one night. I can’t wait to meet her at the wedding.” Sophia grins at Mav and takes a bite of her pancake.

“It’s not like that.” He throws his sunglasses on the table and rubs his hands over his face. “Look, I’m not getting into it right now. You can think what you want.” He glances at me, and I avoid his eye contact. Suddenly feeling hot, I rub the ache in my chest. It’s not that Maverick can’t do more—it’s just that he doesn’t want more with me. I stand up and mumble about having to go to the bathroom.

I lock the door and sag against it, blinking back the tears. God, why does this hurt so bad? Thoughts fly through my head, and I try to catch my breath. He was with Sara last night, and now they have two dates planned. Is this why he told me to go with Logan because he wants to see where this goes with Sara? I thought he was fighting his feelings for me because he was afraid of hurting me and of Noah finding out, but it was all an excuse. He never intended for it to go any further.

I wipe my eyes and wonder how many times over the years I have cried over this man. I need to move forward and forget that we can ever be more. I physically and mentally can't do it one second longer. I've created this whole fantasy in my mind that it was fate that he was my brother's best friend and that we got to grow up together. That he was brought into my life for a reason, and one day, when the timing was right, he would look my way, and I would see him look at me the same way I've looked at him for years. It was all a lie, though. Some made-up story in my head that I have wasted years believing would come true.

I take a deep breath to collect myself before opening the door. I see Maverick leaning against the wall when I come out. He looks up and steps toward me.

"Please don't. I don't want to hear any excuses or explanations. I have to go back out there and pretend nothing has happened the last few days. You were right from the beginning. You could never give me what I need."

"It's not what you think. I can't get into it right now because we don't have the time, and everyone will start looking for us, but nothing happened, I swear. I'll explain it all later." His eyes plead with mine.

"So you guys are what? Friends? You've never even kissed?" I stare at him as he shifts uncomfortably. The guilt on his face says it all. I start to walk away.

"Damn it, Bell, I want to explain." He grabs my arm as I go by. I look up at him and see him struggling with the words.

"You don't have to say anything. The guilt on your face tells me all I need to know." I jerk my arm from his grasp and leave him standing there.

I don't know how I put a smile on my face, but I do as I go back out to everyone. I guess over the years, I've gotten really good at hiding my true feelings. I sit down and try to focus on what everyone else is talking about while I attempt to finish my breakfast.

Maverick returns a little while later and sits down with his sunglasses back on. He probably doesn't want me to see the guilt in those green eyes. He talks a little bit with the boys while we finish eating. I can't tell if he's looking at me or not with those glasses on, but I avoid looking at him, not wanting him to see how badly I'm hurting right now. I put on my fake smile and start talking to the girls about the wedding planning and what's left to be done. I try to ignore the heat coming off in waves next to me or the fact that my heart is once again lying at his feet, crushed into a million pieces.

I'VE SUCCESSFULLY AVOIDED Maverick all day, and I'm feeling pretty proud of the fact that I was able to get through today. After breakfast, the girls and I laid by the pool to work on our tans, and the boys surfed for a bit before the rain came in. We spent the rest of the afternoon playing cards and ended up ordering pizza for dinner. We're all too tired to go out and decide to stay in where it's nice and dry.

I look out the window and see the rain still coming down. We're halfway through the movie, but I've seen it a million times.

"I think I'm going to head home. I'm so tired, and I don't think I can get through the rest of the movie tonight. I just want a hot shower and my bed." I start to take the couch throw off my legs to stand up.

"Are you sure? You can stay here again if you want." Emma pushes pause on the movie and looks at me.

"I'm sure. I've got a lot of edits I want to work on tomorrow, and I want to get a good night's sleep so I can get up early."

"Do you want me to come back with you?" Sophia asks, lifting her head off the couch to look at me.

"No, stay. I know your favorite part is coming up. I'll see you in a little while when you get home." She nods and curls back up under her blanket.

I get up and give Skye and Cole a hug, telling them I'll see them soon for the wedding. I say my goodbyes to Noah and



Emma, intentionally ignoring Maverick before getting my things and jogging to my Jeep in the rain.

Running a hand through my wet hair, I back out of the driveway and head home. Tears start silently falling on their own now that I'm alone and don't have to hide. The rain is coming down steadily as I park and turn off the engine. Lights blind me from behind as someone pulls up alongside me. I see Maverick get out of his Jeep and come running over.

He stands there and looks at me through the window as the rain comes down, soaking his hair and clothes.

“Are you going to let me talk now, or are you going to keep on avoiding me? I can stand here all night. I love the rain.”

Irritated that he followed me home, I know he means it. He's as stubborn as a mule and will stand there all night. I sigh and get out, shutting the door behind me. The rain hits me, and I welcome the coolness of it. I've always loved the rain too. The two of us used to play together in the rain when we were little. Our moms would have to force us inside when the lightning started happening.

I stand there looking at him and cross my arms. He peers down at my chest, and I know my white t-shirt isn't covering much with the rain. His eyes hungrily meet mine before I break contact, ignoring how my body responds to that single look.

“Do you want to talk inside and get out of the rain?”

“No, Sophia will be home soon, so let's get this over with.” Even though I'm hurt and angry, I still don't trust myself alone with him right now indoors.

He runs his hands through his wet hair and looks away before turning toward me.

“I met Sara at a bar outside of town the night I left your parents' house. I was confused about how I was feeling after what happened in the hallway. I thought I could fuck away my emotions, so I went to hook up with someone.”

I flinch at his words, not sure I want to hear anymore.

“She was going through a breakup and wanted an escape that night, too. We left the bar together and started kissing on the side of the building.”

“I really don’t want to hear any more of this.” I start to walk away, but he grabs my arm. “Would you just let me finish? You have a very bad habit of just walking away from me. I’m trying to be completely honest here so you’ll understand.”

I glare at him but stay where I am so he can finish.

“Nothing happened after the kiss. She ended up going home, and I went home alone that night.”

“You expect me to believe you had a girl that was willing to sleep with you, and you just kiss her outside, and then she goes home. You must think I’m stupid if you believe I will buy that.”

“I’m telling the truth. I...I couldn’t do anything with her.”

“What do you mean you couldn’t do anything with her?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s too embarrassing.”

“Well, now you have to tell me. I won’t be able to sleep from the curiosity.” I feel some of my anger leave as amusement takes its place at seeing him so uncomfortable.

“Jesus.” He lifts his head to the sky and lets the rain wash over his face before looking at me. “I couldn’t get hard, okay. She knew she couldn’t get what she wanted from me, so she left.”

“Is this a regular problem you have?” I stare at him, trying not to laugh as his eyes darken, and he takes a step toward me.

“No, it’s not a fucking problem I have. It’s never happened before, no thanks to you.”

“Me? What has your problem got to do with me?”

“Because I couldn’t get you out of my fucking head. Her body wasn’t yours.” He steps closer to me, and I back up, hitting the side of my Jeep. “Her smell wasn’t you. She wasn’t...fucking...you,” he breathes inches away from me.

“You’ve been driving me insane lately, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

My chest rises and falls faster with each word he says. I reach out and run my hand over his chest. His wet shirt is clinging sinfully to his body. His breathing increases as I touch his abs. He grabs both my wrists and puts them above my head against the door.

“You love playing with fire, don’t you,” he whispers in my ear before taking it between his teeth.

I squirm against him, wanting to feel him where it aches. He softly laughs in my ear.

“What am I going to do with you?” He pulls back to look at me and searches my eyes like he’s trying to get a better understanding of what we both are feeling right now. “The things you do to me,” he murmurs before claiming my lips with his.

His tongue finds mine greedily as we deepen the kiss. I want to touch him, but he’s got a strong hold on my wrists, keeping me at his mercy. His mouth trails down my neck, and he licks and sucks the rain off of me. I moan when he sucks hard on my neck. He lets go of my wrists, and I immediately run my hands under his shirt, feeling his back.

He moans into my mouth when I rake my fingernails over his hard muscles. Pressing himself against me, I feel how aroused he is as he grabs the back of my knee and lifts my leg, giving him better access to where I’m aching the most. His hand goes in my hair, grasping hard in desperation as his mouth hungrily eats me up before he finally pulls away. We both are breathing hard and trying to reign in our emotions.

“You are going to be the death of me,” he says in a low voice.

“At least we know you don’t have your *problem* with me.” I giggle.

“No, it’s way worse. I have *this* problem 24/7 with you.” He presses against me to show me just how much of a problem he has. I bite my lip and stifle a moan. His eyes darken. “You

don't know what that does to me," he rasps out. Leaning forward, he releases my bottom lip with his teeth before tracing it with his tongue.

He puts his forehead to mine. "I should be staying away from you before the wedding," he murmurs, "but I can't seem to."

"Then don't," I whisper.

"We both know we can't go any further before the wedding," he says in a pained voice. "I can't sneak around behind Noah's back and risk him finding out. Not to mention the guilt I will feel. Once the wedding is over, we can talk and see where we both are at before saying anything to Noah and Sophia."

"Okay," I nod. I could wait if it meant he was willing to try. My eyes go wide as I back my head away and look up at him. I can't believe I forgot. "You didn't explain what happened last night. You have a date next weekend with Sara, and you're taking her to the wedding."

"Oh, that. I did go to Joe's last night, but only because I didn't trust myself to sleep so close to you and not try anything. My apartment sounded lonely, so I went to drink you out of my head. I saw Sara there, and we started talking, and before I knew it, I had told her all about you. I asked her to the wedding as a friend, knowing she wouldn't expect anything from me.

"In exchange for helping me out, I agreed to be her date for her business party because her ex will be there, and she wants to make him jealous. She offered to drive me home because I was so drunk, and my ID must have fallen out of my wallet." He shrugs his shoulders and grins.

Sara's just a friend. My heart does a little happy dance.

"If I hadn't known you my whole life and already trusted you, I would think this sounds like some weird made-up story to cover your butt."

"It's true, I swear." He laughs and holds up his hands. "Get your stuff out of the car so you can get inside and take a hot

shower. We've been standing in this rain forever, and I don't want you getting sick."

Laughing, I open my Jeep and get my bag before we walk to my front door and stand under the overhang. "You sound like our moms. Don't you remember the hours we would spend in the rain together?"

"Yeah, I remember. Luckily you didn't have boobs at that age, or I wouldn't have been able to concentrate." He glances down again at my wet t-shirt that's clinging to me and grins wickedly before bringing me closer to him. "I think you need one more reminder before tomorrow night's date. We wouldn't want you to forget." I drop my bag on the floor as he captures my lips with his. He goes slower with this kiss, like he's savoring every second. I thread my fingers in his hair and hear him groan as I pull him closer to me. I will never get enough of this.

Pulling back, he grins at me. "That was for you to think about when you're with Logan tomorrow night. Make sure to tell him I said hi."

"Oh, would you stop." I laugh and lightly hit his arm. "What am I supposed to do now? I've already said yes because you told me to, by the way."

"If I remember correctly, I told you I didn't want you to go when we were at the restaurant, but you said yes anyway. Then, I told you to go at the bonfire. I didn't feel I had any right to ask you to cancel when I couldn't promise anything more." He rubs his hands over his face. "I can't believe I'm saying this, especially since I've practically dedicated my whole life to keeping boys away from you, but go have fun tomorrow. You need a date for the wedding, and he could turn out to be a good friend. Just don't sleep with him. I would hate for one of my customers to go missing."

"I'm not going to sleep with him," I say, laughing.

"Good. Because I'm starting to like how the way *you're mine* sounds," he says in a low voice.

"I like the way that sounds, too," I whisper.

“Sophia will be home any minute, and I would rather not make up a *weird* story about how we’re both soaking wet standing in front of your door.” I turn and pick up my bag, and he swats my behind. I yelp and stare wide-eyed at him.

“Yep, I could definitely get used to this.” Grinning, he turns and jogs back to his Jeep. He makes sure I’m inside before he leaves. I look out the window and watch him drive away, praying that at the end of this, my heart will still be whole.

# Chapter Twelve

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## Maverick

PULLING AWAY FROM BELL'S APARTMENT, I CAN'T STOP THE grin on my face. It's like I've become some horny giddy teenager all over again. I grab the beach towel next to me that I always keep in the Jeep and run it through my damp hair. What is it about kissing in the rain that makes it so much hotter?

I wanted, more than anything, to peel that wet t-shirt off her and explore what's underneath. I can almost imagine how she would taste if I licked the rain off those beautiful breasts. I shift in my seat as the throbbing increases at the memory. I wasn't lying when I told her I had a problem around her. It's like I'm fourteen all over again with a constant hard-on.

I park my Jeep on the other side of the building and jog upstairs to my apartment on the second floor. Knowing she's within a short walking distance has always been a comfort to me, but now that I've let myself feel for her, it's becoming more of a temptation.

I peel my wet clothes off and step under the hot shower spray before climbing into bed. I look over at the empty pillow beside me, and a longing to have someone beside me suddenly hits me. Is this what Noah felt every single time he crawled into bed, wishing for Emma to be next to him? I get a deep ache in my chest from how hard that must have been for him.

Is he really going to be okay if I pursue things with Bell? Thoughts go through my head of all the times he was my wingman and how much I bragged to him over the years about the girls I have slept with. Will he think I'm good enough? My

deepest fear is that I won't be. I don't know how to date or be in a relationship. Hell, I've never even slept a full night with a woman. Cuddling has always been too personal for me, and girls get the wrong idea.

Sighing, I put my arm over my forehead and close my eyes. Despite all my fears, the one thing I'm sure of is that she's gotten under my skin, and now that I've gotten a taste of her, I don't think I can stop until I make her mine.

DESPITE TOSSING and turning last night with a mixture of dreams about Bell lying underneath me as I sink into her and then jumping to a nightmare where Noah wants to beat the shit out of me, I get up with the sunrise and decide to check on the waves.

Nothing can calm and center me like a good surf sesh. My dad taught me and Noah to surf at a young age, and the first moment I got up on my board and rode a wave, I was hooked. I did some competitions when I was younger and even won a few, but I grew tired of it over the years. The pressure and training became so intense that it started to take away my joy of surfing. The winning never mattered to me. I just want to surf.

I pull up to the parking lot and walk down to the beach. Scanning the water, I study the waves and patterns for a few minutes to get the feel of them. The waves aren't that big today, but they are smooth. I should be able to have some fun with it. I see a few rollers coming in and smile, already feeling the board under my feet.

I head back to the Jeep and grab my surfboard before sitting in the sand and applying the wax. I notice a couple of surfers going in, but other than that, the beach is deserted. This is exactly what I need to clear my mind.

Finishing up, I throw my wax in my bag and jog to the water before paddling out. I duck dive a bigger wave before breaking the surface behind it. When I get out to where I need to be, I sit on my board with my feet dangling, enjoying the feel of the gentle bobbing of the waves.



“Mav?” I turn my head and see a surfer paddling over to me before sitting on his board beside me. I try not to frown when I see it’s Logan, Bell’s date for tonight. Just because I told her to go and get a date for the wedding doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“Oh hey, Logan, right?” Of course, I know his name, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Yeah. I thought that was you but wasn’t sure. I decided to take my new board out and break her in. Have you been here long?”

“No, I just got here.” I scan the horizon and wait for the perfect set to come in.

“I talked to Bell this morning, and I guess we’re going to a place called Rusty’s. She said it’s a local favorite around here.”

I grip the sides of my surfboard at the mention of her name on his lips. Unclenching my jaw, I turn toward him. “It’s a good choice. Their seafood is fresh, and they should have a band tonight.”

He eyes me closely before asking, “Are you sure you’re cool with this? I don’t want to step on any toes. I may be way off here, but you’re kind of acting like there’s something more going on here besides the older brother vibe.”

I have no idea what to say to this. I know Bell wouldn’t like it if I said anything, and besides, I’m not sure exactly what we are. We haven’t had much of a chance to explore what this is between us. “She’s a big girl and can make her own decisions. Trust me, Bell won’t do anything she doesn’t want to do. Besides, it will be nice of you to have a friend around here since you just moved here.” I emphasize the word friend, and he laughs.

“Yeah, okay. If you say so.”

I see the wave I want and turn to Logan. “See you around. Order the shrimp and scallops. You’ll thank me later.” He nods, and I start to paddle fast toward the wave before popping up on the board. I easily do a few cutbacks and maneuvers

while I ride out the wave. I step off the board into the water and paddle my way back out again, avoiding the area where Logan is. It's not like I think he's a bad guy. He actually seems nice. I'm sure the right girl is out there for him, but it's not Bell. Now that I got a taste of her, the thought of her lips on someone else has a knot forming in my stomach and jealousy flowing through my veins.

Noah's dad was right when he said I would get hit straight in the heart one day. I don't think he was picturing his daughter being the one to do it, though. I frown at what her dad will think. He's like a second father to me, and I know he loves me, but he's also been a part of many guy talks with me and Noah. I've made it perfectly clear with our talks that I'm not looking to settle down anytime soon.

I stare at the endless horizon and feel the water beneath my board. This has always been my place to let everything go and just be. A sense of calm comes over me, and one thought becomes very clear. I can't walk away from her without exploring this. I know I would live the rest of my life wondering what would've happened if I had been brave enough to try. I have to see this through, no matter how much I'm scared of messing it up.

\* \* \*

I RING up my last customer of the day and shut down the computer. It's six, which means Bell is getting ready for her date now. I don't know why, but I'm on edge about it. I don't like it one bit, this feeling of being vulnerable and not in control. I thought surfing this morning would help distract me, but I'm about to jump out of my skin.

I lock up and head to my Jeep. I strum my fingers on the steering wheel, not knowing what to do. I usually go to Noah's parents' house on Sundays for dinner or a bar for food and some company, but neither sounds appealing tonight, especially since Bell won't be at either. Smiling, I get an idea and dial my sister's number.

She answers on the second ring. "Hi, Mav."

“Hey, Soph. I was wondering what your plans were for tonight?”

“Bell’s got her date tonight, so I was just going to do takeout and a movie. I’ve got to be at school early tomorrow. It’s always crazy the first day back after a break. Why do you ask?”

“I just thought we could hang out together. I’m not really in the mood to go out, either. How about I grab some of the orange chicken you love so much, and I’ll join you for the movie in a bit.”

“You don’t want to go out? Are you coming down with something?” I can hear the teasing in her voice.

“Very funny. No, I’m not getting sick. What’s wrong with me just wanting to hang with my favorite sister?”

“I’m your only sister,” she laughs. “Usually, on Sunday, you are either with Noah’s family or picking up your latest flavor. I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

“Well, maybe I’m getting tired of the different flavors.” I’m only craving one flavor right now, and I need to see her before she goes. I know it’s probably wrong, but I want to be on her mind when she’s on her date.

“Wow. Maverick is finally growing up a bit. I feel like a proud parent.”

“Jesus. Do you want the damn orange chicken or not?”

“Yes, please. I would love some. Thank you,” she says, laughing. “I get to pick out the movie, though.”

I groan at the thought of watching *The Notebook* again. She and Bell already made Noah, and I watch it with them one night. I’ve never seen girls cry so much. “Fine. You get to pick out the movie. I’m leaving work now, and I’ll be there soon.”

“Don’t forget the edamame and crab rangoons.”

“I won’t forget. The last time I forgot them, you and Bell laid into me and made me go back and get them.”

“It’s just common sense. You can’t have the orange chicken bowls without them.” I hear a muffled voice, “I’ll be right there!” Sophia gets back on the phone. “I’ve got to go help Bell with her dress. See you soon!”

Images of helping Bell with her dress the night of the bachelor party enter my mind. Next time, though, when the moment is right, I’ll be helping her out of it. Grinning, I pull out of my parking spot and head to the Asian restaurant down the street.

Luckily, the line isn’t long, and I’m able to get in and out with our food. I pull up to the girls’ apartment a short time later and walk in just as Bell enters the kitchen. My eyes meet hers, and we both stop in our tracks. I trail my eyes slowly down her body, taking in her blue sundress and high heels before following her long legs up to meet her eyes again. She must see the desire in my eyes because her hand goes to her chest, and I see it rise and fall. Her blue eyes hold mine, and it’s like getting sucked into the depths of the ocean.

She breaks eye contact with me to glance behind her. She’s probably checking to make sure Sophia is not behind her. Turning to face me again, she looks suspiciously at me. “Sophia said you were coming over tonight to spend the evening with her. What are you up to?” She narrows her eyes and studies me.

“I guess I like playing with fire, too,” I say softly. I step toward her, wanting so badly to touch her, but stop short when Sophia walks in. I clench my hand at my side and tear my gaze away, knowing I won’t be able to hide what I’m feeling from my sister.

“Oh good, you’re here. I’m starving.” Sophia grins and takes the food from me before unpacking it and setting it on the counter. “Bell, you need to get going, or you’ll be late. You look beautiful. Logan is going to shit himself.” Sophia laughs and gets us some plates.

Nodding, Bell grabs her purse and keys off the counter.

“He’s not picking you up? I thought that’s the way a date works.” I look at both the girls.

“If you don’t know the guy, you never let them see where you live on the first date. He could turn out to be a psycho. Plus, if he’s a bore, she can make up an excuse and leave anytime she wants to. It’s girl’s dating 101,” Sophia shrugs her shoulders.

That actually makes a lot of sense, and I’m relieved she won’t be in the car alone with him.

“Of course, if it goes really well, you just leave your car and pick it up in the morning.” She winks at Bell and grins.

“Stop putting ideas in her head. Like you said, she doesn’t know the guy. She shouldn’t even kiss him tonight. You never know, he could have that thing where you have permanent bad breath or like produces extra saliva and gets it all over her.”

I hear Bell giggle, and I grin at her.

“Oh, would you stop. You’re putting thoughts into her head, and she doesn’t need that. I’m sure his dental hygiene is just fine.” She turns to look at Bell. “Now go before you’re late. And don’t worry about me if he comes back here. I’ll be asleep and won’t hear a thing.”

I glare at my sister. If she only knew how close I am to throwing her best friend over my shoulder and taking her back to my place. To hell with Logan and anyone else finding out before the wedding.

“You give the worst best friend advice ever,” I mumble to Sophia. “Ignore your bff, she’s hungry and delusional.”

“You forgot the crab rangoons?” Sophia looks through the bag and frowns.

“Oh, you did it now. I’m out of here before there is any bloodshed.” Bell laughs as she walks to the door.

“I ordered the damn crab rangoons. I must have left them in the Jeep. I’ll go get them before you stab me with your fork.” I follow Bell out and close the front door behind me.

I take my chances with Sophia and grab Bell’s arms, pulling her back to me. “I think that you need another

reminder before you leave. There's no way I'm letting you go on this date without me leaving my taste on you."

Her eyes go wide before turning a deep shade of blue. She glances at my mouth as her tongue comes out to lick her lips. A moan escapes my lips as I grasp her face and run my tongue along her bottom lip where hers had just been. Parting her lips, I dive in deep. Our tongues tangle together as we deepen the kiss.

She grips my t-shirt like I'm the only thing keeping her up as I step closer, pressing myself against her. I hear her moan as my hands move to her behind, digging into her flesh as I bring her even closer to me. I kiss the side of her lips before moving down her neck. I suck her hard, wanting to mark her and praying she forgives me later. The thought of having my mark on her beautiful neck makes me even harder.

I kiss her one last time before forcing myself to pull away. Breathing hard, she gives me a small laugh. "You don't play fair. How in the hell am I supposed to sit through a dinner with this kiss going through my head."

"That's the whole point, and I never said I played fair." I grin at her and reluctantly let her go. "Have fun tonight." I wink at her and watch her walk to her Jeep in a daze. She waves at me before pulling away. Laughing, I get the rest of the food out of my Jeep and go back inside. I have a feeling this evening will be the longest of my life.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## Bella

PULLING INTO RUSTY'S, I PARK OUT FRONT AND PULL DOWN my visor to freshen up. I touch my lips and smile, still feeling Maverick on me. Part of me feels really guilty that I'm going on this date thinking about someone else. I almost canceled several times over the weekend, but something told me to keep the date. I'm hoping he's as sweet as I think he is and will understand if I don't see it going anywhere but friends.

I pull out my lip gloss and reapply it when I see the dark red spot on my neck. No, please say he didn't. I move my hair to the side to get a better look. Maverick fucking marked me. That sneaky bastard did this on purpose so Logan would see it.

Ignoring the part of my brain that thinks it's sexy as hell he wants to claim me, I vow to get him back on this one. I pull out my concealer, thankful that I brought it. I try to cover it up as best I can and sigh when I can still see it. I put the top back on and throw it in my purse. Pulling my hair to the side, I try and hide it. This is the best it's going to get.

I get out of my Jeep and quickly make my way inside, knowing I'm a little late. Scanning the restaurant, I see Logan sitting at a table by the water. Smiling, I walk over.

"I'm so sorry I'm a little late. I got hung up with roommate problems." It's technically the truth. Logan stands up and gives me a hug.

"It's no problem. I haven't been here long." He smiles and pulls out my chair for me. "You look beautiful tonight," he says, sitting down across from me.

“Thank you. You look handsome as well.” Logan is as cute as I remember him. He’s wearing a blue short-sleeved button-down that brings out his eyes with nice khaki pants. His blond hair is a little longer on top and styled nicely, giving him that sexy lifeguard vibe.

“Thanks. This place is great.” He looks around and grins.

“It is. We come here often.”

“We? You and your roommate?”

“My roommate, Sophia, she’s my best friend, and my brother Noah and his fiancé Emma and Maverick, which you already met. We usually come here at least three times a month together, and the girls and I come here after our yoga class for wine night. We know the owner pretty well, and the food is great.”

The waiter comes by to take our drink orders, and we decide on some appetizers. When he leaves, Logan picks up his menu and glances at it.

“Maverick told me to get the shrimp and scallops. What do you think?”

“Maverick? When did you see Mav?” I glance up from the menu and look at him.

“This morning. I saw him out surfing, and we talked for a bit. I was breaking my new board in.”

The waiter comes by with our drinks and appetizers, and I ask him to give us another minute before ordering. I pick up my Prosecco and take a sip. “What else did he have to say?”

“We didn’t talk long. He just mentioned that was his favorite on the menu, and he hopes we have a good time tonight because he said it would be nice for me to have a friend in the area. He put a lot of emphasis on the word friend,” he laughs.

“Look, Mav’s a real nice guy. Like I said in the store, he’s just overprotective of me and Sophia. Don’t let him get to you.”



Logan studies me like he doesn't believe what I'm saying. He glances back at the menu and decides to change the subject. "So what do you usually get?"

"Well, um. I can never decide between the fish tacos or the shrimp and scallops, so, um, Maverick usually gets one, and I get the other so we can share. But we don't have to do that," I say quickly. "I'll probably just go with the shrimp and scallops tonight. I don't even feel like fish tacos." I know I'm rambling, but I can't help it. "If you like both of those, I would go with that. They are fresh right off the boat and melt in your mouth."

The waiter returns, and Logan places his order, and I tell him I want the same. After the waiter leaves, he leans back and looks at me. "Why do I get the feeling that I'm walking into some kind of triangle situation? I asked Mav again today if I was stepping on any toes, and he blew off the question."

I look at him, surprised. "I...I'm not sure.."

"Look, anyone with eyes can see that Maverick is into you. You both can blame it on being overprotective, but we both know it's more than that. I guess the question is, do you feel the same about him?"

I look at Logan, and no matter how good-looking he is, I know that I wouldn't be able to give my heart to anyone right now because Maverick still has a hold of it. Whether he chooses to take care of it or break it is yet to be determined, but I know I have to try, or the what-ifs will haunt me forever. I can't lie to Logan, so I be completely honest with him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel like you were in the middle of something. The last year, things have been... tense between Maverick and me.

"I've known him my whole life, and a lot of emotions are involved. Truthfully, we aren't sure ourselves what is going on. When I said yes to your date, I thought maybe I could get past my feelings for him once and for all, but the last couple of days, things have gotten messy, and it's...complicated. I didn't want to cancel on you last minute because I do really like you

as a person. I thought, at the very least, we could still have a good time together even if it wasn't romantic."

He leans back in his chair and looks at me. I have no clue what he is thinking. Please don't be mad or upset, I silently pray. I hear him sigh, and he gives me a small smile.

"Thank you for being honest with me. I'm not going to lie. I'm a bit disappointed that I'm not the one who is turning your head, but it is what it is. So why didn't Mav just say something? I would have backed off, and he could be sitting here right now."

"Like I said, it's complicated. I'm sure you don't want to hear all the details. Let's talk about something else." I put some appetizers on my plate to busy myself.

Laughing, he says, "Oh, no. You're not getting off that easy. I can tell this is going to be a good story. You owe me. Besides, like I told you earlier, I have two sisters, and I've become a very good listener over the years."

"Isn't it weird though? Me talking about another guy on our date? I don't want to be disrespectful."

"I think we're past the date part," he laughs. "Just think of it as two friends having a conversation. Besides, I'm a big believer in fate. If you aren't the one for me, then we were brought together for a different reason. Maybe I can help you in some way, and one day, you'll return the favor."

I smile. "I'm a big believer in fate too."

He fills his plate with appetizers and smiles. "See, best friends already."

Laughing, I take a sip of my wine, feeling like a huge weight has been lifted off of my shoulders.

We sit there during dinner, and I tell him all about how we grew up together and how I watched him from afar, wanting to be the girl he would leave with. I tell him how I learned he had kept guys from me during high school and how recently he realized he has feelings for me. When I get him up to date, our dinner plates have been cleared, and we're both sipping on our drinks.

“Let me just say from a guy’s perspective, he’s been in love with you just as long as you have been in love with him. He just buried it deep and was too afraid to go there. It was easier for him to go with girls he couldn’t get attached to. There was no chance of them breaking his heart. It’s harder for some guys to be vulnerable. But now that he knows you feel the same, he can’t bury them anymore. You’ve gotten under his skin now, and no matter how scared he is, he can’t walk away.” He shrugs his shoulders.

I sit there dumbfounded. “Wow, you’re good. Are you a therapist or something?”

“No,” he says, laughing. “I’m into real estate. I might as well have been with all the free counseling I gave my sisters. So where are you guys going from here?”

“We haven’t been able to really talk about it, but we both want to see where it goes. It’s complicated with the wedding so close, and then add in the fact that my brother is his best friend, and his sister is mine. I never told Sophia my feelings because I felt embarrassed, especially when I got older and saw Maverick with girl after girl. I felt the only time he would ever look at me would be in my dreams, where I obsessed over this stupid fantasy.

“Now that I know he feels the same way, the wedding is coming up. Even though I know Noah would want us both to be happy, we don’t want to take the focus off of him and Emma. This is their special time, and we’ll have plenty of time after their honeymoon to tell everyone if we decide to move forward.”

“Who are you taking to the wedding? You said Mav is taking Sara because you can’t go together.”

“I haven’t figured out that part yet,” I sigh. “Sophia is taking someone from work, so maybe I should take his partner like Maverick said.”

“Uh, no. Maverick is taking a girl who is not gay, and until he really admits his feelings for you, there is nothing wrong with playing a little dirty. Lucky for you, I’m good-looking

and can dance. Mav's not my biggest fan anyway, so I have nothing to lose if I give him something to worry about."

I stare at him, shocked. "You would go with me even after I kind of led you on with this date, knowing I have feelings for Maverick?"

"Well, when you put it that way, it does seem dumb of me to want to take you."

"Stop," I say, laughing. "You are anything but dumb. You're going to make a girl very happy one day. I hope you know how much you're the total package. I would be honored to have you as my date. I so wish you were Sophia's type. I would throw you guys together in a heartbeat to have her be with a guy like you."

"What? She's not into tall, smart, extremely good-looking men? I'm everyone's type."

"She's more into the bad boy looks. You would need a lot more tattoos to catch her eye."

"A lot more? I don't even have one."

"Exactly. You're way too clean-cut for her," I say, laughing. "Seriously though, thank you for being so understanding and for being my date to the wedding. If my heart wasn't already invested, this whole date would have gone a different way."

"I always tell my sisters to follow their heart, and I wouldn't want you to do any different." The waiter comes by for the check, and I start to reach for it.

"Let me pay. I really feel bad that this turned out to be a therapy session about my love life. It's the least I can do."

"I'm not letting you pay," he says, laughing. "I asked you out, and my mom taught me how to treat a lady right. Besides," he puts his hand on his chest, "even though my heart hurts that I'm not going to get a goodnight kiss tonight, I still ended up having a great time. It pains me to say, but Mav was right. It is nice to have a friend in the area."

“How are you not taken? I can’t believe someone hasn’t snatched you up.” I shake my head in disbelief.

“That’s a story for another time. Let’s just say I get why Maverick is afraid of failing or being heartbroken. I was just like him after my breakup, vowing never to put my heart out there again, but I got lonely after a while. I guess I’m just built to want more.”

“I’m so sorry. How long were you together?”

“Five years. We met in high school.” I see the pain flash briefly in his eyes, and it makes my chest hurt. “Turns out we both wanted different things. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, and she wanted my friend behind my back.”

“Oh, my God. I can’t imagine what you went through. I’m so sorry. One day, she’s going to look back and regret that until the day she dies. She missed out on being with a pretty amazing guy.”

He gives me a small smile. “Thanks, it’s in the past now. I’m in a better place and know what I want. It’s just a matter of finding her.”

“And you will.” I reach over and squeeze his hand. The waiter comes back with the receipt. Logan quickly signs it, and we get up to leave.

“So you have my number. Just let me know the details of the wedding. I’m actually excited about going. I feel like I’m invested now and want to see how this turns out,” he laughs.

“I’m excited to have you as my date. We’re going to have a great time. I can’t wait for you to meet everyone.” I reach up and kiss his cheek before giving him a hug. “Thanks for dinner. I’m really glad I didn’t cancel.”

“I’m glad you didn’t cancel either.” He squeezes me one last time before waving goodbye and walking to his car.

I get in the Jeep and start the engine. The date couldn’t have gone better. I’m relieved that I told Logan everything, and I meant it when I said I was excited to have him as my date. It will be nice to have someone beside me that knows the whole story.

I pull up to my parking spot a short time later and see the lights out. I glance at the clock, surprised to see it's after eleven. I guess we talked way longer than I thought. I quietly make my way inside and go to my bedroom to change. I see a folded-up piece of paper on my pillow. Confused, I pick it up and read it.

*Meet me at the dock when you get home.*

I instantly recognize Maverick's handwriting.

Grinning, I quickly change into jean shorts and an old hoodie I secretly stole from him in high school so that I could sleep in it and be surrounded by his smell. I slip on my tennis shoes and quietly go outside our patio door before running on the grass to the dock. I reach the gazebo at the end of the dock and see him lying on his back on one of the benches.

Walking up to him, I smile when I notice he's sleeping. How long has he waited out here for me? I admire his beauty for a second, just wanting to stare at him before waking him up. Long lashes frame his eyes, and I gently touch a lock of his hair. His full lips are parted slightly, and on a whim, I bend down and press my lips to his. His eyes blink open, and he smiles.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## Maverick

OPENING MY EYES, I SEE BELL LEANING OVER ME. “I GUESS you got my note,” I say softly.

“I did.” She grins at me. “How long have you been out here?”

I sit up, and she takes a seat next to me. “Not long. Maybe an hour.”

“An hour? You waited an hour?” She looks surprised.

I would have waited forever pops into my head, but I shove down the anxiety of what that means. “I wanted to see you when you got back.” I put my hands in my hoodie pocket that I’m wearing and shrug my shoulders.

“I wanted to see you too.”

“Soooooo, how did it go? How much of a competition is he going to be?” I try not to let the worry show, but I’ve been nonstop thinking about the two of them together since she left. I needed answers tonight, or I would go crazy wondering.

“He’s not your competition,” she laughs. “I actually had a really great time. He knows I only want him as a friend, and he’s cool with it. He’s even agreed to be my date for the wedding. I think you’ll like him if you give him a chance. He’s a very sweet guy.”

“So he has you sitting across him, and he’s okay with just being your friend?” Laughing, I shake my head.

“What? It’s true. I told him all about us, and he knows where I stand.”

“And I know where he stands. He’s doing the *I’ll be the considerate friend she can lean on and trust, hoping she will change her mind one day.*” Bell has no idea the effect she has on guys. They all want to be her *friend*, hoping she will change her mind one day because being in her presence is better than not having her at all.

“I don’t think so. I really think he’s okay with just being my friend.”

“I don’t think anyone would be okay with just being your friend.” I reach out and tuck a strand of hair that blew in her face from the light breeze. I notice the hoodie she’s wearing. “Hey, is that my hoodie? I had one just like it in high school and looked for it for days.”

Giggling, she shoves her hands in the pocket. “I may have stolen it from you back in high school.”

“May have?” I arch my eyebrows at her, and she giggles harder.

“Okay, okay. I wanted to sleep in your hoodie, so I stole it.”

“Why did you want to sleep in it?”

“It...” She looks down at her lap. “It smelled like you. I felt safe when wearing it. I know it sounds dumb. I was young.”

I lift her chin with my finger so she’s looking at me. “It’s not dumb. It looks way better on you than it ever did on me. Just so you know, I would have given it to you if you would have asked me for it. I’m glad you have it, though. You look really sexy in my clothes.” I grab her waist and bring her over to me so she’s straddling my lap. She puts her hands in my hair, and I close my eyes briefly before opening them. I push her hair back off her shoulders and run my hand down her neck. I grin when I see the makeup couldn’t cover it.

“I know what you’re grinning at, Maverick Alexander. I can’t believe you did that right before I saw Logan.” She gives me a stern look that I find adorable, and it only makes me laugh.



“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You marked me on purpose so he would see it. I had to hide it with my hair all night long.”

“Do you have any idea how hard that makes me? Having you walk around with a mark that I gave you with my mouth, knowing how good it made you feel when I sucked on your beautiful skin?”

She takes a sharp inhale and moves slightly against me, causing me to instantly swell with need. “I plan on getting you back one day for that, just so you know.”

“Baby, you can mark me anytime you want.” I stare into her eyes and lose myself in them. “God, you’re so fucking beautiful,” I breathe.

I run my thumb over her bottom lip before lightly kissing the corner. I kiss the other side before it becomes too much, and I have to really taste her. I press my lips to hers and go deeper, seeking out her tongue and exploring every inch of her mouth. I run my hands under her hoodie, grazing her skin. I moan when I skim her back and find her braless.

She starts to move on my lap, and I nearly come undone at what she makes me feel. I know I need to stop, but my body overrules my mind. I’ve never wanted anything more in my life than to be deep inside her right now, making her scream my name. I hear her moan as she rocks against me. I seek out the tiny part of my brain that’s saying I can’t do this and break away before it goes any further.

“We need to stop,” I pant.

“Please, Maverick. I want you.”

“I want you so fucking bad too. I’m about to explode with just you sitting on my lap, but I want to do better this time. I always go straight to sex. I skip all the little stuff, so there’s no attachment. I want to enjoy the little things with you first. The making out, the holding hands, the pillow talk, the cuddles, I’ve never done any of that with anyone, but I want that with you,” I say softly.

“You know we can still do all of that stuff after sex, too, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” I laugh softly. “And trust me, it’s taking everything in me not to have sex with you right now, but I also have to think about Noah.”

Groaning, she gets off me and sits next to me. She looks as sexually frustrated as I feel.

“Just hear me out, ok? I want to do this right. It wouldn’t feel right to me to have sex with you or see any of your lady parts before the wedding.”

“Are you serious right now? Lady parts?”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I’m going to be helping Noah a lot these last few weeks getting ready for the wedding. I can’t look him in the eye, knowing I’ve had sex with his sister or seen her naked in any way. It would feel like a betrayal seeing him and knowing I’ve been with his sister that way and not telling him.”

“So kissing is fine?”

“I wasn’t even going to do that, but I have a hard time controlling myself around you. My plan was to stay away from you for the next few weeks until after the wedding, but I wasn’t strong enough. But yes, kissing is fine. I can live with that secret for a little bit.”

She bites her bottom lip while she thinks about it. I stifle a moan as I reach out and release her bottom lip with my finger. “Do you have to torture me, though? This is hard enough without you looking at me like that.”

“Sorry.” She scrunches up her face and concentrates. “So, no touching or seeing anything below the waist? What about boobs?”

I groan and pull my fingers through my hair. “No boobs,” I force myself to say. “I feel like I would have, *I just touched your sister’s boobs* written all over my face the first day I see your brother.”

She giggles, and I smile back at her. Her eyes light up with an idea. “What about pleasing each other through our clothes? It’s technically not sex, but we get the same results.”

“You mean like grinding against each other and exploding in our pants?”

She starts giggling harder. “It’s better than nothing,” she gets out between laughs.

I close my eyes and think about it so she’s not distracting me. I guess it is better than nothing. My mind goes to her coming undone as I grind against her. I open my eyes. “Sorry, but no. You can’t cum because of me. If I watch you orgasm, I’ll always be thinking about it, and Noah will know I gave his sister the best orgasm of her life. We can’t risk it.”

“Noah is not going to know,” I roll my eyes. “And the best orgasm of my life? Sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Very sure,” I grin at her. “He might not figure it out, but it’s too close to sex. It’s better if I just keep imagining what you look like, screaming my name. Less guilt for me around your brother.”

“Fine,” she sighs. “So you’ve really never held hands before? No cuddles? Nothing?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. It was always sex, and then one of us left depending on whose place we were at.”

“That sounds lonely.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to realize that. Come here.” I hold out my arm, and she snuggles under it as I hold her close. “This is what I want to experience with you right now. We can have sex three times a day if you want when this is all over, but right now, I want to prove to myself and you that I can do more than just sex. That I want more than just sex.”

“As crazy as it sounds and as frustrating as it’s going to be, I understand. I also love that you want to do more than just sex. Lie down on the bench,” she tells me. I eye her warily, unsure of where this is going. “I’m not going to jump you and force you to have sex with me,” she laughs. I lie down using my arm behind my head as a pillow. She lies down next to me

with her head on my chest, and I wrap my other arm around her. From this angle, we can see the stars over the canal. “We’re cuddling,” she whispers.

Grinning, I hold her tight. She fits perfectly against me, and it feels...right. I close my eyes and hear her sigh. Yeah, I could definitely get used to this.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Bella

SUNLIGHT HITS ME IN THE FACE, AND I SQUINT AT THE brightness. I snuggle up to the warm body next to me, not wanting to wake up yet, feeling safe and happy. I move slightly and feel the hard surface I'm sleeping on. Disoriented, I look around and try to get my bearings. I glance over and see Maverick sleeping beside me. The gazebo last night comes rushing back to me. We must have fallen asleep.

“Mav, wake up!” I nudge his shoulders, and he mumbles in his sleep before bringing me back to him. “We have to get up. We fell asleep, and I've got to get back home before Sophia sees us.” I get out from under his arm and fall off the bench, landing hard on my butt. “Shit, that hurt.”

Mav opens his eyes and looks down at me. “What are you doing down there?”

“Oh, I don't know. I just thought it would be a good place to sit.” I roll my eyes and get up. Maverick sits up and runs his hands through his hair. “Did we just sleep together for the first time?” He looks at me and grins.

“It would appear that way. We must have fallen asleep last night. What time is it?” I quickly get up to find my phone before I realize I left it in my bedroom. Maverick pulls out his phone and looks at it.

“It's seven.”

“Shit, Sophia will be up and getting ready. What do I do? If I go in now, she'll think I stayed the night with Logan, and

I'm just getting home." I pace the gazebo and try to think of something.

"Christ, it's hot out here. I'm smothering in this hoodie now that the sun is up." Maverick takes his hoodie off, and I stop pacing to stare. I see his chest and abs glistening from the heat. Tearing my gaze away, I look at his face and see him grinning.

"Stop distracting me. You're the one that wants to wait and has all these rules. I'm dying in this hoodie, too, and can feel the sweat dripping down my breasts. Don't think for a minute that I won't take this shirt off. I don't care if the neighbors see or not. I'm sure the guy across the hall would love the morning show." My neighbor has been ogling me for the last two years, and Maverick can't stand him. Even though he's not my type at all, I still love to mess with Mav about it.

Mav narrows his eyes at me at the mention of my neighbor. He wipes the sweat off with his hoodie but doesn't put it back on. "He's definitely not going to get a show. And it's you who's distracting me. Now I have images of sweat sliding down your breasts just begging me to lick it off."

Images of him licking my breasts come to mind, and I bite back a moan. "I guess we both are being tortured," I say softly.

"Seems like it." He stands up and shoves his hands in his short pockets. "Just tell Sophia you got up early and wanted to watch the sunrise."

"Okay, yeah, that will work. I do that sometimes anyway."

"I know. I've watched you come down here and sit."

"You do? I never knew that."

"Sunrise has always been my favorite, too. I told myself that I was watching you because I wanted to make sure the creepy guy across the hall wouldn't bother you, but I'm starting to think it was more than that." He clears his voice and looks away, clearly uncomfortable at admitting it. I want to ask him more, but I let it go for now.

"I need to get going before Sophia starts looking for me. My Jeep is outside, and knowing her, she'll come into my

room at some point for details about my date last night. Thank you for waiting for me last night. I had fun cuddling with you.” I see him smile as he walks towards me and pulls me in his arms.

“I had fun, too. It felt good having you by my side all night.” He kisses the top of my head and swats my butt. “Now go before I decide that going topless in front of our neighbors is a good idea just so I can see them.”

Grinning, I stand on tip toes and kiss his lips briefly before turning and running back to my apartment. I feel his eyes burn into my back the whole way home. Heat thrums through my body at the promises of what is to come.

Reaching the patio door, I slide it open and see Sophia look up from her cup of coffee.

“There you are. I saw your Jeep outside, and when you weren’t in the bedroom, I figured you were down by the water. I was giving you exactly ten more minutes before I went looking for you.”

“I got up early and went to watch the sunrise. I guess I lost track of time.” I make a beeline for the coffee pot, avoiding her gaze until I get my body to calm down from being in Mav’s presence.

“So tell me about last night. I have to leave soon, so talk fast and tell me everything.” She sits down on the bar stool and grins.

I stir in the creamer and glance back at her. “It was fun. He’s a super sweet guy. You’re going to love him.”

“Why do I feel like there is a but coming.”

I sigh and sit down next to her. “But, I told him I just want to be friends.”

“You friend-zoned him already? Why?”

“I’m just not feeling it with him. No fireworks, remember?” Now that I have the Fourth of July finale in my grasp, I’m not about to settle for anything less.

“Well, that’s a bummer,” she sighs.

“It actually turned out to be a really fun date. He’s good with being friends and even wants to take me to the wedding. We’ve got to find someone for him. He’s the total package just not...my package. I even told him I wished he was your type because he deserves someone as wonderful as you.”

“You tried to set me up with your date *on* your date?” Sophia laughs and shakes her head.

“Well, yeah. We started talking like old friends once I told him I didn’t see us working.”

“Do friends suck each other’s necks?” She asks, her eyes dancing with amusement.

