

A HARBOUR VILLAGE NOVEL

I Wish
I KNEW
Then

jessica peterson

i wish i knew then

A Harbour Village Novel

jessica peterson

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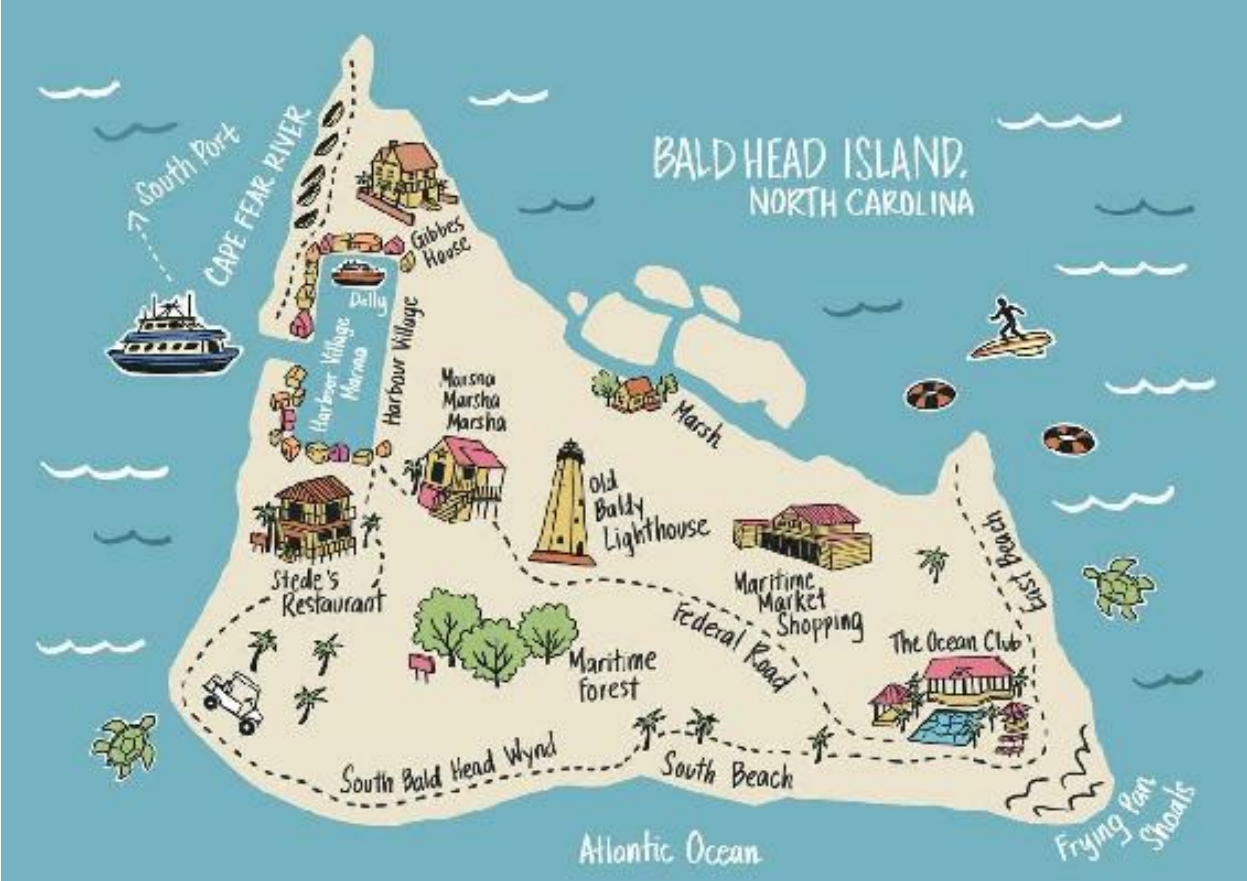
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*For the messy ones.
As Riley says, perfect and shiny ain't real,
and it ain't that interesting.*



then

...

Riley

9 to 5

Ten Years Ago
August

DOLLY PARTON IS THE TITS.

Correction: watching my girlfriend, Lu, make the best damn cheese straws on planet Earth while dancing to “9 to 5” in a tiny tennis skirt is the tits.

We’re in the enormous kitchen of her grandparents’ fancy beach house. Mom is the Gibbes’s housekeeper, so technically I’m helping her out by unloading and then reloading their pair of dishwashers.

In reality, I’m between shifts at my two jobs, so I’m stealing a few minutes with my girl before I head to Merman’s Restaurant. I work mornings, six to two, at the Harbour Village Marina. Then I head to Merman’s at four, where I work as a bar back until close.

The time I get to spend with Lu Wade during the day is rare. Being alone with her in the house like this is even rarer. Gotta take advantage. Next time I’m able to touch her won’t be until after midnight, when we sneak out on Old Winny, her family’s ancient golf cart, or on one of her granddaddy’s boats.

The buttery scent of the batch of cheese straws already in the oven fills my head. My stomach grumbles. I glance down the hall that leads to the front door.

No sign of anyone yet. Mr. and Mrs. Gibbes, Lu's grandparents, are out having a late lunch at the Ocean Club with Lu's mom and her aunt, Lady. They're not due back for another hour, but I'm still paranoid.

No such thing as being too careful.

"Think those'll be done before I gotta go?" I close the dishwasher and join Lu at the island. I put my hands on the marble countertop on either side of hers. Wince when the marble's edge bites into the blister I got from a mooring line on today's fishing charter.

Ignoring it, I lean my body into hers, my front to her back, and kiss the nape of her neck. She looks *good* in her tennis clothes, the white popping against her deep tan. The tiny skirt, tinier tank top. Pristine white shoes.

She smells even better, like the coconut body wash she loves.

Lu grins at me over her shoulder, the contraption she calls a cookie press still in her hand. "Are you asking if I timed them so they'll be just the right temperature for you, right before you're about to leave? Warm, but not too hot?"

"Can't have 'em any other way."

"I've created a monster." She gives me a quick kiss before turning back to the rows of cheese straw dough she's already piped onto a baking sheet.

"Not my fault you've spoiled the shit outta me. I can't even eat Bojangles anymore. That fried chicken you made the other night—"

"Granny's recipe? I know. So good. It's the Lawry's in the breading. And then of course the mayo."

"And the vat of oil you fry it in, Legs."

Lu rolls her ass into my crotch at the nickname—I call her Legs on account of her long, lean, ridiculously sexy stems—and sways said legs in time to the music. Dolly's singing "I Will Always Love You" now. "I can't become a southern Ina Garten if I don't master frying things in vats of oil."

My dick loves the friction a little too much. Mom's going to be back any minute from grabbing a shower in the apartment above the Gibbes's garage, where she and I have lived since the beginning of the summer.

I can't get excited. If anyone finds out Lu and I have been dating pretty much from the moment we met back in early June, we're fucked. Her granddaddy, James Gibbes III, is old school. If he knows I'm sleeping with his favorite granddaughter, he'll fire Mom, no question.

Mom needs this job, the highest-paying one she's ever had, now that Dad is out of the picture. He split in the spring, and served Mom divorce papers

not long after.

Only problem? I can't keep my hands off Lu. She's sexy, obviously. She's also smart as hell—heading to Wake Forest in the fall. She's introduced me to a whole world I didn't know existed as a small-town boy from South Port, North Carolina. Books. Ideas. Dolly Parton.

Food too. She's an extremely talented cook. Her passion for making delicious food for the people she loves most has turned me into a foodie.

Before we met, food was fuel, pure and simple. Then Lu started sneaking me plates of whatever she, her granny, and Aunt Lady cooked. Their famous cheese straws. Grouper sandwiches with homemade slaw. Biscuits made from scratch. A southern take on poutine, which is probably my favorite dish. It's french fries smothered in this cheesy clam chowder type stuff, which Lu and Lady make with local seafood caught by my friend Tuck.

Needless to say, I was an immediate convert to the foodie movement.

In an effort to stay calm, I step back and lift my baseball hat off my head. Put it on backward. "I thought your restaurant was going to be an oyster and rum joint?"

Lu glances at me again, gaze sharpening when she takes in my hat. "We'll serve the oysters all kinds of ways. Raw. Roasted. Fried."

My stomach grumbles again. Now that I know what good food looks and tastes like, I've realized the restaurant scene here on the island is mediocre at best. When Lu confessed that she dreamed of writing cookbooks and then opening her own restaurant on Bald Head, I was one hundred percent on board.

Her ambition ignited my own.

Now I want to help Lu open her restaurant. I want to play a role in the world that's bigger than the one I have now at the marina as the guy with a strong back. I've never met anyone with dreams as big as Lu's, and now I'm starting to dream big too. Mostly about how I can keep Bald Head's authentic island vibe, but improve on the cool thing we already have going here. Before Mom and I moved to Bald Head at the beginning of the summer, I had no idea wealth like this existed. But now that I've worked fishing charters for the bankers, builders, and real estate moguls who make millions developing places like Bald Head, I know what's possible.

I want a piece of the action. With Lu's help, I've brainstormed ways to bring high-quality food and shopping on the island. From what I've gathered, there's money to be made in residential property development too. I'd like to

build some houses that preserve Bald Head's signature look: shingled siding, lots of shutters, and rocking-chair front porches. A real estate guy told me waterfront property has the most potential.

Man, I'd kill to own a place on the water one day myself.

"You're going to keep Tuck very busy, then," I say to Lu.

"That's the hope. Keep it local, keep it fresh." She finishes piping the cheese straws and begins to cut the rows into bite-size pieces. "I like Biggers's idea of keeping it simple too. Really focus on the quality of ingredients."

"I agree. The food would be delicious. I also think it'd make good business sense. Supporting local fishermen and farmers would mean cutting down on shipping and storage costs. Biggers knows his shit when it comes to that stuff."

Frank Biggers is my boss at the marina; I work there with two of my buddies from high school, Tuck and Abel. Biggers has owned and operated it since it opened in the eighties. Lately I've been picking his brain about what he'd like to see happen in Harbour Village, the little town that's sprung up around Bald Head's marina. It's mostly private residences (the Gibbes's being one of them), some shops and restaurants, and an inn. We talk about buying up the property around the village—and across the rest of the island—to ensure the land is properly developed. We want to preserve as much forest and beach as possible, while also making Bald Head a world-class destination on par with places Nantucket and The Hamptons, spots those bankers I meet on charters can't stop talking about.

Maybe one day, if I work hard enough, come across a little luck, I can make all these ideas and dreams a reality. Maybe then Mom won't have to work like a dog to make ends meet.

And yeah, maybe then I can afford to have the family I've always wanted but never really had. I don't think I would mind being an only child if my parents didn't work so much. I was alone a lot as a kid. Still am.

The timer on Lu's phone goes off. Leaning in to give her bare shoulder a soft, quick bite, I grab an oven mitt and pull the tray of cheese straws out of the oven.

"They look perfect, Legs." I put the tray on a nearby trivet. "Golden, just shy of brown."

Lu holds up a hand. "Fuck yeah. Do we make a great team or do we make a great team?"

“You’re doing all the work, but if you want to give me some completely undeserved credit, sure, we’re the best team ever.” I give her a high five. Lace my fingers through hers, my skin buzzing with electricity at the contact.

“Please. You’re the inspiration. And the one who tells me everything I make is the best thing you’ve ever eaten, which is pretty amazing motivation. What’s the point of cooking if you have no one to enjoy your food like that? You’re the best cheerleader ever.” She gives her dark hair a shake. “And not just for my cooking. I told you I like my natural color better, and you told me to ditch the blonde if that was the case. Mom may never forgive me for going back to brunette, but whatever.”

Our eyes lock. The light catches on hers, turning the brown to a shade darker than honey. She grins, her nose crinkling.

My stomach drops. Heart skips a beat.

I wanna lay her down so bad it hurts.

“I’m fuckin’ sick of this,” I murmur. “Always having to run. Sneak around.”

Her grin fades. “I know. But it won’t be forever. We won’t have to sneak around when you come visit me at college. I’m leaving to get ready for Wake in two freaking days, Riley. And when you get on your feet, you hopefully won’t have to work as much . . .”

But how long’s that gonna take?

I’d like to think I’ll be making enough money soon so Mom won’t have to sweat her job. Maybe she’ll even be able to work at an antique shop like she’s always wanted. My ultimate goal is to be able to support her.

But even though I’m working two jobs, plus any other odd ones I can pick up, I still can’t support both of us alone right now. I don’t have plans to go to college, so I won’t be lining myself up to get any high-paying, 9-to-5 white-collar job. And to make the kind of money I hope to have, I know I’m going to have to work really hard for a really long time.

Could be years before I can date Lu Wade out in the open. Her family would never let her go out with a guy like me right now: poor, from a broken family, with no foreseeable prospects in terms of education or stable, much less lucrative, employment.

The idea’s frustrating. Depressing too.

Lu must read my thoughts, because she plucks a few cheese straws off the baking sheet. “This’ll make you feel better. Open.”

I glance over her shoulder at the hall. Still no sign of anyone.

I do as she tells me. Lu pops a straw into my mouth. The savory, buttery flavor melts on my tongue. The texture is crumbly, a little chewy, a cross between Cheeze-It and a biscuit.

Closing my eyes, I groan. “Damn, Legs, that’s good.”

“How good?”

Cracking open an eye, I smirk. “You askin’ if I think it tastes better than you?”

“I know how much you like tasting me.” She wags her eyebrows.

I grab her waist. I love what a perv she is.

How open she is to try new things. In and out of the bedroom.

“Almost as much as you like tasting me,” I reply.

A pink flush works its way up her chest and neck to her cheeks. “I am going to be a disgrace at my lesson because I’ll be thinking about it. About you.”

“I’ll get off as soon as I can.” *Pun not intended.* I lean in and kiss her lips. They’re soft and warm. When I lick inside her mouth, her tongue dances eagerly with mine. I drink deeply, pulling, then pressing.

“God, you’re”—she’s panting between strokes—“a good kisser.”

I smirk. Then I move my hand to her throat and give it a quick, hard squeeze.

Her knee buckles. Eyes flash with heat. “You’re good at that too.”

“I kno—”

“Hellloooo!”

Lu and I jump apart at the sound of Mrs. Wade’s voice in the hall. I cut Lu a panicked glance. *Fuck, that was close.*

“Smells delicious in here.” Mr. Gibbes strides into the kitchen, hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts. “Ah! It’s Louise working her magic. Cheese straws? Just what I was in the mood for.”

She smiles and quickly crosses the kitchen to kiss her granddaddy’s cheek. I notice she doesn’t correct him on her name. “Hey, Pa. I knew y’all might want a snack later.”

“You’re sweet to think of us.” Mr. Gibbes’s gaze lingers a beat too long on Lu’s face. He puts a hand on her cheek. “You’re red, sugar.”

“It’s the oven. Gets hot in here when I cook.”

He smiles. “I like that you’re groovin’ to Dolly.”

“Only because you’re the one who introduced me to her.”

“Just passing along my excellent taste in music. How about we listen to

some Joni Mitchell tonight during dinner?”

Lu beams. “Can’t wait.”

She’s not kidding. Lu and her granddaddy have a serious bond over their love of music. You’d never guess a high-powered lawyer like him would be a connoisseur of rock ’n roll. But he knows his shit.

“Riley! What luck that we get to see you, son.” Mrs. Gibbes, Lu’s grandmother, breezes in behind her husband. I notice she’s got a dark stain on the front of her otherwise pristine dress. “I feel like you’re never around.”

“Yes ma’am, I’m usually out working. Nice to see you as well.” I turn to Mr. Gibbes. “Hello, sir. Hope y’all enjoyed your cocktails.”

His eyes flick in my direction. “Making yourself right at home in my kitchen, I see.”

My heart skips again. For an entirely different reason this time. “Sir, I was just—”

“Handsome as all get out.” Aunt Lady appears at my elbow. She’s got a big old smile on her face. “Seriously, have you considered modeling? I think you’d do very well.”

“Um.” I glance down at my Merman’s T-shirt, shorts, and the frayed, stained Nikes I hope will last me through the summer.

Mrs. Wade walks in after her sister. “Really, Lady, that’s inappropriate.”

“But totally accurate,” Mrs. Gibbes chimes in, grinning.

“Margaret.” Her husband gives her a look. “You should go change. There’s cola all over your dress.”

Mrs. Gibbes’s grin fades. “Of course. How embarrassing. Riley, you take care, you hear? And Lulu, I’ll help you with dinner after your tennis lesson. You still thinking barbecue shrimp?”

“I was, yes. Maybe with a loaf of French bread from the freezer and a kale salad?”

“Yum. Sound good to you, Jimmy?”

“Sounds great.”

My stomach grumbles for the zillionth time. What I would give to be able to sit around the Gibbes’s enormous dinner table and eat Lu’s shrimp tonight.

Mr. Gibbes’s eyes narrow. They linger on me for half a second before moving to Lu. Then back to me.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles to life.

I hold up my hand in an awkward half-wave. “I’ll get out of y’all’s way, then.”

“You’re hardly in the way when you’re emptying the dishwashers and doing the dishes,” Lu replies. “How kind of you to help out.”

Are those daggers in Mr. Gibbes’s eyes? Or am I just imagining it?

“Happy to. Y’all have a good night.”

Lu raises her hand, clearly intent to stop me from leaving without a baggie of cheese straws. I shake my head the tiniest bit. *Don’t give us away.*

I turn and run headfirst into Mom. Her hair is still wet from the shower. She’s wearing her usual apron. She’s also got on her knee pads, which means she’ll be scrubbing floors tonight.

My heart, already fluttering like a trapped bird, twists. “Hey!”

“Hey, honey.” She frowns at my expression. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. Yeah. I’m running late. I emptied both dishwashers and loaded the one on the left with all the dirty dishes from the sink.”

“You didn’t have to do that. Thank you.”

I give her a quick hug. “I’ll bring home dinner from the restaurant.”

“Wonderful.”

The tasteless burgers from Merman’s are hardly wonderful, but it’s one less thing Mom has to worry about.

Scurrying across Harbour Village, the sunburn on my arms screaming thanks to the brutal late afternoon sun, I tell myself there’s only six hours until I get to hold Lu again. Seven, max, if the restaurant is busy. She said she’d bring the book she just finished that she’s obsessed with. Something about a bossy guy in a suit by an author whose name I can’t remember.

I said I’d bring the bottle of Havana Club Tuck swiped from his dad’s bar. Lu can use it to experiment with the rum punch recipes she’s wanted to try. I even got the little paper umbrellas she likes to stick in her parents’ drinks.

It’s not perfect, but it’s the closest thing to heaven I can think of.

One day I’ll love Lu Wade the way I want to. The way she deserves to be loved. Out in the open.

Until then, I do like Dolly and bust some ass.

now

Louise

Present Day
July

*To: Louise Wade & Patrick Lorne (louise.wade@gibbes.net,
Patrick.lorne@PPWFinance.com)*

From: Goldie Smith & Cooper Hunt (goldie.smith@gibbes.net)

Tuesday, August 2 6:50 A.M. (1 hour ago)

*Subject: **Surprise! We've Changed Our Wedding Date *IMPORTANT****

Dear Family & Friends,

Hope summer is treating you well. Ours has been an eventful one. We're thrilled to announce we're expecting! Baby Hunt is due this winter (we won't be finding out the gender!). While this has been a welcome surprise, it does mean we will be pushing up our wedding date. The new date is Saturday, September 2; see below for the official invitation and schedule of events. We sincerely hope you can make it, but we understand if you're unable to attend on such short notice.

Much love,

Goldie & Cooper

Together With Their Parents
Gillian Eliza Smith
"Goldie"

And
Cooper Henry Easton
Cordially Invite You to The Celebration of Their
Nuptials
On Saturday, September 2*
At 5 o'clock in the Afternoon
The Ocean Club**
Bald Head Island, North Carolina
Reception to Follow
www.Goldie-and-Coop.com for Details

*Yes, THIS September 2! As in one month from today!

**Huge thanks to our dear friend, DR, for nabbing us a venue after a last-minute cancellation!

Schedule of Events

Thursday, August 31: Combined Bachelor/Bachelorette Party (details to come)

Friday, September 1: Rehearsal, Welcome Cocktail Reception

Saturday, September 2: Wedding Ceremony & Reception

one

...

Lu

Sea Men

End of August

GRANNY HAS A SAYING: what's done in the dark always comes to light.

For the first time, I wish she wasn't always right.

The full force of my hangover—my heartbreak—hits me just as the sun sinks into the Cape Fear River. The ferry sways in the wake of a passing barge, and my stomach sways with it. I grab onto Goldie's leg beside mine. My best friend offers me a sympathetic smile.

"You all right?" She pats my hand.

We're on the ferry's open-air top deck, so I suck in a lungful of the humid summer breeze and let it out, its familiar, salty smell making me feel slightly less like dying.

"Yup. All good." Even with my sunglasses on, I have to squint against the apricot-hued fire that spreads across the water's rippled surface. I forgot what a show the sunset is on Bald Head. "Sorry, I feel like I should be taking care of you. You're the one with a good excuse for being queasy."

She holds up the bag of mini Oreos she's been munching on since we left Charlotte earlier this afternoon. "I learned the hard way to always come prepared."

I grin. "Still can't believe you threw up on your boss."

Goldie, Cooper, and I all work at the law firm my grandfather founded

back in the seventies. The Gibbes Group is now one of the largest and most successful firms in the southeast. Cooper is an attorney, and Goldie and I work in the event planning department, where we met six years ago.

“Good thing he’s also my fiancé.” She grins back. “Did I tell you he threw up too?”

Mom, who’s sitting on my other side, gasps. “He didn’t!”

“Yup. The second he saw me lose my lunch on his suit, he grabbed the trash can and lost his too. Coop is . . . not great with bodily fluids.”

“Bless his heart.” Mom clutches her invisible pearls and leans in, lowering her voice. “How do you think he’ll do in the delivery room?”

Goldie laughs. “Probably not great. Luckily I have a high pain tolerance and a strong stomach. Well, had a strong stomach. Everyone told me the nausea would let up once I hit the second trimester. I keep waiting, but it’s still—”

“Awful.” Mom shakes her head. “I still remember how bad I felt. Luckily it doesn’t last forever. By the time I hit eighteen weeks with Louise I turned a corner. I felt like a new woman! Oh, but I bet y’all’s parents are thrilled.”

Goldie laughs. “Well, my parents aren’t thrilled about the whole shotgun wedding thing. But yes, they’re very excited about the baby.”

“To get their first grandchild for Christmas? What a gift!”

I look away, my eyes pricking with a fresh wave of tears.

I know Mom doesn’t mean to hurt my feelings. She’s just *that* lady, the one who flirts with babies in line at the grocery store and loves talking about anything and everything related to motherhood. She gave up her career at The Gibbes Group when she had me and never once looked back. Being a mom is her thing, clearly.

I know she’d love it to be my thing too.

The idea makes my chest feel heavy. Two weeks ago, I was well on my way to following in her footsteps. Like her, I work at Pa’s law firm. Like her, I was going to get married in my twenties (she was twenty-three, I was going to be twenty-eight). And like her, I was marrying an ambitious up-and-comer my grandfather introduced me to.

It was finally my turn to get married and, God willing, start a family.

Patrick and I got engaged six months ago. We’d already picked our venue, a gorgeous five-star resort in the Virginia mountains. I caught him on the Four Seasons website more than once, researching honeymoon spots.

That’s what I thought he was doing, anyway.

But here I am, suddenly single on my way to help my best friend pull off her kinda-sorta-shotgun wedding in four days as her maid of honor. Despite being an event planner herself, Goldie can't operate at one hundred percent, thanks to her pregnancy, so she recruited me to be her right-hand woman.

We've spent the past month in furious wedding prep mode. I scoured every wedding dress shop in Charlotte for just the right gown for her; I counted RSVPs and followed up with guests who did not respond to Goldie's updated wedding invitation; I ordered bachelorette party swag, made place cards, and found the perfect pair of shimmery Jimmy Choo heels to complete Goldie's rehearsal dinner outfit.

It's been pure insanity. But to be honest, I don't mind it. Being busy keeps me from dwelling on the fact that Goldie and Cooper are getting married on Bald Head Island. Only the place where I fell in love with the *first* guy who unceremoniously dumped me and wrecked my life ten years ago.

The island I swore I'd never step foot on again.

Talk about history repeating. The universe is one sick son of a bitch.

I never told anyone about Riley and me. Just like I never told anyone other than him about that stupid cookbook I wanted to write. How ridiculous was I, thinking I'd make enough money writing cookbooks to open a restaurant? And how naïve, thinking that restaurant ownership was a dream and not the nightmare I've heard it is? I have friends in the industry, and they've been brutally honest about how stressful it can be. Long hours. High risk of failure. The large majority of restaurants don't make it.

My family still comes to Bald Head, a tiny island of less than five square miles, every summer. Pa passed last year, and Granny had to go to an assisted living facility not long after. But they kept their house in Harbour Village, and now Aunt Lady splits her time between Wilmington and Bald Head to care for the house. Mom drives down whenever Dad isn't traveling enough.

Point being, I've heard them mention Riley's name a time or two. Apparently he's hit it big as a real estate mogul or something on the island. To be honest, I leave the room whenever he comes up.

I almost failed my freshman year of college thanks to him. It took me *years* to learn how to trust myself and others again. He ruined what was once upon a time my favorite place on the planet. I got over Riley a long time ago. But that doesn't mean I ever, *ever* want to revisit that particularly awful period in my life.

