

LOVE ISLAND DUOLOGY

HAWAIIAN HOLIDAY



ELLE JORDAN

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To all of those who complete things simply because your husband/partner said you wouldn't. May the spite fuel all your future endeavors.

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CONTENT WARNING

This novel contains explicit language and sexually explicit scenes. Not intended for those under 18. Additionally, some humor or verbiage may be deemed offensive by some, read at your own discretion.

One

Isla

“**Y**ou have got to be kidding me, Addie. I’m literally checked in and at the gate. What am I going to do alone in Hawaii for two weeks? The plane boards in two minutes and, being that you haven’t answered any of my forty-eight calls, I am guessing you will not be boarding with me. Your excuse better be good, like you’re in a coma or something, and even then, I will still be mad,” I basically yell into the phone. Scratch that, I am yelling.

I am a hundred percent confident that I am causing a scene, and I am also a hundred percent sure I don’t give a fuck.

The people watchers will be eating this up.

I hang up as aggressively as I can without having a flip phone. I wish I had one for a moment like this. It is so much more satisfying.

People are buzzing around me. Some rushing to catch flights, some trying to herd their children like they are cattle

into the direction of their gates.

It dawns on me that I will now be spending the holidays completely alone. And freshly single. I should have gone on the cruise with my parents, but how lame would that have been? Not that I don't enjoy spending time with my parents, they're amazing and I've gone on a handful of trips with them. But being stuck in the middle of the ocean with them for two weeks is a bit much.

Hawaii with my best friend for two weeks sounded like a wonderful idea at the time. Not now, obviously. Ugh. She is so, so, so dead to me. She better not actually be dead or I will feel so guilty. I don't have that eerie gut feeling, so I am guessing she's alive.

"Now boarding Flight 3430 at Gate A7 to sunny Hawaii. Please make sure all carry-ons are of the correct size. Families, any passengers requiring special assistance, and active duty military, please make your way to the front of the line. We will begin boarding shortly. All those in first class, please make your way to the line as well. Thank you for choosing Hawaiian Airlines." The overhead announcement makes me jump a little in my seat. My attention is brought back to the fact that I have to make this choice right now. People start getting up and shuffling closer to the gate we will be boarding at.

Sweet Jesus. Do I go to Hawaii alone? Should I just go home? There is no way I will get this trip refunded. I worked my ass off for months to save up for this trip. It was supposed to be the kind of trip where we didn't say no to anything.

Fancy, three-hundred-dollar dinner? Yes, please! Room service and hot stone massages? Here's my card!

I bought a whole new wardrobe and spent months in the gym so I could feel good wearing the swimsuits I wouldn't dare wear around anyone I know. I can't even sit in a restaurant by myself for a meal without feeling awkward and anxious. So, how the fuck am I going to do that three times a day for fourteen days?

Ugh.

Okay.

Standing in front of the large windowpanes, I look at the runways and planes jetting off into the sky. If I don't go, I know I would regret it.

You know what? Fuck it. I am going. It will be fine. I will have the time of my life being a lone, lonely loner. Being alone in Hawaii is still better than being in Colorado. It's freezing balls out, and it's not even snowing. So, it's not pretty, and definitely not worth being cold. I have a love-hate relationship with snow. Love how it looks, hate how cold it has to be to snow.

After waiting in line to board, I finally get on the plane. I am one of the last to board, so the remaining seats are the ones where you are for sure sitting in the middle seat, sandwiched between two strangers.

Joy.

I sit down next to a middle-aged man dressed in business attire whose headphones are already in. I like it. He will leave me alone. I put one of my bags in the overhead bin. Once I close it and get ready to sit the man in the window seat turns to look at me.

Wowza. He looks like sex on a stick.

His hair is dark and his eyes are blue. Need I say more? He fills out his hoodie well, and I can see his biceps through the sleeves. Jesus. Arm muscles to women are what cleavage is to men. It's science. I am for sure going to accidentally say something stupid to him during these eight hours of travel. Hot men just cause my brain to short circuit.

As I sit down, I pull my headphones out and shove my backpack under the seat in front of me. I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. Pulling it out, I see a long message from Addie. Well, at least she isn't dead, but I can't say it will stay that way next time I see her.

I pull up the message.

"Isla I am so so sorry, Andy came over late last night and unplugged my phone from the charger without telling me and I just now woke up. My phone was dead so none of my alarms went off. There is obviously no way I will make it on time to the airport, I just woke up a couple of minutes ago. I hope you still go. I would call but I know you should be on the plane by now based off your last hate mail. Please still love me."

I know it was a genuine mistake but I am still pissed that I am spending a two-week vacation, over Christmas, completely

alone.

I already am not the biggest fan of her new love interest, and now, he is number one on my shit list. Chances are he will be in the past by the time I return, anyways. She goes through men faster than she does underwear. Leaving her on read, I turn my phone on airplane mode. My rage must be radiating because Mr. Hottie turns his way to look at me.

“You okay? You seem a little upset,” he says as he smiles at me. Hot and nice. Good for him. Or maybe he’s afraid he’s sitting next to a psycho for eight hours. I’m pretty sure I scoffed at her message a handful of times. My mental stability is questionable most days, anyways.

“Depends on your version of okay, I guess. My best friend just ditched me, and now, I am about to spend two weeks in Hawaii completely by myself,” I huff out, the tone of my voice displaying every bit of the annoyance I am feeling.

It occurs to me then that I shouldn’t be telling a stranger that I am going to be completely alone in a place I am unfamiliar with.

“That was stupid to tell a random stranger. So, please tell me you’re not a weirdo stalker who will kidnap me and make this vacation even worse?” Cringing as I look over at him.

He laughs and shakes his head.

“No words, huh? Not looking good for me then,” I retort, blushing a little ‘cause I’m aware of just how stupid I sound.

What is it about hot men that makes my brain turn to mush? I didn't even last five minutes before I said something stupid. I want so badly to be one of those girls who is well-spoken and can flirt their way into any situation, but unfortunately, God didn't bless me with that skill. He gave me a great ass and a sense of humor, but not a suave bone in my body.

"I am happy to report that I am not a weird stalker or serial killer. Actually, I am on my way to spend a Christmas vacation with my family. I will probably need a vacation for my vacation by the time I am done with them," he says as he folds up his tray and slides his laptop into his backpack, getting ready for takeoff.

"Ooh, yeah, rookie mistake. My parents offered to take me on a cruise with them this week, but I declined. I like my mental health as unhinged as possible, and two weeks trapped at sea with my parents sounds like a mental breakdown waiting to happen." My parents really are great, they are free spirits and full of life. They have transitioned more into friends in my adult years and I love that. I just don't think my mental health could handle being constantly together for two weeks.

He chuckles at my joke, which makes me feel a little bit better about my blabbering.

"Well, my sister is getting married while we are here, so it would be frowned upon to skip out. My name is Callahan, but my friends call me Cal." He reaches his hand toward me and it takes me an embarrassingly long four seconds to realize he wants me to shake his hand.

“Oh! Nice to meet you, Cal. My name is Isla. Where are you traveling from?”

“I’m flying from Maine. I live in a small town by the coast. What about yourself?”

“I am from here, Colorado. I live about an hour from here. Maine is much cooler. We don’t have lobster here, but we do have crawdads, which are basically little miniature lobsters if you think about it.” I don’t care what anyone says, they are delicious and not just from the south. That is also yet another dumb thing to say, but it could be worse.

He chuckles a little before replying, “I can promise you the lobster would blow your little crawdads out of the water.”

“I’d argue but I’m sure you’re right. Are you staying on Oahu, or planning to travel to the other islands?” I question.

“Just Oahu. We have a handful of family outings planned. I am already working out how I can get out of half of them. They’re beach bums, and while that sounds like a good time, there is a lot out there to be explored.”

I chuckle a little. He thinks the same way I do. Usually, I come back from vacations more exhausted than when I left. Addie made sure to schedule beach bum days because she knew I’d run us into the ground.

“Addie and I had this whole itinerary planned. We were going to go and ride ATVs, take surf lessons, snorkel, and hike until we dropped. I’m sure there are other things to add to the list, but we wanted to keep our options open.”

We spend the next three hours discussing plans for the trip and random funny stories. I have never been so happy to be recently dumped in my life.

I'm not going to lie, I had been awful for the last month hoping Joe would break up with me. We dated for six months and, at month four, he got comfortable and, ugh. Big yikes. Not what I had in mind, and not what he was originally selling, if you know what I mean.

Time is precious, I had already wasted too much on him. If he hadn't talked me out of a breakup twice before—and believe me, I truly tried—we would have been done weeks if not months before. But he was the master of guilt-tripping. I'd bring it up and he would loop it back to being stressed or how he felt loved when I did things for him. Doing things for him turned into doing everything for him. Obviously, that was a big no-no for me.

If he would have just let me dump him like a normal person, I wouldn't have had to act like a she-devil for the last two months of our relationship. I am glad I finally stuck to my guns. When I mentioned splitting this last time, he must have been sick of my shit because he *finally* agreed.

Eventually, the conversation dies down, and Cal pulls out his laptop to work. I have downed two apple juices, so I decide to be the annoying middle passenger and make my way to the restroom. I always feel so guilty for making the other seat get up so I can squeeze out.

Walking back from the bathroom, I sense his eyes roam over my body and I feel myself blush. I cannot play cool to save my life. I could feel his eyes on me when I was walking to the bathroom, making me extra glad I was wearing those leggings that make my booty pop.

Another four hours pass and I wait for him to make a move. Maybe ask for my number. But when the pilot makes the overhead announcement that we will be landing soon, I can feel my hope dropping down along with the altitude of the plane.

As we get up to grab our bags from the overhead bin, he seems a bit nervous and flustered. He grabs my bag first and hands it to me with a soft smile, revealing all of his perfect white teeth. I bet he didn't even need braces. He was probably God's favorite and just was born like that.

We walk up through the plane aisle and through the tarmac.

He clears his throat. "It was really great meeting you, Isla. Maybe we'll bump into each other again before we leave."

"Thank you for making a long flight more enjoyable. I hope you have a great time. Fingers crossed." I can't believe myself when I realize I've winked at him. I send the flirtiest smile I can muster and make sure to sway my hips in a way that demands attention as I walk away from him.

I get my bags after what feels like a million years of waiting, and find my way to the rental car place. Surprisingly, it is painless, and I even get a free upgrade.

When I make my way to my incredibly small blue Chevy Sonic, I am glad for the free upgrade. How small would my original choice have been? I really need to learn to read descriptions better before I book things.

I throw my bags—all three of them—into the trunk. After a little game of Tetris, they all fit. Sort of, I had to put some force into closing the trunk but it finally latched. Walking to the front of the car, I get seated in the driver's seat. Opting out of turning on the A/C, I roll the windows down instead. I turn the navigation on my phone on, and I am finally on my way.

After being at airports and in airplanes for the last eight hours, it feels great to have the windows down and that warm Hawaiian breeze in my hair. The fresh air revitalizes me after the long day of traveling. I almost can't believe I am actually finally here after all the months of planning.

If the trip is as good as the flight, this vacation might not be as miserable as I originally thought.

Two

Isla

Hawaii is a dream. This is the second morning I've had coffee on the lanai, which is the word they use around here for "patio." At least, that is how I understand it.

Today, I plan on road-tripping around the island. I was obsessed with the movie "Blue Crush" as a kid, and I've been practically bursting at the seams with excitement to go see the North Shore for myself. But first, Leonard's. They are supposed to have the best malasadas, and I have been daydreaming about them since we started planning our trip.

I get dressed, which takes all of five minutes, considering all I have to do is put on a bikini, some shorts, and a T-shirt. As I put my hair in a braid to keep it from tangling in the water later, I look around the room. It's nicer than I thought it would be. It has a mini seating area when you first walk in, two large queen-sized beds, and a very large bathroom that I am sure I will still manage to destroy once I get all my toiletries

unpacked. Addie is the tidy one; I am described as a walking tornado.

I decide now is a good time to take Addie out of friendship jail and actually call her. It should be around her lunch break if I am doing my time difference math right. I texted her the first night I arrived to let her know I made it okay and got checked into the room so she wouldn't worry. She apologized a million and four times, and I do genuinely feel badly for her. Who would purposely miss out on a two-week vacation in paradise? No one.

I plop down at the table on the lanai, wanting to enjoy the Hawaiian breeze and dial Addie's number. She answers on the first ring.

"You're really missing out. The room was worth the extra fifty bucks a night for an ocean view." I am not actually mad at her. Well, maybe a little. The bitch is making me do a whole-ass vacation alone, but it'll be good for me. I need to work on being more independent. And, let's be real, she got the shitty end of the stick.

"I am so happy you called. I am so, so sorry. I've been looking at finding a way to get out there, Isla, but I just cannot afford it. The flights are like two thousand dollars."

"Don't worry about it. I will be fine. The front desk lady knows I am alone and has checked on me this morning and both nights. Before you ask, yes, I did put you down for my emergency contact," I say, knowing good and well she would

want to be kept in the loop. We have been best friends for years, so I know her like the back of my hand.

“Oh, well, good. Tell me everything. What have you done so far?” She sounds chipper for a girl who is missing out on a vacation of a lifetime.

“The flight was good. I sat next to this guy who was incredibly attractive and, of course, I made a complete fool of myself. I think I forgot how to flirt.”

“You can’t forget something you never learned, babe.” She, too, knows me and knows I cannot flirt to save my life. Get some alcohol in me and I will surely try, though. Maybe I should have had some vodka sodas instead of apple juice on the plane.

“Rude, but okay. Yesterday, I just explored around the area of the hotel a little. The Mai Tais are as good as they say.” My nose scrunches as I think about how strong the liquor tasted. “Well, actually, they’re super strong, but after you finish one, you really don’t care. I went swimming and saw a sea turtle, which made me really excited to go snorkeling. Today, I am going to the North Shore. I am hoping I can take some surf lessons or something there. Really live out my “Blue Crush” moment.”

She laughs at that. “As long as I get a video of you eating shit off a surfboard, I think I will survive the raging jealousy I have right now.”

“Is Andy surviving his guilt okay?” I ask.

“I think as of right now, I could get away with murder. I cried when I realized what had happened. He offered to pay for my plane ticket, but I can’t do that. He will spend the rest of his life making it up to me,” she says. We both know he will not be around for the rest of her life, but I love her optimism.

“Maybe you can guilt him into taking you to Hawaii as repayment.” I glance down at the alarm clock on the table and see the time. “I need to get going. I am stopping by Leonard’s this morning, and the longer I wait, the longer the line will be.” Also, my stomach is already growling. It’s already noon in Colorado and my stomach hasn’t got the memo that we are in a different time zone.

“You better take a million pictures and send them to me every day. Love you. Don’t get eaten by a shark.” What wonderful words of encouragement that girl has.



The line to Leonard’s is long and it’s only 7:00 a.m. Parking was an absolute nightmare. The closest spot I could find was three blocks away. I might as well have just walked from my room. That is a bit dramatic but still, the parking situation here is horrendous.

I am digging through my purse, trying to find my debit card while walking up to the line, when I crash into a brick wall.

Nope, that’s a person. Oh, how the embarrassment gods have opened their clouds to shine down on me.

Reaching out to steady myself, I find myself gripping a bicep—a nicely toned bicep at that—not that it’s important right now. Much to my dismay, it’s not just a person. It’s the guy from the plane, who I may or may not have had an X-rated dream about last night. Why does this kind of shit *always* happen to me?

“When I said I hope we run into each other again, I didn’t think you would take it so literally.” He chuckles. His hands are on my shoulders, trying to steady me.

“Shit, Cal, I am so sorry. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going and, well, you know what happened.” I wince internally. Why am I like this?

“Don’t sweat it. How have your first days on the island been? I see you are finding the good stuff.” He nods his head towards Leonard’s.

The line is starting to wrap around the aged building. I was expecting a shinier, newer building, but the smells coming from it are absolutely heavenly and sweet.

“It’s been great. It’s more beautiful than I could have imagined.” He looks around and even in the residential area there is greenery and flowers popping up from every corner and crevice. “And, hell yeah. If I am going to know one thing about a trip, it’s going to be the best places to get food. This is on my Top Five list,” I reply as we walk up to the line together.

“You’ve got a whole list, huh? Man, I must be slacking on my vacation planning skills.” He chuckles as he looks down at

me.

“If you are really nice to me, I might share my top three with you. I’ll even be really nice and not count Leonard’s as one of them,” I joke, and by joke, I mean shamelessly flirt. Or at least try to.

I was so bummed after he never asked me for my number when we went our separate ways on the plane. I have decided that Island Isla is different from Colorado Isla, and this is the one time it’s okay to break my cardinal rule of never making the first move. So far, the rule has worked as a great defense mechanism for embarrassment, but I’ve already embarrassed myself. So, what could it hurt?

“Wow, only three, huh? What do I have to do to earn all five top spots?” He flashes that megawatt smile at me and I almost check to see if my panties hit the floor. I bet he has broken some hearts with a smile like that.

“Well, technically, I’d only be holding out on one, since we are in line for the fourth,” I say as I bump his shoulder playfully. “What kind of plans do you have for the day?” I ask.

“Today is my first day of freedom. I really wanted to check out the North Shore, but my sister took the rental car we’re sharing. So, it’ll have to wait until she finally gives me a turn with the thing. Life tip: never share a rental car with your bossy, older sister.”

He walks with his hands in his swim trunks up the line as it edges forward.

A plain white tee hugs his chest, showing off every bit of what he is working with. The hoodie on the plane did not do him justice. His dark hair is unstyled but has some wave to it, so he still looks put together. I have to try my best to keep from gawking at him.

“You act like a couple days with your family was a million years,” I laugh but completely understand the sentiment. One hour with your family is the equivalent to one day without them.

“When your dad is your boss, it does feel like a million years. He hasn’t quite grasped the work-life balance yet. A little space from him today was completely necessary,” he says. An idea pops in my head and I decide to run with it.

“I know we just met so this might sound a little crazy. Most things I say are, anyways, but if you really want my Top Five list, you can come with me to the North Shore today. I was planning on going there today, too. The free ride will cost you, though.” A weak attempt at a bribe, I will admit, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Do these malasadas count as payment?” He inclines his head towards the building they are serving them out of. All I can see from this side of the building is the large flashing “Leonard’s” sign. It reminds me of the old signs diners used to have: large, blinking light bulbs and faded pastel pink.

“I will allow it. It’s a top five after all. So, it holds some weight.” I grin at him. I feel like a giddy fifteen-year-old girl talking to her crush at lunch.

“Perfect. Did you have anything else in mind today? I’m free until five tonight,” he asks.

“There is this hike I’d like to do. I was going to skip it since Addie abandoned me, and doing it by myself screams ‘Kidnap me!’ But if you’re up for it, I’d love to go.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re no longer concerned I have ill will against you,” he pokes fun at me, referencing the embarrassing first time we met when I blabbered like an idiot. Glad to see he is the forgetful type.

“I wrote down a few trailheads around here,” I reply as I pull out my phone to get my hiking list, trying to completely bypass his reference to my plane blabbering. If I don’t acknowledge it, it didn’t happen. Right?

He pulls out his phone, and I see that his third one is the same one I wanted to do.

I point to his phone, showing him the trail I was thinking of. “This is the one I am dying to do. I’ve heard it’s one hell of a hike, but the views are killer.”

“Alright, I’m game. I’ll buy us each an extra malasada so we can get our energy. Do you need to go change your shoes?” He looks down at my shoes. I’m wearing sandals, so I get his concern, but these babies are practically built for four-wheel drive.

“Don’t let the footwear trick you, honey. I will be kicking your ass all the way up the trail.” I wiggle my sandal at him as I respond.

“Mhmm, I will believe it when I see it,” he replies as we move ourselves up in line.

The line moves quicker than expected, and we walk out with a dozen malasadas. They smell even more heavenly than they did down the block. I open the box and steam billows out. I have to keep my mouth shut in fear of drooling all over them.

We get out of people’s way and head in the general direction where I parked. I don’t even bother to find a place to sit, not that there are any options besides the curb on the sidewalk anyways.

The malasadas are all covered in sugar and fried to perfection. I take a bite, and this one is filled with pastry cream. I think I’ve died and gone to Heaven. A small moan escapes my lips, which makes Cal snap his head up and give me a look. It appears someone has a dirty mind.

After we inhale two malasadas each, we make small talk on our way to my rental car. It’s tiny, but it’ll get the job done.

“Sick ride,” Cal says as he kicks the tire while chuckling to himself.

“It was the cheapest option, okay? Don’t be a hater. At least I’m not sharing it with my mom,” I say as I stick my tongue out at him. Very mature, I know.

“I’m sharing it with my sister, thank you very much. Sheesh, and they say men are bad listeners,” he says as he pulls on the handle, opens the door, and hops in the car.

I type in the address to my GPS, and we are on our way to wherever adventure calls us.

Three

Cal

I kicked myself over and over about not getting Isla's number on the plane. In my mind, it wasn't logical to. It wouldn't ever go anywhere. We live thousands of miles apart, and you can't really pursue someone you most likely will never see again. I rarely do things for shits and giggles and a holiday hookup would definitely fall into that category.

I know, I know. It's a vacation. I should let loose. It feels like nails on a chalkboard when I try to go with the flow. I have gone pretty far in my career for my age, and I didn't get there by not thinking logically. I am structured. I have detailed plans, and meeting a slightly unhinged blondie on the plane was not in my plans.

Unhinged might be the wrong word. Maybe quirky? You couldn't guess the shit that comes out of her mouth if you tried. She made an eight-hour day of traveling slightly less miserable. When I ran into her again this morning, I knew it was the Universe's sign of telling me I fucked up the first time.

To my surprise, the girl has some balls and actually made the first move. I respect that.

After an hour drive with the worst traffic ever, we finally make it to our destination. I got to experience “Road Rage Isla”, which was a real treat. One second, we would be in conversation, she would be mid-sentence, and the next, she was flipping off some dude for cutting her off in traffic. Watching a cute little blonde be ready to throw down with a dude for cutting her off and then slowing down in front of her shouldn’t turn me on, but it did. If I thought the drive turned me on, I was in over my head for when we got to the hiking trail.

She didn’t lie when she said the views on this hike are incredible. I mean, we haven’t reached anywhere cool yet, but I’ve been staring at her ass for the last thirty minutes, and there has not and will not be a single complaint coming from my mouth. She was right about the sandals, too. She’s been kicking my ass the whole way up the trail, sandals and all.

The trail is about six-feet wide, lined with tons of bushes and trees I’ve never seen back home before.

I’m trying to disguise how winded I sound. My attempts are in vain because I am sweating like a pig, and if I breathe any shallower, I am going to pass out. I’m keeping my eyes on the prize, and by prize, I mean the nice, juicy peach of an ass in front of me.

“If you need to take a break, just say so.” Isla looks back and chuckles. I guess I am not hiding it well at all. Eating two

donuts before a hike was a bad idea.

“How are you not dying? You don’t even look like you’re breaking a sweat,” I pant out.

“Dude, I’m from Colorado. We hike mountains all the time, and the elevation leaves us with like two molecules of oxygen. The humidity is the only thing different out here.”

“See, I’m used to the humidity, but I can’t say that I climb mountains for fun. Just give me like two seconds, and I’ll be ready.” I take the lid off my water bottle and chug a good quarter of it. I spill half of it down my chest, which Isla of course sees and is laughing to herself.

It’s not like my shirt wasn’t wet already from the sweat, but I decide now is a good time to strip. I reach my hand to the hem and pull my shirt up and over my head.

If I had any doubts that the attraction between Isla and me was one-sided, that is over now. She’s not even hiding the fact that she’s staring. Who is laughing now? I should play it cool and be a gentleman, but I can’t help myself. She is way too easy to tease. I put on a good show of slowly stripping my shirt off. I am the farthest thing from a cocky man, but I work hard to have a good physique and am really grateful for that as I feel Isla’s eyes assess every inch of me.

“Hasn’t anyone told you it’s rude to stare?” I wink at her as I wad up my shirt, shove it in my backpack, and take another drink of water.

I watch the blush rise up from her chest and flush her face.

Just when I think I have finally stunned her into silence, she opens her mouth.

“Coming from the man who has been staring at my ass the entire hike ... Yes, I noticed. I am glad it has given you the motivation to keep going and not croak on me.” She shoots me a devious little smile, pats my cheek with her hand a couple times, and then turns on her heels and heads right back up the mountain.

Checkmate.

How do I recover from being called out like that? How did she even notice? I am convinced all women are born with eyes in the back of their heads.

“Well, Thor, what are your plans for the rest of your stay? You got any fun Christmas plans?”

“Thor?”

“You know, like the muscly man from the movies with the hammer?” she explains.

“If you think I look like Thor, I don’t think the island will have room for how much my ego will grow.” I chuckle a little, suddenly feeling much better about myself. “Well, my sister is getting married the day after tomorrow, on Christmas Eve. Tomorrow, we have the rehearsal dinner. After that, they are going to their own separate hotel to get some space from us. Basically, she is abandoning me with our parents. I purposefully booked a hotel that was next to my parents’ hotel. I don’t think I could handle them randomly showing up.”

Knowing my luck, they would still try and pop in unannounced.

“Man, you are really third wheeling it, huh? No wonder you are trying to run away,” she says as she puts away her water bottle. She pulls out a granola bar and offers me one, but I’m struggling to hold down my donuts right now. So, I shake my head no.

“I am not running away. My parents are just beach bums, and I actually want to go out and do stuff. Can you see my sixty-year-old parents hiking up this mountain?” I point to the top, which we are finally getting close to.

This hike is marked as beginner/intermediate. I would hate to see what their definition of a difficult hike is.

“Okay, okay, fair enough. If you’re struggling, I’m sure they’d be even worse.” She turns to wink at me. She sits with her knees pulled to her chest, looking completely at ease.

“Okay, it’s race on. Whoever reaches the top last has to buy lunch.” I take one final swig of my water and put it in my backpack. She puts her backpack back on as well.

We line up, side by side, and get in our racing stance.

“On the count of three, we go.”

“One ... two ... ”

“Three,” Isla chirps as she takes off like a bat out of hell. Her taking over the count startles me a little and gives her a second head start.

Cheater, cheater.

The girl gives me a run for my money. I've got a good six inches on her height-wise, and I still have to use every bit of it to beat her to the top. Just when I think I got her, she hip-checks me and we both go down. Next thing I know, our backpacks are flying off. I do the tuck and roll to protect myself, and somehow, Isla ends up underneath me.

The dust we kicked up finally starts to settle and no longer engulfs us. We are both winded and breathing heavily from the all-out sprint, but I think my dick has other ideas on what is actually happening here. In its defense, there is a hot and breathless woman underneath me. Usually, that means we're about to have a good time.

I see it in Isla's face when it registers that parts of me are very excited. Actually, all parts of me are excited. I am just trying to be a gentleman. It would take heavy convincing on my part to get my body to listen and roll off of her.

She starts to press herself against me. Just a little. Just enough to let me know we are on the same page. The girl knows what she is doing. All practicality goes out the window when you have a smoking hot girl giving you the green light.

This is not my thing in the slightest, but feeling her grind herself against me only makes me harder. I look down at her face and it would be a crime not to give her what she wants. I lean in and kiss her. Already breathing heavily from our race adds to the heat of the moment. She lets my mouth explore hers and moans a little.

Jesus.

She runs her hands through my hair and it sets off a trigger in me. It feels like anywhere she touches is on fire. It takes everything I have in me to pull back, but we are in a very public area, and I can faintly hear someone in the distance, probably on the neighboring path. We took a more secluded way to the top, opting for the more scenic route, and I am very happy about that.

“I think you should have some points deducted for cheating.” I wink down at her as I help pull her to her feet.

“Hey now. All is fair in love and war. I won. It seems you were pretty excited about me winning, too.” She looks down to where my little commander is standing at attention. “So, you will need to send your complaints elsewhere.” She rolls her eyes at me, and I can’t help but make them want to roll for other reasons.

I chuckle a little while I take a look around. The view is absolutely to die for. Everything here is so green and, from up here, you can see for miles. Rolling hills of nothing but green and trees with the brightest flowers you have ever seen. When you look out past the greenery, the water is endless, hugging the shoreline everywhere you look. White caps are filling the sand as the waves crash over the reef.

I see why tourism in this state is so high. Everywhere you turn could be a postcard. I wish I could bottle up the smell here, too—the freshness of it. Almost like a floral saltwater

smell, which would track, you know. With the flowers. And the saltwater.

The breeze gives us some relief from the sun. We hiked past the trees now and walked to stand on some lone rocks.

“The view worth the hassle, Cal?” Isla turns back to look at me. This girl is as beautiful as the view and I don’t think she even realizes it.

“Oh, yeah. It’s one thousand percent worth almost dying and getting tackled by a female linebacker.” I send her a wide grin.

She grabs an old polaroid camera out of her backpack. I’m glad she remembered to grab hers. I was so in awe of the view that I left mine a few feet below us.

“I brought this so I can develop the film when I get home and relive the trip. I wanted to make a memory book of mine and Addie’s trip ... Which is now just my trip, I guess. Want to hop in the picture with me?” she asks.

“Hell yeah, I do. You’ll have to mail me a copy when you get home.”

We turn around to get the best part of the view. I throw my arm around her shoulders and put on the cheesiest smile I can muster, while I start thinking of ways to see her more during our time here.

Four

Isla

The drive to the North Shore goes as quickly as anything can in Hawaii. Island time is a real thing. Add Christmas and peak tourism season, and you might as well just walk. The amount of traffic here is insane, which I can handle, but the driving style here is scary to say the least. I am incredibly grateful for GPS; I cannot imagine trying to figure out this island with an old school map.

I'm biting at the bit to get to see the beaches and eat. Thankfully, the traffic settles the farther we get from Waikiki.

I'm practically molten lava sitting next to Cal after our little encounter on the hike. I'm a little proud of myself. I wasn't sure if he was into me, but being that I got a general's salute, that thought can fly right out the window.

"Hope you're ready to loosen up those purse strings. I have a big appetite, and you owe me lunch," I say as we circle the food truck lot, looking for parking.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve always heard cheaters are big eaters.”

“Luckily for you, these shrimp trucks are on the list of my Top Five. So, really, you’re not walking away empty-handed.” I turn my head and grin at him.

“Wow, letting those out so soon? I figured you’d make me work for it.”

That’s not the only thing I’d give him without working for it. Honestly, if he would have tried something on that mountain, I probably would have gone for it. I almost forgot we were in public, but I can’t say that it didn’t add to the thrill. It’s like being a teenager again—half the excitement is hiding it and trying to not get caught. I have gotten down and dirty in my fair share of public places. I think you could almost consider it a kink of mine at this point.

“You earned it after being a victim of my competitive side.”

I did tackle him to win, and I have absolutely no shame. I am competitive at heart, and I wasn’t going to let him get his moment in the sun. It got me under a super-hot man by cheating. So, I can’t regret much.

We spent about thirty minutes figuring out where to park. I heard parking here is crazy, but I underestimated just how crazy it really is. It doesn’t matter where you are—residential areas, shopping centers—there is rarely ever good parking available.

It looks like they have some holiday events going on down here, too. There are holiday lights strung up on trees and even some surfboards wrapped in Christmas lights, leaning against the trees. Some of the palm trees have ornaments hanging from them.

I am glad to see some festivities. Being from Colorado, it's a little odd not having a white Christmas. But the white sandy beaches can count, right? I've always loved Christmas. So, it brings me a little joy not having to miss out on the spirit of it.

We finally snag a spot when someone leaves as we pass by.

There are food trucks right by where the beach spots are. I practically leap out of the car with excitement. It smells so damn good, and my mouth is watering as we walk up to Giovanni's very long line, but patience is a virtue. Not one that I personally hold myself to, but it exists.

We make our way to the back of the line.

“So, Cal, got any special lady friends at home?”

I am not sure why I decided now was a good time to ask that. Probably should have thought of that before I made out with him while half-naked in public, but heat of the moment and all. If we were eleven, you would say I had a bit of a crush on him. A fun, little island fling could be just the thing to cure my lonely holiday blues. People always think that women can't have casual relationships. Like, you whip your dick out, and all of a sudden, our souls are super glued together and we will be a crying, blubbering mess when it's over.

No. At least not for me.

Everything has a purpose and time. Some things are meant to last forever and some things just get you through what you need at the time. I need a good, toe-curling rendezvous to make this Hawaiian holiday top-notch.

Addie would be proud; she says I need to get out there more. I feel like I get out there plenty, but the men in our area are just blah, and not at all worth the trouble. I can't wait to tell her allllll about this.

“No, I don't really date. I have been working on growing my company the last few years and haven't really had the time or desire. What about yourself?”

“Nope, no one special. I have the time, but most of the men in my circle are hardly anything to write home about.”

“Obviously, I'm not in that category. So, please let me know what home says when you write them about me.”

I blush a little when I realize he is flirting back with me. It looks like my lack of flirting skills isn't causing a hindrance. Maybe I never lacked flirting skills but just lacked chemistry with everyone else. It's not that I'm inexperienced with relationships or with having fun, but I'm also about as oblivious as a doorknob. You'll have to turn me and open the door all the way for me to pick up what you're putting down. Even then, it's not usually worth picking up, anyways.

“Wow, one little kiss, and now you think you'll be in the letter to home, huh?”

In his defense, it was one of the best—if not *the* best kiss—I’ve ever had, and I absolutely will be writing home about him. By home, I mean Addie. She will be eating this shit up like the Last Supper.

His eyes darken just slightly and his lips turn up in a smirk. “Don’t lie. I know you were as hot and bothered as I was. I am pretty sure if I would have slipped a finger into those shorts of yours, they would have shown you were as turned on as I was.”

He shocks me a little with his reply. Not that I know him well enough to be shocked by his behavior, but he does seem to be wound a little tight and minds his p’s and q’s.

I immediately blush. Once again, he’s not wrong. He could probably do that now and the evidence would still be there. However, being called out like that takes some wind out of my sails. I was winning the tug-of-war game until now.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll get the chance to test that theory out again if you play your cards right.” I wink at him and then turn on my heels to walk up to the counter. By the look that was on his face, I think I stunned him into silence.