Shit, I forgot about the hickey. My hand goes up to cover it, and she starts laughing. Now, what the hell am I going to say? “I had to be sure there were no feelings, so I kissed him.” I shrug my shoulders and try to play it off. “I wasn’t happy to see it last night when I got home, trust me. But even after the kiss, I still felt the same. We ended up talking afterward, and he’s cool with being my friend.”

“If you say so,” she says, laughing.

Why does everyone think guys can’t be *just* my friend? I decide to ignore the comment. “The good news is, I have a date for the wedding. We’re going to have so much fun!”

“Yes, we are.” Getting up from her stool, she places her mug in the sink. “I better get going. The kids are going to be full of energy today after being off for a week.”

“Have fun with that,” I laugh.

“Just have the wine ready for me when I get home,” she says, teasing. She hugs me goodbye and leaves for work.

I take my coffee with me and peel off my hoodie in my bedroom. I wasn’t kidding when I said I was roasting out there. It was comfortable last night with the breeze, but between Mav’s body heat and the sun, I was baking alive this morning.

I step under the shower spray, and my thoughts go back to last night. I’ve dreamt of sleeping in Maverick’s arms since I



was a teenager. I still can't believe this is actually happening. Even though I love that he wants to take it slow with me, the torture is agonizing.

I understand where he is coming from about Noah, but it doesn't make it any easier. The next three weeks are going to be difficult. If he hadn't stopped me last night, I know I could have easily found release just from rubbing against his swollen length. I've waited my whole life to feel like this with someone, and now that I got a taste of him, it's all I want.

I wash my breasts and moan when I graze my already hard nipples. Images of Maverick shirtless enter my mind, and a deep throbbing between my legs causes me to lower my hand. This won't be the first time I've touched myself thinking about him. After last night and this morning, he's left me in a complete state of arousal.

I enter two fingers and rub my throbbing clit while my other hand goes to my breasts, pinching my already sensitive nipples. I moan as I close my eyes and imagine it's his hands on me now. I picture him naked in the bedroom when I saw him swollen and ready for me. He was so much bigger than I expected, and I ache to know how good it will be when he stretches me and fills me so deeply, feeling him in the depths of my being.

I increase my pressure and feel my walls start to constrict as my orgasm comes crashing down on me. I cry out as I pulse around my fingers, riding out the sparks that flow through me. I sag against the wall as the last waves leave my body.

My phone starts ringing, and I quickly rinse off and step out of the shower. I look down and see the picture I took of Maverick staring back at me. It's my favorite one of him looking out at the waves. Grinning, I answer it.

"Miss me already?" I tease, trying to catch my breath. I get a towel and wrap it around my body.

"You have no idea." I hear him chuckle on the other end of the line before he goes silent. "Why are you breathless?"

“Oh, um, I was in the shower and had to hop out to answer your call.”

“In the shower, huh?” I can hear him grinning over the phone.

“Yes, in the shower.”

“And what did you do in the shower to get you so breathless?” How could he possibly know?

“I told you. I had to get out and answer the phone.”

“Yeah, not buying that,” he says with a soft laugh.

I decide to give him something to think about. It’s his fault he left me in that state with all his rules. “Actually, you’re right. You left me throbbing so hard for you that I took matters into my own hands, and I was coming off my orgasmic high when you called.” I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing, knowing his face must be priceless right now.

“Fuck,” he breathes. I wait for him to say more, but I’m met with silence. Finally, he says in a low voice, “Tell me. Tell me how you made yourself cum. Did you think of me?”

I lick my lips and swallow. “Yes, I thought of you.”

“Tell me,” he says again in a strained voice.

“I...I rubbed myself and put two fingers inside while the other hand was on my breast. I imagined you deep inside me, stretching me, filling me so completely that I feel you in my soul.” I hear him moan and start to breathe heavily. He’s touching himself right now—I know it. Feeling powerful that I can make him feel this way, I continue. “I pictured you naked and what I saw when you walked in on me after your shower. You were so swollen for me, and I wanted so badly to put my lips around you and take you all the way to the back of my throat, tasting you.”

“Fuck, Bell,” he pants out.

“I had my hand on my breast, pinching my sensitive nipple, wishing it was you. I know how good it’s going to be when you finally sink into me, and I felt myself pulse as I rubbed harder before I came all over my fingers. I cried out

your name as my orgasm hit me.” I hear him do the same with mine as he finds his release. He’s panting hard, and I’m gripping the phone tightly against my ear, wanting to memorize every sound coming from him as he comes undone for me. Me. I did this to him. He’s got me aroused all over again just by hearing his breathing over the phone.

“Jesus, Bell. That was fucking intense. Are you sure you’re not one of those secret sex phone operators?”

“No, I’m sure,” I say with a small laugh. “I’ve never talked that way before in my life.”

“Good, because that dirty mouth is all mine.”

I grin against the phone before putting him on speaker so I can get dressed.

“Before I got all distracted, I was calling to ask how it went with Sophia?”

“Good. She did see the hickey, though, and I had to tell her Logan gave it to me. I told her that I felt nothing after our alleged kiss and that we agreed to be friends.”

“But there wasn’t an actual kiss, was there?”

“No, I told you nothing happened. Are *you* going to be kissing other people? Or doing anything with other people, for that matter.” I need to know that he won’t be with other girls while we figure out our stuff.

“Geez, give me some credit. I know I’ve never dated or been in a relationship, but you know I would never do that to you. Besides, we both know how well that turned out in the beginning when I tried to *fuck* you out of my mind. It seems like my dick is only wanting one specific, very beautiful blue-eyed girl. I think I just proved that two minutes ago.”

I grin into the phone. “Your dick is very smart.”

I hear him laugh on the other end of the phone. “It’s been called a lot of things, but smart is a new one.”

I open my dresser drawer and rummage through to find my bra and panties. “We should probably stop talking about your

dick. It's putting images in my mind again, and I need to focus on work in a few minutes."

"I like you thinking about me." I shut the drawer when I find the pair that I want. "What are you doing? It sounds like you're opening and shutting things," he laughs.

"I was looking for my bra and underwear. Sorry, I had my phone on the dresser and couldn't find the one I wanted."

"What color?"

"What color is what?"

"Your bra and underwear."

"Black lace, why?"

I hear him softly groan on the other end of the line. "I just want to picture it."

"I like it when you think of me, too."

"I better get going," he sighs. "I've got to open soon. Are we still on for Wednesday's meeting?"

"I'll be there. I was thinking we need to set up a photoshoot with the new boards that came in. Maybe some with you in them?" I hate to admit it, but the girls' fan club he has going helps our algorithm. Products do much better when he's in them.

"Yeah, we can do that. How about sunrise on Friday? The waves are supposed to be good, so we can also get some water shots in."

"Works for me."

"I'll talk to you soon then. Bye, Bell," he says softly.

"Bye, Maverick." I hang up and finish getting ready. I've got to shoot for a local brewery today and want to get enough content to last the week. Pushing thoughts of Mav out of my head, I start visualizing the video footage I want to capture as I walk out the door with my camera bag slung over my shoulder.

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Maverick

I SET THE COFFEE CUPS ON THE DESK AND GLANCE AT THE clock again. Bell should be here any minute for our meeting. I haven't seen her since Monday morning. We both agreed it will be a lot easier to pass this time if we don't see each other every day. Instead, we've been talking on the phone every night before bed. It's something I've started to look forward to each day. My bed doesn't seem as lonely if her voice is there to fill the silence.

I know Bell inside and out, from her favorite ice cream to the way she watches a scary movie through her hands, barely seeing the screen through the tiny slit she's created with her fingers. It's been nice, though, learning new things about her that the older Bell wants in life. We stay off the topic of her past relationships or my past with women.

Just the thought of her being beneath another man or someone else's mouth on her body makes me green with envy, and I know she doesn't want to know the details of the women I've been with, either. We can't change the past, but we both believe it led us to where we are right now.

I look up from my desk when I hear her walk in. She's wearing white cut-off shorts with a deep V black t-shirt, and my eyes immediately go to her breasts that are on display. Her hair is in a high ponytail today, exposing her neck. I reach her gaze, and you can feel the sexual tension in the room. It's like an unspoken energy that weaves in and around us whenever we are together.

"Hi," she says, her voice a little breathless.

“Hi, I, uh, have your coffee here like always.” I gesture toward the desk like an idiot. Why does she have such an effect on me? I’ve never had a problem talking to women. I’ve always been in control and so sure of myself. One look at her, and I feel like an awkward teenager that just saw boobs for the first time.

“Thanks.” I can see amusement in her eyes, and I know she can see the effect she has on me, and she’s eating it up. I’ll let her have her fun, but she’ll be paying for it later in other ways. Her begging me to let her cum enters my mind. I grin at the thought, and she raises her eyebrows. “I would love to know what you just thought about to put a grin like that on your face.”

“I bet you would. All in due time,” I say, laughing. “Nice shirt. If one didn’t know better, I would think you were playing with fire again.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I just grabbed the first thing I could out of my closet.” She tries to hide her smile, but her eyes give it all away. Setting her bag down, she pulls out her laptop and sits at my desk.

“Yeah, I’m not buying that. Just remember, payback is my specialty. Especially the payback that I have in mind for you.” I take a seat next to her and grin at her surprised face.

“What do you have in mind?” I can see the curiosity on her face.

“Nope. That’s for me to know and you to find out later. If your body can handle it.” I see her swallow and squirm in her chair a bit. Yeah, I definitely turned the tables on this one and got the upper hand again. “Let’s see what you got.” I gesture toward her laptop.

She breaks her gaze and composes herself, getting back into business mode. Opening her laptop, she takes a sip of her coffee before going through the content she has scheduled for this week. I barely listen as I take in her vanilla scent.

She has a few loose pieces of hair coming down, framing her face, and I want to grab her ponytail and expose her neck

more to me as I lick and suck my way down to her breasts. I see the barest hint of black lace from her bra when she moves her arm to show me another clip.

“So what do you think?” I meet her eyes, and she’s looking at me for an answer. I know whatever she just showed me is good, so I nod my head.

“It’s really good. You know I always love your work.”

“Thanks. I’ll have more footage this Friday for next week, but I thought I would do some overall store filming while I’m here. I brought my gimbal, so I’ll be able to walk around and point out all the merchandise.”

“Film away. I’ve got a new shipment of rash guard tops ready to be put on display, so you can get those in some of your clips, too.”

“Perfect.” She stands up and starts to put away her laptop, giving me the perfect view of her ass from my chair. Unable to stop myself, I grab her waist and pull her back on my lap so she’s sitting on me. I hear her gasp as she feels me hard beneath her.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” I bury my face in her neck and breathe in her scent. “I feel like a horny teenager with a constant hard-on. You drive me completely insane,” I whisper in her ear. “I’m used to being in control, and with you, it’s you who has all the control over me.” My hands go to her waist, and I find her bare stomach under her shirt.

“I think you have it all wrong,” she says quietly. “I’ve waited too long to feel this with you, and I’m at your mercy if you decide to walk away.”

“I don’t think I can walk away.” I kiss her neck, and she moans as I lightly bite her skin. I bring my hand up and lightly skim over her breast before grazing her nipple with my thumb. It instantly hardens from my touch.

“Oh God,” she breathes. She shifts on my lap, and I groan as it causes her to rub against me. She turns her head and finds my lips waiting for hers. I suck on her bottom lip before diving in. Our tongues entangle as I desperately try to satisfy my need

for her. Her hand tugs my hair as she pulls it slightly. I hear the jingle of the door open up front, and I break away.

“Fuck,” I groan. I try to catch my breath as I reluctantly let go of her so she can stand. Running a hand through my hair, I let out a frustrated sigh. “I guess it’s time to open.” I stand up and make sure my t-shirt covers up my evidence of how bad I want her right now before walking up front to greet my first customer of the day.

I get busy with a rush of customers and notice Bell come out of the back. I watch her start filming in the back of the store before I focus on the person I’m helping. I’m ringing up my last customer when a group of girls come in. They’re about Bell’s age and my usual go-to type. They walk to the counter and grin when they see me. By the look of their body language, they want something more than what I have in the store, but I decide to play along.

“Hi, ladies. What can I help you with?”

“Oh, you can definitely help us with something,” one of them says before she gets elbowed in the stomach.

“We were just curious about what you carry in the store,” the brunette says. “We’ve been following you on social media and wanted to check it out ourselves.”

“Well, feel free to look around and let me know if you need help with anything.” I grab the box of rash guards and begin to go through them. I hear them giggle as they wander around the store. I look behind me and see Bell watching them with a frown on her face. I softly laugh and enter the tops into the system. These are just the type of girls that Sophia and Bell try to stay away from.

“Do you have a dressing room to try this bikini on?” I glance up and see the blonde one holding a skimpy bikini.

“Yeah, it’s right over there.” I point to my left, where two small dressing rooms sit.

“Thanks.” She walks back toward them, and I get back to work.



“I don’t know.” I hear a few minutes later. “What do you think?”

I look up and see the blonde standing in front of the floor-length mirror, studying herself in the bikini. She’s looking at me and waiting for my reply.

I would have been over there laying on the charm a couple of months ago. She’s a beautiful girl with a great body, but it does nothing for me. “It looks good on you,” I say, not wanting to be rude.

“I’m not sure yellow is your color.” I turn and see Bell standing next to me. She must have snuck up behind me. I try to hide my smile at her comment.

“Really?” She looks again in the mirror and turns around, showing off her cheeky bottoms.

“I think you look hot,” her brunette girlfriend says, turning and eyeing Bell.

“I’m going to get it. Especially since he said, I look good in it.” She motions to me and smiles. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Maverick.” I smile back and feel Bell’s eyes on me.

“I’m Paris.”

“Of course you are,” I hear Bell mutter next to me.

I clear my throat to stop my laugh. “It’s nice to meet you, Paris. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks.” She turns and goes back into the dressing room.

I’m ringing up her friends when Paris comes back out. She lays the suit on the counter and smiles at me. “I decided to get it. So, I saw your page on social media and noticed how good you are at surfing. Do you give lessons? I would love to learn.”

I see Bell stop her filming out of the corner of my eye. I know she’s listening even though her back is to me.

“I don’t give lessons, but here’s a card of someone who could help you out.” I hand her a business card of a friend of

mine who teaches.

She takes the card and looks disappointed. “Ok, thanks.” I ring her up and hand her the receipt. “If you’re not busy later, my friends and I are having drinks at a club named Roxy’s. You should stop by.”

“Thanks for the invite, but I have plans.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I guess I’ll see you around then.” A frown appears on her face before she walks out to her friends on the sidewalk and starts going down the street.

I turn to Bell and grin. “*Not your color?* You almost made me lose a sale.”

“Well, it wasn’t her color. I was just giving friendly advice. The surf lesson line was a good one on her part, a little desperate but good.” She looks at me, and I can’t hide my grin. “What?”

I walk toward her. “Somebody is jealous.”

“Of Paris? Please. Sophia and I run circles around those girls.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Stop grinning at me like that.” She swats my chest, and I grab her hand and hold it.

“This jealous thing you have going on is kind of hot.”

“I’m not jealous.” I look at her and raise my eyebrows. “Okay, fine, I may not like it when girls throw themselves at you. It annoys me. They’re probably the same girls that comment, *marry me*, under your photos.”

Laughing, I pull her closer. “Unfortunately for them, I only have eyes for you.”

Bending down, I kiss her slowly and gently, wanting to savor her taste. I break away seconds before someone walks in. Smiling at her, I turn and focus my attention on the customer who just walked in.

I don’t get any more alone time with her before she leaves an hour later. For the rest of the day, I try to focus on work, but

in the back of my mind, I'm counting the hours until I can see her again.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Bella

I WAKE UP BEFORE SUNRISE AND QUICKLY GET DRESSED. I'M meeting Maverick at the beach today for the photo shoot and would be lying if I said I wasn't excited to see him again. We talked on the phone again last night after I got home from yoga with the girls.

It's become our nightly thing and something I started looking forward to. I would much rather be doing it in person, but we both agreed it's getting too hard to maintain distance when we're together. As frustrating as it is, it's also kind of hot playing with all of this sexual tension between us. It's like a storm is building inside me, just waiting to be unleashed.

I pack my camera gear and beach bag and quietly slip out the door, careful not to wake Sophia so she can sleep a bit longer before her alarm goes off for work. I pull into my favorite coffee shop, The Fix, to surprise Maverick with his favorite coffee. After our late-night talk last night, I know we both could use the extra caffeine. They make the best lavender lattes. I tried to get Maverick to like it, but he always sticks with plain vanilla and almond milk.

I get them both iced because of the heat and pull up to the beach parking lot a short time later. I don't see his Jeep here yet, so I get all my gear and walk down to the beach. The sun should rise soon, and I don't want to miss it.

Laying my towel down, I get settled to watch the sunrise, sipping on my coffee. I only see a couple of people further down the beach. Otherwise, it's deserted. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the salty air. A smile

forms on my lips at how this place makes me feel. I open my eyes and see Maverick standing there watching me.

“I didn’t hear you come up.” I look up and smile at him.

“I didn’t want to disturb you. You looked so peaceful and happy.” He puts his boards down before claiming the seat next to me.

“It’s this place. I feel so at peace this time of day here.”

“Same. I can’t go more than a couple of days without coming here and getting in the water.”

“I brought you some coffee. I figured you could use it since we didn’t sleep much last night.” I hand him his iced coffee.

“You’re not making me try the lavender one again, are you?” He raises his eyebrows and takes the coffee.

“No,” I laugh. “Vanilla and almond milk just like you like.”

“Thanks.” He takes a sip and sighs. “So good.”

We sit there as the first ray of light hits the sky, spanning across the water. I stare in awe as the sun appears on the horizon. It never gets old to see the beauty of it. I turn and see Maverick watching me again. “You’re missing the sunrise. It’s so beautiful today.”

“My view is just as beautiful,” he says softly. He reaches for my hand and interlaces our fingers together as we watch the rest of the sunrise together.

“I’ve never held hands and watched the sunrise with someone before.” I look at our hands before meeting his eyes.

“Really? I figured you would have done it on a date before. It’s a first for me, too,” he says softly. “I like it. It’s nice to share it with someone.”

“I like it too.” His beautiful green eyes take in mine, and I find myself getting lost in their depths. Is he feeling what I’m feeling? I could sit here and watch sunrises with him until my last breath. We haven’t talked much about what happens after

the wedding. I don't want to rush him. I want to give him time to sort through all these new emotions.

Part of me doesn't want to get my hopes up that this will last, but it's too late. I can't imagine my life with someone else—I never could. He tears his gaze away and focuses on the horizon. I know he's checking out the waves and feeling the call to them.

“You better get out there.” I nudge his shoulder. “The waves look good today.”

“This feels good too.” He squeezes my hand and smiles at me.

“Yes, it does, but I know you. You can't stand watching waves like that and not being able to enjoy them. Go, I need to shoot some footage anyway.”

He gives me an excited, boyish grin and quickly kisses me on the lips before grabbing his board and jogging toward the shoreline. I laugh and start getting my camera ready.

TWO HOURS LATER, I see Maverick paddle back in. I lower my camera and put the lens cap back on. I got a lot of footage of the new board for him. He's been trying them out the last couple of months and loved them enough to start selling them. They are a local designer so that'll be a good selling point. Maverick comes over and shakes his head, sprinkling me with water. Laughing, he sits down next to me.

“How did it look?” He motions to my camera.

“You looked great out there. I have a lot to work with. I want to get a few stills with you holding the board, too.”

Groaning, he unscrews the cap on his water bottle and takes a sip. “You know how much I hate posing without being in the water surfing.”

“Yeah, I know,” I laugh, “but the girls eat it up, and we get more views that way. You're the face of your store. Lucky for me, you're very marketable and make my job very easy.”

“Let's get this over with then,” he sighs. He stands up and grabs the short board first. “Where do you want me?”

“Let’s do a couple down by the water. I’ll have you put the board under your arm, making sure the brand on the board is showing.”

We spend the next few minutes taking various shots of Maverick with the short and longboard. Even though he hates posing for me, he couldn’t take a bad photo if he tried. I make sure to get a few where he’s looking out at the ocean. I capture the beauty of his green eyes in the sun before they turn to me. I see him looking at me, and I lower my camera and make eye contact with him. I raise my camera and quickly capture what I see in his eyes. His heated stare is still on me as I lower my camera again.

“Now it’s your turn.” He walks toward me and hands me his board.

“What? I can’t be in the photos. I take them.”

“As long as you have the settings right, how hard can it be to press a button? Besides, I brought a new rash guard from the women’s line and want you to model it for me. You say all the girls ramp up the views because of me, but I know, guys. With you advertising for me, they’re more likely to buy the surfboard if you hold it.”

“There’s a reason I’m a videographer. I like to be behind the camera.”

“You tortured me—now it’s my turn,” he says, grinning. “I know you always wear a suit under your clothes, too, so don’t even start with that excuse.”

“Fine,” I huff out. I walk over to the towel and take my t-shirt and shorts off so I’m in my black bikini. I really wish I knew this was going to happen because I would have worn my one-piece and not this tiny bikini that barely covers my bottom. It’s so close to a thong that it might as well be. I wear suits like this all the time to the beach, but I’ve never had Maverick’s eyes on me behind the lens of a camera.

His eyes roam my body, and I can tell by the look in his eyes that he approves. He breaks his gaze and gets the rash guard from his bag. It’s black with a lightweight wetsuit

material and a zipper down the front. He holds it open, and I put my arms through the short sleeves. He takes his time with the zipper, slowly bringing it up to stop at my breast, leaving it open to show some of my bikini top.

“It looks good on you.” His finger trails over the swell of my breasts. I suck in a breath of air as goosebumps appear on my arms. He smiles and takes a step back, picking up my camera from my bag on the towel.

“Since this is your photo shoot, where would you like me?” I ask him, adjusting my ball cap on my head and making sure my hair is good.

“Let’s get some with the longboard since I did a lot with the shortboard today.”

“Okay.” I bend down to grab the longboard and hear the camera click. I whip my head around. “Did you just take my picture?”

“Don’t worry. That one was just for me.” He grins and lifts the camera again.

“I’m beginning to think that you behind a camera could be very dangerous.” I quickly grab the board this time and walk down to the water. Thankfully, the beach is still deserted, and I don’t have an audience.

“I’m definitely pulling this camera out later when you can really model for me. Clothing will be optional,” he gives me a wicked grin. “I can see why you’re addicted to it.”

The thought of lying on the bed naked while Maverick takes pictures of me sends heat coursing through my body. “Only if you model for me. Clothing optional, of course.”

“Deal.” He says without hesitation as his eyes burn with promises.

I anchor the board in the sand while I pose for him as he snaps away. He gets a few from the front and then moves to the back. “Should I take the hat off for a few?” I’m wearing his store logo hat that he got me.



“No, leave it on. I find you wearing my gear very sexy.” I grin at his comment, and he captures it real quick. “Turn the hat on backward, and let me get a back shot with the logo and board.”

I do as he asks as I look out at the ocean. The waves are smaller now, so most of the surfers have left.

“I think that should do it.” He comes to stand next to me. “When’s the last time you’ve been out there?” He motions to the longboard I’m holding.

“I’m not sure. Probably the last time we were all together at Noah’s and went.”

He puts a hand to his heart. “That makes my heart hurt. Let’s put your camera away. You’re going in today.”

I glance at the water. The waves do look fun. I guess I’m buying a rash guard today. I turn toward him. “Let’s do it.”

“That’s my Bell.” He takes my hat and jogs over to the towel to put the camera away. *My Bell*, my heart skips a beat at the thought. How many years have I wanted to hear those words from him? He walks back over and smiles. “You ready?”

“Don’t you have to open today?”

“Nope, Luke is opening. I asked him yesterday if he could cover for me. I didn’t want to rush our morning. I’ll go in this afternoon to relieve him. I only have one longboard, so we can take turns, and I want to be able to help you. The waves should be perfect for you. I know you don’t like the big ones,” he says, laughing.

“So you do remember me tossing and turning and almost dying that day.”

“You didn’t almost die. It just feels like it when you get tossed around under a big one.”

“Well, feeling like it is bad enough,” I laugh.

“That won’t happen today. You know the basics, so paddle out and wait for the wave you want. When you see it, start paddling with it and pop up when you’re ready. You should be

able to ride it right in. I'll stand in the water and help if you need it."

I get up to my waist in the water with Maverick before hopping on my stomach and paddling out. The waves are small enough, so I paddle over them before stopping and searching for the wave I want. I glance back and see Mav in the water watching me.

"You've got this!" I hear him yell and grin at his excitement. I see the one I want, and I turn around and start paddling fast before popping up. I'm able to stay on and ride the wave past him as he cheers me on. Grinning, I hop off when the wave dies down. I had forgotten how fun it is. He picks me up and spins me in the water. "You did it! You really should do this more often. You got up on the first try, even though it's been a while. You're a natural."

I laugh at his enthusiasm. "I had a good coach."

"Ready to go again?" I nod, smiling. I grab the board and begin to paddle back out.

COMING IN FROM THE WATER, we're grinning like little kids. I'm going to be sore tomorrow, but it was so worth it. I need to remember to do this more often. I got up on most of the waves, only falling off a couple of times. Maverick, of course, rode all his in. He could probably ride a longboard blindfolded and still be okay.

We stop at our towels to pack up our things before heading to the outdoor showers to rinse off the sand and salt. Walking to the side of the building, we pass the bathrooms and see two people leave the showers just as we get there. I set my camera gear on the bench and turn on the spray to rinse off. Maverick joins me, ignoring the other shower next to me.

"Here, let me." He turns me so my hair is under the shower as he rinses off the sand and saltwater. I close my eyes and moan as his fingers massage my scalp. "Feel good?" He whispers in my ear.

"So good." He turns me so I'm facing him.

“Let’s get you out of this top.” His eyes burn into mine as he lowers the zipper, exposing my swimsuit top. I back him up under the spray and run my hands along his chest and shoulders, washing away the sand before trailing my fingertips down his stomach. His eyes darken as I follow his trail to the top of his board shorts. “Bell,” he says in a low warning. I look up at him and bite my lip, begging him with my eyes for something...anything, to ease some of this need.

Growling, he lifts me, and I immediately put my legs around his waist as he backs me up against the wall. The water rains down on us as he plunges deep into my mouth, hungrily taking what he needs.

What I need.

His hands dig into my bottom as he presses against me. I moan in his mouth as I start to throb and move against him, wanting to find relief from this constant ache that only he can take away.

His mouth goes down my neck sucking and teasing me with his tongue. I dive my fingers into his hair as he works his way back up to my mouth. Wanting to taste him, I move to his neck and mimic him, licking and sucking. He moans when I lightly bite him before claiming his mouth again.

“Do you have any idea how bad I want to be inside you right now,” he breathes. “I want to feel you clench around me as I stretch and fill you completely.”

“Oh, God.” His words fuel my desire. I’m so close to going over the edge and saying *screw you* to his rules.

We hear talking and laughter nearby, and it shocks us back into reality. Breathing hard, he releases me right before an older couple comes around the corner. They take turns using the one next to us, oblivious to what they almost walked in on. Maverick keeps his back to them, and for good reason. I glance down and see how aroused he is against his shorts. I stifle a laugh, and he gives me a dirty look. He quickly finishes rinsing off, and I get his towel for him. Wrapping it around his waist, he hides his evidence.

The couple is still talking and taking their time under the shower as we gather our things and leave. We walk out into the parking lot toward our jeeps. “That couple almost got the shock of a lifetime. I can’t believe I had enough control to stop what I was doing. Thanks for laughing, by the way.”

I laugh again. “All I can picture is you turning around, and that elderly lady would never be the same. She would forever hold that image in her head.”

“I could say the same for the guy. I was about two seconds from saying to hell with everything and removing your swimsuit top with my teeth. Trust me, he would never be the same either.”

I have never wanted *two more seconds* more in my life. At this point, I could have a full-on audience and wouldn’t care. I’m so consumed by him that I would never even notice.

“Tomorrow’s your big date, isn’t it?” I ask, bringing me back to the present. I’ve tried not to think about him being with Sara tomorrow night, but it’s been in the back of my mind since he told me.

“Technically, it’s not a date, but yes, I’m going to that work thing with Sara to help her out.”

“So, how far does this *making her ex jealous* need to go?” I ask casually.

He straps the boards onto his Jeep and gives me an amused smile. “I’m not making out with her in front of him if that’s what you’re asking.” He finishes securing the boards and walks over to me. “The only girl I want right now is the one I’m looking at.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “She’s just a friend. I won’t cross that line with her. Same as you and Logan.”

I nod and pull him in for another kiss, wanting another taste. He kisses me back, slowly savoring me before pulling away and hugging me. I hear his heart beat fast in his chest as I squeeze him tight.

“I’ll call you later to say goodnight,” he says into my hair.

“I’ll be waiting.” I smile into his chest before he releases me and heads to get ready for work. I wave as he drives away before heading home and sadly showering alone this time.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Maverick

I MEET SARA AT THE RESTAURANT, AND SHE GREETES ME AT THE door when I arrive. “We have a private room in the back,” she says as I follow her into the restaurant. “Thanks again for doing this. He just got here with her. I swear she looks like she’s eighteen.”

“You look beautiful tonight. Don’t let him get to you. We already established that he’s a frog, so let her have him.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she says, laughing. “I don’t know how I would have done this without you. You look good as well. The girls will have a hard time concentrating with you in the room.”

“Thanks.” I wore my hair back tonight in a small bun at the base of my neck and have on black slacks and a jacket with a light blue dress shirt underneath. I skipped the tie to be more comfortable and left a couple of buttons open. I don’t mind dressing up, but I also like to feel like I can breathe. “So this is a law firm party?” She told me a little about the details, but my mind has been elsewhere lately.

“Yes, he’s one of the lawyers, and I was his legal assistant. The classic story of *you should never mix business with pleasure*. Luckily, I was able to be assigned to another lawyer, so we don’t have to work closely anymore. I really love my job and can’t believe I almost let him get in the way of my goals.”

“How did he meet her?”

“She’s a barista at his favorite coffee shop.” She rolls her eyes, and I laugh.

“The eighteen-year-old scenario is looking more and more to be true.”

“Let’s hope they don’t card her tonight,” she laughs. Opening the door, we go in, and I see several tables laid out for our dinner and a bar in the back where the bartender is serving drinks. Small groups of suits are talking amongst themselves with their girls by their side.

Sara leads us straight to the bar to order drinks. An older grey-haired guy walks up, and Sara smiles at him. “Hi Sara, I’m glad you could make it tonight.”

“Hi, Don.” She looks at me and smiles. “Don, this is Maverick. Maverick, this is Don, my boss. He’s the one I told you about that I was lucky enough to get assigned to.”

I hold out my hand and shake his. “It’s nice to meet you, Don. Sara talks highly of you.”

“I’m the lucky one around here. Sara is a damn good legal aide. Samuel was an idiot letting this one go.”

“Thanks, Don. It all worked out in the end because I get to work with my favorite lawyer in the firm.”

“We make a good team.” He beams at her. “I better go make my rounds. It was nice meeting you, Maverick.”

“You too.” I smile at him as he walks away. “So, which one is he?” I look around and try to figure out who the asshole is.

“He’s at the other end of the bar with the blonde,” she says quietly, looking down at her drink.

I glance down the bar and see him looking at us with a frown on his face. He’s a good-looking guy in a business-type of way. Hair is done to perfection, and the suit is nice and pressed. The blond beside him is on her phone and looks bored out of her mind. I smile at him and then bend down and whisper in Sara’s ear. “He’s looking at you, and he’s not happy that I’m here. Laugh like I said something funny.”

She laughs, and I grin at her. “He doesn’t look happy?”

“Nope, he’s probably tired of hearing about the latest TikTok trends and is regretting his choices right about now.”

She busts out laughing, and a few people glance our way. Laughing, we take our drinks and find a place to sit down and eat. Luckily, we are seated next to Don and his wife, Grace, along with two other couples who Sara likes. Samuel and his date are sitting at the table next to us, and unfortunately for him, he gets a perfect view of us the whole time.

Throughout dinner, we make small talk, and I make sure to put my arm on the back of her chair. By the end of the night, Sara has accomplished what she set out to do. Samuel leaves early, and the blonde can barely keep up with him as he storms off once dinner is finished. He’s definitely pissed she brought a date and probably more pissed that she had a great time and never once looked his way.

“Did you see his face when he left?” She asks, laughing. We’re sitting at the table, finishing our drinks after dinner.

“He definitely wasn’t happy you were here with me.” I grin at her and take a sip of my beer.

“How is your situation going? We haven’t spoken about it since the bar.” I smile as thoughts of Bell enter my mind. “Well, if that smile is any indication, I would say things are going pretty well.”

“I’ve just never felt this way before. We watched the sunrise yesterday, and even a simple thing as hand-holding got me all excited. When I’m not with her, I want to be, and when I’m with her, I feel like I can never get enough of wanting to be near her.”

“You’ve just said what every girl in the world wants to hear,” she sighs with a dreamy look on her face. “The sex must be on a whole other level with feelings like that.”

“That’s just it. We haven’t had sex.”

“What? Why? Does she want to wait?”



I think of all the times I almost caved to Bell's pleas and grin. "No, it's actually me that wants to wait, if you can believe that," I laugh. "I've either lost my mind, or it's clear for the first time in my life. I told her that I want to wait until after the wedding when we can be honest with our families about seeing where this goes. I always go straight to sex, and with her, I want to take things slower. I don't want to mess this up, and sleeping with her and keeping this secret from her brother doesn't sound like I would be off to a good start."

"Who are you, and what have you done with the guy in the bar I met?"

Laughing, I lean back and take a sip of my beer. "I'm just trying to be who she deserves. Someone Noah would want for his sister. For the first time, it doesn't feel right to go straight to sex even though I really, really want to." God, do I want to. "There's also a part of me that's scared to death to take the next step with her."

I sigh and decide to be completely honest with her. At this point, she's the only one I can really talk to about this. "I've never slept with someone I truly care about. It's opening myself up to being vulnerable, and I don't like it. I'm used to being in control, but with her, I feel like she has all the power. If I let her in all the way and she decides I'm not enough, I don't think I could take it."

"Love is scary, and it's about being vulnerable with the person you are with, but it's also the most amazing feeling in the world. She's scared too, trust me, but you have to trust each other enough not to break each other's hearts. I think Noah would be very lucky to have his sister date you. I also think you're doing the right thing. There are a lot of people who are involved, and it's good that you're taking things slow and making sure that this is what you both want. Sex can sometimes complicate things, or in your case, it's just your way of not dealing with feelings and getting instant gratification."

"I just hope you're right about Noah. I can't change my past, but I'm hoping to prove to him that I'm good enough to be in his sister's future."

\* \* \*

I WALK UP the stairs to my apartment building an hour later and see a note on my door.

*Meet me at the dock.*

I grin at the same note I gave her and turn around, heading back down the stairs again before walking across the grass to the gazebo. I see her sitting on our bench, hugging her knees. She has her head back, and she's staring at the full moon.

I stop and take in her beauty, bathed in moonlight. God, she's beautiful. I remember at a young age thinking Noah's sister was pretty, but it wasn't until she was in high school that I really started to see how beautiful she was. It just made my need to protect her all the more harder. I would have done anything to keep her safe. I still would. She must sense me staring at her because she turns her head to meet my gaze.

"Hi, I see you got my note." She smiles at me, and I nod.

"I came here as soon as I read it. I probably should have changed first." I look down at my suit and laugh. I wasn't thinking of anything when I read the note except seeing her. I take off my jacket and lay it on the bench next to me before undoing my cuffs and rolling them up because of the heat.

She gets up and walks over to me, eyeing my clothes. "I'm glad you didn't change. I find you extremely sexy, all dressed up like this." She slides her hands up my shirt and grabs my collar in both hands.

"Extremely sexy, huh? I'll make sure to wear this on our first date."

"Date? Are you asking me out? I didn't think you did dates." She looks up at me in amusement.

"I don't, or I didn't. With you, though, I would like to take you on one. Ever since Driftwoods, I've been imagining taking you there and having you all to myself. Did you know how hard you made me that night just listening to you moan when you ate and watching you lick your lips? I was out of mind that night."

“I’ll have to check my schedule and get back to you.” She laughs at the heated glare I give her. Stepping closer to her, she quickly replaces laughter with silence as she sees the intent in my eyes.

“You’ll have a busy schedule all right, but it’ll be because I’ll be buried deep inside you every chance I can get. You won’t have time for anything or anyone else.”

Her eyes burn into mine. “So we’re really doing this? You want to date me?”

“We’re really doing this. I just pray that our families will be on board and I don’t fuck this up.”

“We’ll talk to them together like we planned after the wedding. They may be shocked at first, but I think they’ll be happy. We’re both adults and want to see where this goes. It’s a scary leap for both of us, but walking away and not trying is scarier.”

I reach out and tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “I don’t think walking away is an option for me anymore.”

“Me either,” she whispers right before I capture her lips with mine. I take my time and enjoy the taste and feel of her. Our tongues dance together as I bring her closer, threading my fingers in her hair. I feel her hands untuck my shirt before they find my back and lightly scrape it with her fingernails. I moan against her mouth and take her bottom lip between my teeth, giving it a gentle pull before releasing her.

She lets out a frustrated groan before burying her face in my chest. I chuckle and wrap my arms around her, feeling her frustration. “Tell me about your date tonight. I need something else to think about and want to hear how it went,” she says against my chest.

“It wasn’t a date,” I chuckle softly. “It went good, though.” I lead her to the bench, and she curls up beside me as I tell her about the dinner.

“Sounds like he knows what he lost.” She says after I tell her everything.

“Yeah, he looked miserable when he left, but it serves him right. He cheated on her, and now he has to live with the consequences. I’m looking forward to you meeting her. I think you two will get along, as weird as that sounds.”

“Like you are with Logan, I’m a bit skeptical that she doesn’t have any feelings for you and is just waiting in the background for an opportunity to jump in. I can’t promise we’ll be best friends, but I promise to play nice when I meet her.”

Laughing, I hug her close. “I get that. I’ll try and do the same with Logan. I’m glad we get to dance, though, in the bridal party. Part of me thinks Emma is trying to play matchmaker.”

“You caught that too?” She laughs. “She asked me a few months ago if I had feelings for you, and I lied and told her you’re like an older annoying brother, nothing else. I don’t think she bought it, though. I catch her studying me at times when I’m looking at you. I guess I’m not as good at hiding my feelings as I thought I was.”

“She cornered me at Driftwoods outside the bathroom and asked me something similar. I told her I didn’t know what she was talking about, but I could tell she didn’t believe me. Just in case, I told her to keep it between us for now until I figured some things out. She’s obviously kept her word because Noah hasn’t broken my door down by now.”

“It’s a good sign that she seems to be on our side. It will make telling Noah and Sophia easier if we already have someone rooting for us.”

“Let’s hope so. So, tell me about your day. I want to hear everything.” She snuggles closer, and I smile. I’ve never felt the need to just be with someone and share our days, but with her, I want to know everything. I run my fingers through her hair as I listen to her talk, knowing there’s no other place I want to be right now. For once, I feel content to just be.

# Chapter Nineteen

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## Bella

THE NEXT FEW DAYS PASS BY IN A BLUR. BETWEEN WORK AND helping with the wedding, Maverick and I haven't had much alone time. It's probably for the best. It's getting harder and harder to resist the temptation, but he's adamant about not going any further until we talk to Noah. It's like he wants to prove to himself that he's good at doing simple things like talking and cuddling rather than just fucking. I have no doubt in my mind he's good at the fucking part. My body has a mind of its own every time we're in the same room, and I want more than anything for him to take this ache away that is constantly there between my legs.

Skye and Cole fly in tomorrow for the dress rehearsal, and everyone is here at my parents' house going over last-minute wedding details. I sip my wine and catch Maverick's eye across the table as Emma and my mom discuss when the flowers will be delivered. His eyes meet mine over his glass of bourbon, and with just one glance in those green eyes, I know exactly what he's thinking.

My heart starts to beat fast, and I press my legs together, biting my lip briefly to stop a moan. He glances down at my lip, and his eyes turn a darker shade of green. I can feel the heat of them burning a trail along my body, leaving a trail of flames where they touch. I release my bottom lip and tear my gaze away from him, not being able to trust myself that I will be able to keep my emotions off of my face.

He downs his drink before getting up. "Does anyone need a refill?" Noah holds up his empty glass along with my dad

and Papaw.

“Thanks,” Noah says, handing his glass to Maverick.

“We could use some more wine, too,” Sophia says, pointing to her and Emma’s empty glass.

“Here, let me help you.” I gather the empty glasses with Maverick and take them inside the kitchen. As soon as I set the glasses down, Maverick has me pinned to the wall, away from the view of the windows. “What if someone walks in?” I manage to get out.

“I’ll take my fucking chances,” he says in a low growl. “Right now, I just need to taste you.” His tongue dives into my mouth, searching and seeking for mine. I taste the bourbon on him and moan from the intoxicating mixture. His hands fist into my hair, and I feel how hard he is against my stomach as he presses against me. I instantly feel the desire between my legs gather, drenching my panties. Breaking our kiss, we both breathe heavily, trying to find some form of reality to cling to and bring us back to the present.

“God, you drive me crazy. I’ve sat out there so fucking hard through most of the evening, and then you go and bite your lip just to torture me more.”

“I wasn’t trying to torture you,” I whisper. “I was biting back a moan because of what you make my body feel. You aren’t the only one being tortured right now.”

“Good to know I’m not the only one about to go insane here.”

“You’re not alone.” I fist his shirt and pull him to me for one more. His hand cups my neck firmly, holding me in place with a possessiveness that makes me only crave more. It’s torture having the one thing I’ve always longed for be right within my grasp but unable to act on it. Moaning, I pull back, knowing we’ve taken too much time already. “We better get back out there. Everyone will wonder where we are.”

He reluctantly lets me go, and I run my fingers through my hair. “You look beautiful, and besides the rosy cheeks and

slightly swollen lips, no one but me will know what I really want to do with you right now.”

“And what do you want to do to me.” I look up at him and resist the urge to bring his lips back to mine.

“Everything.” He gives me a wicked grin and walks back to the counter to refill everyone’s glasses, leaving me with a thousand thoughts going through my mind. I will my heart to slow down and go over to help him. I pull a tray out of the cabinet, and we load the drinks up before joining everyone outside again.

“So everything is set for tomorrow. We have the rehearsal at six and then dinner at seven-thirty,” my mom says, going over her notes. “Guests from out of town will be arriving tomorrow and checking into their hotel rooms. The caterers will arrive at seven to get everything set up for the dinner. Maya and I will be over in the morning with Dad and Matt to set up the tables in your backyard.”

“Bella and I will be over too to help with decorating,” Sophia says. “You took work off too, right, Mav?”

“I’m off until Monday, so I’ll be there to help.”

“Perfect,” my mom says. “Is there anything we’re forgetting, Emma?”

“I don’t think so. I can’t thank you enough for all the help you guys have given me and Noah these past few weeks. We couldn’t have pulled it off without all of you.”

Noah smiles and hugs her close. “She’s right. We appreciate all the help. The last five months have flown by, and we know how hard everyone has worked to bring it all together.”

“Are you kidding? Maya and I have had a blast helping you plan this wedding. We will be pros by the time Bella, Sophia, and Maverick get married.”

“You may be waiting a long time on Maverick,” Noah laughs. “Luna will probably get married before he does.”

I glance at Maverick, and he has an amused look. “Oh, I don’t know. Someone could come in and completely take me by surprise just like Emma did with you.”

“I agree. I have a feeling Maverick’s person might not be that far away.” Emma glances at me briefly before grinning at Maverick.

“I have to agree, too. I feel love in the air tonight.” Mimi says with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Well, I need a big fan to blow it my way,” Sophia says, laughing and taking a sip of her wine.

I catch Maverick’s eye across the table. My heart skips a beat with the look he gives me. If what I’m seeing in his eyes is any indication, we both have been taken by surprise. A fan didn’t blow our way. A whole damn tornado came through.

\* \* \*

SOPHIA and I arrive at Noah’s house in the morning to help set up the decorations. Well, technically, it’s Noah and Emma’s house now. She officially moved in after her accident last year. She still has her house down the street, and they’re waiting until after the wedding to sell it or rent it out. Tonight, the girls and I are staying there for a sleepover while Maverick and Cole stay at Noah’s. We invited Sadie, but with the baby, she and James decided it would be easier to stay at the hotel they had booked for the wedding.

I’m looking forward to our slumber party tonight. It’s been a while since all of us girls have been together. We walk in and see Emma and Noah having coffee.

“Hey, sis.” Noah looks up at me and smiles. I still can’t believe my brother is getting married. Their love story is one most people dream about, and they found it with each other. I couldn’t love Emma more. They’re perfect for each other, and there won’t be a dry eye tomorrow when they say *I do*.

“Hi, Noah. Are Mom and Dad already here?” I sit my bag down and walk over to the coffee pot to pour a mug.



“They arrived a few minutes ago with Maya and Matt, bringing all of this,” Emma says, laughing and waving her hand at the table.

I look over my shoulder and see the spread of fruit, bagels, and a variety of muffins set out for everyone. “That’s Mom for you. Always making sure everyone is fed.” I grin and walk over to check out the muffin flavors.

“What time is Skye and Cole getting here?” Sophia asks, popping a grape in her mouth.

Noah looks up from his plate and glances at Sophia. “We’re leaving soon to go pick them up. They get in at ten.”

“Are you ready for our sleepover tonight?” I ask Emma.

“I am. I can’t remember the last time I had a girl’s sleepover.”

“I still don’t understand why I have to be separated from my finance tonight. Isn’t that an outdated tradition?” Noah frowns into his coffee.

“One night away isn’t going to kill you. Plus, it’s more exciting when you don’t see Emma until she walks down the aisle.” Sophia says with a mouthful of muffin.

“Well, if you’re going to kidnap my girl for the night, don’t be surprised if you can’t find her after dinner. I’m stealing her for a bit before you take her.” Emma giggles, and Noah grins at her before bringing her close for a kiss.

“I see the honeymoon has already started.” Maverick laughs and walks in as Noah and Emma break away. He looks so good today in faded jeans and a white t-shirt. He has a ball cap on, and his golden streaks are peeking out underneath.

I roam my eyes over his body and find his as they stare at me in amusement. He knows exactly how he’s making me feel, and he loves it. He winks at me quickly before walking over to the table. His smell invades my senses as he reaches over me to get a muffin. “Good morning,” he says softly.

“Good morning. I take it you slept well.”

“I did. I had the best sex dream of my life. That’s why I was late. I had to take care of business in the shower this morning.”

I cough, choking on my coffee that I was sipping.

He laughs and starts patting me on the back. “You okay, Bella?”

“Yeah, it just went down the wrong way.” Sophia hands me a glass of juice. “Thanks,” I cough, taking a sip of orange juice.