That particularly awful text he sent me. The one I got when I was on this

same ferry. God, I hope I don't see him. I leave on Sunday morning, which means I'll only be here for five days.

I also hope I don't see Patrick.

Patrick and Coop are—were?—friends. I don't think Patrick would have the balls to show up to the wedding. But he had the balls to ask me to marry him while he fucked other women behind my back, so really, who knows?

It's been fourteen days since he walked into our townhouse as I was making dinner—our favorite meal, a kale salad made with Aunt Lady's garlic dressing and flank steak done in Granny's cast iron skillet—and tore my heart out of my chest, telling me he didn't think he loved me anymore. "I can't be faithful no matter how hard I try," he said.

Ten days since I had a panic attack at my gynecologist's office while a kind nurse in polka-dot scrubs poked my arm and swabbed my cervix for an STI test.

Less than one day since I moved back in (albeit temporarily) with my parents as a twenty-eight-year-old. I got rip-roaring drunk off excellent Chardonnay with my mother, who must be pickled because she woke up this morning fresh as a daisy while I feel like I got hit by a truck.

Wiping my eyes, I blink and Bald Head comes into view. It's a flat sliver of green, punctuated by the battered concrete lighthouse lovingly known as Old Baldy.

For a second the heaviness in my chest lifts. I spent every June, July, and August out here since Granny and Pa built their house on Row Boat Row when I was six. Those summers were pure magic. Cousins. Chaos. Popsicles at the pool, and bonfires on the beach.

Then came high school graduation. Little did I know that summer would be the last I'd spend on Bald Head.

It was the best summer of my life. And then the worst.

We glide into the marina. The ferry lurches, its engines grumbling loud enough to make our bench vibrate. This time it's Goldie who grabs onto me.

"Wow," she breathes. "I am . . . not okay."

I reach into my tote bag, which is wedged awkwardly between my feet. "Here, I think I still have that bag from Chick-Fil-A—"

"Oh, no, girl, I don't need a barf bag. I need you to look."

"Look at what?"

She gives my leg a squeeze. "Look at *that*."

"Is it an alligator?" Looking up, I see Harbour Village, Bald Head's

quaint version of a downtown, come into view. The broad strokes haven't changed since I was here last: same neat rectangle of blue-green water that makes up the marina. Same cute, cedar-shingled homes, shops, and restaurants that border the water on all sides. Same quiet sense of peace.

But the boats that bob in the slips have gotten bigger.

Much bigger.

Where there used to be cute little fishing boats and pontoons you could rent for pleasure cruises, now sleek yachts and Tony Soprano-sized trawlers rise and fall silently in the soft chop of the water. *Who owns those?*

Goldie scoffs. "You think I'd get this excited about an alligator? Hell no. Louise, *look.*"

She tilts her chin in the direction of the large, covered dock beside us. Mom turns her head and looks too. I follow her gaze to the line of porters and deckhands scrambling to tie up the ferry.

My pulse hiccups. This is where Riley used to work, hauling luggage and running fishing charters for Mr. Biggers.

But that's not what makes me lean forward to get a better view.

"They're naked," I blurt.

"Some of them are *mostly* naked," Goldie corrects. "I believe they're wearing pants. Shorts. Whatever."

Goldie's only been to Bald Head once before. Cooper's the one with ties to the island, his family having visited throughout his childhood.

Mom, her hand still on those invisible pearls, says, "God Bless America."

Skin tightening, I watch the shirtless sailors tug on thick ropes and shout orders to each other. It's a blur of sweat-slicked muscle and toned, tanned backs bent in the kind of manual labor you only see in really bad porn.

Not gonna lie, though, I'd watch the shit out of this X-rated video. I can't stop staring.

The shirtless deckhands—that's definitely new.

"It's the heat," a woman to my left explains. "By the end of the day, the guys soak through their uniforms, so some of them just take them off. New owner gave it the thumbs up a couple years back, so . . . here we are."

"Here we are." Goldie glances across the women gathering along the railing. "Is that why ninety percent of the people on this boat are female?"

"No," another woman says. She's peering over the side of the boat, slowly sliding the heart charm on her necklace back and forth over its gold chain. "Wives and kids come to the beach earlier than the husbands, usually

during the week. The guys come on Fridays after work.”

“Ah.” Goldie nods. “Works out well for everyone then, doesn’t it?”

“Sure does,” the woman says, not looking away from the men hustling below us. “Welcome to paradise.”

Goldie leans in to whisper in my ear. “This is the horniest paradise I’ve ever been to. Maybe we can get you laid. Coop’s best man is single.” He and I have never met, but I hear he’s handsome. “If he doesn’t work out, bet one of those sea men—”

“Ha.” I roll my eyes, even as my heart goes haywire watching a particularly ripped sailor wrap a section of rope around an enormous metal cleat.

“C’mon, that’s funny. I know time heals all wounds. But quality dick gets the job done too.”

The sailor straightens, sweat coursing down his back and sides as he stands. He’s turned away from me, so I can’t see his face. But I can see him pluck the baseball hat off his head. In one smooth, obscenely sexy motion, he runs a hand through his dark blond hair, bicep bulging, and flips the hat onto his head, backward this time.

Something about the move makes my skin tingle. My heart drums inside my chest.

Sexual frustration.

That’s all this is. As unseemly as it may be—I’m in the middle of a horrific breakup, for God’s sake—I’m frankly horny as hell.

If I’m being honest, I’d been feeling, er, “lonely” even before Patrick broke up with me. I imagine like most people who are in years-long relationships and have demanding jobs, Patrick and I didn’t exactly have a scintillating sex life.

I feel a stab of shame. I should have tried harder. Maybe then—

“Almost time to go.” Mom slings her bag over her shoulder.

I watch the hot sailor point to something. A small gaggle of other shirtless sailors gather around him to listen. Above the sound of the engines and the people beside us, I can’t hear him. But I can tell he’s the boss. Captain. Dock . . . master?

Whoever he is, he makes things happen. The guys disperse. A second later, I jump at the loud *bang* that reverberates throughout the ferry.

I forgot how loud the pedestrian ramp is when it’s released onto the dock.

Goldie elbows me, holding out my bag. “You can have your sea men

later.”

“That’s the hope,” a woman says before she descends the steps that lead to the exit.

I take my bag and follow Goldie, Mom close behind. My legs feel weirdly rubbery on the way down the narrow stairs, which I blame on the hangover from hell.

Sending up a silent prayer for this awful day to end already, I skirt along the edge of the ferry and head for the ramp.

My gaze rakes hungrily over the people lined up on the dock beside us. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking for Captain Dockmaster Pornstar. Not like I’d ever approach him or anything, but . . . yeah, maybe Goldie’s right about releasing some of this pent-up energy while I’m here.

Why not? It will be mostly couples at the wedding on Saturday. I could couple off with someone new.

Someone temporary, and hopefully as good in bed as I’m fantasizing the captain would be.

“Shit, my mom is calling.” Goldie holds up her phone and winces. “Y’all go ahead, I’ll come find you.”

“Oh boy. Good luck.”

She lifts her phone to her ear and scurries off the boat, head down.

My own head throbs. Adjusting the bag on my shoulder, I step onto the short ramp.

At the same moment, the captain steps into my direct line of sight.

My gaze catches on his nipples first. *Wow, I really do need to get laid.* Taking in the dark whorls of hair that cover his thickly muscled chest, my body pulses.

I should look away. Look down and run for cover.

But I’m just exhausted and hungover enough to not give a shit. I look up.

And I lock eyes with a familiar pair of baby blues that make my stomach plummet.

Ohhhh Godddddd.

A cold rush fills me, burning heat hot on its heels. My face goes up in flames. Knees wobble.

“Riley Dixon!” Mom gasps behind me. “As I live and breathe! What are you doing working the ferry?”

But that’s the thing. I’m not breathing. I can’t seem to get air past the moon that’s lodged itself in my throat. His eyes search mine, gorgeous and

kind and . . . a little sad?

My left knee buckles. I reach for the railing but I'm too late. I stumble sideways, letting out a yelp as the ground rises up to meet me with harrowing speed.

Squeezing my eyes shut in a futile attempt to save my pride, I'm bracing for impact when there's a firm tug on my arm.

I'm yanked right into the very broad, very naked chest of none other than the boy—man—who took my heart and my virginity, and then ran like the lying, cheating, son of a bitch he is.

Captain Dockmaster Pornstar is none other than Riley freaking Dixon.

The first guy I ever loved.

The last guy I should've trusted.

two

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Riley

Old Flames and Felonies

MY HEART FUCKING LOSES IT.

Goes apeshit inside my chest as I hold *the* girl too close for a beat too long. Her arms are trapped between us. Bare skin against bare skin.

“Jesus Christ, Lu.” I search her face. “You okay?”

The way she winces makes my chest hurt.

My mind races.

What finally brought her back to Bald Head?

How the hell is she even more beautiful than I remember?

My blood burns white-hot at the familiar shape of her full mouth. The feel of her tits pressed against my chest, her thin shirt the only thing between us.

And how good she smells? The coconut body wash—she must still use the same kind—takes me right back to eighteen.

I’m hit by a ferocious need for nicotine. The cigarettes and dip and Nicorette I don’t have—quit last year—burn a hole in my back pocket. If I begged, I wonder if Woody would sell me a pack of Camels. I may have made him swear to turn me away anytime I asked, but I *am* Baity’s biggest customer. And landlord. And investor.

“I’m fine.” Lu’s tone is flat, icy, and I feel it like a slap across the face.

Only what I deserve.

Still feels all kinds of wrong to drop her arm and step away. People are staring, I know it, my crew included. I silently curse. I can already hear the island's rumor mill buzzing. It's the end of the summer, and people are bored with the usual gossip—Mrs. Underwood's divorce, Abel's "herb" garden, the sixty-year-old swingers in Beachview Lane units A and B.

To them, Lu is fresh meat. She can do what she wants, but I ain't gonna be the reason people talk shit about her. We managed to keep our relationship under wraps ten years ago. I'm not about to let the cat out of the bag now, even if the secret we kept doesn't matter anymore.

So I step away. I tell myself I'm gonna stay away. Even if she does look kinda frail. Thin. And her face, it's drawn.

Anger forms a fist and punches me square in the gut. Who hurt her?

You did.

I run a hand over my stubble. "You sure, Lu? I can have someone help ___"

"It's Louise." Her nostrils flare.

I blink, confused. She'd strongly preferred that people call her Lu. She began that summer as Louise, the name her family liked to use. But she ended it as Lu, a shorter version of the sweet nickname, Lulu, her granny called her.

"New hair, new name. New me," Lu proudly told me at the time. "Lu just feels right. It will also look super cute on the cover of my cookbook. *The Beach, Barbecue, Blow Jobs, and Me: A Summer Love Story* by Lu Wade."

She was kidding about the title, but not about the name. So that's who she was to me. Lu. Brown eyed and brown haired.

Who, then, is this blonde Louise?

I have exactly zero right to ask that question. But that don't mean I'm not dying to know the answer.

The ache in my chest intensifies when I wonder if I have anything to do with the way she looks. Realistically, I know she probably hasn't thought about me in years. But a flush of shame creeps up my neck nonetheless. How I ended things, the web of lies I spun . . .

"Please, let us help y'all. With luggage, or, yeah, an extra hand? Or if you need a ride? I can—we can—here, I'll get someone . . ."

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Tuck giving me a weird look. I get it. I'm babbling like an idiot. I need to get out of the way already and get back to work. We're short staffed today. I just—

I was expecting to see a lot of familiar faces get off the ferry this week. But Louise Wade's wasn't one of them. Now I can't look away, no matter how hard I try.

This is ridiculous. I forced myself to move on years ago.

Look. The fuck. Away.

I glance at Tuck, who purses his lips and gives me a thumbs up. *You good?*

I'm not. But I nod anyway. All this weird shit, it'll pass once Lu is gone. Out of sight, out of mind.

"We'll manage just fine, thank you." Mrs. Wade offers me a smile. "Good to see you, Riley. Please tell your mother we said hello."

"Yes ma'am," I say. "Great to see y'all. Enjoy your time on the island."

"Will do. Take care."

Mrs. Wade links her arm through Lu's. They head for the line of waiting golf carts and trams lined up dockside. I watch them go, sweat rolling down my face and back.

Aunt Lady, a nickname for Lillian, is waiting for them in a beat-up six-seater. Jesus, they still have Old Winny. I shake my head. The richest folks on this island have the most ridiculous homes but the shittiest golf carts. It's like slumming it on the roads is a point of pride.

I should help the boys unload luggage. Help people find their trams. Instead, I watch Lu and Mrs. Wade greet Aunt Lady, her shock of curly grey hair flying all over the place as she pulls her sister and niece in for nice, long hugs.

My stomach twists. They look happy. Can't help but notice, though, how Lu keeps her sunglasses on. She hiding something? What's her story these days?

Stop. I can't do this again. Lu has her life, and I have mine. If it were meant to be—well, I'd be the one taking her home right now, wouldn't I?

I lost any right to her when I broke things off. Once upon a time I had grand plans of winning her back. Of finally telling her the truth. But by the time I was able to, she'd moved on. New job. New guy.

It was the end of our story. Broke my heart all over again, but I survived.

Barely.

Forcing myself to look away, I turn back to my crew, doing my best to ignore the tearing sensation inside my torso.

Yeah, I'd kill for a chance to make things right.

I'd kill for a chance to make her mine. For good this time.
But that ship has sailed.

Later that night, Tuck crosses his massive, tattooed arms. "Don't."

The lighter makes a small, satisfying *click* as I light my cigarette and take a deep, thirsty pull on the filter. Letting out a stream of smoke, I look away from the large white house that's just visible across Harbour Village. Meet eyes with my CFO on the dock below.

"Don't what?"

Even in the darkness, I can see the judgement on my friend's face clear as day. "Be an ass."

"Fuck you. And by that, I mean I love you, but please leave me alone." The nicotine buzz is going straight to my head. Good. Maybe then I'll be able to stop thinking about—

"Why'd you lose your shit when you saw Lu Wade today?"

I take another long pull on the cigarette, the sore muscles in my back and arms screaming as I lean my elbows on *Dolly's* railing. Been a minute since I worked the ferry dock. I love me some manual labor, but damn does it make me feel old.

Still better than coming home to an empty house. Boat. Whatever.

As if reminding me *Dolly* is not, indeed, empty, my eighty-pound golden retriever Tom thumps his tail beside me.

"I'm not answering that," I say, both to Tuck and Tom.

Tuck grew up in nearby South Port. But he spent a lot of time on Bald Head working at the marina with me. Now he lives on the island, moving here with his daughter, Katie, after we closed our first major deal. He knows all the locals.

What he doesn't know is that I was in love with Lu. No one does, with one notable exception.

"The fuck you aren't." *Dolly* sways as Tuck boards her. Can't help but feel a swell of pride that she no longer groans the way she did when I first bought her five years ago. I spent a not-so-small fortune restoring the hundred-foot classic to her original glory, but it was worth every penny. "I've never seen you freeze up. Ever. Hey, Tom." He ruffles the dog's ears. "I

know, I know, it's going to tear you up when your dad dies an entirely preventable death from lung cancer. I may have to re-adopt you. Or would it be un-adopt?"

Tuck's ex-wife got Tom when he was just a puppy. Not long after, she split, leaving Tuck with a one-year-old daughter and a three-month-old dog. Understandably overwhelmed, Tuck didn't love letting Tom go. But my friend was grateful I volunteered to take the excitable pup who refused to be house-trained.

"I committed a felony today," I say, flicking ash into the inky water below.

"Tell me what happened with that girl."

I use my free hand to tap the pack of Camels in the back pocket of my shorts. "Stole these from Baity's when Woody was in the bathroom. He wouldn't sell 'em—"

"Your mom worked for the Gibbes." Tuck takes a step closer. "Which means—"

"I left a twenty on the counter. But since the transaction didn't technically happen, I think it still counts as stealing."

"Stop." Tuck grabs the cigarette out of my hand and drops it in the cup of water on the table beside my leg. It hisses as it hits the liquid, the acrid smell of smoke blooming between us. "You remember what a dick you were when you went cold turkey last year? Because I do, and I ain't putting up with that shit again. Now tell me why this woman's got you acting a fool."

Tom sniffs the cup. I nudge him out of the way with my knee.

Dropping my head, I press my thumbs into my eye sockets in an attempt to ease the burn there. I'm tired as all get out, but I doubt I'll be able to sleep tonight.

"She and I . . ." I murmur.

Feels weird talking about that summer. It's even weirder, though, keeping a secret that doesn't matter anymore from my closest friend in the world. I guess I could've told him about Lu at some point over the past ten years. But I was healing. Then I was busy. And yeah, maybe I didn't want to jinx my years-long plan to win her back.

But at the end of the day, Tuck's just looking out for me. And I've learned the hard way how much I need that kind of support in my life.

"I was in love with her. We were eighteen and stupid. But we couldn't be together, so we broke up and it was . . . awful, Tuck."

“Wait.” His eyes go wide. “Was that why you—”

“Spiraled out of control when that summer ended?”

Tuck scoffs. “You’re the only person I know who quit drinking before you were even legal.”

“Those were dark days.” I shudder at the memory. “My parents’ divorce was happening then too. Losing my family and my girl all in one six-month stretch . . .”

“Understandably fucked you up good.” Tuck’s voice is quiet. “I wish you’d told me about Lu.”

“I couldn’t.”

He screws up his face. “Why?”

I wave him away. The quiet of the marina pulses around me. “Long story. I’m over her. I’ve been over her for a while. I just—I don’t need to see her again, is all.”

“Lucky you got such a busy week ahead, then.”

“You mean lucky for Coop I’m his best man, and I promised I’d make all his blushing bride’s wedding-related dreams come true.”

“Don’t forget you’re the one who volunteered for that gig.”

I lift a shoulder. “Friend in need. ’Course I’m gonna lend a helping hand.”

Back in the day, I worked a lot of deep-sea fishing charters with Biggers for Cooper and his dad when his family would visit Bald Head in the summer. Even though we were from totally different worlds—Coop’s family is old Charlotte money—we became close over the years.

Ordinarily I’d be thrilled to be away from the office. I can count the number of days I’ve taken off in the past decade on one hand.

I’m fucking tired.

I’m also sick of being chained to a laptop in an office by myself all day, every day. I live by myself, so that’s a lot of time spent alone. Yes, I have a whole team of people who work for me. But Tuck manages day-to-day operations, and I do the bigger picture stuff like research and strategy.

Now, though, I don’t know how I feel about being away from work. What if I run into Lu again? Work may be lonely, but at least it keeps me busy. And busy keeps me from thinking too much about things—people—I shouldn’t.

“I’m gonna lend you a helping hand. Literally.” Tuck glances at the pack of cigarettes in my pocket. “Hand ’em over. I know you’re still thinking

about her, by the way.”

Rolling my eyes, I pull the soft pack from my pocket and drop it into Tuck’s waiting paw. “I wasn’t expecting to see her is all. It . . . she . . . took me off guard.”

How she still makes me feel all the things even after I swore I moved on is taking me totally off guard.

“You’re really not gonna tell me why y’all couldn’t be together?” He turns the pack upside-down and drops that into the cup of water too. It sinks slowly, my heart sinking along with it.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I scoff. “We came from different worlds. And that job, it was helping Mom get back on her feet. I couldn’t risk her losing it.”

Tuck’s gaze burns a hole in the side of my head. I glance up at the sky. Stars are clouded over tonight. A sign from the universe I need to stop thinking about Lu fucking Wade already.

“You’re telling me your horny, angsty, eighteen-year-old self broke up with the gorgeous rich girl because y’all, and I quote, ‘came from different worlds’?”

I search his eyes. One of the things I love most about Tuck is his ability to sniff out bullshit. Guy’s got the nose of a bloodhound when it comes to the truth.

Also makes him a huge pain in the ass sometimes.

“Doesn’t matter anymore. Happened a lifetime ago.”

“That’s all you’re gonna give me?”

I look at him. “That’s all you need. I’m fine.”

“Good. ’Cause I don’t need to tell you I can’t have you getting all weird on me during Labor Day weekend, right? I know you’re technically out of the office, and we got it handled. But if shit hits the fan—”

“I’m not being weird.” I look at the Gibbes’s house across the marina. My heart lurches when I think I see a door open. Close. I squint to get a better look, leaning perilously over *Dolly’s* railing. “Besides, we’re supposed to have all our deckhands back tomorrow. You should probably get going. Your mama—”

“Took Katie to Georgetown for the night to see my sister.”

“How is Jen?”

“She’s all right. I wish she’d move her ass to Bald Head already. I don’t think she’s been happy for a while where she is now.”

I squint harder at the shadows that dance along the water’s edge on the far

side of the marina. Is that someone on the sidewalk? Abel, maybe, going for a run? He lives right around the corner.

Or it's someone from the Gibbes's house.

Yep, that's definitely a person on the sidewalk. No huge, shirtless grump in sight, though. The person is walking quickly, sticking to the shadows. Heading toward Stede's, my restaurant.

"Nice." My gaze is glued to the figure. "But on your night off from parenting, you're bugging me? You deserve better company than that. Go find a friend."

"I got plenty of friends."

I absently reach down to pet Tom's head, my fingers meeting with a knot on his ear. He needs to be groomed. "Of the female variety."

"As I said, I got plenty of friends. But it's you, my friend who not only commits felonies but admits it, that I'm worried about."

I swing my head to look at Tuck. "I can't be the only felon you know."

"Not by a long shot. But you're the only felon who also happens to be my boss. And my baby's godfather."

"I told you Katie deserved better."

"She's four. She's thrilled by the fact you live on a boat and give her ice cream for lunch. You got the godparent thing down."

"But the life thing—"

"You have that down too." He glances around my boat. "Goes without saying. I just don't understand what's got you so off-kilter if you and this chick broke up when y'all were barely out of high school. That was a hundred years ago."

"It was a hundred years ago." But today, holding that girl in my arms, it felt like yesterday.

I look back out over the marina. The figure—she's got legs for days.

Legs I'd know anywhere.

My stomach seizes. I straighten and curl my hand into a fist. What the fuck is she doing walking in the dark alone? Bald Head is about as safe a place as they come in terms of crime, but still. She could step on a snake. Trip on a root and fall in the water.

Did today's impromptu meet-and-greet fuck with her head too?

Good reason for her to be running toward the island's only bar alone.

Or maybe she just wants a drink. An escape from her family.

Whatever her reason, I should make sure she gets there safely, right?

“I gotta go.” Turning, I whistle for Tom to follow me and head for the cabin. I may own Stede’s, but even I can’t show up to a restaurant without a shirt on.

But Tuck grabs my arm and looks me square in the eye. “I can’t do my job if you’re not telling me the whole story.”

“I’m good.”

“I’m worried.”

“Don’t be. We’ll make it work without the extra guys—”

“I’m worried about you, jackass.”

“I need to do this.” I keep my voice low. “Just—gimme tonight. I promise I’ll have my head screwed on straight tomorrow, all right?”

He glances over his shoulder at the figure moving closer. “Didn’t you just say you didn’t need to see her again?”

“I did. But it’s dark, and I . . .”

I know I’m being an idiot, but my curiosity is getting the better of me.

He looks at me for another beat before he drops my arm. “Be good, you hear?”

“I’m always good.”

Except when Lu is involved.

Then, I behave very, very badly.

three

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Louise

Gentleman Pirate

I SIGH with relief when the door to the adorable shingled restaurant gives way.

The bar's open. Praise be. I swore I wouldn't drink tonight, but then Mom and Aunt Lady opened a bottle of wine back at the house. Two glasses later on an empty stomach, I couldn't sit still.

I couldn't stop reliving the handful of seconds I spent in Riley Dixon's insanely ripped arms. I felt so . . . awake, *alive*, it actually hurt. I've done a decent job of numbing my emotions over the past couple weeks. But then I stumble headfirst into Riley's naked chest, and suddenly I'm feeling everything.

Sorrow.

Anger.

Confusion.

The wine I've had tonight isn't doing its job. I'm just tipsy enough to think I need one more drink to make all these inconvenient feelings go away.

I glance at the sign above the door as I walk through it. This place used to be a casual burgers-and-beers restaurant called Merman's, where Riley worked at night. But it appears it has a new name—Stede's.

I smile. That's kinda cute. Stede Bonnet is a local celebrity around here, having abandoned his life as a wealthy planter back in the 1700s to become

the “gentleman pirate.” He swung from the gallows a couple years into his misadventure, but the whole thing still makes for a cool story.

Riley and I would talk about Stede. A lot, actually. The pirate’s story was the perfect confluence of history—my jam—and maritime lore, which was Riley’s obsession. Makes sense, considering his dad and grandfather were fishermen.

At night, he and I would steal one of Pa’s boats for moonlit cruises on the Atlantic. We’d imagine all the cool pirate shenanigans that went down in Bald Head’s quiet coves and labyrinthine marshes, the same ones we’d cruise through night after night, only cutting the engines to talk.

Talking quickly turned to touching. Touching turned into making out. Making out turned into—

Well. Everything.

God, was it good. In the way only teenage-angst-and-hormones-fueled sex can be.

The briny smell of fresh seafood, mingled with the smoky tang of a wood burning oven, hits me the moment the door closes behind me.