I internally pat myself on the back for a job well done.

Five

Cal

You know in high school and college when you're so sure you're going to get laid but don't? I don't think this is going to be a repeat of that. I'd been so close to finally shocking her into silence, but once again, she rose to the task.

It was extremely bold and out of character for me to say something like that. Well, maybe not, but at least out of character to say it in public and to someone I've only known, what, three days? Judging by the blush on her cheeks, I would say she was keen to bold. I am going to take note of that and stick it in my back pocket for later use.

It feels good to be the more free version of myself. I wasn't always such a tight-ass. I used to have fun, but then being an adult got real. Work started going really well for me, and the next thing I knew, I was boring, skipping going out in order to work late, and only striving to better my career. While that's not a bad thing, I miss having fun and not giving a flying fuck. My new personal mission is to be Fun Cal this trip.

Apparently, Fun Cal includes surf lessons. Isla, of course, found a hut of surfboards and, being that she could talk to a brick wall, found someone to give us lessons.

She's hell-bent on photographing this whole trip. I took a picture of her with a shrimp, her with a Christmas-decorated palm tree, and her with the surfboard. It's impossible to not smile a little, because the girl radiates pure and unfiltered joy. I haven't used a camera with film that has to be developed since my first iPhone. So, hopefully I'm using this thing right.

There is a community area close to the beach, with lockers to safely store your items and outdoor showers to rinse the sand off. We rented two lockers and threw all of our belongings in them as soon as we arrived. There are lots of vendors set up around the building, some selling handmade decor, but mostly lots of snack stands. They remind me of the concession stand our local pool used to have. We spent some time walking around and checking out the area before Isla dragged me off to the lessons.

The second I see Isla drag her soaking wet body on top of the surfboard, I wonder why I was nervous about surfing. If I get to look at that all day, I think I'll be just fine. I'm really trying to be a gentleman, but once you know how somebody's body feels under yours, it's hard not to think completely dirty thoughts.

Also, surfing is much more fun and much more difficult than I was anticipating. I hit the gym multiple times a week, but no amount of gym time prepares you for getting the shit beat out

of you by a wave as you're trying not to drown. However, not a thing in the world beats the feeling of getting up on a wave and how incredibly free you feel gliding across the water. There is nothing else like it.

I look over at the instructor when I finally get up on my board, expecting him to be as excited as I am about me standing on this death trap for more than three seconds. He's not. It looks like he's giving a very hands-on lesson to my new vacation buddy. Not that I can blame him for wanting to get his hands on her. She's beautiful and funny. However, I'm ninety-nine percent sure she's oblivious to his intentions.

It takes me a minute to register why I suddenly feel a bit pissed off.

Jealousy.

I have never been a jealous person, but watching the Maui demi-god lookalike graze Isla's thigh with his hands makes me think about grazing his face. With my fist.

The distraction causes me to lose my balance and tumble off my board. Water shoots up my nose and burns like a mother. Thankfully, the ankle strap keeps the board from floating to shore.

I get my bearings once I am back on my board and look back over to Isla. Great. I'm finally interested enough in a woman to be jealous and I've only got her for two weeks. This is probably a good life lesson for me, though. Learning how to go with the flow and enjoy things while you have them. Being a master planner sometimes isn't all it's cracked up to be. I

miss out on opportunities because of logic instead of just enjoying what life has brought me.

I paddle over to where Isla is sitting on her board next to the instructor. Once I am within earshot, I ask her, “Wanna try and catch one at the same time?” Borderline desperate to get her away from the instructor.

“Oh, yes! That would be so cool. Let me get closer to where you are.” She paddles over and we lay on our boards, looking behind us at the next set coming in.

I hear the instructor yell out, “This one! Paddle hard, guys!”

And we do. We paddle our asses off. This is the biggest wave I’ve seen out here yet.

“Make sure to sit your body up higher for these bigger waves,” the instructor yells over the rustling of the rushing water. I can barely hear him over the roaring of the water.

We follow his instruction and both find our feet at the same time. Once I am sure I am on my feet, I look over at Isla. The sun is hitting her just right, and she has a shit-eating grin on her face. I can’t help but smile in response. I know good and well this memory will be burned into my mind until the end of time.

We surf and play in the water long after our lesson ends. We finally get out of the water when our arms cannot paddle or pretty much move any longer. Both of us are looking a little burned and crisp; we probably should have reapplied

sunscreen. They weren't lying when they said the sun hits differently here.

We grab a snack from a man selling fresh fruit out of a cart and walk over to pull our belongings out of the locker. Once I open my locker, I pull out my phone. I look down at the time and the amount of texts and calls I missed.

“Shit,” I say, mostly under my breath.

My sister is going to kick my ass. We were supposed to have a family dinner to talk about the rehearsal dinner tomorrow. I'm not sure why we need to rehearse for the rehearsal, but whatever. Girls are weird when it comes to weddings. It's 6:00p.m., so it's safe to say I will not be making it back in time. It's an hour drive at best and, based on the amount of people pouring out of here, traffic will be slow-moving.

“Son of a bitch!” I hear and look up. Isla has dropped her whole backpack and the contents are everywhere. I walk over to her to help pick up her things. I debate on talking shit to her about being clumsy, but judging by the look on her face, that would not be a smart choice.

“Well, I've officially missed the rehearsal's rehearsal dinner. Are you up for grabbing a bite to eat on the way back to the hotel?” I ask.

“You will not ever see me turn down food, I'm in. I am getting a wee bit hungry which means you only have like twenty minutes till I am full-blown hangry.” She puts the last of her belongings in the bag and zips it closed. “Thanks for your help. I'll be nice and let you pick out dinner.” She stands

up, pats my shoulder, and starts walking back to where we are parked.

“I thought you were supposed to be showing me all the good spots to get your grub on?” I follow next to her down the sandy path. I’ve got sand everywhere and now I’m regretting wearing tennis shoes. We stop at a bench so I can shake some sand out of my shoes. Who wears tennis shoes in Hawaii? I clearly didn’t think this through. At all.

I thought the sandals Isla is wearing were impractical, but I’m doubting she’s got sand sticking to everything in her sock.

I bang my shoe on the side of the bench, watching sand pour out. These will definitely be out of commission once I leave here.

“I can’t show you all my cards in one day. I have to make you work for it,” she says sassily as she puts a hand on her hip.

“Wow, m’kay. Playing hard to get, huh?” I shake my head and laugh at her logic. The girl tackled me and basically dry-humped me, but showing me all her food spots is too much. Makes total sense.

She turns back to look at me and shoots me a wink. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

We finally make our way to the car and Isla asks me to drive. I want to tease her for it but decide not to do that until she is less hangry.

“Pull up nearby places to eat, and we can grab something quick on the drive home,” I say, looking over my shoulder

before we merge onto the main road.

“Okay, let me see. Hmm, there’s a McDonalds, which is a hard no from me. A Popeyes. That’s a maybe—a chicken sandwich does sound good. Ooooh yes, there is a drive-thru joint that does the loco mocos but makes them into burritos!”

“A loco what? Last I heard, mocos were boogers in Spanish. So, I am going to need some reassurance that you aren’t going to make me eat boogers for dinner.”

“No, you ding dong. I will not be feeding you boogers. It’s a hamburger over rice with an egg on top and they serve it with a delicious gravy. Well, the jury is out on that one until I try it. But I’ve heard nothing but good things.”

I let Isla give me directions, but she gets distracted looking at the chickens on the side of the road and we have to redirect our route about ten times. I want to be frustrated, but the look on her face every time she had to tell me she missed telling me about the turn again was amusing. I finally made her turn on the CarPlay that syncs the GPS on the phone to the GPS in the car.

The good news is that the food spot is delicious. I managed to not make a mess as I ate mine while driving.

The sun has now set and the traffic has slowed down since. I realize the car has gotten a little quiet and see why. Isla is passed out, with her head resting against the window. I swear I can hear her almost snoring.

It's funny how something or someone you didn't know last week can fit so easily into your life. I let my mind wander at that thought and turn up the radio a little, feeling more at peace now than I have in years.

Six

Isla

It turns out, even if I hadn't run smack into Cal at Leonard's, I probably would have at some point. He is staying in the same hotel. Same floor. Same hallway.

What're the odds of that? The vacation gods were really looking out for me. Maybe I manifested this by drooling over him the entire plane ride. If that's the case, I'm going to start manifesting myself as a smoking-hot millionaire.

The loud ding of the hotel door rattles me out of my thought process. I hadn't realized how exhausted I am from today's activities until we got in the car. I think I'm half asleep with my eyes open.

The cold air from the hallway hits my face as we walk off the elevator. Cal presses his hand to my lower back to lead me off and into the hall. I don't know what it is about this man, but his touch is laced with an inferno. All the chill I felt from the hallway evaporates and, in its place, are flames all down my back, right down to my core.

“What room are you in again?” he asks as he falls into step beside me. Making me miss his touch the second it’s gone.

“Um, 139. It’s just down the hall and to the right.” I turn to face him and say our goodbyes. “Thanks for today. I had a blast.”

“If you think I’m not gentlemanly enough to walk you to your room, you’re wrong.” He gives me a curt look and continues down the hallway.

I put my hands up, feigning innocence. “Alright, alright. Sorry to assume you’ve had enough of me,” I tease as I turn around.

Without his heated touch, the chill radiates with all the tile flooring and the A/C constantly blasting. The walls are decorated with pictures of the famous Hawaiian waves, USS Arizona, and pineapples. They’ve added holiday garlands and strings of lights to add to the holiday cheer. An odd collection of pictures with the Christmas decor, but I guess it works.

It’s odd being somewhere so tropical for the holidays. Trading snow for sand this year, and I’m not gonna lie, I think I prefer it. They do decorate their palm trees with Christmas lights, so you still get in the holiday spirit without having to freeze your ass off.

We make our way to my room, and as Cal rambles on about whatever picture we just passed—a random factoid about Pearl Harbor—I start to dig through my backpack. I swear I left my key in the little pouch at the top, but it’s completely empty.

“I can’t find my key. I’m going to have to dig through this. Sorry, you can go. I’ll be fine.” I put my backpack on the floor and start digging.

At the point of desperation, I finally just turn my backpack upside down and completely empty it. Still, no luck.

“I can stay here and wait, it’s no big deal. Do you need help?” He gets down on his knees to help, not waiting for my reply. He starts shaking out my towel, but the only thing popping out of there is a lifetime supply of sand.

“Is it possible it fell out when you dropped your bag down at the beach?” he asks as he fumbles through the random belongings on the floor. I’m praying I did not pack anything embarrassing in my backpack by accident.

After five minutes of searching, I finally give up and restuff my backpack. “I’m going to have to run down to the desk to see if they can get me another key.” Due to all the detours, it took way longer to get here. It’s now pushing 10:00 p.m., so I’m hoping that won’t be a problem.

Cal, being the helpful guy he is, volunteers to come with me.

We walk up to the front desk and see a very flustered-looking woman. She’s talking on the phone and, judging by her comments, it’s with IT or some sort of help desk. She repeats that she’s tried turning everything off and back on four times and, no, it’s still not working.

We stand back and let her finish her call.

After she semi-aggressively puts down the phone, she calls us forward. There are very few people in the lobby now. Most are shuffling to the elevators, calling it a day, I assume.

“Hello, I lost my key today while at the beach and was wondering if I could get a replacement.” I smile at her, hoping her post-IT phone call rage won’t turn on me.

“I am so sorry, ma’am, but our systems are down. We won’t be able to get any new keys until the technician comes out. They said they will have one here first thing tomorrow morning.” She gives me a fake smile, which widens and turns a little flirty when she takes in Cal.

Between that and the IT breakdown, I’m feeling a little feisty.

“Don’t you have a way to manually unlock it? Like an actual key?” I stare at her, wide-eyed. What am I supposed to do, sleep on a park bench?

“Well, corporate wanted to go fully digital this year, and it isn’t paying off. We will be able to get you in your room by 8:00 a.m. tomorrow. I have some preset keys for a new room we could give you. It would be five hundred dollars for the night?”

I’m flabbergasted: their technology breaks down, and I’m the one who has to pay the price. Literally.

“Are you shitting me? Five hundred dollars?!” I say as look up at Cal and his expression mirrors mine. At least I’m not the only one who finds this insane.

“I apologize, ma’am. I don’t make the rules,” she says with a bland face. She should probably work on her fake ‘I’m sorry’ smile.

What lovely customer service this place has. I will not be rating it well. Well, aside from the cute lady who was checking on me; she gets five stars. The lady in front of me, not so much.

I don’t even have a chance to summon my inner Karen before Cal hops in on the conversation.

“That’s ridiculous. You aren’t paying that, Isla. You can stay with me.” Cal grabs my arm and starts pulling me to the elevator.

My flip flops can barely keep up with us as we stomp across the lobby. I hear Cal muttering under his breath about how ridiculous this is. It’s almost amusing how angry he is. He’s not the one who is going to be sleeping on a semi-stranger’s floor.

“I can pay the fee, Cal. You don’t need to have me cramp your space,” I say as the doors close in front of us.

“It’s not a big deal. These big chains are always finding ways to grab people’s money. It’s such a rip-off. Total bullshit.” He crosses his arms and lets out a big *hmpf*. The guy is really passionate about the money-grab scheme, apparently.

I laugh to myself as we step off the elevator and veer left towards his room. I know he’s dead serious, but it’s amusing how fired up he is about the whole thing.

He unlocks the door and pushes it open while he puts his hand on my lower back to guide me in. Why is it so hot when men do that?

With that thought, I'm suddenly very aware that I'm going to be sleeping close to a man I am incredibly attracted to and have already tackled. This should make for a super comfortable night.

Awesome.

His room looks almost identical to mine. Except, instead of two queen beds, his has just one. The bed is in the center of the room with a table on each side. I was hoping for a couch, but I'm shit out of luck. There is only a small chair in the corner. Maybe I'll get lucky and the chair will recline.

His patio door is cracked, so the room smells fresh and light. I can't help but notice how tidy it is. His bed is made with the corner folded over for him to be able to slip in easier. There's no trash lying around and, unlike my room, it doesn't look like his suitcase exploded in here. Housekeeping only comes once a week to switch out the linens so I quickly gather that this is all Cal.

I look around, feeling a little awkward. We spent the whole day together. Spent hours in the car together. But this, this is different. Sharing a sleeping space is intimate and something I have only done with those I am super close to or involved with, if you catch my drift. Even if I sleep on the floor after tonight, we will no longer be strangers. I will know how he

sounds when he sleeps, whether or not he snores, if he sleeps on his back.

Unfortunately, the same goes for him. He will know that I look like a sack of potatoes first thing in the morning. What if I fart in my sleep? With your boyfriend, it is endearing and kind of funny. With the hot guy you want to bang on vacation? Not so much.

“Do you want to take a shower and freshen up?” Cal asks, shaking me from my spiraling thoughts.

“Yeah, that would be great. Thanks again for taking me in. I was worried I’d be sleeping on a park bench.”

“No big deal. Spent all day with you. So, a few more hours won’t hurt.” He shoots me a wink, which melts my worries about being a burden.

I turn around and head for the shower.



The shower is nothing short of delightful. There is sand in places sand should not be. My hair feels sticky and grainy from the ocean water. I forgot to grab the complementary soaps from the counter by the bathroom sink. Cal’s three-in-one shampoo bottle does the job of cleaning my hair and whole body. I have no clue how I will untangle this mess without my hairbrush or conditioner, but that’s for tomorrow me to deal with.

Currently, I smell like an upgraded, grown-up version of Old Spice. However, that is still probably better than the smell of sweat, salt, and seaweed.

I step out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel. It dawns on me that I have absolutely nothing to wear. The clothes I wore today smelled like I did pre-shower and, ew. While I am very proud of my current physique, I by no means have the confidence to strut out to Cal butt-ass naked.

Making sure all the goods are covered, I do a spin in the mirror. Once I am sure I am covered, I pop open the door.

“Hey, Cal, do you by chance have any extra clothes I can borrow to wear to bed?” I ask as I walk out of the bathroom. He has changed into basketball shorts but kept his shirt off. I know I’ve seen him without a shirt all day, but in a confined space like this? I have to force myself to look at his face.

“Oh, sure. Let me go grab them.”

I follow him to his bag. I can tell I am making him a little nervous. Having a half-naked semi-stranger in front of you will do that.

He goes to pull his bag off one of the side tables, but the top isn’t zipped. He picks it up with a little too much force, which causes him to lose his footing. He tries to steady himself, but trips over his own feet and falls instead. Because I am standing way too close, I get knocked off my feet as he falls.

I am now laying under Cal. Again. This time, things are a little different. First off, there are no strangers around us to

throw ice water on the heat of the moment, and there is no hiding that there has been some strange tension building between us all day. The chemistry between us is undeniable.

A small piece of me wishes I didn't meet him here. I wish I could have met him somewhere near home, where there would be a real possibility for something to come out of it. I guess I will have to make do with a holiday hookup. Less strings, less messy.

He repositions himself so that half of his body weight is pressed against me as he props himself up on his arms. He looks me straight in the face and I know he feels exactly what I do in that moment. It is like a fire has started burning my skin. Everywhere he is touching is more sensitive, and it makes me want more.

The look he is giving me is one that looks like he is asking for permission to give into what we both want. He has said it before: letting loose is not his thing. Casual, also not his thing. I can see him battle himself on what he wants versus what he thinks is logical. We have been in this position once before. This time, there are less clothes and we are no longer in public. There is nothing stopping us.

I went on this trip alone to become more independent, but the only thing I've grown in so far is boldness.

I make a decision to run with that.

Not giving Cal the time to finish the battle inside his head, I tilt my head up and lift my lips to his. I expect him to hesitate,

but he surprises me. All he needed was my decision on how this was going to go.

His kiss sends little flickers of electricity down my body. My kiss becomes needier. Wanting him closer. His hands begin to roam my body. My heart is racing, like a little adrenaline rush has just coursed through my veins. I push my body closer to his, inviting him to take more. Begging for him to take more.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks.

“Honestly, I think I have wanted to do this since the moment I met you.” My answer must please him because he lets out a little groan and claims my mouth again.

I think back to literally five minutes ago when I thought I wouldn't feel confident in front of Cal. It is actually quite the opposite. I feel his gaze sweep over my body and can see the hunger take over his eyes. That alone makes me feel more empowered and more confident.

“Not that fucking you on the floor wouldn't be the highlight of my trip, but I want to do this right and take my time,” he says as he picks me up. I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me to the bed.

He lays me down on my back and I immediately miss his touch. His breathing is becoming heavier as the tension rises. All I want are his hands on my body. I can literally feel myself get wetter as he starts to shimmy out of his shorts.

“You had an unfair head start in the striptease game,” he says as he steps out of his pants. His smile is nothing short of

sinister.

Fuck, I thought he was hot before, but this version of him is supreme.

“Remember earlier when I said I bet the evidence would still be there? Was I right?” he asks, referring to the other time today I thought this would be happening.

“Why don’t you find out?” I tease.

He lets out a small moan and runs his hands over my waist. Slowly, almost teasingly, he makes his way down to my center. There is no need to test the theory. I can quite literally feel myself dripping down my thighs onto the bed.

He slowly glides his finger into my core, with eyes locked on mine the entire time. He is very much getting the confirmation he is after. I don’t think I have ever been so turned on in my life.

I can’t help but let out a moan and arch my back off the bed. “More,” is all I can mutter out. My brain has turned into complete mush. All I want is to be devoured by this man.

I expect him to cut to the chase like almost all men do. Excited to get to the real prize. That’s the thing with expectations, though. They have a tendency to be wrong.

Linking his arms under my knees he pulls me to the end of the bed. He drops to his knees. I wonder if he could hear my thoughts about wanting him to devour me, because he does just that.

I feel his hot breath against me and I half groan, half mutter some indecipherable words. His tongue takes one swipe over before his mouth lands on my clit. Gently sucking, while he slides his fingers back inside me.

“Oh my God. Yes.” I grab his hair into my hands, it is still surprisingly soft, considering he only had a chance to rinse off at the beach. I push his face deeper into me, which earns me a moan. I want to do everything I can to hear that again.

He picks up the pace as he eats me like I am his last meal. It feels so fucking good. My skin is crawling and my body is begging for release.

“God, you taste good,” Cal says as he finally takes a breather. He glides his tongue into my pussy and slowly rubs his thumb across my clit. That does it. I come so hard I swear I am borderline blacked out.

“Yes, come for me, baby. That’s a good girl,” he says as my back arches and my body spasms. I know I am moaning embarrassingly loud, but I cannot bring myself to give a shit right now. His praise brings a little extra zing to my release.

Before I am even out of my stupor, my body is being pulled back up the bed. I am in for a real treat if he fucks me as good as he devours me.

I hear the wrapper of a condom and realize I must be in an orgasm haze because I never felt him leave the bed.

“It’s okay if that was where you want this to end. We don’t have to go any further,” he offers.

“I need more of you.” I really mean it. I pull him up to hover over me and reach up to kiss him. Tasting my orgasm on his lips does something to me. It is like every shy piece of me has died and all I can think about is chasing my next release. Wanting more of him, everywhere.

Cal must feel my restlessness on his lips because he lines himself up with me and slides in all without his lips ever leaving mine. I grip the sheets as I feel myself stretch around him.

“Fuck, you are so wet,” Cal mutters against my lips.

He is drastically larger than any man I have ever been with. I’ve only slept with a couple other people before this, but I am pretty sure Cal is packing some serious heat.

My legs get pinned back and he rests his hands behind my knees, keeping me spread wide and giving him leverage to hit the deepest parts of me. I whimper as he begins to hit my G-spot. This man knows exactly what he is doing.

“Fuuckkk. Yes, let me feel that pussy clamp down on me.” He grabs my hand from the sheets I am gripping onto to have me hold my leg back as he starts to rub small circles around my clit.

Before tonight, I have never been able to come more than once. With each stroke, I can feel my body getting closer and closer, like a knot that is getting tied so tight it is going to snap. He slowly picks up his pace with his thumb and rocks his hips into me faster and faster.

“Ugh, yes. I’m going to come.” My whole body begins to tense, and I have to resist the urge to pull him closer to me.

He presses down harder with his thumb and speeds up the little circles, continuing the pace as he stretches me to the max. It happens so fast I don’t even see it coming. My back arches and my legs spasm. He grabs a hold of both of them, releasing my hand, as he picks up the speed.

I don’t know how long my back remains arched, or my vision white. As he coaxes my release from me, I swear I come for four minutes straight.

He flips me to my knees with my ass in the air. Before I can even form a sentence, he slams into me. His pace is no longer gentle, and I’m loving every second of it.

“Yes baby, give it to me,” I say. I’ve never been a dirty talker, but this experience with him has brought out a whole new side of me. I am more confident and not afraid to say what I want.

“Ugh, yes,” Cal practically growls. He grabs my hand and guides it to my clit. “Be a good girl and play with yourself while I fuck you good, alright?” He wraps his hand around my damp hair and forces my back to arch.

Jesus.

I can tell by his breathing that Cal is close. I begin rocking my body into his, wanting him to feel the same pleasure he brought me.

It takes him a few more thrusts before he finishes. By the way his body jerks, *explodes* would be a more accurate term. Semantics.

We both collapse and lay side by side on our backs, breathing heavily. I look over to him and can't help but giggle.

“What?” he asks, still breathless.

“I can't believe I just fucked someone I met on vacation.”

“Ditto,” is all he replies, which makes me laugh harder. “You know laughing after sex can really crush a man's ego,” Cal jokes, slowly rolling to his side to look at me.

I slap his arm. “Oh, stop. I can have the best sex of my life and still find the situation amusing.”

“Best sex of your life, huh?” he says as he reaches his arm over to pat himself on the back.

“Sweet Jeebus. I regret filling your ego up.” I slowly start to sit up. I pull the sheet up around myself, which is pointless, considering the things that just happened on these very sheets.

“I think I need to shower again,” I say. I am a disgusting, sweaty mess. Hiking a mountain, I barely break a sweat. On the other hand, thirty minutes of life-altering sex, and I feel like I just ran a marathon.

Cal rolls out of bed, not bothering with a sheet, and makes his way to the bathroom. He really does have a nice ass. I figure he needs to use the restroom, but I hear the shower turn on.

Cal pops his head out around the corner. “Are you coming?” he asks.

“I already did. Twice. Thank you for asking,” I joke, holding up two fingers, before I hop out of bed and join him in the shower.



I am grateful for the hot shower, and even more grateful that he didn't expect another round. Not that I wouldn't secretly be wanting that to happen, but I am so tired that it's not even funny.

He surprises me once again by helping me wash my body and rubs my shoulders. I have never been with anyone who really gave a shit about what happened after, even when things got serious. I surely wasn't expecting this kind of behavior from him, but weirder things have happened, I suppose.

I finally get the sweats and T-shirt he offered me. We crawl into bed after we finish our own nightly routines. The bed feels like a literal cloud once I finally get to relax. The sheets and comforter swallow me whole as I settle in. We left the balcony door open, so you can hear a mix of the traffic passing by and the waves rolling in. The breeze drifts through the room, filling it with the smell of saltwater. The whole thing is relaxing, and I feel my eyelids getting heavy.

I roll, facing away from Cal, wanting to give him some space. He must disagree with needing space because I feel his

arm wrap around my waist as he pulls me to his chest.

“Goodnight, Isla,” he murmurs into my ear.

“Goodnight, Cal.” I wrap my hand over his.

I need to remind myself to thank Addie’s piece-of-shit boyfriend when I get back. Sure, I miss Addie, but this has already been an experience of a lifetime.

I doze off within minutes, drifting to sleep by the sound of Cal’s breathing and the waves crashing on the shore.

Seven

Isla

“**S**hut the fuck up, you did not!!” Addie borderline yells over the phone. In her defense, if she slept with some rando she met on the plane while on an island by herself, I, too, would be freaking out.

“I know, I know. It sort of just happened. I have zero regrets as it was a life-changing experience.” I chuckle as I take a sip of piping hot coffee.

“You have to give me more details than that, you hoe! On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate it based on past experience? Also, you’re not really a hoe; I would have done the same thing.”

“But you have a lover boy. What’s his name again?”

“You’re dodging the question. Answer me, or I will hack all your social media accounts.”

“Wasn’t aware my sex life would result in a satisfaction survey, but okay. It was like an 8.5, with the possibility of

becoming a ten. But you know, the first time with someone is always a little awkward. Get some grease on the wheels, and I'll be riding home on a solid ten," I reply, knowing I am lying to her and maybe a little bit to myself. That was a ten out of ten experience. Almost too good to be true. I mean, the man brought me breakfast in bed.

I sit on the balcony and look out at the beachgoers starting the day by getting the best spots possible. The high-rise I am in gives me the perfect view of the beach, and I get to people watch with absolutely no shame.

"That's not the only thing you will be riding," she snickers at me and I spit out my coffee. I almost choke as I laugh.

I really wish she was here to see this. The water is so blue, it almost looks unreal. It starts turquoise out on the beach and the deeper the water, the deeper the shade of blue. You know those memories and mental pictures that stay with you for life? Core memories, or whatever. That's what the view is. This whole trip has been that if we're being honest. It is hard to believe I have already been here for five days.

I've been running around the last couple days, checking random things off my list. The alone time isn't as scary as I thought it would be. It is kind of nice to do what you want and when you want without correlating with others' plans. I honestly wish I could have brought Cal along on some of them just to have someone to talk to, but he's here with family. So, I guess I have to share.

“Really original, Addie. How are things with your lover boy?” It’s been a while since she and I have been apart for more than a long weekend, and with me trying to make the most of my time, I haven’t really checked in.

“Meh, he is still on my shit list for making me miss this trip to Hawaii. If I am being honest, I kind of think he did it on purpose. He saw a picture you posted—the one with the surfboard—and might have made a comment about your bathing suit being “racy.” I kind of wonder if he felt threatened by me going to a place where I would be living in a bikini.”

I am not surprised to hear her say this. The guy wasn’t winning any bonus points with me the few times I met him. I caught him staring at women’s asses as they walked by when Addie wasn’t looking. Probably why he felt insecure about her coming, because, let’s be honest, he’d be the weirdo on the beach trying to snap a pic to his buddies about the girl he saw.

“Addie, I mean this with love. Dump the sorry sucker. I’ve told you about him being a creep and he gives off major red flag vibes.”

“I know, I know. I just feel like I let people go too easily, you know? Like, no one is ever going to be perfect. You’ve said it yourself that I have a new boyfriend every month.” I feel bad as I hear her say this because I do have a tendency to give her a hard time.

“Okay, first of all, there is a difference between having imperfections and being a douchebag. *And*, while that is true, I have agreed with ninety-nine percent of your choices to cut

them loose. Except for Tate; you pulled a T-Swift and T-Lautner on that one. He was the best.”

I laugh, because he really was. He brought her coffee every day and was literally a golden retriever in human form. I’m pretty sure it got too real, too fast for Addie, and that’s why she made up a dumb excuse and dumped him. She never has admitted this, but as her best friend, I just know.

“Ugh, I know. I regret that one. My one that got away. My lunch break is almost up. I need to get inside, but thank you for the entertainment and therapy session. Call me as soon as you can.” I hear her rattling her keys and the sound of her car door opening.

“I will, and you need to dump loser boy’s sorry ass. I will call when I have updates. Love you, bye.” I pull the phone away from my ear and set it on the table.

Scraping sounds fill the air as I scoot the chair back so I can put my feet up on the table. Leaning back, I close my eyes, taking a big breath in. Almost all of the trees are full of blooms, so the air has a salty, sweet smell about it. It is only 7:00 a.m. here, so most people are still in bed. You get all the excitement of a big city on this island while still enjoying nature and all that Earth has to offer us. The quiet mornings are my favorite.

I spent all of yesterday snorkeling at Hanauma Bay. I never imagined I would see so many different species of fish, but everywhere my head turned, there was a new fish with brightly colored scales. My favorite was this little black with white

spots fish, no bigger than my thumb. I found the best hole-in-the-wall ever for my early dinner. Ray's Cafe had the best fried chicken I've ever had in my life, and my grandma was from the south, so that is saying something. Also, don't tell her I said that.

Today had a big ole question mark of how I would spend it. I've been so go, go, go the first few days I have been here, and I wasn't quite sure how to spend today. It is Christmas Eve, which means most places are closed. So, I might be forced to have a nice and relaxing beach day.

Yup, it's happening. Beach bum day it is. I pull out my list of best beaches and decide to head east. The beaches there are vast and different every couple of miles. We passed a couple of them the other day on our way to the North Shore after our hike.

My thoughts drift to Cal and I wonder what he is doing. Today is his sister's wedding, so I haven't heard from him much or seen him since our night between the sheets a couple days ago. I still can't believe I did that. Actually. That's a lie. I thought about it a lot while on the plane. While sitting in the car next to him. While pinned under his body on the hike. Yeah, on second thought, I am not surprised. I'd do it again. I am not so secretly hoping I get the chance to do it again.

We exchanged numbers and he said he would reach out when he got some free time. He has texted me here and there about what I am doing and what my plans are. At least I know

he is thinking of me, too. The thought brings a little smile to my lips.

I hop out of the car and make my way to the beach. It has beautiful white sand and fairly calm water for winter. The weather here is a dream. It is almost always around eighty degrees, with the perfect salty breeze to keep you cool.

Once I find my place on the beach, I shake out my towel. I look out over the water and squeal with excitement. Everything here looks like a freaking dream. I put my hands over my eyes to look out past the sandbar and see a little island. I wonder if it is possible to get to it. That would be a cool place to explore. Shoving the thought away, I settle in and get comfortable.

It is about 10:00 a.m., and my belly is full from my smoothie and fluffy pancakes I got before heading this way. So, naturally, I take a one-hour food coma nap on the warm sand.



When I wake up, I decide it is time for a snack. There is a food truck not far from here. Actually, pretty much anywhere you are on this island, there is a food truck nearby. Another reason to love this place: the food is amazing and easily accessible.

I put all my beach stuff in the trunk on my car and slide on some shorts. The walk is only about half a mile.

I can't stay quiet to save my life. So, when I stand in line, I start making conversation with the lady in front of me. She is

much older, with wavy dark hair. Her outfit helps me come to the conclusion that she must be a local. She is wearing a white Honolulu Community College tank top and a pair of athletic shorts. Just like me, she's wearing the signature shoe of the island: the flip flop.

“Beautiful weather here today. I haven't eaten here yet. I hope it is good,” I say as I try to break the ice. I don't like quiet, but man do I suck at cultivating a not-awkward conversation.

“Oh, you don't need to worry. Everything here is good. My favorite is the creamy poke bowl. Are you here visiting?”

“Is it that obvious?” I ask, chuckling a little. I will say that the people here are as warm as the weather. Their kindness is constant.

“Honey, your skin is as white as our sand. There is no way you are from here. Where are you visiting from?” she says with a warm chuckle. I like her already.

“Ahh, yes, we lack exposure to sunshine in Colorado. We're usually buried under our parkas in the winter. I am here visiting for the holidays. Hopefully by the time I go home, I'll be tanner. Probably by only one shade. Are you local to Hawaii?”

She laughs at that. I do, too, because I know it is true. I have been lathering on sunblock, trying to save my poor, borderline-porcelain skin from the sun. I actually feel like I've packed on a little tan, but obviously not.

“One shade still counts. Yes, I have lived here my whole life. Do you have any big plans for the holidays while you are here?” She adjusts her weight on her feet as she turns towards me more, welcoming the conversation.

“Not really. Oh! You might know. That island over there ...” I turn my head and point to the island that looks not too far from the beach. “Do you know if it’s possible to go explore that?”

She starts laughing at me again, which doesn’t give me much hope. “Well, it is, but you had better rest up before you make that trek. But you are young and still buoyant. I’m sure you could make it just fine.”

We take a couple steps forward. The line is moving slowly, but I am enjoying the company.

“How do you get out there? Surely you don’t swim, right?” The second the question is out of my mouth, I know it is a dumb one.