“Hey, Dad.” Maverick walks over to his dad, who just walked in from the backyard, and gives him a hug. While Maverick looks like his mom with darker blonde hair and green eyes, Sophia resembles her dad. He’s tall like Maverick but has midnight dark hair, and with his intense green eyes, they mirror each other. Sophia and I used to get teased all the time about how our dads were DILFS. I’m sure Maverick and Noah got the same from our moms.

“Hi, Mav.” His dad hugs him back. “Did you just get here?”

“Yeah, just walked in. Need any help out there?”

“The tables and chairs just arrived, and they’re setting them up now. I’ll need help hanging lights in a bit, though. Mom should be in a minute with Sage and Jax. We want to get something to eat before we start the decorations.” He walks to the table and starts to make a plate.

“Sounds good.” Maverick sits next to me and takes a bite out of his muffin.

“How’s work going, Bella?” Matt sits down across from me and pours some orange juice. “I love what you’ve been posting on social media lately. It looks like you two have found your groove in bringing in more business. I should have hired you years ago,” he says, laughing.

“Thanks. I’m just glad I can help. I love seeing the business grow. I know it means a lot to you and Maverick. He’s been doing a great job finding new inventory from local businesses in Florida. The customers are loving the new

boards.” I glance at Maverick and see his dimples appear as he grins at me. I take another sip of orange juice, feeling my mouth go dry.

“I came in last week and saw those. I want to get one myself,” Matt says, laughing. “I’m proud of him. I know how hard he’s been working. I love that he loves the shop as much as I do. You guys make a great team.” He looks at us and smiles.

“Yes, we do.” Mav winks at me, and I grin back at him as Matt starts talking to Sophia about her work. I feel Mav’s hand find mine under the table, and he squeezes it before letting go and finishing his breakfast. I manage to sit through the rest of breakfast, but my thoughts are far away from what is being said at the table. Thoughts of Maverick in the shower consume me as images of him sliding his hand up and down his hard length keep appearing in my mind. I need to find out what his dream was about, and I want him to show me exactly what he saw.

# Chapter Twenty

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## Maverick

“SO AFTER THE GROOM’S PARENTS SIT DOWN, THERE WILL BE A change in music, and that will be your cue, Noah, to walk in from the side here.” Claire, the wedding coordinator at the hotel, looks at us, making sure we’re paying attention. “After Noah will go Maverick, then James, and then Cole. Make sure to stand slightly apart and at an angle. You want to line up with the bridesmaid you are assigned to. Maverick, make sure you have the rings on you. I can’t tell how many best men forget them or can’t get them out of their pockets, so make sure they are easily ready to get.”

“Will do,” I grin.

“Okay, let’s start the music and give this a try. During the ceremony, there will be a live guitarist, but for now, we’re just going to play it through the speakers.”

The music starts, and Noah’s mom walks down the aisle before taking her seat in the front row. Noah starts walking across the dark plank wooden floor to the wedding altar.

This hotel did an amazing job on its restoration. The ceilings are high with wooden beams, and the walls are covered in floor-to-ceiling windows, giving a beautiful view of the ocean outside. The white walls and all the wooden features give it an elegant but rustic look. Fairy lights hang from beam to beam, adding to the romantic feel. This place will be breathtaking tomorrow, filled with white and pink lilies.

I follow Noah, and we all line up as the bridesmaids begin their walk.

Sophia comes down the aisle first, and I grin and wink at my sister as she takes her spot across from Cole. I glance back down the aisle, and my breath catches as Bell walks down. She looks stunning in a light blue dress that makes her eyes look like the ocean. It has a slit up the side, showing off her gorgeous leg. She has her hair in a loose bun at the nape of her neck. I meet her eyes before she turns and stands next to Sophia.

I tear my gaze away and focus on Skye walking down the aisle, followed by Luna and the flower girl and ring bearer. I hear Noah take a deep breath as Emma comes down last, walking with Noah's dad. I put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze it, letting him know I'm here for him. Noah and Emma have been through a lot, and I know how much it means to him to be standing here with her. Emma has tears in her eyes as Jax whispers something in her ear before handing her to Noah. Without her parents here, I know this will be a bittersweet day for her.

"Emma, once you stand with Noah, you'll turn and give Skye your bouquet. She'll hold it for you until you walk down the aisle with Noah at the end. Now, Mimi is going to take over from here." I love that Mimi is ordained and going to do the service. I can't think of a better person to bring them together in marriage. I know it means a lot to both of them to have her marry them.

"After Mimi has everyone seated and says a few words, Noah and Emma will do their written vows to each other," Claire explains. "Then Maverick, you'll give the rings to Noah as Mimi joins them in marriage after they say I do. She'll pronounce them husband and wife, and they kiss." Noah grabs Emma and kisses her, dipping her low for a long kiss.

"Ow ow," yells Skye while I whistle. Laughing, Emma and Noah come up for air.

"So after that kiss," Claire says, laughing. "You both will walk down the aisle. Maverick and Skye will follow once you get to the end of the aisle, followed by the rest of the wedding party." Skye puts her hand on my arm as we go down the aisle after Emma and Noah.

“Well, that went better than expected. The guys must be on their best behavior tonight,” Skye laughs with Emma.

“Hey, we can act like grown-ups when we want to,” I say, grinning.

“This wedding is going to be so beautiful,” Bell says, reaching the end of the aisle. “This place is amazing! I can’t wait to see it in the evening with all of the fairy lights and flowers. They did a beautiful job renovating this place, and I love how there’ll be a balcony outside with a view of the water during the reception upstairs.”

“Noah and I knew when we saw this place that this is where we wanted to get married. The guests can have cocktails upstairs while we get our pictures done. They can even walk the beach if they want to. It’s just better than I could have imagined.” Emma grins up at Noah.

“I just want this day to be perfect for you,” Noah says, putting his arms around her.

“I’m marrying you. It’s already perfect.” She reaches up to kiss him.

“You guys couldn’t get any cuter if you tried,” Skye says, sighing.

“Does anyone have any questions?” Claire asks, coming over to our group.

“I think we’re good,” Noah says.

“Perfect. I’ll let you get to your dinner then, and I’ll see everyone tomorrow around four. The photographers and videographers are scheduled to arrive then, too. All you two need to do is relax and enjoy your special day. We’ll take care of everything else.”

“Thanks, Claire. We really appreciate it. I can’t wait to see this place tomorrow night. It’s going to be beautiful,” Emma says, hugging Claire.

“You’re so welcome. We’ll see you tomorrow then.” Claire waves goodbye before heading back to work.

“So, who’s ready to eat? I’m starving.” Noah says, taking Emma’s hand and leading her to the door.

“Me too. I’ve been looking forward to tonight’s dinner all day,” Cole laughs and throws his arm around Skye.

“We’ll meet you guys soon,” I tell Noah as we walk outside. “Do you and Bell want to ride over with me? I think everyone else is still looking around inside.”

“Yeah, let me tell Mom and Dad that we’re riding with you.” Sophia disappears inside, leaving me alone with Bell.

“So, what did you think of the rehearsal? It’s going to be beautiful tomorrow.” Bell says when Sophia leaves.

“I think that if you’re even half as beautiful as you were tonight walking down the aisle, I’m going to have a hard time focusing on the wedding around me.”

“I was having a hard time concentrating tonight too.”

“I really want to kiss you right now,” I tell her quietly.

“Me too,” she says softly. I take a step toward her and stop when Sophia comes back out.

“Mom and Dad are going to meet us there. They’re checking the reception area with everyone else and making sure everything is set for tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” I say, getting my keys out of my pocket. I walk with the girls to my Jeep. Sophia climbs in the back, and I open the passenger door for Bell.

“Thanks,” she says, hiking her skirt up and climbing in. I see her bare thigh and let out a frustrated sigh as I close the door. This not having sex is really starting to get to me. It’s been over a month, and I feel like I’m going insane. This has got to be the longest foreplay in the history of foreplays, and it gets harder every day, no pun intended.

I climb into the Jeep and drive us to Noah and Emma’s. I’m glad we’re having the dinner over there. It’s much more private than a restaurant, which means I will get my kiss one way or another tonight. I glance over at Bell, and she has a

small smile on her lips as she watches me. It's like she knows what I'm thinking.

“What are you and Sara's plans after the wedding?” Sophia asks me. “Is she staying in your room?”

I look in the rearview mirror at my sister. “No, I told you she's just a friend. I learned my lesson at James' wedding to never take a girl who wants more. It's the same reason you're taking Frankie. I just want to have a good time.”

“You never know. Crazy things happen at weddings. I made sure Bell got her own room, too, even though she insisted that she and Logan were just friends. I bet those rooms will come in handy after a few drinks and love in the air from the wedding. I already know Logan likes her based on the size of the hickey he gave her. He was marking her,” she says, laughing.

Bell lets out a laugh, and I glance at her in amusement. “Hmmm. He doesn't seem like the type that would play with fire like that. We all know Bell doesn't like to be told what to do, let alone have someone get away with marking her. I'm surprised he had the balls to do it. He must have better game than I thought.”

“I know, right,” Sophia says, laughing. “I'm surprised she didn't kick him in the balls. That's why I think she might secretly like him, and that's why I made her get a room tomorrow.”

“Well, you can take him back to your room because he won't be in mine,” Bell says, turning to look at Sophia.

“Unless there is a tall, dark, insanely hot guy that I don't know about coming to the wedding, I'll be sleeping in the bed next to Frankie all by myself. I promised Frankie a good time and a lot of booze. His partner said I could have him for the night while he enjoys a quiet evening binge-watching Netflix shows.”

Bell laughs and shakes her head. “Well, my room is yours if you need it. I can always sleep with Frankie.”

“I might take you up on it if Mr. Perfect shows up.”



“You’ll get your Mr. Perfect. He’s out there just waiting for you to run into him.” Bell tells her as we pull up in the driveway.

“And you’ll get your fireworks,” Sophia says, smiling at Bell before she gets out of the Jeep.

“Fireworks?” I raise my eyebrows in question, unbuckling my seatbelt.

“I told her I was waiting for the one who would give me fireworks when we kissed. Someone who would make my body burn for him and be completely consumed in his presence. We made a pact a long time ago to never settle for less.” She gets out to join Sophia before I have a chance to ask her more.

Fireworks. I push the thought out of my mind for now and walk into the house with them.

“Oh my God, this looks amazing,” Sophia says as we enter the backyard. Two long wooden tables are set up with white flower bouquets and candles along the center. Fairy lights are strung throughout the backyard, and the pool is filled with floating candles, giving it a romantic feel. A bartender is set up in the corner, and the catering staff is busy bringing out food.

“It’s breathtaking.” Bell looks around in awe. “I feel like I just stepped into a fairytale.”

“Noah, this place looks amazing,” I tell him as he and Emma walk over to us.

“You can thank our moms for that. They had a vision they knew Emma would love and brought it to life.”

“You should have seen me bawl like a baby a few minutes ago when I walked in. It’s so beautiful.” Emma wipes away another tear as she looks around.

Bell and Sophia hug her before taking her away to get a glass of wine. I see my parents arrive along with Noah’s. Mimi and Papaw walk in with Luna, James, and Sadie. James has six-month-old Harper on his hip as she gnaws on a teething ring that’s clutched in her chubby hand. She’s got dark hair like her parents and really is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.

An elderly couple walks in, which must be Emma's grandparents, followed by her aunt and uncle and a couple of her cousins. They just arrived today from Arizona. Noah insisted that they all be invited tonight, too. He knows how important it is that Emma have family here as well.

"Do you want something to drink?" I ask Noah.

"I'll do a bourbon, thanks. I see Emma waving me over to meet her relatives. I'll be right back." He walks over to Emma, and I head to the bar to get our drinks.

Sophia is chatting with James and Sadie as I walk up next to Bell at the bar. "Ready for tomorrow?" I ask her.

"I'm ready." She looks at me and grins. "Our Noah's getting married."

"Yes, he is," I say, grinning.

"I'm just so happy for them." Bell looks over at Noah and Emma. "Noah's waited his whole life for her, and she came back to him. I'm going to be a crying mess tomorrow," she laughs.

"I couldn't be happier for them. They both deserve their happy ever after."

"Yes, they do."

I tell the bartender two bourbons and two white wines for Bell and Emma.

James is next to me, and I feel a tiny pull on my hair. I glance over and see Harper smiling at me with her two bottom teeth proudly on display.

I grin back at her, and she reaches for me. Laughing, I take her from James and bring her to my chest.

"Hey, sweet girl. Are you having fun tonight?" I run my hands through her soft dark curls as she lays her cheek against my shoulder. I look up and catch Bell's eyes. She's staring at me, and something passes between us. A little girl with blond curls and big blue eyes invade my mind. A deep longing in my chest takes me by surprise.

I see her blink back tears and know she's envisioning the same.

"She must really like you," Sadie says, watching the way Harper is content in my arms. "She usually doesn't reach for people that she just met."

I tear my gaze from Bell and smile at Sadie. "She knows who's the most fun here. Kids love me." I grin at the cuteness in my arms.

Sage announces dinner is ready, and Sadie takes Harper from me to strap her in the stroller they brought so she can eat next to them. We get our drinks and find our seats with our names on the place cards.

Noah and Emma are at the head of the table. I hand Noah and Emma their drinks and sit down to his right. Bell's place card is right next to me. I smile at how much Emma strategically places us together. Skye, Cole, and Sophia take seats across from us while James and Sadie are on the other side of Bell. Our parents and Luna are further down the table. Both grandparents and cousins are at the other table next to us.

Sage and Jax stand up at the end and softly clink their glasses with a fork to get everyone's attention.

"Jax and I just wanted to say a few words before everyone starts eating. I'll try to do this without crying, but I can't make any promises." She smiles at Noah and Emma before continuing. "Noah, from the moment you were born and I held you in my arms, I knew you would always be my special boy. Even though you and Maverick gave Maya and me grey hairs prematurely over the years," she looks at me, and we all laugh, "I love you more than you could ever possibly know. You've grown into the type of person that people strive to be one day. I knew you were waiting for that one girl that your soul would connect with, and the moment I met Emma, I knew I was witnessing a beautiful love story.

"Emma," she turns and looks at her, "Jax and I would never want to replace your parents, nor could we. They were amazing people who raised a beautiful daughter, and I wish more than anything that they could be sitting with us at this

table today.” I look over at Emma, and she’s silently crying as Noah holds her. I see Bell wipe her eyes. I place my hand on her thigh to let her know I’m here. She grabs my hand and doesn’t let go.

Sage wipes her eyes and continues. “We want you to know, Emma, that we think of you as our daughter and love you just like you were our own. You love our son unconditionally and bring a light to his eyes that he was missing, and we will forever be grateful to you. There will be times tomorrow that will be hard for you without your parents, but I hope you know they are here with you. You carry them here,” she holds a hand on her heart. “I want you to feel how much love is surrounding you tonight and know that we will always be here for you.” She wipes her eyes again and gives a small laugh. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to do this without crying.”

Jax puts his arm around her, and she lays her head on his chest. “Sage pretty much said it all. I just want you to know how proud we are of you, son. You’ve been one of my best friends most of my life, and you make me a better person just by being in the same room as you.” His eyes fill with tears. “Damn it,” he says, wiping them away and laughing softly. “And Emma, everything Sage said comes from my heart, too. We couldn’t have asked for a better girl for our Noah. You’re family now and stuck with us, and that includes the Lane’s,” he says, looking at my parents and then Sophia and I. “Good luck with that.” We all laugh as they sit down.

Noah and Emma get up and give Jax and Sage a hug. There isn’t a dry eye at the table.

“You ok?” I ask Bell.

“Yeah, I knew I was going to be a blubbering mess today and tomorrow,” she says, laughing softly and wiping her eyes. “Thank you,” she says, still holding my hand.

“For what?”

“For just being here with me.” She squeezes my hand again.

“There’s no place I’d rather be,” I say, knowing that’s been my truth for a while now. It just took me a long time to realize it.

## Chapter Twenty-One

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### Bella

AFTER WE SAY GOODBYE TO EVERYONE, THE SEVEN OF US SIT on the sofa outside by the fire table. The girls and I will be leaving soon to go to Emma's house for the night. We won't see the boys again until we walk down the aisle.

"I'm going to go make sure I have everything packed that I need," Emma says, getting up.

"I'm going to go help her." Noah stands up and sets his glass down.

"I bet that's not all he's going to help her with," Cole laughs.

"We haven't spent a night apart since returning from the hospital. I want to say goodnight to my fiancé the proper way that she deserves," he says, grinning.

Emma blushes and squeals as Noah picks her up over his shoulder and carries her upstairs.

"Well, at least someone is getting some tonight," Sophia says, sighing. "I haven't had a good lay in months, and even then, it wasn't something to brag about."

"Jesus, Soph. I really don't need to hear about my sister's sex life."

"Well, lucky for you, there is nothing to tell. It's practically nonexistent. Guys don't know how to please a girl anymore."

"You haven't been with the right guys then," Cole laughs. "Right, baby?" He looks at Skye.

“That’s right. I have no complaints in that department.” Skye grins at Cole.

“Good for you two,” Sophia says, rolling their eyes at them and making them laugh. “You guys have been together forever, and Maverick obviously knows what he’s doing with the girls lining up for him every weekend. Meanwhile, Bell and I are out there dating, and we know how hard it is to find the total package. There’s always something lacking. They’re either really good in bed and have no personality or a great personality and lack in passion or like Maverick and have both but can’t commit,” she says with a laugh.

“Thanks sis,” Maverick gives her a frown. “I can commit. Maybe I just haven’t been with the right person yet that makes me want more than just one night.”

Sophia studies him before sighing, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I guess I just assumed it was because you were afraid of commitment.”

“It’s okay. If I’m being totally honest, part of me is deathly afraid of letting someone in and being vulnerable that way. It’s hard to let go and give someone else control over your heart.”

“I think if you’re with the right person, they would do everything in their control to protect your heart,” I say softly. He meets my eyes briefly, and I see the conflicting emotions in them. He gives me a small smile before looking away.

Cole clears his throat, and I look over at him. “I agree with Bell. When you’re with the right person, it clicks on all levels. And yeah, being vulnerable and letting someone in is scary, but it also brings you closer and opens up a new level of intimacy you can’t get with a casual one-night stand. Sex is so much better when you both let each other in.”

“To mind-blowing sex!” Skye holds up her wine glass for a toast.

“To mind-blowing sex!” We all cheer and laugh.

“I don’t know if we needed a toast, but thanks, guys,” Noah says, walking back out with Emma.

Maverick looks at his watch. “Only twenty minutes? Have I not taught you anything over the years?”

“Oh, I could go all night, trust me, but when you’re as good as I am, you can hit all the right places and be deeply satisfied in a short amount of time, too,” he says, grinning at Maverick.

“Very true. You were listening.” Maverick grins back at him. “And judging by the look on Emma’s face, I would say she is deeply satisfied right now.”

“Oh my God.” Emma covers her face with her hands to hide the redness that appears on her cheeks. “I will be so glad when I’m not the topic of sex anymore.”

“But it’s so fun. I never knew there were so many shades of red,” Maverick tells her, and we all bust out laughing.

“I think we need to let the girls head to their sleepover before Emma is a permanent shade of red tomorrow for our wedding,” Noah teases, pulling her in for a hug and saying goodbye.

Cole and Skye stand up and kiss goodbye while Sophia goes inside to get our bags by the door. I stand awkwardly by Maverick while the couples talk softly. He looks at me, giving me a small smile. We haven’t had any alone time today with all the people around, and it’s really hard to be this close to him and not be able to touch him like I want to.

He must be feeling the same because I hear him say, “We better hug Bell. I know you’re going to miss me. It’s going to be a full night away from each other,” he teases the other couples as they laugh.

“A full night? However, will we manage?” I grin as he pulls me in for a hug. It feels so good to be in his arms. I resist the urge to sigh and bury my face in his neck.

“Keep your phone by you,” he whispers in my ear before pulling away. I nod slightly and take my bag from Sophia that she just brought out.

“You girls sure you don’t want me to drive you over there?” Noah asks Emma.



“No, we want to walk the beach. It’s beautiful outside tonight,” she says, giving him one more kiss. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll be the one in white.”

“I’ll be there,” he smiles before letting her go.

I give Noah a hug before leaving. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I can’t wait to see you get married. I love you.”

“I love you too,” he smiles. “Thank you for everything and for making Emma already feel like she has a sister. It really means a lot to me.”

“Of course. She’s felt like my sister since the moment we met.” I give him one last hug and join the girls on our walk to the beach.

I TAKE another chocolate strawberry off our charcuterie board and take a bite. “There is nothing better than girl time, sipping Prosecco and eating chocolate strawberries,” I sigh. This is just what I need to relax due to all this bent-up sexual frustration I’ve been dealing with for the past month.

“So why haven’t you and Cole gotten married yet? You’ve been together since high school and live together. You’re practically married anyway.” Sophia asks Skye. We’re all curled up in our PJs on Emma’s couch, enjoying our girl talk.

“We’ve talked about marriage, and we both know we want to get married to each other one day. We wanted to finish college first and get settled into our careers. Now that we have an apartment together, we’re just enjoying ourselves. I know it’s our next step, and I do see us marrying in the next couple of years. I guess we’re just not in any rush.”

“It will be your wedding we’re at next,” Emma says, grinning at her. “I predict Cole will have a ring on that finger by the end of the year.”

“Do you know something I don’t?” Skye asks her, laughing.

“No, he hasn’t told me a thing, I swear. He probably doesn’t trust me because he knows I can’t keep secrets from you. It’s just a gut feeling.”

“You never know with Cole. He’s full of surprises.” Skye reaches over and takes another strawberry.

“Are you nervous about tomorrow,” I ask Emma.

“A little. Not with getting married but the usual nervousness about standing up in front of everyone or tripping down the aisle,” she laughs. “I’m more excited than nervous. I can’t wait to be Mrs. Noah Bennett. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“I know Noah feels the same way. I think he would have married you the week you met if he could have asked you without scaring you away,” I tell her.

“As much as I was scared and fought my feelings, I knew deep down that there wasn’t anyone else for me.”

“We need to make sure we have tissues with us tomorrow up at the altar. I’m going to be a mess,” Skye says, reaching out and squeezing Emma’s hand.

“Have you written your speech yet for the reception?” Sophia asks Skye.

“Yes, and I bawled like a baby writing it,” she laughs.

“I wonder what Maverick is going to say.” I look at Emma and start to giggle.

“There’s no telling. I’m really hoping it has nothing to do with Noah and I’s sex life. He loves to make me turn bright red, so I’m going to prepare myself for the worst,” she says, laughing.

“As maid of honor, I need to get the bride to bed now so she doesn’t have dark circles under her eyes. She needs to be well rested. It’s after midnight, and we have a big day tomorrow.” Skye stands up and takes the empty wine glasses from the coffee table to the sink.

Emma yawns and stands up. “As much as I would love to pull an all-night sleepover like we used to, I know you’re right. I don’t want to be tired tomorrow. Are you girls sure you’re okay with sleeping on the couch? I can get out the air bed.”

“We’re good. This couch is comfy, and there’s plenty of room for the two of us. Go get some sleep.” Sophia yawns and goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

Emma and Skye say goodnight and close the door to the bedroom. I put sheets and blankets on the couch for us and head to the bathroom once Sophia is done. I wash my face and brush my teeth before coming back out. The lights are out, and I can already tell Sophia is sleeping. I crawl onto the couch and get settled when my phone buzzes.

MAVERICK

Are you awake?

I smile as Maverick’s text pops up.

BELLA

Yes. I was just about to lie down. Everyone just fell asleep.

MAVERICK

Cole and Noah just did, too. Want to meet me on the beach for a few minutes?

The thought of being alone with him has me grinning at the phone.

BELLA

Yes. I’ll meet you there ;)

MAVERICK

See you soon ;)

I throw back the covers and quietly make my way to the back deck and down the stairs to the beach. The gentle laps of the waves can be heard in the dark as I walk toward Noah's house. The sand feels cool beneath my feet as they sink into the soft sand.

I see Maverick walking toward me in the distance, and I pick up my pace like I'm being pulled in his direction and my body needs to be near him. I finally catch up to him and notice he's carrying a blanket.

"Hi," I say, breathless from walking so fast.

"Hi," he grins at me. "I really wanted to do something earlier and didn't get the chance to."

"What did you want to do?"

"Everyone else got a proper goodbye kiss, and I felt we got cheated out of it." He steps closer to me and drops the blanket before his hands dive into my hair and his lips find mine. I sink into him and hungrily kiss him back. My hands roam his back as I bring him even closer. Our tongues dance together as we deepen the kiss. He takes my bottom lip between his teeth, giving it a pull before sucking it softly. I moan against him as he continues to kiss his way down my neck.

I feel his hands find my bare skin under my tank, caressing my back. He presses his hard length against me, awakening a desire between my legs. His lips find mine again, and it's me this time that takes his lower lip between my teeth, biting down softly before sucking. I hear him moan as I give it a pull before letting go.

"Do you feel it?" He asks me.

"I feel a lot of things right now. You're going to have to be specific." I softly laugh.

"Fireworks. Do you feel them with me?"

"I've always felt them with you," I breathe.

"Good, because I want to give you everything you've always wanted." He steps back and picks up the blanket before

laying it down. “The stars are beautiful tonight. I thought we could watch them for a bit.”

He lays down on his back with his arm behind his head. He holds his other hand out to me, and I lay beside him and put my head on his chest as his arm goes around me.

“Do you feel it with me?” I ask him softly, looking up at the stars.

“Fireworks?”

“Yeah.”

“If by fireworks you mean that when I kiss you, I can’t get enough of you? That I feel like I need you more than I need my next breath of air? That my body burns and throbs for you more than it ever has for anyone else? Then, yes, I feel the fireworks. It’s like the fucking Fourth of July over here.”

I giggle, and he laughs softly.

“Look,” he says, pointing to the sky. “See that pattern of stars that look like an upside W?”

I look to where he is pointing and see the W. “I see it.”

“That’s Queen Cassiopeia. She was so vain that her crown is upside down as punishment. If you look at the brightest star on the W, it points to Andromeda. She’s her daughter. It looks like the two streams of stars that touch the corner of a square, which is Pegasus.

“It’s said that Queen Cassiopeia told Poseidon that her daughter, Andromeda, was more beautiful than all ten of his children, and he got very angry at her ego and how vain she was that he summoned a sea monster to destroy her kingdom. She was afraid for her life, so she made a deal with the sea monster to sacrifice her daughter to save herself and her kingdom.

“She chained her to a rock in the middle of the ocean for the sea monster to eat. Perseus, the great warrior who beheaded Medusa, was coming home from one of his many adventures on Pegasus and immediately fell in love with Andromeda. Even though she was promised to be married to

another, he slayed the sea monster and fought the guy she was supposed to marry and won. They lived happily ever after, and their love story was written in the stars for all to see. His constellation is right next to her.” He points to the constellation to the left of her.

I turn and look up at him with a shocked face. “Since when do you know about Greek mythology?”

“I love the ocean and follow the tide and moon charts for surfing, and I wanted to know more about the stars I always see at night when I come down to the water. I started studying them and found out they have really cool stories about them. I guess it just became something fun to learn about.” He’s quiet for a moment. “I’ve never told anyone that I’m a secret star nerd until now.”

“Lucky for you, I happen to love star nerds. I’ve always been fascinated with Greek mythology but never really took the time to learn it.” I lay my head back on his shoulder and gaze up at Andromeda and Perseus’ stars.

“Well, lucky for you, I’m a good teacher. I’ll teach you all I know.”

“Andromeda and Perseus,” I say softly. “Their love must have been powerful for the gods to write them in the stars.”

“Athena promised them when they died they could live on together in the stars side by side so everyone would remember their love, loyalty and bravery toward one another.” He runs his hands softly through my hair as we look at the stars.

“Thank you for sharing that part of you with me.”

“It just feels natural to share with you. I look forward to our talks.”

“I do, too.” We lay there and look at the stars, so comfortable with each other that no words need to be said. Just being in each other’s presence is enough. His hand runs along my back and hair putting me in a dream-like state.

“I better let you get some sleep,” he says softly. You need to get your rest so you can keep up with my dancing tomorrow night.”

I sit up and laugh. “You just try and keep up with me.”

“Challenge accepted,” he grins. He stands up and pulls me to my feet before shaking out the blanket and folding it up. “Goodnight,” he says softly before kissing me one more time.

“Goodnight.” We turn and walk back to our houses. I smile as I brush the sand off my feet and quietly go inside and climb under the covers. Tomorrow’s the wedding, and soon there won’t be any more reasons to wait. I’ve waited most of my life to be his, and once I am, I intend to keep it that way. Always.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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### Maverick

I HELP NOAH WITH HIS TIE AS THE PHOTOGRAPHER SNAPS away. Sage walks in with Jax and puts a hand to her heart. Her eyes start to get misty as she looks at Noah.

“You look so handsome,” she says, smiling through her tears. She comes over and hugs him.

“Thanks, Mom,” Noah hugs his parents and blinks the unexpected tears away. I hear the photographer snap away at the special moment.

“Let’s have your mom put your flower on for you, Noah, so I can get some pictures of the two of you.” He hands Sage Noah’s small lily boutonniere.

Noah turns to me and reaches for a small box and card on the table. “Can you give this to Emma for me? I want her to have it before the wedding.”

“Sure. I’ll be right back.” I take the box and close the door behind me as I walk to the girls’ room on the other side of the building. I knock on the door and hear Emma say *come in*. I cover my eyes and peek my head in. “Is everyone decent?” I ask, laughing.

“It’s just me, and yes, I’m decent,” Emma laughs. I walk in and stop in my tracks. Emma is standing in front of a full-length mirror and looks absolutely breathtaking.

“You look beautiful, Emma. Noah is going to lose his mind when he sees you.”



“Thank you,” she smiles at me in the mirror. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s doing good. He’s very excited to marry you.”

“Me too.”

“Where is everyone?” I look around and see that the room is empty.

“The photographer is getting some bridesmaids shots before we all do our group one. I told them I would be there in a minute. I just needed some time to myself for a second. It can be overwhelming with everyone fussing over you, and I just wanted a moment to remember to breathe.”

“I get that. Noah asked me to give this to you.” I hand her the box and note. She reads the note and smiles before she opens the box. It’s a gold necklace with a small blue round pendant. She puts it up to her eye, and tears gather.

“It’s my parents,” she whispers, handing me the necklace. I look into the pendant and see a picture of her parents on their wedding day. They are both smiling happily at each other and look so in love. “He said he wanted me to have them close to my heart today and to remember how much love they had for each other, just like we do. It’s perfect. Please tell him thank you for me and that I love him so much.”

Emotions clog my throat as I have her turn around and secure the necklace for her. It hangs perfectly by her heart. She places her hand over the necklace and grins through her tears. “I have something for him too. Do you mind bringing this to him for me?” She hands me a box similar in size to hers and a note.

“Of course.” I take the box from her. “I’ll see you at the aisle,” I smile at her and bend down and kiss her cheek as she pulls me in for a hug. “Thank you, Maverick. Your friendship means so much to me and Noah. I hope you find what we have one day. You deserve a love like ours. Don’t ever be afraid to grab ahold of it when you do.”

I nod, unable to speak. I think of Bell and how I feel when I’m around her as I walk back to the guys’ room. Noah comes

walking over to me as soon as I enter.

“How is she?” He asks me. “Is she doing ok?”

“She’s doing great. She’s very excited to be Mrs. Bennett. Prepare yourself, though. She’s going to knock your socks off when you see her. She’s a stunning bride.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” he grins.

“She asked me to give you this.” He takes the note and reads it. Smiling, he opens the box and sees a narrow leather bracelet in black. There’s writing on the metal piece in the center. “What does *Nirjhara* mean?”

“It means *waterfall* in Sanskrit. It’s our special place,” he says softly. He turns it over, and I see *connected by souls* written on the back. “It’s perfect.” He puts it on under his cuff and smiles.

“She said the same thing about your gift. I don’t think you could have given her anything else that would have meant so much. She also told me she loves you very much.”

He nods and runs his finger over the bracelet.

“Let’s get these pictures done and get you married,” I grin and put my hand on his shoulder.

“I’ve been waiting to marry her for a very long time. I’m ready,” he grins.

AN HOUR LATER, the music starts, and we walk out with Noah. I see my parents sitting next to Noah’s mom, along with Papaw. A few close friends and family are in attendance, but the majority of the people from town will be at the reception. I see Sara sitting next to Bell’s date, Logan, and smile at her. On the other side of her is Sophia’s date, Frankie. Mimi gives Noah a teary hug before getting in position.

The room looks gorgeous with all the fairy lights and white lilies. The view of the ocean is breathtaking as the sun gets lower in the sky. The photographers should be able to get amazing lighting with the sun filtering in.

Sophia walks up the aisle looking as beautiful as ever, and I wink at her as she takes her place across from Cole. My eyes

go back to the crowd, and my breath catches as Bell walks down the aisle. I take in her black dress and how it molds to her body. There is a deep V down her front and a high slit up those gorgeous legs. Heat pools in my body as I meet her ocean blues, unable to breathe. I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful sight. Her long blonde hair is cascading down her back in waves, and her sides are up with a loose braid and tiny white flowers woven in.

She breaks my gaze and gives Noah a blinding smile before taking her place across from James. She meets my eyes again, and I know I need to stop looking, but I'm unable to tear myself away. Skye walks by me and takes her place next to Bell, and I force myself to look back down the aisle.

Luna walks up next, giving Noah a wide grin, and I wink at her, causing her to giggle. The flower girl and ring bearer are adorable as they make their way up to us. I place my hand on Noah's little cousin's shoulder as he takes his place next to us, letting him know he did a good job.

The music changes, and everyone stands. I hear Noah take a deep breath as he sees Emma for the first time. She looks radiant and is beaming at him as she walks down the aisle with his father. I hear his breath catch and see his eyes tear up at the vision of her. Their eyes never leave each other as Noah's father kisses her cheek before handing her over to Noah. He takes her hands, and I hear him whisper to her how beautiful she is.

Everyone sits as Mimi welcomes them and says a few words. I catch Bell's eyes again and notice that she keeps coming back to me as well. It's a pull that neither of us can deny.

"Noah and Emma have written their own vows to each other," Mimi says to everyone and looks at Noah to begin.

"Emma, we have a love story that most people dream of, and I did literally dream of you every night for as long as I can remember. I knew I would find you one day, and I never gave up hope that you would find your way to me. My prayers were answered when you showed up as my next-door neighbor."

Emma wipes a tear away and smiles at him. “I knew from the first moment I saw you that our souls were connected. You are the other half of me that I can’t live without. I promise to love you and walk side by side with you in this lifetime and for all others. You have my heart, my soul, and my love forever.”

I hear sniffles all around me, and I blink back the tears that have gathered in my eyes. I glance over at Bell, and she wipes her eyes and smiles at her brother.

“Noah, I moved to Florida feeling broken, and I had every intention of staying away from love because of the fear of losing it again. That all changed the moment I met you. I thought I was being pulled to this place because it held the best memories with my parents, but it was you that I was being pulled to. You gave me joy when I thought I would never feel it again, and you filled that emptiness inside me, bringing light back into my world. My soul is not whole without you, and I promise to love and cherish you every day for the rest of this lifetime and all the others we find each other in. I love you so completely, always.”

“I love you so completely, always,” I hear him whisper back. He grabs her face and brings her in for a kiss.

“I’m not sure you’re supposed to do that yet, Noah,” Mimi says, laughing softly.

“I don’t care,” he says, causing everyone to laugh. They exchange rings and say *I do* before Mimi announces them, husband and wife.

“*Now*, you may kiss your bride,” Mimi beams at them.

We clap and cheer as they kiss and walk back down the aisle. I take ahold of Skye’s hand and place it in the crook of my arm, leading her back down.

“Let’s get this party started,” I whisper to Skye.

“Oh, yeah. Think you can keep up with my moves?” She asks me.

“Baby, I got moves Elvis would be jealous of.” I shimmy my hips and make her laugh.

“I bet you do,” she laughs as we gather in the back for pictures. The guests are leaving and heading upstairs for cocktail hour. I see Sara and walk over to her.

“Sorry, I’ve had to leave you on your own.”

“It’s no problem at all. Best man duties are a priority. Logan and Frankie have been keeping me company. We met before the wedding, and I’ve had a lot of fun talking to them.” She glances over at Logan talking to Bell, and I see him look back at her.

I give her an amused look. “Well, I’m glad you’re having a good time. I have to get pictures done now, and then we’ll head upstairs. Emma put you at Logan and Frankie’s table, so I’m glad you’ll have someone to talk to during dinner.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” Her face lights up at the mention of Frankie and Logan, and I’m betting it’s the latter that is giving her that smile right now, especially considering that Frankie is gay and happily with someone. She sees Logan get done talking to Bell, and he glances back at her again. “I better go find my seat,” she says, pulling her eyes away and looking up at me.

A small laugh escapes me as I nod and see her rush back over to Logan. They disappear up the stairs together. Bell walks over to me and laughs. “I think our dates like each other,” she says, watching them walk up the stairs.

“You caught that too, huh?” I laugh. “Does that bother you?”

“Not at all. I’m happy for them. Hopefully it will work out. Are you bothered by it?”

“Nope. I’m actually happy because Logan won’t have his eyes on you all night. I want to be the only one imagining what’s under that dress and how that black satin would feel against my skin.”

I see her eyes turn a darker blue as she plays with her necklace in an attempt to keep her hands busy.

“You look beautiful tonight,” I say softly. “It’s not fair to the bride that you look this good. I can’t keep my eyes off

you.”

“I could say the same about you,” she says quietly. The photographer calls us over, breaking up the moment.

“Let’s get these pictures done.” I lean down next to her ear. “Try not to look at me the way you are right now, or your brother is going to have a boner in all of his wedding pictures.”

She laughs out loud and covers her mouth when everyone looks our way. Grinning, I walk over to stand next to Noah, loving that I can make her laugh that way.

A MILLION PICTURES LATER, we’re finally seated at the head table, about to eat dinner. I stand up, ready to give my toast. I glance over at Emma, and she’s already turning red. Laughing, I take the microphone and get everyone’s attention.

“I walked into the hardware store one day,” I begin.

“Oh, God,” I hear Emma say, and I wink at her.

“I saw a beautiful girl deciding which color of white to choose for her walls. Being me at the time, I offered to show her around town. To my surprise, she said no, thank you.” Everyone laughs, and I continue. “I was shocked, to say the least, because that doesn’t happen.”

Noah rolls his eyes, and I laugh with everyone. “A few days later, Noah and I went surfing, and I finally got to meet his Emma that he annoyingly couldn’t stop talking about. To my surprise, it was the beautiful girl from the hardware store. Emma and I had a good laugh, but Noah didn’t find it as funny.”

“No, I didn’t,” Noah says, causing more laughter.

“I knew then that Emma was the one for Noah. If she could turn down the better-looking guy,” I look at Noah and grin as he laughs, “then I knew there had to be a good reason, and I can’t think of a better reason than having her heart already given to Noah.

“I’ve known Noah since we were born. He’s been my best friend and brother my whole life, and I can’t think of someone

more deserving of love than him. I wish you both all the happiness in the world and amazing sex every night before you go to sleep.” I watch Emma get red and laugh. “But if all the messy hair and satisfied faces are any indication, I think you both are doing just fine in that department.”

Emma covers her face, and everyone laughs. “Seriously though, I love you both. Your love story is one that I look up to and hope to have one day. To Noah and Emma!” I raise my glass, and everyone toasts. Noah gets up and hugs me.

“Thanks, brother,” he says. “I love you too.”

“I didn’t do too bad, did I?” I ask Emma as she gets up.

“No, you did great,” she says, laughing. “It wouldn’t have been a Maverick speech without some sort of redness appearing on my face. I love you too,” she says, squeezing me in a hug.

Sitting back down, Skye stands up. “I’m not as good at giving speeches as Maverick, so I had to write my down,” she says, laughing.

“For those that don’t know me, I’ve been best friends with Emma since we met in kindergarten when we both reached for the same purple crayon to color the rainbows we were drawing. Being the sweet, beautiful girl that she is, she let me use it first, and we’ve been inseparable ever since.” Emma laughs and smiles at Skye.

“Emma doesn’t think she’s strong, but she is the strongest person I know. She’s selfless and kind and would do anything for the ones she loves. She hasn’t had it easy the past couple of years, but I knew she would find her way back to the light.” Skye looks at her, and Emma wipes away her tears.

Skye clears her throat and continues. “When she told me she was moving to Florida, I thought she was crazy. I was worried she would be all alone, and I couldn’t be there for her like I wanted to. All my doubts were gone the moment she called me and told me she had met someone.” She smiles at Noah before continuing. “There was joy in her voice and a light in her eyes for the first time in over a year. I can’t thank

you enough, Noah, for bringing Emma back to us. For showing her a love that she deserves and a life that her parents would have wanted her to have.”

She wipes away the tears, and Cole takes her hand and holds it. “Cole and I couldn’t be happier for you both, and Auntie Skye and Uncle Cole can’t wait to spoil your kids one day.” She grins at Emma and Noah. “We love you both very much. To Noah and Emma!” We cheer again, and Emma wipes away her tears as Skye hugs her and Noah.

“IT’S NOW time for the bride and groom to have their first dance. The bridal party will join them in the next one,” the DJ announces after dinner. I watch Noah and Emma dance as I take a sip of my beer. She laughs when he twirls her before bringing her close to him. The love is evident on their face as they look at one another. I can’t help but want that as I watch them.

The song ends, and Skye and Cole head to the dance floor, followed by James and Sophia. I set my gaze on Bell and walk to her, holding out my hand. She smiles and walks into my arms as we sway to the slow song.

Every sense comes alive, and I’m consumed by the smell and feel of her in my arms. My hand is on her open back, and I run it down her soft skin, lightly caressing her. I can feel her heartbeat speed up, and I have no doubt she can feel how fast mine is.

“You in this dress is driving me crazy,” I tell her so only she can hear.

“This tux is doing things to me, too,” she laughs softly. “The wedding will be over in a few hours.”

“Yes, it will.”

“Noah and Emma leave first thing in the morning. We won’t even see them tomorrow, so they’ll be saying their goodbyes tonight.”

“What are you getting at?” I lean down and search her eyes, seeing the desire so evident in them.



“You won’t have to face Noah for two weeks. So if something were to happen later, you wouldn’t have to feel guilty.”

I quietly moan, bringing her back close to me. My dick obviously agrees with her because I’m hard as a rock right now. “So you don’t think we should wait until we tell them first?”

“We can tell them as soon as they get back. What we do in these next two weeks is our business and things we need to figure out for ourselves.”

“God, I don’t think I have the strength to stay away from you anymore.”

“Then don’t,” she smiles up at me as the dance ends and gives me a wink.

“Playing with fire again, I see.”

“I like fire,” she says, grinning and walking away, making sure I get a view of her perfect ass in that dress. I think I just met my match.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### Bella

I CAN FEEL HIS EYES ON ME AS I WALK AWAY. MY SKIN IS ALL hot and flushed from dancing with him. I felt how hard he was, and my body is done waiting. I want these two weeks with him, and if I have to slowly seduce him this evening, then I will. By the end of the night, it will be him that's begging me.

I walk to the bar and join Noah and Emma and the rest of the bridal party. Skye hands me a tequila shot, and Cole gives Maverick one when he walks up behind me.

“To Mr. and Mrs. Bennett!” Sophia says, holding up her shot glass to the rest of us. I down the shot and welcome the burn sliding down my throat. I slowly lick my lips, knowing Maverick is watching me. This is going to be fun. I order a margarita instead of my usual wine. If I'm doing tequila shots tonight, I need to stick with the same alcohol.

I look around and see Logan and Sara talking at their table. “We should probably go check on our dates,” I say, looking at Maverick and laughing.

“Yeah, that's probably a good idea.” He gets a beer, and we make our way to the table.

I pull out a chair next to Logan, and Maverick does the same next to Sara.

“I think our bridal party duties are officially over. I'm sorry I've been so absent.” I look at Logan, and he smiles at me.

“It’s no problem. Sara has been nice enough to keep me company.” He looks over at her, and she blushes. Yeah, there is something definitely going on here.

“Sara, this is Bella. Bella, this is Sara,” Maverick says, introducing us.

I size Sara up, trying to see if there’s anything between Maverick and her. She’s a beautiful brunette with blue eyes. I can see why Maverick almost took her home. When she looks at Maverick, though, I don’t see anything in her eyes or in her body language that indicates that she’s into him. I look at Maverick, and he arches his brow, questioning whether I will behave.

“Hi Bella, it’s nice to finally meet you.” She looks around the table and gives a small laugh. “This is awkward as hell.”

I laugh and decide I like her. “It’s nice to meet you too, Sara.” I hear Mav breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that I’m going to play nice.

“I think it’s time to hit that dance floor. I see everyone waving us over. What do you guys say?” Maverick asks us.

I look over and see Sophia and Frankie out there with Cole and Skye. They’re dancing their asses off and motioning for us to join them. Laughing, I stand up and grab my drink. “Let’s go show them how it’s done.”

“We’ll be right there. We’re going to grab another drink first,” Logan stands up with Sara, walking her to the bar.

“I think our dates just ditched us.” I watch as Logan puts his hand on the small of Sara’s back.

“They do look good together. I guess it was fate that we both brought them so they could meet.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. The Universe has a way of bringing people together that are meant to be.” I turn to Maverick and grin. “Let’s see what you got on the dance floor. I hope you can keep up.” I laugh and run to our friends joining in on the dance party.

I turn around and see Maverick laugh before slowly removing his jacket and tie. He loosens the top couple of buttons, and my eyes hungrily take in his as he rolls up his sleeves, exposing his tattoos on one arm. He looks sinfully sexy as he walks over and starts to dance with us. He twirls Sophia around, making her laugh as Frankie does the same with me. He lets go of me, and I end up crashing into Maverick's hard chest. He steadies me and grabs my arms.

"You always seem to be falling into my arms," he murmurs against my hair.

"I guess my body naturally gravitates toward you." I bring my hands up to his chest before grabbing his shirt collar. His eyes darken at the touch.

Sophia brings over another tray of tequila shots, and Frankie hands one to me and Maverick. I reluctantly let go.

I touch my glass to Mav's and down the shot with him. This time, it's me who's mesmerized as he licks his lip. He gives me a full-on dimpled grin before we're swept away again on the dance floor. Laughing, I dance with Noah and Luna, who appear beside me. Maverick twirls Luna around, and she squeals in delight.

NEEDING to get some air after dancing for the last hour, I walk out onto the balcony. Ocean breeze hits me in the face, cooling off my heated skin.

I see Miss Sylvia, who owns the library where Emma works, talking to Mr. and Mrs. Anderson from the deli and Henry from the hardware store. I smile at them as I pass by, making my way to the far side railing.

I place my hands on the railing and close my eyes, letting the breeze wash over me. I take a deep breath of the ocean air as I hear the waves crash against the shoreline.

I feel him before I see him. Electricity, thick in the air, as goosebumps appear on my arms. Heat forms behind me as he stands there. He comes up, placing his arms on the railing and caging me in from behind. His presence immediately consumes my senses.