Gawking at the restaurant’s gorgeous interior, my pulse takes off at a sprint.

This is *much* different than Merman’s.

Grey oak paneling covers the walls and ceilings, giving the small but well laid-out space a tastefully subtle coastal vibe. Enormous milk glass globes hang over an expansive marble-topped bar. They coat the room in a warm, golden glow. A few patrons sitting at the counter sip what appear to be short, and I imagine strong, cocktails topped with kitschy paper umbrellas.

To my left, a man in black latex gloves shucks oysters at a stainless-steel raw bar. Set out on the ice in front of him is an array of seafood that rivals any fancy surf-and-turf place I’ve been to: crab legs, clams, lobster claws and tails.

And then, displayed front and center, there’s at least half a dozen different varieties of oysters.

There’s a vast tiled column in the restaurant’s far back corner, which I quickly realize is the wood-burning oven I smelled earlier. It dominates the restaurant’s open kitchen. I watch a small team of chefs slide loaves of bread and oysters by the half dozen into the oven’s mouth. One of them bobs her head in time to the music pumping through the speakers overhead.

The air leaves my lungs when I realize what song is playing. “Dreams”

by Fleetwood Mac. A few seconds later, Carole King comes on.

No.

No fucking way.

But the oysters. The umbrellas in the drinks. The name, Stede's. And the women in rock playlist, the artists Pa introduced me to, who I then introduced to Riley . . .

Can't be. Surely Riley fucked me over enough already? He wouldn't steal the idea for my dream restaurant—

“Welcome to Stede's! How can I help you?”

I nearly jump at the hostess's chipper greeting. She's smiling expectantly at me as I stand there like an idiot, swaying on my feet.

I'm more buzzed than I thought. And yet not nearly buzzed enough to digest *this*.

The fact that I'm standing in the achingly beautiful establishment that looks and feels and smells a hell of a lot like the one I'd cooked up over the course of that awful, magic blur of a summer ten years ago.

It's totally Barefoot Contessa, but southern, with a heavy seafood twist.

“Bar,” I manage. “Just me. Thanks.”

The hostess, still smiling, grabs a paper menu and holds out her arm. “Take any seat you'd like.”

Plopping onto a leather barstool at the counter, I pick up the menu. And promptly see red.

Anger holds my chest in a death grip as I read one line item after the next. There's Aunt Lady's poutine. My famous cheese straws, served as an appetizer or crumbled over a garlicky kale Cesar salad. A grouper sandwich, served just how I like it on a toasted potato bun topped with purple cabbage slaw.

Don't get me started on the oyster portion of the menu. Because yes, there is a whole side of the menu dedicated to my favorite bivalves. I part salivate, part stew in particularly sharp rage as I devour all the options. Oysters roasted with pimento cheese. With bleu cheese and bacon bits. Fried, served with a “secret” dipping sauce.

The raw oysters are served with not one, but two kinds of mignonette: strawberry and shallot. There's a homemade cocktail sauce, heavy on my favorite sleeper ingredient, horseradish, that comes with the roasted shrimp cocktail.

My traitorous stomach grumbles. I haven't been hungry in weeks, but I

guess being at a restaurant that serves all my favorite things has predictably woken my appetite.

“Fuck. *Him*,” I hiss. Because it wasn’t enough for Riley to steal my heart, my virginity, and my pride.

Did he steal my dream too?

If he did, I don’t know how he made it happen. Maybe he sold the idea to someone, or used some of the pile of money he’s apparently made and opened it himself . . . whatever the case, his fingerprints are all over this. He’s the only person I ever shared this particular dream with.

“Pardon?” A bearded bartender stands in front of me, massive forearms rippling as he wipes the bowl of a wine glass clean with a white cloth.

My cheeks burn. So does the place where my heart used to be. “Um. Sorry. I was . . . yeah.” I quickly scan the cocktail list on the back of the menu. More anger when I see the different varieties of rum punch. One fruity, made with pineapple juice. One strong, made with sweet tea and lemon.

I go with the strong one, which the bartender shakes up with satisfying vigor in a brass cocktail shaker. The amber liquid is ice cold and frothy when he pours it in a crystal glass and hands it to me, but not before dropping in a pink paper umbrella.

Makes me remember the umbrellas Riley would put into our Solo cups. How fun that was, perfecting our rum punch recipe. We’d sip, add more liquor or juice or citrus slices, then sip some more before making out for what felt like hours.

Taking a long pull from my glass, I sigh at the perfectly balanced flavors. The sting of the rum, the soothing sweetness of the tea. All topped off with the delightful acidity of the freshly squeezed lemon.

To my mortification, my eyes prickle. This drink, this place—it’s heaven.

The kind of heaven I only allowed myself to imagine—to feel—when I was with Riley.

And now that heaven only exists in a short glass I’m struggling not to hurl at the wall.

Instead, I knock back the cocktail in two, three long gulps. The rum floods my already churning bloodstream, making my vision catch and release on the room with stomach-hollowing quickness.

Oh, boy. It’s not like me to drink like this.

I’m being an idiot. I’ll have the spins for hours now, which will keep me

up way too late. Meaning I'll be horrendously hungover for all the wedding-related errands I'm supposed to run with Goldie tomorrow.

It also makes the "frustration" low in my core flare to new heights. How long has it been since I had sex?

How long has it been since I had *good* sex?

I slam my empty glass down on the bar. I came to this bar to forget Riley, but he's apparently everywhere on this godforsaken island.

"Easy there, tiger. If you hate your drink that much, just have Alex make you something else. We have an excellent return policy here at Stede's, don't we, Alex?"

Turning to look at the man I didn't know was on my left, my heart stutters, then stops beating altogether.

Speak of the devil, Riley Dixon stands beside me. He towers over my barstool as he rests an elbow on the counter beside my glass. The smell of freshly showered man, tinged with sunscreen and citronella, invades my nostrils, making my nipples tighten.

What the hell is he doing here?

My gaze rips down the length of his body, anger and arousal surging through me in equal measure. *Why* does he have to fill out that tee-shirt so damn well? Riley was always in great shape, but now he's . . .

Yeah. Ridiculous. The kind of ripped you only see on that beach in *Top Gun: Maverick*.

Not fair, universe.

How the fuck is it fair that he gets to look like a god and smile benevolently down at me like one too, while I'm here fighting for every breath? Every shred of self-worth?

Also. Did Riley just casually drop a big fucking hint that Stede's is indeed his restaurant? *We have an excellent return policy here.*

"Sure do," Alex replies. "You don't like something, you don't pay for it. What else can I make you? I recommend the Turtle Punch if you're looking for a more refreshing option."

My gaze finds Riley's. He's smiling, but his eyes aren't. I can't read the expression in them. They're focused but soft.

Almost like he's . . . relieved.

I'm confused. I know he's not relieved to discover that I'm okay. Does that mean he's relieved I'm here in his restaurant so he can rub in my face the fact that *he* made *my* dream come true? Sure, I gave up on that dream a long

time ago. But it was still mine.

My chest is so tight with rage and a million other things—*sadness, it's mostly sadness*—I really am struggling to breathe.

He smells so good. Good enough to make me want to cry again.

“Drink was fine.” I grope for my bag. I think I hung it on the back of my stool? “But I’m leaving. I was leaving. I don’t, yeah, need another drink, so.”

“Stay.”

I go still at the command. Because that’s obviously what that word is when spoken in the tone Riley’s using.

Since when did he get bossy?

And since when do I find bossy men so damn sexy?

“Have something to eat. It’s on the house.”

“Thanks”—I throw my credit card onto the bar—“but no thanks.”

“Alex, please get her the poutine—”

“I’m. *Good.*” I glare at him. “Seriously, stop fussing over me. I came here for a drink, I got the drink, and now I’m leaving.”

Riley picks up my card and holds it out to me. “Return policy stands.”

Fuck you and your return policy.

“I told you it was fine. Better than fine. It was fucking delicious.” Yikes, I’m *definitely* too drunk, and I definitely need to get out of here before I say or do something I regret. “I’m not returning it because I drank it all. Therefore, I’m paying.”

Riley does that thing again where he searches my face. He’s still holding my card hostage. “How about you let me buy it for you, then?”

His tone is different now. Softer.

Somehow, that’s worse.

That makes me even angrier and sadder and more confused. This man is a pirate, just like Stede. A thief and a killer. Unlike Stede, however, Riley is no gentleman. Never was, and clearly never will be.

“Give me back my card.”

“Take the free drink—”

“Just—don’t, okay?” I grab the card out of his hand and practically throw it at Alex, who is watching us with wide eyes. “I can buy my own damn drink.”

“I know you can. That’s not what this is about.”

I resist the urge to give him a hard shove. To ask what this *is* about, because last time I checked, Riley didn’t give a shit about me.

But I'm not going there again. Been there, done that, and it one hundred percent sucked.

"Don't. Please, just—I don't mean to be rude, but leave me alone."

"Lu—"

"It's Louise." My voice trembles. It's too much, him being here. Being somehow sweet and a total shithead at the same time. It's too much, being back in the place I loved with all my heart before he ran away with it. "And I got it, all right?"

His brow furrows as he holds up his hands, taking a step backward. "Course. Sorry. Just makin' sure you're okay." He turns his head to look at Alex, making the sinews in his neck pop against his tanned skin. "Alex, run her card." Offering me a tight smile, Riley taps the bottom of his fist against the bar. "Night, Lu."

"*Louise.*"

He looks me in the eye. "You'll always be Lu to me."

Then he turns and leaves.

I grind my teeth, watching him head for the kitchen and push open a door in the tiled wall beside the big wood-burning oven. My hand shakes as I sign the bill.

I'm exhausted. And very, very tipsy. I should absolutely go home.

But when I close the billfold, I can't pry my eyes from that kitchen door. What's Riley doing back there? The balls on this guy, stealing the ideas and hopes and recipes I shared with him when I was at my most vulnerable.

My mind whirrs. I trusted him, and he betrayed me. *Again.* Because cheating on me and dumping me over text wasn't insult enough. Now he's got to go and steal my dreams too, opening a restaurant that is clearly thriving. It's late, but there's still plenty of people here. I don't recognize any of them, but they all seem to be enjoying their meals.

I thought Riley was supposed to be a real estate developer or whatever. What's he doing owning a restaurant, even if it is a successful one? Aren't restaurants supposed to be terrible investments?

Anger overwhelms me. Rum and nonsensical curiosity too.

And yeah, I don't love the idea of going back to my grandparents' house right now. Too many memories. And Mom gets . . . weird after her third glass of wine.

Looping my bag across my torso, I slide off my barstool, putting a hand on its leather seat to steady myself when the room spins.

I take a deep breath. Blink, the room righting itself.

I head for the door. Only it's the one I absolutely, positively should not walk through.

four

. . .

Riley

Hate Fucking is Always a Bad Idea

CHEF PENELOPE IS WALKING me through tomorrow's specials when the door to the prep kitchen swings open.

Glancing behind me, my pulse thunders when I see Lu standing in the threshold. Her shoulder-length blonde hair is a wild mess, tossed to the side like she's been tearing her hands through it. Her nostrils flare.

Her eyes are burning. I am too.

Christ.

I've got my palms wrapped around the edge of the counter, bent over Chef's notebook. Rising, I'm painfully aware of the way Lu's eyes follow mine up. Up. The anger I see in them makes my chest vibrate.

Girl ain't afraid to look me in the eye. I like that.

Too damn much. I thought I was over her. I *am* over her.

Why, then, does my skin feel several degrees too hot with her in the room?

"What the fuck?" she spits out. My dick perks up, even as my stomach clenches when she sways a little on her feet.

Was seeing me the reason she's so tipsy? Or she got other reasons for being shitfaced on a Tuesday night?

The kitchen goes quiet. Beside me, Chef murmurs, "Oh, my."

"Let's talk in my office. Now." I point to a door in the far corner.

Penelope gently elbows me. “You all right here?”

“I’ll be fine. Give me five.”

“Of course.”

There’s a soft rustle as Chef and her team get back to business.

Eyes on fire, Lu cuts me one last death glare before stalking toward my office. I follow her inside and shut the door.

Then it’s just me and Lu in the dimly lit space. Ten feet and ten years’ worth of unspoken words between us.

She turns and stares me down. “This is your restaurant?”

“Yes.”

“You opened it?”

“Yes.”

“You paid for it.”

“I did.”

“Designed it too? The furniture and the menu and the—the fucking drinks?”

“Yup.”

Now it’s my entire body that thunders as she gets in my face. Ten feet becomes ten inches. Less.

How do I explain myself in a way that doesn’t make me look like an asshole? How do I prove I’m not the guy she thinks I am? I let her believe I was a lying, cheating piece of shit, yes, but my reasons for that were good.

None of it is true. But she doesn’t know that, so it makes perfect sense why she hates my guts right now.

“You stole everything,” she hisses. “All my ideas. The cheese straws and the pirate theme. The fried oysters and the Stevie Nicks. *I* came up with all this stuff.”

I lick my lips. I need to tread carefully here. I’m dying to tell her the truth.

But I also don’t want to open old wounds. Fuck with her head. Especially when she’s drunk. What’s the point of telling her all this when she’s moved on anyway?

Hell, I almost made her cry when I offered to buy her a drink. What if it’s easier for her if I keep playing the scumbag? At least that way, she knows where she stands. I get how me being the good guy might throw her for a loop. Come across as bullshit.

I grit my teeth. The way my stomach seizes at the idea has me wondering

if I'm making a mistake. But if that mistake helps her sleep better at night . . .

I puff up my chest and look down at her. Try very hard to ignore the heaviness that gathers between my legs at the sharp, hungry glint in her eyes. "I helped you brainstorm the concept for the restaurant."

"Does it matter? You're the one who owns it now. Whether or not you're able to claim half the ideas, you own the whole damn thing. I have zero." She holds up her hand, curling her fingers into a circle. "Fucking zero. How dare you? After everything—"

"Maybe I opened the restaurant because I knew you wouldn't."

She blinks, gaze murderous. But her cheeks, her neck—they're flushed.

It's her tell. I remember clear as day how pink she'd get when I turned her on. I'd follow the color trail with my mouth, starting at her chest. I'd nick her collarbones with my teeth. Kiss her neck, making her breath catch, then move to the hollow beneath her ear. Her jaw. Her lips.

Now I'm the one feeling murderous, knowing she's sensing it too. The pull between us.

She should fucking know better.

We both should know better. I gotta get her out of here—

Lu gives me a hard shove. I fall back, shocked and embarrassed and *goddamn* my dick just went full salute.

She's still got fight in her. Thank God.

"You know nothing about me," she spits. "Absolutely nothing. But I know you're a thief. A thief and a huge, huge asshole."

The arrow hits its mark. Considering how bad I wanna touch her right now, I am being an asshole.

But she's not mine to touch.

By the grace of God, I manage to keep my hands to myself, holding them up the way I did at the bar as I back away. "You're not wrong."

"That's all you have to say?" Her eyebrows snap together. "Seriously?"

"What do you want from me, Lu?"

"How many times do I have to tell you to call me Louise?"

I feel a surge of anger. "What's that about? You going back to Louise?"

"I grew up."

"I thought you liked Lu."

"You lost your Lu privileges a long time ago, Riley."

"And the blonde—"

She shoves me again, harder this time, and I nearly groan at the heat that

slices through me at how fierce she is. Her wildness.

This is the Lu I fell head over heels in love with.

“I like the blonde,” she counters.

“You didn’t back then.”

“I’m allowed to change my mind.”

The words tumble out of my mouth before I can think better of them. “Do you like the blonde? Or is it someone else who likes it?” Her mama is a blonde, and always told Lu she looked better as one too.

Lu narrows her eyes, a rueful smile playing her lips as she shakes her head. “Look at you, pretending to know the girl you never gave a shit about.”

I swallow. “You have every right to hate me.”

“I do.” Her tongue darts out between her teeth to swipe her bottom lip. “I hate you, Riley. So much I can’t even tell you.”

Fuuuuuck. Now I can’t stop looking at her mouth. “I did care. And seeing you now—running into you today—makes me realize I still do.”

Her eyes go feral. “Why are you still lying when it doesn’t matter anymore?”

“But it does. It matters to me, at least. What can I do to make you believe me?”

A pause. The air between us crackles as her eyes toggle between mine.

We both look up at the gentle knock on the door.

“Helllloo!” Chef Penelope peeks her head inside my office. “Everything okay in here? I heard, ahem, some raised voices.”

“Fine!” Louise and I answer in unison.

“Need another five,” I say.

“I’m leaving,” Lu says.

“Another five,” I repeat.

Despite the skeptical furrow in her brow, Chef has the grace to nod and say, “Sure. Okay. Just—yeah, let me know if y’all need a mediator or, um, the police, all right?”

“Won’t be necessary.” I nod at Chef. “Thank you, though.”

Chef turns, allowing the door to start closing behind her. Lu darts forward to catch it. But I’m faster, bigger too, and I flatten my palm on the door and slam it shut. I can’t let her leave believing I stole from her.

I have to make her see that my intentions were—are—good.

But then Lu spins around, nostrils flaring. She’s trapped between me and the door, my arm an inch from her head. “I said I’m leaving.”

“Let me explain.”

“Go to hell.”

“The Lu I know would—”

“Stop”—she fists my shirt in her hand and looks me in the eye—“*calling me that.*”

Need rips through center, wiping my brain of every coherent thought except *I want*. I can smell the rum on her breath. See the fire glittering in her eyes.

“You hated bein’ called Louise, which means I hate it too. I’m putting my foot down here, Lu.”

She lets out a bark of sharp laughter. “Are you serious? Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m the guy who cares enough to talk. So let me, goddamn it.”

“How about you let me go?”

I glance down at her hand, which is still fisted in my shirt. Did something happen with the boyfriend? The girl I knew would never cheat.

“How about you let *me* go, Lu?”

She blinks. Cheeks burn bright pink. She flexes her fingers and drops her hand.

I catch it, my own fingers locking around her delicate wrist.

What the fuck are you doing? Wasn’t I just saying I need to put some distance between us?

But then Lu does that thing again where she licks her lips. “Call me that one more time—”

“Don’t forget you’re in my restaurant.”

“Don’t forget the food you make in this restaurant comes from my recipes.” Her breath is coming in short, hot spurts. “If you published a cookbook too—”

“Naw. That, I left for you.”

Her eyes catch on mine. “Fuck off.”

I wait for her to pull away. A beat passes. Another. Each one charged, heavy. Part of me is frustrated we’re talking in circles. Another part is relieved. Are either of us at all ready for the truth tonight?

“You really want me to fuck off?” I don’t recognize the scraped-bare sound of my voice.

The hardened points of her nipples brush against my chest as she takes a sharp inhale. “Only kind of fucking I’m interested in with you, yes.”

I manage a soft chuckle. “That why you chased me back here?”

“I chased you because you stole from me. I wanted to hear you say it, that you’re a thief.”

“I ain’t a thief, Lu. Swear it on my mama’s soul.”

She glances down at my hand. The one that’s wrapped around her wrist. Her turn to chuckle. “Wow.”

“What?”

“You think I still want you, don’t you?”

If only.

I drop her wrist. “I’d never assume that, no. Don’t get me wrong, princess. I’ll hate fuck your brains out. But for the record, I ain’t doin’ it when you’re drunk. Besides, I wanna talk to you about that cookbook first—”

“Go. To. Hell.” Her face is red now. She turns to face the door, fingers wrapping around the handle. “Stay away from me, Riley.”

Her words cut like a knife. I clear my throat. Jesus must take the wheel, because I’m stepping back, giving her space to open the door. Everything inside me riots at the loss of her nearness.

“If that’s what you want,” I say.

She’s moving through the door. “It is.”

“Let me at least walk you home. It’s dark—”

“Go away.”

I don’t listen. I jog through the kitchen to keep up with her. She’s practically running out of the restaurant like it’s on fire. Which, again, I get.

I grab the front door and open it for her. “You really not going to let me explain?”

“Nope.”

“How about I walk behind you, then?”

“How about you *go away*?”

I follow her a few steps behind. There’s no moon tonight thanks to the cloud cover, so I can’t see much. But as my eyes adjust to the darkness, I can’t stop staring at her shape. The shoulders, her ass. The long, muscular legs.

I’m dying to ask her what her story is these days.

I’m dying for another cigarette. Blue balls is a real thing. So is regret.

The memory hits me like a freight train: the night Louise asked me to teach her how to give head. I started by going down on her first. I was so hard by the time she got to me, I came in her mouth in two seconds flat.

That night, I don't regret. But what came after?

It doesn't take long for the Gibbes's house to come into view. Looming over us in the darkness, it's as beautiful and classic as ever. White siding. Elegant metal roof. Deep porches dotted with rocking chairs and hammocks that sway in the breeze.

A dream.

I own several houses that I rent out that are bigger and more extravagant than the Gibbes's place. Abel and I are actually building one on this street. But there's something about *this* house that will always make my heart beat a little too fast.

"See?" Louise glances over her shoulder. "Made it without getting mugged."

Hands on my hips, I watch her climb the house's wide front steps. "Gators don't mug people. They eat them. We got two mean old gals making regular appearances in the marina."

She opens the door—no one locks their houses on Bald Head—and without looking at me says, "Good. Maybe they'll eat you."

"If only you were so lucky. Night, Lu."

She throws me a look over her shoulder, daggers in her eyes. "Louise."

Then she disappears into the house without saying goodbye. But I'm still frozen in place, feet blocks of cement on the oyster tabby sidewalk.

I don't want to go home to an empty boat. I want to go inside.

I want to make Lu come.

Would it really be so bad if we hooked up? What if she's single? We lived in different worlds at eighteen, but that's not the case anymore.

Quit it.

I put that poor girl through hell. I'm not sure I trust myself not to do it again. Nothing made me reckless the way Lu Wade did.

Nothing fucked me up more than the summer we met, when I lost everything.

five

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Louise

Shake It Off

I SHUFFLE up the stairs the next morning, careful not to make any sudden movements. I'm scared the hammer in my head will resume its assault on my skull if I do.

Like many homes on the island, my family's has a reverse floor plan. The bedrooms are on the first floor, while the kitchen and living areas are basically one big room on the second. The thinking goes that you want the best views from the rooms where you spend the most time. And for us, that's definitely the kitchen.

"Good morning, sunshine!" Aunt Lady greets me with a wide smile. "We've been waiting for you to get up."

Keeping my head down, I move toward the coffee pot.

Did I really get shitfaced and confront my ex-boyfriend in his kitchen in front of all his staff last night?

And did he really offer to hate fuck me? My body pulses at the memory. *Traitor.*

I feel a stab of shame when I think about my hand gripping his shirt and staying there for far too long. I wanted an explanation—why he opened the restaurant, why he offered to buy me a drink. Why he said he still cared. But when he offered to give me one, I didn't let him.

I finally let his shirt go and ran instead.

Wow, I was drunk. And unafraid. And stupid.

And wow, does extreme shame make a hangover ten times worse. Or maybe it's the other way around.

Whatever the case, that hammer knocks hard against my temples, making the saliva in my mouth thicken.

As if my ego isn't bruised enough. Now I'm going to puke in front of my mom and aunt.

I should've punched Riley in the face and walked out of the restaurant with my head held high.

Instead, I kinda-sorta fondled him like the sex-starved lunatic I am.

Cringe. Even if he did seem to be into it.

Like. Really into it, if the offer of hate sex was any indication. Was he serious?

Face burning, I shove that thought aside. Doesn't matter what Riley's intention was. I *never* want to see him again, much less have sex with him. "I've been up. I was hoping to fall back asleep, but no dice. Lately I wake up at the ass crack of dawn whenever I drink."

Mom, who's flipping through a *Southern Living* magazine that appears to have been published circa 1996, grins. "Welcome to adulthood."

"You seem to be pretty chipper for someone who drank a bottle and a half of wine last night," I say.

What I don't say? And what I know Lady and I are both thinking?

Mom's chipper because Dad's not here. He's in Raleigh this week, visiting some of The Gibbes Group's biggest clients.

I'm glad Mom is happy today. But not gonna lie, it hurts knowing she's pretty miserable when Dad is around. Like all kids, I want my parents to be happy. And for a long time, I truly believed they were.

"I've had more practice than you," Mom continues. "It takes a lifetime to build up this kind of tolerance."

"Fifty years at least." Aunt Lady beats me to the coffee, filling a mug. "Cream and sugar, honey?"

"Tiny splash of skim if you have it."

Lady makes a face. "Really?"

I shrug. "I like my coffee like I like my men. Bitter and black-hearted."

"Take the cream and sugar." My aunt stirs a good bit of both into the mug. "Let's not let that polo-wearing prick ruin *everything.*"

Despite the shame I feel about my behavior last night roiling my gut, it's

my turn to grin as I take the mug from my aunt. Never thought my dirtbag ex-fiancé would be a welcome change of subject. “Thanks for hating on Patrick. He is a prick. Also, thanks for the coffee. It’s such a treat when someone makes me a cup.”

Lady eyes me. “Patrick never made you coffee?”

“Well, no.” I settle onto a stool at the island and wrap my hands around my mug, the heat warming my palms in the most pleasant way imaginable. “Cooking—the kitchen—that’s always been my thing. He kind of just let me have at it.”

“You mean he let you do all the work.” Aunt Lady is a professor of gender studies at UNC Wilmington and a staunch feminist, so it’s no surprise she’s rolling her eyes right now. “Typical. Be glad you jumped that ship.”