“No, honey, but you can rent a kayak. I wouldn’t recommend you go out by yourself. Make sure you have someone with you, and check the weather before you go. It gets windy quickly around here. Tides can make a big difference, too.” I mentally take a note of every tip she gives me.

“Oh, cool. Yes, I will be sure to do that.” I have just the buddy in mind. If I can talk him into it. I don’t know Cal well, but I know that all of his risks and decisions are well calculated. We are pretty opposite that way.

The line moves quickly, so me and my line buddy wave as we say goodbye and go our separate ways with our food.

I shove my face with my freshly prepared food, and she was right. The poke was a great choice. The spicy mayo causes a little zing across my tongue, perfectly adding to the flavor of the fish. The fish here is all fresh, so it is hard to go wrong. I have hours before bed, but my low and slow day has really been hitting the spot. So, I decide to make my way back to the beach, knowing good and well I will be using the sun as a blanket for my post-lunch nap. You can never have too many beach naps.



My beach nap being rudely interrupted, I feel my phone vibrating in my hand and slowly drag myself from sleep. I look down with one eye open and see Cal's name flash across my screen. A happily accepted rude interruption, I suppose.

“You're supposed to be enjoying your sister's wedding right now, sir,” I say into my phone as I sit up on my towel.

“Oh, believe me, I am enjoying it. I'd just enjoy it more if I had a certain someone here with me.”

I smile like an idiot because, obviously, that is incredibly sweet, but also because it appears Cal is most definitely not sober. “Cal, are you drunk at ... What time is it even?” I ask as I pull the phone away from my ear, squinting as I try to read the time on my phone.

It's 5:00 p.m. Wow, that was the longest beach nap ever. I must have been more worn out than I realized. I never sleep that hard.

"It's five o'clock somewhere. Oh, look, it's five o'clock here. No rules broken." His logic makes me laugh because, clearly, he started well before 5:00 p.m. I'm guessing he started before the wedding even began based on his current state and the slight slur to his words.

"Are you gonna come see me, or what?" he asks, not giving me a chance to speak.

"I'm not so sure your sister would want a complete stranger at the wedding, Cal. These things are usually invite-only." I chuckle to myself. He's much more outgoing after a few drinks. I guess that is something we finally do have in common. Well, actually, we have a lot in common, but he is usually much more proper and reserved than I am.

"Well, you are in luck because I am inviting you and Liv said it is okay. I asked her a while ago if I could bring a friend. I'll go ask her again," he half-slurs. Someone needs to give him a big glass of water.

"Liv! Liv! Hey, can I still bring my friend?" I can hear his sister saying she doesn't care on the other end of the line. "See, she said it's fine. Will you come hang out with me? It's boring here." I can hear Liv yell at him for calling her wedding boring. He is clearly not bored since he is two sheets to the wind right now.

I sit and think for half a moment. Let's be real. I don't have plans, and I do love weddings. Seeing Cal is obviously a pleasant bonus.

“Okay, I'll come. Send me the address,” I reply.

“Yes!” I can imagine the gesture that came with that. “I'll text you right now. Wear a pretty dress. Okay, bye.”

Making my way to the car I haul ass to the hotel room. I'm a little nervous to be in a room where everyone knows everyone but me. I try not to let my worries get the best of me as I get ready.

Just as he asked, I brought out the prettiest dress I have. I bought it from a local store on my first day here. Spinning in the mirror I take a peek to make sure everything looks okay. The dress is a little spicy for a wedding with the open back and deep slit up the thigh, but at least it is not white.

Eight

Cal

Honestly, I didn't think she'd agree to it. One, I am most definitely shit-faced. I'd like to blame it on the lack of altitude. Or is it high altitude that makes you more drunk? Let's be honest, I slammed two Mai Tais before dinner was served, and that's where I went wrong. It has nothing to do with altitude. And I had one with dinner because I needed something to wash it down with.

I have always loved weddings, and watching one of my favorite people get married adds to that. So, obviously, I let loose a little. Now, I am trying to chug some water and clear up my system as quickly as possible. I have about two functioning brain cells and both of them are telling me to sober up. She should be here in about ten minutes based on her last text to me.

Why am I so nervous? I've already seen her naked.

I walk over to the hors d'oeuvre table because I saw a giant loaf of bread, and bread soaks up alcohol. It's science. Also,

bread is delicious.

“Why are you shoving your face with plain, semi-dry bread?” Liv asks after watching me stumble to the table and start eating bread as quickly as possible. I think I’m choking more than eating at this rate because this bread is really dry.

“She’s coming,” I say around a mouthful of bread.

“Okay, and what does that have to do with the current situation?” she asks as she waves her hand from my head to feet, assessing my current state.

“Wanna know a secret?” I try to whisper to her.

“Um, obviously. Especially if it explains why you’re being so weird.” She puts her hands on her hips. I may look like I have my shit together, but she *actually* has her shit together. She is everything I try so hard to be.

She does it all so effortlessly. She goes out, she is always there for us, even my dipshit brother who didn’t bother to show up today. I don’t know how she manages it all. Most days, I feel like I am slowly being crushed by the pressure to live up to all the expectations I’ve set for myself.

My dad worked his ass off for this company and I can’t let that go to waste. Lord knows my brother doesn’t care, and Liv is doing her own thing. So, I am it for the next generation of Reynolds Resources.

“I slept with the hot girl from the plane that I told you about, and now she’s coming here. And I’m obviously a littttle not sober, so I’m solving that.” I pick up my water and give a

good hearty chug. I can feel some of the fog start to lift. I should've started chugging right after I got off the phone with her but got distracted talking to people on the way to pick up a water bottle.

I hear her taking a sharp gasp and her eyes practically bug out of her head.

“Mr. I Plan My Life Down to a T slept with a stranger! Say it ain't so! You should have told me it was her you were wanting to stop by. I wouldn't have let you drink so much!” She tries to hold back her laughter but is doing an awful job at it.

“Technically, she wasn't a stranger. We spent eight hours together on a plane, and then eight hours together during the day before we ... you know,” I say, trying to justify my actions.

“Oh, I'm not judging. I'm actually kind of proud you're getting out there and meeting people. You need to have more fun.”

“I have plenty of fun. It just looks different than your fun.” I mean, she isn't wrong. My idea of fun is staying at work while the team goes out to the bar and gets plastered. I am twenty seven but act like I'm pushing fifty most days.

“Yeah, sure you do. You are the biggest fun sucker I know. Well, I hope you have the best time. Don't be nervous. You're weird when you are nervous. Also, you've already seen her naked.” She punches my shoulder to drive her point home.

“Hey! That’s what I said. Well, thought. I didn’t say it out loud. Damn. I need more water, I am weird.”

Liv laughs at me and hands me my water from the table. “Drink up, champ. I think your girl is here.” She points her chin toward the door.

I follow Liv’s gaze and see Isla walk through. I can’t help but smile and wave her over. I watch her assess the environment. There are about thirty or so people here. My sister, my parents, some aunts and uncles who made the trip. Of course, the groom’s family is here and a handful of friends.

I can see a little bit of nervousness in her eyes, scanning the room while she looks for me, I assume. It makes my heartbeat stutter when her eyes land on mine and she busts out that smile I’ve been thinking about since the moment we met. The smile that has been changing little pieces of me every day. I’m so fucked.

Liv watches me as I watch Isla.

“You actually like her, don’t you?” She looks a little amused and equally shocked.

“Honestly, yeah. But there is no point. We go home in a week, and this will all be over.” The thought sobers me up more than the water or food I’ve been inhaling.

I’m not dumb enough to think you can truly fall in love with someone in a week, and I am nowhere near that type of deep feeling. Still, I can’t help but wish there was something more that we could have. I know two weeks with her will not feel

like enough. I can't remember the last time a girl actually made me nervous. Or the last time I liked a girl enough to drunk-dial her just so I could see her again.

“Keep telling yourself that. I have to go entertain my guests,” Liv says over her shoulder as she walks towards the large circle of people on the dance floor.

Isla saunters over, wearing a strapless blue dress that shows off her newly glowing tan I am guessing she picked up while she was running over the island. It's only been a day since I last saw her.

A server walks by with a tray of champagne. I grab two off the top as he passes and hold one out to Isla as she walks by.

“Well, don't you look dapper.” She grins at me as she takes the champagne from me.

My sister insisted on us wearing full tuxes. The second the wedding was over, I stripped out of my jacket, unbuttoned the top of my shirt, and rolled up the sleeves.

“And you look as beautiful as ever.” I see color rise to her cheeks as she blushes.

“It's so humid, I'm surprised you're not sweating to death underneath all that.”

“Oh, I was very hot. Very sweaty. Then, I chugged some Mai Tai's to cool down and, well, now we are here.” Here being my Mai-Tai-drunk state.

“Well, you sound more sober than you did half an hour ago, but it looks like I have some catching up to do.” She winks at

me and downs her whole champagne glass. She inclines her head to the bar. “I think I could skip at least four drinks before I need another to stay on par with you.”

She turns around and starts walking backwards, grabbing my hands to pull me to the bar. This girl could probably ask me to rob a bank and I wouldn't refuse. What harm could a couple more drinks really do?



A lot more harm. That is what a few more drinks could do.

The room is spinning, partially because Isla has had me spinning her around the dance floor and partially because she made me take three shots of tequila. She somehow got my sister to partake in a round of shots, as well.

She mentioned to me once that she gets nervous around new people and doesn't like to do things alone, but I've watched her float around the room like a little social butterfly, befriending everyone she meets. Even grouchy Aunt Marge loves her, and she doesn't even like eighty percent of the people she's related to. A little liquid courage shattered every one of her reservations.



The majority of the music from the last hour has been the same stuff they played at my high school prom, which meant I had a very beautiful girl's back pressed tightly to my chest as she rocked her body to the beat. It makes me wish I wasn't required by the sibling code to stay until my sister finally decides the party is over. I'm guessing at this point that we will be up until dawn.

The liquid courage didn't just help with Isla's nerves, it made all of my reservations that are usually screaming at me quiet down. Wrapping my hands around Isla's waist, I lean down and kiss her bare shoulder. The goosebumps on her skin rise as she presses harder into me. The atmosphere changes immediately and I know exactly what she is thinking.

I am no longer in the mind of a twenty-seven-year-old. I'm in the mind of a seventeen-year-old, who knows he is going to get lucky if he can find the right spot.

We casually make our way off the dance floor after I trail kisses up her neck and feel her firmly grab my hand, almost as a plea to not stop. I could make it to my room, but that's in a whole different building. Obviously, it looks like the sibling code has gone out the window.

Isla is checking every door as we make it down a side hallway, and she finally must've found gold, because she is dragging me into a cleaning closet. I lose the thought of waiting to get to my room when she shuts the door and her hands start roaming my body. The closet has a spare chair,

brooms hanging from one of the walls, and a mop bucket. Plenty of space to make this happen.

There is no need for words to make sure we are on the same page because the second my eyes meet hers, she drops her hands and starts working on my belt, unbuttoning my pants.

I reach to her, trying to pull up her dress, but she rips my hands away and wags her finger at me. “Uh-uh. I’ve been dying to do this for days. Let me.”

I am dying to get my hands on her, but what kind of man am I to deny her of her wishes?

I raise my hands up in defeat and she drops to her knees. The sight about brings me to my knees as well. She looks up at me and winks. Somehow, she knows exactly what to do to drive me crazy.

She works my boxers down from my hips and her hands glide across my thighs. I didn’t think I could get any harder than I was a moment ago, but that was the wrong assumption. Practically aching, I wait for her to take me into her hands, her mouth, literally anything at this point. She takes her time working me up and looks up at me before she takes my whole cock into her mouth.

Good Lord.

“Fuck, baby. Yes.” My hands find her hair and I grip a handful of it. She moans as my dick hits the back of her throat and I have to force myself not to come right then and there.

Slowly backing up, she drags her tongue along the length of me, breathing out and causing every hair on my body to stand up.

I am trying my best not to be loud and give us away. Hopefully the sound of the DJ is drowning us out.

“If you keep doing that, I am going to come right here and now. And as great as that sounds, there are much more enticing places I’d like to come right now.” I slowly turn and plant down on the cold, metal chair. My pants are still around my ankles as I bring Isla to her feet so that she is standing in front of me.

“Are you wet for me, baby?” I ask her, already knowing the answer. She is just as ready for what’s coming next as I am.

“Yes,” she breathes out so quietly I can barely hear her.

“Show me.” Her eyes lock with mine and I can see her wanting to rise to the challenge.

She slips her panties to the side, which makes me groan as she slips a finger into her pussy and closes her eyes. She’s teasing me and doing a damn good job at it. She slips her hand out from between her legs, looks me dead in the eyes, and puts her fingers up to my lips.

A silent invitation that will not be turned down. Taking her fingers in my mouth, I suck them clean just like she had my cock. Her eyes never leave mine, and I can see the lust building behind them.

“Take your panties off.”

“You’re awfully bossy,” she replies as she shimmies out of her panties. I can’t help but practically drool over the sight of her.

Dragging her closer to me, I slowly lower her onto me. Her eyes close as she sinks down, taking me all the way.

“Fuck, you feel good, Cal.”

“You like it when I fill you all the way up, baby?” I reply as I guide her hips and set the pace. It doesn’t take long before her desire takes over.

I reach up and pull the top of her dress down to find her not wearing a bra. Fuck.

Hawaii has been full of beautiful views but there is nothing as beautiful as her. She tips her head back and moans as I take her nipple into my mouth and gently bite down.

“Fuck, Cal. Give me more, I need more.” Her wish is my command.

Guiding one hand of hers to my shoulder and the other to her clit, I move mine to grab on to her hips. I start thrusting as deeply as I can. Feeling her stretch around me about makes me want to come. That thought triggers another: neither one of us thought of protection. Drunk brains don’t think things through. My second rookie mistake of the night.

I slow my movements, which causes Isla to make an angry but very cute face.

“Sorry to ruin the moment, but are you on birth control?” I am praying she says yes.

“Shit. Yes, we’re good. I have an IUD and I just got tested.”

“I was hoping you would say that. I’m clean, too.” I take her lips to mine and feel her smile.

I pick up the pace again and Isla’s moans grow with the tension growing in me, begging to be released. I refuse to finish before her. I am a gentleman and ladies always finish first.

Her movements become more wild as her body coils tighter and tighter around me. She grips her hand around the nape of my neck, the other circling around her clit. I look down at where our bodies are meeting and let out a groan. Watching her stretch around my cock and take it so well makes me want to burst.

I bury my head in her neck and kiss her, then softly bite my teeth down. I can tell she is about to come even before her moan. She throws her head back and I have to put my hand over her mouth to keep her quiet. Keeping my mouth nuzzled into her neck, an attempt to hide my own moans as I empty inside her.

Isla gives me a lazy grin, leans forward, and kisses me. If we weren’t in a closet, it would take all of two seconds of that to make me ready for round two.

I don’t even have time to react as the door cracks open just enough to hear the voice outside. Much to my horror, I recognize that voice.

“I bet there’s a broom in here. It’s no big deal. I can clean it up myself. I’m not useless, I’m just the bride.” The door opens, and I see my sister there. And she sees my very obviously flushed face. If that doesn’t give away that we just did the deed in a cleaning closet, my pants around my ankles for sure will. Oh, and the naked girl on top of me, literally sitting on my dick. Kill me now.

“Oh. Oh! Oh wow. Um, hello, you two. Glad to see you’re having a great time. I see you are letting *extra* loose, Cal. Good for you. Now, if you don’t mind me, I am just going to grab that broom and dustpan behind you and then go bleach out my eyeballs. Thanks so much.”

She grabs the broom and flies out of the closet at warp speed.

“No, no, no, no, no. Ohhhhh my God. *No*. That didn’t just happen, right?” Isla says as she practically leaps off my lap.

I am trying to pull my pants up as quickly as possible so I don’t get caught with my dick out. Again.

“It’s fine. I swear, this is way worse for me. She will literally never let me live this down. I will be hearing about how I had sex in the broom closet at her wedding until my dying day, and even then, she will probably tie it into my eulogy somehow.”

“You’re not helping. She is going to think I’m ... I’m ... I’m some kind of hoe bag or something. Which, I’m not. You don’t know that, but you’re only like the fourth person I’ve ever slept with. Not that I think having sex makes you a hoe bag. More power to ya if that’s your thing, you know. Oh God. I’m

doing the nervous rambles again.” She slaps her hand over her mouth and sinks down onto the floor.

She takes a few deep breaths and starts laughing. Not giggling, but hysterically. Her laugh triggers mine. I sink down beside her and laugh until tears are coming out of my eyes.

“Okay, so, to hide future from embarrassment, next time we bang in a closet, can you please lock the door?” She not-so-gently shoulder-checks me.

I haven’t thought much about leaving, but thinking of only having two weeks with her is already making a little ball form in my stomach. I know she wouldn’t feel the same, and catching feelings for someone you’ve only known for a few days is ridiculous, and I don’t do ridiculous things. So, I swallow the feeling.

“So, what I am hearing is, there’s going to be a next time?” I look over and wink at her.

“Of course, that is what you heard. Typical man, with selective hearing,” she says, shaking her head and laughing.

“I solemnly swear to lock the door every time we get naked from here on out.” I hold my hand up like an eagle scout.

She laughs at my response and looks over at me.

“Do you have an exit plan for how we can sneak out of here, or do we just have to die here with our shame?” She makes her way to her feet and puts out her hand to help me up.

“I think there’s a back door just around the corner. How do you feel about a midnight stroll by the beach?” I open the door

to peek around the corner.

“A beach stroll sounds amazing. It’s a little stuffy in here.”
She fans herself. It really is hot.

“Coast is clear. It looks like ninety percent of the party has
died down. Let’s go!” I drag her by the hand, down the
hallway, and out the side door into the cool breeze.

Nine

Isla

Once the embarrassment was no longer roaring in my head and I could think straight, it really was funny. This type of situation is exactly why I am not usually the flirt or the one instigating risqué behavior. Addie will have a lot to say about this, I am sure. I thought about not telling her, but what kind of friend would I be to deny her the pleasure of hearing about one of the most embarrassing moments in my life? A shitty one. After our walk, it'll be the very first thing I do.

Thank goodness he got me out of there without being seen. It will take months, if not years, to be able to look at them and get over that kind of mortification. Never thought I would feel like I am sixteen and just got caught in the backseat of my first boyfriend's car while being a full-on adult.

“Can you keep it down over there? You're thinking a little too loud.” Cal looks over at me and I can't help but admire the cool confidence he walks with. His hands are in his pockets,

and he just looks so sure of himself. It makes me a little jealous. Wishing I could give off that level of confidence.

Although, anything is possible these days. You never would have caught me doing anything alone before this trip. I have learned some valuable lessons on independence. And making friends. Friends that I have now seen naked twice, but who's counting?

"Sorry, I was just replaying the death of my pride and dignity." I laugh as I look over the water. He took us on a nice beach walk, and I will say, the salty night breeze has washed away the remaining mortification. Well, most of it.

"Don't worry, I was home one time when my parents walked in on her and her now-husband. As you can see, she did not die from the shame. Thanksgiving and Christmas were weird that year, but all is forgotten now. We will be just fine. But let's get you off the subject before you downward spiral again. Tell me more about your life in Colorado."

"Honestly, there isn't much to tell. I like my job but am hoping to jump positions there soon. Advertising is always changing, so it keeps me on my feet. I have been at the current agency I am at now for a couple of years, but if I don't get the promotion I'm looking for, I am going to look elsewhere."

I slow my walk to wiggle my toes in the sand, I have always loved the way it feels when it smooshes between your toes. "My boss, Karen, doesn't like me very much either, which I am sure isn't helping the promotion issue. In my free time, I volunteer at the local dog shelter. I'd love to have one of my

own, but I don't have the space for it in my current apartment. Most of my time is spent getting dragged around by Addie. She is far more social and outgoing than me.”

We make our way to the dock and I try to play it cool when Cal loops his fingers through mine. Something about this man makes me feel like a giddy teenager and the hottest woman alive simultaneously.

“I would argue that you are very outgoing. I'm pretty sure I only got four sentences in the first hour of the flight.” He squeezes my hand and laughs at me.

“Hey!” I unwind my hand from his and punch his arm. “I was nervous. Nervous rambling doesn't count as outgoing, either.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulder to bring me closer, almost like a walking apology.

“I'm joking! Well, I think you are perfectly outspoken. So, I'm sure you would do just fine being social without Addie. What about siblings?”

“None. Nada. Addie is my sister by choice, but my parents were never able to have more after me. So, I became the golden and only child. I think that worked out for them, though. They travel all of the time. We live in the same state, but I think I only see them a handful of times a year—mostly holidays and birthdays. Enough about me. What is life like in Maine?”

We stop walking and plop down on the dock, dangling our feet off the edge. It is late, so we are the only ones out here which makes it that much more peaceful.

“Maine is beautiful. I love the diversity that is there and how close you are to a lot of exciting things. Work takes up most of my time these days, so I don’t get out as much anymore. I hit a huge promotion last year and have tried really hard to prove to the older guys that I earned it. My dad owns the company but actively works over a different region, so I think some of the guys assume that because of my name, I will have it easier.”

“I’m sure you have told me, but what exactly do you do?” I ask as I lean back onto my hands.

“I am the project manager for a development company. Basically, corporations or businesses come to us to find good locations for stores, and then task us with building said business. You get to have your hands in every step of the project.”

“I bet that it is really rewarding getting to watch every step of the process,” I interject. Makes sense why he is so good at taking charge between the sheets now. He is literally the boss. That’s hot, right? Yeah, I’m for sure into that.

“It really is. You get to put together each piece of the puzzle for the build. All the way from contractors to a PR team to help generate buzz. It’s always different, so I am always learning. My grandpa once said complacency is where ambition goes to die, and I try every day to learn something

new and be better.” He repositions to get more comfortable as we settle into conversation.

I am almost in awe of him as he speaks. A man wiser than his years. “I love that. Well, what do you do with your free time? Do you have any pets? Do you even like pets?”

“Hey, I thought I was interviewing you, missy.” He pokes my side and I tilt my head back laughing. “Well, let’s see, hobbies ... I’m guessing work doesn’t count?” He looks to me for an answer and I shake my head no. “Well, I guess I enjoy going to the gym. It works well for me to work out the stress. You’re going to laugh, but I love to play pickleball with the old guys from the gym. They may be pushing eighty, but they kick my ass every time.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. “You do not. I cannot even picture you going toe to toe with an old man.”

“I do! I pretend I let them win, but honestly, those fuckers are good. Umm, okay, and the next question was pets. Yes, I love them; however, I work seventy hours a week, so I don’t have any.” Jesus, the man is committed to the grind.

“Well, that’s unfortunate for us. Dogs are the best. What about siblings? Do you have more than Liv?”

“Yes, fortunately for you, my brother was supposed to be on this trip but blew it off.”

I sit back up, surprised that someone would do that. “So he just didn’t show up to your sister’s wedding? That’s kind of fucked up.”

“My parents had bought him a ticket, but he had some sort of emergency that he couldn’t actually tell us. Liv and I had bet to both of my parents that he would do this. He is their baby and could literally get away with murder.”

“See, stories like this make me glad I am an only child. There is no one to let me down. Except for the overwhelming pressure of not letting my parents down. That would be a nice burden to share with someone else.”

Cal just chuckles at that. “I would say that is a nice part. Liv really has her shit together, so at least my parents will always have her to be proud of.”

I see a thought reach his face. He sits up off his hands as he says, “Hey! I saw this festival thing that is supposed to happen in Honolulu tomorrow night. They call it the Parade of Lights, and it’s basically a giant walk around this park with a lot of lights in the palm trees and bushes. They will even have a Santa there to take a picture with. Would you be up to going?”

“I will only go on one condition.” I know now is my perfect time to trap his ass into my wild hare idea.

“Oh, I am dying to hear your demands. Do tell.” He puts his head on his hand and stares at me intently. Obviously trying to be as dramatic as possible.

“So, I want to kayak to that little island off the east side beaches, but they said you should only go with a person. The currents can get kind of crazy, and it’s safer with a buddy.”

“So, you need me to be your buddy-system buddy on a semi-dangerous adventure, huh? Let me think about it.” He says as he looks up to the sky, stroking his chin as if he is deep in thought. “Okay, I am in.”

I squeal at his response.

“That’s great because I want to go to that festival thing, too. So, I would have gone either way. I am needing some more memories to get on my ole’ camera here,” I say, pulling the camera out of my bag to show him. He’s seen it before after I tackled him on the hike. Good times. Good times.

“Let’s add another one to the ol’ camera roll. I think a post-getting-caught-in-the closet-and-beach-walk selfie is a worthy memory.”

Oh and it was. Forever burned into my brain.

I can’t do much but smile. He pulls me close and kisses my cheek at the same time he captures the picture. The flash is gone in a heartbeat, just like my thoughts of wishing these two weeks would slow down and last a little longer.

Ten

Isla

Traveling during the holidays sounds fun until you are all alone on Christmas Day. I guess I shouldn't complain too much, because I won't be a complete loner all day. Cal will be swinging by my place around five so he can spend the day with his family but still catch the sunset over the beach before we head over to the parade.

Cal's parents are staying in one of those hotel rooms that are more like a condo. So, they will get the luxury of a real Christmas dinner, while I live off leftovers from takeout. He offered to let me crash their family Christmas, but the thought of seeing Cal's sister after our little closet incident literally makes me want to shrivel up and die. So, I politely declined.

The food scene has been everything a foodie could hope it would be. My favorite spots have been the local hole-in-the-walls. I got lucky on my walk this morning and found a coffee shop open that had some bomb smoothies. Leftover poke just did not sound appetizing. I mean, I love me some fresh sushi

and what not, but it has to be after 11:00 a.m. No sooner, because ... ew.

I had thought about having a beach day, but once I opened my curtains and saw the swarm of people sitting on the beach, I decided a little hotel R & R was much needed. It's already late morning, so I don't really have that much time to kill.

I am extra thankful that all the hotel amenities are open today. After careful consideration, I decide I will be taking full advantage of the room service for lunch after a nice hot steam in the sauna. The leftovers can wait.

The sauna is on the first floor, so I get into my bikini and grab a towel.

The building is mostly quiet. After getting off the elevator, I take my time wandering down the hallway toward the locker rooms with the sauna. The indoor pool is the only place I have seen more than a handful of people in the hotel today. It is filled with little kids giggling as they cannonball into the pool. A swim does sound delightful, but sharing a pool with a bunch of five-year-olds does not. So, I decide to skip that detour and head straight to the saunas.

Now that I'm here, I think that I would have rather sat in the splash pad of a pool. Five minutes into my sweat sesh, I hear the door open. I am sitting in the middle of a bench, but there are two free ones to my left and to my right, so I think I will be safe.

Wrong.

I am now very-much-so sandwiched between two very naked old ladies. More power to ya if you don't mind being butt-ass naked in public, but maybe don't make an innocent twenty-four-year-old girl sit in the middle. *And* there are two whole, free benches. We could each have our own benches, with an acceptable distance between one another, close our eyes, and pretend we are alone.

Why does this kind of shit always happen to me? I just wanted a nice R & R day, and now I have the vision of two naked old ladies burned into my brain for the rest of my life.

I have to wonder if this is a prank or a ploy for them to gently bully me out of the room. I also am a ranging empath. Well, with cute, old people; normal people can bite me. But I don't want these cute, old ladies to think I am leaving because of them.

Harumphing a little, I try to get comfortable.

One whole minute passes before I can't take it anymore. Getting up, I walk away. As I close the sauna door behind me, I hear the old ladies snicker and I swear I hear one of them say, "Told you it would work."

Ugh.

Okay, well, I guess a hot tub soak will have to suffice instead. I walk out of the locker room and back into the public space. There is a hot tub tucked into the back corner of the room. A little privacy after the sauna incident sounds perfect.

I turn the corner and immediately turn back around. There are a couple of teens enjoying the hot tub a little too much. The boy was untying her swimsuit top as I turned around.

“Nope, nope, nope,” I say to myself. That’s enough of stranger nudity today. I am maxed out and don’t particularly feel like being a cockblock either.

My selfcare R & R day will have to be done in the privacy of my room. I did bring some face masks and bubble bath supplies, so I will make it work.



The self-spa day gets a ten out of ten recommendation from me. After I made it back to my room, I took a scorching hot bath, and then sat in my robe on the bed while shoving my face with lunch and watching trashy reality television. Lunch was actually just three different kinds of dessert: chocolate cake, brownies and some sort of fruit tart that I read was local to the island. It’s vacation, and if you want lunch to be dessert on vacation, then so be it.

A few hours have been successfully wasted between the snacking and the napping. I’ve now moved onto the self-pampering and have my favorite facial mask on and a deep conditioner in my hair.

The door knocks, and I assume it is more room service. Maybe I am getting lucky and will have some free champagne sent to my room. That would really turn the day around. If I

drink enough maybe I can forget about the trauma my eyeballs have been through today.

I swing the door open, and it is not room service, but Cal. Damn it. I should have looked through the peephole. I can only imagine how I look right now. A jelly facemask on, a pore strip, a deep conditioning treatment in my hair, while standing in my super flattering, white fluffy robe.

“Cal, what are you doing here?” I ask a little exasperated. Literally, nothing can go my way today, can it?

His eyebrows are raised. No doubt at the sight of me in all my self-spa glory.

“Well, I felt bad that you were spending Christmas all alone and decided to come see you a little early. But it looks like you are making the most of the day, huh?” He chuckles as I swing the door open.

“Well, I tried to enjoy a spa day, courtesy of the hotel, but my sauna session was interrupted when I became the middle of a naked, old lady sandwich. And then, I went to the hot tub, because it was the next best thing, and there were two teenagers stripping down and groping each other. So, I decided I would lock myself in the room, where the only naked person I would see is myself.”

He laughs so hard he doubles over. I am not sure if it's at my expression or at the general shit show my day has been.

“*Anywho*, enough about me and my delightful Christmas. How was your early lunch with your family?”

“It was good. We ate our body weight in ham. Liv made not-so-subtle hints about you and I in the hallway, and then thankfully left for her honeymoon around noon. Mom and Dad are completely oblivious to her sexual innuendos, so I don’t think they got it. I listened to them bicker for an hour after lunch had wrapped up and decided to head over here before I stabbed myself in the eye with a fork. I am so glad I did. This is really quite the scene.”

Cal kicks off his shoes and makes his way to the bed. “I’m digging the spread you have here,” he jokes about my dessert buffet I have set up.

“I needed to treat myself after the traumatic morning I had,” I joke as I hop into bed with him. We sit with our backs against the headboard.

“I have to ask, what the fuck is with the goo on your face?” He looks like he wants to reach out and touch it but thinks better of it.

“This, my friend, is a jelly mask. It is soothing on the skin, helps perfect imperfections, and soothes irritation.” I wave my hand around my face, showcasing the glory of the facemask.

“Well, in my book, your face is already perfect. I think you should lather me up so I can try and catch up.” He grins at me and I realize he is serious.

“You’re telling me you want me to put my ‘goo’ on your face. Cal, are you trying to have a spa day with me?” I ask, touching my hand to my chest.

“It can’t be worse than hearing my parents argue or dying of boredom in my room. My assistant at home told me she would physically kick my ass if she saw me working while on vacation. She may be a fifty-year-old lady, but she is scary.”

His thought process makes me laugh. I would never in my life consider working while on vacation. There are days I don’t want to work while I’m at work. Someone needs to teach this man to relax, and I think that someone is me.

“You’ve got a deal. I will let you use all of my awesome froufrou products if you agree to relax and not think about work.” I extend my hand as if we are making a business deal.

He nods his head and shakes my hand.

I start to slide off the bed and make my way to the bathroom so I can grab the face masks. As I land on my feet, Cal slaps my ass.

“I can think of a few things you can do to make me not think of work.” I consider his offer, but I am dying at the thought of Cal in a jelly facemask and nose pore strip.

“Tempting, but like you said, you need to catch up to all of this,” I say, waving my hands up my body and landing my hands under my chin as I give him a cheesy smile.

We spend the next three hours talking, laughing, and fully enjoying our spa day. I pull out my camera and secretly get a picture of Cal lying in bed with an eye mask on, while his jelly facemask works his magic.

He stripped his shirt and is sitting in the extra robe from the room. It's funny how life works. A few days ago, he was a complete stranger, and now, I genuinely couldn't imagine this last week without his company and witty remarks.

It has been the simplest of afternoons, but I don't see how next year's Christmas can possibly top this one.

Eleven

Cal

I will never admit it, but my face has literally never felt smoother. I look in the mirror, and my face is glowing. If the boys at the office could see me now, I am sure I would never live it down. There is absolutely nothing wrong with taking care of yourself, but we have a silent competition of trying to out-tough-guy each other. In layman's terms, a constant pissing contest.

“Sorry to interrupt you staring at yourself, but I need to get ready before we head out to the festival. So, you will have to admire yourself from a different mirror for a few minutes.” My lips twitch at her not-so-subtle dig.

I scoot over to the side of the bathtub and sit on the edge of it. She stands in front of her very cluttered vanity. I have no idea what half the stuff is, but she immediately gets to work with it all.

I watch her do her thing, completely lost in her own world, while she curls her hair and brushes Lord knows what over her

face. It's not like she needs it. Besides the raging bedhead she wakes up with, she wakes up just how she looks now.

I have seen every piece of her body up close and personal, but somehow, sharing this space while she gets ready feels a million times more intimate than all of that. I can't even begin to fathom how boring life will be when I get back, not like it was all that full of excitement in the first place.

It surprises me how much I have enjoyed having little to no control over the last few days. Isla is the master planner. It is her world and I am just living in it. For now, that is. The thought sends a twinge of sadness through me.

“Do you know if the festival has food?” she asks, bringing me back to the real world.

“Yes, they will have a ton of those food trucks you love so much. I know better than to drag you along without food in mind.” It took all of about three minutes of talking with Isla once we got here to realize food was her number one motivator in life.

“Smart man. I would hate to have to unleash Hangry Isla on you.” She looks over at me while she is talking, a curling iron in her hair and one hand on her hip.