“You found me,” I whisper into the night.

“I could find you in a room filled with thousands of people. I can feel your presence from a mile away. It’s like this magnetic pull that no matter how hard I try, I can’t stay away even when I know I should.”

His lips find my neck, and I moan as he licks the sensitive spot behind my ear. I press back into him and feel him digging into my behind. I gasp at the sheer hardness I’m met with.

“Someone could see,” I manage to get out, even though I couldn’t care less at this point.

“I’ll take my chances,” he all but growls. Grabbing my hand, he pulls me to the darker corner off to the side. Blocking my view, he shields me with his body as my back hits the side of the building.

His lips claim mine in a frenzy. I taste the tequila on him and moan as his tongue tangles with mine. Fisting his shirt, I bring him closer to me, pressing him against my body. I hear him groan as he grabs my ass and squeezes hard. My body is so ready for him. I can feel the desire pool between my legs and a throbbing that has me whimpering against his lips.

“Oh, shit!” I hear someone laugh. Mav breaks away, and I immediately miss his contact. I blink and try to get my bearings. I see Maverick running his hands through his hair and looking uncomfortable.

“Sorry to interrupt. Everyone has been looking for you two, and I got the balcony search.” I realize it’s Cole, and my eyes dart to Maverick to see his reaction.

“It’s okay. Thank God, it was you,” he gives a small laugh and turns to me. “Cole figured it out the night we all went to Roxy’s. I guess I let my emotions show even before I knew what was going on.”

“Roxy’s?” My head is fuzzy from what my body is still feeling.

“Yeah, Mav looked like he was either going to kill someone that night for dancing with you or throw you over his shoulder and claim you,” Cole says, laughing.

I look at Maverick, shocked. He gives me a grin and shrugs his shoulders. “It was a fast song, and his hands were getting too clingy. I could tell he didn’t deserve you.”

“Oh my God,” I laugh.

“This poor guy has probably tortured himself for years, thinking he was protecting you from other guys when deep down he was jealous as hell, and it was him he was protecting you from.”

“Okay, Dr. Phil. Thanks for the therapy session.” Maverick glares at Cole before glancing at me with a small smile playing on his lips. How did I not figure that out?

“There you guys are!” Sophia comes running over with Frankie. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“I just needed some air. Maverick came out, and we just started talking.” The lie slips easily from my lips, making me feel like the worst best friend ever.

“The dance floor is calling your name, Bella, so get your fine ass back in there and shake that thing.” We all turn to Frankie, surprised, and start laughing.

“What? Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate a fine ass when I see one.” He hands Maverick and me the tequila shots he’s holding. We down them before walking back inside.

“As long as he knows who that fine ass belongs to.” I hear Maverick whisper in my ear.

I grin back at him. “Let’s see if that fine ass of yours can keep up.” I join Noah and Emma, along with our friends, on the dance floor. I laugh when Emma throws her arms around me and starts dancing.

We drink and dance the night away, having the best time of our lives. Every chance he can take, I feel the slight touch of Maverick’s hand as it lingers on my body, leaving a scorching trail of heat in its wake. I sneak glances at him and always see his eyes on me. They seem to burn their way into my soul, leaving me in a breathless state.

I feel the alcohol buzzing through my body as I sit down to catch my breath. They'll be closing the place down soon. Noah and Emma left a few minutes ago after saying goodbye to everyone. I made them promise to FaceTime me on their honeymoon so I could see the place they're staying at.

Logan walks over and sits down next to me. "Thanks for inviting me. Your friends and family are so much fun. I don't think I've danced this much in my entire life," he laughs.

"Me either," I laugh with him.

"So, um, I hope you don't mind, but I think I'm going to head out. Sara wants to show me a few bars in town. This would be very awkward if we were actually on a real date, but since we're just friends, it makes it a lot easier to tell you. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not. I'm really happy for you, Logan. You deserve someone special, and Sara could be the one you've been waiting for."

He lets out a breath he's been holding. "Thanks. I really hope so. I can't explain it, but something about her makes me not want this night to end."

"I understand completely." I look at Maverick, and he's talking to Sara. She's probably telling him the same thing about Logan.

"He's got it bad, you know." I glance back at Logan, and he's nodding toward Maverick. "He hasn't taken his eyes off of you all night. You should have seen the look on his face when you walked down the aisle. You would have thought he was the groom seeing his bride for the first time. He may still be fighting it, but it's only because his feelings are so strong that he's terrified of what it will do to him if he loses you. Don't let his fears be an excuse for him. Go after what you want and make him see you're not going anywhere."

"Thank you," I say, unable to get any more words out. I hug him before he walks back over to Sara, and they leave holding hands.

Sophia comes over, giggling with Frankie. “The bar here is closed, but we grabbed the last bottle of champagne to take with us. I think we’re going to walk the beach and check out a bar down the street. Do you want to come?”

“I think I’m going to head up to my room. I’m exhausted, and I’ve had more than enough to drink.” I laugh at the pout she gives me. “I love you, though, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I love you too.” She hugs me before walking over to Maverick. I hear her ask him the same thing, and he laughs and shakes his head before hugging her and telling Frankie to keep an eye on her. Sophia giggles as Frankie gives her a piggyback ride out of the reception.

Maverick grabs his jacket and tie off the chair and walks over to me. I can tell he’s buzzing pretty good by the way he gives me a boyish grin. “And then there were two.”

“No bars tonight with Sophia and Frankie?”

“No,” he says, laughing. “I’ll let Frankie take this one.”

“Agreed,” I say, giggling. We walk to the elevators and wait for the door to open. We’re the only ones in the hall, and I’m finding it hard to breathe all of a sudden. I can feel his body heat next to me and can hear the steady rhythm of his breathing.

The doors open, and we step inside. He pushes the floor where we have the block of rooms. The doors shut, and I’m pressed up against the wall in a matter of seconds as his tongue dives into my mouth.

I fist my hands in his hair, and he groans and takes the kiss deeper. His hands find the slit of my dress as he palms my bare ass and presses me against his hardness. I moan against his lips as his mouth works its way down my neck, sucking and biting.

The door dings, and we break away as it opens. Panting hard, we look at each other as we arrive on our floor. I can tell he’s struggling with what to do, and I know we’ve both had a lot to drink, but I’ll be damned if I go back to an empty bed tonight.



“Maverick Alexander Lane, I know you’re getting into that head of yours, and I swear to God, if you don’t give me what I need tonight, I’m going to walk out of this elevator and find someone who will.”

His eyes widen before turning a dark, heated shade of green. He holds the door open with one hand and cages me in with the other. “You really think you can find someone who could give you what I can?”

“Show me what you can give me.” My eyes plead with him, and I don’t care at this point if I have to beg.

He picks me up over his shoulder, and I yelp as he carries me down the hall. His hand is resting on my bottom, and he gives it a squeeze. I moan against his back, and he softly laughs as he swipes his key to his room. He shuts the door with his foot and walks me to the bed before sliding my body down his so I can touch the floor.

“All night, I’ve watched you in this dress.” He fingers the straps before trailing his fingers down the deep V in the front. His finger grazes the side of my breast, and my breath catches. I can feel my nipples harden at his touch. “Do you have any idea how bad I want you right now? I’m so fucking hard just by being in the same room as you. Are you sure you want this? There’s no going back once we cross this line.”

“I want this,” I breathe. “I want this with you.” I reach up and start to unbutton his shirt, needing to feel him. I run my hands over his chest and down his flat stomach. He sucks in a breath as I kiss his chest and run my tongue along his skin. He takes off this shirt the rest of the way and kisses me with such intensity that it takes my breath away. I’ve never felt this consumed before, this wanted. I press myself against him, wanting to ease this ache that is growing.

I feel his hands push the straps of my dress down as it pools at my feet, leaving me only in my black lacy thong. I hear him suck in a breath as his eyes roam my naked body. “You are so fucking beautiful,” he breathes before bending his head and taking my nipple into his mouth. He sucks hard, and

I gasp at the sensation. “You like that baby?” He whispers against me.

“Yes,” I manage to get out as he does the same to the other one. The ache is unbearable as I try and rub against him. I reach out and undo his belt, desperately wanting to feel him. I undo his pants and zipper, and he steps back and takes them off along with his boxer briefs. My eyes go wide at the sight of him. I thought I remembered how big he was from seeing him naked at Noah’s, but it doesn’t come close to what I’m seeing now.

I start to get worried that this will hurt. “Will it fit?”

He laughs and steps closer to me. “Yes, it will fit. It’s going to be hard and fast tonight. I promise to explore and taste every inch of this perfect body when I don’t have so much alcohol in me and I haven’t been walking around hard for you for over a month. I don’t think I can last long with all this foreplay that’s been going on between us. I promise you’ll be screaming my name, though, before we’re done.”

He lowers my panties to the floor and kisses his way back up my thighs, nipping as he goes. He breathes in deeply when he gets to the wetness between my legs. I feel his warm breath on me and moan as he swipes me with his tongue. “So fucking good,” he breathes before coming back up to kiss me. I taste myself on him and moan again as he sucks on my bottom lip and releases me.

He throws back the covers and picks me up, laying me on the bed. I reach out to touch him, and he stops me. “Later, baby, I need to be in you now, and I don’t want to cum in your hand.” He slides his fingers through my folds and moans. “You’re so wet for me.” I rub myself against his hand.

“Please,” I beg. “I need you.”

“I need you too...so fucking much.” I feel him at my entrance before he slides into me in one long thrust. I bite my lip to stop my cry at the sudden pain. “Holy fuck, you’re so tight. God, you feel so fucking unbelievable.” He starts to slowly move in and out, and the pain is quickly replaced with

a million other sensations that have me meeting his hips, causing him to go deeper. I never knew it could be like this.

He takes my nipple into his mouth again, biting down before sucking hard. I arch my back and grip his hair hard as I cry out. He does the same to the other side, and I buck my hips faster to meet his. A deep pull forms in my core as he increases his pace. I wrap my legs around him and run my nails down his back as I hear a deep growl come from him. Digging my heels into his back, he pounds into me, hitting all the right spots until I can't take it anymore. He reaches between us and pinches my clit hard, and I come undone around him.

I cry out his name as wave after wave of pleasure takes over my body. I hear him yell as he pours into me, causing me to clench and pulse around him. He milks out every last bit of my orgasm until there is nothing left of me to give.

He buries his face in my hair as we both try to come back down to our bodies. He kisses me gently before sliding out of me and bringing me to his stomach so he can wrap his arms around me from behind. I snuggle up against him and sigh. This is exactly how I pictured our first time, except it was more than I could ever imagine. My body has never felt so alive.

“I think I almost died for a moment by orgasm,” he says in a muffled voice behind me.

“So I did alright? You were happy?” I know he's been with a lot of women, and I need to know my inexperience didn't show.

“Are you serious right now? That was the best fucking sex of my life.”

I giggle and snuggle in deeper next to him, pleased that I made a good impression on him.

“What about you?” He asks from behind me.

“It was everything I thought it would be with you and more. So yeah, it was the best fucking sex of my life too.”

“Good. Just wait until I don’t have all this alcohol in me. You haven’t seen the best of me yet,” he says in a sleepy voice. I hear his breathing go even, knowing he’s fallen asleep. I close my eyes and drift off with his arms around me, knowing I’m exactly where I belong.

I WAKE up still entangled in his arms. His leg is thrown around me, and I smile as I remember last night. Not wanting this moment to end, I snuggle back against him, causing my bottom to rub against him. I hear him moan as I feel him start to get hard. His hand around me is splayed across my stomach as he holds me there. Lowering his hand, he finds me already wet for him. I hear his sharp intake of breath against my back as I rub against his hand. I’m sore, but it’s a good kind of sore that I welcome.

He throws back the covers and turns me so I’m on my back. His dimpled grin meets me as he runs a finger over my breast, causing my nipples to harden.

“Good morning. It’s another first for me.” He trails his finger along both breasts before sliding it down my stomach. “I’ve never woken up to a beautiful girl in my bed before. I think I could get used to this, too.”

His hand goes lower and finds my wetness again. “You’re so ready for me again. Do you have any idea how beautiful you are right now and what you do to me every time I look at you?” I arch my back and moan as one of his fingers slides in. “Fuck,” he breathes. He’s watching me with such a hunger on his face, making me feel like I’m the sexiest thing he’s ever seen.

He moves over me and kisses my stomach licking and sucking his way down. Closing my eyes at the sensations, he spreads my thighs open wider and completely stops what he’s doing. I open my eyes to see why he stopped, and he’s looking at me in horror.

“Why is there some blood on your thighs, Bell, and the sheets?” His face turns pale, and I quickly look down and see a little dried blood. It’s a very small amount, but enough that he noticed.

“It’s nothing,” I quickly say, wanting to take that pained look off his beautiful face.

“Please tell me you’re on your period,” he says quietly.

“It happens the first time. I’m fine. I’ll go take a shower if it bothers you.”

“You were a virgin?” I flinch at the way he says *virgin* like it leaves a bad taste in his mouth.

“Yes, I was. I’m sorry I’m not as experienced as you. You didn’t have any complaints when you fucked me last night.” I pull the sheets up to cover myself, feeling too exposed at the way he’s looking at me.

He winces at my words. “You think I’m upset with you for not being fucking experienced?” He gets off the bed and pulls on a pair of shorts from his bag. He runs his hands roughly through his hair. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think it mattered. We’re both adults, and I wanted to be with you.”

“Jesus, Bell.” He paces the room, and I can see the torment in his eyes. “I’m so fucking sorry. I had no idea that was your first time.”

“Don’t, don’t you dare be fucking sorry. That was the best night of my life, and I won’t let you diminish what we did.”

He doesn’t listen to what I’m saying as the guilt seeps its way into him. “I let your first time be with a drunk guy. I was rough with you,” he rasps out. “Did I hurt you?” His pained green eyes meet my blue.

“No, I’m fine. I swear. Don’t feel guilty about this or regret it because I sure as hell don’t.”

“Noah’s going to kill me when he finds out. Not only did I sleep with his sister, but I took her virginity like some rough animal in heat. I could have hurt you,” he says again.

“But you didn’t. You would never hurt me. Noah doesn’t need to know about my sex life. It’s not his business whether I was a virgin with you or not. That’s between us.”

He starts to shove his things in his bag. I can tell he's afraid and backing away from me. He blames himself for what happened last night, but I won't let him.

"Where are you going?" I ask him.

"I just...I need time to think. I shouldn't have had so much to drink last night. I should have noticed that you were in pain. I just need to be alone right now." He grabs his keys and wallet.

"Please don't go. We need to talk about this. I promise you did nothing wrong last night. I was the one who wouldn't let you walk away from me in the elevator. I wanted this just as much as you did, and I don't regret a single second of it. I.."

I want to tell him I've been in love with my whole life, but I'm afraid it will scare him even more.

"I just need time to think," he says again, turning his back on me. "I'm so fucking sorry, Bell, if I hurt you. If I had known, I never would have had your first time be like that. You deserve so much more than I fucking gave you," he says quietly before walking out of the door, taking my heart with him.

I sit there for what seems like hours, crying softly in bed before I wipe my eyes and throw my dress back on. I'll be damned if I let him walk away from me because he doesn't think he's good enough for me. He gave me everything last night, and I won't let him take that away from us.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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### Maverick

I PULL UP TO THE BEACH AND THROW MY SHIRT ON THE FRONT seat of my Jeep. I feel like I can't breathe and need to be in the one place that calms me. I dive in the cool water and swim out as far as I can, wanting to feel the burn of my muscles—anything other than feeling this pain in my heart.

How could I have not known? I remember how fucking good it felt. She was wrapped so tightly around me, and I remember thinking, this is what heaven feels like, but not once did I think she was a virgin. She goes on so many dates, and I just assumed she had been with other guys.

I know I was rough with her, too—that's what's killing me. I don't care that she's a virgin. In fact, deep down, I fucking love that I'm the only one that's ever been inside her. A primal part of me really, really loves that fucking part.

I would have done things differently and made sure it was more special, taking my time with her and making sure she was worshiped like she deserved. Instead, I fucked her like some wild animal, not even bothering to use a condom because I can't think straight when I'm around her. All I could think about was burying myself deep inside of her before I embarrassed myself and came before I was even in her.

I don't know what I'm more scared of, the fact that I could have gotten my best friend's sister pregnant or the fact that despite everything, all I want to do right now is show her what last night should have been like.

I bob in the waves until my muscles are too exhausted to keep me up anymore. For once, the water doesn't calm me or give me the answers I need.

I towel off and get in my jeep. My phone vibrates next to me, and I glance down and see Bell's beautiful face light up the screen. A pain shoots through my heart at the sight of her. Gripping the wheel tightly, I ignore the call and pull out of the parking lot as my tires spin on the sandy pavement.

I know I need to talk to her, but I want to figure out what the hell I'm going to do. I feel bad leaving her this morning, but the walls started closing in, and I needed to get out of there. Seeing that blood on her and knowing I probably hurt her was more than I could take. It's literally been less than twenty-four hours of being with her, and I've already fucked it up. I should have kept my distance and watched over her from afar as I told myself a long time ago to do. She's better off without me.

Not wanting to go back to my apartment, I take a left and head in the other direction. I pull into Emma's driveway a few minutes later. There's just something about this house that makes me feel at home. I'm in no shape to have a conversation with Bell now, so I take the coward's way out and hide.

Emma and Noah gave me keys to both their houses while they were gone so I could water their plants and watch over things. Noah. Just thinking of him is like a punch to the gut. If he knew what I did last night, he would never forgive me. I should have stayed the fuck away from her, but instead, I took her damn virginity and then left her because I'm too fucking ashamed to face her.

I slide the key in the door and walk straight to the liquor cabinet, grabbing a bottle of tequila. I take it with me to the back deck and take a long pull, welcoming the burn. Sitting down on the lounge chair, I do what I do best. I drown myself and shut out my feelings, letting the numbness take over. It's better this way, I try to convince myself. I'll talk to her and tell her again how sorry I am and make her see I'm not what she needs...what she wants.



I take another long drink, already feeling the effects of the alcohol on an empty stomach. I sit there watching the waves for what seems like hours before the bottle slips from my hand and darkness washes over me.

GROANING, I sit up and put my hand to my head to stop the spinning. The sun is set low in the sky, so it must be close to evening. I pick up the half-empty bottle and stumble my way inside, knowing I need to eat something to soak up all this tequila. My phone vibrates on the counter, and I glance at it before getting a glass of water. I have several missed calls and texts from Sophia and Bell.

Not being able to face Bell right now, I read the last text from Sophia that just popped up.

SOPHIA

Where the fuck are you? If I don't hear from you within an hour, I'm calling Mom and Dad and getting an APB put out on your ass. TEXT ME BACK!

Grimacing, I text back, not wanting her to worry.

MAVERICK

I'm fine. I had work stuff come up and lost track of time. Sorry.

I'm already going to hell. What's one more lie?

SOPHIA

Nice try. I already checked your work, and they haven't seen you all day. Why are you lying? Are you with someone? Because you're not home either. I've been to your apartment, and it looks like you haven't even been home since the wedding.

Shit. I'm too drunk to be having this conversation right now. The words are blurring together and not making sense. I put my hand on the counter to stop the spins. It's always

someone's guess when they can't find me. Mav's off fucking someone. Why would anyone think differently?

It's what I do.

It's who I am.

It's all I'm good at.

I get my thumbs to work and tell her what she wants to hear.

MAVERICK

Yeah, you guessed it. I'll be home at some point. No need to worry.

I see three dots immediately appear.

SOPHIA

Next time, let someone know, okay? You had us worried to death.

I give her a thumbs-up and drop my phone back on the counter. Ignoring the water next to me, I grab the tequila instead and make my way to the couch. Taking another long pull, I happily accept the burn once again. I set the bottle on the coffee table before my head falls back, and I succumb to the darkness once again.

FUCK, my head hurts. I squint as the sunlight shines through the windows on my face. Putting my arm over my eyes, I groan at the simple movement as pain shoots through my head. Maybe tequila wasn't the brightest idea to deal with my freak-out. And that's exactly what it was, one big fucking freak-out. Fear and doubts came crashing down on me so hard that I lost it.

I force myself to get off the couch, wincing when my head gets another stab to the brain. I head to the bathroom before downing a glass of water. Picking up my phone, I see the last text Bell sent on my notifications.

BELL

GO TO HELL.

What the fuck? I reread it again, hoping it will make sense this time. I scroll up and see her texts apologizing to me for not telling me she was a virgin and that the night of the reception meant everything to her, and she doesn't regret it for a second. A few more begging me to text her back because she's worried about me. And then the last one. *GO TO HELL.*

Is she pissed at me for not texting her back? I check my other messages and notice I texted Sophia last night. I reread our conversation and slam the phone down on the counter.

"Fuck!" I pull my hands through my hair and start to pace. I told Sophia I was with someone last night. Bell must think I left her and went straight to someone else. What the fuck was I thinking? I clearly had a self-pity party last night and made more of a mess of the situation than it already was. I've got to talk to her and explain.

I pick up my phone and call her, and it goes straight to voicemail. I send her a text and wait for a reply. Glancing at the clock, I see it's after eight. Sophia will already be at school. I straighten the couch and throw away the empty tequila bottle making a mental note to replace it for Noah and Emma. I make sure everything is locked up before getting in my Jeep and heading to the girls' apartment. I need to talk to her and explain that I wasn't with anyone. My heart painfully beats against my chest at the thought of her thinking I just fucked her and went on to the next girl.

I make it to their apartment in record time and bang on the door. When there's no answer, I glance at the parking lot and realize Bell's jeep is gone. Wanting to make sure, I dig my keys out of my pocket and use the one I have. I walk through the living room and kitchen and make my way to Bell's room. The door is open, and the bed is unmade. Clothes are thrown about like she was in a hurry.

I get out my phone and text Sophia.

MAVERICK

Hey, I'm trying to get ahold of Bell for work. She's not answering. I stopped by the apartment, and she's not home. Do you know where she is?

I hold my breath as I wait for a response.

SOPHIA

She left early this morning. She had a job up north that popped up. She'll be back in a couple of days.

She left. I know with absolute certainty it wasn't because of a job. She left because of me. I take a painful breath of air, my lungs filling like they can't get enough oxygen. I type out a response.

MAVERICK

Thanks. I'll keep trying her. She's probably working and can't answer.

I see her texting back.

SOPHIA

If I talk to her, I'll let her know you're trying to get ahold of her.

I give her a thumbs up, not able to do anything more. I drop my phone on the bed and lay back. Bell's scent invades my senses as I close my eyes and breathe deeply. Pain slices through me at the hurt I have caused her. I've got to make this right. I'll make her listen to me when she gets back. She's got to believe me when I tell her that I lied to Sophia. It was a stupid drunk lie, and the last thing I want is to be with someone else. Not when I've had her. I don't think I'll ever feel what I felt Saturday night with anyone but her.

I get up slowly because my head still hurts like a motherfucker and go back to my apartment to shower. I think about getting someone to cover for me at work, but I need to keep busy. If I don't, I'll go insane thinking about her. I need to figure my shit out fast because she deserves more than what I've given her so far. I send her another text explaining that I wasn't with anyone and to please come home so we can talk. My message goes unread, and the pain in my heart deepens.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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### **Bella**

MY HANDS GRIP THE STEERING WHEEL AS I DRIVE ALONG THE coast. Not even the sight and smell of the ocean makes me feel better. I blink my dry, puffy eyes, trying to get some moisture back in them. I don't have a single tear left to shed. I told Sophia I was hungover and sick all day yesterday to avoid having her see the pain I was in. I knew there was no way to hide it, so I hid myself, pretending to sleep the day away while I silently cried under my covers.

He ignored my texts and calls all day and never came home. My hurt quickly became fear that something could have happened to him. It wasn't until Sophia told me she had finally gotten ahold of him and he was with someone that I truly knew what pain felt like. I don't know how I kept it together until she left my room, but I somehow managed to play it off. I don't even remember what I said to her before she told me goodnight. My mind and body shut off to reality, living in a void where I felt nothing anymore.

I knew there was a possibility that I would be a one-night stand, but I thought it was different between us. That I would be the one he would want more with. All those late-night talks and wanting to see where it goes led me to believe that he wanted to make this work.

I know I should have told him I was a virgin, but I didn't think it would matter. I could tell he was freaked and scared that he messed up, but I thought after he had time to think, I could make him see how perfect the night was and how much

it meant to me. The last thing I expected was him to go off and fuck someone else like I meant nothing to him.

I blink back the tears as the pain hits me all over again. Evidently, your body is able to produce a magnitude of tears. My phone dings next to me, and I see Maverick's name pop up again with a text. Reaching over, I silence my phone. Nothing he could say to me would make up for what he did. I don't know how to move forward without him in my life, but it's something I have to do for myself. I won't let myself feel like this ever again. This is the last time I'll cry over Maverick Alexander Lane. I wipe the last of my tears away and dig deep to find what's left of my strength before turning *on* the music and turning *off* thoughts of him.

I DRIVE UP THE COAST, not having a destination in mind until I come across a little inn right on the beach. The sign out front says *vacancy*, so I turn into the parking lot and shut off my engine. I told Sophia I had work and wouldn't be back for a couple of days. Technically, it's true. I have a ton of work I brought with me to keep me busy. The thought of laying in my bed with Maverick so close had me packing my bags the next morning. I just need some time to pull myself together before I face him again. He's my brother's best friend and Sophia's brother, so I know I can't avoid him forever.

Grabbing my overnight bag from the back seat, I make my way inside to get a room. If I'm going to hole up here for a couple of days, I might as well splurge and get a view. I get my key and walk up the flight of stairs to where my room is. It's a cute inn with wooden floors and various seashell decorations. It's small, with only ten rooms on each level, and I love the cozy feel. It's exactly what I need.

Sliding the room key, I go inside and set my bag on the cute white comforter of the poster bed. It's adorable in here with the old wood floors and throw rugs. I walk out onto the small patio and take in the view of the Atlantic Ocean, hoping it will calm me some and lessen the hurt I feel in my chest. I take out my phone and send a quick text to Sophia, letting her know I made it to my job site so she won't worry. I send another one to my mom so she'll know I'll be gone working

the next couple of days before putting it back in my pocket, not bothering to check the several texts and missed calls from Maverick.

It's tempting to listen to the voicemails just so I can hear his voice, but I know it won't help me in the long run. If I'm going to move forward, I need to distance myself from him until it doesn't hurt so much. I just pray that it's possible.

\* \* \*

"DO YOU WANT ANOTHER ONE?" I finish the last of my margarita and eye the cute bartender across from me.

"Sure, why not." I push my glass toward him and smile even though my heart isn't in it. I ended up walking down the beach when the sun was setting and found this restaurant on the water. I forced myself to eat some dinner, barely tasting a thing, but the margaritas are having no problem doing down.

He slides my margarita to me and hesitates before asking, "Rough night?"

"Rough twenty-four hours." I give a sad laugh and take another long drink of my margarita.

"I've had those before," he says with a laugh. "Just remember, it does get better even though it feels impossible right now."

"Yeah, I don't know about that. It all went to hell really fast. Not at all what I pictured when I wished for this growing up."

"Everything has a way of working out. You'll see." He gives me a smile before walking over to the next customer to take their order.

I can't see this working out, no matter how hard I try. Even though we weren't technically a couple, he betrayed my trust, and I don't see myself being able to move forward from this. For the sake of our families, we will have to try and find a way to be civil toward each other.

I down the rest of my margarita, letting the tequila do its job of making my head fuzzy so I can't focus on him. Signing



my check, I leave a generous tip before I go appreciating the fact that he was so nice to me. If it were any other lifetime, I would probably be staying longer and flirting with the bartender like any normal girl my age would do. Instead, I'm going back to an empty bed, not wanting anyone else but the one person I shouldn't want anymore.

I curl up in my bed once I get back and feel the tears slide down my cheeks once more, dampening the pillow. Not being able to help myself, I pull up the latest pictures on my phone and scroll through the wedding reception photos that I took wanting to go back to the night where everything in my life felt perfect. I stop on the selfie I took of Maverick and me and blink back the tears. Our faces are close together, and we look so damn happy. His dimpled grin is on full display, and there's no denying the joy in our eyes. I press the phone to my chest and curl up tighter as the pain becomes too unbearable. Eventually, exhaustion hits me, and I fall into a restless sleep.

\* \* \*

I THROW myself into my work when I wake up. I'm way behind on edits from all the wedding planning and events we had planned. I refuse to let my business suffer because of my personal life. I've worked too hard to let it slip through my fingers.

Mav keeps texting and calling, so I end up putting my phone on *Do Not Disturb*. I've been checking in with Sophia and my mom, but other than that, I don't bother looking at my phone anymore. By the time dinner rolls around, I'm feeling back in control of my business. I still have edits to do for Maverick, but I put those off for another day.

I open my phone to order some food to be delivered. I worked through lunch and can hear my stomach grumbling at this point. A text message pops up from Sophia, and I open it to read it.

SOPHIA

For the love of God, answer Maverick. He's driving me insane, asking me every two seconds if I've heard from you. Did you guys have a fallout or something again?

I chew on my bottom lip, trying to think of something to say.

BELLA

We're good. I just got busy and forgot to text him back.

SOPHIA

Okay, well, make sure you do before he gives himself a stroke.

BELLA

I'll do it right now. See you tomorrow. Love you.

SOPHIA

Love you too.

I set my phone on the bed and pace the small room. I'm not ready to talk to him yet, but I also don't want Sophia to become suspicious. Just because we messed up and crossed lines that we shouldn't have doesn't mean everyone else has to suffer.

Sighing, I grab my phone and open up Mav's messages. My screen fills up with the last ones sent to me today, saying how sorry he is about everything and how we need to talk. His last ones sound desperate when he wants to know where I am. I don't bother scrolling up to read all of them. A person can

only deal with so much at once. I think of what to say and type it out before I can think about it any further.

BELLA

Please stop texting Sophia. She's going to get suspicious and find out things that never should have happened. Let it go. I already have.

I hit send and bite my lip again as I see him responding right away. I haven't let anything go, but he doesn't need to know that. He wanted a one-night stand, and I can play the part just as well as any other girl who doesn't want to reveal how deep the cut was.

MAVERICK

Why the fuck have you been ignoring me? Have you even read a single text I've sent?

MAVERICK

So you think Saturday should never have happened? That it was a mistake?

I've never lied to Maverick, and I never thought I ever would, but a selfish part of me wants him to hurt like I do, so I give him the biggest lie I've ever told.

BELLA

We both got what we wanted in the moment. We knew deep down this would never be more than one night, even if we tried to convince ourselves otherwise. I should have listened to you when you told me that you don't do more. I'm letting you off the hook. It was fun while it lasted, but it's not something I want anymore.

I hit send as the tears fall silently down my face. My chest hurts as I try to breathe deeply to calm myself. I know that text

will hurt him, but he'll find someone else tonight who will be more than willing to lessen his pain for the night. It takes a full minute before I see the dots appear.

MAVERICK

You don't mean that. You can't mean it. Where are you?  
We need to talk. NOW.

BELLA

I do mean it. I need to get back to work. Just don't text Sophia anymore. I don't want her to know about any of this. We need to leave it in the past and forget about it.

MAVERICK

I won't ever be able to forget about it. It's all I think about.  
Just tell me where you are so I can come to you.

It's all I can think about, too. The memories of that one night are all I have left. I shut off my phone and lay back down, pulling my knees to my chest. My stomach suddenly filled with knots, taking away all the hunger from earlier. I pray for sleep, but it never comes as I lay there in the dark alone with my thoughts and should-have-beens.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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### Maverick

NOW I KNOW WHAT HELL FEELS LIKE. I'VE BEEN LIVING IN IT for two fucking days, and I'm about to lose my mind. I think I've gone through all the emotions but it's the fear that grips ahold of me at night and won't let go. Weaving its way inside and settling into the darkest corners of my soul. I've spent my whole life trying to avoid feeling like this, and now I'm knee-deep in it with a suffocating feeling that I'm going to lose her.

I didn't text her back after she left me unread, wanting to give her space. She has another thing coming if she thinks I'm just going to forget about her and move on. I'll give her space, but it won't be for long. She needs to hear me out and let me explain. I have no clue if she's read my messages or voicemails explaining that I lied to Sophia. It was a stupid drunk mistake, and I know it hurt her, but if I have to spend the rest of my life making up for it, I will.

I drive around the parking lot so I can pass her apartment like I've done every day for the past two days, hoping to see her Jeep sitting there. My heart's in my throat when I notice she's back. I breathe a sigh of relief, knowing she's safely home. Every part of me wants to stop and make her listen, but I have no one to cover for me today, and I'm already running late. I force myself to drive by and turn onto the main road.

I'll have to plan this out carefully because of Sophia. It'll have to be when she's at work since I have no intention of leaving until we work this out. She can't hide from me forever.

Thankfully, I stay busy at work today with customers and a big shipment that arrives, so the day passes quickly. I think

about stopping at the girls' apartment after work, but I know there's no way to hide the fact that something is going on between Bell and I. Sophia will know something is up the minute I walk through the door. Maybe I won't have to wait, though. I grab my phone from the console in my Jeep and send Bell a text.

MAVERICK

Meet me at the gazebo at ten?

I wait for a response, willing the three dots to appear.

MAVERICK

Please

I add, feeling desperate at this point. I even do the prayer emoji as extra, hoping she'll take pity on me. Sophia will be asleep by then, so she should be able to sneak out. I make myself some dinner and shower before sitting down and turning on the TV to kill time.

When it's close to ten, I head down to the gazebo and wait. I glance at my phone for the millionth time, wanting to see a text come through. Sighing I set my phone down and lean my head back to look at the stars. I spot Andromeda and Perseus right away and think back to the time when Bell and I laid under the stars, and I told her their love story. That night gave me hope that one day I could have a love like that. It seems like lifetimes ago when I held her in my arms.

I stay there until midnight before I walk back home. She either didn't read my text or read it and chose to ignore it. Both scenarios hurt like a motherfucker. I crawl into bed, mentally exhausted, and set my alarm for when Sophia goes to work. If I have to use my key and wake her up, I will. I can't go another day feeling like this. She's going to hear me out one way or another.

THE NEXT DAY doesn't go any better. Bell's already gone by the time Sophia goes to school, and when I get home from work, I'm unable to get ahold of her to get her alone. I make a quick call to one of my employees, and we switch days off, leaving me waking up extra early today, giving her no time to leave right after Sophia does. When I see Sophia drive past my building on the way to work, I bypass my Jeep and run the distance to her apartment.

Just as I get to her door, she opens it hurriedly and locks it, not seeing me until she turns and runs right into my chest.

"You've been leaving awfully early the last two days. It's almost like you're avoiding someone." She backs away from me quickly, like she's been burned by my touch.

Avoiding my eyes, she runs a shaking hand through her hair. "I've just been busy with work, is all."

I take a step toward her, and she takes a step back, hitting the door. I put my hand on the door frame and cage her in. Her eyes go wide when she finally meets my stare. She knows there is no escaping this time.

"You don't have your camera bag, so my guess is that you're headed to a coffee shop to work on edits and kill time until I leave for work."

Her surprised eyes tell me I guessed correctly, but fire quickly replaces it. "Contrary to what you believe, not everything revolves around you. I've been behind on work, and my going to a coffee shop has nothing to do with you. I love coffee shops."

"Well, today is your lucky day. I make damn good coffee. We can either do this the easy way or the hard way because I'm going to talk, and you are going to listen."

"You don't get to tell me what to do. I don't want to hear what you have to say." Her eyes bore into mine.

"So, the hard way it is." I scoop her up and throw her over my shoulder, walking down the sidewalk to my apartment.

"Maverick put me down." She hisses into my back, obviously not wanting to yell and alert the neighbors.

“Not a chance. You’ve avoided me for almost four fucking days, and if this is the only way to get you to listen to me, then I’m not above holding you hostage until you do.”

I reach my flight of stairs and walk into my apartment, shutting the door with my foot before setting her down. Blues eyes lit with fury stare into mine. She has her hands clenched at her sides, and her chest is rising in a fast rhythm. I match her stare before she breaks contact first.

“Fine. Say what you want to say so I can leave.” She crosses her arms over her chest and meets my eyes again.

“Do you want to sit?” I gesture toward the couch.

“No. This won’t take long. I’m listening.”

I run a frustrated hand through my hair to gather my thoughts before answering her.

“Why have you been avoiding me? We always talk through everything, even when we’re mad at each other.”

“If it’s not obvious to you why I wouldn’t want to say a single thing to you, then we really don’t have anything to talk about.” She starts to move toward the door but I block her.

“Damn it, would you just for two seconds quit walking away when I’m trying to explain. Did you even read the texts I sent you?”

“I read enough. I don’t want to hear your apologies. Save it for another girl.”

“I don’t want another girl.”

“Well, your dick says otherwise, seeing as it was shoved inside someone else the day you left me crying in bed, begging for you to stay. The bed wasn’t even fucking cold yet before you moved on like I didn’t mean a thing to you. I was just like all the other girls. I guess you can cross me off your list now of those you want to fuck.”

I flinch at her words before I back her up against the wall. I don’t know whether I’m more angry or hurt that she would ever think I would do that to her. That she could ever be just a fuck to me.



“If you hadn’t been so stubborn and jumped to the worst possible conclusion about me, you would have found out by my texts that I went to Emma’s. Alone. I panicked about what happened and ended up getting shit-faced drunk. I didn’t even remember sending the text to Sophia until I read it the next morning while trying to figure out why I got a *go-to-hell* text from you.”

“I don’t believe you.” She shakes her head and tries to push me away, but I’m not budging.

“I would never lie to you.” I lean down next to her ear. “But you lied to me.” I pull on her earlobe with my teeth and hear her gasp.

“I...I didn’t lie.”

“You told me you didn’t want me anymore. That Saturday night was a mistake. To leave it in the past and forget about it. But see, I don’t believe you.” I lick her neck and suck softly as her head falls back on the wall. “Your body craves my touch just like I crave yours. One night with you will never be enough, and I sure as hell don’t ever want to forget about it.” I hear her softly cry, and I lift my head to catch her tears with my thumbs as I thread my fingers in her hair.

“Hey, don’t cry.” I bring her to my chest and hug her. She buries her face in my shirt and sobs. “It’s okay, Bell. Everything is going to be okay.” I rub my hands over her back to try and soothe her. “Tell me what’s wrong so I can make it better.”

“I just...I...all of this is my fault. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you that I was a virgin. If I hadn’t kept that secret, then you wouldn’t have left the next day. It wasn’t a big deal to me, and I wasn’t thinking how it would make you feel by not knowing. All I could think about was wanting to be with you so badly.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m not mad at you for not telling me. I just wish I would have done things differently. I would never want to hurt you, which is why I freaked out. It had only been one night, and I already had fucked everything up.”

“You didn’t, I swear. Saturday night was perfect. Please don’t take that away from us.”

“It was perfect for me, too. I’m sorry I left and lied to Sophia about where I was.”

“Why did you lie?” She looks up at me, and the pain in her eyes breaks me in two.

“I don’t know,” I sigh. “It’s all a bit fuzzy, but Sophia asked me if I was with someone, and I guess I just got upset that everyone always assumes that, even though they have every right to. It just rubbed me the wrong way because I want to change for you, and her saying that made me doubt myself. I let her think it because it made the most sense why I wouldn’t be home and didn’t text her. It was something she would easily believe. I regret it now because it hurt you, and I wasn’t thinking about Sophia telling you and what that would do to you.”

“I guess we both did things we weren’t proud of. I lied, too. I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me. I wanted you to think that it meant nothing to me when, truthfully, it meant everything to me.”

I pull her into another hug. “It meant everything to me, too,” I whisper in her hair. I breathe in her scent and close my eyes. “God, I’ve missed you. I’ve been haunted by vanilla and sunshine the last four days. I could smell you everywhere I went. You’re all I thought about.”

“It hurt so much,” she whispers into my chest. “I just had to get away. I couldn’t deal with the pain and seeing you again.”

“I’m so sorry for what that lie made you feel. I just wish you would have heard me out instead of thinking the worst of me. I would never do that to you. Let’s make a pact that if one of us is ever upset or mad over something, we’ll never run or avoid each other again. That was the worst five days of my life.”

“Deal.” She looks up at me and smiles and it’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen. I’ve missed everything about

her, and I don't want to be apart from her for another second. I brush my lips against her before sliding my tongue along her lower lip. She sighs, and I take that moment to dive deep and show her how badly I've missed her.

She desperately clings to me, tangling her tongue with mine as we frantically try to erase the pain of the last few days. I press myself against her, and we both moan at the contact.

"I want to take care of you like I should have done Sunday morning instead of leaving," I whisper against her lips. "Let me take care of you. I need to know you're real and here with me now. I want to show you what I should have done instead of walking away," I say again, feeling the desperate need to erase how I responded.

"I'm here. I'll always be here."

Groaning, I pick her up, and she wraps her legs around me as I walk toward my master bath. Not wanting to let her go for fear she'll disappear again, I turn on the shower with one hand and let the water drench us both.

I'm glad I decided on the apartment with the bigger master bath and bedroom. I love the white marble shower and the fact it's big enough for two shower heads on either side. I don't use the big garden tub, but that might have to change as images of Bell naked and covered in bubbles appear in my head.

Her fingers dive into my hair, bringing those beautiful lips to mine. I'll never take another day for granted to have her want me like this now that I know what it feels like to not have her.

I back her up against the wall and grind against her as my fingers dig deeper into her ass. I hear her moan as she frantically tries to take my wet t-shirt off.

I set her down, and she immediately removes my shirt before trailing her hands over my chest and stomach. I briefly close my eyes at her touch, wanting to savor the feel of her.

"I didn't think I would be able to touch you like this again. You have no idea how bad it hurt to think you were with

someone else in this way.”

“I should never have lied. If I have to spend the rest of my life making it up to you, I will. Starting now.” I lift her t-shirt and expose her lacy bra. She unbuckles her shorts and slides them down her long legs before stepping out of them. I suck in a breath at the sight of her. “You scare the hell out of me, you know. Every time I look at you, it’s like another piece of me now belongs to you until one day, you’ll own me.”

“I’m scared, too,” she whispers. “Pieces of me have belonged to you for a very long time, and I’ve tried to get them back, but you have a hold on me that I can’t break no matter how hard I try.”

“I don’t want you to get them back. They belong to me now just like I belong to you.” I lose myself in the depths of her blues before I crush my lips to hers. I undo her bra and let it drop to the floor as I rub my thumb over her nipple.

I feel her start to undo my shorts, and I back away and step out of them as she lowers her thong. Her eyes take in my erection as she bites her bottom lip. Groaning, I feel myself get harder as arousal glistens on top. She reaches out a hesitant hand and circles her hand around me. I suck in a breath as her thumb catches my precum, sliding her hand down my entire length. I have no clue what she has experienced so far, and I plan on asking her later, but for now, her innocence is unleashing something in me. A possessiveness over her and a deep satisfaction that I’m the only one who has seen her like this.

I release her hand and squirt some body wash on my sponge as I start to wash her. “This. This is what I should have done that morning. I should have taken care of you,” I say softly. Regret and pain weave their way into my heart. I watch as the soap slides down her body as I brush the sponge over her nipples. They harden as she closes her eyes and parts her lips. I make sure to clean every inch of her as I stare, mesmerized by her beauty. When I start to clean between her legs, I stop.

“Did it hurt?” I ask softly, afraid of the answer.

“No, I was just a little sore, but in a good way. Please don’t feel guilty about it. It’s something I wanted to give you.”

I lower myself to my knees and lay my head against her stomach. Closing my eyes, I feel her fingers run through my hair. I try to release the guilt of what I’ve been given. She gave me a piece of her that I vow to cherish until my last breath.

I kiss her stomach before running my finger through her folds, noticing how wet she already is for me. God, I love how she responds to my touch. Wanting so badly to taste her, I lick and suck my way up her inner thigh before stopping and breathing her in. Her scent consumes me, and I moan against her softness. “Has anyone ever kissed you here?” I ask quietly against her sex.

“No,” she whispers, breathing hard.

“Fuck,” I breathe, questioning what I did to be so damn lucky to be her first on this as well. “I want to fuck you with my mouth, baby,” I say against her skin. “I want to taste you while you cum all over me.” I give her a long, slow lick, and she squirms against me.

“Oh, God,” she rasps out.

I smile at her reaction and lift her leg over my shoulder while I feast on her. She tastes so damn sweet, and I moan against her as she grips my hair tighter. I fill her with my tongue as my hands come up and grasp her behind, pulling her deeper onto me.

“Maverick, it’s too much. I…” She’s unable to talk as I lick and suck some more. I can tell she’s close, so I push her over the edge and give her clit a flick of my tongue before sucking hard. She cries out my name as she comes undone. I suck and lick every last juice of her drawing out her orgasm until she’s barely able to stand.

I kiss my way up to her and kiss her long and deep when I reach her mouth, wanting her to taste how good she is. I break away, and she looks so damn sexy with her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. Her eyes are clouded with desire and have a

dreamy, faraway look to them. I pull her under the water with me and start to wash her hair.

“That was...” she says, searching for the words. “I don’t know what that was, but I almost blacked out, it was so good.”

Chuckling, I rinse her hair. “I’m glad you loved it, but I promise you I loved it way more than you did.” I reach for the body wash so I can wash myself, and she takes it from my hand.

“It’s my turn to take care of you,” she says with a gleam in her eyes. She squirts some on her hands and begins washing my chest. Her hands trace the tattoos on my left arm. “I’ve always thought these were extremely sexy on you.” She trails down my arm over the many dark patterns I have from shoulder to wrist, extending to the left side of my chest. There are various scenes of waves, underwater views, and some island life flowers and palm trees.

“Extremely sexy, huh?”

“Very,” she says, moving to my back and running her hands over my body before gliding across my behind. She pulls me under the water with her to rinse me off before walking me back to the tiled wall. She lowers her gaze and licks her lips. My heart starts to speed up.

“You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for,” I tell her as she starts kissing and licking my stomach, following my trail.

“I want to taste you,” she breathes right before her tongue comes out and catches my arousal on her lips. I suck in a breath as she slides me in her beautiful mouth.

“Fucking hell,” I say, gritting my teeth and trying to force myself to let her take her time instead of ramming into the back of her throat. She starts to suck and move up and down, squeezing me underneath, and I dig my fingers into her hair. She moans against me, and the vibration nearly makes me fall apart.

I groan when she takes me all the way to the back of her throat and starts fucking me with her mouth. She grabs my ass,

and her fingers dig into me as I feel myself close to the edge. “I’m going to cum, baby.” I warn her in case she wants to let go, but she stays put as I release into the back of her throat with a shout. She milks every last drop of me before releasing me with a pop.

I haul her up and crush my lips to hers, tasting myself on her. She moans against my mouth, and I can tell she is just as aroused, pleasing me as I am with her.