“He actually jumped my ship, so . . .”

Mom frowns. “Patrick worked long hours. He didn’t have time to cook.”

“And your daughter doesn’t work long hours too?” Lady asks. She and Mom may look alike, with their thick hair and Pa’s eyes and nose, but they couldn’t be more different. Lady’s a free spirit, whereas Mom is a staunch traditionalist.

“Well, yes. But that’s different,” Mom replies. “Patrick helped out with the yard. And at least he did his own laundry. Elliot doesn’t even know where our washing machine is.”

Lady sputters. “So you’re saying Louise should be grateful for whatever scraps of respect her partners throw her way?”

Mom tsks. “Of course not. I’m just saying Patrick did what he could.”

You’re saying I should feel lucky my partner was nice to me at all, because Dad’s never been especially nice to you. I grew up thinking my parents were perfect. That’s the image they projected, anyway. But the older I got, the more I began to see the cracks in their perfect façade. Same goes for my grandparents.

But I don’t want to go there, so I quickly sip my coffee and let out a groan. “Wow, Lady, that’s good.”

Aunt Lady’s expression softens. “Like your grandmother said, it’s best to start your day off sweet. Especially when you’re in the midst of an awful breakup with a man who had sex with multiple other women and didn’t use condoms.”

“Louise, what time are you supposed to meet Goldie?” Mom asks in a clear bid to change the subject. “Y’all are going to see the planner and

finalize the setup at the club, right?”

She gets up from the living room’s well-worn chair and pads over to the kitchen, opening the dishwasher to put her mug inside.

“Yup.” I dig my phone out of the pocket of my shorts. My head throbs when I see a text from Goldie. I hope she doesn’t hate me for being such a hot mess today. “Shit. She wants to meet in twenty minutes. I guess Cooper took the ferry over a little while ago, and he and his best man are going to meet us at The Ocean Club.”

“That’s kind of the boys to help,” Mom says.

Lady and I meet eyes. “It’s Coop’s wedding too,” I say. “Shouldn’t he be helping?”

“He did knock up the bride,” Lady says.

It’s Mom’s turn to roll her eyes. “Who’s his best man again?”

I lift a shoulder. “Guy named DR. I’ve actually never met him. I guess he’s an old friend of Cooper’s? I feel like I should know more, but that’s Goldie and Coop for you.”

Cooper and Goldie have had a whirlwind romance. Less than a year ago, Goldie went home with Cooper after meeting at a bar, and she never ended up leaving his place. Three months later they were engaged, and two months ago I got the call that they were expecting, which meant their wedding date would get pushed up several months.

Over the course of their very short engagement, they’ve both mentioned DR in passing. He was even supposed to come to Charlotte at one point so the four of us could go to dinner, but he ended up canceling because of a work commitment.

DR came up again recently, when he pulled some strings and nabbed Goldie and Coop their top choice for a venue, the terrace at The Ocean Club. It’s the newer (and nicer) of the island’s two clubs. But amidst the chaos of planning a wedding in one month, I never asked about him.

Lady sets breakfast in front of me. My stomach grumbles at the familiar smell rising from her famous grits bowl: cheesy grits, topped with a perfectly poached egg, tomato gravy, and chopped scallions. “Good thing I already made breakfast.”

Eyes filling, I set down my mug. “Bless you. This is—really, it’s such a treat, Lady. Thank you.”

My aunt pats my hand. “I love you, honey. I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

Her kindness makes the tears spill over. I dab at them with the napkin my

mom presses into my hand. She tucks my hair behind my ear and rubs my shoulder.

“Does it make me an asshole to say I’m jealous of Goldie and Coop’s love story?” I ask.

Mom shakes her head. “Of course not. Just makes you honest.”

“I’m happy for Goldie. I really am, I just . . .”

“You can hold both those things at once,” Lady says. “Being jealous of your friend while also being thrilled for her. Life isn’t meant to be neat, or neatly compartmentalized.”

I sniffle. “Then why does it seem like it’s neat and perfect for everyone else?”

“Fucking social media.” My aunt makes a face. “I’ve learned to be wary of anyone who says things are neat and perfect. Those ‘shiny’ people are usually full of shit.”

Mom furrows her brow. “I’d like to think people can be genuinely happy.”

“Of course they can! But no one is happy *all* the time. Things can’t be perfect *all* the time. That’s not how life works.”

“Instagram would beg to differ.” I dig into my grits and nearly pass out from the extreme deliciousness of it all. The butter, the cheese, the creamy egg yolk.

Patrick went paleo a couple years ago, and after he kept telling me how great it made him feel and I should try it, I did too. Which means I haven’t eaten a carb in years.

I forgot how much better they make life.

“Damn, Aunt Lady, this is killer.”

“I know.” She smiles. “How about the three of us cook dinner together tonight? We could pour some wine. Fisherman Joe has had really great shrimp lately, so maybe we could barbecue ’em up?”

“Yes,” I breathe, already tasting the tangy, buttery sauce Granny taught me how to make in this very kitchen more than a decade ago.

Granny and, when she slowed down, Aunt Lady were the ones who really nurtured my love of cooking. I was five when I asked Granny if I could help her make her famous blueberry and buttermilk popsicles. I distinctly remember the sheer pleasure of pouring the sugar over the berries in a pot. She’d let me stir the jammy mixture until the blueberries broke down and the sugar melted, making this sweet, slightly tart mixture we’d pour into molds,

then top with buttermilk and vanilla cake crumbles.

She loved having company in the kitchen, and I loved having one-on-one time with her. She always seemed so much less stressed than Mom did. More pleasant, I guess. Granny was not only patient with me, she also made me feel safe to be who I really was. Bookish, quiet. A dreamer who once upon a time fantasized about growing up to be an author and restaurateur.

Things I felt my social butterfly of a mother didn't always appreciate.

Lady began to help out more in the kitchen when I was in high school. Vegetables are her specialty, but seafood will always be her first love. Before I moved in with Patrick, Lady would visit me often back in Charlotte. We'd spend most of our time together in the kitchen, cooking, drinking, and laughing. Eating too, of course.

It was during those times that I'd think about the cookbook.

The one I spent a whole summer dreaming up with Riley's help. I had it all planned out: I'd write the cookbook, publish it, and then hopefully make enough money to one day open my own seafood restaurant here on Bald Head, where I'd live full-time in a sweet little place in Harbour Village. A cottage maybe. One close to the water.

Obviously my plan had huge holes in it. Did I really think I could make enough money from one cookbook to open a restaurant? How would I build a platform large and engaged enough to launch a cookbook onto a bestseller list? What would I do for health insurance?

And was I willing to live the kind of around-the-clock lifestyle owning a restaurant requires? As an event planner, I work with restaurants and catering companies daily. I witness firsthand how hard the industry is on its workers.

But really, it came down to practicalities. I was a wreck my freshman year at Wake. When Pa offered me an internship at The Gibbes Group the summer between my freshman and sophomore year, I jumped at the opportunity. My grades were shit, and I didn't have any other options. Plus—and I'm ashamed to admit this—ditching the cookbook and restaurant ideas to pursue a nice, stable corporate career in Charlotte felt like sticking it to Riley.

It felt good. And terrible. But since I didn't get to decide when our relationship ended, it felt empowering to choose a life totally different from the one we'd planned together. It put distance between us, psychologically and geographically, and since it was the only kind of satisfaction or closure I'd ever get, I took it.

And then I took a job as an event planner at The Gibbes Group when I graduated, organizing events for the firm's attorneys and clients. I never forgot about the cookbook and restaurant. I just sort of shoved those dreams aside and chased after different ones—dreams that felt more familiar to Pa and Mom and everyone else, really. I still cooked on the weekends for family and friends. But I stopped developing recipes, and I definitely stopped saving restaurant aesthetic images on Pinterest.

Lady still visited me in Charlotte when I lived with Patrick, but she and I didn't cook all that much. Mostly because we were paleo at that point. I'd allow myself a cheat meal every so often—the kind of meal Lady and I liked to make together—but Patrick didn't.

Just the thought of being back at the stove with Lady makes the drumbeat of sadness and shame inside my chest fade. We'll miss Granny, of course. But maybe we can FaceTime her while we cook.

Aunt Lady claps her hands. "It's a date. We'll have everything ready when you and Goldie get back."

All but licking my bowl clean, I rise and give her a hug. "Thank you."

"This too shall pass," she whispers in my ear.

I tell myself she's right. As much as it hurts, I'm glad Patrick showed me his true colors before I married him.

As embarrassing as it was, I'm also kinda glad I confronted Riley last night, because I got to see his true colors too.

What's that saying? Thank God for unanswered prayers? That's definitely true when it comes to my past relationships. I wanted so badly for those men to love me the way I loved them, but they didn't. And maybe things happened, or didn't happen, for a reason.

Maybe there are better things to come.

I'm just crossing my fingers and toes that I won't have to see Patrick or Riley again. I haven't heard from Patrick, and Goldie told me Cooper hasn't either. I'm taking that as a sign he's definitely not coming to the wedding.

As for Riley—well. Bald Head may be a small place, but it's not like he's going to be involved in any of Goldie and Coop's wedding festivities. Cooper did summer out here as a kid, but as far as I know, the only guest attending the wedding not from Charlotte is his best man DR.

So like Taylor so wisely once said, I just need to shake off this anxiety—this hangover. I'm going to help my best friend pull off the best damn wedding week ever, and I'm going to have a good time doing it.

Maybe I'll need to fake it 'til I make it for a day or two, but I am so done letting guys ruin my fun.

six

. . .

Louise

Emotional Support Animal

CARS AREN'T ALLOWED on Bald Head, so after a quick shower, I hop onto our golf cart and head across the island to meet Goldie at The Ocean Club.

I'm late. But it's literally impossible to rush when you're here. There's a saying that you're on "turtle time" on Bald Head, meaning exactly that: things move slowly, including this golf cart. Old Winny, as Aunt Lady affectionately dubbed her years ago, groans when I put the pedal to the metal, topping out at a whopping fourteen miles an hour.

To be honest, I don't hate it. It's a stunning late summer morning, sunny and seventy-five degrees. Needless to say, I'll be taking the scenic route to the club.

A warm breeze blows back my hair as I trundle through the shaded tunnel formed by the island's dense maritime forest. I breathe in familiar scents: salt, sand, the loamy smell of marshland beyond.

Old Winny whines her way across the island, a virtual jungle enveloping me in bright green and pale, knuckle-like trunks that form a sun-dappled ceiling overhead. The marsh, alive, thrums to my left; it's very quiet otherwise.

I round a bend and the forest falls away, revealing a wide, pristine swath of glorious North Carolina beach. It's the same as it was when I first came to

Bald Head years and years ago. Shallow dunes, slate-blue ocean, wisps of beach grass bent in the breeze.

My heart twists. I've avoided coming back to Bald Head for a very good reason. But damn, have I missed this view. The feeling of freedom I get experiencing *this* slice of ocean roaring beneath *this* Carolina blue sky is unlike anything else on Earth. You could get addicted to it.

Once upon a time, I was.

Makes me miss Granny. Bald Head was always her happy place—it was her idea to build a second home on the island—and it's a huge bummer she can't travel anymore.

Grabbing my phone, I give her a call. When she doesn't pick up her cell phone—sometimes she forgets to charge it—I try the assisted living facility's main line. The receptionist, Laurel, answers.

"How did the Berry First birthday go?" I ask.

I hear the smile in Laurel's voice when she replies, "It went so well! Ava loved her smash cake."

"Aw, that's wonderful. Give that sweet baby a kiss for me."

"Will do. Your grandmother is in a great mood today."

"Let me guess—y'all served cinnamon rolls for breakfast?"

"Sure did. Here, I'll put you through."

Granny laughs when she hears my greeting. "Well hello, Lulu! What a nice surprise to hear from you first thing. I know you're always so busy with work."

"I'm off this week to help with Goldie's wedding, remember?"

"Oh, yes, that's right. What a kind friend you are to lend a hand. How's Bald Head? Beautiful as ever?"

I let out a long, low breath. "Just gorgeous. I miss you, though. It's not the same without you and Pa here."

"Aw, don't let that stop you from having some fun. You need it, sugar. I still can't believe what that son of a bitch did to you. Lord forgive me, but I hope Patrick's dick falls off."

I don't know if it's Pa's passing, old age, or just not giving a shit, but Granny's gotten spicy over the past year. I adore it. My family and I grew up idolizing Granny and Pa's marriage, attending their extravagant fiftieth wedding anniversary party, seeing the beautiful jewelry he'd give her for Christmas every year. We were told their relationship was magical. Perfect. Just like my parents'.

As I got older, though, I began to pick up on the not so perfect parts of Granny and Pa's marriage. How controlling he was. The demeaning way he talked to Granny sometimes. He'd never do it in public, of course, which meant everyone thought they were "hashtag couple goals" until the very end. And even as I knew things weren't picture perfect, I still toed the line as the good girl Pa wanted me to be. I still followed the path he wanted me to follow, working at The Gibbes Group, dating Patrick, buying a house in a prestigious neighborhood beside Pa's prestigious country club.

Is that what I even want, though?

Is that kind of life Granny wanted? Or was she just following the path laid out for her by her parents?

No wonder she feels liberated as an eighty-something-year-old widow.

My turn to laugh, even as my throat tightens. "It's good to be away from Charlotte, that's for sure."

"In my humble opinion, the men are much better looking on Bald Head anyway. Did you know they let the boys at the ferry dock take off their shirts when it gets hot?"

My heart does a somersault. Seriously, why does the universe keep fucking with me? I can't escape Captain Dockmaster Pornstar.

"Yup," is all I can think to say.

"Just reminding you of nature's bounty is all. There are other fish in the sea, Lulu. You just have to look."

"I need to look for another fish like I need a hole in my head."

"If you say so. Oh my, would you look at the time—I'm sorry, sugar, but I have to run. My mah-jongg group meets at ten on Wednesdays."

"Y'all have fun. Oh! Lady and I are going to make your barbecue shrimp tonight."

"Delicious! Be sure to use more butter than you think is wise. And speaking of Lady, keep an eye on her, would you? I'm beginning to suspect she's getting antsy, which means she'll be on the hunt for a new beau sooner rather than later."

I grin. Being the free spirit she is, Aunt Lady never got married and never had kids, preferring instead to travel the world with a string of boyfriends. Some long-term, some not so much.

Whatever the case, it's always a good time when she brings a new man around. She has a taste for the fun ones, which means she also gets herself into trouble on occasion. I'll never forget the time I had to bail her out of jail

in Charleston after she and a smoking-hot Scandinavian actor fifteen years her junior were arrested for public indecency.

“I’m on it,” I say. “Love you, Granny.”

“FaceTime me later, all right? I want to check in on your mama.”

“Are you kidding? She’s happy as a clam here.”

Granny sighs. “Your daddy better stay busy with work, then. Love you, sugar.”

“Love you.”

My chest aches when I hang up and drop my phone back into the cup holder. I may have shit luck when it comes to men. But the women in my life? I hit the jackpot.

Poor Old Winny barely makes it up the last and biggest hill. On my right, the Atlantic glitters beneath a strengthening sun. The club comes into view, a gorgeous Cape-Cod style compound set atop a series of gently sloping dunes. Its cedar shake siding and clapboard decks make it look like it’s been here forever, when really it was built fifteen or so years ago. There’s a huge, Olympic-sized pool overlooking the ocean, along with a smaller one that’s set up as a splash pad for kids.

I smile when I see a familiar figure on the club’s ocean-front terrace. Goldie is pointing at something while a small army of people scribble furiously in notebooks.

She must be feeling better, because she’s clearly getting shit done.

I park Winny in the little lot beside the club and climb up the steps toward the terrace, scanning Mom’s membership card to get inside. I threw mine into the ocean on that awful ferry ride home ten years ago. Part of my vow to never come back.

But I am back, heart swelling at the view that stretches out before me when I climb the last step: cerulean pool, a flat stretch of beach, then the ocean. It’s a spot called Frying Pan Shoals. Riley told me there’s a bunch of shifting sandbars underneath the shallows here, making the water choppy and restless.

Exactly how I feel.

Goldie breaks out into the biggest, whitest smile when she sees me.

“Here she is! My maid of honor slash best friend slash emotional support animal.”

If only she knew how much of an animal I was last night.

Cringing inwardly, I paste on a smile. “Morning, y’all. Sorry I’m late. I,

um, slept through my alarm?”

Goldie gives me a look. My face burns.

Later, I mouth.

Was it a sailor? She mouths back, eyes going wide with excitement.

I’m probably the color of a tomato by now.

I shake my head.

Goldie sighs. “Welp, there’s time yet.” She slips her arm through mine. “Anyway, let me introduce you to everyone. This is Marianne, our food and beverage guru . . .”

I shake hands with the club’s team, and Goldie quickly brings me up to speed on what I missed. The weather report is iffy for the weekend, with a fifty-percent chance of showers on Saturday. Because there’s no backup plan—the Club’s only ballroom is booked for another wedding that night—the ceremony will take place rain or shine in the outdoor pavilion by the beach. In the event of rain, Marianne and her team will bring in tents.

Goldie and Cooper were understandably bummed when only fifty guests were able to make the wedding. But that also means they’ll be able to fit everyone on the club’s fabulous terrace for the reception.

Goldie asks for my opinion on the layout. After reacquainting myself with the space, I’m quickly able to visualize the flow of the evening: with the band and dance floor at the back of the terrace, we’ll have plenty of room toward the front for the round tables Goldie requested for dinner so guests can move freely between the two spaces.

We decide to put the bar nearby on the deck, where we’ll also do cocktail hour so everyone gets A+ views of what we hope will be a glorious sunset. I advise Goldie to double up on passed hors d’oeuvres since they’re serving a boozy signature cocktail.

“And do y’all still have those cool bistro lights? I think I remember them strung over the pool for an event way back when,” I ask.

Goldie gasps. “That would be gorgeous! Also, pregnancy brain is real, y’all. I feel like I should’ve thought of that.”

“Good lighting is almost as important as having a good band.” I wink at my friend. “Almost.”

Marianne turns the page in her notebook. “Amen to that. And yes, we do still have them. Shouldn’t be a problem to get those up by Saturday.”

“What do you think about adding some taper candles in glass hurricanes to your tables?” I ask.

“For sure,” Marianne agrees. “There’s actually a great little shop here on the island that might have some if our rental company doesn’t. I’ll make a note of it.”

I gesture to the area where the tables will be. “They’d look so pretty with the flowers. And now that I’m out here, I’m realizing how gorgeous some candlelight will look when it gets dark.”

Goldie claps. “Love it. So far I’m thrilled. Thank you, guys, sincerely. I know this is all so last minute, so I was kind of hoping for the best but expecting the worst in terms of doing anything extra. But y’all are coming through, and that means a lot to me. Now we just have to pray for decent weather.”

My heart skips a beat at how lit up she is. I wrap her in a hug. “Just because you had premarital sex doesn’t mean you don’t deserve the wedding of your dreams.”

“It was only once, I swear.” Goldie gives me a sly smile as she pulls back. “But I’m grateful this is all coming together.”

Marianne closes her notebook. “Y’all lucked out. We rarely get cancellations, least of all on a holiday weekend. Did you have any trouble booking other venues or activities? Because the island is going to be packed.”

Goldie smiles. “Not really. Lucky for us, Coop knows a guy, and that guy pulled some major strings to make this week happen. He’s actually Cooper’s best man—”

“Y’all talkin’ shit about me again?”

We glance up in unison at the handsome man in khakis and a button-up who appears in a nearby doorway.

Goldie and I *still* laugh like schoolgirls whenever Cooper Easton walks into the room, and today is no exception. There’s a reason I call him George Clooney’s illegitimate son. He’s got a wickedly handsome smile, a head of thick, dark hair, and charisma for days.

No surprise it was love at first sight for Goldie. I was there the night they met a little less than a year ago, and I remember clear as day her curling an arm around my neck and pulling me in to whisper, “I’m gonna marry that sexy bastard.”

Said bastard strides onto the terrace like he owns it, taking his hands out of his pockets to cradle Goldie’s face and plant a kiss on her mouth.

I realize a beat too late I’m part of the collective sigh the entire club releases at seeing these two gorgeous human beings lock lips.

Goldie wraps her arms around Cooper's waist. "You shouldn't make it so easy."

"You shouldn't be so lovely." He buries his head in her neck. "How're you feeling?"

"Same as I was last time you asked me an hour ago. Just fine."

"*Just* fine? I don't like the sound of that. What can I do to make you feel better than fine?"

"I have some ideas."

"Are they naughty?"

"Do you know me?"

"Better than anyone."

I let out a chuckle, even as I feel a slice of . . . jealousy isn't the right word. Neither is regret. Remorse, maybe? Longing?

I want what they have. The whole wedding rigamarole aside, I know how crazy my best friend and her fiancé are about each other. Coop would go to the ends of the earth to make Goldie happy. And she is happy. Anyone can see that in her smile, in the way she looks at him.

Being in love that way, being *loved*, is the best feeling ever.

When was the last time I felt that way with Patrick?

I shove that thought aside. I have too much to do this week to indulge in any extra existential angst. All I know is that I miss being in love. Even if I want to stay far, far away from that word for a long, long time.

"I could actually use a water," Goldie says.

"DR's got you one. DR!" Cooper calls. "He was just settling up our bill inside—ah, there he is!"

I glance up at the same door Cooper walked through. If memory serves, it leads right into the little bar/waiting area at the front of the clubhouse. It's open again, only this time a *blond* handsome man walks through it.

One with blue eyes. Broad shoulders. And a wide, white smile that ties my heart in a painful knot.

My stomach heaves. "You've got to be kidding me."

"What?" Goldie's head snaps in my direction. "Louise, are you okay?"

I don't know how to answer that. Riley is completely transformed from the casual restaurant owner in shorts and sneakers. He looks fucking *good* in a crisp white button-up and khakis, and the confident way he moves—tucking one hand into his pocket, holding out a frosty bottle of water to Goldie with the other—sends my pulse skidding.

“Fine?” I swallow the bile in my throat. “Totally fine.”

Maybe this is a mix-up. Maybe Riley is, I don’t know, a random guy Cooper ran into inside?

That’s got to be it. No way is Riley Cooper’s best man, DR. Those aren’t even his initials. Not in the proper order, anyway.

But the way Goldie turns to Riley and wraps him in a tight, happy hug gives me a very bad feeling.

“DR!” she squeals. “I’m so glad you’re here. Seriously, you’re a magician. We can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done to make this week happen. Best best man ever!”

I cover my mouth with my hand at the same moment Riley’s eyes meet mine over Goldie’s shoulder. I see the same shock and softness in them that I did last night.

The same interest.

It *kills* me.

It fucking kills me.

I bolt for the bushes on the other side of the terrace. I make it just in time to lose my breakfast everywhere in hard, angry heaves.

seven

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Riley

Second Chances

“OHMIGOD LOUISE!” Goldie cries.

Coop’s fist flies to his mouth, his other hand going to his stomach. “Y’all, I do not do well with . . . that.”

Side-eyeing the groom-to-be, I hurry after Lu, Goldie hot on my heels. My chest tightens at the sight of her waif-like body trembling as she retches violently into the bushes. I gather her hair in one hand and hold it back. I place the other between her shoulder blades, gently flexing my fingers.

Her heart flaps against my palm like a panicked hummingbird.

I frown. “Let it all out. That’s it. You’re going to feel a helluva lot better when you’re done.”

Goldie tries to elbow me aside. “Let me, please.”

“Coop said you’ve had some nausea. This isn’t going to help.”

“Really, I can—”

“I got it,” I reply, not taking my eyes—or my hands—off Lu.

I feel responsible. We shouldn’t have served her last night. She was drunk when she walked into Stede’s, and absolutely shitfaced when she left.

It’s an awful feeling, waking up with a full-body hangover. I’d know. I spent the better part of nineteen and twenty not knowing if—when—I’d vomit up what I drank the night before.

Also. Lu only tossed her cookies when I showed up.

Really, when Goldie called me “the best best man.”

Fuck me, Lu is Goldie’s maid of honor.

That’s why she’s here at The Ocean Club. Cooper told me Goldie enlisted her maid of honor’s help this week because Goldie wasn’t feeling 100%.

He never mentioned her name. To be fair, this whole thing was very last minute. The calls I’ve had with Coop have been quick and to the point. Clearing schedules, booking venues. Basically figuring out how to pull off a wedding on Bald Head, a popular wedding destination, with one month’s notice. I called in a lot of favors, this being one of them. Luckily I’m tight with the Club’s manager.

My heart skips a beat. If Lu is the maid of honor, and I’m the best man, that means we’re going to be spending a lot of time together this week.

A lot.

Coop already took me up on my offer to host the joint bachelor/bachelorette party on *Dolly* tomorrow. Obviously there’s the wedding here at the Club. And then there’s the rehearsal, and the cocktail party after the rehearsal dinner at Stede’s.

My heart skips another beat. And another.

I said I didn’t need to see Lu again. But here I am, very much into the idea of seeing Lu again all damn week.

What the actual fuck?

But this excitement I feel, it has a sharp edge. Nervousness. She made it crystal clear last night just how much she hates me. I don’t want to ruin her week by being around. I also don’t want to let Cooper down by not showing up.

Not sure what I should do here.