Much to my surprise, it only took her about thirty minutes to finish getting ready. I ditch the robe she gave me and pull my shirt back on, buttoning up the Hawaiian shirt I acquired at one of the local ABC stores. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Isla silently watching me. I have spent enough time with her to be able to read the looks she gives. That one in particular

makes it really hard to get dressed. It also makes some other things a little hard, but this isn't the time.

“If you keep looking at me like that, we won't be going anywhere anytime soon.” I shoot her a wink and watch as her cheeks turn pink.

She sheepishly smiles as she looks down at the floor and turns around. She slips on her sandals and we are on our way.

We take a nice, long walk on the beach and I have to work up the courage to grab her hand. I don't know where she wants to draw the line, and I don't want to make her feel like she has to let me. The more time we spend together, the harder it gets not to get completely wrapped up in her.

She is equally as thoughtful as she is carefree. She likes to say she isn't a control freak like me, but the girl has each and every day planned out by the time she's done with her morning coffee. That's not to say she thinks the whole plan out; most of the time, she knows what she wants to do but wings it on the execution. She is slightly chaotic, but I love it all the same.

Isla started letting me drive her rental car, mostly because the road rage was killing her vibe. Her words, not mine. I glance over as we pull into the parking lot for the Christmas light festival, and the look on her face is completely priceless. She looks like a kid waking up on Christmas.

We got here early. So, for once, parking was not a disaster. I bought tickets online, so we were able to get in quickly. It is a mile-long loop, with different setups throughout. There are a

few vendors when you first walk in, and Isla literally skips over to the line for iced cocoa.

Well, okay, guess we are starting there. I chuckle to myself watching her giddiness.

The line moves quickly, and I step up and order two large, iced cocoas. I am fairly confident this will just be iced chocolate milk, but anything to get into the holiday spirit, I guess.

We grab our drinks and head out of the line. Surprise washes over me when I take the first sip. It tastes exactly like hot cocoa but cold.

“Let’s start this way,” Isla says as she grabs my hand and starts to the far left. There are three different entrances, each having their own display of light shows and decorations. They all connect and loop around to eventually spit you back out to the front.

“Now this is the Christmas spirit I was looking for!” Isla says with a little too much excitement. She has practically been dragging me from stop to stop.

“I am guessing Christmas is a favorite of yours?” I ask. I would assume, being from Colorado, that she is used to white Christmases and all the pizzazz the holiday has to offer.

“Actually, I prefer Thanksgiving. It is a holiday spent on eating and being grateful. So, I love that. I like Christmas and all, but I feel like sometimes the holiday gets a little lost in the hustle and bustle of it.”

Her answer completely surprises me in the best way because I have said the same thing myself.

We come around another corner, walking hand in hand as we admire the sparkling lights. The trees are lined top to bottom with them. Some have cool flashing lights, while some have multiple colors and some are plain old white Christmas lights.

My favorite so far was the setup that was down by the third loop. The lights danced along to Lil Jon's "Snap Yo Fingers." The deer danced to the beat and the Christmas lights turned into a flashing rave. I made Isla stay two times so I could get the whole thing on video and immediately sent it to my sister. She is all pencil skirts and business, but the second 2000's hip-hop comes on, it's like she's in the club and pop, lock, and dropping it again. She would appreciate the show as much as I did. I now completely understand the hype of this place.

Isla's favorite part has been the food. Shocking, I know.

As we make our way through the last aisle before we are snaked away to the front again, I spot a little snow cone stand. Shave ice is on every street corner down here, so I am not surprised to see a stand out here. I also learned that it is important to call it shave ice, not shaved ice. I about had my head bit off by a sweet-looking old lady a couple days ago for saying it wrong.

She must finally notice where I'm leading her to because I hear her pipe in, "Ooooh, snow cones!"

If I learn anything from her, I hope it's to find joy in the little things. I envy how she sees things and hope I can bring that

home with me.

Isla orders lychee shave ice and I order grape. They are the good kind that have syrup drenched on, with every bite all the way to the bottom completely covered in sugary goodness.

“Cal! Can you get a picture of me with my snow cone next to this tree?”

I don’t have time to respond before she shoves her camera in my hands and backs up to the tree.

“This thing is melting as we speak. You better get to snapping, Callahan.” The sound of my full name on her lips sends a little buzz through my body. I always thought my name sounded old and boring, but coming out of her mouth, it isn’t so bad after all.

I snap a picture of her with her snow cone that is made to look like a snowman as she poses in front of a decked-out palm tree. Isla stops a passerby to get a picture of us both with our snowman snow cones.

There is one last stop we have to make. She mentioned on the way here that she is missing her white Christmas. While this won’t be the real thing, I hope it will do.

I hear her make a sharp gasp as she covers her mouth in shock. “Cal, look! There’s snow!” She all but sprints to the Santa station. They have the faux snow machine, so the whole corner is covered in fake snow. I will say, it does look incredibly realistic. She looks back at me with a smile brighter than the sun.

Yep, I nailed this surprise.

We get in line, and I can feel her staring at me.

“You’re gonna take a picture with Santa, right?” she asks, still munching on her snowman.

I give her a look that says absolutely not. Not my thing. I stopped believing in Santa at age eight and haven’t thought about the man since.

“You have to! Come on, how else would he know what to bring you?”

“Baby, it’s Christmas. Santa already came.” I didn’t think much about the pet name as it casually rolled off my tongue, but I fight the regret that comes on as soon as it is out. Lines are so blurry when you know shit is temporary.

Relief crashes into me when Isla shows no signs of deterrent when she looks to me to respond. “Oh, yeah. Duh. *But* there is always next year!”

I already know what I would want for Christmas next year, and no, it isn’t going to happen. The thought sinks my mood, but I smile at her anyway.

“Okay, fine. I will take a picture with Santa if you insist.” She does a little jump mixed with what I am guessing is a dance move of hers before she grabs my hand and pulls me up the line.

Lord, help me.

She skips right up to Santa's lap, and when he asks her what she wants, she says, "A million dollars."

He chuckles back and says, "No can do. Try again."

She gives him an inquisitive look. A swarm of kids come up behind me, so I don't get to hear her second request, but he doesn't deny her. She gets her picture taken with Santa and hops off his lap.

"Your turn, pretty boy," she says, mockingly.

"Oh, good. I'm so excited." My voice is dripping in sarcasm.

I walk up to Santa's lap and sit.

I hate my life.

A twenty-seven-year-old grown man should not be sitting on a Lord knows how old but also grown man's lap. He asks what I want, and I actually think about it. It doesn't take long to know what I would want for Christmas, being as she is looking right at me. I turn my head and whisper to Santa, "Her."

Twelve

Isla

The last few days have blurred together. I haven't slept alone in the past few days, and I'm using the term "sleep" lightly, if you catch my drift. Cal and I have been scouring the island, soaking up as much island time as possible. I don't think I've laughed as hard or been this carefree in my entire life. And I know how to have a good time, so that's saying something.

I think about the Cal I first met and the version of him now. It makes my heart smile a little. He has shed every bit of shyness and I've got to see the best parts of him shine through. He is funny and caring, and he has a way of making me feel alive. The simplest things like our new nightly routine of beach walking are now my favorite part of the day. Who am I turning into that mild exercise is the best part of my day?

My heart squeezes at the thought of what is next to come. There is not a single part of me that is ready to never see him again. Somehow, he has found a way of making me wish this

could be something more. But he lives a bazillion miles away, and I can barely make my close-proximity relationships work.

Cal leaves tomorrow and I leave the day after that. So, today is our last hoorah together, which means that I finally get to do the kayak trip. We saved it for the very last item on our itinerary since it was the thing I decided I wanted to do most. Cal's choice was cliff diving, which we did yesterday.

I freaking hate heights and willingly jumping off a cliff sounds downright awful. But I did it anyway. With Cal's hand in mine, we jumped at the count of three. The memory flashes back and I find myself smiling like a freaking idiot. What is wrong with me? I feel like a lovesick puppy.

I spent the majority of last night sitting on the lanai with my feet on Cal's lap while I googled until it felt like my eyes were going to fall out of my head. I searched for the best places to launch for our upcoming kayak trip, what time of day is best, and what you can expect when you are there. The Mokulua Islands are only 1.5 hours away by kayak. The weather is supposed to be clear all day. So, it is set up to be a perfect day to kayak over.

Cal promised to bring me a delicious lunch. One of the many things I enjoy about him: he knows I love my food. I dragged him all around the island to my laundry list of restaurants to try. We finished the top fives days ago and have moved on to the honorable mentions list. I considered it a win when only one wasn't great. It was actually terrible, but Cal paid, so I am

pretending that I enjoyed it. You know, to be polite and what not.

“Knock, knock,” Cal says as he walks through my hotel door, holding two coffees. Clapping my hands, I run up to him, reaching for the coffee as I get on my tippy toes to kiss his cheek.

“Yes, show me the goods!” I take a big gulp of coffee and feel the caffeine hit my veins. Ugh. So good. Hawaiian coffee blows Starbucks out of the water. I will be sad to drink my normal coffee when I get home. There is a store that sells the beans harvested here and I for sure will be stocking up before flying home.

“I mean, I would, but you were very specific about today’s plans. You would think you were the one who was psycho about structure. Carefree, my ass.” Cal plops down onto the bed.

“Hey now! I am carefree, just not when it comes to caffeine and once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Other than that, I am all zen and shit.”

“Mmmhmm, keep telling yourself that, sweetheart.” Something else I am going to miss is hearing his endearments roll off his lips. It warms my soul almost as much as this coffee. Almost.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road. The kayak rental place opens at eight, and I want to be the first person in line so we can get the best kayak.”

Cal gives me a knowing look. I'm as surprised as anyone that he isn't over my antics yet.

Shuffling around the room, I'm grabbing this and that, shoving it into the waterproof bag I bought at the tackle store we visited yesterday. It's hot pink and I love it. I love it even more when I watch Cal sling it over himself. He is built like a Greek god and somehow manages to make a pink backpack look sexy. Maybe I should have had him show me the goods before we left.

We take the scenic route to the launch site, opting to drive up the coast with our windows down. Cal has been my unofficial chauffeur the past few days. Apparently, I have too much road rage.

Taking full advantage of not being the driver, I lean my arm on the open window, resting my head on the crook of my arm. Closing my eyes and taking in the last bit of Hawaiian breeze. It feels cool and warm at the same time as the breeze rustles through my hair.

I open my eyes and watch the waves explode over the rock on the shore.

Turning my head, I look at Cal, a small smile on my lips, and find he is already looking at me, with a look I've been seeing more and more as our time together gets closer to ending.

Wanting to feel his touch, I reach over to where his hand is resting on the center console and give it a squeeze. He pulls our intertwined fingers up to his mouth and kisses the back of my hand. It is so gentle and so sweet. I am eating my own

words of this being a simple island fling; I know good and well that crushing feeling in my chest is anything but simple. I push those thoughts aside as Cal turns into the parking lot, which is shockingly mostly empty. Most people on the island are slow to rise and live on Island time.

I am so excited I could pee. Even from here, you can see the small islands. It doesn't look like they are that far away. Easy peasy.

The rental place is opening up when we stroll around the corner.

“Aloha! You guys here for a rental?” the employee asks.

“Yes! We are kayaking to the islands!” I hook my thumb and point over my shoulder with a big smile. The giddiness is practically radiating out of me at this point, I am not even trying to hide it or play cool anymore.

“Nice. That is a fun trip, for sure. Make sure you load up on sunscreen and keep your eyes on the skies. The weather can change in a heartbeat out here, so just be prepared.” He starts to pull out clipboards and grabs a couple of pens.

“You have until 5:00 p.m. to return the rental. There are some flares tucked into the front should you need them to alert us for help. There is storage in the back compartment for bags, food, and whatever else you feel like putting in there. Life vests are required. Please wear them, as our seas can be very unforgiving should you find yourself in rough water. Any questions?” He shifts his gaze between Cal and me.

“Nope, we’re both good swimmers. Just excited to get out on the water.” I’m subtly trying to speed up his little spiel about safety and yada, yada. The water and islands are calling my name, and the longer we chat, the longer I have to wait.

“We just need you two to sign these waivers and then you are free to go.”

I scribble my name as quickly as possible and help the employee drag our kayak to the shore. Once it is ready, Cal and I shove our bags into the storage container.

“You better have remembered to pack our lunch in there!” I say.

Mister PlanEverything gives me an incredulous look. “Being that I value my life, yes. I’d rather not be left to swim with the fishes,” he replies as he does his thorough investigation of the boat. He is the calculating and careful to my crazy and cool.

“Cal, honey, I am sure the boat is just fine. Can we please get out there?”

“It’s not like the islands are going anywhere, but yes, we can go. The boat looks in good shape.” He starts pulling the boat in the water as I sit in the back. As fun as it would be to watch Cal tip the boat, I try and keep it still as he finally climbs in.

“Let’s hit the seas, Captain!” Cal says from the front of the boat as he starts paddling.



We are only thirty minutes in and my arms are on fire. The view is nice. Not the ocean. I mean, that's pretty, too. But watching Cal's bare, muscular back power through the paddling? That's a sight to behold right there.

“Did you turn into a passenger princess in the kayak, too, or are you going to get paddling?” He looks over his shoulder to see me sitting there. Staring. Like a creep.

“Sorry, I was just admiring the view.” I'm sure he will think I'm talking about the water. “How much longer do you think we have to go?”

“Isla, baby, it's only been like thirty minutes. We're not even halfway.”

I look behind us and see that we really haven't gone that far. Fuck. I should have smuggled a boat motor with me.

“Goodie,” is all I can spit out.

“Just think, when we get there, we will have some delicious snacks. Stay strong.” Cal really knows how to motivate me because that does get me back to work.

We paddle in silence, mostly because I am winded and Cal is whistling. I don't even have the air supply to whistle. This must be how Cal felt on our first hike. I am now the one in the back trying not to gawk, while trying to keep my breathing even so he doesn't catch on to how dead I am.

Cal starts to rustle, and even from back here, I can hear his brain churning. I have heard him start to talk but immediately

stop a few times now, like he is trying to work up the courage to ask something.

“Hey, Isla. While you’re out here and unable to run away, I wanted to talk to you about something.” The words make my stomach drop. Nothing good has ever happened from someone wanting to talk. It is how I have started every breakup for as long as I can remember.

“‘We need to talk’ are fighting words for girls with anxiety, you know that, right?” Humor, I’ll use humor to mask the fact that I am shitting bricks while waiting for him to spit out what he has to say.

“Okay. Well, um, I just want to get out what I have to say, and get it all out once, and then you can respond. If you stop me now, I know I won’t have the nerve to do this.”

“O-oh, okay. I can do that.” My senses are in high drive. The wind picks up a little and cools off the sweat that is now dripping down every inch of my body. Almost like nature’s way of trying to calm down my panic.

“Okay. Um ... I was thinking. Uh, um, I have been dreading going back home, and I thought that was because I was going back to work and back to the hustle and bustle. Plus, no one ever really wants to be done with vacation. Especially when you are in Hawaii, you know?” I think Cal is nervous rambling. It’s nice that it’s not me for once.

“Anyways, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it’s not the beautiful vacation I don’t want to leave. It’s the beautiful girl who has somehow wormed her way into my life.

I know you said that this was just fun, but I don't think I want this to be just fun anymore. I think I would like to try something when we get back home. I know we live thousands of miles away from each other, but I think we could cross that bridge when we get there."

Wow, I think I have finally found someone who can stun me into silence.

I don't get the chance to reply, not that I have one. The gentle breeze I felt earlier was a warning sign of impending weather, but I was focusing so hard on Cal that I didn't notice the water getting choppier. We are getting closer to the shore, so I just figured it was the waves. It was the waves, but we are still a good hundred yards off from the sandbar. Fuck.

Looking up, I see the cloud cover has turned an angry shade of gray. I knew the weather rolled in here fast, but damn. It was completely clear five minutes ago.

My head turns just in time to see a wave come at us from the side. The kayak is knocked sideways from the change of currents, making us angled side by side with the waves, which are growing larger with each oncoming set. The boat jumps and turns just enough to spit me off the side. Getting caught in a rolling wave, I can barely hear Cal yelling my name as the waves crash over my head and from the rain that is beginning to fall.

I am grateful I listened to the rental guy and kept my vest on. My heart roars as the adrenaline begins to pump through my system. If I can swim twenty yards forward, I can make it out

of the roughest waters. Swimming in the ocean with currents ripping you in every different direction is much harder than swimming at shore.

I continue to cough up water but try to swim my heart out. It feels like it is taking me years to get to calmer water, and my energy is quickly draining from fighting the currents. Using the little adrenaline I have left, I paddle as hard as I can forward.

It finally gets to calmer water, where I can at least take a breath without catching a gallon of water in my lungs. The waves are just big ripples here. I look everywhere for Cal, praying it didn't overturn the boat entirely. Once I spot him, I start waving my arms.

"Cal! I'm over here!" By some chance, he sees me and starts paddling his way to me.

He throws out the rescue buoy. Pulling my body against it, I finally get to rest.

I don't know if it's been an hour or five minutes, but Cal finally makes his way to me. "We need to get you back in the boat." Cal has worry washed all over his face. His eyes are bright and his brows are furrowed.

"I don't want to tip the boat, though. The storm has calmed down enough. Can you just drag me the last bit? I can see the shore now that the storm has started to die off," I say as I try to catch my breath. They were not joking when they said storms come and go in the blink of an eye on this side of the island.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. The weather is better, but this is tiger shark territory, and that is just too dangerous to tow you. We can use the buoyancy from your vest to pop you out of the water.” The thought of being a shark snack quickly changes my mind and I nod my head in agreement.

He explains how it works: he will dip me in the water for a second and the life vest will shoot me back up.

It works like a charm, and as soon as I am back in the boat, the last bit of adrenaline crashes and I begin shaking. Cal paddles with all he has, and by the time we reach the shore, I am in full panic attack mode. I can feel my heartbeat in my ears, and everything sounds like a million miles away. Through the haze in my mind, I can hear Cal saying my name as we reach shore, but I cannot get out of this trance.

I feel Cal’s hands cup my face. “Baby, look at me. Look at me. You’re okay. I am going to get you out of the boat now, okay?”

My eyes meet his and I give a small nod.

He picks me up and pulls me close to his chest. Somehow, he manages to keep his balance as he makes his way to shore. I can feel the waves kiss the back of my thighs until we hit shallower water.

I feel myself shaking and my breaths coming faster and faster, until I start to see spots in my vision. Shit, am I going to pass out?

“Just breathe. In through the nose.” He holds me close to his chests and rocks, gently stroking my hair.

I don't know how many minutes have passed before the roaring in my head finally quiets. All I know is that I am in a safe place now.

Damn, that was embarrassing. I nuzzle my now-burning face in Cal's chest.

“I'm sorry,” I mumble into his chest. A laugh bubbles up because, what else can I do?

“Are you good?” He pulls back slightly to look at me, almost to make his own conclusions on if I am really okay.

“Yeah, I think so. I swallowed Lord knows how much water, but I'm fine now. I'm sorry I freaked out.”

“I would've freaked out, too. I couldn't find you for a while. Even with your jacket on, the water was pulling you down, and the currents must've gotten you. That storm came out of nowhere.”

I look out at the water now and it is completely clear. You wouldn't even know that a storm just rocked our shit.

I take my time to get my bearings. Standing up out of his lap, I dust the sand off of me, which isn't easy to do when you are soaking wet, but I do my best.

“Well, let's go explore. I wouldn't want to waste my near-death experience by sitting on the beach.”

I half expect him to bring up his speech, but he doesn't. I don't honestly know what I would say back to him.

The chemistry between us is undeniable. I laugh harder with him than I have with anyone else in my life. Don't tell Addie, because she will take that very personally. It's just so easy with him. The conversation flows easily; it feels like I have known him my entire life. But that's easy to say when we are on a vacation. There are no stressors here. No work to deal with. No emotional baggage we are dealing with here. Vacation life is not real life.

We are also complete opposites. I don't see how that can ever work in the real world. He is driven and focused. He knows exactly what he wants and I am not even sure if I like my job. I feel like I am still at the phase in my life where I am aimlessly wandering around, waiting for life to show me what to do next.

"You sure you're okay?" Cal asks. Me being quiet for the last couple minutes as my thoughts run wild was probably a red flag for him.

"I'm good, I promise. Thank you for literally saving my life." I give him a small smile of gratitude.

"You would have been just fine. The surf would've carried you to shore at some point." He bumps into my shoulder, then grabs my hand. I look at him and feel like I could see what our life would be. I shake those thoughts and drag him along to our next adventure.

We hiked around the mountain and saw some killer views of the crystal clear blue water. After my nerves calmed down, we swam in the ocean, now that it isn't a death trap, and had a bomb picnic. He brought a whole spread of local fruits, sandwiches, and some completely melted chocolate almonds. He obviously didn't think that through, but the thought was there and they still tasted great, even melted.

When the time comes, we pack up everything we brought, and I wave goodbye to the island. The good news is, the paddle back is much less eventful than the trip out there.

With each minute that goes by, I keep waiting for Cal to bring up the elephant that is in the room, but he has completely dropped the subject. Maybe he's changed his mind? The thought makes the pit in my stomach feel hollow. I don't know how to tell him I feel the same way but am scared shitless. I guess there are too many unknowns. For now, I will just soak up the next twenty-four hours and savor every moment. Knowing good and well two weeks in paradise will never be enough.

Thirteen

Cal

I completely fucked that up. I should have been paying more attention to our surroundings, but I got lost in my thoughts, trying to work up the courage to spill everything I have been thinking to Isla.

Fuck.

My hands run through my dripping wet hair as I try to gather my thoughts. How do I fix this? I was hoping she would bring up what I said on the boat, but she never did. Maybe she doesn't want this thing between us to go any further. But I do. Fuck, do I want to give it a try.

My feet haven't moved from the shower, knowing she is sitting in my bed. She got out of the shower a few minutes ago and is likely resting after our shitstorm of a day. Thank our lucky stars that it didn't end differently. The level of panic that was racing through my body when she was thrown over and caught under wave after wave was enough to throw me into cardiac arrest. She held her own though. Like she always does.

I love that she is a little bit badass and a little bit cuddly puppy dog. It makes her, her. Completely unlike anyone I have ever known.

This is my last night with her. Tomorrow at noon, I get on a plane, and if I don't figure out a way to convince her this would work between us, it could very well be the last time I see her. The last time I'll wake up to her lazy smile and crazy bedhead that I have grown to love. I don't think it would take much more for me to fall completely in love with her. I think I am already on the free fall, which is why my heart feels like it's in a vice grip. We are at the brink of what could be.

Once I dry off from my shower, I walk out into the room, the cool air hitting my face. I had sat in the bathroom longer than necessary, trying to sort out my thoughts.

“Well, Isla. How would you like to spend your Hawaiian New Year's Eve?” I ask. Usually, I would either spend it with family or with some friends, but I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate the New Year than with the beautiful girl in front of me.

My parents are staying in tonight, I think they are officially vacationed out. I have tried to pop in to have lunch or dinner with them in-between my time with Isla. They are used to me being independent, so I don't think my absence raised any red flags with them. I'm sure they've enjoyed alone time in paradise, too.

“Mmm, I would like to avoid the mass amounts of people if at all possible. I am pooped from this morning and not feeling

super people-y,” she says as she sips her afternoon mimosa from a bendy straw. She is completely kicked back in bed and looks gorgeous. Her blonde hair is slightly wavy from the humidity—the same humidity that is making her skin look like it’s glowing.

“Well, how do you feel about driving up the east side of the island and finding a quieter beach to watch the fireworks at?” With that, she perks right up.

Those must’ve been the magic words because she grabs her phone off the nightstand and starts furiously typing.

“Ooooh, yes. I love that Idea. There is this one beach I found on a locals’ page. It looks like no one ever goes there. It has little hidden caves and is supposed to be a super chill location.” She is looking down at her phone, I am guessing trying to find the exact directions on getting there. She looks up at me and pats the spot next to her in bed.

One thing I have learned about Isla is she constantly craves contact. If I sit on a chair next to or across from her, she will pop her feet up into my lap. If we are sitting in bed, she will drape her legs over mine. If we’re sitting in the car, I’m holding her hand.

Personally, I am not the most touchy-feely human. I am so used to being down to business that I don’t usually do much physical contact outside of a handshake. My mother constantly chastises me for my wimpy one-armed hugs. Somehow, Isla has found a way to make me crave the way she wraps around me.

Isla shakes me from my thoughts as I plop down and she shows me the map. “Here. See, if we just go up the highway over there, and drive along the coast for a while, until we hit,” she points with her free hand to the spot on the map, “that little area. The one where we got the smoothies at, like four days ago.”

Somehow, I do know exactly the spot she is talking about, even though those directions were complete and total shit. I laugh to myself a little. This is why I took over driving. She blamed it on her road rage, but the girl has the same sense of direction of a squirrel playing in traffic. Absolutely none.

“That sounds wonderful. We should probably run and grab a bite to eat before we leave then. Unless you want another picnic?”

“I think I will be taking a nice, long break from kayaking and picnicking after today. So, eating out it is.”

Patting her leg, I say, “Well, let’s get dressed then.”

“But I like it so much more when I know you’re naked under the robe,” she says and I laugh.

“I promise, I will take my sweet time showing you what is under the robe when we get back from fireworks.” I grin as I turn around and put my arms on the bed with my feet planted on the ground. Her body under mine.

She lightly giggles at that as I bring my lips to brush over hers. The sound is like music to my ears.



Isla scurries to her room and somehow manages to come back looking like a million bucks thirty minutes later. I've only seen her with her hair styled a handful of times and prefer it the way she has now. It's wavy like it was before while she was lying in bed, but a little more reformed. She must've added some of that styling shit to it.

There is not a lick of makeup on her face. The freckles across her nose have gotten darker with each day in the sun, and I think they have become one of my favorite attributes she has. She is wearing the same dress she wore to my sister's wedding. It shows a lot of her tan skin and makes me wish we could just stay wrapped up in the sheets all night instead.

"Alright, I made a reservation at a steakhouse. It's on the strip area thing. So, it'll be a little busier, but I figured tonight, we should dine in style for our last hoorah," I say. Roy's has amazing reviews, and once I saw the giant dry-aged steak on the menu, I knew my search for dinner was over.

"Well, I guess it is a good thing I wore the pretty dress, but I should have done something more with my hair." She starts to look in the mirror and fluffs her hair.

I sneak up behind her. Looking at her in the mirror, I wrap my arms around her waist and kiss her cheek. I whisper in her ear, "You look absolutely perfect. You don't need to change a thing."

She blushes a little. She is usually a spitfire but seeing the little bits of shyness pop out here and there is endearing as hell. I kiss the blush on her cheek once more for good measure.

I take a step back and slap her ass. “Alright, let’s head out, hot stuff.”

She laughs at that, shaking off the shy exterior, and we head to the door.



The steak was abso-fucking-lutely worth eighty-five dollars. Isla got a little tipsy on her Mai Tai. In her defense, it was the strongest one I had since we arrived. She slammed the last of it before we hit the road. Her buzz fully kicked in by the time we made our way back to the hotel, where we walked from.

Isla apparently was taking us way off the beaten path. She, of course, made me stop at the smoothie hut. I am shocked they are open since it is a holiday, but she slurps it down as we make our trek to the beach. A twenty-minute trek, mind you. This woman had me thinking it was a walk down the road and we were there.

Wrong.

First, we walk through a path completely shaded by trees on both sides that make it seem like it is more of a tunnel. We, of course, have to stop and take pictures with every new flower she sees.

Once we finally make it to the small beach area, we are the only ones here. There is a small cove to the left of us, but the rest is just us and the sandy beach.

I pull out the wine I secretly brought and the towel. Isla walks up until the water is kissing her toes and stares out across the water. It really is beautiful. The surf is the calmest I've seen. I sit down on the towel and watch Isla walk through the water, kicking it out with her feet. A small smile glued to her face. This place is completely and utterly peaceful. I guess it is worth the twenty-minute hike to get here.

Isla finally makes her way to me and plops down beside me.

“Well, I brought us wine, but I forgot glasses. So, we will be drinking it the classy way,” I say as I take a huge chug. I bought a sweet red and it really is pretty good. Perfectly balanced, not too much of a bite.

“Classy ain't my style, anyways.” She grabs the bottle from me and takes a hearty sip herself.

I think we are both trying to tiptoe around what I had said. What now? What next? Do we keep in touch at least? I decide to let it lie. If she wants to make a move, she will. If not, I will just have to find a way to be content with our two weeks we had.

We talk and laugh on the beach until we completely drain the wine bottle. Both of us are a little tipsy at this point. Isla gets that look in her eye. The one she gets before she is about to ask me to do something I really don't want to do.

“You know what sounds really fun?” she says on all fours, looking right at me. “Skinny dipping.”

I knew it was going to be something I really didn't want to do before she even opened her mouth. I prefer to not get charged with public indecency while on vacation.

She stands and starts slowly walking backwards toward the water. She reaches back behind her and unties her dress.

Oh, fuck me.

The whole back is nothing but one big string. So, when she tugs it forward, the wrap around her comes loose and her breasts spill out. She stops long enough to shimmy the dress the rest of the way down.

It is almost dark now, with the sky painted a beautiful soft orange with streaks of pink. It almost looks like the horizon is glowing. Add the woman standing in front of it, and fuck, if that isn't the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Who am I to say no to her?

Those will probably be my dying words but fuck it. I stand up, unbutton my shirt as fast as my fingers will let me and kick off my sandals. I strip out of my shorts and boxers closer to shore.

The water is somehow still warm here, even in the middle of winter. Isla has made it a little more than waist deep. She has turned around now, and I walk up and wrap her in my arms. She lets out a deep sigh and closes her eyes. Soaking in the moment, I suppose.

I slowly press my lips to her neck and make my way up to her ear, leaving a trail of goosebumps in my wake. I hear her hum a sound of approval. Followed by a little giggle when the scruff from my facial hair scratches against her.

She grabs my hand and starts to drag me to the little cave. My brain is screaming that this is a bad idea, but I am just praying that we have already dealt with our bad luck cards for the day.

We make our way to the cave and it isn't what I expected. The water is warmer, and there are rocks that almost act as benches encircling the small body of water. The water freely flows through here, so it isn't stagnant. The moon is beginning to peek out, and it shines perfectly through the holes in the rock above us to give us some light.

She turns around and, honestly, for lack of a better word, she looks majestic as fuck. Her collarbones are popping up beneath the water. She swam here, so her hair is perfectly slicked back. The moon is reflecting on her eyes, making them look like they're almost glowing.

"Fuck, you are beautiful." I can't help but say it out loud. She should be told each and every day how beautiful she is. A million times, each and every day.

The mood since we arrived has drastically shifted, with the tension becoming more taut any time we are close to one another. I grab her hand and pull her into me. I have almost a full head on her, so she tucks right in.

She slowly starts kissing my neck and across my collarbones. My pulse picks up and I can't help but grab her by the waist.

She looks right in my eyes and slowly drops her hands down below the water. I knew she felt it the moment she kissed my neck, how instantly hard I am for her.

I slowly work our way to the edge of the rock formation as she slowly strokes my cock with that shy smile on her face. I lock her lips with mine and kiss her. Savoring every moment, and every taste of her. I grab her waist and hoist her up to the side of the rocks. My forearms push her knees apart. She leans back on her palms as I slowly push her chest.

“You drive me crazy, do you know that?” I ask her.

She just moans in response as my hands drift up her thighs, slowly teasing her. Her legs a little wider, a silent invitation.

I lean down and lick up her slit and her whole body convulses under me. I lock her thighs in with my hands so she can't buck me away.

“I could get drunk on the taste of your pussy, baby.”

“Fuck. Touch me. Please,” is all she can sputter out.

As per usual, her wish is my command.

I slide my tongue up her pussy and back down, until I feel her start to get so wet that it is dripping down my face. I lean back to get a breath and she grabs the back of my head.

“No, please, don't stop. More.”

I darkly chuckle and slide a finger into her pussy, while sucking on her clit. My fingers reach around to her G spot, and in seconds, she is exploding on my face.

“Fuck, Cal. Oh my god. Yes.” Her back arches harder as one hand grips my hair.

I don't let up and I do not yield. Not until I feel her clench down on my fingers one more time.

Slowly, she sits up and stares at me with nothing but lust in her eyes. I lock my eyes on hers and slip my fingers into her mouth. She moans at the taste of her come on my fingers. That about does me in and I almost finish right then.

I scoot her back until her whole body is on the length of the ledge. Climbing out of the water, I put my weight on my forearms so I can prop myself up right on top of her.

“I'm not done with you yet, baby. Not even close.” It's not just this moment that I am talking about. I don't think I will ever get her out of my system. As a whole, she is intoxicating, and I am constantly craving the next high.

I drape her knees up over my shoulders as I align myself with her pussy. In one sweeping motion, I thrust deep into her. She gasps at the sudden shock of my length.

Her pussy feels as good as it tastes.

“Fuck,” is all I can mutter out. My brain is on overdrive and feels like it is humming.

“I love you deep like this,” she says as she grips her hands on my forearms beside her head.

I look down at where her pussy is gripping my cock as I pull back and let out a deep groan. I lean down and kiss her hard, slowing my movement. She slides her hands into my hair and kisses me back with everything she has.

I know at that moment that I've got her. She may not be willing to admit it yet, but she is as tangled in this web as I am.

Pulling back from the kiss, I look at her face. Her eyes lock with mine. Her pussy starts to clench down on my cock and I get the pleasure of watching her face as she comes. I lied earlier. This is the look I like best on her. Her coming undone around me, mumbling out my name as she finishes. That shit's like a drug.

I last two seconds longer and am finishing hard myself.

Collapsing on to my back, I pull her into my chest and kiss her head. "That's why you wanted me to go to a secluded area, huh? Wanted the thrill of fucking me in public." I laugh at her as she slowly gets up and slinks back into the water.

"No ... that was just an added bonus. Now, get back in here so we don't miss the fireworks." She winks at me and starts to swim off.

"Oh, believe me, I already saw fireworks," I say, laughing as I slip into the water and catch up with her.