“It seems my girl isn’t so innocent after all. Where the hell did you learn how to do that?”

“I love to read spicy romances,” she shrugs her shoulders and grins.

“You learned to do that from a book? Jesus, I was reading boring surf magazines as a teenager when I could have been reading about how to please a woman.”

She laughs. “I don’t think you need any help in that department.”

“Tell that to the girl I gave my virginity to when I lasted all of four seconds.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen,” I wince. “To be fair, I was always big for my age, so I looked more like sixteen. At least that’s what the seventeen-year-old girl thought when she slept with me.”

“We were fourteen and seventeen once before you turned eighteen that year. You hit Eric when he was seventeen and looked at me.”

“Yeah, I know. Because it was you, and he shouldn’t have said those things. He’s lucky that the black eye I gave him was the only thing I did.” I take her face into my hands and rub my thumbs across her cheeks. “I can’t change the past, Bell. I’ve slept with a lot of women, and I’m not going to lie about it. If this will be a problem for you, I need to know.”

She searches my eyes before shaking her head. “The past is the past. All I care about is where we are right now.”

I search her eyes, satisfied that I see the truth in them. “Me too.” I kiss her before turning off the shower. I dry her off and wrap her in a towel.

“I don’t think I’m going to need the towel.” She drops the towel and walks toward me with a fire in her eyes. She slides her hands up my chest before taking my hand and placing it between her legs. “See what you do to me? I’m so wet for you just from pleasing you.”

I moan and slide my fingers through her slick folds. Her words causing my body to react with need all over again. “I think I’ve created a sex nymph, and I absolutely love it.” She giggles as I pick her up, grabbing her ass as she throws her legs around me. I walk us to my bed and throw back the covers before laying her down gently.

I lean over her and kiss her with everything in me, wanting to give her what I should have Saturday night. Our tongues tangle together as I reach down and squeeze her breast before rubbing and pinching her nipple. She moans against my mouth as I move to her neck. I lightly bite her earlobe before licking and sucking my way down her neck and collarbone. I feel her hands in my hair as she arches her back.

I find her breast with my tongue and suck hard on her nipple while my other hand pinches and squeezes her other one. Lowering my hand, I cup her wetness and rub my palm against her swollen clit as she raises her hips to meet me. Gently pushing two fingers inside, I hear her gasp as I go deeper, hitting her sensitive spots.

“Maverick...” she rasps out.

“I know, baby, just let go. I’m here to catch you.” I increase the pace with my fingers as I start to feel her clench around me. I apply pressure to her swollen bud, and she cries out my name as I feel her pulse around me. Her orgasm takes over her body as she trembles beneath me. Sliding my fingers out, I meet her heavy-lidded stare as I suck her arousal off. “So fucking sweet,” I breathe.

Her eyes go a deep shade of blue as she watches me savor her taste. I kiss her thoroughly while her hands find my back



before grabbing my ass and pulling me closer to her. I break away before it goes any further. I need to talk to her about something, and I don't know how she'll react.

"I didn't use a condom Saturday night, Bell," I say quietly. "I'm clean, I swear. I've never gone without one before, but I wasn't thinking straight with you, and I'm sorry. Whatever happens, I want you to know that I'll always be there for you."

She looks at me and smiles. "I'm not pregnant. Our moms took Sophia and me when we were teenagers to get us both protected. I'm glad we didn't use a condom because I didn't want to be separated from you even in the slightest way. I trust you that you're clean, or I wouldn't have slept with you."

Relief washes over me. It's not that the thought of her pregnant with my child doesn't do something to me because deep down, it does, but I would like to be married first and in a home together.

"Do you want me to wear a condom now?" I murmur against her neck, praying to God she says no but wanting to give her the choice since I didn't last night.

"No," she shakes her head with vigor. "I won't get pregnant, and I trust you about being clean. I don't want anything between us."

I moan at the thought of feeling her without a barrier. "I don't either." I position myself and slowly enter her as I search her face for any pain. When I'm satisfied that I only see desire in those blue eyes, I fill myself completely with her heat. "You feel so fucking amazing. It's like you were made for me. Are you okay?" I ask her when I'm fully deep inside of her.

"I've never been more better than I am right now," she sighs, bringing me down to meet her lips.

I start to move inside her and moan at how tight she feels. Her body welcomes me in as I stretch her completely around me. She puts her legs around my waist and tilts her hips to meet me, going even deeper at this angle.

I grab her wrists and place them above her head, exposing her breasts to me as I feast on them one by one. She's writhing

beneath me as I torture her slowly with my teeth and tongue. I know she wants to touch me, but I love making her wait. When she's panting and can't take it anymore, I let go of her wrists, and she immediately rakes her fingernails down my back and digs her heels in harder, lifting her hips to meet my thrusts.

Everything about this feels different than what I've done in the past. I'm not just going through the motions. I'm feeling and sensing everything around me. I notice her sighs and the way her skin feels against mine. I can smell her arousal and the hint of vanilla that I love. Everything is heightened, bringing it to a whole new level.

"Maverick, please..." she rasps out. "Harder like last time."

God, could she be any more perfect for me? I was trying to hold back because I knew this was only her second time, but I grin down at her, knowing she loved Saturday night as much as I did.

"Hang on, baby," I say, putting my hand on the headboard in front of me to get a better hold before I start picking up my pace. I slam into her, loving the way her breasts bounce beneath me. Her eyes close as her back arches from the pleasure. I bring my finger up to those beautiful lips and press inside. She greedily sucks my finger, grazing it with her teeth. "Open your eyes, Bell. I want to see you when you cum."

She opens her eyes, and lust-filled blues find mine. She sucks harder and moans against my finger. I feel her start to clench around me, and I release my finger and pinch her nipple hard, pushing her over the edge with a cry.

"Fuck!" I shout, emptying inside of her over and over again. I ride out the orgasm, both of us being taken out of our bodies. I collapse on top of her, feeling her rapid heartbeat against mine. "Jesus, Bell. I don't think I've ever cum that hard," my voice is muffled against her hair.

Giggling, she runs her hands through my hair. "I'm glad I can please you. I was worried that I wouldn't measure up to

some of the girls you've been with," she admits softly. "I don't have the experience that they do."

I lift up on my elbows and look at her. "Please don't ever compare yourself to girls from my past. They meant nothing more than getting instantly satisfied at the time. I was the same for them. It doesn't even compare to what we just did."

"And just so you know, I find it insanely hot that you were a virgin. Some deep animalistic part of me loves the thought of being the only one to ever be inside of you. If I'm being absolutely truthful here, I don't think I would handle the situation very well if I wasn't your last. Just the thought of someone else feeling and seeing what I just did with you makes me want to kill someone."

"I feel the same. The thought of you being with someone else like this makes me want to rip the bitch's hair out."

We both bust out laughing. "Well, let's try not to let it get to that for either of us. I'm too good-looking to go to prison. Everyone would want to make me their bitch, and I'm just not into that kind of thing."

"Oh my God." She rolls her eyes at me. "Can you be any more sure of yourself?"

"I got the most beautiful woman ever to look at me, so how can I not be sure." I tickle her, and she squirms beneath me. "You forget I've known you forever. I know exactly where you're the most ticklish. I used to hold you down and tickle you until you begged me to stop so you wouldn't pee your pants. I actually think you did one day."

"I did not pee my pants!"

"I'm pretty sure you did." I laugh and tickle her harder.

"Mav! Are you home?" I hear Sophia's voice from the living room.

We both stop laughing and go still. Bell's eyes go wide, and I jump off the bed quickly to throw on some shorts before she comes in. This was not the way I wanted to tell my sister that I'm sleeping with her best friend.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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### Bella

I WATCH MAV FRANTICALLY THROW ON SHORTS, AND IF IT were any other situation, I would be laughing at the way he's hopping on one foot naked, trying to get his shorts on. I hear Sophia's footsteps come closer, and I do the only thing I can think of. I throw the covers over my head and hide.

"Mav, are you in here? I had a half day today, and Bella and I were supposed to meet for coffee. She's not home or answering me. Do you know where she is?" Shit, I completely forgot about the coffee date.

Sophia walks in just as Maverick pulls his shorts up. I bury myself in the covers, praying I've become invisible. "Oh, my God. I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were with someone." Clearly, my body lump isn't as invisible as I thought.

"Hey, sis. It's no problem. We were, uh, just talking."

"Have you seen Bell? Her Jeep is out front, so she's got to be around here somewhere."

"I, uh." I hear Mav sigh deeply. "Shit, this wasn't the way I wanted you to find out. We need to talk."

Oh shit, so we're doing this now? I don't know whether to come out or stay hidden.

"Just a sec." I hear Sophia say. "Let me try one more time. I just want to make sure she's okay, and then we can talk."

"Wait!" Maverick says seconds before I hear my phone start ringing in my purse. Fuck it all to hell. The one time I

don't have it on silent. I hold my breath, and the room goes eerily quiet.

“What is going on here?” Sophia asks in her no-nonsense tone. “You better explain to me right now why my best friend's phone is ringing in your apartment, and I was two seconds away from seeing your naked ass when I walked in here.”

“I can explain. Just try and hear me out first, okay, before you go all ape shit on me. Can we go in the kitchen and talk?”

I quietly thank him for at least giving me the chance to get dressed before I have to face my best friend. Her seeing me naked in her brother's bed might scar her for life.

Sophia lets out a deep sigh of frustration. “This ought to be good.” I hear her leave the room, and Maverick sighs.

“Let me go talk to her for a second. I'll try and make things easier for you.” He peeks under the covers and smiles at me. “It's going to be okay. We had to tell her eventually, and it's probably better this way. I wasn't planning on letting you go tonight, so at least now Sophia won't have to wonder who kidnapped you while Noah's on his honeymoon.” He gives me a dimpled grin, and I can't help but grin back at him. He kisses me softly before walking to the door and closing it behind him so I can get dressed.

I throw back the covers and realize my clothes are in a wet pile in the shower. Would wearing her brother's clothes make things worse? I decide to hide myself and go for the *don't kill me, I'm too cute and innocent in this oversized hoodie look*.

I rummage through his drawers and put on a pair of his boxer briefs. I find an oversized hoodie in his closet. It hangs to my knees and covers everything. It's perfect. I go to the bathroom and run a brush through my hair, trying to make it look like I didn't just have the best sex of my life seconds ago and three mind-blowing orgasms, but who's counting.

I quietly open the bedroom door and tiptoe down the hall to assess the situation. I stop when I hear Mav's voice.

“We wanted to tell you and Noah, but we were waiting until after the wedding. We didn’t want to take any attention off of them, and I had things I needed to work through before I could move forward.”

“I swear to God, Maverick, she’s not some girl you can just hook up with. If you hurt her, I won’t ever forgive you.”

“You think I don’t know that? Jesus, Soph. I’ve been going out of my fucking mind with what I feel for her. I know she’s not just a fuck. All these emotions hit me at once, and I’ve been feeling like I’m going fucking crazy. I got shit-faced drunk because I couldn’t handle it and lied to you about being with someone so you wouldn’t know anything was wrong.

“Deep down, I think I’ve wanted her for a long time, but I never let myself see her that way. I just told myself all this jealousy is because I’m protective of her, and she’s Noah’s little sister, but I know now that it was more than that. Hell, you’ve seen us fight lately. Every time she went on a date, I wanted to kill the guy.”

I hear Sophia sigh. “She’s been saving herself for someone special. You must have given her fireworks.”

I smile at my best friend’s words. I decide to be brave and face the fire, not wanting Maverick to have to do it all alone. I peek around the corner and catch Sophia’s eyes. Maverick turns and looks at me.

“I can’t believe you hid under the covers from me,” Sophia says, her lips slightly turning up as she fights back a smile.

I give a nervous laugh. “I freaked out and went straight back to our childhood when we would pull the covers overhead thinking we were invisible from the monsters.”

“Well, I’m glad you think I’m a monster.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just chickened out big time.” Maverick holds out his hand and brings me to his lap before wrapping his arms around me.

Sophia eyes us both, and I hold my breath while she studies us. This isn’t going to work if I don’t have my best

friend's blessing. "You guys do look damn good together." I let out a deep breath, and Mav squeezes me tighter.

"Damn right we do," he says, grinning at her.

I turn to Maverick. "Can I have a second alone with Soph?"

"Of course. I'll take a walk down to the water and give you two a second." He kisses me on the head and pulls a t-shirt on from his bag that's sitting there before walking out the back deck.

I turn back to Sophia and blink back the tears. "I'm so sorry, I didn't tell you. It all happened so fast, and with the wedding and Maverick being so scared with what he was feeling, it was all just too much."

"How long have you been in love with my brother?" She asks softly. Sophia knows me better than anyone, and even though I hid it well from her, she can see right through me now.

"For as long as I can remember," I say quietly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I see the hurt in her eyes, making the tears come faster.

"I was too embarrassed. I was in love with someone who had girls lining up for him, and I never once saw him look my way. The only time I got his attention when I got older was when I went out on dates. I think half the time, I did it just to get a rise out of him so I would get some kind of attention from him. I felt like some dumb girl with a crush on a guy that she could never have."

"Bella." I see tears gather in her eyes. "I just wish I could have been there for you. That must have been so hard to see him with other girls."

"It definitely wasn't fun," I laugh and wipe my eyes. "Did you know that he punched Eric for talking about me inappropriately when I was fourteen?"

"No..." she says, her eyes going wide.

“And he threatened all the guys in high school except for the ones he vetted and deemed safe to take me out. You know the ones I’m talking about. I had the worst dates ever in high school because everyone was afraid to go against Maverick.”

“Holy shit,” she says, laughing.

“He also threatened my date at James’ wedding and purposefully hit his head on the car, throwing him into the Uber.”

“It seems he’s been in love with you just as long. He just didn’t realize it.”

“Do you think? I mean, we haven’t really discussed what happens now that the wedding is over besides the fact that we want to try. I just worry that I won’t be enough for him. He’s not used to being with the same girl day in and day out.”

“Are you listening to yourself right now? He should be the one worried that he’s not enough for you. I bet he’s scared shitless that he will screw this up somehow and lose you. Don’t sell yourself short. He’s the lucky one.”

“Thanks, Soph. I’m lucky, too. I have the *best* best friend in the whole world.”

“Damn right you do,” she says, grinning at me.

“So, are you okay with this then? I couldn’t truly be happy if I didn’t have your approval.”

“I was shocked. I’m not going to lie, but when I saw the way he talks about you, I knew it must be something special. I’ve never seen him look like that, ever. You know him. He’s never even had a girl stay the night. He pulled you on his lap to cuddle you, for God’s sake. What the hell have you done to my brother?” She laughs.

“I have no idea, but I’ve never been happier.”

“I’m happy then too.” Her eyes get wide. “Do you know what this means? If you guys get married one day, you’ll be my sister-in-law, and our kids will be cousins,” she squeals.

“Let’s just see how the dating part goes first before you jump the gun and have us walking down the aisle. But it would



be amazing, wouldn't it?" I squeal with her.

She stands up and gives me a hug, and I squeeze her tightly. "I love you, and for the love of God, no more secrets, please. I want you to be able to tell me anything."

"I love you too. No more secrets, I promise."

"Well, I'm going to go get some grading done and let you get back to whatever it is that you were doing before I interrupted."

I laugh and walk her to the door. "I know he's your brother, so I will spare you the details, but, damn, did I see fireworks. More than a few firework shows, if you know what I mean." I grin at her and give her a wink.

"Okay, maybe keep some secrets to yourself." She covers her ears and pretends not to be listening to me. "If we're still going to have girl talks, I'm going to have to find a way not to picture my brother naked."

I laugh as she walks outside and shuts the door. Feeling like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders, I run out back to find Maverick. I see him standing under our gazebo, gazing out at the water. My heart skips a beat at how gorgeous he is. I throw my arms around his stomach, squeezing him from behind.

Laughing, he turns around and hugs me. "I take it that it went well?"

"It did," I say into his t-shirt. "I feel like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders."

"Me too. I told her not to say anything to anyone until we can talk to them ourselves. I think we should wait to tell our parents until after we tell Noah."

"I think so too. And don't worry about Noah. He loves us both and wants us to be happy. Emma's already on our side, I can tell."

"I hope you're right. I'm glad Emma will be there to soften the blow." His hands run up under the hoodie, and he gives me

an amused look as he cups my bottom. “Are you wearing my underwear?”

Giggling, I nod. “I hope that’s okay. It was either wear your clothes or a towel since mine were soaked. I opted for the least sexiest to talk to Sophia. I was hoping I would look innocent and not look like I just experienced a mind-blowing orgasm minutes before she walked in.”

Laughing, he pulls me close, pressing himself against me and showing me how hard he is right now. “I love how you think that wearing my clothes wouldn’t be the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.” His hands roam over my back before grazing the size of my breasts with his thumbs. “You don’t have anywhere to be today, do you?”

I smile up at him. “Nope.”

“Good, because I wasn’t lying when I said I wasn’t letting you go tonight. Let’s order some food. I’m fucking starving, and I have a feeling I’m going to need the fuel later to keep up with the insatiable sex nymph I’ve created.”

I squeal when he throws me over his shoulder and walks me back to his place. “I am not a sex nymph,” I say, laughing. He spans my boxer-covered ass hard, and I moan against his back.

Laughing, he rubs the spot, and I squirm against him. “You sure about that?”

“You don’t play fair,” I mumble against his back.

“You should know me better than that. Since when have I ever played fair when it comes to something I want.”

I think back to all the guys he kept away from me and all the dates I went on to try and make him jealous. I grin against his back. I guess we both don’t play fair when it comes to something we want.

WE’RE CURLED up on the couch, eating my favorite orange chicken takeout. I spear a piece of broccoli and look over at him, watching me. He takes a bite of his food and smiles. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

He slowly chews deep in thought before answering. "I'm just thinking how nice it is to just be sitting here with you and doing regular couple stuff."

"So we're a couple now?" I tease him, and he gives me a smirk.

"Well, I sure as hell don't want to share you with anyone, and I have no interest in pursuing other women. I thought it would be harder for me to adjust to doing this whole dating thing outside of sex, but this last month, it's felt completely natural talking at night and just being with you."

"We haven't really discussed what we're doing or where you see this going. Are you worried at all that you'll get bored with me? I know you've never seen yourself with just one girl for any length of time. I think you used the word *prison* before when you described relationships." I raise my eyebrows at him, causing him to laugh.

"Yeah, well, that was me being too stubborn to see what was right in front of my eyes this whole time. I guess, like you, I was saving a part of myself for the right girl.

"And to answer your question, hell no, I don't think I'll get bored with you. Truthfully, I've felt like I've been missing something for a while now. My apartment started feeling lonely a long time ago, but I tried to keep myself busy enough so I wouldn't think about what that meant."

I let his words sink in as he takes my empty container from my hands and sets it on the coffee table with his. "Come here," he says softly, bringing me to his lap so I'm straddling him. "I want to make this work if this is what you want, too. I've never felt this way about anyone, and with you, I want to experience being in a relationship for the first time in my life. Do you see yourself with me as well?"

I feel the tears form in my eyes and nod. "I've been waiting a long time to hear you say that. Of course, it's what I want."

He swipes my tears with his thumbs. "Don't cry, baby. I'm sorry it took me so long to realize my feelings for you were so

much more.”

Shaking my head, I place my hand on his heart and feel it beating fast like mine. “Don’t be sorry. Everything happens for a reason, and I’ve always believed it was fate that you were my brother’s best friend and that we got to grow up together. We happened when the timing was right for the both of us.”

He brushes back my hair and shows those dimples that I adore. “So we’re really doing this then?”

“We’re really doing this,” I laugh. He grabs my face and kisses me hard, his tongue seeking mine. I greedily kiss him back and wrap my arms around his neck. He takes my lip between his teeth, and I moan when he sucks hard. I reach for his shirt, pulling it over his head as he does the same with my hoodie, both of us needing skin-to-skin contact.

“You look sexy as hell wearing only my underwear,” he whispers against my neck. I throw my head back as he lavishes my neck with his mouth. I feel him hard against me as I rub myself along his length. “There’s so much I want to do to you.” He sucks harder on my neck, knowing he’s leaving his mark on me again. “I fucking love that I get to be the one to give you all your first experiences. Do you know how hard that makes me? Knowing that I’ve been the only one.”

His words send a pool of desire between my legs. I gasp as he finds my already tight nipple. He scrapes it with his teeth before pulling it in with a long deep suck. Wanting to know if he likes it too, I run my fingernail over his nipple before pinching it hard. He moans against my breasts, and I smile before doing it again. His hands go into my waistband and cup my bottom, digging into my flesh and moving me against him.

I push myself up on my knees and step off the couch. I watch him as he watches me slowly lower the boxer briefs. His eyes roam my body, and there’s no mistaking the hunger I see in those emerald eyes. He makes me feel like I’m the sexiest thing he’s ever seen. I see him lift his hips and slide his shorts down before kicking them to the side. His arousal is evident on his glistening tip. Keeping contact with his eyes, I lower my hand and cup my wetness.

Smoldering eyes watch me, and I see his breathing increase as I slowly enter two fingers. I should be shy or unsure what to do, but he makes me feel so desirable that all I can think of is making him feel as much as he makes me feel. My body just knows what to do around him.

I watch him circle his hand around his swollen length, slowly bringing it up and down. I don't think I've ever seen anything sexier than what I'm seeing now. I move my other hand to my breast and squeeze it before rubbing my nipple. His eyes burn into mine as he grabs my wrist.

"Come here," he demands, pulling me on his lap to where I'm straddling him again. He takes my hand and puts my two fingers into his mouth, sucking and licking off my arousal. I watch mesmerized. No, this is the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

He grabs my hips, his fingers digging into my skin before he lifts me and fills me completely in one hard thrust. I gasp before moaning as he lifts me, coming back down again. He feels so deep inside of me at this angle it's almost more than I can bear. My body welcomes him like he was made to be inside me.

Realizing I have all the power right now in this position, I start moving and savoring every inch of him. He moans when I go harder. His mouth seeks out my breast, and when he bites down hard, I cry out from the pleasure mixed with a little bit of pain. He soothes the spot with a lick, and my body goes into a frenzy. I put my hands on the back of the couch to get a better grip and move faster and harder on him.

"That's it, baby. Fucking ride me and take what you need." He grips my hips and slams me down even harder, and I cry out as my body convulses around him. "Fuck!" I hear him roar seconds before he lets go. My body trembles above him as my orgasm hits me hard. Just when I think I'm done, he pinches my clit hard, and another wave follows. I moan loudly as millions of sensations overtake me.

Coming down to my body, I collapse against him, and he wraps his arms around me. Our hearts beat fast against each

other. I feel the wetness on my cheeks but have no memory of crying. I brush them back as he strokes my hair.

“Why are you crying? He asks softly. “Did I hurt you?” I can hear the concern in his voice, and I quickly shake my head against his chest.

“God, no. It was amazing. I guess I’m just overwhelmed with all the emotions. Every time with you is like an out-of-body experience. It just gets so intense sometimes. I didn’t even realize I had tears until after.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I almost cried too,” he laughs softly. “I’ve never had the emotional side of things with sex. When you add that in, it takes it to a whole other level.”

“I guess we both are having a lot of firsts.”

“Yes, we definitely are,” he says softly. I can hear the emotions in his voice and squeeze him tighter, loving that I get to see a side of him that nobody has ever seen before. There are a lot of layers to Maverick, and I have every intention of exploring every single one of them.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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### **Maverick**

WATCHING HER SLEEP CURLED UP NEXT TO ME UNCOVERS emotions in me that I never thought I wanted or was even capable of having. We had spent the evening watching a movie before I buried myself deep inside her again, holding her after as she fell asleep in my arms.

A fierce possessiveness washes over me, and all I want to do is protect her and make sure she's happy every fucking day of her life. How could I have been so blind all these years? I noticed her beauty right away at a very inappropriate age, and I just stuffed it away in a deep part of me, never letting myself think about her in that way again.

The protectiveness never left, though. My need to watch over her only got more intense over the years, and my way of dealing with it was burying myself in someone else to take the edge off. All it took, though, was one look from her with her walls down, and she started to crumble mine until I was forced to deal with my feelings for her that I had buried a long time ago.

I had no clue that she had felt something for me through the years. She buried her emotions just as I had done. Both of us in our own personal hell of some kind.

For years, I thought that something was wrong with me. I would hear Noah talk about the girl from his dreams, and I would get envious that he was so in love with her and how he would wake up every day wanting her. I never felt like that with any of the girls I was with. Yeah, I would get sexually satisfied for the moment, but when that slowly faded, I felt the

emptiness return. I couldn't get personal with any of them. Just the thought of cuddling with them through the night or actually dating them sent me running in the other direction.

Up until now, I thought I was the problem, that I was incapable of doing *more*. The problem wasn't that I was incapable, though—it was because none of them were *her*. I had given my heart away a long time ago and buried it away where I could be in charge of it never being broken.

I hear her sigh against my chest as she holds me tighter. I brush back her hair and inhale her scent. For the first time in my life, I'm about to fall asleep with someone in my bed next to me. My heart is on full display as I feel the emptiness recede, knowing that the beautiful girl beside me holds all the power now. My heart is in her hands as I fully let her the rest of the way in, into a place that I've guarded so well up until now.

I AWAKE with my arms around her. Her bare ass is pressed against me, and I feel myself start to get hard. She wriggles against me, and I bite back a moan. I feel her press against me again, realizing she must be awake and likes what she feels as much as I do.

“Good morning,” I whisper against her back.

“Mmmmm. Good morning.”

I move my hand down her stomach and stop right before I touch her where she wants it the most. She squirms against me, and I grin behind her back, wondering how long it will take before she starts to beg. Her behind rubs against me again, and I move my hand closer and then back away again.

“Maverick, so help my God, you better stop teasing me right now, or I'll take matters into my own hands and please myself, leaving you with a hard-on all day as a reminder of what you could have had.”

I chuckle softly against her hair and lower my hand to cup her, finding her soaking wet for me. “Is this what you want?” I ask her, sliding my fingers through her folds. My other hand



comes around and squeezes her breast before tugging on the nipple.

“God, yes,” she moans, moving that perfect ass against me again.

I slip two fingers inside her and rub my hand against her as her breathing increases. I get her just to the edge and then back off again and remove my hand.

I hear her whimper. “Tell me you want me,” I whisper in her ear. “Tell me that you fucking need me as much as I need you. That I’m the only one who could ever make you feel like this.”

“I want you,” she breathes. “I fucking need you, Maverick. You’re the only one who could ever make me feel this way.”

“Good girl.” I position myself behind her and slide into her, both of us lying on our side.

She moans as I lay a hand on her back, pressing her forward, causing her ass to rise higher as I go deeper. Reaching around, I grab her hand and place it on her center so she can feel me moving against her wetness. I guide her hand and rub it against her swollen bud as I move faster and deeper inside of her.

I groan as she lifts her behind higher to meet my thrusts. I feel myself tightening and know I’m close. I take her fingers and press down hard on her clit as she starts clenching around me. I hear my name being called as I pulse inside her with a shout. Both of us, taking the other over the edge. Breathing hard, I hold her tight against me until our breaths even out.

“I think I could wake up like that every morning for the rest of my life,” I mumble against her back.

“Same,” she giggles.

I slowly pull out of her and roll her over to face me. She smiles up at me as I brush her hair back. “Unfortunately, I can’t stay in bed all day and do the millions of things I want to do with you because I have to go to work soon. What does your day look like?”

“I have edits that I need to work on and a video shoot this afternoon for one of the businesses in town.”

“I want to take you out to dinner on Monday. Are you free?”

“Like on a date?” She grins up at me.

“Yes, like on a date.”

“Maverick Alexander Lane on a date? What’s next? Unicorns showing up at my doorstep?”

She laughs out loud as I tickle her. “Okay, smart ass.” I go for the kill and tickle her in the spot she can’t take.

“I give,” she laughs out between breaths. I stop tickling her as she grins and wipes the tears from her cheeks. “I would love to go out with you on Monday.”

“That’s better,” I say, grinning at her. “Now get that sexy ass of yours in the shower with me, and then I’ll make us some breakfast.” I slap her on the ass hard and jump out of bed, running as a pillow hits me on the back. Laughing, she chases after me, and I grin back at her before silencing her with my mouth once again.

\* \* \*

I LOOK up from logging in inventory and see Logan and Sara walk in hand in hand. Sara’s beaming from ear to ear, and she’s got a light back in her eyes that I’m glad to see.

“Hi, Mav. Logan needed a few things, so we thought we would stop by.” Smiling, I walk around the corner, and she gives me a hug.

“Hey Sara, it’s good to see you. I want to thank you again for coming to the wedding with me, although it seems like it was meant to be,” I say, eyeing her and Logan.

Sara blushes and smiles at Logan. “Yeah, we’ve kind of been inseparable since the wedding.”

“I hope there isn’t any hard feelings, Mav. I would never have taken Bell out if I knew you two had feelings for each other.”

“No hard feelings at all. I probably need to apologize to you, though. Sometime over the years, my protectiveness over Bell became more like jealousy, and I took it out on you. Sorry that you unintentionally stepped in the middle of all of that.”

“All’s forgiven. It worked out the way it was meant to,” he winks at Sara, causing her to blush some more. “I’m going to go check out the new surfboards that just came in.” Logan motions to the back of the store.

“I’ll be back in a sec. I want to talk to Mav real quick.”

Logan looks at me and grins. “Just so you know, I do have feelings for this one, so my jealousy will come out if you make a move.”

Laughing, I hold up my hands. “Sara is all yours, I promise. I just left Bell this morning, and she’s enough for me.”

He walks away laughing, and I swear I hear Sara sigh. Grinning, I arch my eyebrows at her. “Somebody has it bad,” I tease.

“You’re one to talk,” she laughs. “But yeah, I do have it bad. I’ve never felt this way before about anyone.”

“I’m happy for you. You deserve happiness, and Logan’s a good guy, from what Bell’s said. This could be your prince,” I tell her, grinning.

“I think he is,” she whispers, watching him in the back as he looks over the boards. “So,” she says, turning back to me, “I take it things with Bella are going good too? Leaving her this morning, eh?”

“Things are going real good,” I say, grinning again. I haven’t been able to stop smiling since I got to work.

“All your parts are working perfectly fine, I take it?” She tries to suppress a laugh and fails.

“You’re never going to let me live that down are you? But yes, if you must know, my parts are working better than fine. Like fucking fantastically fine.”

“Good to know because if she’s waited all these years for you only to be disappointed in that area, it would be a travesty.”

“Trust me, she’s not at all disappointed. In fact, she’s probably counting the hours right now until I can satisfy her again. I know I am.”

She shakes her head, laughing. “We are quite the pair. It’s funny how things work and lead us to where we’re meant to be. Have you told Noah yet?”

I frown and shake my head. “No, they left early the next morning after their wedding and will be gone for two weeks. We plan on telling them as soon as they get back. My sister found out, though.”

“How did Sophia take it?”

“Better than I thought, considering she almost walked in on me buried inside her best friend seconds before she opened the door.”

She gives a small laugh. “I bet that was a fun conversation.”

“Wasn’t up there with the most comfortable moment, but she took it better than expected after she realized how much feelings were involved and letting me know that she’ll never forgive me if I hurt Bell.”

“And will you? Hurt her?”

Sighing, I run my hands through my hair. “I did have a freak-out moment the next morning, and we both got hurt in the process, but if anything, it showed me how much she means to me and that not having her in my life isn’t an option anymore. Once I felt my walls go down and let myself feel for her, I think it’s safe to say that she’s the only one that holds the power to hurt anyone.”

“It’s hard to put yourself out there,” she says softly.

“More like fucking terrifying,” I say, laughing softly.

“If she wasn’t your person, you wouldn’t be feeling like this. On the other side of fear is your happy ever after. Trust

me, she's just as scared." She looks at Logan, and I can tell she's struggling with it too. Turning back to me, she smiles. "You just have to push through it and trust in each other. The greatest love stories are worth it. Just look at Noah and Emma."

"Before you start singing and my store is filled with forest creatures, you need to walk your Disney butt back over to Logan."

Laughing, she looks at me with amusement. "I expect a wedding invitation. I feel like I had a huge part in this relationship and need to see it all the way through."

"Go," I say, laughing and pointing to Logan in the back. She laughs and turns to go. "Sara?"

Stopping, she turns and looks at me. "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says, grinning and walking over to Logan. I see her wrap her arms around his back before he turns and kisses her. Smiling, I get back to work as thoughts of Bell consume me once more.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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### Bella

I WALK IN THE DOOR TO MY APARTMENT AFTER WORK, AND Sophia is sprawled out on the floor in our living room, surrounded by pictures and artwork. “What is going on here?” I ask, laughing at the mess.

“She lives! My brother must be doing something right since I haven’t seen your face since I left yesterday morning.”

“It’s been a pretty amazing twenty-four hours.”

“You’re glowing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look like this coming back from a date. I take it things are going good. He’s behaving himself?”

“Things couldn’t be better. So what’s going on here?” I gesture to all the stacks of books and papers everywhere.

“I want to do a little scrapbook for each student to give to them on their last day. I’ve been taking photos throughout the year and keeping some of their artwork. I thought it would make a good gift for the kids and their parents.”

“That’s a great idea. Need any help?” I feel bad that I haven’t been spending as much time with her as I usually do.

“That would be great. I may have taken on more than I can handle with twenty books to make. I still have three weeks until school is over, so I wanted to get a jump start on it.”

“We’re going to need wine for this,” I say, walking over to the cabinet and getting some glasses down. “Have you eaten yet? It’s after six. I could order us something?”

“Sushi? We could order from that place we love so much.”

“God, that sounds amazing. I’m in.” I start looking through my phone for their menu and see a text come through from Maverick.

MAVERICK

Miss me yet?

Grinning, I text him back.

BELLA

Always. Missing me yet?

MAVERICK

You have no idea. All day long, I’ve been picturing the way you looked in my bed this morning.

BELLA

And how did I look?

MAVERICK

Like you belonged there.

A grin spreads against my face, and my body is flooded with warmth.

MAVERICK

Have you eaten dinner yet?

BELLA

I was just about to order sushi and help Sophia with a school project.

MAVERICK

Room for one more? I could pick up the order and grab a bottle of wine on my way home.

I look up and see Sophia watching me with a sly smile on her face.

“What?”

“You’re all flustered. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you flustered before, either. That must be my brother texting you?”

“He said he could pick up our sushi and grab us a bottle of wine on his way home if we wanted.”

“He’s just full of surprises. That’s fine with me. The more the merrier.”

I text him back.

BELLLA

That would be great. Thank you. What would you like to eat?

MAVERICK

I can think of one thing I would love to feast on right now.

Thoughts of his mouth on me enter my mind, and I lose my train of thought and forget to text back. I look down when it dings again.



MAVERICK

Are you still there?

BELLA

Yeah, you distracted me.

I know he's grinning right now and loving that he has this effect on me.

MAVERICK

Good. I want you thinking about my mouth on you. Just order me our usual so we can share. You know what I like. I'm closing up now, and then I'll head over there.

BELLA

Sounds good. See you soon.

MAVERICK

I'm looking forward to it.

Grinning, I place our order and fill up our wine glasses before joining Sophia on the floor.

I see her grinning at me as I reach for a scrapbook. "I know, I know. I have a stupid grin on my face. I can't help it. I'm just so freaking happy."

"I just love seeing you like this. I've been thinking back to the last couple of years, and the signs were there. I just didn't see them."

"What do you mean?"

“The way you two would argue. He would get so mad every time you went out on a date, and sometimes I felt like you didn’t even want to go on the date.”

“I didn’t,” I sigh. “I liked the rise I would get out of him. I was trying to make him jealous and give him a taste of what I was feeling every time he left the bar with someone. I knew I was being immature, but I couldn’t help it. The other part of me was hoping I would find someone that would make me feel even half of what I was feeling for Maverick so I could move on.”

“That had to have been hard seeing him with all those girls. In a way, I guess, you both were in your own personal hell, neither of you knowing what the other was feeling. Do you *really* feel he’s capable of giving you what you want? I love my brother, but he’s got a lot of fear around commitment. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“We talked about it last night, and we really want to give this a go. I can tell he’s scared, and I am, too, because of all the feelings I have for him, but at this point, I don’t think either of us can walk away. When we’re together, it’s like a fire is lit inside me. I’m so drawn to him, and if there is a chance I’ll get hurt in the end, I don’t think I could walk away now, even if I wanted to. I’ve been saving myself for the one person who would ignite those flames in me, and now that I have, I don’t ever want to let it go.”

She reaches out and squeezes my hand. “I saw the way he looked at you yesterday morning. He’s right there with you. I know Mav, and if he wants to try with you, then he’s not taking it lightly. That’s a huge step for him, and, like you, I think he was waiting for that person too, who would make him feel alive as well.”

Nodding, I wipe the tears that appear on my cheeks. “Thank you for not freaking out about all of this. I really don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Well, lucky for you, you won’t ever have to find out. We’re sisters for life, remember?”

“Sisters for life.” I lean over and hug her. “I love you.”

“I love you more. Now get your beautiful ass to work and help me with these books before I go crazy.” Laughing, we get to work organizing the photos and artwork for each child. I’m halfway through the book for little Cody when Maverick walks in.

“Oh, thank God! I’m starving.” Sophia shuts the book she was working on and gets up to get some plates. I stand and walk to the kitchen.

Maverick sets the bags down on the counter and walks over to me. “Hi.” He gives me a dimpled grin, and my stomach does a little flip.

“Hi.” I grin back at him and shriek when he throws me over his shoulder.

“We’ll be right back,” I hear Maverick say.

“Seriously, guys? You can’t wait to have sex and eat first?” Sophia asks.

“We’re not having sex,” Maverick says, laughing. “I just want a proper kiss, and I don’t think my sister is ready to see that just yet, and I don’t want to wait.”

“I’m okay with you guys kissing in front of me,” she laughs.

“PG kisses, yes, but this one will be Rated R,” Maverick says over his shoulder as he walks me down the hall.

“Oh my God,” I say, laughing against his back. He goes into my room and shuts the door before setting me down.

“I’ve missed you today.” He bends down and nuzzles my neck, breathing in my scent. “I’ve missed your smell.” He kisses my neck. “I’ve missed this body.” His hands roam down and cup my behind, bringing me up against his rock-hard arousal. “I’m not used to missing anyone.” His tongue slides down my neck. “Or thinking about someone all day long. Please tell me I’m not the only one feeling this way,” he says close to my ear before sucking my lobe.

“You’re not the only one feeling this way. I’ve thought about you all day, too. My thoughts are consumed by you.”

Groaning, his lips find mine. His tongue traces my bottom lip. Teasing me.

Tasting me.

He dives in deep and kisses me thoroughly, our tongues seeking each other out as he deepens the kiss. I run my fingers up in his hair as he presses against me. My body starts to burn for him when I feel rock-hard heat touch my core. I moan as I try to get closer, my body aching with need that only he can ease.

We break away, panting hard. “I’ve been looking forward to doing that since I left this morning.” He brushes back my hair and smiles at me. I run my fingers over his perfect lips and take in his beautiful green eyes. I see my emotions mirrored back at me as he looks at me. “What are you thinking about right now?” He asks softly.

“That I’ve waited my whole life for you to look at me the way you are looking at me right now.”

He leans down and softly kisses me again. “I’m sorry it took my stubborn ass so long to let you see it.”

“Yeah, you definitely were a stubborn ass,” I laugh softly.

“Well, I’m your stubborn ass now, so you better get used to it.” He slaps my ass and grins. “We better get out there before Sophia eats all the sushi. You know how she can put those away.” He takes my hand and leads me to the door.

Laughing, I walk back out to the kitchen with him. “Yeah, she can. I’m not one to talk, though. I’ve been known to eat a few rolls all by myself, too.”

He leans down and whispers in my ear. “Better get some fuel in you then. You’re going to need it later.” He winks at me and hands me a plate.

I decide to play with fire once again. “Is that a promise?”

His eyes get a wicked gleam in them. “It’s a fact.” My body, still reeling from the kiss moments ago, reacts to his words. It must show on my face because he laughs softly,

knowing that he got to me. He loads up his plate and joins Sophia at the table.

I take a sip of my chilled white wine to soothe the heat coursing through me before making my plate and joining them.

“Did you two get it out of your system so you can act like normal adults now?” Sophia asks, taking a bite of a roll.

“It’s no way near out of my system, but it will do for now,” Maverick laughs. “Guess who came into work today?” He asks, changing the subject.

“Who?” I ask, taking the chopsticks out of the wrapper.

“Logan and Sara. They haven’t left each other’s side since the wedding. They looked really happy together.” He spears a spicy tuna roll and dips it into the spicy mayo before taking a bite.

“Awe, I love hearing that. I felt really bad on our date, and I’m glad he found someone.”

“I even apologized to him for being a jealous ass that day in the shop.”

“You were an ass that day. I remember Bella coming home pissed at you,” Sophia laughs and takes a sip of her wine.

“Thank you for that added clarification. I think I’ve more than made it up to her.” He winks at me, and I start laughing.

“All is definitely forgiven.” I grin at him. Fidgeting with my chopsticks, I try and pick up a piece of sushi.

“Why don’t you just use a fork? You’ve been struggling with chopsticks since we were teenagers.” I look at Mav and grimace.

“It’s the whole experience of eating sushi.” I finally squeeze a piece, only to lose it in my soy sauce. Frustrated, I squeeze it again and make it to my mouth. “See, it’s much more fun than a fork.”

“We need to get those kid ones with the cute panda bears on the end that hold the chopsticks together for us,” Sophia

says, working one between her sticks.

“Or you could just use a fork,” Maverick says, laughing and quickly eating another speared one.

We finish dinner and grab our wine before helping Sophia knock out a few more scrapbooks. I’m sprawled out next to Maverick on the floor, gluing the last pictures in the book I’m working on.

“Have you guys thought about how you’re going to tell Noah?” Sophia asks us, rubbing her glue stick on the back of a piece of artwork.

“They get home late next Saturday, so I was thinking maybe having them over for a game night on Sunday, and I say something like, *Noah, can you pass me the guacamole? And by the way, I’m sleeping with your sister.*” Mav laughs when I swat him.

“Yeah, you may want to work on that,” Sophia laughs.

I hear my phone ring and see Noah and Emma’s smiling faces appear. “They’re FaceTiming now. Oh my God! Everyone act normal.” I fix my hair and scoot further away from Mav, and he starts laughing.

“I don’t think they’ll be able to tell over the phone that you’re sleeping with Maverick.” Sophia giggles and scoots closer to me as I hit answer.

“Bella!” I see Emma’s face appear next to Noah. She couldn’t look happier.

“Hi, Sis! We wanted to check in with you before our snorkeling trip today. How is everyone there?” Noah beams at me through the phone.

“We’re good. Everyone is fine. Nothing new going on here.” I can’t seem to stop rambling. Sophia nudges my shoulders to get me to shut up.

“Hey guys, it’s so good to see you. Are you having fun?” Sophia moves her head closer to me so they can see her.

“Hey, Soph. We’re having so much fun. You should see this place. It’s absolutely amazing here! Check out this room.”

Emma turns the camera around and shows us the hut they're staying in above the water. It has a huge king-size bed in the center of the room, overlooking the most turquoise water I've ever seen. The whole wall is open, giving you the most breathtaking view.

"Wow. It's gorgeous. I can't believe you get to stay there for two whole weeks." I look at it in awe.

"It's going to be so hard to leave, but I also miss all of you and Nala. How is she doing?" Emma asks, turning the phone camera back around.

"She's doing good. Having the time of her life with Hurley. What time is it there?" I've never been good at knowing time changes.

"We are nine hours ahead of you, so it's only six in the morning here. We have a snorkel trip at eight and wanted to have breakfast and talk to you before we left. Can you tell Maverick we called and that I'll try and call him this week to fill him in?" Noah asks me.

"I'm actually right here," I hear Maverick say as he takes the phone from me.

"Hey, Mav. I didn't expect you to be over there. It's what? Nine?" Noah checks his watch.

"Yeah, I brought wine and sushi to the girls and ended up helping Sophia with some scrapbooks for her class."

"Wine and sushi? That was nice of you." Emma says, grinning at him. Sophia scoots closer to me, making me move closer to Maverick so we can all be in the camera.

"I didn't take you as a scrapbooker," Noah says, laughing.

"It's definitely a first," he laughs. "You guys up for a game night next Sunday? We want to hear all about your trip and thought it would be fun to get together."

"That sounds like fun. Count us in." Emma says excitedly. "You guys look like you're having fun over there. It seems like everyone is getting along better." She glances between

Maverick and me. Why is she bringing this up now? I nervously grip Mav's thigh.

"Ow," he says under his breath, prying my hand from his thigh and holding it instead.

"Sorry," I whisper.

"We, uh, yeah, everyone is getting along fine over here. Sophia has been on her best behavior," he says, trying to divert the attention away from us.

"Hey!" Sophia swats him on the back of the head.

Mav lets go of my hand to rub his head. "She *was* on her best behavior."

"I'm glad you guys called. We miss you even though it's only been a week. It's different knowing you're so far away." I say, playing referee in the middle of these two.

"We miss you too, sis," Noah tells me. "We'll be back in Florida before you know it. We better get some breakfast before we have to leave. Tell Mom and Dad we love them, and give Nala a big hug from us."

"Will do." We say our goodbyes, and I exhale a big breath I had been holding. "Do you think he knows?"

"Noah doesn't have a clue, but Emma definitely knows something is up." Sophia starts to pick up the artwork and pictures, putting them in a box.

"I think she figured out what I was feeling before I even knew," Maverick says, chuckling. His phone dings at the same time Sophia and mine do.

I read the group text from our parents wanting us to go on the boat with them next Saturday.

Groaning, I lay back on the floor. "How the hell can I spend the whole day with you in front of our parents without a big neon sign above my head that says *I've had sex with this guy sitting next to me?* You know I break under pressure. My mom and Mimi will see right through me."



Laughing, Sophia pats my leg. “Yeah, I don’t know how you can keep it a secret from them. I feel the sexual energy just by being in the same room as you two. Nothing gets past our moms, and especially Mimi. Better bring tequila for this boat day.” She puts the lid on the box and sets it on the coffee table.

“That’s your advice? Bring tequila?” I cover my hands with my face.

“Tequila is always the answer, babe.” She gets up and yawns. “Thank you guys for the help. I’m going to head to bed. I was up early, and I have a book I’m dying to finish tonight.” She picks up the empty wine glasses and sets them in the sink before saying goodnight to us.

Mav pulls my hands away from my face. “It’s going to be okay,” he softly laughs. “The worst that can happen is they find out too, and I have to face your dad on Saturday and explain that I’m not going to ruin his daughter.”

“He’s not going to think you’ll ruin me. He loves you. I guess I was just hoping that we could tell Noah first so he could be there when we told our parents.”

“Well, don’t look at me in front of our parents like you want to undress and fuck me, and I won’t have to carry you off somewhere, and we should be fine.”

“Maybe it’s you who will look at me that way and mess everything up.”