“I’m so sorry,” Lu says between retches. “This is—*shit*.”

She heaves one last time before gasping for a deep, shaking breath.

“Nothing to apologize for. We’ve all been there.”

“Not me,” Coop says proudly.

“You just stay in bed forever and moan about how awful you feel when you’re hungover.” Goldie rolls her eyes. “Honestly, it’d be better if you did puke. Then we could get on with our lives.”

Lu cuts me a look as she wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist. “I’m okay. You can let me go.”

“You sure?”

She straightens and leans a little to the left. Just far enough that her hair

falls from my grasp. She quickly tucks it behind her ears and dabs at her eyes with her fingertips. “I’m sure. I just—yeah, made the mistake of trying to keep up with my mom and aunt last night. They can drink a real housewife under the table with her own Chardonnay.”

Goldie is rubbing Lu’s back now, slowly shaking her head. “Honey, we all know Katherine Wade is in a league of her own.”

Lu hiccups. It’s fucking adorable. She manages a wobbly smile. “When will I ever learn?”

“You want some crackers?” Coop asks. “A soda?”

Goldie grabs the water from him and cracks open the cap, handing it to Lu. “Water first.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lu repeats as she chugs the water. “I’m okay, really.”

“This is an introduction you’ll never forget.” Coop glances at me. “We’ll definitely be telling this story to our grandbabies.”

“I sincerely hope you won’t,” Lu says.

Goldie pats her friend’s shoulder. “Let’s try that again, shall we? Louise, this is DR. That’s what we call him, anyway. His real name is Riley Dixon, but after a weekend gone wrong to the Dominican Republic—”

“I swear to God, those coconuts weren’t mine,” Coop says.

“RD became DR,” Goldie finishes. “He’s my favorite of Coop’s friends. I’m so excited y’all finally get to meet.”

I glance at Lu. How do we play this? Do we pretend we’ve never met? If not, how much of our story do we share?

Her eyes flicker. If the puke didn’t tip me off, the rapid rise and fall of her chest does. She’s a nervous wreck too.

I don’t want to overstep. I also don’t want to put the burden of figuring out how to address this shitshow solely on her.

Lu looks at me. I look back. Somehow manage to paste a dumbass smile on my face as I wait with my heart in my throat for her to say something. Anything that might give me a clue as to where she wants this to go.

Part of me hopes she tears me a new one. Hopes she lets the truth spill out. At least then I’d know she may have changed her hair, but she didn’t let the world fuck with her no-bullshit attitude.

But Lu doesn’t miss a beat. Screwing the top on her water bottle, she offers me a tight grin. “Riley! How funny—small world, right? It’s good to see you again.”

Polite. Kind.

Fake.

Sadness unfolds inside my chest. The Lu I knew was truthful and fierce and authentic in every sense of the word.

But this woman who insists on being called Louise? Not so much. Why'd she change? What happened to that fierceness? The bravery I adored?

My smile must falter, because her eyes do that thing again where they flicker.

"Y'all know each other?" Goldie furrows her brow.

I nod, wondering if I should hold out my hand to Lu. She doesn't move, so neither do I. "My mom worked for her grandparents back in the day."

"We crossed paths over the summer." Lu drops her arm, her water bottle dangling by her leg. Its condensation drips down her skin, making my own feel two sizes too tight. "That was, what, ten years ago?"

"Something like that."

"Small world is right," Cooper says. "How great y'all are already acquainted. Makes all our jobs that much easier."

Goldie gives Lu pointed look. "Does it?"

"Of course," Lu replies. "This week is going to be great. Right, Riley?"

"Right. Best week ever celebrating these two fornicators."

Her face lights up as she lets out a bark of genuine laughter.

That laugh. Fuck me. It's like a shot to the chest. I feel my sadness leak out of the bullet hole, replaced by something that feels like soaring.

Coop laughs too. "Guilty."

"Very guilty." Goldie holds up a hand.

"Good to know we can send y'all off together to get shit done if need be," Cooper says. "We really are going to have a good time, aren't we? We'll be the fab four."

Lu's smile disappears. She opens her water and takes a long, slow sip.

Green about the gills again. Shit.

I turn around and find Marianne patiently waiting to resume the meeting a few steps behind us.

"Speaking of getting shit done. Marianne—"

"You know Marianne too?" Lu asks.

Turning back around, I tug at the collar of my shirt. "Yep."

Cooper rolls his eyes. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Pretending like you don't own the place."

Lu's eyes bulge. "You own—wait, this—the club—the Ocean Club? Riley, you own it?"

I put my hands on my hips and squint up at the sky, doing anything I can to avoid looking at Cooper lest I punch him in the face. "I don't own the club. But I do, ah, own some land around it."

"All the land," Cooper says with a smile.

"That's—wow, Riley, I . . . don't know what to say."

Goldie is looking at Lu and me, her eyes knowing as they zip between us.

"How do you not know any of this? I feel like your family has been coming to Bald Head forever," Cooper asks.

Lu does that tight smiling thing I hate. "I haven't been back in a long time."

I can tell Cooper wants to follow that line of questioning, but Marianne is politely clearing her throat, notebook at the ready.

"Thanks for your patience," Goldie says. "Let's get back to it."

Lu looks as relieved as I am at the change of subject. She positions herself on the other side of Goldie, putting as much distance between us as possible. My body still rings with awareness at her presence. How she shifts her weight from one leg to the other, the hem of her sundress lifting to reveal more thigh as she moves.

What is she thinking?

Does she need some lunch?

Will that hate sex I offered make her feel any better?

Jesus Christ, quit it already.

I gotta quit reliving that moment she held my shirt in her hand. Yes, I'll give Lu Wade anything she wants. Needs. But something tells me it's not the savage hate sex I was ready to give her last night. And it's still not clear whether or not she's still dating that guy. The one I saw her with when I went to Charlotte to win her back a few years ago.

"Excellent job as always." I shake Marianne's hand when the meeting wraps up. "Thanks for helping us out."

She winks as she closes her notebook. "Anytime."

"I think our event planner has a crush on you." Goldie puts a hand on her stomach.

Coop scoffs. "Everyone has a crush on DR."

"Not true." I run a hand up the back of my head. "Y'all still up for the food tasting on the boat? We'll kill two birds with one stone and taste

everything for the bachelor/bachelorette party tomorrow and the rehearsal dinner on Friday.”

Cooper stretches. “Hell yeah, we’re still down for it. Stede’s serves some of the best food I’ve had, period.”

“Stede’s is doing the food?” Lu’s voice has a note of panic in it.

“Only the best for my bride,” Coop says.

“First, the ladies’ room.” Goldie bumps her hip against Lu’s. “We’ll be right back.”

Cooper and I wait on the deck just off the terrace, elbows on the wooden railing that faces the ocean. I try not to think about what Goldie and Louise are talking about right now. But I know they’re talking about me. My nerves return with a vengeance.

So does excitement. Which is plain stupid. I may want to spend time with Lu—I have so many questions, she’s so fucking sexy—but she sure as hell don’t want to spend time with me.

How am I gonna be around her for, Christ, four days straight and not fall all over again?

How am I not gonna get all hard and shit if she keeps wearing these cute little dresses that show off those fucking legs?

I do just fine in that department. I wanna get laid, I have calls to make.

But all of a sudden, the only person I wanna call is Lu Wade.

And that’s a big fucking problem, because *she has a boyfriend*. I saw them together when I went to Charlotte a few years ago. I am not the kind of man who fools around with women who are taken.

More than that, she hates me. Even if I wanted to get naked with her, no way in hell she’d be interested.

But maybe, if she let me tell her the truth—

Coop elbows me. “Everything okay?”

I dig my sunglasses out of my pocket and put them on. I love the late summer skies out here—clear, crisp, a shade of blue unlike anywhere else on Earth—but the sun is strong this time of day.

Clearing my throat, I wonder what I should say. I don’t want to lie to my friend. But I’m also not sure how much of the truth I can share. “Eh.”

“Don’t think I didn’t see the heart attack you had when you laid eyes on Louise. She may have p—” He puts his fist to his mouth again. “Lord, I can’t even say the word. Point being, she may have had a violent reaction to seeing you, but I could tell she knocked you off balance too.”

There's a spot on my left lens. I take off the glasses and pull the hem of my shirt out of my pants, using it to scrub furiously at the spot. "Wouldn't you be surprised if a girl you knew a decade ago turned out to be the best friend of your best friend's fiancée?"

Coop grimaces. "Sorry to bum rush you like that. I really had no idea."

"I know, I know." I wave him away. I've tried to get together with Goldie and Coop more often. But they're always jetting off somewhere. I only got to see them once for a quick lunch here on Bald Head a few months back, and then we spent that wild weekend in the Dominican Republic (that's where the DR nickname comes from—I have lots of friends down there, so Coop started calling me Mr. Dominican Republic, which was then shortened to Mr. DR, and then just DR, over the course of the weekend). I certainly haven't had the chance to meet any of Goldie's friends. She's never mentioned the name Louise either.

I would've definitely remembered if she had.

"Did y'all have a thing?" Cooper asks.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out. Survey the waves that thunder on the beach. It's a good day for surfing. I should get out there. Clear my mind.

"We did."

"Was it serious?"

I fall onto my elbows on the railing. "It was."

"Okay." I can tell Coop is treading carefully, which I appreciate. "If this is gonna be weird for you—"

"Don't worry about me. This week is about you and Goldie. I mean that. It was ten years ago, and I imagine Lu—"

"She's Lu to you?"

I hold the tip of my tongue between my teeth. "Yes. And I imagine she's moved on—"

"She has. Well, she did. She actually just broke off her engagement."

My stomach seizes. My head snaps in Coop's direction. "What?"

"Yeah. He's a buddy of mine. Or was. Came clean about cheating on her a couple weeks ago. Wound's still fresh, which might explain the—"

"Puking." *And the extreme tipsiness last night.*

"For the love of God, if you say that word one more time—"

"Sorry." I look back at the ocean, head whirring, heart pounding.

She's single.

Jesus Christ, Lu Wade literally fell into my arms, single and, if her

hanging on to my shirt last night is any indication, in serious need of TLC.

If that's not a sign from the universe, I don't know what is.

I put that desire for her to bed after I went to Charlotte to win her back a few years ago. Told myself I needed to find someone new. Lu did, and so would I. I tried. I dated. Swiped left plenty of times. But I ended up comparing the girls to Lu. No one inspired me the way she did. No one gave me that sense of excitement and possibility.

Still, time passed, and I thought I was over her. But maybe I just told myself I was. Maybe this desire's been simmering in the background all along, and now that Lu's in the picture again, it's come roaring back to life.

I can't ignore it.

"How could someone ever cheat on her?"

Coop's stare burns a hole in the side of my head. "Did you?"

"Fuck no. I'm guilty of many sins, but cheating ain't one of 'em. He's not coming to the wedding, is he?"

Cooper lets out a sigh. "He was invited, but I doubt he'll show."

"Good."

"Trust me, no one wants to punch the guy more than I do." He looks at me. "I understand if this is all too much for you. I can find someone else to fill in as best man—"

"Absolutely not. I'm okay, really."

She's single. She's hurting. She's horny.

She's here.

We're both here, and we've been thrown together once again by an epic twist of fate.

Timing may not be perfect, but second chances don't come often.

I sure as hell ain't wasting mine.

eight

...

Louise

White Knight

“YOU TOTALLY FUCKED HIM, didn’t you?”

Goldie crosses her arms and looks at me in the mirror as I wash my hands in the sink. Avoiding her eyes, I stick my hands underneath the dryer.

“I did when I was eighteen.” I have to raise my voice so Goldie can hear me. Seriously, why do these things sound like jet engines?

My friend waits until I’m done. “Why have I never heard about him?”

I think about my answer for a minute. I know it’s been ten years, but it still feels weird talking about my relationship with Riley. Probably because I’ve never really talked about it before.

But again, it’s been *ten years*. And clearly Riley isn’t sweating his mom losing her job anymore. We’re not kids, and I’m not going to get in trouble if anyone finds out about us. Pa is gone, Granny’s not here, and Mom’s busy pickling herself in white wine and ocean water.

I lower my voice. “I’ve never told anyone about our relationship.”

Goldie’s expression softens. “Why not?”

“He was worried his mom would lose her job. His parents were splitting up and she really needed the money.”

She nods, hand on her stomach. Goldie’s not really showing yet, but I can just make out the tiny beginnings of her bump. “Understandable.”

“You okay?” I glance at her belly.

“Ugh, yeah, just starting to feel bloated. And tired. And my feet hurt. But I want to hear more about you and DR. Was it lust? Was it love? Why’d it end? He’s gorgeous, Louise.”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t notice.”

“Was he as hot back then as he is now? Not gonna lie, when Patrick took himself out of the picture, I wondered if you and DR might hit it off.”

“Goldie, Riley told me he loved me, took my virginity, and then broke up with me over text. I’m not touching that man with a ten-foot pole.”

Even though I may or may not have touched him last night.

Goldie doesn’t need to know that part. It’s not like the hate sex he was talking about is going to happen.

I still cringe thinking about the whole thing, even as a hot rush moves down my thighs.

Why’d he have to look so good?

Why’d he have to *smell* so good? Like summer and possibility and freedom?

No one ever turned me on the way Riley Dixon did.

Goldie gasps. “He didn’t!”

“Oh, he definitely did. I met him at the beginning of the summer. I came to Bald Head like I always did the day after school ended. I’d just committed to Wake Forest, which was my dream school, so I was on cloud nine when I got here. And then the second I walk into my grandparents’ house, I lock eyes with this insanely cute guy I’d never seen before.”

“DR,” Goldie says.

“Yup.” I smile ruefully. “He was so different from the guys back home. Or so I thought. He was kind, down to earth, and interesting. He also surfed, which didn’t hurt.”

“I think my teenage brain would’ve exploded seeing eighteen-year-old Riley Dixon with a surfboard under his arm and no shirt on.”

“Mine did. I fell so hard, Goldie.” I swallow. “We had this magical summer together. Hot and heavy from the start. I mean, three weeks in, we were saying we loved each other.”

Goldie slowly shakes her head. “Summer lovin’.”

“We made plans to be together after the summer ended. I was off to Wake, and Riley was going to work full-time at the marina. But I had a car, and he was working to save up to buy one too. He told me he’d visit me as often as he could. I felt—no, I *knew*—it was real. I know this sounds

ridiculous, but I thought there was a good chance we'd get married."

"Oh, boy." Goldie sways side to side. "I don't like where this is going."

"Come August, I kissed Riley goodbye and boarded the ferry. I was headed back to Charlotte with Mom. She was going to help me move into my dorm later that week, so we had a lot of shopping and packing to do. Anyway, we're halfway through the ferry ride—there was a terrible storm that day, just sheets and sheets of rain—and I glance at my phone, and there it is. A text from Riley saying there was someone else and he was breaking up with me. So basically he cheated and ran."

Goldie gasps again, louder this time. "No!"

"Yes. It didn't sound like him—"

"Exactly what I was going to say."

"So I pushed back, but he didn't respond to any of my texts or calls. I emailed him. Slid into his DMs. But yeah, long story short, I never heard from him again."

Goldie's eyes are wet, making my throat tighten. I don't get this emotional anymore reliving the saga. Until I do, I guess. Maybe because I've only relived it privately in my own mind. Now I'm sharing it with someone, out loud, for the first time ever.

Or maybe I'm emotional because history just repeated itself and reopened old wounds.

"And you couldn't tell anyone about what happened, so you went off to a brand-new school in a brand-new city while dealing with a broken heart all by yourself."

I nod. "Low point."

"Aw, friend." Goldie wraps me in a tight hug. "I'm so, so sorry. If I'd known you back then, I would've murdered him and helped you bury the body. What a dick."

"Right? For a while, I wondered if I did something wrong. Like, was I not enough for him? Not hot enough, or cool enough . . ."

"Fuck him for making you doubt yourself that way."

I let out a mirthless laugh. "Not gonna lie, I still hate him."

"I do too!"

"I mean, to be fair, it was ten years ago, and we were really, really young. I'd like to think Riley's changed, but . . ."

Goldie loosens her grip on me, but still keeps her arms wrapped around my waist. "I'm shocked hearing this. I wasn't lying when I said he's my

favorite out of all Coop's friends. Then again, I don't know him super well. He lives on Bald Head full-time, so we don't get to see him often—"

"And he really owns, like, half the island? What's the story there?"

"Welp, he sure as hell isn't the housekeeper's son anymore. Coop told me the guy who owned the marina left it to Riley in his will. Riley borrowed money against it to buy some real estate here on Bald Head, and when things boomed, he made a big old pile of cash."

I scoff, heart palpitating. "He was super smart. And he worked really, really hard."

Goldie searches my face. "He never deserved you. Still doesn't. You know that, right?"

"I know." The tightness in my throat is making my whole head hurt. "Being back here . . . it's just weird."

Goldie tucks my hair behind my ear. "I'll make sure y'all don't see each other this week, okay?"

"Not necessary." I shake my head. "Honestly, this is all ancient history. I'm fine, I promise."

She smiles kindly. "You're obviously not okay. Louise, you vomited when you saw him. And let's not forget that Patrick just pulled the same crap on you that Riley did ten years ago."

"Yeah. Shitty luck."

"The shittiest. You know what, I'm going to make Coop ditch him as best man. One of his other bro friends can fill in."

"Please don't. I told you, I got this. Honestly, focusing on how much I hate Riley is a good distraction from how much I hate Patrick."

"That's a lot of hate. I'd rather you focus on, I don't know, working out your feelings in a more naked way with one of those other sea men."

The realization hits me. Riley owns the marina. Which means he was just helping out on the ferry dock. Which means . . .

He isn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

He may be rich now, but he's still the salt of the earth. Helpful. Thoughtful. Never too proud. While the guys I hooked up with in college were busy chasing banking jobs and doing coke, Riley Dixon was fixing boat engines and hauling luggage.

Still is. Only he owns the boats now, and probably has more money than the people whose luggage he's hauling.

He's also still an asshole. Stealing my restaurant idea? Trying to buy me a

drink in said restaurant, like that might make me forget how badly he hurt me?

Seriously, fuck that guy for life.

Maybe the best revenge is playing it cool. Not making a fuss over him being around this week, because I couldn't literally give less of a shit. I may have just broken off my engagement, but I still have a life I'm proud of: good job, good friends. I know how to have a good time, and I'm not going to let an ex-boyfriend from the distant past ruin it.

"You okay, Louise?"

I shake my head. "Yeah. Yes. Like I said, please don't change any plans on my account. I'd tell you if I couldn't handle it, but I really do think I can."

Goldie searches my face for a long beat. "And you'll tell me if that changes?"

"Absolutely."

Another beat. "Okay." She sighs. "But he's really handsome, Louise. Like, *really*. And funny. And I thought he was sweet—"

"But he's not. I promise, I'm able to keep my hands to myself."

"He did burn you pretty badly."

"He did. Bad enough I'll never forget it, and I'll definitely never forgive him." I reach for the door. "So let's hit up this tasting, shall we?"

"I did tell you he lives on a yacht, right?"

I roll my eyes. "Honey, my pleasures are small these days. Having someone else make me a cup of coffee is a thrill. I truly don't care where Riley Dixon lives. As Shania Twain said—"

"That don't impress me much." Goldie smiles. "Let's do this. I'm so excited about the food."

"Me too. I think my stomach's finally settled, because I'm starving."

We head to the parking lot, where Riley and Cooper are waiting. I'm surprised to see Riley climbing into a nondescript four-seater cart that looks like a newer, classier version of Winny.

He's wearing a pair of gold-rimmed aviators. He turns his head to look at me, and the combination of it all—the sunglasses, the crisp white collared shirt with the top two buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up, the hard jawline and the way the ocean breeze blows the hair off his forehead—hits me in the backs of my knees.

Ignore.

I look away.

Coop helps Goldie into their cart. “Meet you guys at the marina?”

“Sounds good.” I climb into Winny, cursing the fact that I parked next to Riley without knowing it.

Cooper and Goldie take off, but Riley frowns as he fiddles with a portable speaker.

I turn Winny’s key, waiting for the salt-encrusted dials on the dash to spring to life.

Only, they don’t.

I feel a beat of panic. I try again. And again. Sweat breaks out along my scalp.

My hands shake. I need some food. And a nap. And a goddamn break.

“Can I help?” Riley asks. “Old Winny giving you grief, huh?”

Putting my hands on the wheel in an effort to steady them, I take a deep breath.

Of course he’d remember the cart’s name.

And of course he’d play the white knight.

“Looks like it.”

“Lemme take a look.”

My pulse jumps when Riley climbs out of his cart and heads for mine. “I feel like the battery’s dead or something. But she was plugged in this morning.”

Riley slides onto the seat beside me, making Winny roll forward. The clean, summery smell of Coppertone floods my senses. I press my thighs together.

“Hmm.” Riley’s brow is furrowed as he checks the key, the gear shift. The battery. “Yeah, I think you’re gonna need a tow.”

I scoff. “Of course I do.”

“Hey, Winny was old back then. It’s a miracle she’s still kicking.”

Back then. He says it so casually, like he’s not referring to the summer that destroyed me.

“She’s a legend,” I manage.

He grins as he digs his phone out of his pocket. “Just like her namesake, Wynonna Judd. We’ll get her fixed, Lu. I’ll have my guy check her out and bring her back to your house by dinner, no problem.”

“I can handle—”

“I got it.” He brings his phone to his ear and turns around. Whoever he’s talking to picks up on the first ring, and Riley gives him instructions before

hanging up and turning back to me. “Yep, not a problem. In the meantime, why don’t I give you a ride?”

Universe, you’re killing me today.

I stare out the windshield. “Your guy can’t bring me another cart?”

“Nope. Not in time, anyway. And you don’t want to miss this tasting. Chef is preparing us a small feast.”

Turning my head, I glare at him. “Why are you doing this?”

His smile falters. “Doing what?”

“Being nice.”

“As opposed to . . .”

“Being the asshole I know is in there somewhere.” I nod at his chest.

He frowns. “That’s not where my asshole is.”

I don’t want to laugh, but I do. I forgot how infuriatingly charming—disarmingly pervy—this guy can be.

His frown morphs into a cocky, dazzling smile that turns my heart upside-down. “See? I’m not all bad.”

“Just mostly.”

He grabs onto the roof of the cart and hauls himself to his feet. “C’mon, let’s go. Least I can do is feed you after over-serving you last night.”

I follow him, pressing a hand to my face. My skin is burning.

“To be fair, I’m pretty sure I over served myself.”

“Good thing we got grouper sammies on the way, then.”

I grab onto the seat railing as I climb into his cart, holding on for dear life. Grouper sandwiches are my favorite lunchtime meal here at the beach. The fish you can get on Bald Head are some of the freshest, and most delicious, on Earth.

“Another idea you stole.”

He puts the cart in reverse. Uses the heel of his hand to guide the wheel as we pull out of the spot, the sinews in his bare forearm rippling.

Reaching down to put the cart in forward, he looks at me. All cockiness and tanned skin and white teeth.

“That’s because your ideas were always the best, Lu.”

My heart twists. “I asked you not to call me that.”

“You can ask me ’til you’re blue in the face, but I told you, you’ll always be Lu to me.”

nine

. . .

Riley

Passenger Princess

THE PIECES of my plan to win back Lu fall into place as we drive across the island.

First, I feed her.

Then I talk, in the hopes she'll talk too. I'll take it slow. I don't want to overwhelm her, but it's only fair she knows the truth.

When I'm not helping Coop, I'll be helping Lu. Anything she needs, a ride, a meal, a quickie in my office, she'll get.

I gotta prove I'm not the man she thinks I am. Her ex is a cheating scumbag, but I'm not. I can only hope she'll understand why I had to end things the way I did. Why she doesn't know I tried reaching out in the meantime.

I gotta hope she'll forgive me.

It'll take a full charm offensive, no doubt. Luckily I'm one charming motherfucker.

I nod at the portable speaker in the cupholder. "Why don't you put on some music?" It was always one of her favorite things to do, ride around with the music blasting, her feet propped on the dash. We'd have to do it at night back in the day so no one would see us, the cicadas and crickets loud enough to drown out the sound of our music. Feels good to be able to do it out in the open now.

Lu shifts slightly as she grabs her phone out of her bag, her movements stiff. “Sure.”

“Whatcha listening to these days?”

She keeps her eyes on her screen and scrolls. “I’m actually having a huge Kelsea Ballerini moment. I also just discovered this new chick Julia Wolf—”

“‘Fuck Falling in Love’ Julia Wolf?”

Her head jerks up. “You know her?”

“I keep up with my ladies in rock.” I grin. “Been kinda addicted ever since someone introduced me to Joni Mitchell about ten years back.”

She looks away, but her lips twitch as her thumb keeps moving over her screen. “You’re welcome.”

“I actually saw Joni in concert about a week ago.”

“Stop! In L.A.? I heard about that!”

I nod. “Yup. I stayed in Santa Monica a couple nights for work. Then I caught the show before heading back.”

“I’m jealous. Bet she was incredible.”

“She was.”

“If you’re still into Joni, you should check out Maggie Rodgers. And Vérité. Both very soulful. Big voices, with big things to say.”

Sparks ignite up and down the column of my spine.

This.

This is what made me fall so hard and so fast for Lu Wade. She was always so *into* things. She loved nothing halfway. Instead, she dove deep into whatever caught her attention. Musicians. Ideas.