We make it back to shore and get dressed just in time to watch the fireworks.

She sits in between my legs as I lean back and prop myself up on my hands. Her forearms rest on my thighs and her hands

are lazily rubbing down the sides.

“I’m not ready to say goodbye to you,” I hear her almost whisper.

She isn’t the only one not ready for goodbye. I want to tell her that this doesn’t have to be goodbye, that we can figure something out, but settle for, “Me either.”

Waiting for her to make a move and take the bait, but she doesn’t. So, I swallow the choking feeling in my gut and savor every last second I have with her.

Fourteen

Isla

This morning, I wake up alone for the first time since ... well, I guess, five days ago? It's hard to keep track of time on vacation. That sounds a bit dramatic when you say it that way.

Also, when did I turn into such a sap?

Saying goodbye to Cal yesterday afternoon should not have been that hard. We promised to keep in touch and left it at that. Much to my dismay, I cried, but not until I was back in my room and completely alone. Somehow, a couple weeks here have felt like an entirely different lifetime.

Unfortunately, I don't have time to dwell or throw myself a pity party. I let the man go without saying any of the thoughts in my head. So, I think I deserve to lay in my big, plush bed a little longer and pretend to process what is going on in my brain.

I slept with the sliding glass door open last night, so there is a nice, cool breeze flowing through the room. I stare at the ceiling fan, counting the rotations and trying to ignore the nagging feeling in my gut that I royally screwed up. I should have told him. I should have picked up where he left off when we were on the kayak. If I am being honest, I think the thought of this being something real terrifies the shit out of me.

The good news is, Addie is picking me up from the airport, so I will have plenty of time for a therapy session on the car ride. I just have to endure being alone with my thoughts during the eight-hour flight. Super.

After a few hours of lounging, I finish packing my bag, throwing things in with absolutely no rhyme or reason. Organizing would distract me from my current pity party. The same pity party that is now causing me to run late.

With one last sweep of the room, I make sure I didn't miss anything under the bed or in the shower. It looks like I have it all.

Walking over to the sliding door, I stand out on the lanai one last time. Closing my eyes and taking a big breath in through my nose, I commit the smell to memory. Sweet flowers and salty breeze. With eyes now open, I look out at the water one last time and allow myself a minute to feel every bit of sadness coursing through me. I am not ready to say goodbye to this place. Hawaii will forever be tattooed on my heart.



The plane ride home was much more boring than the flight into the island. Luckily, the flight home wasn't fully booked, so I was able to get a window seat and had no one directly next to me. Looking out the window, I said one last goodbye to the island as we took off.

I woke up just before landing. Now, I am still half asleep as I shuffle through Denver International Airport—DIA—to get to the train that will take me to baggage claim.

Addie being Addie is already waiting there at baggage claim. She always looks effortlessly flawless. Her red hair is in the perfect top knot, and she is wearing a cute little matching dusty blue lounge set. She wears enough makeup to look put together, but not so much that you can't see her light freckles shining through.

As I get closer, I see she has a sign.

Jesus. I hate my life.

The sign reads: "My best friend got lei'd." I can feel the flush reach my cheeks, going all the way to my toes.

"Why am I friends with this woman?" I ask myself under my breath.

Making my way towards her I ask, "What, ditching me at the airport two weeks ago wasn't enough, so you have to embarrass the shit out of me here, too?"

She smiles big and puts on her best innocent face. Luckily, I've known her long enough to know that face is full of shit.

“You just got back from Hawaii, I'm sure you got a lei there. Any other interpretations of the sign are completely coincidental,” she says as I walk up to her. She pulls me into a big bear hug and shakes me back and forth. “I missed you, bitch!” Ah yes, her terms of endearment. There is no other human out there like my best friend.

We begin to walk away as she puts her arm over my shoulders and I wrap mine around her waist. I missed her more than I realized. It was nice figuring out how to live life without her, but nothing compares to conquering the world with your best friend.

We maneuver our way out of DIA in record time and are finally on the road. I already miss the warmth of Hawaii. It is cold enough here in Colorado to freeze your tits off. There's still no snow on the ground. I was certain we would have gotten at least a storm or two while I was gone. Colorado can be absolutely magical when it's covered in snow in the winter. Those are probably the pictures you would find if you googled it, but on the plains especially, it is just empty farm lots and dead grass in the winter if we're in a drought.

“Sooooo, tell me everything. Once you and Airplane Boy hit it off, *someone* stopped calling me with updates.” She gives me an incredulous look.

“Sorry, I got a little preoccupied,” I say as I take a sip from my Starbucks cup. Yup, Hawaiian coffee completely ruined

Starbucks for me. How sad.

“I bet you were living your best island life. Frolicking around with the man of your dreams. Being a ho-ho-ho.” She looks over and winks at me and I roll my eyes.

“Ugh, honestly, it was the best. I didn’t want to come home. I spent the whole day he was gone just moping around my room like a lost puppy.”

“So, you really like him. Do you think you guys will continue to talk, or was this like a hit it and quit it type of situation?” You gotta hand it to the girl, she doesn’t bullshit you. She gets right to the very blunt point.

“Honestly, I am not sure. He mentioned wanting more, but then I got tossed into the ocean and almost died, and neither one of us brought it up again.” I sigh heavily and lean my head back against the headrest. “He probably took it as an omen; he tells me he wants to try things out and then we almost die.”

“Okay, we’re gonna circle back to the whole ‘you almost died’ thing shortly. What would your answer have been? Do you actually like this guy?” she asks, a bit of a shocked expression on her face.

“I mean, it was only two weeks, and we really only get to see a small window of who we really are on vacation. Sure, I like him now, but I don’t know who he is once he is back in his routine. He seems pretty different from me. He is all structured and I am, well, I am me.”

“You are wonderful. You have your shit together more than I do, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, yeah. Speaking of. Did you dump What’s-his-nuts?” I cannot remember the man’s name for the life of me right now. I think the cabin pressure turned my brain into mush. Or maybe it’s the jet lag? Or the fact that his name wasn’t really worth remembering? That is probably it.

“Yes, you will be happy to know that I dumped him the day after we talked on the phone. I slept on it and decided you were completely right. He was a total weiner.”

I pat her arm that’s resting on the center console. “That’s my girl.” I smile as I look out the window.

“Don’t try and dodge the subject. What would you have said if you weren’t nearly drowned like a sewer rat?”

I scrunch my face at her comparing me to a sewer rat. At least she keeps me humble.

“One, I am not a sewer rat, and two, I have absolutely no idea. I almost brought it up so many times on our last day together, but just couldn’t find the courage. It was so easy with him, but there was no pressure at the time, you know?”

“You know, you don’t have to have it all figured out the second you decide to make more of it. You could just feel it out and see where it goes. If he has you this twitterpated after two weeks, I think it’s worth your time. Just because it isn’t convenient, doesn’t mean it isn’t worth it.”

I sit and think about what she says. The silence lingers as my thoughts try to process where to go next. I have his number, so I could easily call him. We agreed to stay in touch. I know making moves isn't his gig, but just this once, it would be a nice reassurance. Well, I guess he did make a move. Shit. I shouldn't have been a coward.

Fifteen

Isla

It takes me a good week to unpack. I have been trying to keep the whole independence ball rolling and going out to places on my own, so I haven't been home as much. Mostly, I go to coffee shops before I head to the office to get a head start on the day. It isn't much, but progress is progress. If I am being honest, the quiet is kind of nice and, unlike my brain tells me, literally no one stares at me and thinks I've been stood up or something. I don't quite have it in me to go out the way Addie would want us to. I left a little piece of my heart with Cal and have been struggling to fill the void.

The only thing fueling my motivation to get unpacked was getting to develop my camera roll. I know it will mostly be a play-by-play of Cal and me, but I kind of want to relive it. I miss him. I miss him all the way to my bones, but I'm holding out until I know exactly what I want to do. Or until the universe gives me a sign that whacks me across the head. I haven't reached out to him yet, mostly because I am not

entirely sure what I would say ... *Hey, you still want to give this thing a go?* That sounds lame and anticlimactic. Ugh.

I start with unpacking my clothes, then move to the toiletries before I start to unpack my sealed bag. Fuck.

The camera is not here. I begin to frantically tear through my carry-on. Not there either.

No, no, no.

I took, like, three whole pictures on my phone. That camera had every memory captured on it. The thought of it being gone brings tears to my eyes. I can't tell if I am crying over the lost camera or the lost memories of Cal and me.

The doorbell rings and I wipe the tears from my eyes. I look in the mirror to make sure I don't resemble a raccoon, but somehow, the mascara held up.

I swing the front door to my apartment open and see a delivery guy standing at my door. He is wearing the signature FedEx uniform. This apartment complex has a mailroom, which almost all packages are sent to for us to pick up. It helps a lot with the theft of packages, so it is a little out of the ordinary to have a package sent to my door.

"Hi, can I help you?" I smile politely at him. I almost wonder if he doesn't have the wrong apartment.

"Are you Isla?" the delivery guy asks.

"Yes. That would be me." Guess that answers that question.

“We were given instructions to only deliver in person. Can you sign here?” He points to the dotted line.

“I can do that.” I sign my name on his tablet and smile up at him as he hands me my package. It’s not heavy but it is labeled fragile.

Did I drunkenly order off of Amazon again? Ugh. I need to stop drinking and shopping. It is doing awful things to my bank account.

I turn to walk farther into my quaint living room and sit down on the sectional. The apartment is pretty small, but the price is right and the building manager isn’t an asshole. So, I can’t really complain.

“What the hell did I order now?” I mutter to myself as I rip apart the packaging, which seems to be double reinforced. Sweet Jesus. They really didn’t want anyone getting in here.

I rip at the two sides with all my might and it finally opens.

My camera plops right in my lap. How the fuck?

I guess I should have read the shipping label before I ripped the package in half. I put the two ripped pieces back together and look at the shipping label.

Callahan Reynolds.

Holy shit.

Trying to find some sort of note, I tear apart the shipping bag. A million questions run through my mind. The number

one being: how the hell did he get my address? I really don't think I ever gave that to him.

I find a note. And a plane ticket. To Maine. Where he lives.

Not the plot twist I was expecting.

Isla,

I am sure you have a lot of burning questions. I will answer the three I'm sure are at the front of your mind.

1. *Your camera must've been left in my room and I didn't know it, being that I stayed with you until the last possible moment. My packing job mostly consisted of me shoving everything into my suitcase as quickly as possible.*

2. *How did I get your address? Well, this one, I might have overstepped my bounds on. I did some research and found your full name and date of birth on social media (that took me a good day by itself). Once I had that, I lied to our HR recruiter and had her run a full background check on you, which gives me your address. I could have just asked you, but that would have ruined the surprise. Also, remind me to ask you more about that public indecency misdemeanor.*

3. *The plane tickets. That one is simple. I miss you. I hate my empty bed. I hate being thousands of miles apart from you. I swore that after I told you*

how I felt that I would let you come to me, but it seems that I have absolutely no willpower. Similar to you and smoothie huts. I just can't get enough of you. Two weeks has never been nor will ever be enough, and I think you know as well as I do that we deserve a real shot. We can figure out the details later. The ticket is open-ended so that you can come when it works best for you. If this isn't what you want, you can tell me to kick rocks. But I am really hoping you don't. Call me when you get this. I miss you.

I stare at the letter in my shaking hands. Well, shit. I asked for a sign and the universe freaking delivered.

Don't be a coward. Don't be a loser. Call him.

And I truly want to. With every fiber of my being, I want to call him. I want to hear his voice and hear his laugh after I nervously ramble for Lord knows how long. I know he is right. We really do have a shot. I guess that's why I pull my phone out from my pocket.

He is still on my recent calls list. It feels like yesterday and a million years ago all at once.

It rings only once.

“Hi, baby.”

His voice immediately brings a smile to my face, I feel a wave of shyness wash over me and I struggle to get out a good reply. “You sure know how to wow a girl.”

I hear him chuckle on the other end of the phone. “So, I take it you got the package, huh?”

“Oh, I sure did, I thought I had drunkenly bought something off Amazon. This was a much better surprise.” I lean back, relaxing into the couch. “I miss you, too, Callahan Reynolds.”

“So, are you going to come see me or what?” he says. I can hear a smile on his lips.

“You’re just going to have to wait and see,” I tease, while lifting the glass of water off the side table and bringing it to my lips.

“Oh, no, no, no. I’ve already been waiting. I had to go through drastic measures when I never heard from you in order to get your attention.”

“Hey now, you didn’t reach out either. And I didn’t know what to say. I thought maybe you had changed your mind,” I say, a little self-doubt bubbling up. Doubt has been the biggest hindrance to this relationship since we got started, so I don’t need any help with that, anyways.

“I would never in the history of ever change my mind about you, Isla. I meant every word I said. I was just waiting for you to say you felt the same way,” he replies, immediately washing away the dam of worry I had built up. This man is something else.

“Did I ever tell you, you’re a real smooth talker?” I get up off the couch and make my way to the kitchen. Talking to Cal

again sends a little wave of energy through me, and it makes me feel restless.

“I think you would be the first to say that outside of my conference room. Speaking of which, I have a meeting in about five minutes I need to get to. Can I call you when I get home and we can talk through it more?”

“Dude, it’s Saturday. What are you doing at work?” I ask. This man needs some hobbies outside of his office walls.

“Usually, I don’t work Saturdays, Miss Judgy-Pants. We are on a team that is opening a large hotel chain, and we have a lot of details to get nailed down before our launch meeting on Monday.” I am not going to lie, hearing him talk business is kind of hot. It reminds me of other places he took complete charge. That thought makes me miss him for entirely different reasons.

“Okay, okay. We need to find you some hobbies though.” I absentmindedly go open my fridge. As always, looking for a snack.

“I have hobbies. One of them being recently discovered, you.”

I hear Cal say, “Come in,” and someone—a female, her voice sounding a bit older—asks him if he is going to flap his lips all day, or if he is going to get shit done.

I can’t help but laugh at that, which makes Cal respond, “Don’t laugh at her, Isla. It will encourage her behavior. My

assistant is currently dragging me out of the office. So, I will call you back as soon as I can.”

With that, I hang up the call and drop my phone from my face. I can't help but do a little happy dance. This does not even feel like real life right now. Being that this is a major change of events, I obviously have to call Addie. She will help me decide on exactly what to do next and unscramble my thoughts. Cal made his move, and now, I have to figure out my next one.

Sixteen

Isla

Addie must have driven a hundred miles per hour to get here as fast as she did. I told her what happened, and her only response was, “I will be right there.” Twenty minutes later, and we are sitting on the floor of my living room with McDonald’s and a bottle of wine. A bottle actually isn’t accurate; it’s more like a gallon.

Chicken nuggets are my comfort food. She knows me well. Naturally, I am assuming we will be turning this into a sleepover since no one should be driving after finishing off that big ol’ bottle of wine.

“Soooo, when are you going to see him?” Addie asks. As per usual, she is jumping into the nitty-gritty of it right away. She sits criss-cross applesauce next to me, with our backs leaning against the couch. A chicken nugget in one hand and a big-ass glass of wine in the other.

“I honestly don’t know. I can’t just take off of work again. My boss already isn’t my biggest fan.” I purse my lips. My

brain is working way too hard for a Saturday.

“Tell her you have the stomach flu. No one ever questions you when you are potentially going to shit your pants if you come into work,” she says as she dips her nugget in the ranch cup.

“Okay, yeah, but that would get me two days. I am going to need more than two days with him.”

“Fly out on a Friday after work, and call in Monday and Tuesday. Bam. Four, almost five days.”

I can't help but think that wouldn't be long enough either. What would be long enough for me? The thought sends little butterflies through my system. I don't know if there will ever be a time when I feel like I've had enough of Cal.

Damn, I think that this might be the real deal.

Besides Addie, I always need a little recharge after being with someone for so long. I never needed that with Cal.

“Yooohoooo, earth to the lovesick puppy.” Addie waves her hands in front of my face, and I realize I must've zoned out.

“I am not lovesick,” I mutter.

“You not only are lovesick, but you, my friend, are in loooooove.” She halfway sings the word “love” and I almost flinch. I don't think I have actually ever been in love before. Sure, I've had my fair share of relationships, but I have never found someone I can fully invest myself into. I hate to admit it, but I think she is right. How the hell are we going to make this long-distance thing work?

“How can I be in love with someone that lives two thousand and eighty-six miles away from me?” I ask, burying my face in a pillow and trying to work through the mess in my brain.

“You googled how far it was, didn’t you?” Addie asks, with a slight disapproving look. She turns her face closer to me and puts on her serious face. “Listen, if you want to find reasons for this to not work, you will find them all over the place. What you really need to be thinking about is the reasons this can work.” She’s right. I hate when she’s right.

“You’re going to love this, but you are right. If I want this to work, I need to not be a Debbie Downer.” I hug the pillow to my chest and rest my head on the top of it, looking sideways at Addie.

“Of course I am right. I am always right.” She flips the few strands of hair dangling out of her messy bun. Just like I expected, she is gloating over her victory.

“I can think of forty-three times in the last year alone that you have been very wrong. You literally tried to hit on your new boss last week.”

“Shhhh, we’re not talking about me and my poor life choices right now. And to be fair, I didn’t know he was the new boss until the morning huddle,” she says, and I let out a much-needed laugh.

“When do you think I should go?” I ask as I chew on my lip, trying to relieve some of the stress building in my body.

“If I were you, I would have caught a standby flight, like, yesterday,” she says as she takes a big swig of wine.

If I had it my way, I probably would have never left him in the first place.

“You don’t think I am being crazy?” I ask. The look on my face is telling her how serious I am. This is a big change in my life, and with all big changes, you need your bestie’s seal of approval.

“The only crazy thing you did was let him go without solidifying this thing between you. Things don’t happen by accident. You just have to decide what to do with what fate has laid in your lap.” She pauses for half a second, and I’m guessing she wants to make sure she doesn’t scare me by what she is saying. “I have never in my life seen you like this over someone. All I am saying is, you deserve to chase your happy, and if happy is a man who is two thousand miles away, then so be it. You will make it work.”

“So, you’re telling me you would be okay if I ended up with a man two thousand miles away? You know, he is basically next in line for his dad’s business. I would have to move there. Away from you.” The thought of leaving Addie behind is terrifying and physically hurts. She has been my ride or die and biggest cheerleader.

I know that I couldn’t and wouldn’t ask Cal to ever move here. One, let’s be real. I don’t super-love my job. I love what I do, but my current office is really holding me back, and my boss is, for lack of a better word, a bitch. Cal has gone on and

on about work, so I know it is more important to him than mine is to me. I couldn't ask him to choose, when me leaving would be the better choice.

Addie turns to look at me, and puts on a small, sad smile.

“It would break my heart to have you leave me, but it would break yours to stay. Besides, it's not like this is happening tomorrow. See where things go. You're getting way ahead of yourself. Fly to Maine, have him treat you to a big-ass lobster, and then go from there. Also, I have to pee. I downed this wine way too fast. Also, do you mind if I stay the night? I shouldn't drive after all this.” She shakes her empty wine glass in my face as she stands up. I can tell by the rambling sentences that she is already feeling the wine.

“Of course, I think a good sleepover would be good for my soul.” I stand up and she toasts her empty glass with mine, and then hands me hers before she darts down the hall to the bathroom.

I feel my phone buzz in my pocket and see Cal making good on his promise to call me back.

“Hello.” I smile into the phone.

“Hi, baby. Sorry that it took so long. There was a big argument over the final budget, but we finally got it worked out,” he says, sounding dog-tired.

“It's okay. Addie came over, and we have been having ourselves the dinner of champions.”

“Do I even want to know what that consists of?” He chuckles.

“Well, one of my weaknesses is chicken nuggets from McDonald’s. That’s important for later bad days I will have. So, commit that to memory, and also, a big-ass jug of wine.” I squish the phone between my cheek and shoulder so I can grab the wine jug and fill both our cups back up.

“Considering your food choices in Hawaii, I am kind of shocked to see you stooping to the level that is McDonald’s.”

I set the wine bottle down, about to school this mofo on the delicacy that is chicken nuggets. “Listen here. McDonald’s chicken nuggets are a delicacy, and I will not have you slandering their deliciousness, okay?” I say in the most serious voice I can muster through my smile.

I hear him laugh, and I wish I was there to soak it in. “Well, sorrrrrry. What do you ladies have planned for tonight?”

“Mostly, we are going to talk about you. So, if your ears are ringing, that’s why.”

“Well, I was expecting you to be doing that, but I was *expecting* you to lie about it. And what will you be saying about me?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Our most recent discussion was when I was going to go see you.” I rest my hand on the cool, gray granite countertop.

“Now, that is some girl-talk I am interested in. Tell me, Miss Isla, when is my life going to be graced with your presence

again?” he asks. A little eagerness rests in his voice.

“How do you feel about next weekend?” I know it is soon, but we’ve already been apart for what feels like a million years. It was actually only a little over a week, but I have a flair for the dramatics.

“I feel like that’s the best damn thing I have heard all day. Are you sure you will be able to catch a flight? That is kind of last minute.”

“Yeah, I think I can. I am not really sure how these open-ended seats work, but I am guessing it has something to do with stand-by flights?”

“Yeah, that’s what the customer service desk said when I bought them for you. I can call tomorrow and check to see if they have any flights?” he asks. I am almost taken aback by his willingness to help. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. If Cal has done anything, he has absolutely shown up.

“You would do that? I know you are super busy,” I say. I am definitely not used to having this kind of dedication from anyone.

“I would sell my left kidney if it meant I got to see you sooner.”

“Callahan, stop it right now. You are going to make me blush, and then Addie will bully me for it all night,” I say as I put a hand over my face, like that’ll cover the full-body blush I have going on.

“That wasn’t my intention, but if I was going to make you blush, I would be talking about how I missed your body under mine and the taste of your pussy.”

GEEZUUSSSS.

I take a sharp inhale. Not sure how I forgot that this man had an incredibly filthy mouth, but I haven’t forgotten how much I love when that filthy mouth is all over me.

“Okay, wow. Well, I miss that, too, but I am going to go ahead and go. Will you let me know what you find out tomorrow?” I ask.

“Of course. I will talk to you tomorrow. Don’t forget to tell Addie how good I am in bed.” He is definitely goading me now.

“Ha ha. Yeah, I am going to go ahead and not do that.” Just kidding, she already knows. but I am not going to fill his sex ego anymore. “Goodnight, Cal. I miss you.”

“I miss you most.”

I hang up the phone and am smiling like an idiot when I spot Addie leaning against the hallway wall that leads into the kitchen.

“Oh, girl, you may not be ready to admit it to yourself, but you are one hundred percent in love with your little island boy.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, and I wish I had something in my hands to throw at her.

Damn. I think she is right.

Seventeen

Cal

I walk into family dinner Sunday, smiling like I just won the lottery. Not to be cheesy, but I kind of feel like I did. I wasn't sure if she would even come, but the fact that she is so eager, that she wants to be here next week ... That's even better than I hoped for.

I was able to secure her flight for Friday for a small upcharge since it was so last second, but it's a price I am willing to pay.

"Why are you smiling like you just did something stupid?" Liv asks as she walks into my parents' foyer.

My dad has done really well for himself, so we have never really gone without. Our house is the one where you would take all the prom pictures at, and where all the kids wanted to hang out. There's a pool in the backyard, and the inside has plenty of room. The whole main floor is basically just open-door frames that lead to the next in the shape of a square, besides the middle hallway, where Liv has now trapped me.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I say as I shrug off my jacket and hang it in the coat closet.

“You literally have a shit-eating grin on your face. Spill.” She puts her hands on her hips, so I know I will for sure not be getting out of telling her about Isla.

“Remember Isla?” I ask.

“The girl you fucked in a cleaning closet during my wedding? Kind of hard to forget.” She laughs at that. She has been not so subtly teasing me for it since she got back from her honeymoon two days ago.

“I guess that would leave quite the lasting impression.” She isn’t wrong, and it makes me laugh a little. “Anyways, she is flying out here next weekend to see me.”

“You are telling me you would never ever go through the trouble of dating anyone I tried to set you up with here, but you are flying Isla out to come visit for the weekend?” She really has tried to get me into the dating scene but finally stopped a few months ago when I refused to go on any of her blind dates.

“Isla is just different.” The memories of Hawaii flash through my mind and I find myself trying to hide the tight-lip smile that spreads across my face.

“Damn, I got married and Cal fell in love. What an eventful family vacation.” She pushes herself off from where she was leaning on the wall and starts to make her way to the dining

room. I have yet to see my parents, but I am sure they are here somewhere.

“No one said anything about love.” Not that I am afraid of love, but I am very adamantly against believing in love at first sight. Does it count as first sight if we spent two weeks glued at the hip, though? I find myself searching for justification for the warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest.

“Oh, please. You are so in over your head. What time does she get in? Will she be coming to family dinner next week?” she asks eagerly, with a giant grin on her face. I don’t know who is more excited that I have found someone I want to date, me or her.

“She lands at 7:00 p.m. on Friday, and abso-fucking-lutely not,” I respond, giving my sister a curt look.

“Why not? She has already met everyone. I want to get to know her more.” She puts her hands on her hips, giving me the, “I’m the big sister, I’m in charge” look. I outgrew her in the fourth grade, so that look quit working a long time ago. I like to let her think it works, though. Keeps up her confidence.

“The first time she met people, everyone was toasted from all the Mai Tais. Secondly, she is only here until Tuesday, and I haven’t seen her in a couple weeks. I will be keeping her with me, thank you very much.”

She drops the subject once we hit the dining room, and I am grateful. I don’t want my parents overhearing. They’ve been nagging me about being single almost as much as Liv has. It’s annoying.

My parents are sitting in their usual spots. My dad sits at the head of the table, with my mom to his right. I sit at his left and Liv sits next to mom. The table can sit eight, so it sits mostly empty unless it's a holiday. My brother, Samuel, never shows up unless it's Thanksgiving or Christmas. If we're lucky, he shows up for birthday dinners.

“Liv, where is Tyler? I thought he would be joining us tonight?” my mom asks. Everyone here loves Tyler. They had been dating for years, and them getting married was a long time coming. If you ask my mother, it was about three years overdue. Tyler, like me, is pretty driven when it comes to work. He has been busy climbing the ladder in his law firm and finally made partner last year. Hence the reason he was finally ready to settle down and devote time to things other than practicing law.

“He is super behind on work since he took almost a whole month off for the wedding and honeymoon. He has meetings with clients and his team most of the week to get caught up.”

“Good man,” is all my dad mutters. He grabs his glass of red wine and takes a swig. He isn't a man of a lot of words. Unless you get some whiskey in him. Then, he doesn't shut up. He has always showed up for us, though, and would burn the world down for us without thinking twice. “Speaking of meetings, how did yours go yesterday, Son?”

Yesterday's impromptu meeting was a shitshow. The majority of the team was unprepared. The budget was a mess. We got it all figured out after two hours of back and forth. It's

hard for some of these old guys to accept that I am the boss and do things differently than my old man, but we are getting there.

“It was alright. A bit of a mess when we walked in, but we will be ready to go by Monday. The projections are looking like we will be on time and the budget was finalized.” I grab my fork, ready to move on from work talk and get to mom’s food.

“Harry and the boys giving you any trouble?” I feel like he knows this answer. He knows the old men at the office are as stubborn as he is.

It was surprising when my dad said I could run my division anyway I wanted. Since taking over, I’ve modernized the flow, going almost completely digital with designs and changed the way we hire contractors and employees. They’re slowly getting caught up with the times, and I just have to do my best to not knock the old guys out after every meeting.

“They’re coming around,” I say as a way to evade answering truthfully. They are coming around. About as quickly as a sloth in quicksand, but progress is progress. To be honest, I like the challenge, and I don’t need my old man stepping in.

“Good deal. Now, let’s eat,” my dad says.

My mom’s cooking is probably the main reason we almost never skip Sunday dinner together. Plus, it keeps us all close without having to plan family outings.

Dinner conversations start to flow as we all shove our faces with mom's roast and mashed potatoes. She and my dad have been married for thirty-one years, and they have officially hit the bickering like an old married couple phase. Honestly, it is hilarious to watch my mom light my dad's ass up like the Fourth of July.

I tense when I hear my mom ask if anything new is happening in our worlds. Meaning, my sister and I.

I see a glimmer of mischief in my sister's eyes and wish I was close enough to kick her shin, but unfortunately, I am not.

"Cal's girlfriend is coming to town next week," Liv says. If looks could kill, the one I shoot her would have keeled her right over.

My mom's posture goes straight and I swear to God I see a sparkle of hope in her eye. I wish I could sink out of this chair and somehow teleport back to my car. Liv is officially on the shit list.

"I didn't know Cal had a girlfriend. How long have you been seeing her for?" Cheer and excitement drips from my mother's voice.

"She is the girl he brought to my wedding, remember her? She and Cal wandered off at the end. What were you two doing, again?"

That's it. I'm going to have to run her over with my car after this.

Fuck my life.

“Oh, she was lovely.” My mother claps her hands in excitement. “Where is she coming from? Did you start seeing her in Hawaii? What does she do for a living? What was she doing in Hawaii?” I swear my mother’s questions pour out of her for two minutes straight. Liv has a smirk on her face, and I’d love nothing more than to wipe it off of her.

“She is coming from Colorado and will only be here until Tuesday,” I reply, keeping my head down and absolutely refusing to make eye contact with my mother. I look at Liv and shoot some daggers her way, though.

“Oh, wonderful! So, she will be joining us next week?” Mom takes a sip of her wine and I can’t help but feel like I have been backed into a corner. I hate talking about my private life. It’s usually easy to avoid, since all I do is work.

“I will have to check with her and see if she is comfortable walking into the lion’s den,” I mutter out.

My mother gasps, obviously insulted. “Family dinner is not the lion’s den. I just want to get to know the girl who has captured the attention of my workaholic son.”

I smile at her to help bring her off the ledge and take a big bite to avoid having to give a reply sooner.

“I will talk to her. I am sure she will be okay with it. We got real close and personal while we were in Hawaii. Surely, I could talk her into it,” Liv says. Her subtle digs about our little closet fiasco are luckily going over our parents’ head. My mother would literally have a coronary if she knew I screwed a girl in a closet at my sister’s wedding.

She isn't just a girl, though. She is my girl. The thought brings a smile to lips.

“Well, that settles it. We will be seeing her for dinner next week.” My mom does a little happy dance in her chair and I start the mental preparation for next week's dinner. I will have to get Isla mentally prepared, too, for the onslaught of questions my mother will have. I am sure ninety percent of them will be wildly inappropriate and invasive.

We manage to avoid talking about Isla and me for the rest of dinner. I do really love this time with my family, even with the bombardment of questions. I just hope Isla can love it, too.

Eighteen

Isla

The week has absolutely dragged. The more excited you are about something, the slower time goes. It has been a whole week of treadmill minutes, but the time has finally come. I have to start weaving the threads to my super believable story for calling in next week. I also have to go home early today to be able to catch my flight on time.

My boss, Karen, absolutely lives up to her name. It wouldn't surprise me if she is the reason for the inspiration behind the "Karen" personality. Basically, I really need to sell my story to keep my ass out of hot water.

At work we all have our own little cubicles that are broken up into separate pods. I am in the Marketing Pod, but there are other divisions, like HR, Risk Management, and a bunch of others I never really talk to.

Karen's office sits to the side of all our cubicles. She acts like her office is a throne and we are all her peasants. It's actually the worst, and I have to talk myself out of throat-

punching her once a week. She has a tendency to be incredibly demeaning and downright bitchy. Nothing is ever good enough, and no matter what it is, Karen can do it better.

I hit the “clock out” button on the app on my computer for lunch and push my chair back. Normally, I don’t tell Karen when I am heading out for lunch, but today, I will. I am telling her I am going out for sushi. I can just pretend I am trying to kiss her ass and butter her up like my podmate, Heather, does. She is lucky her nose isn’t brown from how far her head is up Karen’s ass.

Peeking my head into the office, I slap a smile on my face. “Hey, Karen, I am heading out to lunch. There is this new sushi place a couple blocks down that I am going to run to.” She looks up at me over her glasses and raises her eyebrows. Her office is as bland as she is. The only thing hanging on the walls is her diploma. There are windows that would let amazing light in, but she chooses to keep the curtains drawn. Maybe she’s a vampire?

“Okay? Is there a reason you are telling me this, or are you looking for permission?” Yep. Pretty much what I was expecting her response to be.

“Nope, just wanted to let you know where I was going.” I say as she rolls her eyes and pushes up her glasses.

Alrighty then.

Taking that as my dismissal, I make my way out to lunch to eat the peanut butter and jelly I packed. I refuse to eat anything that will upset my stomach. With getting on a plane in five

hours, I am already getting a case of nervousness, which almost always leads to a stomachache and other embarrassing things that I would rather die than do on a plane. Or at Cal's.

The anxiety about seeing Cal for the first time in a couple weeks is setting in. This is us in the real world and not in vacation land. I have this fear that I made up all the feelings I have because I was in my happy place while on vacation. Everything is great when you are on vacation. Can we live up to the hype we created while we were there?

The second I get back from lunch I immediately start complaining about my stomach hurting to literally anyone who will listen. Completely aware that this is embarrassing and tarnishing my image slightly, but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. Right now, this girl has to convince everyone in the office that she ate shitty sushi, which is now making her feel shitty. Pun intended.

Word travels fast. Granted, I have literally run to the bathroom three times in the last hour to really sell the show. So, I shouldn't be surprised that Karen sends me home before I infect the office. Not that food poisoning is contagious, but Karen isn't nearly as smart as she believes herself to be.

I was going to have to ask to go home in thirty minutes, anyways, but this is a much better change of events. Now, I will be able to make my flight on time and be in Maine in just a few hours.

My image at work is as good as dead, but at least my plans for a long weekend are alive.

I rush home and get ready. Normally, I look like I've just crawled out of bed on a plane, but I have a hot date as soon as I land. Opting to leave my hair curly, I add some curl cream to prevent it from frizzing up the second I step off the plane and into the East Coast humidity. The humidity there is literally double what it is here in Colorado. The air is so dry here, especially since we haven't had any moisture or snow in the last month. I don't know how winter humidity works, but I'd rather be overprepared in hair products than under.