“That’s the most likely scenario because I always want to undress and fuck you.” He leans down and runs his tongue along my collarbone. His simple touch ignites me as I feel his breath on my body. “Come home with me? I like having you in my bed,” he whispers, sucking and licking my neck.

“I like being in your bed.” He groans against my neck as his skilled tongue finds mine. He kisses me with an urgency that has me writhing beneath him and panting hard.

He pulls away, and I whimper. Chuckling, he looks at me. “I’m going to take care of you, trust me. Grab what you need,

and let's get out of here before I wake my sister by making you scream my name."

Feeling the heat between my legs, I hurriedly run to my bedroom to get what I need in record time before joining him at the front door. I make sure it's locked and get in his Jeep so we can drive the short distance to his apartment. He keeps his hand on my thigh the whole way, teasing me when he's so close to where I ache. He finds my panties wet when he runs a finger along my center. I see him grip the wheel tighter as he fights for control. By the time we pull into his parking spot, I'm throbbing with need and straddle him as soon as he turns off the engine.

# Chapter Thirty

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## Maverick

SHE'S STRADDLING ME BEFORE I CAN EVEN REMOVE THE KEYS from the ignition. Her hands are in my hair, and her lips find mine. I gladly return the kiss, already hard and throbbing from our kiss earlier, and finding her soaking wet for me. God, will I ever stop wanting her with this ferocious need that overtakes me every time I'm near her? She bites my lip, and I moan, loving that she feels safe enough with me to take what she wants.

What she needs.

Her hands claw at my shirt, and I stop her, panting hard. "Here? We're a few feet from my apartment. It will be much more comfortable for you in my bed."

"You've got to stop worrying that you'll somehow taint me. You've put me on this pedestal for most of my life like some prized jewel that you were afraid to touch, like you would somehow hurt me. I love that you look at me like that, but sometimes I want to be knocked off that pedestal and just fucked hard in the back of a parking lot because I can't go another minute without you inside me."

"I just.." I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "You deserve everything. I just don't want you to ever feel like you're like the other girls. Like a quick fuck in the car because I can't keep my dick in my pants. You're so much more."

"I don't feel like the other girls. You make me feel like I'm more all the time. I just don't want you to be afraid to show that side of you with me. The side that I know wants to fuck

me really bad right now in your Jeep. I love this new side of you who wants more and makes me feel special, but I also love the reckless side of you, too. The one that takes what he wants anytime or anywhere because it's being offered to you, and I am offering myself to you right now in case there was any doubt."

"No, there isn't any doubt." I laugh softly. "There also isn't any doubt that I do want to fuck you really bad right now in my Jeep. I want the image of you shattering against me in my head every time I get in this fucking Jeep." I lower her straps on her sundress, leaving her in a pink lacy bra. "I want your smell in here so I can breathe you in every time I sit in this seat." I unclasp her bra, freeing her beautiful breasts. "I don't know what I did to deserve you," I whisper against her skin, "but I have every intention of slowly worshiping you and also fucking this perfect body until I no longer have breath in me."

"Then do it," she whispers. She sinks her hands into my hair while I start to feast on her breasts. "I'll gladly be worshiped and fucked by you until my last day."

Groaning, I pull her nipple between my teeth and suck hard as she grinds against me. I grab her ass and sink my fingers into her skin. Her dress rides high around her waist as she lifts my shirt and pulls it over my head, her fingernails raking down my chest. My hand moves to her front, and I feel her soaked-through panties with my thumb as I stroke, circling her clit.

"Oh God, Maverick. The things you make me feel," she breathes. "Don't stop."

"Never, baby." I apply more pressure to her swollen bud, and she greedily rubs against me. Wanting to feel her clench around me, I undo my pants with one hand, freeing myself before moving her panties to the side and diving in deep with one hard thrust. "Fuck," I whisper, barely holding it together.

"Oh God," she moans as I move deeper and harder. She raises up on her knees, meeting my thrusts. The moonlight shines through the window, and I memorize every detail of

how she looks with her head thrown back and her lips parted, wanting to sear it into my mind.

I run my hand up her back before grabbing her hair and giving it a pull, making her arch her back more for me. I hear her moan as her fingers dig into my shoulders. The air starts to get hot in the Jeep, and sweat starts to form on our bodies. I capture her nipple in my mouth, tasting the salt from her skin. I give it a hard tug with my teeth, unsure how far to take it.

“Harder,” she pants. “Show me what it’s like. Don’t be afraid to be rough with me.”

My dick goes harder at her words if that’s even possible. “Tell me if it’s too much, and I’ll stop. Promise me,” I breathe against her skin.

“I promise.”

I grip my hand in her hair, pulling harder as I bite her nipple hard before sucking deeply. Gasping, she tightens her hold on my hair. I do the same with the other one as my other hand pinches her clit, mixing the pain with pleasure. She cries out as I pound into her, wanting to brand myself into her soul.

In this moment, I know I’ll never be the same. This beautiful girl owns me, and I’m never letting her go.

“I don’t want anyone ever to have you like this,” I ground out. “Nobody gets this sweet pussy but me.” I unfist my hand from her hair and grab the back of her neck firmly, bringing her lips to mine. I suck her bottom lip hard before swiping my tongue across it. “Say it. I need to hear it.” I rasp against her lips.

“I’m yours, Maverick. Always....just yours.” I growl with satisfaction as I feel her clench around me and shatter as her orgasm rocks her body.

I follow her over the edge, my body pulsing deep inside her. Her hand goes to the window for support, leaving her handprint in the condensation as she slides it down and falls against me. I wrap my arms around her and run my hands down her slick back. I listen as our breathing returns to normal, and every fiber of my being wants to tell her how I

feel. She breaks the silence first when I hear her speak against me.

“You were right earlier when you were worried my dad would think you would ruin me because you have. You’ve ruined me for all other men. I don’t think it’s possible to ever feel this way with anyone else,” she whispers against my neck.

Emotions clog my throat as I run my hand down her hair. “I’m ruined, too.” If Noah and Emma have taught me anything, it’s that we aren’t promised tomorrow, and we have to grab onto love when we find it, even if it scares the hell out of you.

I take a deep breath before setting aside my fears and laying my heart at her feet, trusting that she’ll keep it safe. “You were brave first, and let me see your vulnerability and feelings for me that night in the hallway, so it’s my turn to be brave for you. Somewhere between playing in the rain when we were younger and watching you grow into the beautiful woman you are now, I fell completely in love with you,” I softly say against her hair. “You have my heart, Bell. Deep down, you always have.”

She sits up and looks at me. Her beautiful blue eyes are bright with tears. I wipe one away with my thumb as it slides down her cheek. “I’ve been in love with you for as long as I can remember. You’ve had my heart and always will. God, I love you so fucking much, and it feels so good to be able to finally say it.”

I lean my forehead to hers and close my eyes, feeling so much at once that it’s overwhelming. “So does this mean I have my first girlfriend,” I tease her a few minutes later when I can speak.

“Yes,” she says, laughing through her tears. “You have your first girlfriend.”

“And my last,” I whisper.

“Definitely your last. You’re stuck with me, Maverick Alexander Lane.”

“God, what have I gotten myself into?” I laugh as she tries to swat me. I grab her wrist and pull her closer, silencing her laugh with a very thorough kiss.

\* \* \*

I WILL NEVER MAKE fun of Noah again for walking around grinning all the time. I couldn't stop doing it if I tried. I wake up to Bell and fall asleep with her beside me every night, and I've never been happier. Once I told her how I felt, it's like the last bit of wall between us came down, and there is nothing separating us. We both laid our hearts out and trust the other to take care of it.

Today is Monday and our first official date. I keep picturing her in one of her sexy dresses that have always driven me crazy, but tonight will be different because she's mine.

I open another box of clothes that came in today and start sorting through it when my phone rings. Glancing down, I see my mom's smiling face.

I hit answer and put it on speaker. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetie. Are you too busy at work to talk?”

“No, I'm in the back unloading a shipment. Luna's upfront and will let me know if she needs me. What's up?”

“I was just calling to see if we were still on for Saturday. Sage said Bella is coming, and Sophia is too. I know you said you were, but I wanted to make sure.”

“I'll be there. Sounds like fun.” Hopefully, I can keep it together with Bell next to me all day long in a bikini. It's not going to be easy. “Is Mimi and Papaw coming too?”

“Yep. We're taking Jax's bigger boat so we can all fit. It's been a while since we've all been out, so I'm pretty excited to spend the day on the water with everyone. Sophia and Bella will probably want to bring the jet skis, so maybe Luna could ride with Sophia and you with Bella to get them out there. I know how much fun Luna has on them.”

Luna's always ridden with me while Sophia and Bella have their fun. Something is starting to feel off. "Yeah, that would work." Whatever is going on in her head to have Bell ride with me, I'm not going to complain about. "What time were you thinking?"

"Ten on Saturday work? Dad and I are meeting at Sage and Jax's, so if you could grab the jet skis and then meet us over there to grab Luna, that would be great."

"Ten works for me. I'll let Sophia and Bell know."

"Perfect. Thanks, honey. So, how's work going?"

"Everything is going great. I'm hoping to open a second by next Spring."

"That's amazing! I knew that was your plan, but I'm so happy it's coming together for you sooner than planned. Dad and I are so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom. That means a lot. I owe a lot to Bell for the growth, though. Her advertising has put me over the top. New customers come in daily because of her work." I can't keep the pride out of my voice.

"She's pretty special, isn't she?" She asks me softly.

I hold my breath, not sure how to answer. I don't want to lie. My mom would see right through it anyway. "Yeah, she is."

"You two seemed like you were having a good time at the wedding." I hold back a sigh and rub a hand over my face. She definitely knows something is up. I couldn't hide my feelings that night as well as I wanted to. I blame it on the dress she was wearing and all the wedding talk that put images in my head of what I wanted in my future. Her.

"We did have a good time. I think everyone did. It was a beautiful wedding."

"Yes, it was. Well, I'll let you get back to work. I just wanted to touch base with you. Sage and I are packing lunches for everyone, and I think Dad and Jax want to grill later that evening at their house, so it'll be a full day."



I breathe a sigh of relief that she isn't going to push anymore. "Sounds like fun. I'll load my cooler up with extra drinks then."

"Perfect. I'll see you on Saturday then. Love you, baby."

"Love you too, Mom." I end the call and blow out a breath. I need to warn Bell because if my mom is suspicious, I know for a fact that Sage and Mimi are right there with her. I wouldn't put it past them to corner us on Saturday and force it out of us. Sophia may be right—tequila is the only answer to get through Saturday.

\* \* \*

I WALK into Bell's apartment, and Sophia looks up from the sofa. She's curled up with a book and grins at me when she sees the flowers.

"I feel like a proud parent right now, seeing their son go on his first date and even remembering to get flowers." She puts a hand to her chest and sighs.

"Very funny. Do you think she'll like them? It's what she always used to pick when we would go to the cabin on our vacations together." I look at the white and yellow daisy bouquet I got her. The flowers remind me of her, sunshine and happiness.

"I can't believe you remember that. I think that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard. She's going to love them, Mav. You did good."

"Thanks," I say, smiling at her before my gaze goes to Bell, and I nearly drop them on the ground. Her hair is up tonight, exposing her slender neck. She's wearing a red silky dress that dips low in the front and back, but unlike the bridesmaid dress, this one is short. Her long legs end in the sexiest pair of red high heels I've ever seen. Her toes are even painted a sexy shade of red.

"I think you did the impossible, Bell. You made Mav speechless," Sophia giggles. I don't take my eyes off Bell as Sophia gives her a hug. "I'll let you two have a moment. Have

fun tonight, and don't do anything I wouldn't do," she says, laughing and walking to her room.

"Are those for me?" She asks once we're alone. I tear my gaze away and look down at the flowers I'm holding.

I clear my throat and try to get my mind to work. "They are. I hope you like them. I remember how you used to love picking them at the cabin. They, uh, reminded me of you."

"You remembered that? I had to have been around eight." She takes the flowers and beams at me. "I love them. They always remind me of sunshine and.."

"Happiness," I say, finishing her sentence. "I remember."

"Thank you," she says softly. "They're perfect."

"You look beautiful." I hold her gaze and step closer to her.

"So do you." Her eyes roam my body, taking in my grey dress pants and white button-down shirt. I have the sleeves rolled up, exposing my tattoos on one arm, and the first couple of buttons undone because I know it drives her crazy. Her hands roam up my chest and grab my collar.

I take the flowers from her hand and set them on the counter beside me before cupping her neck and bringing her lips to mine. I run my tongue over her lip before seeking her out and deepening the kiss. I make myself break away a couple of minutes later, not wanting us to be late.

"We need to get going. I wouldn't want us to be late on our first date. You really shouldn't have worn that dress. I have a feeling it's going to be very hard for me to behave tonight," I chuckle. "I can think of so many things that I want to do to you right now wearing that dress. And those shoes, I think those are staying on later once I have you naked in my bed."

Now it's her turn to be speechless as she stares at me, her eyes burning bright with need. I hold out my hand, and she takes it as I walk to the door. "Wait, I want to put the flowers in water real quick. I don't want them to die." She bends down to get a vase out of the cabinet giving me a perfect view of her ass. I groan as my dick seems to enjoy it as well. It'll be a

miracle if I can make it through dinner without straining against my pants the whole night.

She puts the flowers in water and gets her purse from the counter. She giggles as she sees the uncomfortable state I'm in. "Just get in the car," I all but growl. "Giggle all you want. I love a good payback. I never play fair, remember?" I whisper in her ear as my hand slides down to caress her ass before squeezing it hard. Her giggles stop as she swallows hard. I open the door for her and help her inside. Grinning, I shut the door. This could turn out to be a very interesting night.

## Chapter Thirty-One

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### Bella

HE SHUTS THE DOOR, AND I TRY AND GET MY BREATHING under control. I press my legs together hoping to stop the throbbing he's caused me. All I can picture is me in his bed later with these heels on letting him please me in ways only he knows how.

He gets in and starts the engine. Once we are on the road, his hand rests on my thigh again, like he needs the contact just as much as I do. He chuckles softly when he notices how hard I'm pressing my legs together.

"Something bothering you over there?" He asks, looking over at me and grinning. "Looks like we both are in the same boat." He squeezes my thigh, and I squirm in the seat.

"So, how was your day at work?" I ask, desperately wanting to take my mind off of how I'm feeling right now.

He softly laughs and reaches for my hand, deciding to play nice for now, at least. I intertwine my fingers with his and will myself to relax. "It was good. I got a big shipment of clothing in that we'll have to set up a shoot for. A lot of new customers came in today, and almost all of them found me through social media. Thanks to you." He glances briefly at me and smiles before turning back to the road.

"I'm glad it's helping you. I only do part of it, though. You're the brand Maverick. I may get them there, but you keep them returning. It's very hard to resist that charm of yours. You listen to the customers and take care of them. They don't forget that." He squeezes my hand, and I smile over at

him. “I can take some footage after our Wednesday meeting. It’s still on, right? I know we skipped the last one because I already had clips to work with, but I can show you the new stuff I came up with.”

“It’s still on. I like our meetings.” He glances at me and smiles before turning back to the road. It’s probably silly to keep the meetings when I could just show him at home since we’ve been spending so much time together, but I like coming into his store. The meetings have been something I have looked forward to in the past when I would get him all to myself. I don’t want to let it go. “I almost forgot, my mom called me today about Saturday. I think they’re on to us.”

“What do you mean? How?” I ask, turning and looking at him.

“I just got the weird feeling that something is up. She told me to tell you and Sophia to meet me at their house so we can bring the jet skis over and grab Luna.”

“We’ve done that before. Why would that sound odd?”

“She told me Luna could ride with Sophia, and you could ride with me.”

“Luna always rides with you. She loves it when you ride the waves and make her almost fall off.”

“Exactly. So why suggest you and me ride together? Then, she said it looked like we had a good time at the wedding.”

“Oh God, they noticed, didn’t they?” I groan. “I think with all the drinks, I probably had fuck me, eyes pointed at you all night long.”

“I know I definitely had them pointed at you,” he says, laughing.

“If your mom suspects, then you know my mom does too, and most likely, Mimi. Do you think they’re planning this whole thing to corner us so we break under pressure?”

“That thought did cross my mind,” he chuckles. “Maybe it’s best this way. We’ll play it by ear and see how it goes. If they find out, then they find out. Truthfully, I’ll be glad when

everyone knows. What fun is having a girlfriend if I can't tell anyone that you're mine?"

"You're right. I'm tired of worrying that I'll let something slip when I talk to my mom. I want everyone to know that you're mine too."

We pull into the parking lot and park. "You know our moms are going to go nuts when they find out we're together. They've probably been secretly hoping for this day for a very long time."

"Yeah, they probably have been. We're their only hope to join the families by marriage. Noah and Sophia never had feelings like that toward each other, and Luna is too young for you."

"What do you think your dad will say?"

I see the worry in his eyes, and I reach out and place my hand on his cheek. "You have nothing to worry about. He's always wanted someone who is kind to me and loves me for me. You are both of those and more. Just tell him how you feel about me, and he'll see what I see. He already loves you like a son. He knows your heart."

He nods and leans over, and kisses me. "Thank you for picking me to love," he whispers against my lips.

"Thank you for picking me," I whisper back. He kisses me softly before pulling back and opening the door. He walks around the Jeep and opens the door for me. "Such a gentleman," I giggle, holding his hand as he helps me down.

He leans down next to my ear. "You may rethink that later," he sucks my earlobe before pulling away, leaving me wanting more.

Grabbing my hand, we walk to the door. Excitement fills me as I enter the restaurant with him, finally able to be on his arm and knowing he's mine.

"We have reservations for two. Last name is Lane," Maverick tells the hostess. A pretty blond girl who couldn't be more than twenty looks up, and her eyes go wide when she

takes him in. I glance at Mav, and he seems oblivious to the attention.

“Um, yes, let me check the books.” She tears her gaze away and runs her finger down the list of reservations. “Here it is. Right this way, Mr. Lane.” Maverick keeps a hold of my hand while we follow the hostess to the table. She sits us at a secluded back table with a booth. The light is dim back here, giving it a more intimate feel. “Enjoy your dinner,” she says, looking at Maverick and not giving me a second glance.

“Thanks,” he says, not paying attention to her and helping me slide into the booth. I’m surprised when he slides in next to me rather than across. I hear the hostess sigh, clearly not getting the attention she wants, before she walks back up front.

“She was totally trying to get your attention and practically drooling over you,” I laugh softly.

“Was she? I didn’t even notice. I’ve got the most beautiful girl in the restaurant right next to me. Why would I want to look anywhere else?” He takes the drink menu and scans it.

“Are you sure you haven’t dated before? You’re very good at it.”

“I’m sure,” he laughs. “It just comes naturally with you. I like giving you compliments and making sure you know how I feel when I look at you.” He glances at me when I remain silent. “What?”

“You just continue to surprise me, is all. Just when I think I couldn’t love you anymore, you go and say something like that.”

His green eyes meet mine. “I guess you bring out the romantic side in me. It makes me happy to please you.” He bends down and softly kisses behind my ear. “With words and in the bedroom,” he whispers in my ear before his tongue comes out to taste. I suck in a breath, and he softly chuckles before pulling away and glancing down at the drink menu again. “Do you want wine with dinner? We could get a bottle of your favorite red.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I manage to get out. His eyes dance with amusement at seeing me so flustered.

The waiter comes over, who is thankfully a guy, because I really don't want to have to put up with ogling the rest of the night. We place our drink order and get a couple of appetizers to share. He comes back over with our bottle and pours us a glass before checking on another table.

“To our first date, one of many to come,” he clinks his glass with mine.

“To our first date,” I say, smiling and taking a sip. I close my eyes at the taste of the cab. I lick my lips and savor the taste. “Mmmm, I had forgotten how good it was here.” I open my eyes and see him staring at me. There's no denying the desire I see in them. His hand goes to my thigh and rests there, making small circles with his thumb. The heat rises in my body just from that simple touch. I reach for my glass and take another sip of wine, trying to calm this heat that is spreading before it ignites.

“What are you getting tonight?” He asks, looking over the menu as his thumb continues to torture and caress me.

“Um, I'm not sure yet.” I pick up the menu and try to focus on the words in front of me. “The cedar plank salmon looks good, but the steak and scallops look good too.”

“I was looking at those too. Want to get both like we usually do and share?”

“I was hoping you would say that because I can't decide,” I laugh.

“It's the best way to satisfy all your cravings.”

“I agree.”

The waiter comes back with our appetizers and places them on the table. He starts to go over the specials with us, and I feel Maverick's hand slide further up my dress. I press my thighs together to stop him and see his lips quirk as he suppresses a smile while listening to the waiter. His thumb finds my center, and he starts making small circles again.



“So what can I get you, Miss?” I realize the waiter is talking to me and waiting for my answer. I glance at Mav and see his amused face. Damn him.

“Um, I’ll have the cedar plank salmon.”

“Good choice and for you, sir.”

“I’ll do the steak, medium, with the scallops.” You would never know he was torturing me under the table with the way he is acting so normal.

“Perfect.” He takes our menus from us and busies himself at another table.

“What are you doing?” I whisper when we’re alone.

“I’m having dinner with you.” He eats a lobster bite and moves his hand further between my thighs to cup my already soaked-through panties. “Mmmmm. Somebody is enjoying this.”

“I can’t do this here. We are in the middle of a restaurant.”

“We are in the *back* of a restaurant. It’s dark, and no one can see you in that corner. I don’t think you have a choice because I’m going to make you cum.” He glances at me with his dimples showing and his green eyes lit with a challenge.

I stare at him wide-eyed. He can’t be serious. His fingers push my panties to the side as he slides two in. “Oh, God,” I breathe. He’s serious.

He chuckles softly as he continues his assault. He leans over and whispers in my ear. “Does it turn you on to be in public like this? Everyone around is oblivious to the fact that my fingers are deep inside your sweet pussy right now. I bet every guy here would die to be in my position right now, but you’re mine.”

He rubs my swollen clit, and I bury my face in his neck, trying to hide as much as I can. I grab his thigh hard, knowing I’m close. My arousal is on a whole other level. My body loves the fact that I’m doing something forbidden and reckless. He presses down hard on my clit, and I let go as I clench around him. I bite his neck to muffle my scream as my

orgasm hits me hard. Moaning against his shirt, my fingers dig into his thigh. Waves of pleasure take over my body as I tremble against him.

Breathing hard, I try to compose myself. His other hand comes up to lift my chin. He kisses me softly on the lips and smiles at me. “How’s that for knocking you off of your pedestal tonight? You really shouldn’t have told me you like my reckless side. I think someone has a very naughty side, too, and enjoyed that as much as I did.”

“I can’t believe I just orgasmed in a room full of people. Don’t think for one second that I’m not going to get back at you for this.”

Laughing, he removes his hand and lowers my dress back down. “I wouldn’t expect anything different from you.”

I see the red mark on his neck and grin. Well, at least I got payback for the one he left on me. I hope the hostess gets a good look at it as we leave.

The waiter appears with our food, and my stomach growls. I put some appetizers on my plate, realizing I haven’t gotten to eat anything yet.

“Hungry?” He asks, laughing at my plate filled with food.

“I seemed to have worked up quite the appetite.” I try to hide my smile. I give him half my salmon and sides, and he does the same. We’ve been doing our meals together like this since we were kids. Every time our parents took us out, we insisted on sharing so we could try more food, never being able to decide on one thing.

I bite into a scallop. “Oh my God, this is so good.” Moaning, I take another bite.

“This is exactly why I wanted to take you here. You did the same thing last time and drove me crazy with how sexy you sound when you eat.”

I take a bite of the steak and moan again. Licking my lips, I suppress a smile.

“Tease all you want. Unlike last time, I’ll have you in my bed later, and those beautiful lips that you are licking will be put to better use.”

“I look forward to it.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “You are so made for me.”

I grin at him as I take another bite. We enjoy the rest of our meal as we laugh and talk about stories from our childhood together. By the time dinner is over, my cheeks hurt from smiling so much. All the dates I’ve been on in the past don’t even compare to this one.

Holding my hand, we walk up the stairs to his apartment, both of us not wanting the night to end. As soon as the front door is shut, I’m up against it, and Mav has me caged in.

“About these red shoes...”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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### Maverick

I'VE BEEN THINKING OF THESE RED SHOES ALL NIGHT. I LIFT her arms above her head and hold her wrists with one hand, holding her in place against the door. Her chest rises and falls faster as my finger trails down the front of the dress, grazing both breasts. She squirms against me as I hold her tightly in place.

Leaning down, I lick my way up her neck before sucking the sensitive spot behind her ear. My knee goes between her legs, spreading her wider. She moves against it and moans. Capturing her lips with mine, I dive deep, tangling my tongue with hers. My hand pushes her fabric to the side, exposing a breast as I squeeze and rub her nipple.

I feel her rubbing against my knee, and I groan against her lips as her panties soak through onto my pants. Letting her hands go, I grab her ass and pick her up as she throws her legs around me. I carry her to my bedroom and set her down, holding her gaze as I reach up and undo her hair, causing it to fall down around her.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. I’ve been picturing you in my bedroom like this since I first saw you in this dress.” I walk around her and brush her hair to the side. Slowly lowering the zipper, I kiss my way down her neck and shoulder. Her dress drops to the floor, leaving her in a red lacy thong and these sexy heels that I love.

I lean down to whisper in her ear. “Those books that you love to read. Is there anything you’ve read that you want to try?” She turns to me and looks at me surprised.

“I...I don't know.”

“There's got to be something. Don't go shy on me now. I want to please you.” I nip at her ear.

“You do please me.”

“Tell me.” I suck harder on her ear, pulling it with my teeth.

“I liked it when you slapped my ass when you carried me over your shoulder,” she blurts out.

“You want to be spanked?” I grin against her neck.

“I think I do. I've never tried it, but thinking about it turns me on,” she confesses.

I moan into her hair. Just the thought of spanking her in this red thong is making me throb with need.

“Put your hands on the bed for me.” She turns and puts her hands on the bed. I unbutton my shirt and take her in as she's bent over with that gorgeous ass in the air standing in those red heels. “This is the most sexiest thing I've ever seen.” I remove my shirt and walk over to her. Running my hands over her bottom, I give her a squeeze. “Tell me if it's too much and you want me to stop.”

“I will,” she breathes.

I slap her ass hard and hear her moan as I rub the redness that appears. I instantly get harder as I see my mark on her beautiful, soft skin. I do the other side and hear her breathing increase. “How does that feel?” I ask, rubbing her bottom again before spanking her once more.

“So good,” she moans. I reach around and put my hand in her panties and feel her dripping with need.

Groaning, I run my fingers through her slick folds. “So fucking hot,” I whisper against her back. I rub her clit and spank her behind again. She whimpers and moves against my hand for relief. I slap her ass again and pinch her clit, and she cries out as her body lets go. I increase my pressure on her swollen bud as she rides out her orgasm against my hand. I pull her back against me and rub her sore bottom.

She drops her head back on my chest. I grin, loving that she was turned on by it as I was. I lower her thong, and she steps out of it. Turning her around, I lay her on the bed. I stand up and remove my shoes and socks. Lowering my pants and boxers, I stroke myself as she watches me with those piercing blue eyes. I'm so fucking hard right now I can barely stand it.

She sits up to remove her heels, and I shake my head.

"I'm not ready to let those go just yet." I walk toward her, and she scoots to the middle of the bed as I crawl over her. Putting her legs up on my shoulders, I find her entrance and fill her in one hard thrust.

"Oh, God," she moans.

"Bell," I breathe. She feels so fucking good at this angle. I start to move hard against her, watching her breasts bounce with each thrust. She digs her high heels into my back, and I moan from the contact. "Harder," I pant. She presses them further into my skin, and I groan, wanting her to make her mark on me as they dig deeper into my flesh. I watch as she arches her back, and her lips part on a soft cry.

I go faster as she digs her heels in deeper. I reach between us and press hard on her clit as she explodes around me. I shatter with her, pulsing deep inside her as she clenches around me. My body strains with each thrust as I ride out every last wave with her. I feel her body tremble beneath me as we come back into our bodies.

I gently remove her legs from my shoulders and curl her against me, both of us breathing hard. My emotions are all over the place. I never knew it could be so intense when it's someone you love. It's the best damn feeling in the world.

"I love you," she whispers against my chest.

"I was just thinking how much I love you," I softly laugh. "I never knew it could be like this with someone. I've always just had sex, but that was.." I try to come up with the right word.

"A deeper connection. Love, passion, fire, need..all rolled up into one."

“Yeah, that about sums it up. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to let you go.”

“Then don’t.” She snuggles up against me, and I breathe her in as I hear her breath even out as she falls asleep. Smiling, I lean down and gently remove her red heels before joining her in sleep, seconds later, feeling more content than I have in a long time.

\* \* \*

BELL

I'm sorry again that I have to cancel our Wednesday meeting tomorrow.

I GLANCE down at my phone sitting on the counter and smile. She’s been apologizing all morning, and even though I had plans to use my desk other than for work tomorrow, I completely understand that she needed to go to this meeting up north. I can bring my sex dream to life another day. With what I had planned for her, it’s not like we would have gotten any work done anyway. She’s put a lot of time in with emails and calls to get to know this business, so when they called her this morning and asked if she could come up for a couple of days to finalize the contract and start shooting right away, it was a no brainer that she had to go.

MAVERICK

Quit apologizing. You know I’m not upset about you having to cancel. Your business is important to you, which makes it important to me.

BELL

Thank you for supporting me. You and Noah’s business is what put me over the edge and got me noticed. I’ll always be grateful that you gave me a chance.

I don't respond to her text, my mind only going to one thought. I know she left this morning for the drive and could still be on the road.

MAVERICK

Are you texting and driving?

BELL

No, lol. I got to my meeting early, and I'm just waiting to go inside.

MAVERICK

Good. Because it's dangerous, and if anything ever happened to you, I don't think I would be able to handle it.

BELL

Ok, Dad.

MAVERICK

I mean it. No taking chances. Please, for me?

Shit, I hate feeling this way. It's like my whole heart is walking around outside of my body, and I have no control over keeping it safe.

BELL

I'll be safe, I promise. No taking chances.



MAVERICK

Thank you.

MAVERICK

And to respond to your earlier text, Noah and I should be thanking you. We may have given you work, but it's you and your talent that made it successful. You having a hand in growing my business makes it feel like it's ours. I kind of like that feeling.

MAVERICK

What have you done to me? I'm all soft and sappy now.

BELL

I like you soft and sappy. I better go inside. It's showtime, lol. I'll call you later tonight when I check into the hotel. I love you.

MAVERICK

Give them hell! I love you too, babe. More than I thought I was ever capable of feeling.

What the hell has gotten into me? It's like I'm a walking Hallmark commercial.

BELL

The feeling is mutual.

I smile at the heart emoji and send her one back before getting back to work, hoping my balls might be found in one of these inventory boxes because I sure as hell have lost them.

She makes me want to spew cheesy Hallmark stuff, and the funny thing is, I don't mind it one bit.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

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### Bella

I RUN UP THE STAIRS TO MAVERICK'S APARTMENT, EXCITED TO see him. Even though it's only been two days, it feels so much longer. I miss waking up to him and falling asleep with him. It's become a comfort to have him by my side and one I never want to live without.

I see the note on his door and grin when I read that he's waiting for me at our spot. I turn around and head in the direction of the gazebo. I stop when I see candles lined up around the area and a blanket laid out in the middle with pillows. He even has Prosecco on ice with a cheese and fruit tray next to it.

"What's all this?" I ask, coming up to him and throwing my arms around him.

Laughing, he hugs me tightly as I breathe in his scent. "It's to celebrate your new account. My girl kicked ass and landed another one. We can't let that go unnoticed. I'm so proud of you."

"This is the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me. Thank you." I say softly, meeting his eyes. "And you're right. I did kick ass. They loved me."

"What's not to love." His thumb brushes my lower lip, and I lean into his touch. "I've gotten used to you in bed. I missed having you there. I've also realized I miss our talks during dinner and watching you read curled up next to me when I'm watching TV. Nothing seems right when you're not here." His fingers weave their way into my hair, and I bite back a moan at

his touch. He glances down at my lip caught between my teeth, and the emeralds of his eyes darken.

Bending down, he takes my bottom lip with his teeth and tugs it back out before sucking it. I do moan this time and pull him closer to me as I fist his t-shirt. “Just so you know,” I say against his lips, “I’ve missed you too. My bed and my heart were lonely. Nothing seems right when you’re not there either.”

Groaning, he dives in deep and kisses me so thoroughly that the world around us seems to melt away, and he’s my only existence in this moment. “Mav...” I can barely get the word out, my emotions getting the best of me.

“I know, baby. I know. I feel it, too.” He runs his hands down my back as I cling to him. “Let’s get some food in you. You’ve got to be starving from driving most of the evening.” He takes my hand and pulls me down on the blanket.

Handing me a glass of Prosecco, he clinks his glass to mine. “To kicking ass,” he grins.

“To kicking ass,” I laugh, taking a sip and letting the cool bubbles slide down. “Mmmm. You sure know how to treat a woman.” I take a bite of a strawberry before turning and laying back against his chest.

“Not just any woman,” he says, wrapping his arms around me. “Just you.”

“Do you remember the time Sophia and I went camping with you and Noah on the island with all your friends? We must have been about sixteen. You told us we were too young to be hanging out with your friends on an overnight trip, but we begged you both to let us come. We knew other girls would be there, so we didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“I remember. You two snuck a bottle of tequila without us looking, and Noah and I had to guard you all night long.”

“You didn’t have to guard us,” I laugh. “Nobody tried anything.”

“That’s only because we threatened them beforehand not to lay a finger on either of you.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me,” I giggle. “When Sophia fell asleep, I came out of our tent and tripped over you. You had put your sleeping bag in front of our tent.”

“I didn’t want anyone trying to sneak in there. Just the thought of one of my friends trying something with you made me see red. You had a hold on me before I understood what I was feeling.” He nips my ear and nuzzles my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

“What you didn’t know was that I was on my way to seduce you.”

“What?” He stills on my neck and lifts his head.

“I had this whole plan in my head that I was going to go to your tent and crawl into your sleeping bag with you, and you would tell me how badly you’ve been wanting me but were scared to make the first move. We then would have hot sex and live happily ever after.” I laugh. “It sounded like such a good plan in my tequila-induced mind.”

“You do realize I was twenty, and you were only sixteen, right?”

“It didn’t matter to me.” I shrug my shoulders. “Age is just a number, and I knew one day four years wouldn’t matter.”

“As much as that turns me on to have you seduce me, I’m so glad I ruined your plans by causing you to trip over me and waking up Sophia when you fell. I don’t know what I would have done if you would have thrown yourself at me. I would like to think I would have been a gentleman and walked your drunk ass back to your tent, but my willpower with you only goes so far.” He chuckles behind my back. “Thank God I didn’t have to put it to the test.”

“In my head, I was very persuasive. You didn’t stand a chance. Looking back, it probably wasn’t such a good idea with Noah’s tent right next to yours.” I giggle.

“You think? Very poor planning on your part. I could have been killed that night, not to mention the fact that you were jailbait.” He runs a hand through his hair and laughs. “For the record, though, feel free to seduce me at any time from here on

out.” He whispers into my ear before his tongue comes out to taste my neck. “Dance with me,” he says against my ear.

“I would love to.” He pulls out his phone, and soft music fills the air. I get up, and he pulls me into his arms as we sway to the sound. His hand comes around my waist as the other holds my hand to his chest.

Sighing, I close my eyes and lay against him, letting the music and the feel of his body lull me into a deep peace like I’ve never felt before. I feel wrapped up in the comfort of his love, never wanting it to end.

“It’s raining,” he whispers in my ear before he pulls me with him out from under the gazebo roof. Laughing, I tilt my face to the sky and let the light rain wash over me.

“I thought I loved rain before, but you know what’s even better?” I watch as the raindrops slide down his tattooed arm.

“What?” He asks, taking a step closer.

“Kissing you in it.”

He grins back at me and grasps my face with his hands. “That we can agree on,” he says seconds before his lips find mine. His kiss is slow and torturous as he takes his time. Heat spreads throughout my whole body down to the very core of me. God, this man can kiss. When they say these moments only happen in the movies, they are lying because right here, right now, everything I have wished for is right here, holding me.

\* \* \*

“HEY, I didn’t know you were coming by.” Maverick looks up from his laptop and grins at me.

“I wanted to surprise you with lunch.” I hold the takeout bags up and laugh as he swoops me up into a hug. “You’re squishing our lunch,” I laugh as he squeezes me tighter.

“It’ll survive.” He kisses me before setting me down. “Now, what did you bring me?” He rummages through the bag like an excited little kid, and I laugh.

I pull over a chair to his desk and sit down with him. “Your favorite wrap from across the street. You should have seen the grin Mrs. Anderson gave me when I told her to make your favorite. She made sure to have me tell you that she’s proud of you for following your heart, whatever that means.”

Maverick shakes his head and chuckles. “I went there before the wedding and got lunch. She was talking about how she’d be at mine one day, and I told her not to hold her breath. She said my girl is out there. I just needed to follow my heart, and I would find her. Guess she was right,” he says, grinning at me.

“You know how these older ladies love to talk. She’ll be telling Miss Sylvia and her sister, Sadie, before the day is over. She’s probably on the phone with them right now.”

“Yeah, our secret is definitely over. Luckily, Noah and Emma get back late Saturday night and will be too jet-lagged to hang around town on Sunday. We should be good until we tell them. Now, our parents, I’m not so sure.” He chuckles and takes a bite of his wrap.

“I guess we’ll know tomorrow when we see them. God, I forgot how good Mrs. Anderson’s wraps were.” I take another bite and catch Maverick watching me. “What?” I say, licking my lips.

“I just love to watch you eat.” He gives me a wicked grin before finishing the rest of his lunch.

I walk over to the garbage can and throw our wrappers away when I hear the door lock. I feel him come up behind me, the air crackling with unseen energy.

“Thanks for bringing me lunch.” He nips my neck and places kisses along my collarbone. “Dessert is on me.” His hand grazes my nipple, causing it to instantly harden.

“What about Luke? He’s right out front.”

“Then you better not scream.”

His words send a pool of desire straight to my core, and all my thoughts of getting caught disappear in an instant.

“As much as I want to bend you over my desk and bury myself inside you, I’ll have to leave that for another day when we’re alone. I want to be able to hear you scream and see your naked body displayed on my desk. No one gets to hear those screams but me.” He tugs on a nipple, causing me to moan and press my backside against him.

His hand finds me throbbing for him as he cups my wetness under my sundress before sliding into my panties and entering two fingers.

“Mmmm, so fucking wet for me. It’s time for me to eat my dessert now.” He turns me around before his lips crash down on mine, his tongue mercifully taking what he needs. I feel him hard against me as I press deeper against him to ease the ache.

He backs me up against the couch he has in his office before picking me up and lowering me down so I’m sitting. He kneels in front of me before giving me a devilish grin, his green eyes hinting at a challenge. “Remember, no screaming. That’s only for my ears.”

I nod my head vigorously. I’ll do anything at this point if it means he will stop this ache.

“Good girl.” He lowers my thong and pulls my legs, so I’m hanging off the couch before placing them on his shoulder. His tongue is at my core before I’m able to catch my breath. I moan at the invasion, and he stills.

“It wasn’t a scream,” I whisper. I move my body against him, hoping he will continue what he was doing.

“No loud moaning either. Luke doesn’t get to hear what’s mine.”

“I’ll be good. Just...don’t stop, please,” I whimper.

I feel him grin against me as his hand grabs my ass and lifts me higher to meet the thrust of his tongue.

“Oh, God,” I whisper. His tongue dives deep before sucking hard on my clit. There’s no way I’m going to last long with an assault like this. I bite the inside of my cheek to stop another loud moan.



“You taste so good, baby,” he breathes against my skin as his tongue does things to me that only he can make me feel. “Best fucking dessert I’ve ever had.” He goes deeper and runs his tongue along my slick walls.

“Mav..” I dig my fingers into his hair and moan softly.

“Cum hard for me, baby. I want to taste every last drop you can give me.”

It’s all too much...my core starts to tighten as I feel the first wave of my orgasm hit me. I grab the couch pillow to muffle my scream that I’m unable to stop as I feel my walls constrict with each lick and suck of his tongue.

Panting hard, I remove the pillow so I can breathe as my heart rate starts to return to normal. Mav lifts his head, giving me a cocky grin as he licks his lips.

“If I had the energy to move right now, I would knock that grin off your face. Do you have any idea how hard it was to be quiet? I’m going to have a permanent bite mark on the inside of my cheek.”

Chuckling, he leans over me and gives me a kiss. A knock on the door has us breaking apart.

“Mav, a customer is asking for you?” Luke’s voice filters through the door.

“I’ll be right out,” Mav calls back. He rests his forehead against mine, and I weave my hands through his soft hair. “I need to get back out there,” he sighs before kissing me once more and standing. He bends down and picks my thong off the floor before stuffing it into the pocket of his faded jeans.

“I need that.” I sit up and push my dress down to cover my nakedness.

“You can earn them back later. I like the idea of being the only one to know that your swollen wet pussy is bare under that sundress of yours.” He gives me another wicked grin before opening the door and closing it, leaving me speechless and completely at his mercy.

I stare at the closed door and blink. I can't believe he took my underwear. Thoughts of a good payback run through my mind as I fix my hair and dress in the bathroom before grabbing my purse and walking back out front.

Maverick is with a customer and lifts the side of his mouth in amusement as he glances at me before returning his attention back to the customer. He's enjoying this way too much.

I run my hands down my dress, making sure nothing is showing even though I know I'm fully covered on the outside. It's just knowing that I'm walking around the store with strangers with my bare pussy just inches away. Part of me finds it very erotic. Ok, a big part of me likes having this secret right now with Maverick.

I walk around the store while Mav finishes up with the customers and I smile at all his hard work. People come for miles to get his expertise on surfboards and the exclusive inventory he carries from dealers he's met in the surfing industry. My heart swells with pride at what he's accomplished.

"Hey, Bella, did you have a nice lunch?" Luke comes up behind me and grins. Oh, God. Did he hear? I thought I was quiet. My cheek is still sore for God's sake.

"I did. Thanks." I feel my cheeks start to get warm, and he laughs. Luke is younger than me at twenty, and with his brunette curls and blue eyes, he's definitely not lacking in the looks department. Even though he's a big flirt, he's never crossed the line with me, and even if he did, I would have turned him down. He's still got a lot of growing up to do, and I've never felt it with him.

He glances behind me and then nervously smiles at me. "I'm getting a warning look over there," he laughs softly. "I've been told not to flirt as much with you anymore."

I glance behind me and see Maverick eyeing Luke as he rings up the customer he was helping.

"Not to flirt *as much*?"

“Ok, well, maybe it was along the lines of *no more fucking flirting* at all.” He laughs.

“That sounds more like the Maverick, I know.” I give a small laugh.

I feel a warm hand on the small of my back. “Don’t you have work that you need to do?” Maverick asks Luke.

Laughing, Luke holds up his hands. “Dude, I swear I didn’t say anything inappropriate. In fact, I’m happy for you guys. Do you know how many girls’ numbers I’ve gotten lately because Maverick passes them on to me when they come in? This is like the best job ever.” He grins at me before walking away to tend to the next customer who just walked in.

“You told Luke to quit flirting with me?” I ask him when Luke leaves.

“Hell, yes, I did. I was young like him once and know exactly the game he’s playing. He needed to know that you are off limits now.” He brings me close to him and puts his arms around me, not caring who is watching.

I sigh against his chest and breathe him in. “Are you coming over later? I promised Sophia I would watch a movie with her tonight. You’re welcome to join us.”

“It’s not a girly flick, is it? As much as I’m afraid to admit that *The Notebook* is a damn good movie, I’m not about to sit through it again and pass you girls’ tissues all night long. A guy can only take too much.”

“No,” I laugh. “We can compromise and find something we all like. We can order pizza and drink wine. It’ll be fun.”

“Now, how can I pass that up, especially when you’re looking at me like that? I think it’s come to the point where I can’t say no to you.”

Grinning, I reach up on tiptoes and give him a peck. “I’ll remember that later when I have you alone.”

Groaning, he leans down close to my ear. “If I didn’t have a store full right now, I would be hauling you into the back

room to prove it. I'm having a hard time thinking of anything else, knowing you're bare for me under this dress."

"And who's fault is that?" I meet his smug grin and laugh. "I better get going. I've got a ton of work to do at home before tonight."

"I'll see you later when I get off work." He bends down for one more quick kiss before I make my way to the front door. "Bell," he yells, stopping me in my tracks. I turn my head to look at him with my hand on the front door. "Thanks for lunch. Especially dessert. It's a favorite of mine."

His eyes gleam with mischief, and I feel all eyes on me as my face gets warm. Luke chuckles up at the register, and I want to crawl in a hole. I meet his greens as they sparkle with amusement.

"You're welcome. I have more at home I can share with you later." I open the door to his laughter and grin as I walk to my Jeep. Two can play at this game.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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### Maverick

I BUCKLE THE STRAPS ON BELL'S LIFE JACKET AS SHE GRINS UP at me. "I can do it myself, you know."

"And miss the chance to tighten these straps across these beautiful breasts? I don't think so. I'll do anything that involves touching you or strapping you in," I grin at her and wink.

Laughing, she pulls me down for a kiss. I grab her behind and bring her close to me.

"Are you guys done making out over there so we can hit the water, or should I just come back later?" Sophia asks, storing her bag in the seat.

Bell grins against my lips. "We better get going so our parents aren't waiting."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I lean down for one more kiss before pulling away and securing the buckles on my life jacket.

We ended up falling asleep on the couch during the movie and woke up to Sophia in the kitchen making coffee this morning. I haven't gotten any alone time with her since, and now we have to spend the day with our parents, acting like I don't want to touch her every chance I can get.

Bell puts our bags under the seat to secure them. My parents took our cooler this morning to load it on Jax's boat, so we just need to pick up Luna. The girls get on the jet skis, and I push the button to lower them into the water. They back up,

and Bell swings around to pick me up. She scoots back so I can get on the front and wraps her arms tightly around my waist.

We slowly wind our way through the canal and channels before hitting open water.

“Don’t you dare throw me off,” I hear her say behind me.

“Don’t you trust me?” I grin over my shoulder.

“That’s debatable.”

“Hold on tight, baby.” Laughing, I gun the jet ski. She shrieks and holds on tighter as I cut through the water next to Sophia. Loving the feel of her arms around me, I maneuver us over some waves. She laughs behind me, and I grin. Sophia keeps up with me easily. We’ve been on these skis since we were legal to drive them. We race through the water before slowing down and entering the canal where Jax and Sage live.

I pull up alongside their dock, where they’re loading the boat, and cut the engine. Putting my hand out, I grab the deck post to hold us in place as Sophia parks behind me.