Me.

“I’ll definitely check them out. Thanks for the recs.”

Julia Wolf pours from the speaker. Lu reaches down to turn up the volume. I smile grimly when I catch the lyrics to “Get Off My”, which is, quite literally, Julia telling the world to leave her the fuck alone.

Lu falls back on the seat and closes her eyes, tilting up her chin so the breeze blows her hair out of her face.

It’s all I can do not to stare. She’s fucking gorgeous. Hair everywhere, shoulders and mouth relaxed. Music swells around us. Breeze is warm. My blood is hot.

I’m practically shaking with the need to make this girl mine. I dreamt about her for years. Even after I gave up hope of ever winning her back, she’d still slip into my dreams. Wild and happy and so beautiful I’d wake up

hard every time.

But I *need to take it slow*. This song is a case in point. I may be in hot pursuit, but Lu wants nothing to do with me. I've got one shot, and one shot only, to prove to her I'm the kind of man she deserves.

And that man needs to slow his roll and respect her timing. Girl just ended a serious relationship. I doubt she's ready to hear the things I wanna say to her.

So I literally slow down, easing my foot off the pedal.

No need to rush when I got Lu in a good place.

But she must notice, because she cracks open an eye and says, "Good thing we're not in a rush, grandpa."

"Just keepin' you alive, princess."

Her nostrils flare. "I'm Louise. Not Lu, and definitely not princess."

"Don't lie, Lu. You still like being a passenger princess on a long golf cart ride, don't you?"

"You have no idea who I am or what I like."

I change hands on the wheel so I can lean toward her, listening. "What? You really tellin' me you don't have someone driving you around aimlessly for hours while y'all listen to whatever playlist you're into that day?"

"Unfortunately I have to be an adult now, so no."

"Tragic." I shake my head.

"No shit." Her eyes flick down my body. A flare of arousal ignites between my legs. "But you seem to have all the time in the world."

I smile. "To do this? Listen to good music while enjoying good company? Hell yeah, I do."

"God, you're shameless." She rolls her eyes. "You know your flattery's wasted on me, right?"

"You can't tell me you're not feeling better than you were half an hour ago."

Lu rolls her tongue between her lips, a pair of indents appearing between her eyebrows. They used to show up whenever she was giving something a good ponder.

"It was a classic boot and rally. Of course I'm feeling better." Lu spears a hand through her hair, mussing it to the side in the sexiest way imaginable. I hold the wheel in a death grip. "I just had way too much Chardonnay last night. Dad's not here, so Mom is living it up."

My heart skips a beat. "Your parents doing well?"

“Well enough, I guess.” She cuts me a glance. “What about yours?”

“Mom’s still on the island. Dad’s still gone.”

“That sucks.”

“Does, yeah. But Mom’s remarried, and I think she’s happier now.”

A long beat of silence.

“Can we talk about last night?” I ask.

Lu turns away, eyes glued to the blur of trees we pass. “I’d rather not. It was a mistake. Like I said, too much Chardonnay.”

“If you say so.” A pause. I need to tread carefully. “Coop told me about your breakup. I’m sorry.”

I watch her throat work as she swallows. “I haven’t been single in a while. Got a little . . . carried away with the booze.”

Confirmation she is indeed single. That’s a good thing. The fact that she’s clearly been hurt, and hurt badly, isn’t.

“Just know that whatever you need, Lu, I’m more than happy to oblige.”

She cuts me another look, sharper this time. “It’s Louise. And I don’t need a damn thing from you, Riley. Now shut up so I can listen to the music. This is my favorite Julia song.”

I nod. “Yes ma’am.”

A few minutes later, I pull into my parking spot in Harbour Village directly across from the ferry landing. At the moment, things are quiet. It’s a little early for the lunch crowd at Stede’s, but a few tourists I don’t recognize are seated on the patio, drinks in hand as they look out over the water.

Beside the restaurant, the door to Surf’s Up is propped open, allowing passersby a glimpse into the activewear shop I helped a friend of mine open a few years back.

I’ve spent the past decade building my empire. Keeping Bald Head small and authentic while transforming it into a world-class destination. And my chest still swells anytime I lay eyes on the fruits of my labor.

Something else swells as I watch Louise climb out of the golf cart, showing me far more leg than I can handle. I catch a glimpse of panties—pink lace, fuck *me*—when she raises her arm to wave at Cooper and Goldie, who are waiting at the entrance to Dock A, where *Dolly* is moored.

I could kill Tuck for ruining that pack of cigarettes last night. I’m not sure I’ve ever needed one more.

Digging my keys out of my pocket, I unlock the gate. The dock dips beneath our weight as we head toward the end of the wooden walkway. The

boats get progressively bigger the farther out we go. I own a few that I charter. Others belong to fellow residents.

I sneak a glance at Lu, who's careful to keep her distance. She's staring in disbelief at each boat we pass, her steps slowing like she can't believe what she's seeing.

She comes from money. James Gibbes owned several boats, although none of them were as big as the ones we're seeing now. The fact that I'm able to blow this girl's mind—the girl who's seen it all—

Not gonna lie, feels good.

Also feels good knowing I'm about to have a boatful of people. People I love being around.

"Welcome aboard, y'all!" Kurt, *Dolly's* first mate, greets us from the stern. He unlatches a rear door and gestures us inside. "Wait 'til y'all see this food. If this is just the tasting, I can't imagine how fabulous the actual event is going to be tomorrow."

I help Goldie and Coop on first, then wait for Lu. But she's stuck staring at the silver leaf letters on the back of the boat that spell *Dolly*.

"This is your boat?" she asks.

I dip my chin. "It is."

"The one you live on."

"I feel like we keep having this conversation. Yes."

"And you named it *Dolly*?"

I smile. "She's one bad bitch."

Kurt snaps his fingers. "The baddest."

"Just like *Dolly Parton*. Kinda felt meant to be." I hold out my hand. "C'mon, I don't want those sandwiches getting cold."

Lu shakes her head. "This is . . ."

"Amazing. I know. Come on."

Lu doesn't take my hand. But her expression does soften when she sees Goldie gasping with delight at the epic spread Chef Penelope set out on the covered table on the port side of the deck. There are several trays of appetizers: fresh cantaloupe with prosciutto and hand-torn chunks of mozzarella, oysters on the half shell, shot glasses of chilled sweet corn soup. Then of course the grouper sandwiches, made with fluffy potato buns and Chef's purple cabbage slaw. Spritzers in elegant wine glasses (virgin for Goldie and me) wait at each place setting, as do paper cups of truffled french fries, which I can smell from here. Chef also set out a tray of homemade

cookies I ordered from Drury Lane, a bakery my friend's wife owns back in Charlotte.

"You outdid yourself." Coop takes my hand for a handshake but ends up pulling me into a hug. "Thank you."

Lu watches the interaction, those indents appearing again.

She doesn't understand yet. How the lying, selfish asshole I made her believe I was ten years ago is actually the kind of guy who does all this for his friends.

It's on me to undo my own dirty work. To show her who I really am, the man who worked day and night for ten years straight to build the kind of life she and my mom deserve.

The man who'd do anything to make them happy.

Today, though, I'll settle for making Lu smile. Baby steps.

Tom emerges from below deck. He makes a beeline for us, tail wagging.

Seeing him, Lu smiles. "Why hello, there. Who's this?" She bends down to pet him. In true Tom form, he's all over her, a big doggy smile on his face.

"That's Tom," I say. "We been together what, five years now, buddy?"

He jumps up on Lu's legs in reply.

"Tom!" I yank him off her. "I'm sorry. He's five, so this puppy energy should be gone by now. But like his namesake, he refuses to age."

Lu raises an eyebrow. "Who's his namesake?"

"Tom Cruise."

She laughs. The sound sends my pulse into overdrive. "That's...actually hilarious. Why'd you name him Tom Cruise?"

"He's nutty. He doesn't age. Definitely doesn't behave."

Goldie's giggling now too. "I see it now."

"Really, I inherited the name from his first owner. But it stuck."

Lu's petting his neck now, making him pant. "He's perfect."

"Y'all let me know if he gets in the way." I turn around. "Hey, Kurt?"

He appears at my side, hands clasped behind his back. "What can I do?"

"Do you mind turning on some Kelsea Ballerini? Start with 'Muscle Memory'."

"On it."

I meet eyes with Lu. She's staring at me again as she rises, indents deeper than I've ever seen them.

I hold up my hands. "Don't worry. I'll shut up so you can listen to the music."

She rolls her eyes. But I catch her lips curling into a tiny smile.
Score.

ten

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Louise

BDE

DOLLY IS big dick energy defined.

Really, the mind behind the classic yacht's tastefully subtle yet exquisitely executed overhaul is big dick energy.

A boat like this costs millions. Renovating it? Many more millions. Which makes me think Riley could've easily bought an oligarch-style yacht. Huge, brand-new, something that came with a helicopter pad and a European supermodel.

Instead, he bought *Dolly*. She's a big boat, don't get me wrong; I imagine she has several bedrooms at least below deck. But instead of being big for big's sake, she's tasteful, a classic wooden boat crafted of gleaming mahogany with three stories and a large back deck, where we are now.

There's a dining area to my right, with a square table surrounded by a curving booth upholstered in black-and-white striped fabric. To my left is a set of steps leading up to the bridge (where the controls are), and another set leading down to a cabin area.

Dolly's chrome railings gleam in the late morning sunshine, nary a fingerprint in sight. The floors are mahogany as well, and are polished to within an inch of their life. I can just glimpse an area for sunbathing up ahead, a pair of built-in chaises also upholstered in that striped fabric. A crisp American flag waves from the stern, flapping in the salt-scented breeze.

And then there's the beautiful food laid out on the table, and the chef in the white jacket, and the man apparently named Kurt in the polo shirt embroidered with the name *Dolly*.

Also, Kelsea Ballerini is playing over the speakers. My favorite song too.

Let's not forget Tom Cruise. He's huge, his coat more red than golden, and very friendly, staying by my side.

The whole thing is a dream.

It's Riley's dream, to live on the water like this.

He did it.

He made his ridiculous idea a reality.

Were we really so ridiculous?

It's happening again—that thing where I can't breathe. I put a hand on my chest in an effort to spur my heart back into motion.

I look at Riley to see him looking at me. He's frowning. "You okay?"

Why'd you have to ruin everything? I want to say back.

Putting a hand on the nearby railing, I nod. "All good. I just wasn't expecting you to live on the set of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Spoiler alert, if Matt Damon shows up, I'm going to faint."

"I saved Matt for tomorrow for exactly that reason." Riley grins as he gently cups my elbow in his hand and helps me up a pair of steps to the table. My body pulses at the press of his warm, calloused palm against my skin.

I close my eyes. Take a deep inhale, the savory smell of the truffled french fries filling my head.

Is this man trying to kill me? First he holds back my hair while I lose my breakfast in the bushes. Then he takes care of my broken-down golf cart, all but sings along with me to my favorite new artist, and tells me he'll give me whatever I need.

Hate sex.

He was talking about the hate sex he offered me.

My body pulses again as an image flashes across the backs of my eyelids: Riley climbing over me in a cabin downstairs, shoving up my dress and raking his hands down my thighs as he pulls off my underwear. In this fantasy, he'll still eat pussy like a champ, pushing my legs open and making me come on his mouth. Then he'll stand up, shuck off his shorts, fist himself in his hand before—

"You're hungry, aren't you?"

My eyes fly open at the question, delivered in a gravelly purr I feel

between my legs. Riley is looking at me again, a smirk on his lips like he knows I was thinking about the magical things he could do with his tongue.

“How would you know?”

“Your stomach just growled.” He’s still got his hand on my elbow, and he leads me to a spot at the table set with white china and what appears to be an Aperol spritz.

My knees wobble. But this time, I sit before they give out and I end up in Riley’s arms again. “Everything looks and smells delicious.”

“It really does.” Goldie takes the seat next to me, which is set with a wine glass filled with a clear bubbly liquid. Sparkling water?

Jesus, Riley thought of everything. I notice there’s a sparkling water at the spot where he sits too. Is he not drinking? Why?

And why does he have to look so fucking good in those aviators and that white shirt? He’s giving off sexy, young-JFK vibes, and I would so be here for it if he wasn’t an ex who cheated on me and left me for dead.

One of my exes who cheated on me and left me for dead.

The idea that there’s a pattern is sobering to say the least. Fool me once, sure, it happens. But twice?

Makes me think I’m doing something wrong.

Whatever the case, I’m doing myself no favors by daydreaming about Riley Dixon naked.

I’m polite as we eat our meal, but I’m careful to avoid addressing Riley during the natural flow of conversation. Instead, I keep Goldie and Coop talking about the wedding and their honeymoon. They’re headed to Italy next Monday.

The food is so good, it’s hard not to inhale. I may or may not tear up a little behind my sunglasses as I savor a particularly satisfying bite of my grouper sandwich—just the right proportion of bun, fish, and slaw.

It tastes like summer, and if my stomach was at one hundred percent, I’d totally have another, tight pants be damned. I keep realizing how much I missed carbs.

The sun climbs higher in the sky, warming our shoulders. The boat drifts easily on a docile sea, the water plunking against the hull. It’s hard not to imagine how lovely a nap on those sunbathing chaises would be after a meal like this.

Tom sits at attention at Riley’s feet. Riley rolls his eyes, pretending to be annoyed, but I catch him sneaking Tom several bites of grouper throughout

the meal.

“That”—Goldie gestures at her empty plate—“was better than sex.”

Cooper’s head snaps back. “You wound me!”

“Okay, fine, I’m lying. Orgasms are incredible when you’re pregnant.”

“And when you’re having them with me,” Cooper pouts.

“Obviously.” She smiles at her fiancé before turning back to Riley. “But seriously, that was the best seafood I’ve ever had. That sandwich? The grouper was like butter, and then the nice tangy crunch of the slaw—”

“Heaven, right?” Riley smiles that fucking handsome smile of his, and my stomach dips. I look away. He’s dangerously hot when he’s happy like this. “I wish I could take credit, but this was all Chef Penelope. And Lu.” He nods at me.

“Lu?” Goldie’s brow creases, her eyes moving to my face. “One, that’s a nickname I’ve never heard anyone use for you before.”

“That’s because my name is Louise.” I smile tightly.

“And two, how are you involved with the food?”

“I’m not,” I say quickly. I know where Riley is going with this. “Just, you know, back in the day, I was experimenting with a lot of recipes. A grouper sandwich was one of them. I was learning how to cook.”

“You knew how to cook,” Riley says. “As a matter of fact, she loved it so much she wanted to write a cookbook.”

Goldie’s eyes look like they’re about to pop out of her head. “Louise! Lu! How did I not know this?”

I grab my Aperol spritz and take a quick sip. I haven’t really touched it over the course of lunch. I’m still feeling a little queasy, and I’ve already filled my lifetime quota for doing dumb things while drunk. But I need some liquid courage.

“Louise. And it was stupid,” I say.

“It wasn’t stupid,” Riley counters.

I roll my eyes, even as my pulse takes off at a sprint. “Can we not talk about this? Actually, I feel like we should be going—”

“Not before I hear about your cookbook!” Goldie counters.

“Lu had a whole vision for how the book would come together,” Riley continues. “The concept was really interesting—really well done. Basically what you’d make for a table full of your favorite people while celebrating life at the beach. It’d have pictures of the Gibbes’s big old farm table set with different meals. There’d be cheese straws galore, fried chicken, grouper

sandwiches wrapped in butcher paper to take to the beach.” He gestures to his plate. “And then of course big, hearty dinners. Paella with a southern twist —”

“That sounds interesting,” Coop says.

I take another sip of spritz. My face is burning again.

I can’t tell if I’m embarrassed, angry, or sad about revisiting my cookbook. I gave up on the idea a long time ago. I’ve thought about it since, of course, but it’s always felt like a waste of time. It’s not happening, so why go back there? Especially when the whole thing was so tied up in my memories of Riley.

I clear my throat. “You add diced sweet potatoes and use Carolina gold rice.”

“Freaking *yum*,” Goldie replies.

Riley lifts his glass of sparkling water. “One of the best things I ever ate.”

“There’s a dirty joke in there somewhere,” Coop says with a laugh.

Goldie glances at me. “Pretty sure Louise doesn’t think it’s funny.”

I am struggling not to finish my spritz in a single gulp—struggling not to pepper Riley with the million questions zipping through my brain. Why is he so hung up on me writing this damn cookbook? Does he really believe I’m talented, or is he only trying to get in my pants? And why is so intent on making himself out to be the hero here? It’s wasted effort. I meant what I said—we are never, *ever* getting back together.

Whatever the case, it’s time to go.

First, though, I have to pee. “Restroom?”

“I’ll take you.” Riley sets down his drink. “It’s a bit of a maze—”

“I can figure it out. Down there, right?” I point to the steps leading into the cabin.

“Yes—”

“Great, I’ll be right back.”

I zip down the steps before Riley can follow me. The last thing I need is to be trapped with hottie-with-a-body Mr. President below deck. Tom tries to follow me, but Riley coaxes him back to the table with another bite of grouper.

I don’t want to linger, but I can’t help slowing down to admire the cabin’s interior. It’s just as beautifully restored and lovingly cared for as the deck above, with mahogany floors, walls, and ceilings. There’s a small kitchen to my left and a dining area to my right. Above the table and benches, a long

bookshelf runs the length of the room. It's packed with books whose spines are creased, pages soft from age and use. My heart twists when I see some of our old favorites: a classic fantasy trilogy, a few thrillers, and a handful of romances too.

I have to try very hard not to think about how Riley and I reenacted our favorite sex scenes from a particularly hot mafia romance, reading them over and over again to get the details just right. The effort makes my entire being ache.

I also try not to think about why Riley kept those specific books, and why he chose to display them so prominently. I turned him into a voracious reader that summer; I imagine he has oodles of books he could display on his bookshelf.

Instead, he chose the ones I introduced him to.

The ones we talked about on our meandering golf cart rides and stolen moonlit cruises.

I find the bathroom down a narrow hall to the left. It's tiny but beautiful, of course, all white tile and chrome fixtures.

It smells like him, and I see why: there's a bottle of Coppertone by the sink, cap still open.

The ache inside me is almost unbearable by the time I emerge from the restroom.

I need to get out of here.

I need to get laid.

I need to figure out why I can't ignore this shit knowing what I do about Riley. He isn't the guy I thought he was when I fell in love with him ten summers ago, and that alone should make it easy to keep my distance. Never mind the fact that he wasn't faithful and broke my heart.

But he keeps making me feel *things*, and I truly hate him for it.

I hate myself for not having more control over my emotions. I'm twenty-eight years old, for crying out loud. I know better.

But then Riley says things like *it wasn't stupid*, and all of a sudden my heart's taking a swan dive.

I turn the corner but draw up short when I see him descending the steps, his legs moving rhythmically, confidently, like he's trundled down those stairs thousands of times. His chest and shoulders strain against the starched fabric of his shirt as he ducks his head and steps off the final tread.

He takes off his sunglasses and tucks them into the V of his shirt. He

looks up and our eyes lock, the blue in his appearing especially saturated in the watery light inside the cabin.

Now I *really* can't breathe.

"I was just coming to find you," he says. "It's not exactly a huge space down here, but it is easy to get turned around."

A polite reply is on the tip of my tongue. *I'm fine. Your boat is rad. I should go, I know Goldie's getting tired.*

Instead I blurt, "Why'd you bring up the cookbook?"

He looks at me for a long beat. Raises his arm to grasp the edge of the opening in the ceiling above the stairs. The move is obscenely sexy, but the way he leans forward? The bulk of his body crowding mine?

It makes my brain short circuit.

"Because I always hoped you'd actually do it. But I never saw it—the cookbook—as the years passed. Believe me, I looked. I even set up a Google alert."

I've only had one panic attack. It was at my doctor's office last week. But I'm pretty sure I'm on the verge of another one right now: can't breathe, can't think, chest tight.

I still manage to let out a mirthless laugh. "Riley, I was never going to publish a cookbook. That was an eighteen-year-old's pipe dream. I live in reality now."

"How's reality treating you?"

Not great. "None of this makes sense. You steal my ideas, you steal my recipes, but then you tell my friends how great you'd think my cookbook would be?"

He leans toward me a little more. I should move, step back, but I don't.

My pulse is racing.

"It would be great. A bestseller for sure. I waited and waited for it, but since it never happened, I decided to take matters into my own hands. If you weren't going to make your dreams come true, I'd do it. Part of my plan to, well. . .win you back."

I stare at him. My brain scrambles to keep up with what he's telling me. Meanwhile, my heart is rioting inside my chest. I cover it with one hand and hold up the other. "Win me back?" A bark of harsh laughter escapes my lips. "Are you serious?"

But his eyes—they're dead serious. Calm and full and so damn gorgeous they're hard to look at.

“I never stopped wanting you, Lu.”

I grit my teeth. “That makes zero sense. *You* cheated on *me*. *You* broke up with *me*. I haven’t heard from you since.”

“I made a lot of mistakes.” His jaw tics. “I’d like to make up for them now if you’d let me.”

An ache spreads inside my throat. “Screw. You.”

“That’s why I opened Stede’s. Not to make a buck, but to keep your dreams alive. Your talent, your ideas, your food—that shit’s too important to let die, Lu.”

I tap my hand against my chest. “I’m the one who gets to decide that. How dare you assume you know me better than I know myself?”

His jaw keeps ticking. “I just hate to think you’ve lost touch with the girl I knew ten years ago. The wildly talented, insanely brave human who knew exactly what she wanted and wasn’t going to let anyone stop her from going after it.”

I swallow, hard. *Please, God, don’t let me throw up again.* “I have gone after my dreams.” My voice wobbles. It’s embarrassing. “Yeah, maybe I don’t live on a yacht—”

“Who do you think I bought all this for?” He tilts his chin, gesturing to our exquisite surroundings. “Why do you think I’ve worked as hard as I have to be able to afford a life like this?”

My heart is throbbing in my ears. I can’t keep up. Can’t make sense of what Riley’s telling me.

“Why should I care?” I retort.

“Because I did it all for you.” He lowers his voice. “Growing up as poor as I did, I swore my life would be different. I wanted it to be different so I’d finally be worthy of you, Lu Wade.”

The backs of my eyes burn. I blink, alarms going off inside my head. Feels like a bomb is detonating inside me. I can’t think. Can’t feel. I just stand there, numb, terrified, waiting to be blown to pieces.

Is he for real?

I don’t know what to say—what to address first—so I blurt, “Being worthy has nothing to do with money and everything to do with how you treat someone.”

“I told you, I didn’t—”

“Y’all fall overboard down there?” Goldie calls from above.

Riley drops his arm and clears his throat. “You can’t fall overboard when

you're inside the cabin.”

“You could fall out of a porthole.”

“Those aren't big enough. We'll be right up.”

“Good, because Louise and I have to get going.”

“Coming!” I force brightness into my tone as I wipe my eyes and move to step around Riley.

He stops me with a hand on my arm. “For the record, I think you should still do it. Write the cookbook.”

“That's a joke, right?” I pull my arm away. “This conversation is over.”

His eyes search mine. “You were never afraid of the truth. Not back then. What's changed?”

My nose stings. “That's rich, you bringing up the truth.”

“I'm trying to explain myself—”

“And I'm trying to get the hell out of here. Leave me alone, Riley.”

I push past him and hustle up the stairs, swallowing the lump in my throat.

elevēn

• • •

Riley

A Shot in the Dark

“IS that a stranger hanging out with your kid?” I shield my eyes from the sun so I can get a better look at the petite brunette in the red bikini. She’s helping my goddaughter build a sandcastle on the beach.

Beside me, Tuck grunts as he sits up on his board. “Remember that teacher my mom told me about? The one who was looking for a part-time gig while she got her master’s degree?”

“I do.”

“Welp, that’s her. And she’s my new nanny.”

I nearly fall off my board. I was already in the water when Tuck arrived with Katie and this new nanny, so I didn’t get to meet her.

Tuck and I rise up on a wave, the late afternoon sun glinting off the water in a blinding shade of orange. “No shit. She’s—”

“I know.” We fall back down. “She’s also twenty-two, and Katie loves her.”

“Ah. In other words, off-limits.”

“Yup.” Tuck screws an eye shut as he looks up at the sky. “It’s weird, right, if I ask Maren to wear a bathing suit that’s all one piece? Maybe with leggings or something?”

I glance behind us, searching for just the right wave. “Yeah, probably.”

“Fuck me.” Tuck tugs a hand over his face. “I just won’t come to the

beach with them anymore. I can do that.”

“Sure you can.”

“She’s living in the crofter.” Tuck’s house on the island has a detached garage with a small apartment above it. The crofter is approximately twenty feet from the main residence, and it overlooks the primary bedroom where Tuck sleeps. “And she doesn’t always close her shutters.”

“Then you close yours.”

“I do. But then when I open them in the mornings, I look out and there she is, walking around in just a T-shirt. No shorts. No fucking bra. I’d like to think I’m a decent man, but I have my limits.”

“Surely the Navy subjected you to harder tests than this one. Pun not intended.”

Tuck’s enormous chest barrels out as he sucks in a breath, his eyes on his daughter and her bikini-clad nanny. “I don’t know, man.”

“Godspeed.”

“Ha.”