Rifling through my closet, I pick out my best jeans, a slouchy sweater, and a pair of white sneakers. Effortlessly cute. Doing a little spin in the mirror, I make sure everything looks good.

My bags are packed. I actually packed three days ago, which isn't like me, but I am so excited I couldn't help myself. Addie came over and we did a fashion show with all of my outfit choices. She made me change out half of them and dragged me to Victoria's Secret to pick out a couple new matching sets. I am prepared on all fronts so long as I can keep the nerves in check.

My plane leaves at three, but with the time change, I won't be getting to Maine until around 7:00 p.m. Cal and I have talked every chance we get. I call him on my drive to work and before bed every day. We have fallen into a comfortable routine this week. Addie was right; I need to not overthink things. Cal and I have something good, I can feel it in my heart of hearts. Speaking of Addie, my phone vibrates, and I see a text that she is on her way.

Shit is getting really real, really fast. Sitting down on my bed, I take a sip of water, hoping to calm my nerves. I am jump roping the line of excitement and being so nervous that I might literally pee my pants. I decide that I am teetering more towards excitement. In just a few hours, we won't be half a country apart, and I can't help but smile at that.

I do a few mundane tasks around my apartment to keep my hands and mind busy. Just sitting here, twirling my thumbs, while waiting for Addie will do me absolutely no good. Everyone knows I am the most awkward person alive when I am nervous, so I have to keep that at bay. Cal has already been a victim to my nervous babbling too many times to count.

Addie calls as soon as she pulls up front. She told her boss she had a very important appointment that she couldn't reschedule to get out of work. If you really think about it, she isn't wrong. At least, that's what she told me when she was trying to justify lying. Not that she cares that much, anyways. Unlike me, she does love her job, she just lives without a care in the world at baseline.

When I hop into the car, Addie hands me a drink. "Hello, you beautiful bitch. Are you ready for your big weekend?"

I should have asked more questions because the drink has liquor and a strong dose at that. "Addie, what the fuck is in this?" It looked like a normal cup of coffee, but I should have known better.

"Relax, I put just a smidge of Kahlua in it. I knew you would be a Nervous Nelly, so I gave you just a little to make you

calm down.” She is a dirty liar because I know for a fact that there is much more than “just a smidge” in here.

We fall into easy conversations, and I am glad she drove me because she and the Kahlua definitely helped me calm down. She hypes me up the whole drive. Everyone deserves a friend who feels like sunshine, and that’s what Addie is to me. My own little ray of sunshine, there to part my gray clouds and shed some light on the heavy stuff.

We pull up to the airport drop-off and she looks over at me. “Have the best time ever. Don’t overthink it, just enjoy it. Every minute. Do your worst. Now, get out of here and go see the love of your life.”

“I think it is a little early to label him as the love of my life, but I love your enthusiasm. Thanks for the ride. I will call when I land.” I reach over the center console and hug her.

“I love you!” I hear her yell as I hop out of the car and make my way through baggage check-in. They have a little kiosk right by the entrance gates, which comes in handy when you pack as heavy as I do. Two bags for four days is probably a bit excessive.

As I weave through the airport, I think back to the last time I sat in this airport, not knowing one of the best things that could ever happen to me was my best friend not showing up. It’s funny how one little thing can drastically change everything in the best way possible.

Nineteen

Cal

Isla texts me when she lands. I booked her a direct flight to save us some travel time since she is getting in later in the day, anyways. Knowing better than to skip on dinner plans when it comes to her, I made reservations so we can stop for dinner on the way back to my condo. Work was a welcomed distraction today, but the drive to the airport gives my mind time to reel. Forty-five minutes in the car by yourself probably isn't a good idea. I feel like this weekend is our "make or break it" weekend, and I just want to do it right. Show her my neck of the woods and make her love it as much as I do.

Making my way through the airport traffic, I park my car in a garage and get to baggage claims. Looking at the flight board, I find her flight number on Carousel Number Three and anxiously await her. I have built this up so much in my head that I hope I didn't spoil it for myself. I look around, people-watching, and desperate to find her face in the sea of people pouring out of the walkway.

The anxiousness quickly leaves my head when I spot her. She hasn't seen me yet, but I see her, and she is just as beautiful as the last time I saw her. Her hair is wild and wavy. Her backpack is on and she is carrying her purse. Her eyes eventually find mine, a giant smile spreading across her face. I return the smile without hesitation.

I don't think I realized how deeply I missed her until I saw her beaming at me. Unable to wait, I find myself making my way to her, and she picks up her pace. When she finally makes it to me, I wrap her up in my arms and give her a big squeeze. At that moment, I know that I didn't build any of this up too much. In fact, I think I underestimated what we had built during our short time together.

Isla pulls herself back, with her legs still wrapped around my waist. "I missed you," comes out of her mouth. Before she can say anymore, my lips find hers. There are people rushing past us all over, but we are in our own little bubble.

The loud bell for baggage finally goes off, letting us know her bags will be showing up on the carousel any moment.

"I missed you, too." I smile at her and set her down on the ground. Linking my fingers through hers, I'm desperate to keep the contact we've gone too long without. We make our way to baggage claim. "How was your flight?"

"It was good. The plane had a TV built into the headrest, so I was able to watch a movie the whole flight. Made it much quicker. How was your drive?"

“It was quick.” It didn’t feel quick, but all the anxiety seems a little stupid now. “We can get some food while we are up here if you are up for it?” I ask her. Traveling after working all day can be exhausting, and I don’t want her to feel like she has to.

“We both know I am always up for food.” She squeezes my hand as she grins at me.

“I figured as much. I made reservations for a local hot spot. It’s not super fancy, but it has a 4.5-star rating, so it has to be pretty good.” Liv has eaten there before, too, so I know the reviews aren’t lying. It is supposed to have a very “chill” atmosphere, whatever that means, and the best food in the city. It is becoming more popular by the day, hence the reason for reservations.

“You know me so well. Any other big plans while I am here, or are we just winging it?” she asks.

This would be a good time to warn her about Liv’s interference.

“The only thing solidly planned is family dinner Sunday. I planned to keep you safe from it, but Liv had to spill the beans about you coming to town. Now, my mother will not leave it alone, and there is no way we can get out of it.”

She laughs at me, and I wonder if it is partly a nervous laugh. “It’s fine. Your family was all nice and welcoming the last time I saw them. I could do without seeing Liv, but at least this time I will have my clothes on. So, I have that going for me.” We both break out in a laugh.

“Last time you saw them, everyone was drunk and having a good time. I should get some practice questions ready so you can be prepared for my mother.”

“She can’t be that bad. Also, I can arrange everyone getting drunk again. Maybe if I liquor your mom up, she will like me extra.” She shimmies at the word “liquor”. I missed how full of life she is.

“You don’t have to worry about my mother liking you; it is impossible not to like you. However, that woman has never in her life turned down cocktail hour. So, feel free to do as you wish.”



Getting out of the airport took a little longer than I was expecting, so we barely make our 8:00 p.m. reservations. The restaurant is only a few miles from the airport, thankfully. By the way she is currently devouring her food, I am guessing it’s a hit.

“So, I take it the food is to your standards, huh?” I laugh as I take a sip of beer.

“Itth amathing,” she says over a bite of her burger.

We easily slipped right back into our flow the second we were together. All the nerves were not needed. I have to watch myself and make sure I am not staring at her like a creep as we eat dinner.

“Also, don’t hate me, but I have to stop by the office on the way to the condo. I was kind of frazzled when I headed out for the day and left my laptop in my office.” It’s something I realized on the way to pick her up. I will be working significantly less this weekend, but still need to be available should something crazy come up. And, as I have learned, something catastrophic always happens.

I was expecting her to be annoyed by this, but she actually perked up when I mentioned going to the office.

“Ooooooh, can I come in and look at it?” she asks.

“Well, duh. I’m not going to leave you waiting in the car.” I shake my head at her. “Also, I haven’t seen you in two weeks. I want to make sure you are good and sick of me by the time you head back home.”

“Well, I have bad news for you, buddy. I don’t think I will ever be tired of you.” I don’t know what I was expecting her to say, but that was definitely not it. I never really had her confirm her feelings are the same as mine. She has made me work for every inch of progress we have made. I know deep down that she was probably scared, and that’s why she never reached out when she got home. Hell, I know I was. It’s scary putting yourself out there when there is a strong chance you could end up hurt.

Getting on the plane was a big step for us, bridging this from an island fling into something we actually want to put some effort into. It took some work to get us here, but having her in my space was worth the wait.

I reach over to grab her hand and give it a squeeze. “Same, baby. Same.”

We drive in silence for a while. I start to wonder if Isla has dozed off. She isn’t asleep, but she is taking every little detail in. We have gotten a good amount of snow this year and it is covering most of the ground. With the glow of the streetlights, it really does look beautiful. I can’t wait to actually show her around town tomorrow.

We make our way into town and I pull into the office. I start to feel a little nervous as I wonder what she will say about the office. We have the biggest building on the block. It is about ten stories tall. There is a different floor for each unit we have here, with management and leadership on the top floor.

I park at the front of the building. No one is here, so I don’t mind parking in the spot closest to the door. I hop out of the car and walk over to open Isla’s door, but she has beat me to it. Miss Independent. “You were supposed to let me do that,” I pull my badge out of my wallet and then grab her hand.

“I *can* open a door myself, but I appreciate the gesture.”

We take a few strides and make our way to the door. Isla’s eyes roam over the building.

I badge us in, and as the automatic doors open up, Isla takes it all in. The first floor opens to our front desk. It is obnoxiously oversized for just two people, but at least they never have to bump elbows. The large tiles on the floor give off a small glow from the light coming in from the picture windows up front. I pull her to the right, where the elevators

are, and press the button. Being the only ones here, the door pops open right away.

“After you.” I put my hand on Isla’s lower back and guide her in. The small gesture changed the temperature in the room. I’ve seen that look in Isla’s eyes many times. It looks like my presence isn’t the only part of me she was missing.

I can’t help myself. I’m just a man on fire, ready to burn for her. Grabbing her hand, I pull her into me. She giggles a little as my lips find hers. The giggles stop when I deepen the kiss and her hands find my hair. I wrap my hand around her waist to pull her as close as we can possibly get. I’ve never gotten laid in the elevator, but now sounds like a good time to check that off the list. But being that there are cameras in here, that probably wouldn’t be the smartest move.

Isla must have other ideas because she pulls away from me the second the elevator dings.

“You are supposed to be giving me a tour, sir,” she scolds me as I groan, trying to subtly adjust myself in my pants. “Hot and bothered for me already? You haven’t even seen what I packed for you, yet.”

I let out a groan, knowing it is going to be good. And because she caught me. She always catches me.

She walks down the hall like she owns the place. By the time I caught up to her, she had already passed my office. I stop by my door and whistle at her to get her to turn around. “Hey, you went a little too far.” I nod my head to the door and unlock it.

Isla hustles over and peeks her head in the door as I walk into the room. I hear her let out a whistle.

“Damn, hot shot, this is quite the office. You’re real hot shit here, huh?” She looks up at the walls. I have a corner office, so two of the walls are nothing but windows looking over the town. My desk is a giant L-shape, and my computer faces the open window. The light helps me think and keeps it bright in here. There’s a couch on the far side of my office, and next to it is a door that leads to my personal bathroom.

“Well, I am kind of the boss in these neck of the woods.” I sit down at my desk and start grabbing random papers I may need this weekend.

“That’s kind of hot. I like a man who can take charge.” The tone in her voice causes me to look up and I see her prowling my way. I absolutely know how much she loves it, because my work ethic takes over in the bedroom and I take worshipping her body very seriously.

She reaches my knees and straddles my lap.

I really liked this office before, but I don’t think I’ve ever loved it quite as much as I have at this moment. I lean back to look at her and she wraps her hands around the base of my neck. It shoots little goosebumps down my body.

“I really wanted to wear my new outfit for you, but I don’t think I can wait until you get me home.” She leans down and meets my lips halfway. My heart buzzes a little bit when she calls my condo home. If I have it my way, one day, she will call it home and mean it.

She shimmies out of her coat and I coax her arms up so I can pull her shirt off of her. She has a white-trimmed lace bra on. I am a starved man and can't help myself. I reach around and free her breasts from her bra, kissing her from the neck down.

My body freezes when I hit her breast. It dawns on me that I didn't lock the door. Lord knows this woman will not let me live it down if I get us caught again. I hold her to my chest as I roll my chair across the floor. Turning the lock, I hear it snap into place.

Isla's laughter fills the room and I drink it up. "Well, I am glad you learned your lesson last time. Now, if you could get back to ravishing me, that would be great."

Her wish will always be my command.

Gripping her by the back of her thighs, I carry her to the couch in the corner. I reach down to unbutton her pants. She watches as I slide them off her body and steps out of them once they hit the floor. I now sit between her legs. She is completely bare to me, and I am still wearing everything I walked in here with.

"This isn't fair. I need you to take something off."

I chuckle at her comment and remove my coat. I make slow work of unbuttoning my shirt. She watches like a hawk, so I take it extra slow. When I finally get my shirt off, I push her so she is laying on her back on the couch. The couch isn't super long but it is deep. I have slept on it a fair share of times.

My fingers find her pussy and I glide over it just enough to make her buck her hips.

“Did you miss this as bad as I did?” I whisper into her ear before slowly kissing her neck.

She answers not with words but by grabbing my hand and dragging it back across her pussy. She moans at my touch and I can feel myself melting at the sound.

Fuck, this woman will be the end of me.

“I will take that as a yes.” With that, I slide two fingers into her and slowly start dragging the palm of my hand across her clit. A whimper escapes from her, but it isn’t enough for me. I want her screaming my name so loudly, you can hear it down the block. She may not want to get caught, but I want the whole world to know she is mine and only mine.

I pick up the pace, until I feel her start to tighten around my fingers. Her hands start wildly grabbing at my back as her breathing gets more ragged. She comes and it drips down my hand and to the couch.

I will probably have to get it reupholstered, but it will be worth it.

I kiss her fiercely. She is just as eager as I am. I feel my belt being undone and my pants being unzipped. So, I prop myself up a little more to help give her better access. Her hand brushes against my dick and that does it for me. I take over the stripping game and am flinging my pants and boxers off at warp speed.

“You want me inside you, baby?” She nods her head yes, but I am dying to hear her say it. “I need you to say it for me, baby. Tell me how badly you want me.” I kiss up her neck again, causing her to groan out in frustration.

“Cal, I am not trying to be dramatic, but if you don’t touch me in the next two seconds, I will literally die. Please.” That’s good enough for me.

I line myself up with her and, in one swift motion, I am filling her up. How could I forget how tight she is around me? I have to quickly distract myself from that thought to keep myself from finishing this early in the game.

We stay in that position briefly, but the couch isn’t quite long enough for either of us to be super comfortable. I flip her over to her hands and knees, grabbing under her hips to bring her ass back up to me. Don’t get me wrong, the view of her tits is great, but nothing compares to this girl’s ass.

I wrap her hair around my wrist to arch her back up farther towards me. The pulling of her hair makes her let out a little moan, and I swear it is music to my ears.

“Can you play with yourself while I fuck you good back here, baby?” She nods yes, so I grab her hand and drag it to her clit. We aren’t leaving this office until my girl screams my name.

She starts meeting me thrust for thrust.

“Fuck, I missed this pussy, baby.” Grabbing onto her hips, I pull her against me faster and harder. Looking down, I see her

dripping down her thighs. I wipe it up with my fingers and bring it around to her mouth.

“You want to taste how good I fuck you, baby?” She immediately nods her head yes. Just when I thought my dick couldn’t get any harder, she licks my fingers clean.

“Cal, I’m gonna co—” The last part of her sentence falls silent as she unravels all over me.

Hot damn.

I pick up my pace, ready to get her home so we can do this in a bed, where we have all the room in the world. It takes three pumps and I fill her up.

She slowly makes her way to her back while under me and gives me a lazy smile. I lean down and give her a slow kiss. Much gentler and less rushed now that we have taken the edge off.

I kiss the tip of her nose. “Not that this hasn’t been great, but I would love to get you home so we can do this properly. I’m dying to see what you have packed for me.”

I start picking up our scattered clothes and hand Isla hers. She walks around, half in a daze. Slipping on her pants, she completely ditches the bra and just pulls her sweater over her. As she slides into her coat, I get into mine. I watch her slip her bra into her coat jacket.

I unlock the door and open it. “I’m guessing you want to skip the tour of the rest of the place?” I glance at her and she gives me a look.

“We can come back later, and I can get an official tour when my bra isn’t in my coat pocket.” She pulls out a piece of her bra to prove her point.

“Fair enough.” Reaching for her hand, we head on our way now that I have what I came for, both literally and figuratively.

I can’t help but think about how natural this all feels, having her here in my space. The thought warms my chest as we get ready to bear the cold of winter in Maine.

Twenty

Isla

The smell of coffee and syrup drags me from sleep on Sunday morning. I reach my hand across to Cal's side of the bed and find it empty. Peeking my eye open—not really ready to fully commit to waking up—I find his side of the bed made and empty.

“Rise and shine!” Cal says as he walks into the room, while carefully holding two plates. I'm guessing one's for himself and one is for me.

“Please, tell me one of those is for me?” I say as I yawn, stretching my hands above my head. I slept so hard last night that I almost feel a little drunk this morning.

Rubbing my eyes, I ask, “What time is it?” Cal opens the curtains to his room and it's so bright that I have a hard time keeping both eyes open.

Cal's room is almost exactly how I expected it would be. It follows the minimalist vibe his whole condo has going. The

dark blue comforter he has is perfectly warm and plush. The condo is equally masculine as it is bright with the big windows. The majority of his furniture is some shade of black or grey, which contrasts nicely with the white walls. He has a few little accents of raw wood. A very different vibe than I'm used to. Usually, I would think it would look unfinished, but it fits him so well.

“I know better than to walk into a room with two plates and not have one for you.” He winks at me. “It is ten thirty. I wanted to let you sleep a little longer, but honestly, I got hungry and figured the smell of food would drag you from your coma.” He walks over and hops in bed. My plate was set on my black bedside table, and he held on to his as he hopped in bed.

I pull my plate into my lap and look at the spread he made me. He has treated me to breakfast in bed both yesterday and today. A girl could get used to this. My plate is stuffed full of French toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon. He has the good maple syrup, too, not the artificial one. I waste no time and dig right in. I close my eyes as I savor the maple flavor dancing over my tongue.

“Mmmmm. Cal, I'm not gonna lie, I kind of thought you were too good to be true before I knew you could cook, and now, I am completely sold on the sentiment.” There is no way a man can be that good-looking, funny, nice, not to mention great in bed, and not have something detrimentally wrong with him.

“I’m sure you will find something you don’t like that I do and will nag me about it for the rest of my life. Keep looking.” He chuckles as he cuts off a piece of French toast and brings it to his mouth. “Wow, I really did outdo myself, huh?” His comment makes me wonder if I really could see nagging him about something stupid for the rest of his life. A life filled with Cal sounds like a life well-lived.

“Yeah, I think I found your flaw. ‘Does not take compliments well. Takes them directly to the head, and it swells with his ego.’” I give his shoulder a playful nudge.

“See, that took you no time at all.” He takes a swig of his orange juice. He must have brought us juice while I was away in dreamland. “Anything particular you want to do before we head to my parents’ house for dinner?”

I think it over but, besides our little parade through town, I have no idea what the place really has for us to do. “Well, Callahan, what is there to do for fun around here?” I ask.

“Uhm, let me think. We have a movie theater, a gym—”

At that, I make a face that must say what I am thinking: absolutely not. Not that I don’t like the gym, but this is a little break/vacation. A breakation, if you will, and that shit can wait until I get home.

Cal chuckles at the look on my face but continues. “I think we still have the arcade, but it’s usually swarming with screaming kids on the weekends. And um. Oh, yeah, and ice skating.”

“Oooh, yes, can we please go ice skating?” I’ve been ice skating in Colorado before. We had a place called the Ice Haus, but unfortunately, it closed like ten years ago and I haven’t been since.

“So long as you promise to not get crazily competitive about it and tackle me, again.” He shoots me a wink and I pretend to stab him with my fork for picking on me.

“First of all, that was one time. Second of all, I don’t think ice skating really counts as a competitive sport.”

“Babe, ice skating is literally an Olympic sport. Plus, knowing you, you will find a way to make it competitive.”

I scoff at his response, not addressing that he is one hundred percent right. How does someone who has known me for what feels like such a short amount of time already know me so well?



He was right. I found a way to make it competitive. Honestly, it’s basically an illness at this point how competitive I am. I am not overly athletic, so I think I overcompensate with my competitive drive.

We have a current bet: whoever falls the most has to buy the hot cocoa. Unfortunately, this time, I am not winning the bet. And there is no way for me to cheat my way to victory, either.

I don’t know why I thought ice skating would be fun. It is fun when I watch Cal eat shit, don’t get me wrong. It’s just not

as funny when I fall, obviously. Unfortunately for me, I am falling twice as much as he is. Possibly literally and figuratively. This man has somehow made me feel more in a few weeks than I have in a whole lifetime.

Thinking back, not a single man I have ever been with holds a candle to the feelings I already have for Cal. It's a little scary, but the more time we spend together on this trip, the more assured I feel. If I thought I had feelings for him in Hawaii, the distance we have spent from each other has only made them grow stronger.

The ice rink has quite a lot of people but isn't overly crowded, and luckily for me, I am not the only one struggling. It is a cute, little spot with a couple of vendors around, some selling snacks, and some selling random warm beverages.

“Okay, let's see if we can get a full lap without you eating shit, huh?” Cal taunts me, knowing good and well it gets on my last nerve that I suck at this. I really thought this would be easy. “I'll even hold your hand.”

“Ever the gentleman, you are, Mr. Reynolds.” He grabs my hand and we slowly start making our loop. Finally, I start getting into a rhythm and finding my balance. The cold air kisses my face as we swoosh around a group of kids. Cal lets go of my hand and gets really fancy and goes backwards.

“Alright, alright. We know you won. No need to rub it in. Also, you should have told me you were good at this. I was expecting us to suck together as a solid unit.” I actually didn't know I would suck this bad but still.

“I can’t play all my cards. I have to leave you in awe, wanting more.” He whips back around and does a little spinny move. I can’t help but throw my head back laughing. This guy.

My head being backwards causes me to lose my balance and I get a case of the giraffe legs. Cal whips around and catches me before I hit the ground.

“That would’ve been a doozy, thanks,” I say, looking up at him.

“I’ll catch you every time you fall, sweet girl.” I blush immediately and put a hand up to cover my face. Trying to shy away from him.

“That was the cheesiest and cutest thing you’ve ever said.” I giggle a little as he brushes my hand away from my face and brings his lips to mine. The warmth spreading from his lips warms me against the frigid temperature we are enduring for our little day of fun.

“Cheesy, but true.” He beams at me and I feel my stomach do a little flip flop. Son of a bitch.

This man will either be the love of my life or the greatest heartbreak I’ll ever have.

He shakes me from my thoughts as he pulls me around the last bit of the lap and we exit, heading for hot cocoa.

“Let’s get that hot cocoa you owe me, and then we should probably head back to clean up for dinner. Are you sure you’re ready for a full-on family dinner? My family is great, but it

can be kind of overwhelming.” He gives me a look, waiting for me to take the out.

I came from such a small family that I am actually kind of excited to see what a family dinner is like when there is more than one kid getting questioned and absolutely no lulls in conversation. I’ve already met them all, too, which helps.

That’s not saying I am not slightly nervous, because that would be a full-on lie, but I know how important family is to Cal, and I can’t wait to see where he came from. You know, when we’re all sober and functioning adults capable of remembering the whole conversation.

I grin up at his questioning eyes. “Bring it on. But first, hot cocoa.”



The hot cocoa was good. Not as good as the one that we had in Hawaii, but still good. It served its purpose of warming us up on the drive home and zinging us with a little sugar high.

When we got back, I had the typical female conundrum. What the hell do I wear when I am meeting my boyfriend’s parents for the first time? Technically, the second, but first time sober.

Also, is Cal my boyfriend? It dawns on me that we never really had a conversation digging into that. I mean, he sent me plane tickets and I flew halfway across the country. So,

obviously, this is more than friends. My feelings for him are definitely more than friends.

Do boys still officially ask you to be their girlfriend, or does that stop after high school? My thoughts wander, trying to remember the last time I was officially asked to be someone's girlfriend, and I am drawing a blank. Huh. I'll have to add that to the Things I Should Ask Addie bank for later. Right now, I need to focus on an outfit.

It's cold, so there is no way in hell that I will be wearing a dress. I have a semi-dressy blouse and some black trousers that are cute. Or maybe I should wear jeans so I don't look like I am trying so hard.

I am way overthinking this. Maybe I'm more nervous than I thought? Knowing myself, that is probably the root of this. I knew my social awkwardness would show its ugly head at some point.

"Hey, Cal, what is your usual Sunday dinner dress code?" He peeps his head out of the bathroom door, with his hair still damp and his body wrapped in a towel. "Like, should I be kind of dressy, or will that be too much? I also have jeans." Picking them up, I show him. I drop them and pick up the next option. "Oh, and I have these leggings that would look cute with this sweater?" I start laying them out so I can really get a feel for how they look.

"Wear whatever you are most comfortable in. I will personally be wearing jeans and a sweater." He nods his head to the clothes he has laid out on the bed. "There is no dress

code. A couple weeks ago, Liv showed up in sweats.” He ducks back into the bathroom to finish cleaning up.

Okay, that makes this a little easier. I think I will go with the leggings and oversized sweater—cute and comfy. I slip on the black leggings and put on the block-striped oversized sweater.

Walking into the bathroom, I hip-check Cal a little so he can give me some room at the vanity. It has double sinks, so there is plenty of room for both of us. He chuckles at me as he brushes his teeth and moves over a little.

The last couple of days have washed away most of my worries about if we still click off the island. Honestly, it is like we didn’t miss a beat. If anything, seeing him here on his turf makes me want him more. I love seeing him be the boss when he answers phone calls from work, and I love seeing little pieces of his hometown that shaped him. The thought of going back home already has dread pooling in my stomach.

I finish getting ready, pulling my hair into a styled top knot that’s just messy enough to be cute without looking like I didn’t brush it today. The boots I wore through the airport are pretty much my only choice, since I only have three shoe options and the other two don’t match.

Cal looks as handsome as ever without trying. It’s so annoying that men just wake up and look hot. Meanwhile, I wake up with bedhead and drool. Women really do get the short end of the stick sometimes.

Cal slaps my ass as we walk through the door to the car. It makes me jump a little and hustle to the car, where my ass is

safe from him.

This is the last big check mark in my book. Family is such a big deal to Cal, and if I can fit in with his family, we're looking good. I feel more confident every minute that I am with him that we can figure this shit out.

Twenty-One

Isla

We walk in through the door and I internally cringe. Liv is standing in the front hallway, hanging up her coat. I know it's not a big deal, and most of the shame has been washed away by now, but all I can think about is that Cal's sister has seen my boobs. Not exactly the fan club I pictured her being in.

I look up and around and am in shock. This is some fancy shit. They have the cool stairs that kind of curve as they make their way upstairs. And they have a freaking foyer. My parents weren't struggling by any means, and we never went without, but, like, this is "pinkies up" fancy.

Cal pulls me from my gawking by taking my coat off me and walking it to what I can assume is the coat closet. We pass through the foyer and make our way to the closet where Liv is hanging up her coat. The house has endless space; the foyer alone is the size of my living room in my apartment. The decor

has an old English vibe. Cal definitely didn't inherit his family's style.

“Hi, I'm Liv. Which, you already know that because you were at my wedding and, well, other things.” She is the female version of Cal, with long brown hair and big blue eyes. Just like Cal said, she is dressed very casually. She has on a long-sleeve shirt that hugs her slender frame and a pair of straight-leg jeans, looking effortlessly put together.

My cheeks instantly redden at the memory, I have to fight the urge to dart through the door and just head on home.

She notices my reaction and reaches for me. “By the way, don't let that get to you. I'm sure Cal had to tell you the story about how my parents caught my husband and me once? Also, I am glad someone has finally made this one loosen up a little.” Her head nods towards Cal, while giving him a grin.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I can't help but laugh. Cal did tell me the story, and at the time, it did kind of help lessen the embarrassment I felt. “Ohhhh, yes, he sure did.”

“I'm sure Cal has made it seem like we're crazy, but I swear we're not. I mean, Mom is a little off her rocker, but she was born that way. And it's kind of funny.” Liv leads the way as we start to walk towards the dining room.

“Never said you guys were crazy. I was going to let her figure that out all on her own. I did warn her that Mom will probably ask a million and one questions, and at least half will be inappropriate.”

Liv takes this in as if she is weighing the truth in his statement, her head nodding from side to side. “Yeah, I wish I could tell you that wasn’t the case, but our mom knows absolutely no boundaries. But she does it with love.” She pats my shoulder as she goes and makes her way to a chair.

Cal grabs my hand and leads me to where we will be sitting. So far, we are the only three in the room. I debate on if I should try to make small talk with Liv, knowing my history of nervous babble. I tried really hard to convince myself not to be too nervous, but my social anxiety is winning the current battle. The house is super fancy and I am not. I am a little worried they will notice, and then they will hate me and not like me. Ugh. It’s fine. This is tottttally fine.

“So, um, Liv. How is married life? Will your husband be hanging out with us tonight?” I stumble over my words. The nervous babbles starting early this evening, I see.

Cal grabs my hand under the table and gives my fingers a squeeze. His touch instantly helps calm some of the nerves. Looking over, I give him a small smile.

“Oh, it’s great. We have been together forever. So, honestly, not a single thing has changed. Tyler should be joining us at some point tonight. He is finally caught up on work. We are actually quite boring these days. Tell me more about you. What do you do for a living?” Liv grabs the bottle of wine sitting in the middle of the table and pours herself a glass.

“No one will be questioning the guest of honor until I can partake in fun.” A woman, I am guessing Cal’s mom, walks

into the room. She, too, is beautiful. Damn, this whole family is attractive. She has salt-and-pepper hair, worn in a cute, curled bob. She is more dressed up than the rest of us, wearing tan slacks and a long-sleeve baby pink blouse. Her skin has that beautiful olive tone that both her kids share. One that my pale ass is envious of.

She walks up to me and I scoot my chair back so I can stand. Her hand reaches out for me to shake it. “You must be Isla. I am Anna. I’m so happy you are here.” Both my hands are enveloped in hers. Everything about her is warm. Her touch and her smile. I almost instantly relax.

“Thank you so much for inviting me. Your house is gorgeous.” I look around the room, still a little in awe.

She waves my comment off and gestures for me to take a seat again. “Now, Liv was asking a question before I popped in.” She wiggles in her seat as if she is getting comfortable and I huff out a laugh.

“Yes, um. I work at an advertising firm right now. We do marketing for companies in northeastern Colorado.”

Liv not so subtly starts scooting the wine across the table. Looking up, I see her mouth, “*You will need this.*” Stifling my laugh, I pour myself a glass. I feel as if I am being prepped for an interrogation.

“And do you like it? Do you see yourself working there long-term?” Ope, Cal warned me one question will quickly turn into five, and he wasn’t wrong.

Cal readjusts in his seat, likely sensing his mother's intentions. Her last question has me wondering if she was hinting at if I have any desire to leave Colorado or my job to come here with Cal. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it. I love it here. It's beautiful, and a fresh start doesn't sound so bad when I'm doing it with Cal. I never thought it was possible to feel this much for someone, and I would do just about anything to hang on to the way he makes me feel.

"I do like what I do for a living. I have to be honest, though, my boss is, um, how do I say this politely ... The worst? So, I don't really plan on staying forever, but it was my first job out of college and, overall, they have been good to me." I take a big swig of wine because Liv was right, I will need this. Not that these questions are invasive, but I've only been here five minutes and the night is still young.

I hear the front door open and two men walk in, one quite a bit younger than the other.

"Hi, honey! You're late." Anna stands and makes her way through the dining room and foyer to the front door. She grabs their coats and kisses the older one's cheek. I am guessing that it is Cal's dad. I don't remember seeing him at the wedding, but then again, I was a little preoccupied with his son in the closet.

Now, the man next to him is either the douchebag brother who skipped out on the wedding or Liv's husband. He does look faintly familiar, so I am guessing it is the latter.

“Tyler, Michael, this is Isla. Cal’s, um, special friend.” She smiles at both of them, and they approach.

“Hi, I am Tyler. I am pretty sure you were at our wedding, right?” The smile he gives me lets me know Liv absolutely told her husband what happened. Honestly, I can’t blame her, because I would have done the same.

I nod my head yes.

“Michael.” Cal’s dad shakes my hand and gives a small smile. “It’s a pleasure to have you. Now, let’s all sit and get to eating, shall we?” Cal’s dad isn’t nearly as chatty as his wife. He is the hardest one to read in the room.

Anna comes in, holding a serving tray of roasted chicken, veggies, and a side of mac and cheese. The smells coming off the platter are enough to make my mouth literally water. Herby deliciousness. Everyone has a drink in front of them and ready to dig in.

We take a minute and pass around the food. Not wanting to be rude, I wait until every plate is full before I dive in.

“Ohmahgod.” The mouthful of food doesn’t stop the words from slipping out. I one hundred percent meant to keep that in my brain, but my mouth had different ideas.

Anna sends me a smile, and I try to return it over a mouthful of food. “Make sure you save room for dessert, honey. I made pie.”

I look over at Cal with big eyes. We never ate like this at my house. It’s probably a good thing my mom was a mediocre

cook, or I would have eaten myself into a coma every day.

“Oh, don’t worry about her. She can out-eat everyone at this table.” Cal chuckles and I slap his arm.

“Hey!” I feign being angry. Although, I know he is probably right. Pretty sure I was born with a second stomach.

Everyone chuckles as we all dig in. It allows me some quality time to watch the conversation. There is a lot of love sitting around this table. It makes sense why Cal is such a good guy.