“You guys made it!” My mom grins at us and walks over. “We’re just about loaded up. I’m glad you all were free to come out today. I hope Maverick behaved, Bella. Your hair is still dry, so I take it he didn’t throw you off yet.”

“That’s only because I was hanging on for dear life and not his lack of trying,” Bell says, laughing.

“I could have thrown you off if I wanted to. Trust me.” I grin at her over my shoulder.

Luna comes running over with her life jacket on.

“It’s just you and me today, Lunabug.” Sophia holds her hand out to Luna and helps her on the jet ski. “Let’s show Mav how it’s done.”

“Try not to get too far behind,” Luna grins at me.

“You wish.” She giggles at my comeback. “Which island are you headed to?” I ask my mom.

“The island furthest south on the north side.”

“Sounds good. We’ll meet you out there.” I start the jet ski up again and slowly move away from the dock.

“See you soon.” My mom walks back to the boat to help the others load up. Sophia moves alongside me as we go back through the canal.

“How are you doing back there?” I squeeze her thigh that’s pressed up against me.

“I’m perfect.” Her hands roam my stomach as we ride slowly out of the canal. It’s going to be a long day pretending that I’m not craving her touch.

As soon as we are out of the no-wake zone, I zoom ahead of Sophia, wanting to get a head start. I love the feel of the water beneath me as we jump the waves. The wind whips at our hair as the saltwater sprays our bodies. I can’t imagine living anywhere else. My mind and body needing and wanting the ocean.

Sophia comes up next to me, and I take a sharp left, spraying both of them when I turn. Luna squeals and laughs. I feel Bell shake behind me as laughter rolls through her body. We race side by side, jumping the waves and weaving around the intercoastal before we slow down near the island that our parents will be bringing the boat to. We find an empty spot to tie up as I cut off the engine. A few families further down the beach are already set up for the day, but this side is deserted.

“I can’t believe you splashed us like that!” Luna hops off the jet ski and starts to take off her life jacket.

“I have no clue what you’re talking about,” I grin at her before she runs off to the beach. Sophia pulls the anchor out and secures us together.

Sliding off the jet ski, I grab Bell’s waist and bring her into the water with me. I hold her gaze as I unbuckle her life jacket and slide it off her shoulders, letting my fingers brush down her arms. Goosebumps appear, and I see her nipples get hard beneath her hot pink bikini top. Groaning softly, I let my hands slide down to her bottom, squeezing her exposed cheeks in her

skimpy bikini that has been slowly torturing me since the minute I saw her in it.

“You should never have worn this sexy bikini today. It’s going to be impossible not to look or touch you in this. I’m going to have to hide this hard-on all day long.”

Giggling, she unbuckles my jacket and runs her hands over my chest. “And you should wear a shirt today because these tattoos and this body is doing crazy things to me.” She continues to explore my chest as my eyes meet her ocean blues.

I hear a boat approaching and look up to see Jax’s boat slowing down near us. Reluctantly, I let her go. “I guess it’s showtime,” I sigh and give her a small smile before laying our life jackets across the seat. I make sure the jet ski is secure before walking over to help with the back anchor as Jax backs in the boat.

I glance at Bell, as she gets our bags from the jet skis and walks them to the beach, where Sophia has laid out a blanket for us. Her perfect ass just staring me in the face as she walks out of the water like a sun goddess, her blond hair flowing down her back. Forcing myself to turn away, I catch my mom’s eyes as she tries to suppress a smile. Fuck, this is going to be a long day.



## Chapter Thirty-Five

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### Bella

I PUT MY DARK OVERSIZED SUNGLASSES ON, THANKING GOD, I thought to bring them with me. At least with these on, I can sneak glances at Mav without anyone seeing the longing in my eyes. I've been doing it for years every time I filmed him surfing, so I should be able to hide it well today.

Sophia applies her tanning oil and lays down on the towel. Looking over at me, she lowers her sunglasses and laughs. "I give it one hour until you both are busted."

"That obvious?" I watch Mav secure the back anchor and walk to the boat to help with unloading the chairs and coolers onto the beach.

"You two can't keep your eyes or hands off of each other. It's like watching two animals in heat during a full moon."

Laughing, I run my fingers through my hair. "That pretty much sums up what I'm feeling. I can't get enough of him," I whisper, watching him through my sunglasses as he walks back to the boat to get another load. "He's my person, Soph. It's always been him, and now that I know he feels the same way, it's been explosive between us. It's like we're making up for lost time and just want to crawl inside each other and never come up for air."

"Damn, I'm jealous. Not with my brother, of course, but you found it, Bell. What we've both been waiting for."

I lay down next to her and turn to face her. "You'll find it too. I know you will." I take her hand and squeeze it.

“Just promise me you’ll visit me when I become the crazy cat person all alone in my empty house.”

“You’re not going to be a crazy cat person. A crazy dog person, maybe.” I laugh when she lightly pushes my shoulder. “Your person is out there. I know it. And when you two meet, look out world. We’ll all feel that sexual energy when it forms. I can’t wait to see the hot male species that sparks that flame in you.”

“It’s going to be so hot,” she agrees, giggling.

Mav walks over to us and hands us a corona and lime before sitting down next to me. I sit up, smiling, and take a sip.

“Thanks.” He’s sitting so close to me that his thigh is brushing mine.

“You’re welcome,” he grins at me before taking a sip. Reaching into his bag, he puts his sunglasses on and runs a hand through his hair. The sun glints off the golden streaks. He must have dove underwater because his skin is glistening and his hair is wet, causing it to wave slightly around his bronze face. “I can feel your eyes on me even though I can’t see them,” he says quietly, looking out over the water. “It’s taking everything in me right now not to grab you and say hell with it.”

“I know,” I whisper. “It’s torture.”

Luna comes running over with a shell bag. “You guys want to walk the beach and look for shells?”

“What do you say, girls? Want to walk around the island?” Maverick looks at Sophia and I.

“I’m in, Lunabug.” Sophia gets up and grabs her drink before following Luna.

“I’m in, too. I need to burn off some of this restless energy,” I say, standing up.

“You’re telling me,” he grins, following me down the beach. “We’ll be back in a few. Luna wants to go shell hunting around the island.” Maverick tells our families as we walk by.

“Have fun!” My mom grins at us from her beach chair next to Sage and Mimi while the guys set up the canopy.

We fall in line behind Sophia and Luna, sipping our drinks while we walk the shoreline.

“I love it out here,” I sigh. I lift my face to the sun beating down on us as a soft breeze blows my hair away from my face. “I try and remember every day how lucky we are to live by such beauty.”

“Yeah, me too.” I feel his gaze on me and smile. He nudges my shoulder with his arm.

“I found a sand dollar!” Luna excitedly picks it up and places it in her bag.

“Nice, Lunabug.” Sophia looks at it in her bag.

I see a few keepers along the way and place them in Luna’s bag. When you live here, you’re more picky about the ones you take, wanting only the rare ones. We’re on the far side of the island now. No boats are in this area because of the trees and shrubs close to the shoreline. We wade through the water, stepping over fallen driftwood logs. Coming to a small beach, I smile at where we are.

“We used to camp here when we were little. Do you remember?” I grin over at Mav.

“Of course, I remember. It’s some of my best memories. Especially when Noah and I scared you and Sophia that one night pretending to be bears scratching at your tent.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “It took me forever to get to sleep that night. Our moms were so upset that you two scared us so bad we cried.”

“I do remember feeling bad about that part,” he says, chuckling. “We had no idea that you girls would actually believe a bear would be out here in the middle of the ocean.”

“We were seven,” I laugh. “We probably would’ve believed anything at that age.”

“I also remember giving you a special shell that I found the next day because I felt so bad.”

“I remember,” I say quietly. “I still have it.”

He stops and turns to me. “You kept it?” He asks, surprised.

“Of course. You gave it to me, and I remember thinking it was better than anything I’ve ever found on the beach.”

He lifts his sunglasses on top of his head. My breath catches at the emotions I see in his emerald eyes. “Bell,” he says, brushing my hair back softly with his hand. “I still can’t believe I shut myself off from you all these years, thinking that I could actually stay away from you if I did. I should have let you in a long time ago, but I was so fucking scared I would mess it up and lose one of my best friends.”

“You could never lose what’s always been yours.” My heart is hammering in my chest as he holds my face and rubs his thumb along my cheek.

Sophia comes up to us, and I tear my gaze from the one set of eyes I can lose myself in. “Do you remember this spot?”

“Yeah, we used to camp here.” Mav slowly breaks my gaze and looks at Sophia. “We were just talking about that.”

“Do you remember our *secret* spot?” She asks us.

“I’m sure it’s ruined by now with all the storms through the years.” I remember how hard we worked on that structure, taking every piece of driftwood we could find and enclosing an area we had found under the trees. We would spend hours in there pretending we were castaways on an island, and it was our home.

“It’s probably taking a beating, but I bet the tree and privacy are still there,” she says, grinning at us. “You have ten minutes. Make the best of it.” She winks at me and runs back to Luna. “Let’s go this way, Luna. I bet we can find some sea creatures in these shallow waters over here.” She looks back at us and nods in the direction of the trees.

“Remind me to buy her a bottle of her favorite wine when we get back home.” Mav takes my hand, pulling me with him through the trees until we come upon the big one we built a fort under. Most of the structure we built has been blown

away, but the tree still provides a blanket of cover when you go beneath the branches. He bends down and pulls me through the overhang until we're surrounded by hanging branches, shutting us off from the outside world.

"I can't believe it's still so secluded after all these years." I look around and can't see anything other than the tree limbs hanging down with various vines growing through them. I feel him come up behind me, the air feeling electric, making it hard to breathe.

"Ten minutes, what shall I do with you?" He murmurs against my neck before sucking and licking the sensitive spot behind my ear. I groan and push back against him, feeling him rock hard behind me.

Turning me around, he backs me up until my back hits the tree trunk. I look around, wondering if someone will see us. "No one can see us, Bell. It's just you and me. Just do your very best not to scream." He gets a devilish grin on his face before his mouth slams into mine.

All my concerns about being seen are gone the moment his lips are on mine. Need overtakes my senses as I claw at his back and run my fingers up into his hair. Moaning, he lifts me and wraps my legs around his waist. I take his bottom lip between my teeth and suck hard, letting all my pent-up desires run loose on him.

"Fuck, Bell. You drive me completely insane. All I think about is you and how good it feels to be inside you."

"I need you." I grind against him, feeling the wetness gather in my bikini bottoms.

"God, I need you too," he breathes. His hand comes down to undo the ties on his board shorts as he frees himself. I moan and rub myself against his swollen tip. Closing his eyes, I see him swallow hard. "Christ," he says as I continue to press against him as my throbbing increases. Opening his eyes, he moves my suit to the side and slams two fingers into me. I close my eyes and throw back my head, gasping, my body so ready for him.

“Look at me, Bell.” I open my eyes and meet his green eyes. I see the hunger in them, and I nearly come undone at the intensity of it. He removes his fingers and places one in my mouth. “Suck beautiful. Taste how sweet you are.” I suck his finger, tasting my arousal on him, and we both moan at what that does to us. He releases his finger and moves my suit to the side, filling me up in one quick thrust.

I softly cry out as my body wraps around him. A perfect fit. He grabs my ass and presses his fingers into my flesh as he fills me deep and hard, just like I want it right now.

He takes me to places only he can bring me. My body, a slave to him, and I gladly will take anything he has to give me. I pull his hair, bringing him back to my mouth. His skilled tongue works me until I’m gasping for breath as his teeth find my neck.

His hands tighten on my ass, and I feel a deep burn start to form. My body prepares to ignite as he thrusts harder into me.

“Cum with me, baby,” he pants into my neck before devouring my mouth to stifle our cries. My body automatically follows his demands as I start to clench around him. I feel the tree lightly scraping my back, only adding to the intensity of what I’m feeling. He pulses inside me and milks out every last drop of my orgasm before he slowly releases me to the ground.

“I love you,” he whispers against my lips before tracing it with his tongue.

“I love you, too,” I breathe, deepening the kiss before we have to let go.

He fixes his shorts while I straighten my bikini. I start laughing as a thought comes to me.

“What’s so funny?” He asks, an amused smile on his face.

“I was just thinking how funny it is that we built this fort as kids only to have sex in it years later.”

“Maybe that’s why I worked so hard on the damn thing that day. A part of me deep down knew that I would need to build it to last for this moment.”

“I do remember you working your little ass off that day. Maybe you did,” I say, laughing as we walk out and join Sophia and Luna by the water.

“You guys look a little bit more relaxed.” Sophia eyes the two of us, grinning.

“I owe you one, sis,” Mav says, grinning.

“I’ll let you know when I need to cash in the favor. Let’s head back and get some lunch. I’m starving.”

“Me too. I’ve seemed to have worked up quite the appetite.” He laughs as I splash him with my foot.

We pick up the empty beer bottles that we tossed on the sand earlier and start walking back to the boat. Our dads have the corn hole game set up when we get back.

“Just in time, Mav,” Matt says, looking over at us as we walk toward them. “Let’s show Jax and Papaw how it’s done.”

“It’s on,” Mav says, grinning and taking the bean bags his dad holds out to him. “Do you two want to play the winner?” He asks, looking at Sophia and me.

“We’ll take that challenge. I know how competitive you are, so no crying later when we kick your ass.” Sophia laughs at my comeback and high-fives me.

His eyes hold mine, amusement dancing in them. “Care to make a side bet?”

“What do you have in mind?” I ask, holding his steady gaze.

“Winner gets a yes night.” Not tearing my eyes from him, I hear Sophia softly laugh next to me.

“You’re so in trouble,” she says.

“Yes, night?” Ignoring my friend next to me.

“It’s like a yes day but at night. The loser has to say yes to everything the winner wants to do.” Excitement flows through me. Technically, I can’t lose on this one. I either get to choose, or I let Mav decide. Either way, it will end up with me getting what I want...him.

“You’re on.” I hold my hand out to him. Grinning, he shakes it.

“You just made a deal with the devil,” Sophia softly laughs.

He winks at me, the dimples on full display, as he walks over to my dad to play the first round. My heart beats loudly in my chest. I mean, how bad could it be? I rub my bottom lip between my teeth, deep in thought of what he could come up with. I glance at Mav, and he softly laughs, knowing exactly what I’m trying to figure out.

I walk over to the cooler and get another Corona for Sophia and me before joining her on the towel to watch the game with Luna. Mimi and our moms bring their chairs over to sit next to us as they hand out sandwiches to everyone.

“What in the world happened to your back, honey? It looks like you fought a bear.”

I turn my head and try to look at what my mom is talking about. “What is it?” I ask, not being able to see it.

“You’ve got scratches all over your back.”

I hear Sophia stifle a laugh, and I shoot her a warning look to get her to stop. Maverick comes over to take a look. He looks concerned as he traces the scratches. “Does it hurt?” He asks softly.

“No, I don’t feel a thing. It must have happened when we,” I try to think of something. I know damn well how it happened as images of me up against the tree with Mav deep inside me over and over again until I thought I would die from the pleasure it brought. “When we went into the trees to look for shells. A branch must have scraped me.”

“You sure it doesn’t hurt?” He asks again.

“No, I’m fine. I promise.” He searches my face and must finally accept that I’m not hurting. He nods and then walks back to the game.

“What did the two of you do? Roll around in a sticker bush? Mav has scratches, too,” Mimi says, laughing and



pointing at his back.

Oh God, I bite my lip to stop my laugh. I knew I clawed at him but didn't think I had left a mark.

His eyes dance with amusement as they meet mine briefly before looking at Mimi. "I guess we both got scraped. We wanted to see if our old fort was still there."

"The one you guys built years ago?" Maya asks, laughing. "You worked your butt off that day hauling every piece of driftwood you could find."

"Yeah, I remember. I wanted it to last forever. Part of it is still there."

"Well, next time, be more careful. You both look like you fought an animal off your back." Mimi shakes her head at us and sits down to watch the game.

"They were animals, all right," Sophia whispers in my ear. "Two animals in heat, to be exact."

I laugh and look over at Mav. He's grinning at me before he turns and focuses on the first throw. We watch and cheer while we eat. I'm not sure who I should be rooting for, but I'm secretly hoping Maverick beats my dad and Papaw so I can get a shot at him. Sorry, Dad.

Maverick's competitive side reigns as he throws the winning bag and lands it in the hole for three points, pushing them over twenty-one and ending the game. He's doing his dance in the sand and rubbing it in my dad's face as Maya laughs at her son beside me.

Turning those emeralds on me, he grins. "You girls ready to take on the best cornhole players on this beach?"

"Oh, please," I say, standing up and brushing the sand off my legs. "I could have won that game with my eyes closed."

"You forget that Bella and I beat you and Noah last time," Sophia says, taking her place next to her dad.

"Only because we were taking tequila shots every time we got one straight in the hole. Noah and I were seeing two boards by the time we were done." He hands me the bean bags

as I take my place next to him. “Get ready to give me a yes night,” he says quietly so no one can hear.

“I’m already planning mine for when I win.”

“Part of me wants to let you win just so I can see what you come up with.” He gives me an amused look.

“The competitive side of you would never let you,” I say, laughing.

“Maybe my yes night will be giving it to you. Either way, I win.” His emerald eyes flash with heat and a challenge behind them.

“You’re up, Mav,” his dad calls down to us. “Let’s kick their pretty butts.” He laughs as Sophia smacks him in the arm.

“Let’s see what you got.” I toss the bag up and down in my hand, loving that his eyes roam my body before he turns and focuses his attention on the game. I never said I played fair, either. A little distraction never hurt anyone.

We’re halfway through the game, and the guys are winning by only two points. I can feel Mav’s eyes on me every time I throw or pick up the bags off the ground. It’s not my fault that I have to bend over so far to pick them up. I hear a slight groan as I pick up the one right in front of him. We’re taking a quick break while Matt and Sophia get another beer for all of us.

“I know what you’re doing?” He says from behind me as I pick up the last one off the ground.

“What do you mean?” I turn around and ask him innocently.

“You’re playing with fire again. Distracting me, so I’ll lose concentration.”

“I’m just picking up the bean bags.” I try and suppress my smile.

“Your perfect ass has been in my eyesight more times in the last hour than it has my whole life. You know exactly what you’re doing to me. Maybe those cheeks need my handprint later for torturing me like this.”

My eyes whip to his, and there's no mistaking the fire I see in them. I swallow hard and feel my breathing increase. "Look who's trying to distract who now."

He grins and then starts to frown as he looks behind me. I turn and see a group of about five guys walking our way. I cringe when I notice David in the mix. He's asked me out a few times, and I've always gotten a bad vibe from him. He's known for being a player and loves the chase until he gets you. He'll pretend to be a loyal boyfriend for a while but always ends up cheating on the poor girl at some point.

Sophia walks over to the group when she sees a couple of guys we went to high school with. We have remained friends with them over the years, seeing them out and about around town. David breaks away and heads over to us. I feel Mav tense beside me. This is not going to end well.

"Hey, Bella. I thought that was you. I haven't seen you around lately." His smooth voice hits me as he stops in front of me. He's a good-looking guy with dark hair and blue eyes, but his ego makes him unattractive to me. He thinks he's God's gift to women and doesn't seem to get the hint that I don't want him.

"I've been busy with work." I'm hoping he'll get the hint from my non-smiling face and lack of words and move on before Maverick does something stupid.

"Yeah, I heard you were playing around with video stuff."

"She's not *playing* around. She owns her own business, and half the town is hiring her." Mav grounds out.

David glances at Mav and brushes him off before turning to me again. If looks could kill, David would be lying at my feet right now. "We're in the middle of a game right now," I tell him, trying to move him along before a fist lands in his face.

"Sounds like fun. Maybe I could play the winner?" He's clearly not getting the hint.

"I don't think so. You should probably move on along. I'm sure there are plenty of other victims out here that you can

choose from,” I hear Mav say in a warning voice next to me.

“Victims? Nah, I’m a good guy. And the only one I’ve been wanting to look my way is standing right in front of me.” He looks at me and gives me a smile most girls would fall for. “Why haven’t you returned my texts?”

“I’ve told you before that I’m not interested.”

“But you haven’t told me why? Are you free this Friday? At least give me a chance, and let me show you that I’m not the bad guy you obviously think I am.”

“How many times does she have to tell you that she’s not interested.” Mav takes a step forward, and I put my hand on his arm.

“Chill, guard dog. We all know how protective you are of Bella, but dude, let her make her own choices. She’s a single adult woman and can decide for herself.” David must have a death wish or just completely stupid not to feel the wrath that’s about to come down on him.

“Mav…” I say, trying to get his attention as he glares at David and takes another step closer.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

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### Maverick

I CAN FEEL THE ANGER TOWARD HIM COMING OFF MY BODY IN waves. I've never liked this guy and would love nothing more than to punch him in his ego-centered face right now and wipe that smirk off of his face. The only thing stopping me is that Luna may be watching, and I don't want her to see me snap like that. I try to reign in this anger, but nothing can stop the next words that spill from my mouth.

"She's not fucking single, asshole. She's my girlfriend, and she's mine. So if I ever hear you so much as breathe her name in public, I'll have a fist in your face faster than you know what hit you. And tell all your other friends too that she's off limits and to stay the fuck away from her."

Breathing hard, I feel Bell take my hand and squeeze it, bringing me back to the present. I can feel the silence around me and know I've just dropped a bomb on our families, who I'm sure witnessed the whole thing.

David puts his hands up and steps back. "I had no clue, dude." He says, half laughing and trying not to let it show how close he came to getting punched. He glances at Bell again. "If it doesn't work out, you know where to find me." I start to take another step toward him, but Bell stops me as he turns and meets his friends before they walk back down the beach.

"Shit," I say under my breath, knowing I have a lot of explaining to do. Taking a deep breath, I tighten my hold on Bell's hand and turn toward our parents. I see my mom's amused smile first and notice Sage and Mimi have the same.

Thankfully, Papaw and Luna are at the shoreline looking at shells and missed the whole thing.

“You owe me a bottle of wine,” Mimi tells Sage and my mom. I blink, not sure I heard that right.

“I thought he would at least last until dinner,” Sage says, laughing.

“I was so close, too.” My mom glances at her watch. “I guessed four, and it’s two.

“What the hell is going on here?” I ask the three of them. I look over at Bell, and she’s just as confused as I am.

“Come sit.” My mom points to the chairs next to them.

“Luna? Want to go swimming with me?” Sophia asks, walking up to her. I silently thank her with my eyes, and she nods slightly.

“Sure. Race you in!” Luna gives Papaw her shells and races into the water with Sophia right behind her. We take a seat next to everyone, and I keep my hand in Bell’s, needing the contact right now.

“We’ve had our suspicions for a while now.” My mom looks at us, and Sage and Mimi nod. “We saw the way you were so protective of her and the way you looked at her when she wasn’t looking. We knew, though, that you didn’t even realize it yourself.”

“Bella was the same way. She was always going on dates and getting you so riled up, but there was no doubting the love and longing in her eyes when she didn’t think anyone was watching her. As a mom, I saw her watch you with that look before she even knew what it meant.” Sage reaches out and squeezes Bella’s hand.

“We knew that you guys needed to work out those feelings yourself, and eventually, they would have to be addressed. The wedding was our final confirmation, though, that you guys had already acknowledged those feelings. The way you looked at her, honey when she walked down that aisle, I thought my heart would burst out of my chest. There was no denying the fact that you two were in love.” My mom smiles at me through

the tears that formed. I swallow the lump in my throat and feel Bell tighten her hold on my hand.

“What we can’t figure out is why you guys just didn’t tell us,” Mimi says, looking at the two of us.

I let out a breath, knowing I need to be completely honest. I want them to know how seriously I’m taking this. “That’s on me. I was afraid that because of my past,” I pause, feeling uncomfortable. “I haven’t exactly been lacking company the past few years,” I clear my throat and force myself to look at Jax. “I was afraid that you would think I wasn’t good enough for your daughter because of it. I didn’t know how Noah was going to handle it, so we decided to wait until after the wedding to tell everyone. We were going to talk to Noah first when he got back, but I guess I let our secret slide today.” I give a small laugh and rub the back of my head.

Wanting them to know how I feel about her, I continue, “I closed myself off to her a long time ago when I started to notice I had feelings. I shut them away and told myself it was because I was protective and just wanted what was best for her. I think I was just protecting my heart and afraid to put myself out there. It was easier and safer just to have flings with no emotional attachment than to go after the one person who could break me if things didn’t work out.”

“Oh, Maverick, honey. How could you, for one second, think that you wouldn’t be good enough for our daughter? You’re like a son to us, and we love you like one of our own. To be honest, I’ve secretly wished for this to happen. Nothing could make me happier than knowing Bella is with someone like you. Someone who is loyal, kind, and would do anything for her.” Sage smiles at me, and my heart couldn’t feel more full than at this moment. “And don’t worry about Noah. He’ll see what we see when we look at the two of you.”

I nod, unable to speak.

“She’s right, you know.” I hear Jax speak for the first time and meet his eyes, trying to figure out what he’s thinking. “I get why you were afraid, but your past doesn’t make you a bad person. You were young and trying your best to navigate

emotions that were flying at you. It's not like you were a cheating bastard like the guy you almost punched over there." I return his grin. "We know your heart, Mav, and if Bella chooses to give you hers, then I have no doubt it'll be in good hands."

"Thank you for trusting me. That means more than you know. I would never hurt her."

"We know, son." Jax grins at me, and my dad gives me a wink and smile, letting me know he's proud of me.

"You guys really made a bet today?" I hear Bell ask, lightening the mood for us.

"We had to make things interesting. We were just curious how far you would take this charade of not having feelings for each other. I thought having Bella ride with you was a nice touch." My mom grins at me. I knew they were up to something.

"Mimi's time was closest, though, so Maya and I will be buying her a bottle this week." Sage laughs and looks at Mimi.

"Better be top shelf," she says, looking at our moms.

I shake my head and laugh, not quite believing that everything is out in the open. Jax comes over and slaps me on the back. "Just take care of each other, and everything will fall into place. I knew it would take someone special to capture that heart of yours. I don't think you could have made a better choice." He bends down and kisses Bell's head before heading to the cooler.

Our parents join Sophia and Luna in the water as Mimi and Papaw look for seashells.

"They took that better than I expected," I say when we're alone on the beach.

"I told you that you had nothing to worry about. They love you almost as much as I do." She smiles at me, and my heart does that flip that only she can make me feel.

"Come here," I say softly. I pull her onto my lap and wrap my arms around her. Now that I don't have to hide anymore, I



have every intention of being as close as I can to her. “I’m sorry I got so upset earlier and blurted everything out. It’s definitely not the way I planned to go about it,” I bury my face in her hair. “He just rubs me the wrong way. I’ve had more than a couple of talks with him to stay away from you, and the little fucker just doesn’t take a hint.”

“It’s kind of hot how you’re so protective of me, but you also know that I can take care of myself, right? You have to know that I’m not interested in anyone else and never will be.”

“I know you can take care of yourself, and I also know you want to be with me. I’ve been protective of you my whole life, especially from assholes like him, so it’s going to take some time for me to get used to the idea that guys are still going to look and hit on you even if I am by your side. Just don’t get mad at me if they need a little reminder every now and then of who you really belong to.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” she chuckles. Turning her head, she kisses me softly on the lips.

“Ow! Ow!” I hear Sophia yell from the water. Laughing against her lips, we look over and see everyone watching us. Our moms couldn’t be beaming more.

“We better join our nosy and loud family before they start picking out baby names for us.”

She laughs and stands up. “That sounds exactly like something they would do.”

I scoop her in my arms, and she yelps as I carry her to the water. I look down at her with a mischievous grin.

“Don’t you dare.”

“You knew exactly who you were falling in love with, so don’t start being surprised that I would still throw you in even though you’re my girlfriend now.”

“Don’t I get special treatment? I think girlfriends should get a throw pass.”

“Oh, you get special treatment, all right. Those scratches on your back are proof of that.” I give her a wicked grin before

she shrieks in the air and flies from my arms into the water.

She comes up laughing and jumps on my back like she always has, trying to dunk me, too, but always failing. I fall on my back, dunking her again as we both go under.

I come up, shaking the water out of my hair. Both of us drenched and laughing.

“I guess some things never change,” my mom says, laughing.

I grab Luna next and throw her before she has time to run from me. “Mav!” She yells seconds before she hits the water. I grin as she comes up, splashing me. I swim over to her and bob in the water, wanting a moment with her. “Are you good with me dating your sister, Lunabug? I feel like I should get your permission since you are my best employee I have.”

She looks to be deep in thought as she thinks about what I said. “Do you love her?”

“I do. Very much.”

“Does she love you?”

“Yeah, she does.” I try to hide my smile at her seriousness.

“Then I’m good with you being her boyfriend. Does this mean you’ll be my brother one day when you get married?”

I choke back a laugh. Leave it to Luna to get right to it. “Technically, I already think of you as my sister, and you always will be, but yeah, if we get married, then I would legally be your brother-in-law just like Emma is your sister-in-law.”

“Cool.” She dives under and swims back to our parents. Well, that was easy. Maybe telling Noah isn’t going to be so bad after all.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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### Bella

“I CAN’T SEE A THING,” I WHISPER. “DON’T LET GO OF MY hand.” We left Mav’s apartment before the sun came up. He took the day off, wanting to spend our last day together before seeing Noah and Emma tonight. I didn’t know it would involve sneaking through his parents’ backyard in the middle of the night.

“I won’t let go of your hand,” he says, chuckling. He adjusts the cooler on his shoulder as we make our way to the dock.

“We could have just waited until the sun came up. It would have been so much easier.”

“To actually see a sunrise on the water, you have to be on the water before it happens.” We reach the jet skis and set our bags down on the dock. Maverick takes out his phone and uses the flashlight to find the life jackets that are in the storage box next to us.

“Come here, baby.” I walk over to him, and he lifts my t-shirt over my head before pulling on my life jacket over my swimsuit. He fastens it tightly and grins at me. Yanking me to him by the straps, he sweeps his tongue along my bottom lip before kissing me. “Ready?” He asks, pulling away and putting his life jacket on.

“I don’t know. After that kiss, I’m thinking we should have never left the bed today.”

Laughing, he starts to put our bags under the seat along with the small cooler. “You are going to love this, trust me.”

He holds out his hand while he helps me onto the jet ski before lowering it. I start the engine and back up off the lift before bringing it around to the side of the dock. He hops on behind me this time and wraps his arms around me to place his hands on top of mine.

Making sure all our lights are on, we ease out into the canal in the dark of the night. I've been on a boat before, going out with my dad on one of his fishing trips and leaving before the sun was up, but never on a jet ski. The water is pitch black beneath us and smooth as glass. The only sound is the low hum of our motor as we wind through the canal.

I feel Mav's body heat behind me and snuggle back up against him. His left hand comes down to rest on my thigh, giving it a squeeze.

"I used to do this a lot when I was younger. I would sneak down here when my parents were still asleep and take the jet ski out. I think they caught on to me eventually, but they knew how much I loved watching the sunrise. I've never shared a sunrise with anyone on a jet ski before, and the ones at the beach have always been just you and your brother."

His words flow through me and warm me like a sip of good bourbon. "I've never shared a sunrise with anyone else either," I turn to say to him. He kisses the tip of my nose before I focus on the water before me.

"You've become a lot of my firsts, Bell. A lot of firsts that I never knew I wanted or needed." His warm breath glides down my neck, causing goosebumps to appear on my arms. "I just want you to know that I don't take it lightly that you loved me enough to give me your first time and to let you know that I saved a lot of firsts for you, too."

I blink back the tears and turn my head to look at him. His emotions pour off him, enveloping me with the love he is giving me. "I'm glad we could be that for each other, the firsts that we held on to."

"Me too." He gives me his dimpled grin that I love so much. "Ready to hit the open waters?"

Nodding, I grin back. "I'm ready." Maverick knows these waters like the back of his hand as he weaves through the channels and into the Atlantic. He doesn't slow down when we get to the islands but keeps going further out. The sky is getting lighter now, making it easier to see, preparing to show itself in a few minutes. He takes us further out, where it's just the two of us and the ocean.

Slowing down, he shuts off the engine as we float in the water. He reaches in front of me and unfastens my life jacket. He hangs it across the handles, doing the same with his. He wraps his arms around me as I lean back against him.

"Much better," he whispers into my hair and holds me close.

"So much better," I agree.

I watch in awe as the sun starts to appear and the water glistens in millions of different tiny diamonds. Orange and red hues fill the sky as the first touch of light lands on us. I've seen pretty sunrises on the beach, but never like this. It's like I could reach out and touch the sun if I wanted to.

"It's beautiful," I whisper.

"It is," he breathes against my ear. I notice he's not even paying attention to the sunrise but focused on me.

"You're missing the sunrise." His eyes meet mine. The green is so vibrant against the sun's first rays.

"I'm enjoying my view more." Seeing his eyes on me, I'm unable to look away, completely captivated by his stare. Needing to see him better, I stand up and turn around before sitting back down facing him. I run my fingers along his jawline before gliding across his bottom lip. His eyes briefly close at my touch before opening and searing me with his look. He brushes my hair back before weaving his fingers in my hair.

My lips part with a sigh as he leans forward, his lips touching mine. There's no urgency in this kiss. He takes his time as if he wants to brand this memory into his mind. My hands go up, finding his back as I lightly caress him, loving

the feel of his smooth skin against hard muscle. Deepening the kiss, he lightly bites my lower lip, sucking softly before his tongue works its magic again, leaving me wanting more.

When he breaks away to put his forehead against mine, a deep throbbing has me speaking the next words. "I want another first with you," I whisper.

"Oh yeah? And what is that?" I see him grin against me.

"Well, we're the only ones out here. The islands are just a speck in the distance. It would be a shame to let this gorgeous view go to waste without taking advantage of the situation. Have you ever..?" I hesitate to ask. I hate remembering Mav's past with girls, but I also love it when I'm a first for him, too.

"Have I ever what?" He leans back with an amused look on his face. He's not going to let me get away without asking him.

"On a jet ski...with a girl..."

"Have I ever taken a girl for a ride on a jet ski?" His eyes dance with laughter. He knows exactly what I'm talking about. I slide closer to him, so I'm straddling him, deciding to play his game with one of my own. I feel him hard against me as I settle down in his lap. His hands cup my ass, causing me to rock against him. "This...have you ever done this." I move against him more, causing him to groan.

"No, you would be another one of my firsts." He breathes out, going to my neck and sucking my sensitive spot.

"Good," I moan when he continues to lick and bite along my neck. My nipples are straining against my swimsuit as they rub against his chest. The light swaying from the water just adds to the movement. I reach down between us and untie his shorts before exposing his tip. My hand moves down his length before running over the glistening top.

"God, Bell, you've ruined me. I hope you know I wouldn't be able to survive if you ever left me." I lean back to look at him. How could he ever think I would leave him? My heart aches at the thought of never being his. His fear is still there,

though. Under all that confidence on the outside is a guy who's pushed me away for years for fear of being hurt.

"You own me, Maverick Alexander Lane. My heart, soul, and body belong to you. I hope someday you truly believe that I will forever be yours."

He studies me and must see the truth in my eyes because he nods and crushes his lips to mine. His hand goes down to push my bikini bottom aside as I free him the rest of the way out of his shorts. I stroke his hardness as his fingers find me soaking for him.

"Fuck. You are always so fucking ready for me. It's the biggest turn-on that I make you feel like this."

"Only you."

Moaning against my lips, he lifts me before I slide down onto him. "You feel so good, baby. Nothing has ever felt like this for me." His thumb brushes across my nipple, causing me to arch back at the sensation. He moves my triangle top to the side, exposing one breast as he teases and pinches my sensitive nipple until I'm wanting with need so bad that I hear myself whimper.

I increase my pace, needing him to be deep inside me.

Hard.

Fast.

Branding me.

His hand grabs my ass and digs into my soft flesh as he meets my thrusts. I feel a deep burning in my core before I shatter around him, clenching and pulsing as he goes over the edge with me. He captures my lips in a searing kiss, cutting off our screams as he devours my mouth like someone who is on the brink of starvation.

"Un-fucking-belivable," he whispers against my lips. "We have to do this at least once a week out here."

"Once a week?" I say, laughing against him.

“Okay, once a month, then.” He grins, and I reach out to touch his dimples.

“Once a month, it is.” He kisses me one more time and then fixes my bikini top before tying his shorts.

The sun has fully made its appearance now as we make our way back to shore. We pull up to one of our favorite islands for the rest of the morning to swim before heading back to the dock. I see Maya walk towards us as we get the ski on the lift.

“Bella! I guess Maverick took you to see the sunrise?”

“He did. I can’t believe how gorgeous the view is from out there. I thought the beach view was beautiful, but it doesn’t come close to what you see out there.” I get off the jet ski and put my jacket in the storage box along with Maverick’s.

“He always did love sneaking out there to watch it. He didn’t think we knew when he was younger, but Matt and I always did.” She laughs softly.

“I thought I was being so sneaky, too,” Mav says, laughing as he sprays off the jet ski.

“Parents always know. I’m glad he brought you, Bella. He’s never brought anybody out there before.” She grins at me before turning to Mav. “I’m just thrilled you guys realize what we’ve seen for a long time.”

“Yeah, it took me long enough.” Mav points the hose at my legs, spraying me as I yelp from the cold. He laughs and goes back to the jet ski.

“You have your hands full with that one, Bella, but if anyone can handle him, it’s you.”

“Oh, I can handle him alright.” I take the nozzle that he just set down and spray his chest.”

“You’re so going to pay for that later.” His eyes dance with amusement before slowly walking over to me. I back up, hitting the dock post, knowing I’m trapped. He slowly takes the nozzle out of my hand, not breaking eye contact. I know any second, he’s going to blast me with it. He grins wickedly before turning and spraying his mom on her bare legs.



“Maverick Alexander!” She tries to dodge the spray and fails, getting completely wet on her legs. “I can’t believe I didn’t see that coming.” She laughs and tries to swipe the water off her legs.

He’s grinning like an idiot or a mischievous devil—either would work right now. He puts the hose up and turns it off.

“You must be getting off your game the older you get.” If I hadn’t grown up with him and his parents, I would be shocked right now at his banter with his mom. I know they love to give each other hell, being more alike than they realize.

“I’ll remember that the next time you want me to make your favorite tacos.” She tries to hide her smile but breaks out into a grin when he picks her up in a hug.

“Not the taco threat. I need those in my life.”

Laughing, she swats his arm. “Put me down, you goof. You know I love feeding you.”

“That’s what I thought.” Mav sets her down before turning to me. “You ready to grab some lunch?” He picks up our small cooler, and I get our bag.

Nodding, I take his hand, and we walk to the house.

“Where are you guys going?” Maya opens the door, and we walk in behind her. Going over to the basket she has by the door, she gets two towels and hands one to us so we can dry off from the hose. I dry my legs before putting on my shorts and crop t-shirt that I had in my bag.

“We’re going to Rusty’s for lunch,” Mav says, putting his shirt back on. I dig in our bag for our flip-flops and hand him his.

“You guys have fun. It’s a beautiful day today to eat outside.” She goes to the fridge and pulls out two coconut waters before handing them to us. “So tonight, you tell Noah?”

I take a sip of my coconut water before nodding. “Yeah. They’re coming over for a game night. We’re going to tell them then.”

“You both are the closest to him. How do you think he’ll take the news?”

“I have no clue,” Mav says, blowing out a breath. “It can go two ways, he’ll accept it right away and be happy for us, or he’ll be pissed at me for a while until I can prove myself to him. Either way, it’s not a conversation I’m looking forward to having.”

“It’s going to be fine,” I say, reaching over and squeezing his hand. “Noah loves us both. He’ll accept it.”

“I agree with Bella. You have nothing to worry about, and if, for some reason, he is pissed, you guys will work it out like you always have. You used to get mad at each other all the time when you were little and always worked things through.”

“That was for little stuff like taking the last cookie. I think this is slightly bigger than eating the last cookie Noah had saved.”

“He used to get so mad at me, too. Don’t even get me started about the time I ate the last slice of apple pie he was saving.” I laugh. “Luckily, Emma makes damn good apple pies to appease his sweet tooth. And don’t forget, she’s on our side.”

“I just want it all done and out in the open. We better get going. That protein bar I ate hours ago is not cutting it.” He laughs and hugs his mom.

“You two have fun and call me after talking to Noah. I want to hear all about it.” Maya hugs me and opens the front door for us.

“We will,” I promise her. I follow Mav to his jeep and hop in when he opens the door for me.

Rusty’s lunch crowd is in full swing by the time we arrive a few minutes later. We make our way up the stairs to the outdoor dock and are led to a table overlooking the water. I see a group of four guys sitting down for a meal. All four of them are built and covered in arm tattoos. The closer we get, the more I notice how good-looking they are. They have to be

related because they all share the same dark hair and striking eyes.

One of them smiles at me as we pass by, and I immediately think of Sophia. She's going to die when I tell her about them. They couldn't be more her type if she would have picked them out of a catalog herself. They must be new in town or on vacation because I've never seen them around here, and I know for a fact Sophia hasn't laid eyes on them yet. I almost want to go over there and get some details for Soph, but I refrain myself. I'm sure the last thing Mav wants to do is try and set his sister up with a big-tatted guy. Hopefully, they'll be around again, and she can talk to them.

We sit down and order our drinks and lunch when the waitress arrives. We know the menu like the back of our hand and always go for the fish tacos off their lunch menu with a side of fries to split.

I'm taking a sip of my margarita halfway through our lunch when a blond girl comes up behind Mav and puts her arms around his neck.

"Hey, sexy. I've been wondering when I would see you again. It's like you've dropped off the face of the planet. You haven't been out lately to your usual spots." Mav tenses and looks over his shoulder at her. He untangles her arms from around his neck and meets my eyes briefly before turning his attention to her.

I lift my eyebrows at him but say nothing, wanting to see how this plays out.

"Hey, Cara. Yeah, I've been busy."

Her eyes shift to me. "You're Noah's baby sister, right? I think I remember you hanging out with him and Mav one night with his younger sister, Sophia. It's cute that they let you guys tag along."

My eyes bore into hers, and I will myself to calm down. I'm about to respond with a few choice words when Mav reaches out and takes my hand, knowing I'm on the verge of letting her have it.

“She’s actually the reason I’ve been so busy lately. I’ve been spending time with my girlfriend. And for the record, they never just tagged along. Noah and I have to beg them to drop their plans to hang out with us.”

Her eyes go wide as she looks at the two of us. “Girlfriend? But you said you never wanted more, that you never wanted to settle down. And now you’re with your best friend’s baby sister?” Her eyes go back to me like she’s disgusted with just the idea of us.

“I’d be real careful how you talk or look at Bell. She’s my girlfriend, and I won’t have you disrespect her. I never lied to you. I never did want more until I let myself see what was right in front of me. It just took the right person for me to see that.” He squeezes my hand that he hasn’t let go of, and I feel my anger at this girl slowly melt away.

“So this is it then? A tiger can’t change its stripes, you know. You’ll be texting me next week for a late-night visit once you get bored in this relationship.” She crosses her arms like a toddler having a tantrum. I almost feel sorry for the girl. Almost.

“Your phone number, along with every other girl, has already been deleted, so no, you won’t be hearing from me again. And trust me, there’s no chance in hell that I’ll get bored.” He looks at me, and I try to hide my amused smile when I remember our morning. Nothing is boring about us. “We’re going to finish our lunch, but I wish you the best.” He glances at her one last time before returning his attention to me. He takes a bite, clearly showing her that she’s dismissed.

She eventually storms off, and I shake my head at Maverick. “I swear your taste in women sucked before me. She’s a flat-out bitch. What in the world did you ever see in her?”

“I’m not proud of some of my choices, but unfortunately, after a few drinks, you don’t realize their negative side when they’re begging you for one night. I regret a lot, but there’s nothing I can do about it now except put it in the past and move forward with you.”

“You don’t miss it at all? The going out? Doing whatever the hell you want?”

“Not for one second.” He says it with such absolute certainty that I know he’s telling the truth. “You aren’t having second thoughts, are you? Unfortunately, until word gets around about us, we may have to deal with some ghosts from our past.”

“I’m not having second thoughts. I’m all in, just like I told you from the beginning. Nothing will change that especially jealous bitches like those.”

“You’re pretty hot when the claws come out. I guess that’s the panther in you.” He grins and hits me with the dimples as I laugh out loud, remembering Sophia and I’s name for ourselves when we went out to a club last Thanksgiving with everyone.

“That was such a fun night.”

“All I remember is almost breaking my beer bottle in my hand because I was gripping it so tightly every time a guy came up to you and put his hands on you.”

“And to think it could have been your hands on me that night.”

“Don’t remind me. I was a stubborn, blind ass. Hopefully, I’ve more than made up for it these past two weeks.” His eyes turn a playful color of green.

“You’re getting there.” I hide my amused smile.

“Then I better work extra hard the next few days,” he says with a laugh.

“Yeah, you probably should.” I try to keep a straight face but end up breaking into a grin when he starts to laugh.

“I love that my girl is insatiable. Lucky for you, I can never get enough of you, either. I’m thinking we need to hurry up here so I can get home to eat dessert.” He takes another fry from our plate and lifts it to his mouth. I’m so mesmerized by his lips that I don’t realize I’m setting myself up.

“What are you eating for dessert?” I could go for some brownies.

“You.”

I choke on my food, and he laughs when I wash it down with water. Okay, so it’s way better than brownies. I start to eat quickly, and he breaks out in a grin as we busy ourselves eating, my thoughts now on being his dessert again.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

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### Maverick

“YOU NEED TO STOP PACING. YOU’RE MAKING ME NERVOUS.” Bell looks up from stirring the guacamole. We’re at her apartment getting ready for game night. Noah and Emma should be here any minute. I talked to him on the phone a couple more times since sushi night, and I had a hard time with it. I hate keeping this secret from him. It’s slowly eating away at me, and I just want to be done with it.

“Sorry.” I run my fingers through my hair for the millionth time before stuffing them in my pockets and forcing myself to stand still.

“I’ve never seen you this worked up,” Sophia laughs. “It’s Noah we’re talking about, not some mobster who’s going to put a gun between your eyes because you’re sleeping with his sister.”

“I didn’t think of that. You don’t have any ties to the mafia that I’m not aware of, do you?” I look over at Bell, and she shakes her head and laughs.

“No, we don’t have any ties. You realize that you’re acting like a crazy person right now, right? You need to relax. Here, put these chips and guacamole on the table for us.”

I take the bowls from her and walk over to the table to set them down. I need to calm... The. Fuck. Down. I walk over to the fridge and get a beer, practically downing the entire contents in one long drink. Belle comes over and wraps her arms around me.

I take a deep breath. Just her presence sends a wave of calm over me. I hug her back and breathe in her scent.

“It’s going to be fine, I promise.” She places a hand on my heart, and I will it to slow down. Emma walks in with Noah behind her, and we quickly break away.

“Oh my God, we missed you guys so much!” Bell runs over and jumps into Emma’s arms before finding her brother. “It’s so good to have you home,” she says, squeezing Noah tightly.