I was wired after my exchange in *Dolly’s* cabin with Lu. The kind of angsty, heady, can’t-sit-still energy I can only burn off with sex or surfing. So after running over to Stede’s with Cooper to finalize the headcount for Friday’s cocktail party, I grabbed my surfboard and called Tuck and Abel. Luckily all our dockhands showed this afternoon, so Tuck was off ferry duty and able to meet me at East Beach for an impromptu surfing session. Abel already went for a run this morning and didn’t have time.

Conditions aren’t great—the Atlantic was choppy at Frying Pan Shoals, but here on South Beach the water is calm—but it’s better than nothing.

The muscles in my arms and quads burn when I push to standing as I catch a wave. Tuck follows suit, his movements smooth and lethally quick for such an enormous human being. Guy is 6’ 4”, but he moves with more agility than I could ever hope to at six feet on a good day.

Tuck’s told me about his time in the military. He’s proud of the work he did, as he should be. But judging from his Jack Ryan moves, there’s a lot I don’t know about his Navy SEAL days. I imagine he was among the Commander in Chief’s first calls whenever shit went south.

Total badass.

Which makes the fact that he’s wrapped around his four-year-old’s little finger so damn satisfying.

We ride the wave, then paddle back out. I resolve to keep up with Tuck, if

only to prevent myself from thinking about Lu by pushing my body to the limit.

I catch wave after wave. Paddle harder than I ever have. My shoulders scream and my lungs ache, sweat pouring down my face and chest despite several refreshing spills into the water. I listened to Vérité on my drive over here, and I repeat some lyrics over and over again inside my head in the hopes it will distract me. Lu was right, this chick is *good*.

And still, I see Lu's face when I confessed why I opened Stede's. Why I've worked my ass off over the past decade to build an empire. The emotion in her eyes, the confusion—Christ, makes my chest twist every time I think about it.

Which is a lot.

I didn't intend to have a breakthrough in *Dolly's* cabin the day after I see Lu for the first time in a decade. But with nothing—everything—to lose, I put myself out there, and I'd like to think that moved her dial from *hate* to *like* the tiniest bit. I know she doesn't believe me. Not yet. But it's a start.

"The Wade girl," Tuck says, yanking me back to the present. "Something happened today, didn't it?"

We're sitting on our boards again, legs dangling in the water as we wait for another wave.

I raise my arm to wipe the sweat off my forehead. "Found out she's single."

"Oh boy."

"I'm gonna take my shot."

Tuck arches a brow. "I thought she was one of the major reasons you went into a death spiral at eighteen. You also said you didn't need to see her again."

"She's innocent. Our families . . . not so much. Point being, I messed up the first time, but now that I have another chance, I'm gonna get it right. I have to try."

"That was fast. What makes you so sure this is the right move?"

"It's her." I lift a shoulder. "She's changed, sure. But I know the girl I fell for is still there. She expanded my mind. Showed me new things. She made me want more, you know? And I want to draw that girl back out, because I think she might've gone into hiding."

"So you're saying Lu is the fire in your belly?"

"She's not the fire. But she's the one who stoked it. And that fire is the

reason I am where I am. And why *you* have such a sweet gig.”

Tuck grins. “Pay is pretty good. So what’s your first move gonna be, then?”

“I told her I’ve done everything I have over the past decade because I always wanted to win her back.”

He looks at me. “Dang, you ain’t afraid to come out swinging, huh?”

“Maybe that was a little much. But I had to do something. I’ve let her believe I’m an asshole for so long, and it’s time to change that.”

“Why?” Tuck narrows his eyes.

“Reasons.”

“Just tell her the truth, then.”

“I am. I will. I just . . . don’t want to overwhelm her or throw anyone under the bus unnecessarily. I keep telling myself baby steps.”

My friend tucks his chin to spear me with a look. “You just confessed to investing years of your life and millions of your dollars in her ‘passion’. That ain’t a baby step.”

“I offered her hate sex. Would that be better? A smaller step, maybe?”

Tuck snorts. “Jesus fucking Christ. I thought I was in trouble.”

“You are. But so am I. It’s the only in I have right now. And yeah, maybe she can work out some of her feelings for me when we’re together, and the hate sex will become something more. Much more.”

Glancing over his shoulder at an approaching wave, Tuck says, “You’re gonna catch feelings.”

“I already have.” Or, really, the feelings I had for her ten years ago clearly never went away.

He grins again, shaking his head. “I give you credit. You ain’t afraid to dive in headfirst. Love is some scary ass shit, man. Not gonna lie, I’m still terrified.”

Tuck went through a nasty divorce a few years back. It killed him that his ex abandoned their family—she left them for a guy back in Tennessee, where she’s from—but now that some time has passed, I think part of him is relieved he doesn’t have to deal with her shit anymore. Even while another part of him hurts for his motherless daughter.

“You kidding?” I run a hand through my hair. “I’m scared as hell. But I’m doing it anyway. I owe it to her. To myself too.”

Tuck’s eyes move to the beach. Maren and Katie are in the water now. They wave to us. Tuck and I wave back.

“That fucking bikini,” he says through gritted teeth, smile still pasted on his face. “Gonna be the death of me.”

I get a call from Marianne about some glass hurricanes Goldie requested, so after I shower up, I head for Marsha Marsha Marsha down the street in Harbour Village.

The second I walk through the door, Marsha and Mom round the counter to greet me with hugs. They’re partners and co-owners of the cute little shop that’s quickly become a local favorite here on the island.

“Hello, handsome.” Mom pats my cheek. “We’ve been thinking about you.”

“We heard Louise Wade threw up on you earlier at the club,” Marsha says.

Mom nods. “What happened? Are y’all okay?”

“Hello to y’all too,” I say with a laugh. “Never fails to amaze me how fast word spreads around here. She’s fine. I’m fine. We’re all fine.”

“Fine indeed.” Mrs. Underwood, a fifty-something romance novelist who lives a few blocks from the marina, looks me up and down. “Clary, you sure do make beautiful babies.”

Mom smiles, the skin around her eyes crinkling. “He’s not a baby anymore, is he?”

I rest my arm on her shoulders. “I’ll always be your baby, Mom.”

“So you and Louise Wade, huh?” Mrs. Underwood says. “Your mom was saying y’all used to live in the Gibbes’s house. If I had to guess, your story with Louise is . . . what, second chance? Forbidden love? Opposites attract, perhaps?”

My pulse skips. “Um?”

“I’m always looking for new ideas. *The Notebook* was a huge hit for a reason.”

“Are you saying I look like Ryan Gosling? Because I’ll take that compliment.”

“Oh, honey, Ryan ain’t got nothing on you.” Mrs. Underwood gives me another once over. “Would you consider posing for one of my covers? I pay good money.”

I laugh again. “It’d be an honor.”

“Aw, look, he’s blushing.” Marsha grins. “We’ll leave you alone, Riley. But if you ever want to invite Louise over for dinner—”

“Because that wouldn’t be weird, inviting a girl I’m not even dating over for dinner,” I say.

Mom’s eyes dance when they meet mine. “Y’all seemed to be good friends back then. Why not invite her over now?”

Where do I begin? But I don’t want to ruin Mom’s day, so I don’t say anything.

I give my mother a lot of credit. It would’ve been easy for her to become bitter. Dad left her high and dry with an empty bank account and a teenage son to raise. But then I started making a little money, and she was able to retire from housekeeping to dabble in antiques. Then she and Marsha fell in love after running into each other in France. Now they own Marsha Marsha Marsha, a luxury boutique that’s exploded in popularity thanks to a combination of their cute social media feed and the amazing finds Mom and Marsha sell here. Antiques, hand-poured candles, and gifts galore.

I was Marsha Marsha Marsha’s first investor. To this day, it’s one of my best calls. Mom and Marsha are even talking about opening a second location by the Maritime Market, Bald Head’s other shopping center in the middle of the island.

Point being: Mom found happiness after my dad burned her life to the ground. It’s taken ten years, but she’s in a good place.

She’s also a good person, and I know she wants me to be happy.

“I’m actually here on behalf of Cooper and Goldie. I hear y’all might have some glass hurricanes we’re looking for? Marianne said something about a tablescape for the reception.”

Marsha’s expression lights up. She taps her finger to her lips. “We’ve got just the thing! I don’t know how many you’re looking for, but we’ve got several gorgeous antique pairs in the back.”

I follow her and snap some pictures, which I send to Coop, Goldie, and Marianne. I wonder if I should send them to Lu too—Marianne did say she was the one to mention the hurricanes—but decide against it.

Like Tuck so kindly said, I came out swinging with that confession this morning. I want to let Lu know I’m interested, but I also don’t want to send her running for the hills.

Pumping the brakes is the right call here.

Also, who knows if she still has the same number?

But on my way out of the store, I do swipe a coconut scented candle from the display by the register.

Lu clearly still loves coconut. So do I. I'll light it—when—she spends the night.

It's a literal shot in the dark.

But it's one I'm taking.

twelve

...

Louise

Tug of War

I GIVE the shrimp in the cast iron skillet a toss, then lean in to give them a sniff. The tang of the barbecue sauce floods my senses, along with the briny scent of the shrimp.

The knot in my throat loosens ever so slightly for the first time since I ran off *Dolly* like she was on fire earlier today.

“Think the shrimp still needs more butter,” I say.

Aunt Lady, who’s refilling my water glass beside the stove, leans over to take a peek. “Yep. A tablespoon or three oughta do it.”

“More butter is always a good idea.” Mom empties a bottle of Chardonnay into her glass. “So is more wine.”

Aunt Lady bends down to dig another bottle out of the wine fridge. “Cheers to that. How nice is it, us ladies back in the kitchen again together?”

“We’re just missing Granny.” I stir in the butter, which immediately melts in the pan to create this delicious, creamy sauce that will be perfect for dipping.

Speaking of dipping—I take a French baguette out of the oven, which smells divine. Lady carefully slices it while I give the kale salad one final toss, deciding at the last minute it needs one more handful of freshly grated Manchego cheese.

I also made a pot of grits (I added several handfuls of that Manchego to

this as well) and an icebox pie for dessert.

Surveying the spread, Mom lets out a low whistle. “Louise, you really outdid yourself.”

Cooking has always been a form of self-care for me. It’s where I feel most connected to myself, and to my friends and family. Especially when I’m cooking something delicious and carb-heavy. Feels nice to return to the recipes I haven’t made in a while.

It’s also a really great distraction. Goldie did a good job of keeping me busy today, but we ended up cutting our errands short when she ran out of energy around four o’clock. I found myself back at the house, exhausted but unable to rest, thanks to Riley fucking Dixon.

What the hell kind of game is he playing? On the one hand, he was the grade-A asshole who promised to love me for as long as he was alive, but then dumped me without warning when he confessed to being unfaithful.

Lest we forget, I never heard from him again. No explanation. No apology.

And then he tells me out of the blue that everything he’s done—the money he’s made, the restaurant he’s opened, the life he’s built—has all been part of a plan to *win me back*.

I don’t believe him. If any of that’s true, why I haven’t I heard a word from him in ten years? He’s had plenty of opportunity to make things right, and he hasn’t.

But the intensity in his eyes when he said *I did it all for you, I did it to be worthy of you, Lu Wade*, haunts me. I can’t shake the feeling that the story he’s telling isn’t all bullshit.

But I have to keep reminding myself that Riley is an excellent liar. He fucked me over once. I refuse to let him do it again.

Still. While spending the rest of the day in the kitchen has been a great distraction from thinking about Riley and his arms and why he suddenly put himself out there the way he did, making all this food has me thinking about that damn cookbook.

The one I dreamed up with Riley that summer ten years ago.

Giving up that dream hurt at first. But after a couple years, working at my family’s firm, The Gibbes Group, felt normal. It felt right, especially after Pa introduced me to Patrick and we began dating. We bonded over our dedication to our corporate jobs and the lifestyle that came with them. Yes, the hours were long. But the vacations we were able to take were awesome.

We bought a house. Ate out often.

Do I love my job? No. Were Patrick and I as crazy about each other at the end of our relationship as we were at the beginning? Also no. To be honest, I was never as crazy about Patrick as I was about Riley. I loved Patrick, don't get me wrong. But the feelings I had for Riley went deeper and were far more intense. Maybe because I was eighteen? Because he was my first everything?

I don't know. But I do know that up until two weeks ago, life was all right, and that was enough.

I just wish I felt the way I do right now, plating beautiful food for a meal with my favorite people in what used to be my favorite place on the planet, more often.

But really, how much can I expect out of life? It's asking for too much, isn't it, to love what I do, and *be* in love, and be successful too? You can't have it all.

Unless you're a man. But that's another topic for another day.

My head feels uncomfortably crowded when I finally sit at the table with Mom and Lady.

"I told Granny we'd FaceTime her." I prop up my phone against a heavy brass pepper mill. "Maybe she'd like to eat with us."

Lady nods, peeling the translucent shell off a perfectly cooked shrimp. "Bet she'd love that."

Granny must've remembered to charge her phone this time, because she picks up on the first ring, a big old smile on her face. "It's my three beautiful ladies, eating some beautiful food. Warms my heart! Gracious, would you look at those shrimp! Louise has been cooking, I see."

"Lucky for us." Mom sops up the sauce with a piece of bread. "These shrimp are amazing, Mama."

Granny smiles at me. "How much butter you use?"

"You don't want to know," I reply.

"Right answer. Oh, how I wish I could be there with y'all."

Lady holds up her wine glass. "Miss you, Mama."

Granny holds up what appears to be a margarita. "Miss you more."

I answer Granny's questions as I peel my shrimp and eat hunk after hunk of bread. "So far, so good on the wedding front. Goldie and Coop really lucked out."

"I'm so glad. I'm also glad you're eating again. You seem to be feeling better?"

I blink, surprised to find that I really am feeling . . . not good, but not bad either.

“I’m okay,” I answer honestly. “I think the carbs are helping.”

“Carbs help everything,” Lady replies. “Maybe that’s why Patrick was so miserable. He was hangry.”

“And an ass.” Granny shakes her head. “I’m telling you, Lulu, you may not recognize it now, but I think you’ll be glad that relationship didn’t work out. Just look at me and your m—”

The doorbell rings, making me jump. “Must be the golf cart guy.”

“Riley’s golf cart guy?” Granny asks.

I drop my fork. “How do you know Riley has a golf cart guy?”

“Not my fault that man’s got his fingers in every pie on that island. Maybe he’ll put his fingers in your—”

“What in the *world* are they mixing in your cocktails at that facility?” Mom asks, horrified.

“I’ll get the door,” I say, rising to my feet.

Lady rises too, wiping her mouth on one of Granny’s monogrammed linen napkins. “I want to see the golf cart guy.”

I grab my phone. “We’ll talk to you later, Granny.”

I don’t know why I run down the stairs. It’s not like Riley’s going to personally return Old Winny.

Lady hot on my heels—wait, why is she also running?—I open the door to find an enormous man covered in tattoos standing on the front step.

It’s Tuck, Riley’s friend. I met him once or twice that summer ten years ago, but we never really got to hang out. Riley talked a lot about him though.

“Evening, y’all. Apologies for the bother, but I got your golf carts.”

I blink. “Carts? But there was only one.”

Lady pokes her head out the door. “Hey, Tuck. Your daddy here?”

Another man’s face appears over the first’s shoulder. They’re carbon copies of each other, but the older one’s dark hair is peppered with grey. “That you, Lady?” His face creases in a smile. “Hello. Tuck asked me to help him with his errand over here—I drove one of the carts.”

“Lucky for us.” My aunt curls her hair behind her ear. “Hello, Joe. By the way, the shrimp are delicious. Thanks for the recommendation.”

I’ve heard about Joe from Riley, but I’ve never met him.

He puts his hands on his hips, the skin at the edges of his eyes crinkling. “I’m glad y’all are enjoying ’em. Stop by the stand anytime—we always love

seeing a familiar face. Special's always on for you."

"Careful, Joe, or I just might take you up on that every day this summer."

"I wouldn't mind that one bit."

"Bet you say that to all the women on the island."

"Hell no, Lady. Only you, for shrimp *and* for crab."

Aunt Lady curls her hair behind her ear again, even though it's already tucked neatly away from her face. "I would make a joke about you giving me crabs—"

"Okay then." I smile up at Tuck, who's looking at me with his brow furrowed. "About those golf carts. I only had one that needed to be repaired."

Tuck holds out two sets of keys. "We repaired one. The other's brand new."

"Brand new?" Lady blinks. "I didn't buy a new cart."

"Courtesy of Riley. He said you needed an upgrade? Something more reliable?" Tuck is still looking at me funny. "Good to see you again, by the way."

My stomach dips. Does that mean Riley's told Tuck I'm back?

And did Riley really just buy us a new freaking golf cart and have it delivered to our front door?

"Good to see you too. Do you work for Riley now, or . . .?"

"I do. But so do half the people on this island, so that's nothin' special."

Joe's paw of a hand lands on his son's shoulder. "Tuck's being modest. He's Riley's right-hand man—the guy he trusts with the most important stuff."

A bark of disbelieving laughter escapes my lips. "Does Riley own every business on Bald Head?"

"Pretty much," Tuck says with a shrug of those massive shoulders. "Anyway, y'all enjoy the new cart." He holds out the keys again.

"I—we can't accept this." My heart pounds as I stare at the shiny silver key dangling from a foam keychain that reads *DIXON CARTS & MORE: For All Your Pleasure Cruising Needs*.

Freaking adorable.

And I am going to freaking kill Riley for doing it yet again—for being obscenely generous. For trying to "win me back".

This is *not the man I know*.

I grab the keys. "I'm returning this. Right now."

"Shop's closed," Joe says. "And even if it wasn't, there's no way Riley'll

take back the cart.”

I go up on my tiptoes so I can see the marina. Clouds are gathering overhead and it’s getting dark, but I can see *Dolly’s* windows lit up in her slip by the ferry dock.

Riley’s home.

“We really appreciate y’all stopping by,” Lady is saying. “Joe, next time you’ll have to come for dinner when we make your shrimp.”

“I’d be much obliged, Lady. Thank you.”

Tuck’s looking at me again. His brown eyes are kind but full, focused, like he’s trying to tell me something.

“Riley wants to do something nice for you,” he says at last. “Let him.”

There’s a tart reply on the tip of my tongue, but Tuck is ambling down the steps before I can utter a single word. Joe offers us a wave goodbye, his gaze lingering on my aunt for a beat too long before he and his son head down the street in the deepening darkness.

“What the ever-living fuck.” I whirl around and stalk back inside. “Where the hell are my shoes?”

“Everything all right, honey?” Mom calls from upstairs.

“Riley Dixon just bought her a golf cart!” Lady calls back.

I jam my feet into my Birkenstocks. “I’m returning it.”

“Well, now, wait a second—”

“The nerve of him, to think I can be bought.”

Lady blinks, clearly confused. “Okay, I feel like there’s something I don’t know here, so I’m going to back away slowly and let you do your thing.”

“I won’t be long. I’m just driving the cart to his boat and leaving it there.”

I hear footsteps running overhead. Mom. “Well, at least bring a plate of food with you! From what I hear, the poor man lives alone and could probably use a home-cooked meal.”

Aunt Lady rolls her eyes. “Because men clearly can’t take care of themselves without a woman’s help.”

“I am *not* bringing him food!” I toss up my hands. “Ugh, you’re getting this all wrong.”

But Mom is already down the steps, a plate covered with tinfoil in her hands. “Be kind, would you? Thank him for the lovely gesture, but say it’s completely unnecessary. The food will lessen the blow.”

“Mom, seriously, he doesn’t need food. Nor does he deserve it.”

She pats my cheek. “Perhaps. But a plate of your food is not to be wasted.

I won't let you leave without it."

"Fine." Rolling my eyes, I take the plate. "But I can't promise I won't throw it in his face."

"Seems extreme for buying you a new golf cart," Aunt Lady says.

"Y'all think you know Riley, but you don't. I'll be right back!"

I yank open the door and head for the garage, noticing the grey clouds gathering overhead. On the tiny driveway, I encounter a gleaming new golf cart painted in blue, my favorite color. It's a big one, six seats, with all-terrain tires and butter-soft leather upholstery.

I toss the plate onto the passenger seat and climb in. "Seriously, fuck this guy for life."

Of course the cart is a dream to drive. And of course it has a built-in radio, complete with satellite radio.

But it's the station the radio is set to that really makes my blood boil.

Channel 84. Stevie Nicks radio.

My eyes catch on something in the cupholders. My throat tightens when I see it's a pair of front-row tickets to Stevie's upcoming concert in Charlotte. Face value: eight hundred bucks each.

Jesus, what is Riley really after here? I don't buy him wanting to win me back. Does he want to get laid? He did offer me hate sex last night.

Surely he has other women to call for that, though.

Surely he wasn't serious when he said he spent the last decade building a big, beautiful life *for me*.

I whip into a parking spot beside the dock, catching the plate of food just before it careens into the windshield. I grab it and the concert tickets and hurry to the dock's bolted entrance. Blink when a drop of rain lands on my eyelashes.

"Riley!" I call. "Riley Dixon, what the *hell*?"

My heart pounds in my throat as I wait for him to appear. The marina is especially gorgeous this time of day, even with the clouds. The whites and grays of the darkening sky catch on the water's calm surface. The air is warm, the heat of the day a fading memory, and the smell of the ocean fills my head. Boats bob lazily in their slips, rigging clanking in a soft breeze.

It's quiet. Calm. I imagine it's not that different from when good old Stede trolled these waters how many hundreds of years ago.

I loved it here. Hard not to.

But then Riley went and ruined it for me, and now I'm not sure how to

respond to all this beauty. How can I appreciate something that went on existing when I suffered category-5 hurricane level destruction?

“Lu?”

My stomach plummets when I see him. He steps off *Dolly* in bare feet, reaching up to pluck the baseball hat off his head and put it on backward.

The motion is so achingly familiar—so unspeakably hot—it makes my chest feel heavy.

That heaviness migrates lower and gathers between my legs as I watch him jog toward me, eyes locked on mine. Tom at his heels, tail wagging.

“Everything all right?” Riley asks.

The motherfucker’s not the least bit out of breath when he unlocks the door and holds it open for me. He’s wearing a Bald Head Island T-shirt and a pair of broken-in khaki shorts. His nose is sunburnt.

Tonight he smells like coconut. Even in bare feet, he towers over me.

A wave of desire hits me, hard, which only pisses me off more.

Tom noses my leg, panting.

“Hey, Tom.” I give the dog a quick pat on the head before I hold out the golf cart key and Stevie Nicks tickets to his shithead owner. “This is yours. The tickets too.”

He looks down at them. “Nope. They’re yours.”

“I’m not accepting any of it.”

“I’m not taking any of it back.”

He looks at me. I stare him down. Eyes slipping to his mouth. The scruff that covers the sharp angles of his jaw. The soft sinews of his throat.

“You need reliable transportation,” he says softly. “Something safe. I love Old Winny, but she’s past her prime. If you ever got stuck . . .”

The words burst out of me. “Why do you keep doing this? Honestly? You broke up with me ten years ago and disappeared. Now I run into you—purely by chance, by the way—and all of the sudden you’re Daddy Warbucks, giving away golf carts and telling me you made all this money to deserve me or some shit?”

His lips quirk into a cocky grin. “You can call me Daddy anytime, princess.”

“Fuck you.” I blink when a raindrop lands on my nose.

Grin fading, he holds the door open a little wider. “C’mon. Let’s talk.”

“Whatever you have to say to me, you can say it right here.”

“Lu, it’s about to start pourin’.” He glances up at the sky. “You don’t

gotta come inside, but let's at least get on the deck underneath an awning."

I bite the inside of my cheek. I don't trust this bastard as far as I can throw him.

I don't trust myself when he looks—and smells—this good.

But then another raindrop lands on my face, then another. Riley blinks when one hits him too.

Rolling my eyes, I step through the gate. "Fine."

thirteen

...

Riley

Tan Lines

WE WALK TOWARD DOLLY, the dock swaying in time to our hurried steps. Tom lopes beside Lu, trying to jump on her every two seconds.

“Dude, stop bein’ ugly!” I gesture to the boat. “Get on up.”

Instead, he sticks his nose into the foil-covered plate Lu is holding. She manages a tight smile. “Smells good, right?”

“That’s enough, Tom.” I take the plate from her. “What’s this?”

“Dinner that I made.” Her eyes are sharp when they meet mine. “Mom insisted I bring it. Little does she know I’m planning to throw it in your face. Would you take these tickets already?”

I pretend not to see them. Tom nearly topples Lu as he leaps on board *Dolly* at the same time Lu is stepping onto the deck. I offer her my hand just in time. She grabs onto it. A shockwave of awareness bolts through my skin from the place where her palm meets mine.

“Jesus, Tom! I’m really sorry about him.”

“He’s fine.” She drops my hand as she steps beneath the awning that partially covers the deck. Then she puts her hand on the small of her back, wincing when she twists to the side. She sore from standing in the kitchen?

“You still cookin’, then?”

“Not as often as I’d like to, but yeah.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Lu tilts her head, clearly annoyed. “Seriously, Riley, drop the act already, would you?”

“Act?”

“Stop pretending like you’re the good guy when we both know you’re a scumbag.”

Her words hollow out my chest. I set down the plate on the table. Lu follows me and puts down the tickets beside the plate. I pick them back up and deftly slide them into my pocket, making a mental note to return them to the cart when we’re done here.