I notice his dad hasn’t said much but watches and smiles every time someone cracks a joke. Anna’s questions get a little more personal with each glass of wine she tips back. I find myself getting caught in fits of laughter. Honestly, she’s actually pretty funny. The premature judgments I made when I saw how nice the house is—assuming they would all be snooty and cookie-cutter—proved to be false. Their jokes are inappropriate, the food is good, and the laughs are endless.

“So, Isla, next time you are in town, we will have to have a girls’ day. Cal was adamant on not sharing you this time, but Liv and I usually have a girls’ day once a month. It would be nice to have a fresh face.” My heart warms a little at her wanting to include me in their routines.

Liv whips her head towards Anna and chimes in, “Hey, first of all, my face is very fresh. Second of all, yes, we would love to have some alone time without Cal hovering and restraining the questions we are allowed to ask.” She sticks her tongue out at him and I laugh. It’s hard not to feel at home here,

surrounded by Cal and his family. My heart feels fuller than it has ever been.

I never thought I went without not having a sibling, but I am a little envious of them and their relationship. My family is great and all, but we definitely lack the pizzazz this family has. Most of the spice in my life comes from Addie.

“That sounds great. I would absolutely love to. I am not sure when I can come out again, with work and all, but I will be sure to let you guys know as soon as I do.” Cal reaches over and grabs my hand. When I look over at him, the smile on his face is enough to melt a heart of ice. I think mine has been in puddles at his feet since we met.

We finish eating, and Cal decides it's time to go home before his mother can get the rest of us wine-drunk. It was tempting to ask her to bring out the baby pictures, but I will save that humiliation for the next time I am here. After tonight, and seeing Cal with his family, I know without a doubt that if I have it my way, there will be a never-ending amount of next times because I am head over heels in love with Callahan Reynolds.

Twenty-Two

Cal

In a better mood than I have been in weeks, I walk into family dinner. Every Sunday since Isla left, my sister and mom have hounded me about when Isla would be returning. If I had it my way, she never would have left.

She went to work with me the day before she left, wanting to see what I do. Mostly, she just stared at me, a little fire behind her eyes. I think back to the time I got off a heated call with a distributor, and the look she gave me ... I have to work to not give myself a boner thinking about it. My girl likes it when I am in charge, and she literally jumped my bones in the middle of the day. It was game on when she locked the door and strutted her little ass over to my desk. Now, I can't even walk into my office without thinking about her. One month is way too long to be apart.

Yeah, I can't be thinking about that as I walk into dinner with my family. I have to readjust my slacks a little to make them hide my situation.

On Wednesday, I will be getting on a plane to go see Isla for Valentine's Day. She finally worked up enough PTO to take a couple days off, and we are going to spend it in the cabin I rented.

We are in the middle of a crazy build with work, but honestly, I don't care. I am going crazy without having her here. Or me there. Admittedly, I am pretty excited to see where she comes from and meet the infamous Addie. Actually, I am terrified to meet Addie, but if I lie to myself enough, I will start to believe it, right?

No one is in the front of the house, so I walk through the hallway past the dining room and find Liv and Tyler sitting in the living room near Dad's bar cart. They have the fireplace going to warm up the space. The weather hit a record-breaking cold temperature today and dumped another four inches of snow.

"Starting the party early tonight, eh?" I ask as they both take a sip from their drinks. Liv has her long legs draped across Tyler's legs. A little pang of jealousy rises in my chest. I am missing my girl a little extra tonight.

"A pre-dinner cocktail never hurt anyone. Actually, except for you at my wedding. So, no pre-dinner cocktails for you," Liv jokes. I did accidently get a little more hammered than I meant to.

"Ha ha. Very funny. I remember many times when you were in college and in much worse situations, you Judgmental Judy."

Tyler chuckles at my weak-ass insult, but it's the best I could come up with.

Mom pokes her head in through the kitchen. "Liv, sweetie, can you come give me a hand for a moment?"

"Of course. Don't have too much fun without me, boys." We both watch Liv leave the room.

"Liv says you're off to go visit Isla on Wednesday. You guys getting serious?" he asks, and honestly, it's a good question.

"To be completely honest, we haven't really talked about it. It feels serious. We will both have flown across the country to see each other after this weekend in a month's time. So, I feel like that means something."

Tyler has turned into an unofficial big brother. My dad is who I go to for work advice, and Tyler is great for pretty much everything else. I'd talk to Sam about more things, but that would require him to actually show up.

Tyler picks up his cocktail and takes a sip. "Sometimes, things make themselves clear without having to speak a word about them. So long as you both are on the same page, that's all that matters," he says.

I take a moment and think that over.

Walking to the bar cart, I pour myself a neat scotch. I sit next to Tyler and swirl my drink around in the cup. Completely lost in thought, I zone out, watching the flames dance in the fireplace.

“Tyler, when did you know Liv was the one?” I ask, almost too quietly to hear. I’m embarrassed to be having this talk, but I have way too many thoughts wrapped up in my mind, and none of the guys from work are what I consider close friends.

“Damn, man. Um. I think it was, like, our fifth date. We were in college and she stayed up all night to help me study for a big exam. I have never laughed so much while studying.” He looks down at his drink and smiles as he recalls the memory.

“She made up these stupid acronyms to help me remember these policies I kept forgetting. I crushed that test. We had a lot of growing to do as individuals still, but we just fit. She never busted my balls about how much time I committed to work or school, and she showed up every day. I had a feeling then, but it grew and continues to grow more every day. Even when she threatens to WWE body-slam me for being a dumbass.” We both laugh at that. I wouldn’t put it past Liv; she is small, but she is mighty.

“The key is to not show fear. Liv thrives on fear. I learned that at the age of two.” Giving him advice on how to survive Liv is the least I can do for the guy.

“Do you think she’s it, man?” he asks, setting his drink on the table.

I start to reply but get cut off by Liv yelling from the dining room that dinner is ready.

We all sit in our unofficial assigned seats. Mom mixed it up tonight and made a big batch of soup and a loaf of homemade

bread to dip in it. With how cold it is outside, a nice, hot bowl of soup actually sounds perfect.

“So, honey, are you excited for your trip?” Mom blows on a spoonful of soup.

I know she is absolutely loving that I am seeing someone finally. It helps that Isla fell right into place with our family. Watching her with my family last week was a little piece of the puzzle falling into place. They can be a bit overwhelming, but she held her own and even made Dad crack up a couple times.

“Yeah, we have a cabin up in the mountains we will be staying in. It’ll be pretty snowy this time of year, but it should be a nice, long weekend.”

“I wasn’t aware you were leaving town again, Son. When do you leave?” Dad pauses mid-bite to look across the table at me. The only other PTO I took at all this past year was my sister’s wedding.

“I will be off and out of town from Wednesday through Sunday. I will be back in the office Monday.”

A bit of frustration flares in his eyes, and I feel myself go on defense.

“Now isn’t really the time to be taking additional time off. I thought you knew that.” Dad’s tone immediately changes and everyone gets quiet. You could hear a pin drop in the room. I hate nothing more than when my dad treats me like I am still a child.

“My team has been made aware and they are capable of figuring things out until I get home. It is only five days.” I can feel myself getting frustrated. I am twenty-seven years old for crying out loud. What is the point of the company allotting us time off if we can’t use it?

“Do you have any idea how important this build and deal is to the company? You really need to be present and ready to put out any little fires that may come up. You can’t just be frolicking around with some girl you met on vacation.” Dad half-slams his fists down on the table and both Mom and Liv gasp.

It has been a very long time since my dad and I have butted heads. It never goes well. It is a large portion of the reason we don’t work in the same division and why he covers separate projects. We don’t work well together.

The comment about Isla being some girl I met on vacation causes my anger to rage. It was a disrespectful thing to say about her, and I don’t give a fuck if he is my dad or not.

“And what about what’s important to me? No one chastises you for taking time off to go on vacation with Mom. Isla is important to me, so I will be going, and if you have a problem with it, that’s on you.” Standing, I point a finger at Dad. I’ve lived in fear of letting him down for too long. Even he can’t deny that I am great at my job.

“She isn’t just some girl I met on vacation, and if you can’t see that, then maybe you should be paying closer attention. I have devoted the majority of my prime years to your company,

and I am not going to piss away the one person in the world I can see a future with. I would have expected you to be more understanding.” Glancing up, I see everyone besides Dad is looking at each other, with jaws on the floor.

Storming out of the room, I am desperate to put some space between my dad and me. My appetite is gone, and if I don't walk away and get out of this house, I will say something I regret. Like, telling my father to fuck right off. Although that is tempting at the moment, it won't help anything.

“Honey, wait,” I hear Mom yell from the other room as I grab my coat. Her chair scrapes across the floor. “Michael, I rarely speak to you when the children are around out of respect, but it seems you have forgotten that you have to give respect to get it. That was complete and utter bullshit, and I am so disappointed in you.”

I have heard my mother cuss a total of three times. Just now included. Her shoes click against the hard floor as she walks up behind me.

“Cal, I am so sorry. Your dad was way out of line. We will be having a talk later tonight. He owes you an apology.” She has a hand gripped around my arm, so I look down at her and listen. “Work is not everything, and you, more than anyone, deserve to be happy. I am so proud of you for putting something you care about first for once.” She taps her hand on the side of my cheek.

I lean down and kiss hers. “Thanks, Mom. I am going to go. I don't see me sticking around here tonight going well. Thank

you so much for making dinner. I love you.” She gives me her best smile and I walk out the door.

Even though dinner was a shitshow, I walk out of there feeling proud of myself. It is about time I put myself above dead last.

Twenty-Three

Isla

“Are you sure you are ready for this? I know you thought meeting your family was a lot, but Addie is a lot of personality in a tiny human. She will do everything she can to make you squirm,” I ask Cal as we sit at the breakfast bar.

Addie is coming to meet Cal today, and I think I am more nervous for it than he is. Your best friend liking the man you date is an incredibly important step in a relationship. I would argue it's more important than the first kiss or sleepover. You can get second chances with those things, but you can't exactly fix a first impression with my incredibly protective best friend. Don't get me wrong, she has been nothing but supportive, but if I know her like I think I do, brunch will be an interrogation.

“She can't be that bad. If you can survive dinner with my parents, then I can survive a grilling from Addie.” Cal takes a

sip of his coffee and I let out a big sigh, turning towards him and resting my head in my hands.

Cal told me that his dad was a royal asshole about him taking more time off. This whole long-distance thing is already getting complicated. I knew it was only a matter of time before the other shoe dropped. Cal told me not to worry about it, but that's like telling water to not be wet. Literally impossible.

Cal slides off the chair and spins my chair around so that I am facing him. He gives me a little kiss on my forehead. "When did you become the worrywart in this relationship?"

A chuckle falls through my lips, because he is right. I am usually very "go with the flow". Apparently, when I catch feelings, I also catch a tad of anxiety.

"I just think you are underestimating the whirlwind that is Addie."

"Oh, I am painfully aware of the punch that girl can give. I am not going to lie to you and say I'm not nervous, but I am ready. She's a big part of your world, so she needs to be part of mine." Seriously, I have no idea how this man was still single when I met him in Hawaii.

"I have never in my life met a smoother talker than you, Callahan Reynolds." Wrapping my arms around his neck, I bring his lips to mine and get lost for a little while.



Cal literally jumps off the couch when he hears the door knock. I think someone is a little more nervous than they are letting on. A laugh slips from my lips as I swing the door open.

Addie literally never knocks. She usually just barges her happy ass in the door. It doesn't matter if I am half naked or busy; she marches to the beat of her own drum. She's the type who would rather ask for forgiveness than ask for permission.

“Hi, babe. Didn't want to barge in and catch Cal with his pants down. I think you all have had enough of that in your relationship, don't you think?”

I slap her on the arm, and Cal gives me an incredulous look.

“What, did you think I wasn't going to tell her that your sister caught you with your pants down and me with my tits out?” He lets out a forced laugh as his cheeks redden.

“I've heard a lot about you, Addie, I am happy to finally put a face with the name.” He reaches out to shake her hand. She grabs it and pulls him into a hug. He looks at me over her shoulder and sends an SOS signal through his eyes. I have to turn around to hide my laugh. You can't say that I didn't warn the man that she was a lot. Him not taking me seriously is his own fault.

“Pleasure is all mine. Isla said you were making breakfast.” She looks over at the breakfast bar in the kitchen and sees the spread. Her jaw drops and her eyes light up. One of the many things Addie and I have in common is our love for food.

“I know you’re not going to believe this, but it tastes even better than it looks,” I tell her as she sets her purse down on the couch.

“We will have to eat in the living room since the spread is taking up our super fancy dining space.” My apartment is pretty small. The whole main living space is open, and the only place to sit and eat is the breakfast bar.

We all pile our plates with scrambled eggs, pancakes, hashbrowns, and sausage. Cal really went all out. I watch him look at Addie as she takes her first bite. She immediately closes her eyes.

“Okay, Cal, what’s wrong with you? You cook, you’re nice to her, and you put in effort. Are you, like, a closet serial killer or something?” He chuckles at her. It’s a fair question; he really is the full-package deal.

“I am happy to report that I am not a serial killer. Glad you like the food.” Cal sits with me on the couch and Addie is in the adjacent chair. I nudge him with my shoulder and feel a little proud that he is mine. A smile finds my lips as we all dig in.

We all fall into easy conversation. Much to my dismay, Addie tells embarrassing stories about high school and college to Cal. Including how I got the public indecency ticket. Apparently, it doesn’t matter that it was an accident and my halter top broke; if it happens in front of a cop after you’ve had a couple drinks, it’s going on your public record for the

rest of your life. I really do have bad luck, now that I think about it.

They both got a good laugh reminiscing about that one. In their defense, it is kind of funny. It feels good watching Cal and Addie talk like old friends. You wouldn't even know today was the first time they've met.

“As much as I'd love to stay here and embarrass Isla some more, I really should be heading back to work. I used this as my lunch break today.” We all get up and move our plates to the sink.

“I'm going to go freshen up before we take off to the cabin. Addie, it was a pleasure. I hope you stop by next time I'm in town,” Cal says as he sends a little wave and heads down the hallway. He is giving us space to discuss him. What a guy.

“Soooooo, what do you think?” I ask with a worried smile.

“Yeah, I would have fallen in love with him, too. It's a good thing I missed that plane, huh?” She punches my arm and I grin.

“You are the real MVP for ditching me for two weeks in Hawaii, yes.” The thought of never meeting Cal makes my stomach feel queasy. Things worked out exactly as they were meant to; I think he was always meant to be mine.

“Seriously, though, I am happy for you. The way that man looks at you ...” She fans herself. “Does he have any brothers? I could use some of that kind of attention in my life.”

“Actually, he does, but from what I hear, he is the polar opposite of Cal. So, no dice. But I’ll ask about close cousins?” We both laugh.

She grabs her purse and hugs me one more time. “Have the best time this weekend, babe. Drive safe, and text me when you get there if you can.” I open the door for her and she waves as she heads to the parking lot.

Cal peeks his head from around the corner. “So, she likes me, huh?” He has the smuggest grin that I’ve ever seen on his face.

“Yes, it appears Addie, too, has fallen victim to your charm. She asked if you had brothers. I told her yours was an ass but that I would check in about eligible cousins.”

He laughs and pulls me closer to him. “Did I by chance hear a little line about love, as well?” My cheeks instantly grow red. Without a doubt in my body, I know that I love him. I love him even more after seeing him and Addie hit it off. Saying it out loud is an entirely different ballgame. I much prefer when the man leads the charge on these things. It hurts my ego less.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, you snoop.” I slap his chest a little and try to turn and walk away.

He grabs my waist and pulls my back into his chest. “Not so fast.” He turns me around to look at him. “I wanted it to be a bit more romantic when I said it for the first time, hence the weekend getaway. I’ve had to stop myself from blurting it out three times today alone. But I love you. I think I’ve loved you

from the moment you tackled me on our hike. I wasn't even looking, but I am so glad the universe brought me you."

I stare at him, wide-eyed, as a slow smile forms on my lips. That was the sweetest thing I've ever heard in my life, and I can't believe someone said it to me.

I bring his lips closer to mine and kiss him hard. Every emotion I've kept shoved down finally bubbles up.

We break to catch our breath after what feels like minutes.

I peek up at him, unable to tone down the smile plastering my face, "I love you too."

"Let's go get our stuff to the car before I start doing all the dirty things I want to do to you here instead of in our beautiful mountain cabin."

"Who's driving?" I wink at him, knowing that man doesn't trust me behind the wheel. Between my road rage and lack of direction, I don't really blame him. Plus, Colorado has finally been dusted with a fresh coat of snow. Of course, it has to be a weekend when we have a decent drive ahead of us.

"Being that I value my life, that will be me."

Cal walks back into the bathroom, actually freshening up now. I do a little happy dance as soon as I'm sure Cal isn't still creeping. That went a million times better than I could've ever hoped for. The whole thing is still a little scary, since so much is up in the air and, at some point, one of us will be making a pretty big change to make it work. This isn't a vacation fling, anymore. This is the real deal.

For the first time in my life, being tied to someone doesn't feel like I'm being weighed down. It feels incredibly freeing.

Twenty-Four

Cal

The drive up to the cabin was only supposed to be about an hour and a half, but with the road closures, accidents, and awful road conditions, it took us about three hours. Isla only had two mini panic attacks due to the shitty roads. So, I am calling it a win.

We pull into the drive and Isla stares out the window. The place is absolutely beautiful. The snow is heavily covering the pine trees, and everything else is buried under a few feet of snow. Whoever maintains the property does a good job of keeping the quarter-mile drive back to the cabin easily drivable.

The cabin finally comes into view, and Isla claps her hands in excitement. “I am so excited. It’s been so long since I’ve stayed up in the mountains. I am usually too much of a chicken to even bother driving up here in the winter. It was totally worth almost dying twice.”

I look over at her and fight rolling my eyes. We did not almost die; the car slid one inch while we were coming to a stop.

“We need to brush up on your definition of a near-death experience. In Hawaii, that would qualify. Sliding while coming to a stop is not even close.” It almost makes me laugh how well she handled the whole kayak thing compared to driving in the winter weather.

She replies by sticking her tongue out at me as I pull up next to the cabin. It isn't super big but will be perfect for the two of us. We grab our bags from the back of her 4Runner and make our way inside. Isla gets one foot in the door before she freezes and takes a look around.

“O-M-G, this place is too freaking cute. I can't wait to light that fireplace.” The whole living space is completely open. The kitchen is surprisingly updated with granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances. The fireplace helps it keep its cozy feel.

I push Isla in a little farther so I can stop freezing my ass off outside and put our bags in the room. The walk-through hallway is short and leads to a guest bathroom and the master suite, which is the only room in the cabin. The suite also has its own fireplace and a large, king-size bed centered in the room. They have a table and chair set up next to the large window. It really is a beautiful space.

I hear Isla walk in behind me. “Holy wow.” She walks into the ensuite bathroom. “Cal, look, it has a tub big enough to fit

your tall ass in.” I chuckle. When we were in Hawaii I had tried to hop in the bath with Isla once, needless to say it didn’t go well and we went through our whole stash of towels to clean up the water spillage from the floor.

I wrap my arms around her waist as I come up behind her. “I think there are other things in this room I want to take advantage of.”

She giggles as she presses her ass into my groin. “Oh, do you mean drinking coffee at the table as we watch the snow fall?” she says, the sarcasm practically dripping from her voice.

“I think you know exactly what I’m talking about,” I whisper into her ear.

She turns around and loops her arms around my neck. “I actually don’t. I think I will need a very detailed and specific explanation of what you mean, dear.”

“I’m going to have to wait to show you what I mean because I need to get those groceries we brought in the fridge. They’ve already been out longer than we planned, since the drive took us so long.” I kiss her on the forehead and turn towards the kitchen.

“Did anyone ever tell you it’s rude to get a girl all hot and bothered and just leave her hanging?” She stops in the kitchen and puts her hand on her hip. Sass just radiates from her body. I am convinced it is what keeps her so warm. That, and the constant, simmering road rage she has.

“Don’t you worry, love. I promise I will take care of that for you as soon as I take care of this.” I start filling the fridge. We premade a pot of soup and froze it, so I keep it on the counter for us to warm up tonight.

“I’m sorry, what did you call me? I didn’t quite hear you.” She turns her head and pushes her ear at me.

“What, does my girl need to hear that I love her again?” I push myself off the counter, where I am leaning and close the distance between us.

“I think I need to hear it just a few hundred more times for good measure.”

I pull her to my chest and kiss the top of her head. “No need to rush it. I’m pretty sure I’ll be telling you for the rest of my life exactly how much I love you.” She hugs me tighter. I close my eyes and savor the feeling of having her here in my arms. I fucking hate leaving her, and I hate even more that she lives so far away.

“Since it’s past dinner time, and I am starving, how do you feel about getting dinner warmed up? Brunch wore off like an hour ago. We can light the fireplace and eat there, take a nice hot bath, and then watch a movie?” She arches her eyebrow at me in question.

“That sounds absolutely perfect.” My stomach rumbles. The long drive has my appetite flaring. So, I haul ass to the kitchen and dump the frozen soup in the pot, hoping it will melt quickly. It already partially melted on the drive in, so it shouldn’t take too long.



The tortellini soup and breadsticks hit the spot. We lay in the giant tub now, with Isla's back pressed against my chest. This is probably the most at peace I have ever been in my life.

I received a text from my dad when we got here, apologizing for the way he spoke to me, and that he will work on respecting and not questioning my choices. I haven't responded, mostly because I am trying to savor every second Isla and I have during our trip.

I turned my phone to "do not disturb" and tossed it in my bag. I can't remember the last time I turned my phone off. He isn't the only one who has had to get used to the change in priorities. I realized, though, that if I don't put my wants and needs above work, I am no longer the only one paying the price. I am not my job; Isla has helped remind me of that.

We can see the flicker of the fireplace from the tub. We left the door open so we could enjoy the ambiance. Isla's words, not mine.

Her hands are lazily gliding up and down my legs as I run my hands through her hair. If we never leave this cabin, it will still be too soon.

"So, do you want to do anything while we are up here? We could go skiing. I think there is a ski resort about twenty miles up the road," I ask.

The water sloshes as she turns around to look at me, her brows furrowed. “One, skiing is absolutely not my thing. I have the coordination of a one-legged flamingo. I tried once when I was a kid and ended up yardsaling all my things down the mountain. Two, the roads are absolute shit. I will be staying here, where it is warm, comfy, and safe.”

“Okay, what the hell is yardsaling? Also, in that case, what would you like to do while we are cozied up here for the next four days?”

She turns around and pushes back until her back is leaning on the opposite side of the tub, getting ready to answer my question. “Oh, I am so happy to paint you a visual of my misery. Yardsaling is when you lose all of your belongings while eating shit down the hill. I personally lost my goggles, a ski, my beanie, and both of my ski poles. It was a very humbling experience. You will never see me showing my face in Vail again.”

She pops herself onto her hands and knees and starts to crawl towards me. Not like she has far to go, being that we are in a tub, but it still gives its desired effect. “I can think of a few things we can do while we’re stuck here. You know, it *is* Valentine’s Day weekend.” She slowly brings her lips to mine.

Most of our kisses have been hot and heated. Our time together is always so limited that it’s like we have to get the most out of it while it lasts. This kiss is nothing like that. It is slow and gentle. I have to say, I almost like it like this most, when I can feel on her lips every emotion she is feeling. I get a

taste of her love, and damn, if it isn't the sweetest thing I have ever tasted.

She pulls back, with her eyes still closed and a lazy smile on her lips. This is my favorite version of her, when I have her all to myself and I get to peek behind the windows. The more I find out about her, the more I love her and her chaos.

“Have I told you lately how beautiful you are, love?” I ask. It's my life mission to make sure she knows she's the most beautiful woman in every room she will ever stand in.

“You have, but you can keep telling me. I like having my own personal hype man. It's good for my ego.” She slowly straddles my lap and I feel my little commander getting ready to jump into battle. She must, too, because she looks right at me and wiggles her hips just enough to drive me crazy.

“There's only room for one crazy big ego in this relationship, and you have told me many times how big mine is.” I nip at her lips and see the look in her eyes change. The moment she goes from playful to lust-filled is the best. I love even more that I have figured her out, knowing what each little look and sound means.

“Would it make your ego even bigger if I said that isn't the only big thing about you?” Her eyebrows dance up and down. A laugh falls from my lips.

“Obviously, I was talking about your big ol' heart, but it appears someone has a dirty mind.” She wiggles her finger as she points it at me.

“It’s hard not to have a dirty mind when I have a beautiful, very naked girl grinding herself all over me.” I grip on to her ass and give it a little squeeze. My hand starts trailing along her legs, slowly working their way to her inner thighs. Two can play at the teasing hands game.

Her hips start to drag across me. Those pretty blue eyes close as her head tilts back. Her arms rest across my shoulders, and I feel her hands move up to my hair, sinking her fingers into it.

I stop moving my hands and she lets out a huff. I give her a small smile and let out a dark chuckle. This girl turns me into something feral. There is no such thing as too much or too close.

“I’m sorry, baby. Is there something that you want from me?” I ask.

“You know exactly what I want from you,” she says as she grinds her hips against me. My hands land on her hips and I release a chuckle. “Please, Cal.” That does me in.

“Your wish is my command,” I say against her lips. The urgency rapidly grows.

Her hands find the back of my neck and my hair. She grinds herself against my length and lets out a moan. The plan was to take this slow, but this girl has a way of ruining my plans in the best way possible.

We must be on the same exact page because she uses my shoulders to push off with and give her hips some leverage to slide over and down on me. I close my eyes and relish the feel.

Fuck. This is as good as it gets—alone and buried inside the woman I love.

She starts grinding herself on me, making the water on the tub splash up and over the edge. Neither of us really care at this moment.

“Fuck, baby, you ride me so good.” My praise immediately makes her pick up her pace. Her lips find mine once again and I get lost in the moment. My hands find the back of her neck, holding her to me.

My hips start rising to meet her, thrust for thrust. Isla’s breathing is already turning ragged. Her eyes are closed and her head is tossed back. Damn, she is beautifully undone like this.

“Do you want to come, baby?” She nods her head yes, but I want more. “I am going to need you to say it for me, baby.”

“Yes, yes. Please. Now.” Her eyes are still closed, but her mouth falls open when my fingers start gliding over her clit, giving just enough pressure to send her over the edge.

“Come for me, baby.” Her eyes barely open as she sends me a lazy smile.

“As you say, ‘your wish is my command.’” She grinds herself against my fingers and falls over the edge. Her pussy clamps down on me. I can’t help but finish right alongside her. Or inside her, I should say.

She rests her body and face against my chest. We sit in silence for a moment while I hold her, taking the moment and

peace in.

“That was the best bath of my life.” Her words vibrate against my chest.

“Glad to be of service,” I say into her hair. “You want to get out of here and go watch that movie in front of the fire? I brought popcorn.” She perks right up with that, and her sudden movement causes the water to slosh around the tub.

“Oh, yes!” She grabs the side of the tub to stand up off me. I stand up next to her and we grab our towels and dry off.

We make our way down to the kitchen and turn on the TV in the living room. We pile blankets on the floor before I grab the popcorn from the microwave and give it a shake to really get all of the buttery goodness coated on the popcorn.

We prop up against the couch and hit play on the movie. I tried to fight Isla on her choice of movie—*The Proposal* with Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds—but if I am being honest with myself, I have watched it alone. It is the best chick flick I have ever seen.

My hand finds Isla’s thigh. She wraps her arms around mine and looks over at me.

“This is perfect. I wish we didn’t have to leave our love bubble.” She rests her head against my arm and hugs it tighter.

“Me either, baby.” I pull on her legs so they drape over mine, making her curl up next to me. Already dreading the goodbye that is still days away. I hate that I always have that thought in

the back of my head when I am with her—that goodbye will be knocking on our door once again soon.

We sit in silence and I pretend that we won't be saying goodbye in a few days. I soak up her presence, dreaming of the day that she is mine for good. No planes required, just us getting to wake up to each other each day. Now, that would be a dream come true.

Twenty-Five

Cal

The bed is empty when I wake up. Not something I wanted to be doing on my last day with her. Every day I have with her is a tease of what life could be like if we didn't live over two thousand miles away from one another. I tossed and turned all night trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my gut. I fucking hate leaving her. Life is so much brighter when she is around.

I get shaken from my thoughts when Isla karate-kicks the door open, holding two plates in her hand and a cup of coffee in the other.

“Sorry! That was supposed to be quieter, but my hands were full and I didn't want to drop anything,” she says as she walks through the door.

“Obviously, karate-kicking the door is the only option?”

She walks over and sets a cup of coffee on my side of the bed and hands me a plate, completely ignoring my question.

I pull her lips to mine and give her a quick peck. “What’s all this?” I ask.

“Well, you always spoil me to breakfast in bed. So, I wanted to return the favor. It is important to know that you shouldn’t get too excited. Not all of us had an Anna to teach us how to be a boss in the kitchen. I had to run around the house, trying to find enough cell service to be able to get a pancake recipe to load.”

I chuckle as I try to sit up and get more comfortable. “I am sure it is great, thank you.” I take a big bite with my fork. Isla is watching me, waiting for my reaction. I have to fight spitting it out. This is the saltiest fucking pancake I’ve ever had. Jesus.

“Is it good?” she asks. Well, at least I know my face is ready for a game of poker.

I grab a cup of milk to swallow down the pancakes. I mean, she’s going to figure it out when she takes her own bite. “Mhmmm,” I say as the cup is to my lips. It is, in fact, not good.

I watch her as she takes a bite, and immediately spits it out. Laughter erupts out of me. She reaches over and swats my arm, which only makes me laugh harder. I shouldn’t be laughing, but honestly, the girl who loves food can’t cook to save her life. What are the odds?

“It’s not funny!” she says. Her cheeks are a little pink.

“Baby, it’s fine. Next time, just use, like ... I don’t know, half of the salt you put in.” I kiss the side of her head and grab the bacon on the plate. It has to be a safe option.

“It called for a tablespoon.” She grabs her phone off of the nightstand and shows me the recipe. “See, right there, TSP. Tablespoon.”

I shove another piece of bacon in my mouth to keep from laughing. I know she is embarrassed, and I don’t want to make it worse.

“Baby, TSP means teaspoon.” I look over at her.

“Oooooooooooh. Well, shit. I’m sorry. I was trying to be nice and do something for you. You always spoil me, and I wanted to return the favor.” She angrily bites off a piece of bacon.

“You do enough by supplying endless entertainment in my life.” She gives me a cross look and rolls her eyes.

“How about this: finish what is on your plate, and I will show you how to make pancakes?” We finish the bacon and scrambled eggs without any more sodium incidents.

I show her how to make pancakes, without a recipe, which might be the best move until she can figure out the difference between TSP and TBSP.

Once breakfast is over, we slowly make our way to the room. Neither one of us is looking forward to what is next. I go home again until one of us can find enough time to get back. It’s even harder on Isla, because she has to bank PTO for every trip. Plus, her job pays well, but I am over six figures.

So, this is a little easier for me. I'm not rich by any means, but I know that this could quickly become a strain on finances with round-trip tickets being four hundred dollars at best. This distance shit is only going to continue to get harder.

Not knowing when you are going to see the person you love again will put you in a really sour mood. I'm getting on a plane at 9:00 p.m. tonight, and have no idea when I will be able to get back on one to get up here.

We get all of our things into the car and take one last sweep around the house to make sure we aren't missing anything. Isla has gotten a little more quiet, a telltale sign that she is overthinking.

I wrap my arms around her waist. "I can't hear anything over you thinking so loudly."

She leans into me and grips her hands on my forearms. "I hate this. I hate only getting little spurts of you and me. We get a little taste, and then go our separate ways until God knows when." Her voice cracks a little at the end of her sentence.

I flip her around and pull her tightly to my chest. "This isn't forever, baby, and it'll get easier. We will get used to it until we can figure out a plan on where to go from. This, too, shall pass." I squeeze her hard and can feel a tear soaking through my shirt. I thought the hard part was going to be the airport drop off.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to cry. This weekend was perfect. I loved every minute, almost as much as I love you." As hard as this is, my heart warms at hearing those words roll off her lips.

“I love you most, baby. We’ve got a long drive, so let’s head back.” I drop my arms from around her and we walk to the car.

I open her door for her and she hops in and puts her seatbelt on. Because I am a starved man for her, and literally cannot keep my hands to myself to save my life, I pull her in for a quick kiss before we hit the road.



The drive home was much faster than the drive in. It wasn’t actively snowing, so the roads were much clearer and less slippery. I could see Isla’s tears fall every now and then. She was mostly quiet and kept her head turned toward the window. I haven’t cried in years, but seeing the woman you love hurt will do that to a man. I fought my own tears the majority of the way. Keeping one of my hands gripped over hers, afraid that if I let go, I might end up losing her entirely.

I leave my bags in the car, knowing we have to leave in like thirty minutes, anyways. Dread settles deeply in my gut. I wonder how long she will be able to do this before it is too much for her and she bails. The thought of her no longer being in my life literally knocks the wind out of my lungs. She has found a way to wrap herself around everything that I am. I can see the sadness in her eyes and find myself hating every individual mile that will be separating us.

She walks out from her bedroom, her tear-stained cheeks and puffy eyes tell me everything I need to know.

Fuck this.

“Isla, this is stupid.” Her eyes snap up at me and I realize she might think I am calling her stupid for being sad. “No, not like that. We don’t have to do this, you know?” Oh, God. I am not making this better. Now, it sounds like I am breaking up with her.

She flinches to those words and I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“I am fucking this all up again. What I mean is, we don’t have to be sad. We can end this right now. I hate seeing you sad. I hate spending my last night with you wide awake, because I know that my time with you is limited, and I don’t want to miss a single second.” I close the gap between us. She stares at me, wide-eyed. I grab her hands.

“Come home with me. And stay. Leaving you is stupid when I know it is possible for you to come home with me. I love you, and I honestly don’t want to spend the next few months waiting for us to decide to do what I am asking us to do now. It physically hurts to think about leaving you here and having to wait until God knows when for one of us to be able to visit. The four days with you is not nearly enough to make up for the months I will end up spending without you.” I pause, waiting her for her to say something, anything. Dread starts to pull in the pit of my stomach. What if this was too much, too fast for her?