“It’s good to be back.” He laughs and releases her before turning to me. “Hey, brother,” he pulls me into a hug, and I can’t help but grin back at him.

“Man, I’ve missed you.” I release him from the hug and scoop Emma up, kissing her on the cheek. “How’s Mrs. Bennett doing?”

“Mrs. Bennett is doing amazing. We had the best time ever.” She grins at me before pulling Sophie into a hug. “God, I missed you girls.”

“We missed you too,” Sophie says before letting her go. “You guys look amazing. Being married looks good on you both.”

“I don’t think I’ve stopped smiling since the wedding,” Emma laughs. “Wait until you see all of the pictures we took. We brought gifts, too!” She holds up a bag before walking over and setting it on the counter. The girls follow her and gush over the matching bracelets that she pulls out of the bag that the three of them now have alike.

She hands me a small hand-carved surfboard keychain. I study the details on it and smile. “We came across a local on the street who carves all of these by hand. I couldn’t believe the tiny details. We thought of you as soon as we saw it.”

I grab my keys off the counter and add it to my keychain. “I love it. Thank you.”

Noah and I get a beer while the girls pour some wine before sitting down and looking at all their photos while they tell us about their trip.



Noah sits back when we're done. "Well, now that you know what we've been up to the last two weeks, what's been going on around here? Anything exciting happen?"

I cough on my beer and look anywhere but at Noah. I can't delay this any longer, but the words just don't want to come out. I take a deep breath and force myself to get this over with.

"There is something I've been meaning to talk to you about. Maybe we could go outside for a bit? Just the two of us?"

"Why would you want to do that? You know whatever you have to say to me, you can tell Emma and the girls. We're family."

"It's, um." God, why is this so hard to get out? "Since you've been gone, I've realized some things. I've, uh, realized that I have very strong feelings for someone, and she feels the same way about me." I hear Bell hold her breath next to me, and Sophia reaches out a hand and places it on my arm.

"Are you serious? I can't believe I missed all this. Someone finally caught your eye, and I missed the whole damn thing. Who is she? Do I know her?"

Emma puts a hand on Noah and looks at Bell and I. I can tell she knows by the excitement that appears in her eyes.

"Yeah, you know her. I...I don't know how to tell you this because I'm not sure how you'll take it." I give a small laugh and run my hand through my hair again.

"I'm not following you? Is it someone I don't like?" Noah's eyes are full of confusion when he looks at me.

"No, you like her. Love her even. It's..."

"It's me. I'm the one Maverick is talking about." Noah's head whips to Bell, and I cringe as I see a frown appear on his face.

He meets my eyes, and I can't tell if he's shocked or mad as hell about this. "Yeah, you're right. We need to talk outside. Now." He gets up and storms out the backdoor, leaving us all sitting there.

“Shit.” I get up, and Emma puts a hand on my arm. “It’s not as bad as it looks. He just needs to process it. Just talk to him and help him understand the situation.” She looks at Bell, and her grin goes wide. “I knew I wasn’t just imagining things between you two. I’m so happy you guys finally decided to act on it.”

“Thanks, Em.” I give her a small smile. “I better go talk to Noah.” I open the backdoor as I hear Emma say to the girls, “Oh my God, tell me everything, and don’t leave a single thing out.”

I shut the door and see Noah down by the dock. I make my way down to the water, knowing this is a talk that has to be had. I need him to understand how serious I am about his sister.

His head turns in my direction as I walk up behind him. “What the fuck are you doing, Maverick? You know you could have your choice of girls out there. Why the hell did you pick my sister to mess around with?”

“I’m not messing around with her? And I don’t want any other girl out there.”

“All your life, you’ve protected her from guys like you. Guys that just like to fuck with no attachments. Bell isn’t like the other girls you’ve been with. She won’t be happy with just a fling.”

“I know that. God, do I know that. I’ve changed, though, Noah. I’m done with one-night stands. She’s all I want. I...I love her and not in a sister kind of way.”

Noah’s eyes widen with shock before he rakes his hands through his hair, focusing on the water before us. “Shit,” he says softly. “How long?” I hear him sigh.

“Probably my whole life, but I pushed the feelings way down and convinced myself that my feelings were just me being protective and not wanting her to settle. When I learned she had feelings for me, the walls I had put up came crashing down, and I couldn’t fight it any longer.”

“She feels the same way?”

“Yeah, she told me she’s been in love with me for as long as she can remember, but she hid it from everyone because she was embarrassed and felt I would never look at her that way. Then she let her feelings slip the night we were at your parents’ house discussing the wedding party dance.”

“That was over a month before the wedding! You guys have been going behind my back for two months? What the fuck, Mav?”

“It wasn’t like that, I swear. I had a lot of shit to figure out because I wasn’t about to jump in and mess it all up without being completely sure that I wouldn’t fuck it up. I didn’t do anything more than kiss her because I couldn’t stand beside you at the wedding, knowing I took things further with your sister without being honest with you.”

“You should have just told me from the beginning.”

“I didn’t want to ruin your wedding. I wasn’t sure how you would react, and we both wanted the focus to be on you and Emma. We needed time to figure things out before we told you.”

I hear him sigh again. He looks out over the water, deep in thought. Moments later, he turns to look at me. “So what now?”

“Now? Well, I continue to show your sister how much I love her every day that I’m breathing. I didn’t think I was capable of ever feeling this way about someone. I envied you for it. When I let my guard down and told Bell how I felt about her, words can’t describe how relieved I was to know she felt the same. I won’t do her wrong, Noah. She’s my end game and will be my wife someday.” I feel my throat get tight as emotions overcome me. I’ve never talked about marriage before to Bell, but she’s my forever if she’ll take me.

“Jesus. It’s like I came back to an alternative reality, and my best friend has done a complete life change.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve had a lot of firsts lately that I never thought I wanted, but now I can’t imagine my life without the

simple things like hand-holding and waking up next to someone you love.”

“It’s the best feeling, isn’t it?” He smiles at me, and I breathe a little bit easier.

“The best.”

“Everything okay out here?” Bell walks over and looks hesitantly between the two of us before walking over to me and taking my hand.

Noah glances at our laced hands. It’s going to take some time for him to get used to seeing us together, but I won’t go back to not touching her. Not even for him. He looks at me, and I raise my eyebrow in question before he looks at Bell.

“Are you happy? This is what you truly want?”

“I couldn’t be happier. I love him, Noah, with everything in me. He’s what I want.” I squeeze her hand and pull her closer to me before kissing the side of her hair.

“Then Mav and I are good.” He looks me straight in the eye, so I know he’s serious. “You know how much you mean to me and how much I love you, but she’s my sister. If you ever hurt her or do her wrong, I *will* choose her.”

“I would expect nothing less from you, but I won’t ever put you in that situation. You have my word that I would never hurt her.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get back inside and get this game night started.” He grins at us and walks back to the house.

And just like that, the last barrier to truly being together is gone, and nothing is holding us back.

\* \* \*

BELL ENDED up leaving Monday afternoon when she got a call from a potential client that she has been communicating with. It’s a local smoothie place further up north. They saw the work she did for my mom’s place and wanted to meet with her. They ended up signing a contract, so she decided to stay a couple of nights so she could stack up some video footage since it was a four-hour drive.

I glance at the clock again and see it's almost nine. She should be pulling up any minute now for our Wednesday meeting. My apartment has felt ten times lonelier without her in it. It's like it was brought to life with her being there, and now it feels emptier than it ever has. It's crazy how easy it was for me to slide into a routine of being together. It feels like we've been like this our whole lives. It feels...right.

I look up from the paperwork that I had been doing to occupy my mind when I hear the front door open. Smiling, I lean back in my chair as Bell walks in. She has white flowy pants on and a black crop tee. Her belly button ring is on full display as my eyes roam hungrily over her body like a man who has been thirsty for the past two days and just now seeing his first drink of water.

"Hi." Setting her laptop and camera bag down, she smiles at me. God, I've missed that smile.

"Hi. How was the drive back?"

"Long. The trip was worth it, though. They're paying me good money to advertise for them." She pulls out her laptop and sets it on my desk before giving me a quick kiss hello. I hide a smile. It's actually cute that she thinks I'm just going to sit here and have an actual business meeting when I haven't touched her in over forty-eight hours. For the past two days, I've had images running through my head of what I want to do to her on this desk.

I decide to amuse her for the time being and see how long it takes her before our business turns to pleasure. I stand up and let her have my chair while she opens her laptop and finds her edits of my store. I lean over her like I've always done for the past couple of years, breathing in her scent, but this time, I can allow myself to touch.

I pull her hair to the side and kiss the side of her neck. "Maverick, don't you need to see these before I post? We only have an hour until the store opens, and I need to finalize these with you."

"I trust you. Post whatever the hell you want." I say into her neck as I continue to lick and suck my way down to her

collarbone.

“I’m trying to be professional here. I don’t want you to think that I’m going to take advantage of the situation and not take my work seriously with you anymore.”

“I would never think that, but you can definitely take advantage of me anytime you want.” I grin against her neck. My thumb grazes her nipple, and I see them harden through her thin t-shirt. I pinch it slightly, and she arches her back and moans. “Did you lock the front door behind you?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Good girl.” I continue my assault on her neck. “Do you know how many times I pictured you across my desk in here even when I shouldn’t have been?”

“You missed a lot of opportunities because I’ve always been yours.”

Groaning, I swivel her around and bring her up to me. “Then I better start making up for those missed opportunities.” I crush my lips to her, and she welcomes me in as our tongues meet. I suck her bottom lip and dig my fingers into her hair, needing her closer to me. Her hands run up my t-shirt, finding my bare chest. I pull back and lift my shirt over my head, watching her as she does the same.

Reaching behind her, she unclasps her lacy bra, and I watch as it falls to the floor. I hungrily take in her full, perfect breasts before bending down to have a taste. I greedily suck on her nipple as her hands dig into my hair. She moans as I do the same to the other one.

“God, I’ve missed you. Two days has felt like a lifetime.” I murmur against her skin.

“I missed you too.” She throws her head back as I continue to feast before sliding my hand down the inside of her pants and thong. I’m met with a pool of desire and heat. She’s so wet for me that it makes me even harder than I already am. “Maverick,” she whimpers, rubbing against me.

“I’ve got you baby.” I slide two fingers in and cup her, rubbing against her swollen bud. She quickly works with

undoing my pants and lowering the zipper before she pushes down my boxers and springs me free. Frantic with her movement, like she can't hold back the need to touch me, she rubs my tip and catches my arousal on her finger. Circling her hand around me, she goes down my length and slowly comes back up in one long, torturous stroke.

Closing my eyes, I let her stroke me a few times before the need to be inside is more than I can take. I reach around her and close her laptop, pushing it to the side as I quickly push the paperwork to the floor, not caring about anything other than having her tight around me.

"Turn around," I ground out, barely holding it together. "Lay down on the desk for me, baby. I want to see this perfect ass." I grasp her pants and thong, lowering them to the floor as she steps out of them. Coming back up, I lick my way up her inner thigh before finding her wet center. I give a long stroke with my tongue before feasting on her.

"Oh, God," she moans. The side of her face is pressed against the desk, and her bare breasts rub against the wood as she starts to move against my face. I lick and suck, bringing her close to the edge. I reach up and squeeze her ass hard, my fingers digging into her soft flesh. She moans against the desk as I move to her clit, sucking hard before she cries out. Her body convulses as I suck every last drop.

She's breathing heavily against the desk as I stand up and center myself before filling her in one hard thrust. "Fuck," I rasp out, her body fitting perfectly to mine. I grab her hips and fill her over and over again. She pushes her ass toward me, meeting me thrust for thrust. My hand goes around and rubs her swollen bud.

Her body starts to clench around me, driving me over the edge with her as I pour into her with each pulse. I shout, matching her cry as we lose ourselves in each other.

I kiss along her spine as our breathing slows down to a normal heart rate. Slowly bringing her up against me, I pull out and turn her around. Smiling down at her, I brush back her

hair that has fallen over her face. I kiss her deeply before laying my forehead to hers, just wanting to soak her in.

“I love you,” she whispers, bringing her hands up around my neck and into my hair.

“I love you too. I don’t know how I got so lucky for you to love me back, but I promise never to stop.”

“I’ll never stop either.”

I kiss her one more time, forcing myself to pull away because I know I have to open the store soon. I button my pants before helping her find her clothes that are on the floor. She walks to the bathroom to clean up as I start to pick up the paperwork that got tossed aside. I grin as I set it on the desk. I’ll never look at this desk the same way again.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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### Bella

“YOU WANT TO DO WHAT?” I LOOK AROUND AT ALL THE camping gear laid out all over Mav’s apartment that I’m tripping over as I walk through the door.

“I’m giving you your tequila-induced plan. I got off work early today because Luke closes tonight, and I have tomorrow off. I know you don’t have any clients planned, so I’m taking you camping tonight. And trust me, baby, I won’t be turning you away when you crawl into my tent to seduce me.” He grins like a little boy on Christmas morning.

“Oh my God. Are you taking me camping? Tonight?”

“Yep. I about have everything ready. We can get there in plenty of time to set up the tent before the sun goes down.”

I look at the cooler, already packed with hotdogs and smores, just like the night when I was sixteen. Laughing, I pick up the bottle of tequila and eye him.

“You can’t have a tequila-induced plan without the tequila.” He grins and stuffs some clothes into a bag.

“No, I guess you can’t,” I laugh. “I need to go pack then if we are doing this.”

“It’s already done. It’s not like you’re going to need a lot of clothes.” He winks at me before picking up the cooler and walking to the door. “Your bikini is over there if you want to change before we go.” He nods toward the couch, and I see my clothes lying there. “I never knew a girl could have so many,” he laughs.

“It’s a necessity in Florida. It’s like a daily outfit here, and you don’t want to wear the same one over and over.” I roll my eyes at him like it’s just common sense to know this, and he shakes his head, chuckling, before walking out the door to pack his Jeep.

I pick up the bikini and laugh at what he chose. I think it’s the skimpiest one I own and definitely the sluttiest. I’ve only worn it a handful of times on vacations. It’s a shiny gold string bikini, and the triangles barely cover my breasts, not to mention the thong bottoms. It leaves little to the imagination of what’s underneath.

I guess if I’m seducing him tonight, this is definitely the one I need. It’s better than the shorts and sweatshirt I was wearing at sixteen. I quickly change in the bathroom and throw on cut-off shorts and a t-shirt over my bikini before walking back out.

He’s grabbing the last of the stuff, and I help him carry it to the Jeep. “Nice choice on the bikini.” I hand him a bag to put in the back.

“I thought so.” His eyes sparkle with amusement. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“It’s not one I usually wear on a boat day with our families.” I laugh. “Even though I’m twenty-four, my dad would still force me to put something over it.”

“I don’t blame him. Lucky for me, the beach should be deserted, and it’s for my eyes only.” He shuts the back door of the Jeep and pulls me to him. “I didn’t get my *honey*, *I’m home* kiss yet.”

“Well, we need to fix that. Honey, I’m home.” I reach up and pull him to me as his lips meet mine. His soft lips suck on my bottom lip before his tongue dives in and seeks mine. I melt into him as his hand on the back of my neck holds me firmly and possessively.

“Much better,” he murmurs against my lips before giving me one more soft kiss and releasing me. “You ready for Operation Seduce Me?”

“You named it?” I laugh and shake my head.

“All great plans have a name. Makes it more fun.” He shrugs his shoulders and sends me a grin as we head to the door to lock up.

WE MAKE it to the island and set our tent up before we gather old driftwood for the fire. I look around and smile at the spot he chose. It’s the same place we went all those years ago when I was a love-struck teenager. Okay, I’m still a love-struck teenager when it comes to him.

I glance over at him and admire the way his muscles work as he picks up the firewood. Sweat glistens off his bare chest as the last of the sun beats down on us. I find myself licking my lips as I watch a drop slide down his tattoo-covered bicep.

“I wish I could capture that look you are giving me right now. It’s making me so fucking hard.” I jerk my eyes up to his, and smoldering emeralds meet mine.

I swallow hard as my heart beats against my chest in a pounding rhythm. Families down the beach pull our gaze away from each other as children’s laughter rings through the air. I watch as the parents attempt to pack up the day’s adventure. Sand toys are thrown everywhere as evidence of a successful beach day with the kids.

There are only a couple more boats out here with us, and they’ll be leaving soon. The excitement starts to build at the thought of spending the night out here with Mav, just the two of us, the ocean, and the stars.

I glance at him again, and he’s studying me. “What are you thinking about right now?”

“That I’m excited to spend the night out here with you. Just you, me, the ocean, and the stars. It’s a full moon tonight, too. It’s going to be beautiful.”

“I know. That’s why I planned it tonight. I’m excited to be out here with you, too.” He walks over to me with an armful of driftwood. “Let’s set up the firepit so we can get a swim in before dark. We wouldn’t want the bears to get you.” He grins before walking toward our campsite.

“Very funny.” His laughter rings out as he places the driftwood in the firepit area already here. The island is a small spoiler with lots of trees and an area cleared out by campers to make a campsite. A small beach lines one side of the island. With the island being so small, a slight breeze can be felt as the wind goes across the span of it, keeping the bugs at bay.

I lift my shirt and take off my jean shorts to get ready for our swim. Tossing them in my bag, I hear a sharp intake of breath as I glance over at Maverick.

“Jesus, Bell.” His voice is low, and his eyes hungrily roam over my body.

I feel my skin heat at the intensity of his gaze, sending tiny jolts through my body. His eyes smolder with desire as he strains against his swim trunks. I think this just became my new favorite bikini. I could stand here all day with him looking at me like this.

He takes a step in my direction, and I back up. He stops, and a smile plays on his lips, lifting one corner. His eyes fill with amusement and a hint of a predatory gleam.

“You going to run from me, Bell? We’re on an island. There’s nowhere to hide.” He starts to move toward me, and I slowly move back, my blood thrumming with excitement and the thrill of the chase. I may be the one seducing him tonight, but he’s going to have to catch me first.

I run to the water and dive in, swimming out as fast as possible. I hear him chuckle before diving in seconds behind me. Strong hands grab me by the waist and bring me to his hard chest. I gasp at the contact as heat pours from his body, sending goosebumps over my skin.

“Not a good move on your part,” he whispers in my ear. “I can swim these waters in my sleep, and you just became my perfect wave that I’ll do anything to catch.” He nips my ear, and his hand firmly holds my stomach, bringing me flush to his hard arousal pressing into my behind.

I groan at the contact as his hand slides down under the water and palms my center, applying pressure to my bud with

his thumb. The thin material of my swimsuit barely gives any barrier.

The remaining boats have left by now as the sun starts to sink low. It's just the two of us and the ocean as the saltwater gently caresses my skin.

"I don't think you need this anymore." His voice is low in my ear seconds before the ties of my swimsuit bottoms come undone, and he fists it in his hand. "Or this." His skilled hands remove my bikini top in seconds. My nipples harden as the water laps over them.

"I thought I was the one doing the seducing tonight?" I whisper as I close my eyes and moan when he rolls my nipple between his fingers.

"I think we both know that I don't need to be seduced by you. You have me. I'm a slave to you and yours to own." He bites my neck and sucks hard before soothing it with his tongue. Heat pools between my legs, and I rub against him, causing him to moan against my skin.

"I need you now, Maverick. Please," I whimper as his hand finds my swollen clit again.

"Some of the best fucking words out of your pretty little mouth that I love to hear." He turns me around and picks me up over his shoulder as I yelp. Walking back to shore, his hand caresses my bottom and then stills. I squirm against him, wanting him to go further. "Ask me," he says, stopping at the tent. His hand circles my bottom again before trailing down and finding me soaking wet with his finger.

"Oh God," I moan as his hand comes back up to squeeze my ass. "Spank me," I whisper against his back.

"Mmmmm. That's my girl." His hand comes down on my cheek, and I gasp as the sharp sting mixes with intense pleasure. He rubs it before coming down hard on the other side and massaging away the pain, leaving me flooded with need.

I slide down his body as he lowers me to the ground. I hear him groan as I rub along his hardness. I quickly untie his wet boardies and let them fall to the ground with his boxers. His

tip is glistening with arousal as I circle his swollen length and rub my thumb over the top, catching it.

Growling, he backs me into the tent before bringing me down on the covers with him.

“I’m yours, Bell. Take what you wanted all those years ago. Take what I should have given you over and over again—what I should have seen that was right in front of my eyes.”

He looks up at me as I hover over him. His green eyes filled with a sweet mixture of love and lust. I lean down and run my tongue along his full bottom lip before his hands grip my head tightly, and his tongue invades my mouth, seeking mine. Claiming me.

I straddle him and slowly lower myself down until I’ve taken him all the way in. We both moan against our lips as I start to move. Sitting up, I feel his hands grip my waist tightly as I clench around him.

“That’s it, baby. You’re in control. Take what you need. I’m yours.”

Tilting my head back, I close my eyes and increase my pace. My breast bouncing with the movement.

“God, you’re so fucking beautiful,” he rasps out. His hands reach up and grab my breasts, pulling and pinching my nipples hard.

I arch my back and cry out as it shoots straight to my core, causing the pleasure to build. I feel my body start to tighten, preparing itself for its release.

As if he knows my body and can sense I’m close, he pushes me over the edge by grabbing my hips and slamming me down harder, hitting me in the spot that causes me to explode around him.

I cry out his name, my body pulsing and trembling around him as wave after wave of pleasure hits me. My hands rake down his chest as he continues to move inside of me.

“Give me one more baby.” He pants, applying pressure to my swollen bud.

“Oh God.” My body is sensitive to his touch, and just when I think I’m coming down from my high, he pinches my clit and slams me down hard on him, causing my body to orgasm again.

“Jesus, Fuck!” He yells, exploding inside of me as I feel myself pulse around him, matching his. We ride it out together until my body collapses on top of his. Both of us try to catch our breaths as we come back into our bodies.

“Holy shit,” I whisper against his chest. “I think I may have died for a second.”

“Me too,” he softly laughs. “Me too.” His hand runs down my back softly, lulling me to sleep.

I AWAKE SOMETIME LATER to an empty tent. I throw one of Mav’s t-shirts on and step out of the tent. He looks up from his spot on the blanket by the fire and grins when he sees me.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.” He pats the spot next to him, and I curl up beside him.

“I guess you wore me out.” I softly laugh. “I was out like a light.”

“You were sleeping so peacefully I didn’t want to wake you.” He murmurs against my hair. The stars are out for us again.” He points to the night full of constellations, and I grin.

“Tell me some more stories about the stars. I love hearing you talk about them.”

His dimples show as he kisses the top of my head. I love that he loves to share this side with me. I settle against him and let his voice fill the night air as he tells story after story. I listen and watch, mesmerized by the stars above us as each one’s story is told.

# Chapter Forty

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## Maverick

THE SUMMER PASSES BY QUICKLY, AND IT'S BEEN THE BEST one I can remember. Bell and I have spent almost every night together and have gotten into a nice routine with our work schedules. Everyone in town knows about us now, so things have settled down with the rumors and speculations revolving around us. Noah has seen the change in me and is fully on board with our relationship now, thank God. Part of him is even relieved because he knows his sister is with someone he trusts and would rather die than hurt her.

I'm waiting for Bell to finish getting ready when my phone rings. I see Emma's face appear and grin as I answer it.

"Aren't you supposed to be getting ready, too?" I glance at my watch. We're meeting Noah and Emma, along with Sophia, at Joe's tonight for a game of pool.

"I'm getting ready while I talk to you." I hear her muffled voice as she rummages through something on the other end of the line. "I wanted to let you know that everything has been finalized, and it's a go."

I get off the couch and glance down the hall, making sure Bell is still in the bathroom. "That's great. I can't believe the lawyers got the contract drawn up so fast."

"They owed Noah a favor," she says, laughing. "Can you come by tomorrow morning and sign them?"

"Tomorrow is perfect. I'll be there." Bell walks out into the kitchen, and I can't help the way my heart still speeds up when I see her. She's wearing a pair of white jean shorts and a



light blue crop top. My eyes skim her body as hers roam over me in my fitted green t-shirt and dark jeans before locking those blues with my green. “Bell just got done getting ready, so we’ll meet you guys in a bit.” I hang up, my eyes never leaving hers.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Emma.” I slowly walk her way and bend down to nuzzle her neck. “You look beautiful.” I lightly bite her, and she tightens her grip on my arms. Grasping her hips, I bring her flush against my body, letting her know exactly what she does to me every time I’m near her.

I silence her moan with my mouth as my tongue seeks hers out. I take my time tasting her. I savor her until we both are left breathless.

“Have I told you today how much I love you?” I feel her grin against my lips.

“Yes, but I never tire of hearing it,” she breathes.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“We better get going. Is Sophia riding with us?” I reach for my keys and wallet on the counter.

“No, she said she would drive separately.” I look over at her, and she has a worried look on her face.

I take her chin in my hand and lift it so she’s looking at me. “What’s wrong?”

“I just worry about Sophia. Now that we’re a couple and Noah has Emma, I know she’s recently felt like a third wheel whenever we do things together. I guess I’ve been feeling a little guilty because I’m so happy and have everything I’ve ever wanted, and she’s still searching. I’ve been spending almost every night here, and I just don’t want her to be lonely.”

“Hey,” I hug her tightly and rub her back. “Sophia is going to be just fine. We’ve both talked to her, and she’s happy for us and understands why you’re over here a lot. She’s been busy

this summer, putting in some extra time with the summer programs at her school, and the new school year will start in a couple of weeks. She has a couple of friends at work she's been going out with when you and Emma can't go. The last thing she would want is for you to feel guilty about being happy."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." She sighs against my chest.

"She's probably enjoying the peace and quiet and having the TV all to herself."

"She probably is," she laughs softly. We lock up and head down the apartment stairs to my jeep.

By the time we get to Joe's, Noah and Emma are already saving us a spot at the table with Sophia. The girls immediately start talking to one another while Noah and I get a couple of buckets of beer from the bar.

"Emma told me she called you to let you know the papers are ready to be signed."

"Yeah, she did. Are you sure she wants to sell?"

"Are you kidding me? She couldn't be happier to sell to you. We still have her parents' place in Tennessee, and I've already got my eye on another house to buy for flipping. The timing couldn't be better. When are you doing it?"

I look over at the table, and Bell looks my way like she can sense the connection and my eyes on her. She smiles at me before going back to her conversation with the girls. "Soon. I want to do it right and talk to your dad first."

"He's going to say the same thing I said to you. You know we both couldn't be happier that you're the one who loves Bella just as much as we do."

"I still want to ask him though. It's just a respect thing that I want to do."

"I get that. Our parents are going to be over the moon."

"That makes five of us because nothing will make me happier."

Noah puts his hand on my shoulder and grins. “Who would have thought it would happen so fast for us? I guess it’s no surprise. We’ve always gone after what we wanted and never did have the patience to take things slow.”

“No, patience has never been our strong suit,” I laugh. “Once I know what I want, there’s no stopping me until I get it.” And there’s no doubt in my mind that she’s the one I want.

“Amen to that.” He tips his beer bottle to mine as we walk back over to the table.

I get a beer out of the bucket and open it for Bell before handing it to her. Sitting down, I put my hand over her chair and lean back, taking a sip. “So what have you girls been talking so excitedly about.”

“I had completely forgotten to tell Sophia about these guys I saw when we went to Rusty’s a few weeks back. They were her type to a tee, and I wanted to know if she had seen them around before. She couldn’t miss them with all the tats on their arms, and they had the bad boy look down pat.” Bell giggles and takes a drink of her beer.

“I think I would remember if I saw them. They were probably on vacation, and I missed my one and only opportunity for a four-on-one.”

Noah and I both choke on our beer. “What the fuck, Soph.” I glare at her.

“I’m only kidding,” she says, laughing. “I got you so good, though. Trust me, I only want one guy.”

“Good,” says Noah, wiping up their spilled beer.

“One guy with the stamina of four.” She adds, causing all of the girls to bust out laughing.

“Jesus,” I mutter under my breath.

“Speaking of tats and wanting to get off this subject, the new owner of Charlie’s Ink bought the house I just finished.”

“What. That’s great! That wasn’t on the market for long at all.” Mav grins at Noah.

“He came by yesterday and saw the place. He took one look at it and signed right on the spot. The girls did an amazing job staging it, and he wants to buy it all,” he says, laughing.

“Is he living there by himself?” Bell asks her brother.

“Him and his son. He was living with his brothers about an hour north of here, but when he got the opportunity to open another tattoo shop, he jumped at the chance to relocate and get his own place. He’ll be running this one, and his brother will be running the other. They’re partners in the business.”

“Does he do good work? When I heard Charlie was retiring and selling his place, I was hoping it would land in the hands of someone as gifted as him. I want to add a little bit to mine.”

“His tats looked badass, and his brother’s looked just as good. He definitely has talent and an eye for art.”

“I’ll have to stop in when he gets it up and running and take a look at his work.”

The waitress comes over to replenish our beer, and we order some food while we wait for a pool table to open up.

“You ready for the new school year, Soph?” She grins at me at the mention of getting to meet her new students. She was born to be a teacher. The children love her.

“I’m so ready for my first year teaching kindergarten. It’s always so exciting to meet all my new students on the first day of school. I’ve checked out some of the students, and I’ve had a couple of their older siblings, so it will be fun to already know the family. There were a couple of names I didn’t recognize and one little boy who is new in town, according to his records. I always scan for the new students to make sure they’re making friends and fitting in nicely. It’s always fun to see them blossom throughout the year.”

“Maybe you can manifest a hot single dad of one of your students,” Emma says, winking at her.

“That’s my one rule. No dating the dads of a student. I made the mistake a while back, and things got messy when it

didn't work out. The kids always come first now."

"To be fair, the dad turned out to be a completely obsessed lunatic. Not every dad you date would be volunteering at every school function to be near you and disrupting your classroom by delivering flowers every hour for weeks." Bell laughs at the memory.

"Still, it took a lot of explaining to the school board about why he was around all the time, and his daughter didn't understand why Daddy had become a permanent fixture in the back of the classroom."

"You just have that effect on guys," Emma says, laughing. "They become obsessed with you."

"Yeah, well, there's a fine line between obsessed sexy and obsessed crazy. I'll send the crazies packing every time," she laughs. "I'm very excited, though, to have you come read your book to us this year," she grins at Emma. "All the teachers are envious that my classroom will be the first to have *Emma Hunter* read for us and give the kids signed autograph copies. Have I told you how proud I am of you?"

"Only about a million times," she laughs softly. "I still can't believe I'm a published author."

"Believe it, baby. I always knew you would be." Noah beams at her, his love and proudness for her shining through.

"I couldn't have done it without you by my side, encouraging me."

"We make a great team. You're a damn good editor and made my latest book top the charts. I couldn't have done it without you either." He reaches over and gives her a kiss, causing her to blush.

"I still love that you married your pen names," Bell says, smiling. "Beck and Emma Hunter, two bestselling authors in this town, just eating fries at Joe's on a Friday night."

"I thought using Emma Hunter was a nice touch. Noah is still under the radar, but I wanted to be able to meet the children who love my books and read to them during story

hours at the library and in classrooms,” she adds, smiling at Sophia.

“I think Noah is having too much fun having a whole other identity with you, and he doesn’t want the whole town in on his dirty little secret. I bet he lets Beck Hunter out in the bedroom to recreate his book scenes and to do a little fantasy role-playing.” I laugh when Emma turns red, proving I’m spot on.

“Mr. Hunter does love to come out and play with his librarian.” He laughs when Emma swats his arm, her face turning a deep shade of red.

“I still got it,” I say, laughing as Emma looks at me, trying to give me her best glare before she gives up and joins the laughter at the table.

# Chapter Forty-One

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## Bella

I SINK INTO THE MOUNTAIN-HIGH BUBBLES AND SIGH. I DON'T know how Maverick ended up with the better bathtub at his apartment, but I've claimed it as mine now. I sip my wine and close my eyes, sinking down lower.

I feel him before I see him, my body always in tune with his. The energy in the room instantly changes to these electrical currents that can physically be felt throughout my body. I open my eyes to see him standing there, watching me in the doorframe. His green eyes pierce me as they roam over me, their hunger evident. My body instantly reacts with need as a deep throbbing starts to take place between my thighs. Before I can stop myself, my hand glides across my stomach, going further until I touch where I want him the most.

His nostrils flare, and I see his breathing increase like he knows exactly what I'm doing under the bubbles.

"Are you touching what's mine?" His eyes never leave mine as he remains standing against the doorframe.

"I would rather it be you," I moan as I enter two fingers and palm myself. Arching back, I bite my lip to stop the moan as I rub harder. His eyes turn a shade darker as they drop to my lips before coming back up to meet mine. He pushes off the door frame and slowly walks over to stand beside the tub. I can see him straining against his pants as he slowly takes off his shirt.

Tanned muscles move against the movement as I take him in with my eyes. I will never get tired of looking at him. I

follow the tattoos up one arm before lowering my gaze to his rock-hard abs, where his jeans are hanging low on his waist. He unbuckles his pants and steps out of them, standing completely naked in that glorious body of his.

He's already glistening with need as he circles his hand around his hardness and slowly strokes himself, never taking his eyes off me. "Put your hands on the side of the tub where I can see them. You're not cumming unless it's me touching you."

I whimper as I release my hand and grip the side of the tub. Watching him touch himself along with his words has me so on the edge that I press my thighs together to try and ease the ache. He continues to stroke himself, and I'm unable to stop myself from sitting on my knees and replacing his hand with mine.

I run my thumb over his tip, catching his arousal, before slowly stroking down and back up. His head goes back, and I see his throat move as he swallows. His muscles are tight and strained in his arms from reacting to my touch. I lick my lips and lean over, wanting his taste on me. Moaning, he grasps my hair tightly while I take him all the way to the back of my throat.

"Fuck," he rasps out. His hold on me tightens as I start to move up and down on him. I moan against him as the throbbing between my legs increases. He pulls out of my mouth, and in one motion, I'm picked up out of the tub, and my legs wrap around his waist as he slams his lips to mine. He bites my lower lip hard before sucking it, causing me to whimper against his lips. I grind against him, and he breaks the kiss to walk us to the shower.

Cold water hits us first before it quickly turns hot, neither of us noticing anything other than the need to get closer. His lips find mine again as our tongues seek and tangle together. My back hits the shower wall, and he reaches down to position himself, filling me in one hard thrust. He stills inside me, grasping my ass tightly.



“This is where I belong,” he whispers against my neck. “This,” he slowly moves out and then fills me again, where I feel it deep in my soul. “This is mine. I’m the only one that’s been inside you and the only one that will ever be inside you.” He fills me again, and I moan at how deep and good it feels.

“You’re mine too. No one ever gets to be with you this way again. You belong to me.” I breathe out as he goes harder with each thrust.

“I’m yours,” he whispers, grasping my ass harder and plunging deep and shattering me to pieces as I cry out, convulsing around him. He follows with a yell, pulsing and emptying in me as we cling to each other and ride the waves as one. He continues to move inside me until my body has nothing left to give.

I sag against the shower wall as he slowly lowers me, pulling out before crushing my body to his. His arms come around me, and I can feel his fast heartbeat against my ear as I wrap my arms around him.

“I love you so much,” I whisper against his chest. “So much, it scares me at times,” I softly say, burying my face in his chest.

“I know that feeling, trust me. I love you so fucking much, too. I don’t know if the scary part will ever go away, but that’s how you know it’s real. It’s a connection that doesn’t happen every day. I’ll take that little scary part, though, if it means I get to have you by my side for the rest of my life.”

“Me too.” I snuggle deeper into his chest and place a kiss over his heart, vowing to always keep it safe.

\* \* \*

THIS PAST WEEK, something has been off. I can tell Maverick is keeping something from me, and he’s been on edge lately. When I ask him about it, he assures me everything is okay and that he’s just busy getting the plans together to open another store up north. I’m in my office at my apartment trying to get work done, but my thoughts keep coming back to him.

Sighing, I shut my laptop, knowing I won't be able to concentrate on the edits. I hear my phone ding and glance down to see a text message from him.

MAVERICK

Hey baby, I want to take you out to eat tonight, just the two of us. Could you be ready by six?

I stare at the text message. Surely, if something is wrong, he wouldn't tell me in the middle of a restaurant, right? I drum my fingers on my desk, feeling the anxious thoughts invade my mind. I type my response.

BELLA

Sure. Sounds like fun.

MAVERICK

Perfect. Wear a dress. I want to see those sexy legs. ;)

I laugh out loud, feeling more at ease, and realize I'm making a bigger deal of this than it is. He's just stressing about work. Opening a new location is a huge deal. I make a plan to make sure he relaxes tonight and has a good time.

BELLA

I'll wear a dress only if it ends up with you unzipping it at the end of the night. ;)

I smile, knowing I got a grin out of him with that one.

MAVERICK

I'm already getting hard thinking about it ;)

I laugh out loud. Another text comes through.

MAVERICK

I love you

BELLA

I love you more

MAVERICK

Not possible. See you at six.

BELLA

I'll be ready.

Grinning, I set my phone down. I can't believe I thought for a second that he was keeping something from me. This is Maverick we're talking about—my whole world. I get up to look through my closet for the perfect dress to wear tonight, humming softly as I imagine him unzipping it later.

“YOU LOOK AMAZING, BELLA.” Sophia grins at me as I look at myself in the full-length mirror.

“Are you sure this isn't too much? It seems too fancy for just a dinner.” I eye the white shimmer dress that Sophia made me try on. It had been in my closet from a fancy event I was invited to last year. It does look damn good, though, hugging my curves in all the right places. I turn and look at the back. It dips low, showing off my bare skin, resting just above the curve of my bottom. It's longer in length with a high slit up one leg.

“Trust me, it's perfect. Don't you dare change.”

I smooth down the fabric while trying to decide if it's too much when I hear Maverick walk in the front door.

"Too late to change now." Sophia grins at me and rushes into the living room. Rolling my eyes at her, I look one last time. What the hell. I love the dress, and it will give me a reason to wear it again. I pick up my small matching handbag and make my way to the living room.

Sophia and Maverick have their heads together, and Sophia is grinning from ear to ear when I walk out. She quickly breaks away when she sees me. I meet Mav's eyes and stop in my tracks. He's wearing black dress pants with a white dress shirt. The sleeves are rolled up, revealing his tattoos on one arm, and the collar is open at the top, just like I love it. He's always hated ties, and I secretly love the way I can see some of his chest with a couple of buttons undone. It's my favorite spot to breathe him in while I nuzzle his neck.

"Jesus, Bell. You look..." His eyes roam my body before meeting my eyes again. "You look breathtaking."

"Thank you. I was hoping I wasn't overdressed. Sophia insisted I should wear this. I'm glad she did, though, because you look stunning. What's the special occasion tonight?"

"I can't take my girl to a fancy dinner just because I feel like it?" He grins at me as he walks over.

"No complaints from me," I say, grinning back at him. He stops in front of me and runs his hands down the length of my arms, causing goosebumps to appear. He brushes the fabric of my dress across my breast, and my breath catches in my throat.

"I don't think I've seen anything more beautiful," he whispers before bending down to kiss me softly. "I love the dress." I feel his breath against my skin as he kisses behind my ear.

"You two should probably get going. You don't want to be late." I glance at Sophia, and her eyes are dancing with joy. I don't think I have ever seen her this excited.

“What’s up with you? You’re acting all giddy and unusually happy.” I eye her, trying to figure out what I’m missing.

Mav quickly grabs my hand and starts walking me to the door. “She just doesn’t want us to be late. I told her earlier that I made reservations.”

I look at Sophia one last time. Her grin hasn’t left her face. She winks at me, and the confusion on my face grows. Shaking my head, I let it go and follow Mav out the door.

I buckle in as he closes the door and walks around to the other side.

“I need to run by Emma’s house real quick on the way. She wanted me to look at a couple of things she’s leaving behind that would look good in the new store I’m opening. They’re donating it all tomorrow, so I told her I would stop by tonight. I hope you don’t mind.”

“That was sweet of her. No, I don’t mind at all.”

He takes my hand and smiles at me before turning his attention back to the road. We pull into Emma’s driveway a short time later. He gets out and opens my door, helping me down from the jeep in my high heels. He’s got a boyish grin on his face, and I can’t help but grin back at him as we walk up the front steps. He unlocks the door and opens it for me as I step into the house.

My hand flies to my throat, and I gasp in shock. Candles are lit on every surface possible, and vases of daisies are everywhere. The place is completely empty except for a beautiful wooden table set for a dinner for two. Fairy lights have been strung around the place, giving it a magical feel. I turn to Maverick, and he’s watching me take it all in.

“You did all of this? It’s beautiful. It must have taken you hours to put all this together.”

“I had help from Noah, Emma, and Sophia, but I wanted to do something special for you.”

“I don’t know what to say. It’s...magical. It’s perfect.”

He takes my hand and walks me further into the house. There's a small box sitting on the table that he picks up and hands to me.

"This is gift one of two." I look at the small white box and run my fingers over the light pink ribbon. I open the box and see a key nestled inside.

"What's this?" I hold the key up and search his eyes.

"That is the key to our new home. This home. It's ours." His eyes search mine, and I look around the house I've grown to love, not really believing that it's ours.

"You bought a house? This house?"

He softly laughs at my shocked face. "When Noah told me Emma wanted to sell, I jumped on it. I couldn't think of a better place to make a home with you. I've put money back over the years with some of the surf competition money and made some smart investments, so it was an easy decision to buy. My lease is up this month, and Sophia wants to take mine over because it's a smaller one-bedroom, and she loves the tub."

"No wonder she was excited. I knew something was up but couldn't figure it out. She knew what you had planned tonight."

"She almost ruined the surprise tonight with her excitement. She never has been good at keeping secrets."

"No, she hasn't," I laugh.

"We will, of course, have to add on at some point when we have kids, but for now, it's perfect. You have a room overlooking the water you can use for your office, and our neighbors are pretty cool up on the hill..."

I throw myself in his arms, and he laughs. "It's perfect. You're perfect."

"It goes with your next gift," he says softly in my hair. I watch him bend on one knee, and my eyes instantly start to water as my emotions take over.

“Isabella Maya Bennett, I’ve loved you my whole life but never truly knew what that meant until you broke down my walls, and I let myself see what I truly wanted for the first time in my life. I want to build a life with you in this house and raise a family. I want to spend every sunrise with you on that deck, watching the first light hit the water with you in my arms. I want you to be the first person I see in the morning and the last person I see before I go to sleep every day for the rest of my life. I’m so deeply in love with you, and I want to start our life together with you tonight if you’ll have me. Will you marry me and be by my side as my forever person?”

The tears fall down my face as the love I feel for this man overcomes me. I see that same love shining bright in his eyes as he looks at me. I drop to my knees, nodding and crying.

“Yes,” I say through my tears. “Yes, I’ll marry you. I’ve loved you my whole life and promise to continue loving you for the rest of mine. You’re my forever person, too,” I whisper.

He grins that dimpled grin I love so much as he puts the most beautiful diamond ring I’ve ever seen on my finger before he softly kisses my lips, savoring every second and committing it to memory.

He rests his forehead against mine. “I love you, Bell,” he whispers.

“I love you more,” I say softly.

“Not possible,” he grins.

Pulling me up with him, he leads me to the back deck. I put my hands on the rail and breathe in the salty air. His arms come around me from behind, and I lean back against him. I close my eyes and take in the feel of him, knowing we will fill these walls with love for many years to come. *Our home.*

I can hear the waves crashing against the shoreline as I open my eyes and see the night is full of stars. I see Andromeda and Perseus side by side, shining extra bright tonight as if they’re giving us their blessing. I know without a doubt our love story will be written up there in the stars one

day, shining brightly for all to see. Connected by Stars...him and me.

## THE END

THIS ISN'T the last time you will see Maverick and Bella! Grab your FREE bonus scene at [www.sophiabelleauthor.com](http://www.sophiabelleauthor.com). You will also see all the characters again in Book Three in the Connected Series coming Spring/Summer 2024! What happens when the hot tattoo artist and single dad moves into town?

Sophia has one rule...no dating the dads of her students, but when she finds out that the little boy with grey eyes who has stolen her heart is the son of the one man who's ever made her feel alive, will she be able to resist him or is this rule made to be broken?

Travis was left once, five years ago, with a newborn in his arms, and he's vowed to protect his son from ever being left behind again. He's got a good routine going, and the casual hookups satisfy his needs, keeping his private life out of it. When a beautiful stranger needs his help one night in a bar, the urge to protect her gets deeply rooted in his being, and no matter how hard he tries to resist, she has her claws in him now, and this may be a fight that he will gladly lose.

IF YOU HAVEN'T READ Noah and Emma's love story yet, check out Book One in the Connected Series, Connected by Souls.

*No matter where they are or how far away, they vowed to always find one another.*

*Noah*

I've dreamt of the green-eyed beauty my whole life. No other woman has come close to what I feel for her in my dreams.

But what if they weren't dreams but memories of our past lives together? All my memories have one thing in common—she is mine, and this lifetime will be no different.

*Emma*

The last year of my life has been a living hell, but I survived.

Packing up everything I own, I head to a small town in Florida. I feel an undeniable pull to this place that I can't



ignore. Vowing to protect my heart, I've sworn off love, but my neighbor has other plans. One look into his intense blue eyes ignites a familiarity and passion I cannot resist.

FOLLOW ALL my social media platforms and sign up for my newsletter to get behind-the-scenes updates and sneak peeks, plus download a FREE bonus scene of one of Noah and Emma's past lives. Grab your copy below!

Sophia Belle

[www.sophiabelleauthor.com](http://www.sophiabelleauthor.com)



# About the Author

Sophia Belle is an emerging author of contemporary romance. She loves writing about small-town romances where the guys have boy-next-door qualities but love turning up the heat in the bedroom.

Connected by Souls is her debut novel.

When she's not writing, you can find her boating with her family on the weekends, enjoying the beaches, homeschooling their youngest, and going on fun group dates with their friends. She lives in Florida with her husband, three children, and two golden retrievers, and yes, Mimi and Papaw live above the garage, just like in the book. :)

## *A note from Sophia*

One night, I dreamed about the characters from *Connected by Souls*. I woke up in the middle of the night, opened my laptop, and started writing. I have always been an avid reader but had no clue what I was doing. I was having so much fun writing that I told myself if I only did this for my eyes, it would be enough because it brought me so much joy.

Before I knew it, I had an entire novel sitting in front of me. A novel I cried and laughed with while sitting in the dark by myself, typing away in the still of the night. A story I knew needed to be shared with others.

I've opened up this whole creative world that I didn't know existed inside me, and I never want it to end. Writing has given me something I can own outside of being a mom. A sense of accomplishment and joy that I didn't know was missing.

I look forward to beginning my journey as an author, and I'm excited to connect with my readers on a deeper level. I've put my heart and soul into what I write, and my wish for you is to feel connected to my characters as much as I do.



Sophia Belle

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