“Cal, I have a job here. I wouldn’t have anywhere to work. I can’t just move across the country on a moment’s notice.” I

find a little hope in the fact that she hasn't dropped my hands yet. I just have to make her believe that we can make this work.

“I know that you will want to shut down what I am going to say, because you are Miss Independent, but please hear me out. You can come work for Reynolds Resources. We have an advertisement division, and you can go work for them. You wouldn't be working for me; you would be under someone else entirely.”

“I don't want you just handing me a job, I have to earn it. I worked hard to be where I am today and I don't want people thinking I got this job because I am sleeping with the boss.” I try to not let it sting that she referred to this as sleeping together, when we both know it is so much more.

I rub my thumb over where our hands meet, not sure if I am trying to calm her or myself at this moment. “That's fine. I will set you up an interview, and you can earn it yourself. I won't tell HR who you are. They will just think I am bringing another applicant. Plus, it wouldn't be the first time your name has floated across their desk as a potential employee.” I wink at her, trying to lighten the mood and remind her about the time I used my HR team to track her down.

“I am not worried about that, because I know you and know that you can charm the socks off just about anyone.” I squeeze her hands a little and she closes her eyes. I don't know what else to say to convince her.

“Isn’t this too soon? I mean, we have only known each other, for what? Two months?” Fair point, and one I’ve asked myself. One thing I have learned from this whole experience is that time isn’t always a reflection of feelings and potential. You could spend four years with the wrong person, and those four years won’t make you any more suited for one another.

“I don’t think so at all. Life threw exactly what I needed right at me. I don’t need months of time to go by to confirm what I already know. I know that I love you and cannot fathom being apart again. I don’t want to jeopardize this by making it harder than it has to be.”

She opens her mouth and closes it again. Damn, I finally make her speechless, and it is the one time I need her to say something.

“I can’t—” She starts her sentence and stops.

I feel my heart and stomach crash out beneath me. How do we bounce back from her turning me down like this? I don’t want her to feel badly and end up pulling away. I honestly didn’t think she would say no.

She clears her throat. “I can’t come with you today, but—”

I don’t wait to hear what she says next. I drop her hands and pick her up, pulling her into a hug. There was a but, which isn’t a no.

She laughs a little. “Let me finish. *But* I can come after I put in my two weeks and pack this place up.” Now that she says

that, I realize that expecting her to come right here, right now would have literally been impossible.

“Karen is kind of a bitch. Do you really need to give her a whole two weeks?” I joke, trying to play it cool. I am failing miserably, though, because I am smiling so hard my face literally hurts. Maybe that’s what they meant by love hurts—you smile so hard your cheeks burn.

“I have to keep a good, professional record in case your company rejects me. Plus, I have to pack all this up. And talk to Addie.” Her face falls a little at that. Those two have an undeniable bond. There is nothing in the world that could bring that force of nature apart.

“Okay, I can do that. You promise you won’t bail on me or chicken out the second I hop on a plane?” I know good and well she is an overthinker.

“I promise I will not change my mind. You aren’t the only one who was dreading the time we were going to be spending apart.”

I can’t wait any longer. I kiss her hard, picking her up and spinning around the room.

This feels almost too good to be true. I hate that I have to break up this moment, but if we don’t get on the road now, I will for sure miss my plane. While my dad has warmed up to me not being married to my job, I am pretty sure being a no-show on Monday at the 8:00 a.m. meeting would be enough to send my dad into cardiac arrest.

We finally break apart and hop in the car, this time I am looking forward to what's to come instead of dreading the goodbye.

Twenty-Six

Isla

I pull out of the airport after dropping Cal off and am glad for the time to decompress. There are a million things that could have happened this weekend, and me agreeing to move across the country in two weeks was absolutely not one I saw as a possibility. But here we are.

My brain starts checking off all the things I will have to do. Get a resume ready to send off, pack my whole life up, and my least favorite, find a way to tell Addie that I am moving two thousand miles away. The thoughts cause a wave of anxiety to course through me. My hands flex around the steering wheel.

Being that I will have very little time at all to get this done, I decide to get the Addie thing checked off first. I will need her help getting all this done in time, anyways.

I hit the hands-free calling button, and the voice command comes over the speakers. "Call Addie."

It rings a couple of times before she picks up. “Hello, are you back home already?”

“Nope, I am still in the car. However, I am going to need you to meet me at the house when I get home.” I glance down at the dashboard to see the time. “I should be home in about forty-five minutes or so, so long as the roads are all clear,” I say. My voice sounds a little sharper than usual.

“Is this a happy house visit, or do I need to get wine?” she says, a little bit of nervousness in her voice.

“One, wine is always welcomed. Two, that depends on what you consider happy, I guess. I’m personally happy, but I do have something to tell you.” I know she will be supportive, but that doesn’t make this any easier. Addie has been and will forever be my soulmate.

“Bitch, are you pregnant? Tell me you’re not pregnant.”

I huff out an exasperated laugh. Of course that’s where her brain went.

“No, Addie, I am not pregnant. Why would I have asked for wine if I was knocked up?”

“I don’t know. You’ve been getting laid a lot. It was a legitimate option. Well, if you’re not pregnant, what is it?” I hear her keys jangle and a door close on her end of the phone.

“Well, um. I think it would have been easier to tell you I was pregnant. Um, Cal asked me to move in with him,” I say, wincing a little in expectation for her response.

“Oh, shit. I better get the big bottle of wine. That’s big! Are you going?” she asks.

“Let’s talk about it when I get home. I should be home in about forty-five-ish minutes. I promise I will hurry.”

I hang up the call and find a smile stretching across my lips. I am moving in with Cal. How the hell did I meet a guy on vacation and manage to fall stupid in love with him? Luck usually doesn’t side with me, but when it comes to Cal, I consider myself a very lucky girl.

The roads are clear, so I am able to zone out the rest of the drive. Mostly thinking of what I have to do. A little bit of me worries we are making a mistake by moving so fast, but Cal is absolutely right. We are wasting time. We both knew it would come to one of us moving at some point. And this feels right. I have never felt better than I do when Cal is around. The moving part is a little scary, I think that is where most of my nerves are coming from. The more I think about it, the Cal part feels one hundred percent right.

I pull up to my apartment and head in to talk to Addie. And by talk, I mean get wine-drunk and discuss my life choices in heavy detail.

“You made it home quickly,” Addie says, pouring me a glass of wine. Addie pours wine all the way to the very brim, and I love that about her. Whoever says they like the half-glass bullshit restaurants serve are lying.

I set my purse down on the couch and plop down, heavily sighing. “The drive was completely clear and the roads dry, so

I was able to go pretty fast.”

“Soooooo, are we going to address the elephant in the room, or should we skip that and just start packing? We both know you’re moving.” She nods her head towards the corner of the kitchen, where two empty totes and a couple of empty boxes sit. God works hard, but Addie works harder.

“I said yes. Is that crazy? Do you think we should be moving this fast?” I ask.

Addie walks into the living room, plops down next to me, and hands me my wine. I take a good, hearty chug, needing to take the edge off a little. My eyes twitch a little. Jesus. This stuff is strong.

“Actually, I think you would be crazy not to go. Besides me, you don’t have a whole lot holding you here.” She takes a big sip of wine and studies my face.

“Yeah? Oh, also, the ‘L’ word has officially been used.” I was expecting more of a reaction from her, but she just smiles at me.

“Oh, I knew that was coming. That boy looks at you like you personally hung every star in the sky. You deserve this, babe. Love is the greatest adventure, and you are making the right call by following your heart.” She reaches over and grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze.

“But moving there means leaving you.” A bit of sadness creeps through my voice.

“Girl, it’s the twenty-first century. We have Video Chat for immediate needs. And I’m not sure if you knew this, but they make these big things that float in the sky and take you from place to place super fast.”

I slap her arm and roll my eyes. I’m surprised we made it this far in the conversation before she turned to sarcasm.

“You could at least pretend you are going to miss me, smartass.” Emphasis on the “smartass” part.

“We can either discuss how much we will miss each other, or we can discuss that in a short amount of time, you will be living with a boy, all by yourself, like a real-life grown up. When are you moving?”

I purse my lips and shake my head. “I am turning in my two-week notice tomorrow. Cal is flying in to help me drive the car to Maine.” I turn to face my apartment, looking at all my shit. How in the actual fuck am I going to fit this in my 4Runner? “Sooooo, we just have to find a way to make all of this fit in my car. I will sell the furniture, but pretty much everything else is going, and we only have two weeks to get it done.”

“Big yikes. We are going to need more wine. And more boxes. How are you feeling about living with a boy all by yourself? You nervous?”

“A little? But honestly, I am kind of excited. We’ve never spent time together where there wasn’t an expiration date.” I smile at the thought that in two weeks, there won’t be any more tearful goodbyes. It feels like a weight off my chest.

“Do you have a work situation figured out, or are you just going to slip into the role of trophy wife?” She leans against the hallway door. So far, getting things done is going really well. Maybe after this bottle of wine we will be more productive.

“While lounging at home sounds like a wonderful idea, I do actually like my job. I’m applying with Cal’s company. He isn’t telling them who I am, so I still have to get it myself. He works on a different floor and everything. I made it very clear that home and work have to stay separated. I think I am going to apply at some other places, too, though.”

I wonder how that dynamic will work. I can already see them being assholes about dating the boss. I mean, it can’t be much worse than working with Karen and her brown-nosed bestie. Plus, if I get the job, I told him we could never collaborate on the same project. That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen. I have bad luck as it is and don’t need help with finding disasters.

“Ohhh, you can be the dynamic office duo. Kicking ass and taking names. If the girls in the office hate you, it’ll be because they were hoping he would fall for them and you ruined their plans. Don’t take it personally.” I roll my eyes at her.

“Oh, good. You’re really helping with my anxiety, thanks. Can we eat and get to packing before you send me into a premature panic attack?” I give her a sarcastic smile and turn towards the kitchen.

She took all this as good as can be expected. Maybe I can find a way to convince her to move to Maine someday. We've never ever been apart. We became instant best friends in high school, and that was that. We even went to the same college. She has always been my comfort person. Sometimes you have to leave your comfort to grow, though, and I think that time for me has come.

Twenty-Seven

Isla

My walk is a little lighter leaving work, since today was my last day. The look on Karen's face when she read my notice two weeks ago brought a little joy to my heart. She has been dragging me along for a couple of years, making false promises about promotions. I genuinely don't think she thought I would ever leave. I was sure to give a pretty honest review of her performance at my exit interview.

Honestly, it probably would have taken me a bit longer to wise up if it weren't for the move. The thought of leaving sends a little flutter of anxiety for me. I have my first phone interview with Cal's company this week. Assuming this one goes well, I will have an in-person interview. I have put in a couple of applications and resumes to other companies in the area just to be safe. Plus, it doesn't hurt to have options. I have just enough in savings to have a month or so of cushion before I need to panic.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I look down and see Addie's face on the caller ID. "Yes, dear?" I say.

"Well, did you burn that shithole to the ground, or did you leave with dignity?" Addie asks and I laugh.

"It was tempting, but I walked out with my dignity. Actually, I am just walking through the doors now. I should be home any minute."

"Well, lucky for you, I just finished the last of the cleaning. So, you should be ready to go." Addie took the day off to help clean the apartment while I was finishing my last day.

"Thanks, again. I owe you big time."

"Yes, you do. Next time, ditch me on a buddy vacation so I can find the love of my life and we can be even," Addie says.

"Okay, deal. I should be home in about fifteen-ish minutes. Do you want me to grab any food?" Work provided me with a goodbye brunch, which surprised me. I've worked there a long time, but I definitely am not super close with anyone there. I am not hungry, but with Addie's hard work, the least I could do is feed her.

"Actually, I am good. I had a late breakfast."

"Okay, see you soon. Love you!"

I take the phone from my ear and end the call, walking to the Uber I ordered. My car is currently shoved full of all my belongings and has a full tank of gas, so I opted for an Uber today.

Addie has been coming over every night to help pack. In the name of honesty, I think we have been spending as much time together as possible. I will take as many wine nights and laughs with her as I can get. I hope she can meet Liv someday. I think they would hit it off. Liv has the same kind of organized chaos vibe that Addie has. Actually, I think all three of us have those vibes, now that I think of it.

Liv and Anna have already planned our first outing when I get up to Maine. My heart is happy at their warm acceptance. I've talked to Anna and Liv more this week than I have talked to my own parents in the last year. My parents are off frolicking around Europe right now. I sent an email to them letting them know I had met someone and was moving. Being free spirits, they were nothing short of happy for me.

It's probably a good thing they didn't have more kids because those two were meant to be carefree. Some might harbor some resentment, but honestly, I enjoy watching them live their best lives. It gives me hope that love and adventure really can last.

I walk into my now very empty apartment, well, except for Addie who is standing in the empty kitchen. I was lucky and my landlord said I could terminate the lease with no fees, pending a walk-through at move-out. I do live in a rent-controlled apartment, so he probably isn't doing this out of the goodness of his heart. He probably just wants to up the rent for the next guy.

Cal will be flying in today to help me make the long drive. Addie is picking Cal up at the airport so I can wrap things up here.

I send up a silent prayer for him. If he can survive an hour in the car alone with Addie's no-filter questions, he could probably survive just about anything. "So, babe, you still ready to go? Any final second thoughts? Speak now or forever hold your peace, because I have to leave to pick up your man in," she lifts her hand to read her Apple watch, "five minutes." She puts her hands on her hips and gives me a good stare down, waiting to see any unsaid fear or second thoughts, but there are none. The closer that we've gotten to this day, the more excited I am. I know in my heart that I am making the best choice for me.

Cal will always be the best choice for me. All of my reservations have evaporated in the last couple weeks, and all that is left is my excitement to be closer to Cal, right where I belong.

"Not a single one. Well, actually, asking you to pick up Cal without my supervision could easily turn into a second thought." I clasp my hands together and shake them at her, almost in a begging fashion. "Please, don't say anything weird, or shamelessly question him the whole drive. It would be a shame for him to change his mind since everything I own is shoved into my car."

We got it all to fit. I did have to drop quite a bit off to Goodwill, but everything that I have now genuinely means

something to me, and that feels kind of freeing, too. Maybe I can get on board with Cal's minimalist way of living.

"I promise ... absolutely nothing. Listen, I am selflessly letting my best friend leave me. So, I am allowed to torment the man in whatever way I see fit," she says.

I roll my eyes at her. Honestly, there is no use in arguing. The woman will do as she pleases regardless.

I eye the clock on the stove since it is the only one left. "You better head out so you're not late. The landlord will be here within the next hour if he sticks to what he said. Thanks again for doing this." I walk to her and pull her in a hug. I am partially speaking of picking up Cal and mostly speaking of her unwavering support. I have worried that we might drift, being that I am going to be living across the country, but I don't think there is any way in hell we would let our friendship die.

"It's no big deal! I'll text you when I get there and when the goods have been secured." She whips around and heads out the door.

I chuckle at her and take a look at my empty apartment. It seems so much smaller now. Or maybe I just outgrew it. I moved in here fresh out of college, starting my first "big girl" job. I think of the crazy things that have happened in this place, and how it all somehow magically led me to where I am now.

I never in my life thought I would have the courage to move away and start a new life. Colorado and Addie have been a

comfort blanket for me. You have to get a little uncomfortable to grow sometimes. I smile, thinking about the man I have waiting for me. I guess love really can make all things possible.

Twenty-Eight

Cal

Hopping off the plane, I make my way to baggage claims. I can't tell if my anxiety is from what is about to happen or the fact that I will be stuck in a locked vehicle with Addie. Don't get me wrong, she is hilarious and a great friend to Isla, but there is something slightly unhinged about her that leaves you questioning exactly what she will say or do next.

I get my bags in record time and make my way out to the passenger pick-up. It's sunny for a winter day in Colorado, and the cool air feels refreshing after being on a plane for hours. Addie is leaning against a red Ford Bronco, and not one of the new sporty ones. It is completely old-school but in great condition. I was expecting her to drive something like a Slug Bug, but then again, I have learned that when it comes to Addie, expect the unexpected.

"Hey, best friend stealer, you ready to hit the road?" she says, and she waves at me as I approach.

“Hey, I am just asking for joint custody. I promise to not steal her all the way away.” I throw my bags into her backseat and hop up in her car. “This is kind of a kick-ass car. I wasn’t expecting you to drive something like this.” She looks over and smiles as she starts the car, the engine roaring to life.

“Thanks, I love it. I helped my dad restore it in high school, and he gave it to me as a twenty-first birthday present. It’s not the best on gas, but it makes me look like a badass, so that is a sacrifice I am willing to make.” She pulls out of the terminal pick-up and onto the freeway.

“So, did you guys get everything to fit this morning, or will I be riding on the roof?” I ask, half-joking, half-worried for my personal wellbeing.

“We had to make a few sacrifices of clothing and wall decor, but we made it happen. If you notice she is wearing more clothes than usual today, mind your business.” My mind immediately thinks of Joey from Friends, wearing all of Chandler’s clothes. At least if we get into an accident, she will have a lot of body padding.

“Glad to hear it. How is she doing? Is she getting nervous?” I’ve asked her myself, but it’s nice to double-check with a source she tells all her deepest, darkest secrets to.

“Surprisingly, she is ready to go. I thought for sure she would have some sort of mental breakdown, but she has been cool as a cucumber.” She stays quiet for a second, almost as if she is trying to find the right words. “We have never, ever been apart. Not since we’ve become friends. You’re going to

take care of her, right?” She looks at me, her eyes a little misty. Fuck. I thought she was going to bust my balls. Damn, this girl really is a wild card.

“Scouts honor. I will not let anything bad happen to her, I promise. And you are more than welcome to visit whenever you please.” Those two have a friendship I have never had myself. At least, not recently. Tyler has become my closest friend, but I don’t know if your sister’s husband can really count as a best friend. It’s not like I don’t have friends and good colleagues; I just haven’t invested enough time in any of them for them to hold any substance.

“Okay, well, if she has a bad day, you have to get her a cheap bottle of wine. It’s basically glorified grape juice, but she loves it. Oh, and chicken nuggets. If it is a really bad day, pick her up a chocolate shake. Food can fix just about anything for her. And cheesy chick flicks.” I listen as she rambles off things. Smiling a little to myself about all the things I will get to learn about her. I feel like I have known her my whole life though. Sometimes, I forget just how quickly things bloomed between us. I can’t wait to see what we will become with the proper amount of time.

“She is really lucky to have you, you know? I can’t say that I have a best friend like that. You have to make a promise to me to not let that go. I can keep her cared for and loved if you can keep her spunky.” She smiles at that and punches my arm. And she is back to normal Addie.

The rest of the drive is mostly intrusive questions and story times of Addie and Isla going through high school and college together. I soaked up every bit I could learn about her from Addie.

We finally reach her apartment and I practically run for the door. I feel like I was waiting for her to change her mind all week, but looking at her 4Runner packed to the brim, my heart suddenly feels packed to the brim too.

This is really happening.

The girl I met on vacation and fell in love with is moving to be with me. I know just how big of a deal that is, leaving her whole life behind and taking this chance. It's a lot for her to sacrifice, and I promise myself not to let it go to waste.

I walk through her front door as her landlord leaves. He hands her a check; I am assuming it's her deposit return. He nods his head at me and leaves.

I look at Isla and can't help but smile like a fool. This beautiful girl is all mine. I thought I loved her when I woke up this morning, but looking at her now, I somehow feel it even more.

She walks to me, being that I am staring at her while slightly frozen in place.

“You sure you're ready for all of this?” she asks.

I don't hesitate, because I know without a shadow of a doubt that this girl is it. My endgame.

“I don’t know, Addie told a lot of embarrassing stories about you. I might be having second thoughts.” She gives Addie a dirty look over my shoulder as she walks through the door.

“What the fuck, dude? You weren’t supposed to tell her I told you all of her deep, dark secrets,” Addie says, winking at me as she walks past.

“Yeah, I’m not letting you two hang out without me anymore. I don’t need you conspiring against me.” She slips out of my arm and rests against the countertop that divides the kitchen from the living room. She looks over at the clock and knows what I do: we’ve got to hit the road. We are making one pit stop tonight, since it is already 2:00 p.m. Our hotel is about nine hours away, so if we want to get there at a decent hour, we have to leave now.

“I hate to ruin our fun, but we really should get on the road,” I say.

Isla tenses a little, bracing herself for the big goodbye. Her face scrunches a little as she tries to shove down the emotion welling in her eyes.

“Don’t even think about crying. We are leaving here with nothing but good vibes and good times, alright? You aren’t dying. You’re moving onto bigger and better things, and that is something to be celebrated, not mourned.” Addie grabs one of Isla’s arms and pulls her into a hug. “That being said, I will still miss you more than life. But I am so freaking happy for you.” She lets go and chooses not to listen to her own advice as she sheds a single tear.

“Thank you. I will text you as soon as we make it. Actually, I probably will be a passenger princess for the majority of the ride. So, I will text you the entire time,” Isla says as she smiles at Addie.

“That is probably the best idea for everyone’s mental health. Anyways, I am going to go before we get all blubbery. I don’t look good blubbery.” She pulls Isla in for one last hug. “Okay, for real this time, goodbye and I love you. Have fun driving, Cal.” I take my hand out of my pocket to wave at her as she closes the door.

Isla looks over her entire empty apartment before her eyes land on me.

“It’s not too late to change your mind. I know leaving is hard, and I wouldn’t hold it against you if you weren’t completely sold on the idea yet.” I don’t want this to ever be something she regrets. I’m sure me asking every five minutes if she is sure is annoying, but I would rather be annoying than be the man who doesn’t care about what she is leaving behind.

“Nope. I’m one hundred percent ready to be a resident of Maine. Oh, did I tell you that I have two interviews set up for next week? Every place I have applied to wants to do an interview.” I make my way towards her and grab her waist.

“Well, of course, they do. I didn’t doubt for a minute that you would be able to get a job no problem. Plus, I heard a rumor that we have a great candidate coming for an in-person interview next week. I wonder who that could be?” Sarcasm comes easily for me, especially with Isla.

“I don’t know, but I bet she is super-hot and super funny,” Isla says as she brings her arms around my neck. I chuckle a little as I bring my lips to hers. A soft, reassuring kiss for both of us.

“Have I told you lately that I love you?” I ask as I pull away. Eyes locked on hers. Damn. Never in my life did I think I would find the one person I couldn’t live without on my little Hawaiian holiday.

“Only, like three times today. You’re really slacking, but it’s okay, I love you anyways.” She laughs under her breath. I really don’t know if there will come a time that hearing her say those three little words won’t light my soul on fire. She interrupts my train of thought by asking, “So you ready to take me home, Callahan?”

I am pretty sure I was born ready to love this woman. I can’t wait to have her in my bed every morning, no more coming and going and no more goodbyes.

“I can’t think of a single thing I want to do more than bring you home for good.” I kiss her one more time before we hit the road. I thank my lucky stars that Addie missed that plane. Without her missing it, I would have likely missed out on all of this, and what a tragedy that would have been.

EPILOGUE

Christmas Morning Isla

The smell of coffee pulls me from my sleep. Rolling to my side, I open one eye to see a steaming hot cup on my side table and immediately smile. This is like Santa Claus, but for adults. Instead of presents, we get coffee served at bedside. I make my way to a sitting position, extremely slowly, mostly because I am still being held captive by the grogginess. It doesn't help that we own the world's most comfortable mattress; I have a hard time leaving bed every morning.

I look out our window and see nothing but white. A big smile immediately finds my lips. I love a white Christmas. I think back to how last year's Christmas was white sand, except for the snow machine at the festival Cal happened to stumble upon. Damn, we have come a long way in a year.

I got a job at an advertising agency as a lead in my department—a step up from my last job. My boss is a saint, and there is plenty of room for growth. Cal's company offered me a job as well, but I figured it would be less of a headache

and conflict of interest if I worked somewhere else. Plus, it is nice to know I got this one all on my own. My skills and education landed me that job and I am damn proud of it. I'm also proud that I have almost doubled my income since moving here. Things really couldn't have fallen better into place if I tried.

I get my mug off the bedside table and take a small sip. I have made the mistake of burning the shit out of my lips on bedside coffee before, so I proceed with caution. It is perfectly warm and brings a little pep back to my step. I take another sip and realize this is made from the coffee beans from Hawaii. Their coffee was amazing, and I could probably spot its flavor anywhere. We only use it on special occasions so we can make it last.

Cal pops his head into the door. "Hey, pretty girl. You ready to come be with the living? My parents and Liv and Tyler are here. Oh, and you aren't going to believe this, but my brother is here."

"Really? I for sure thought he would bail, since he was a no-show to Thanksgiving." I haven't met Sam yet, but I am completely prepared to be everything but dazzled by him. He seems like a complete douche if you ask me.

"Yeah, I did, too. Anyways, I will be downstairs. We are going to eat breakfast and then open presents." It's then that I catch a hint of cinnamon in the air.

"Oh my God, did your mom make cinnamon rolls?" I ask as I shove off the covers, ready to find parent-suitable clothes. I

am guessing my cheeky shorts and strappy sleep shirt wouldn't be appropriate. One wrong move and you might see an ass cheek or a nip slip.

Cal laughs. "Yes, she did. I had a bet that all I would have to do is open the door and you would be down there in five. Someone else said it would only take you three minutes."

"You know me so well." I race to my closet and pull out a hoodie and a pair of joggers.

Cal waits for me as we go downstairs. His whole family is full of early risers. If they had it their way, we would have eaten an hour ago and been done with presents already. Did I mention it is only 8:00 a.m. right now? I would barely consider this sleeping in. They are wonderful, though, so it is a small price to pay.

I never quite realized what I was missing when it came to family until I was absorbed into the Reynolds family. Every holiday is a big thing. We have weekly family dinners, and they are always up in each other's business. I don't think I have gone one day since I arrived in March without a text from Anna or Liv. I love feeling like I belong somewhere, and that someone is proud to have me be a part of their tribe.

Cal and I got a new condo a few months ago. A place where we could marry each other's styles. Much to his dismay, we do have more than the bare minimum, but I have drastically cut down my supply of Hobby Lobby wall decor. All the bedrooms are upstairs and the living room, kitchen, and dining

room are all downstairs. It makes entertaining a breeze. Hence, why everyone is sitting in my kitchen now.

“Well, well, well. Look who finally decided to bless us with her presence,” Liv says from the breakfast bar in the kitchen as she takes a sip from her mug.

Anna is pulling out a fresh batch of cinnamon rolls. Michael, Tyler, and Samuel are in the living room on the couch. I spot Samuel and he looks so much like Cal. A little less refined, and his hair is much darker. He has only stubble for facial hair and his curly hair is almost black. He must feel my gaze on him because his eyes meet mine. His eyes aren't blue but a dark honey instead. I've seen photos of him, but he looks so much different in person.

Cal notices us catching each other's gazes and takes the opportunity to introduce us. He grabs my hand and pulls me into the living room. We stop beside the couch the men are sitting on.

“Sam, you haven't had a chance to meet Isla, yet. Isla, this is my brother, Sam.” I reach out my hand to shake his and he stares at it. What the fuck is with this guy?

He eventually grabs my hands and shakes it. “Nice to meet you. I heard you took the stick out of Cal's ass.”

I choke out a laugh. Damn. Straight and to the point, I guess.

“It took some effort, because it was really wedged up there, but we did learn how to have fun again.” I hip-check Cal and he gives me a cross look before rolling his eyes.

“I like her,” is all Sam says. He is incredibly hard to read, so I am hoping that was genuine and not sarcastic. Still, I am going to take it as a win.

“Well, that is enough joking at my expense. How about we dig in while it’s hot?” Cal says. The boys get up off the couch, and we all file into the kitchen.

Breakfast goes without a hitch. No fighting, which is surprising, considering the brothers clearly have some deep, unresolved tension going on between them. Liv seems to be the peacekeeper. She helps keep the conversations to light and fluffy topics, I am guessing to avoid a full-on brawl.

We make our way to the living room after we finish eating. Cal let me get a real Christmas tree this year, and I have had nothing but solid regret. I think a dog would be easier to manage. I have to water the stupid thing once a day and vacuum up the damn pine needles every five minutes. However, any time Cal talks about it, I tell him I love it. NO way in hell am I letting him know he was right and that fake trees are the way to go. I would literally rather die than admit I am wrong.

Everyone sits around the tree. Anna and Michael sit on the couch, and the rest of us are on the floor, closer to the tree. Liv takes all the presents and drops them off at whomever they belong to.

“Well, now that we have all our presents, I want to start with one that isn’t wrapped,” Cal says. Anna takes a sharp breath.

Oh, shit, is he going to propose? Anna has been not so subtly suggesting that it's our turn to tie the knot.

I hear a sound in the kitchen and see Addie pop out of the hallway. Okay, not a proposal, but this is almost as good.

“Surprise!” Addie yells. She is wearing the cutest oversized plaid flannel and ripped jeans. Her red hair in a messy ponytail. I immediately find my feet and am running to her. I have seen her twice since I moved. I have been complaining about how much I miss her lately, and apparently, Cal took note.

“Did you do this?” I ask Cal as I hug Addie, refusing to let her go.

“He sure did. I am surprised neither one of us spilled the beans. I thought when I accidentally mentioned taking off time to go on a trip, you would have figured it out,” she says as I get squeezed into a boa-constrictor-style hug. “We all had to be quiet as mice this morning so you wouldn't hear me when I came in.”

“Nope, didn't register at all that you were taking time off to come here. How long are you here for?” I ask.

She finally lets me go and we make our way back into the living room.

“I fly back home on New Year's Day. Your Prince Charming was kind enough to fly me out here.” I pull her in for one more squeeze, mostly to prove to my brain that she is really here, and this isn't some sort of dream.

I walk over to Cal and wrap my arms around his waist. “Thank you so much. This is the best Christmas present ever. The only way you could have topped it is if you put a giant bow on her head.”

“I recommended he wrap me in a box and I jump out and scare you, but he wanted to be a party pooper,” Addie says as she places her hands on her hips. Everything about her expression is saying, “I told you so”.

“Can we get back to our regularly scheduled programming?” Samuel says from across the room, shooting us all an annoyed look.

“Who the hell is that guy?” Addie says. I really wish it was a whisper, but I don’t think she could whisper if her life depended on it. She met Cal’s family last time she visited, so he is the only unfamiliar face to her.

“That is Samuel, Cal’s brother,” I say, trying to avoid the look he is giving us both.

“Well, yes, Prince Samuel. You may get back to regularly scheduled programming. I would hate to delay his royal highness.” Sarcasm is at the front of her voice. She does a small curtsy before plopping down on the floor next to Liv, who, of course, can’t help but laugh.

Samuel rolls his eyes, not impressed by her meeting his sass with even more sass, I suppose.

We all sit in a semi-circle around the tree. Cal and I at the far right, with Addie next to Liv and Tyler and Sam at the far left.

Liv reaches over and gives her a half hug. His parents never left the chairs that face us. They would probably be more comfortable on the couch, but I think they still like watching our expressions as we open presents.

We finally make our way through the presents, each with one left. Cal was thoughtful enough to get Addie a gift as well so she didn't feel left out. I had already mailed hers. So, I guess she can enjoy Christmas twice.

I am the last one to go. I start opening the box, not bothering to see who it is from. I am a giant child when it comes to Christmas presents.

It's a box. Inside a box, which is inside another box. By the time I'm at the fifth box, I stop and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Okay, which one of you bitches thought this was funny? It was you, Liv, wasn't it? Is this payback for your birthday?" I ask. I sent her a card that, when opened, shot glitter and confetti everywhere. I thought it was hilarious, but she did not.

"This one is not me. But don't worry, your time for payback is coming." She shoots me a wink as she repositions on the floor.

I finally get through the last box just to find it empty. Well, this is some bullshit.

"Okay, whoever did this should be charged with cruel and unusual punishment." I toss the last empty box behind me, so it can join its twelve other box friends.

The whole room is quiet and everyone is staring at me.

“What?” I ask. Addie juts her chin out, motioning for me to turn around. I look over my shoulder and see Cal on one knee.

Holy. Shit. Is this happening?

“Isla, baby. I am pretty sure I have known you were it since you tackled me on the hike. Having you in my life this last year has been everything I could have ever asked for. Will you please do me the honor of being my wife?” His eyes are a little glassy. I have to laugh a little because the ring is upside down because he has the top part of the box on the bottom. He looks at the box when he hears my small giggle.

“Man, and I knew I would mess this up,” he says with a small laugh.

“Yes, I will absolutely be your wife, and you didn’t mess it up. This was perfect. Almost all of my favorite people are here.” He slides the ring on my finger and pulls me into a hug.

“Your parents were supposed to be here, but their flight out of Denver got delayed from the weather. They will be here sometime tonight or tomorrow, depending on the weather and all.”

“That’s okay. Thank you so much for arranging all this. Just when I thought you couldn’t top last year.” I kiss him again for good measure.

“Well, Santa must’ve rewarded me for sitting on his lap. Last year, I asked for you and now, you get to be mine for the rest of my life.” His smile still knocks the wind out of me. I almost

wish all these people weren't here so we could practice consummating the marriage.

We finally separate and Addie shows me the notebook Cal got her. I thought it was a plain planner, but it is actually a Maid of Honor Bible. It has all the things we will need to plan a wedding.

I look around and smile. A year ago, I never would have imagined this would be the fallout of Addie missing the plane. I figured out how to stand on my own two feet, met the love of my life, and with that, got the best bonus family ever. Sometimes, it just takes a little bad luck mixed with a dose of the right place, right time, for everything to fall together.

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About the Author

Elle is just your typical book lover turned writer. Her full time gig is at a small rural hospital where she channels all of her *Grey's Anatomy* vibes. She enjoys being outside (preferably while drinking a strong margarita) and playing with her dogs. Oh, and spending time with her husband. She has been writing since high school but recently decided to dive back into the world with writing romance novels.