Strands of Lu’s hair catch in the breeze as she crosses her arms over her chest and shoots daggers at me with her eyes. Tom tries to jump onto the bench at the table so he can eat the food. I grab his collar and guide him back onto the floor.

Then I rest my back against the table. Guarding it from Tom, sure. But I also curl my hands around the table’s edge so I don’t reach for Lu. “Maybe I had to be the bad guy.”

“What does that mean, you ‘had to be the bad guy’? No one was putting a gun to your head, telling you to cheat on me.” She uncrosses her arms and jams a finger into my chest. “That, you did all by yourself.”

My body thrums. I tighten my grip on the table.

She’s too damn close.

She’s not close enough.

“I didn’t cheat.”

Lu blinks, eyes going wide as she lets out a low chuckle. “Sure you didn’t.”

“I mean that, Lu. I was never unfaithful to you. I’m not that kind of man.”

“Then why’d you tell me you were?”

The space between us is alive. Tension. Pain. Desire.

Rain patters on the awning overhead. Lands softly on the deck by our feet.

“I knew it’d make you hate me.”

Her eyes are blazing now. “Mission accomplished.”

“I knew our relationship wasn’t going to work out, so saying I cheated was the only thing my dumbass eighteen-year-old self could think of that would really break us up. You and me—we came from different worlds, Lu. It was never going to work. I was ready to drop everything for you, and I

know you felt the same. I loved you, Lu. More than I ever thought possible.”

I watch her throat work as she swallows, taking a beat to absorb what I’m telling her. The rain gets louder.

So does the sound of my pulse in my ears.

“That kinda love at that age, it’s dangerous,” I continue. “I didn’t want you dropping out of school or blowin’ up your relationship with your family to be with me.”

She blinks, eyes going wide. “If that’s true—and I’m not saying it is—then what you did wasn’t fair. You made a huge, life-changing decision without involving me.”

“Course it’s not fair. But it felt like the right thing to do at the time.”

Lu blinks again, shaking her head. “Destroying the person you supposedly loved more than anything in the world was the right thing to do?”

“I was young and stupid. I was just trying to protect you, Lu.”

“It’s fucking Louise!” she shouts, throwing up her hands. “God, Riley. Just...*Jesus.*”

“You still don’t believe me.”

She stares at me, eyes wider and more vulnerable than I’ve ever seen them. She steps forward so she’s in my face again, same as she was that night in my office. “I have absolutely no reason to, no.”

“Give me a chance.”

“Give me a break.”

My heart goes wild. I step forward so I’m in her face now, our noses inches apart. The rain is loud and so is my voice. “That’s what I’m trying to do! I’m trying to fix all the shit I messed up so badly. And I messed up bad, Lu. I know I have a lot to atone for. So gimme a fuckin’ chance to explain.”

Tom cowers beneath the table. Lu scoffs. “If you think I’d ever forgive you—”

“Trust me, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to forgive myself.”

She’s shaking her head again. “What you’re saying is bullshit. Our relationship could’ve worked. We were more alike than different—”

“You really think your granddaddy wouldn’t’ve killed me if he found out I had my hands all over you? And my mom, you know she needed that job. At least until I could get on my feet. Make my way in the world. And I had no idea how long that’d take. I didn’t want to string you along. Have you missing out on opportunities because of me.”

Louise’s lips part. “Riley, I almost flunked out of college because of

you.”

“I’m sorry! I’m so—fuck.” I turn away and run a hand over my face in an effort to collect myself. I put that hand on my hip and turn back to Lu. “I’m really fucking sorry that happened, Lu. I had no idea.”

“You would have if you’d returned any of my calls or texts.”

The rain is coming down hard enough to ricochet off the deck, spraying my legs and feet. “I knew you’d fight me on it—knew you’d come back—so I did what I could to make sure you stayed away. I intentionally hurt you.”

“You almost killed me, Riley. I’m not about to let you do it again.” She looks me in the eye. “Leave. Me. The *hell*. Alone.”

Then she brushes past me, shoulder bumping mine as she heads for the dock.

For half a heartbeat I can only stare at her retreating back. Do I leave her alone? Or do I listen to the voice screaming in my head, my chest, telling me to chase her?

“You don’t think I didn’t die inside too?” I shout, stepping out into the rain. “It’s why I’m sober now. Or part of the reason. I hit rock bottom after we broke up. Between my parents’ divorce and losing you, I was a wreck. If I wasn’t working, I was drinking. It was the only thing that made the pain go away. Mom and Tuck had an intervention with me three weeks before my twenty-first birthday. I haven’t had a drink since.”

She pauses at the step that leads to the swimming platform. Turns her head to look at me over her shoulder.

She’s crying, face crumpled. Raindrops roll down her temples. Off the tip of her nose. The urge to spill it all—to throw the people she loves to the wolves—is strong enough to make me dizzy.

But I made her want to strangle me once upon a time. I’m not about to make her detest anyone else. Especially the person she adored so much.

“Please,” she says. “Please tell me you’re not lying about that.”

I put a hand over my heart. The rain feels good on my overheated skin. “I’m not a fucking liar, Lu. I was just a kid with his back against the wall.”

She looks at me, chest heaving. “Why’d you never reach out, then? You had so much time—”

“I did reach out. I came back for you three years ago.”

“Are you kidding?” Her eyes are wide again. She shivers.

I frown. “Aw, Lu, you’re freezing. Let’s get you inside—”

“Tell me,” she says with a slight shake of her head. “Tell me, Riley.”

I draw a sharp breath through my nose. “I drove my ass to Charlotte with the intention of winning you back. I was going to tell you the truth then—try to undo the damage I’ve done. I knew you’d still hate me, but I had to try. So I did a little research and found out you worked at The Gibbes Group uptown. My plan was to wait outside your building in the hopes you’d come out at some point. And you did. Only you came out on the arm of a good-lookin’ guy. Y’all were talking, clearly having a good time.” I swallow the moon in my throat. “He made you laugh. You looked so happy, Lu. Broke my fucking heart, but I wasn’t about to mess with the good thing you had.”

My blood leaps when she turns around and takes a step toward me. Her hair is plastered to her head now. Her dress clings to her torso, the outline of her pebbled nipples clearly visible through the thin material.

“You’re kidding,” she repeats.

I keep shaking my head. “Nope. Still have the speech I was gonna give you on my phone if you wanna see it.”

“Why?”

“Why’d I keep the speech?”

“Why do you still want me?” She’s close enough now that I can see the way the rain’s clumped together her dark eyelashes. “Why go through all that trouble for a girl you dumped ten years ago?”

I search her eyes. Pulse leaps when I see a glimmer in them. Hope? Belief?

Fire? Not the kind she’d use to burn me to the ground.

The kind I’d use to make her come.

Swallowing, I say, “I never stopped thinking about you. You opened up the world for me, Lu, and I wanted to give you the world in return. Still do.”

Her expression softens. “I introduced you to Stevie Nicks and romance books. Hardly the world.”

“It was enough for a country boy like me. You showed me what was possible—what to aim for—and without you, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Which is why I want to make sure the girl I fell so hard for is still alive and well.” I nod at her. “Lu Wade, cookbook author, brunette, Dolly Parton fan. Dreamer. I want you to be who you really are, Lu, and I’m worried the world’s chipping away at you, piece by piece.”

Her face crumples all over again. I step forward at the same time she steps toward me.

My stomach bottoms out.

“Fuck you,” she whispers.

My heart falls. “Lu, I’m begging you—”

“Fuck.” She flattens her palm against my stomach. “You.”

My body ignites at her touch. When she moves that hand lower, eyes flicking to my mouth, my dick throbs.

Holy shit, is this happening?

Did I finally break through to her?

“This mean you’re gonna keep the golf cart?” I ask hoarsely.

She bites her lip. “I don’t know what this means. I just—let me work it out the way I want to.”

I lean in. Imagine slanting my mouth over the lush softness of hers. “I’m all yours, princess. But let’s make a deal. I make you come on my dick, you keep the golf cart and the tickets. You don’t come, I take it all back.”

Her nostrils flare. The rain comes down harder. “No kissing.”

My blood roars. “That’s fucking stupid.”

“It’s what I want.”

“I don’t love it.”

“You’re not supposed to love it. This is hate sex. Your words, not mine.”

I draw a sharp breath through my nose. “So you still hate me.”

“Yes. That gonna be a problem?” Her hand is on the waistband of my shorts now.

Damn her.

“Naw, princess, that ain’t gonna be a problem. Always liked a challenge. Now let’s get you inside already.”

Then I curl my hand around the nape of her neck and stalk below deck. Tom, being Tom, follows us. Love my dog, but he keeps interrupting the action. I put him in his crate and head to my cabin at the front of the boat. Heart thundering the whole time, its hard, insistent beat echoing my thoughts.

Holy. Fucking shit. Lu Wade. Is here.

And I’m gonna make her lose her damn mind.

The exhaustion I saw in her, the defeat. The hunger. I’mma take care of all that shit. Maybe then she’ll believe me when I tell her I did what I had to ten years ago. And I’m going to do what I have to do now to win her back.

I always loved making the prim and proper country club girl in her come apart.

Can’t wait to do it again.

She bounces on the mattress when I throw her on the bed. I turn off the

lights and whip off my hat, which is soaked. Then I light that new candle I set on my bedside table. Her dark eyes are liquid in the dim light.

They catch on me. I reach behind me to grab the collar of my shirt and take it off. Her lips part on an exhale. “*Jesus.*”

I run a hand over my stomach. “Hate me more?”

“I do, yeah.” She licks her lips, transfixed. “How do you look like this at almost thirty?”

Lifting a shoulder, I reach down to run my hands up her thighs. “Surfing. Sobriety.”

Her breath catches when I push her dress up and hook my fingers in the lacy band of her panties. Even they’re soaked from the rain. I pull them down.

Suck in a breath at the sight of her pussy.

It’s neatly groomed, a landing strip of dark hair leading my eyes to the apex of her slit, where her clit peeks through.

Blood surges to my dick.

“Bet you came here wet, didn’t you?”

Her brows curve upward, like she’s in pain. “Why don’t you find out?”

Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I put a hand on the inside of her thigh and guide her a little wider. She opens for me.

I groan.

“You got such a pretty pussy, princess.” I gently roll my thumb over her clit. Then I move lower. Move easily through her swollen slickness.

She’s *drenched*. My mind races. That mean what I think it does?

“Fuck,” I bite out. “When was the last time you were taken care of? Properly, I mean?”

Her hips roll into my touch as I dip the tip of my thumb inside her tight heat. “Too long.”

My heart contracts. Where the fuck was this ex-fiancé of hers? “I can tell. I’m gonna fix that.”

“So do it.” She’s panting now. “Properly, I mean.”

“Ain’t nothin’ proper about what I’m gonna do to you. Now get on your hands and knees.”

Her eyes go wide. “But I like—”

“Give me what I ask for so you can take what you need. The dress comes off, Lu. Everything comes off.”

I stand, watching her undress while I do the same.

My body ignites at the sight of her nakedness. She's thinner than I remember, but her tits are gorgeously full. Nipples pink and puffy. Just begging to be sucked. And the sweet slope of her belly that curves into hips, both of them marked with tan lines—

Yeah, my hands are definitely shaking as I shuck off my boxers. Lu's eyes go hazy when she sees my dick.

I take it in my hand. Give myself a long, lazy stroke, like I'm not about to blackout from the need to bury myself inside her immediately. "Don't tell me you're afraid."

"I'm not."

"You should be."

She climbs onto all fours, ass toward me, affording me a view of her pussy and asshole that nearly gives me a goddamn heart attack. "Like you even know what to do with that thing."

I bite the inside of my cheek. She's baiting me, and I fucking love it.

"Those are fightin' words, princess. Keep talking shit, and I'm gonna put this in your mouth to keep you quiet. Got it?"

"You're the one who keeps talking." She arches her back, making her glistening slit blossom. "You said you wanna give me something back, so give."

Challenge accepted.

"You still like it when I do this?" I glide my hand up to her throat. Give it a gentle squeeze. Her whole body convulses. "Aw, yeah, princess, you definitely like it when I do that. Good to know."

She reaches up and grabs my wrist. "Riley . . ."

I loosen my grip. "Too much?"

"No. It's just . . . I haven't done that in a while."

"Why not?" I furrow my brow. She used to love this.

More than anything, she loved trying new shit. Her open-mindedness was one of the things I liked most about her.

Made me want to push myself to try new things too.

"Feels a little, I don't know . . . dirty, I guess?"

"Last I checked, you didn't mind dirty. In fact, you liked it." I firm my hand on her throat again. "And I loved that you liked it."

She relaxes into my touch the tiniest bit.

"Don't tell me your ex—"

"I don't want to talk about him." She closes her eyes. Takes a breath.

“Yes, I like that. And yes, I want you to do it again.”

It’s obvious her ex didn’t make her feel safe to express her needs, her desires. Seriously, the more I hear about this guy, the more I despise him. But I clearly do make her feel safe. Nice knowing I’m still capable of that.

“Yes ma’am.” I climb onto the bed behind her and put a hand on her back between her shoulder blades. I press her torso down onto the mattress so that she’s on her elbows, angling her ass farther up into the air. “There we go, princess. Gimme all of you. Since you won’t let me kiss your mouth, I’m gonna kiss you here.” I press my thumb to her clit. “I’mma do it well too. I’m gonna bring you to the edge, but you ain’t goin’ over until I say you do. Got it?”

Her pelvis rocks into my touch. “If that’s what I want, sure.”

I don’t know if this is my first shot at pleasing Lu or my last. I’m not holding back.

This is all about giving her what she needs.

Judging by her hunger—both literal and figurative—she needs a lot.

So I lean in. I nose her slit, inhaling her salty-sweet scent. I hear the sheets rustle as she gathers them in her hands. I grab her leg and move it so she’s spread wider, and then I press my tongue to her clit. I give her a deep, savage lick, front to back, before I gather her clit between my lips and suck.

She cries out. Not my name. Not yet.

But she’s rolling her hips into my mouth.

She’s panting.

She’s here, totally present. No holding back. No shame.

Fuck. Yes.

I eat her pussy like I mean it. Circling the tip of my tongue over her clit. Licking inside her. I nip at her flesh. Suck on her. Thumb her slick heat to hold her open wider.

“Fuckin’ delicious.” I kiss her clit. “You’re perfect, princess.”

Lu moans. Her legs begin to shake. “Riley.”

“Talk to me.” I slip a finger inside her.

“Just like—*oh*.”

I nick her clit with my teeth. She jerks, head popping up. Both legs are shaking now.

Slipping a second finger inside her pussy, I feel her flutter around me. My lungs contract.

“Aw, yeah, you’re definitely close. Good girl for telling me.”

Straightening, I grasp her hips and roughly spin her onto her back.

Her tits bounce. She gasps, mouth falling open to form a perfect o. For a second I contemplate putting myself there. Girl could suck dick. Turned her on, being in control.

I decide to bet on myself and wait on that. Tonight is about her. We can practice giving head tomorrow, after the party. I'll ask her to stay. Then I'll ask her to get on her knees and swallow.

Groaning, I bite the inside of my cheek and take a short, hot breath through my nose.

I will not come before I'm inside her.

I will make this last.

I will make sure she's sore so she remembers who fucks her right.

I'll make her remember who she really is. Not the accomplished, upstanding blonde person. But this messy, horny, curious woman who's allowing herself to unravel in my bed.

One hell of a mission, sure.

But I didn't go from boat boy to successful businessman by playing it safe. I aimed high. Landed higher.

Her turn to get high.

Back in the day, we were religious about using condoms. But I don't want to fuck with them now. She's it for me. I'm ready to draw that line in the sand.

She's not, though. And wasn't I just preaching to Tuck about baby steps? Fucking Lu Wade bare is not a baby step.

So I grab a condom from the drawer in the bedside table and toss it to her. She always liked putting them on for me. "Do it right."

Without missing a beat, she sits up and carefully opens the packet. I get on my knees in front of her and fist my dick. The contact of my hand alone is overwhelming. How am I going to not explode when it's her wrapped around me?

Lu carefully swats my hand away, replacing it with her own. Tongue pressed to the corner of her mouth in concentration, she begins to roll on the condom. I curse when she leans in and sucks my latex-covered tip into the warm heaven of her mouth.

Her eyes flick to meet mine. They're dark. Hot.

Cupping her chin, I say, "See? Dirty. I like that, princess. I like it a lot."

Now she's the one fisting my dick as she rolls on the condom. She works

her hand while she sucks with her mouth. Pressure builds in my balls. The base of my spine.

“Enough.” I pull out of her mouth and gently push her back down onto the bed. “You’re too fucking good at that.”

Lu thumbs a string of saliva off her bottom lip as she looks up at me. “I know.”

I grab her leg and bend it, pressing her knee to her chest. “Remember our bet. You come, you keep the cart.”

“Make me come and we’ll talk.”

It kills me not to kiss her as I press my tip to her clit. I wanna taste her. Feel her rise into my caress again.

Baby steps.

The feel of her soft, tight heat pressing against me has me seeing stars. I circle her clit once, twice. Her tits rise on an inhale as her eyes roll to the back of her head.

Then I notch myself at her entrance. “I ain’t going slow unless you ask me to. Right now, princess. You gotta say the words or—”

“Or what?”

Reaching up to cup her breast, I thumb her nipple at the same moment I draw my hips back, then slam into her in a single, vicious thrust.

“Or I’m going to do that,” I growl. “Fuck, honey, you’re *tight*.”

The muscles in my lower back and legs spasm at the feel of her stretching to fit me. She gasps, eyes flying open, and grabs onto me. Fingers curling into my sides, making goosebumps break out on my arms.

Her gaze catches on mine. For a full beat the world dissolves, leaving behind only stillness. Pure sensation. Her grip on me. Her belly pressed against mine. The soft brown of her irises, clear and hungry.

The truth of her desire—the fact that she’s allowing me to see it—makes it hard to breathe.

We float there for as long as the need of our bodies allows. It feels so fucking good to just *be* with her.

Just be, period. No striving. Proving. Doing.

Her eyes move to my mouth. My pulse skips. She gonna let me kiss her?

“I . . . forgot how good this feels,” she whispers.

Her words give me a mushy feeling in my chest. I don’t wanna scare her. Come on too strong. So I joke, “Being with me?”

“Sex.”

My turn to blink. “Been a while?”

“Yeah.” She closes her eyes. I wait for her to explain.

She doesn’t.

So I duck my head and take her nipple into my mouth. Give it a gentle suck. “I’ll go slow to make up for lost time, then.”

“Can hate sex be slow?” She cracks open an eye. One side of her mouth quirks upward.

“Can be whatever the hell we want, princess.”

I lock eyes with her. And then, at the same moment, we begin to move.

Muscle memory at work again.

It quickly becomes a hard fuck. I thrust and she meets me, our bodies coming together with a rude slap. The angle allows me to go slow but deep. It’s a workout, holding back. Carving sharp, steady circles with my pelvis.

But she likes it, so I do it. Gladly.

I know she wanted to keep it as impersonal as possible with the no-kissing bullshit. But that means we look at each other the whole time.

And that somehow makes it feel more intimate than kissing ever could. I read her thoughts as they flicker across her face. *More*, her lips say when they fall open after I swivel my hips.

I give her more.

Yes, her eyes tell me when I reach between us to thumb her clit.

So I roll my thumb over her swollen flesh again and again. Her pussy clamps down on me. Nails dig into my sides.

“Riley. I’m close. I’m there. *Do it already.*”

The cabin’s windows are open. The air is cool now, thanks to the rain. But we still sweat, our skin sticking as the athleticism of our movements grows.

Her cheeks and chest are bright pink.

I nip at her neck before I take her other nipple in my mouth. At the same moment I press my thumb to her clit, hard. Her eyes squeeze shut.

“*Riley!*”

Her pussy pulses around my length. Her nails dig into my sides as her hips and legs jerk. She wants to bring her knees together, help abate the intensity of her orgasm, but I keep her spread wide by thrusting harder. *Harder*. Her tits bouncing. The need for release pounding through me.

She pulses around me again and again. Milking me.

“Fuck, honey.” I’m hanging on by a thread.

“Go,” she whimpers.

Don’t have to tell me twice.

Sensation, sharp and terrifying, rises up to meet me. The orgasm hits, and *hits*, knocking the wind out of me. I come in hot, hard pulses.

My control slips. I lean in for a kiss—something to soothe the roar inside me—and Lu shocks me by kissing me back.

For half a heartbeat I’m stunned into stillness. But then Lu’s soft mouth moves over mine.

A plea.

A promise?

Whatever the case, I kiss her back. Hard. I open the seam of her lips with my tongue and take long, thirsty pulls of her mouth.

The familiarity of her taste drives me fucking wild.

She moans into the kiss, her chin tipping up to keep pace with me.

I’m out of breath. Sweating bullets. But I keep kissing her anyway. We move in sync, her head tipping to the right when mine goes left. She sucks on my bottom lip—damn, I like that—and I brush my nose against hers, receiving another moan of gratitude.

I don’t know what this is. But it sure as hell don’t feel like hate.

fourteen

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Louise

Butterflies

I AM NOT A RULE BREAKER.

Except, apparently, when Riley Dixon is in the room. Then I'm a fucking rebel.

I suck a breath through my nose as his mouth plunders mine. I smell salt—the sweat on our skin, the air coming off the ocean—and coconut, thanks to the candle that flickers beside the bed.

He *lit* a goddamn *candle*.

He was a good kisser ten years ago. He's an even better kisser now. Creative. Unafraid. Patient.

I need to stop kissing him. Immediately.

Instead, I lick into his mouth and run a hand up his back, reveling in the smooth glide of the muscles there, the way they bunch beneath his skin. He's huge, and despite him holding up most of his weight on his forearms, I'm still breathless from the press of his body into mine.

From the way he uses his hips to pin me down on the mattress.

I'm worried the world's chipping away at who you really are.

I want to keep the girl I fell in love with alive.

How did Riley pick up on all that in the, what, few hours we've spent together so far?

And why does his concern—his attention—turn me on so much? I can't

remember the last time I had sex like this.

I feel wrung out. Cleansed.

Better.

I feel so much better than I did a mere half an hour ago.

Which is a big fucking problem. Or is it? Can I trust Riley? Or am I an idiot to go down this path again?

He's changed. Or maybe it's my perception of him that's changed.

Maybe he really has been the man I fell in love with all along. If what he's saying is true—if he left because he loved me too much, not because he didn't love me enough—that changes everything.

Everything.

So does the fact that he's kissing me like the world's about to end. I can't help but melt into his touch. I want to fuck again. I want to feel this way all the time. Adored. Safe.

Seen.

How playful the sex was, how obscene—I loved it. I could let go in a way I haven't in a long time.

That kind of freedom is delicious.

The rain hits the water outside the windows with a sigh. Drops onto the roof over our heads, an insistent drumbeat.

Riley bites the corner of my mouth before pulling away. I whimper at the loss of his heat. His touch. Which ordinarily would horrify me. I try very hard not to be needy, especially with men. But something about being with Riley unleashes a strong sense of *fuck that* in me.

So, fuck that.

“Don't stop,” I plead.

Laughter rumbles in his chest. “I'll kiss you all night if you'd let me, princess. But I don't want you gettin' a UTI. Let's get cleaned up, all right?”

My heart twists. His concern is . . . overwhelming.

So is the way his accent gets thick when he gets naked.

I nod. “Okay. Yeah.”

“I'm gonna pull out.” He rests his forehead on mine. “Lemme know if it hurts.”

There's a small pinch between my legs when he moves. I wince.

“Sore?”

“Going to be, yeah.”

He pushes up onto his hands above me, the muscles in his arms and chest

bulging. “Maybe I want you sore.”

“That’s kind of fucked up.”

He smirks. “Turns you on, though, doesn’t it? Knowing I want you to remember me every time you take a step?”

Turning my head, I give his chest a playful shove. It’s weird—and hot, so freaking hot—how well he still knows me after all this time.

I don’t realize I’m shaking until I try to stand. I grab onto the bedside table. Riley leaps to his feet beside me, forehead creased as he curls a steadying arm around my waist. “You really are sore.”

“It’s not that. It’s just . . .” *You fucked me so well—you see me so clearly—I’m having a hard time calming down.*

“I got you, Lu. C’mon.”

Despite my protests that *I’m good, I’m fine, I just need a minute*, he helps me to the bathroom. I don’t ask for privacy and he doesn’t give me any. I feel like I should be embarrassed, mostly because Patrick would’ve been beyond grossed out.

But I’m not with Patrick, and I’m not embarrassed. I take care of my business and Riley takes care of his. I’m transfixed by the way the sides of his bulbous ass cheeks hollow out when he carefully removes the condom and, tying it off, drops it in the trash.

Turning around, his gaze collides with mine. “How’s your back feeling?”

Blinking, I rake my gaze over his body. His cock hangs heavily between his legs. Pink head. Neat nest of dark pubic hair at the root.

Everything about this man is gorgeous.

I lick my lips. “How’d you know my back is bothering me?”

“I pay attention. How ’bout I pour you a drink and work that out for you?”

My eyes flick to his. It’s obvious he’s trying hard to win me over.

Not gonna lie, part of me is dying to be won. Not in the sense of being a prize. But maybe being *prized* as a whole human being.

I’m at my messiest right now. I’m not making great choices. I’m getting wasted at bars and puking in bushes, for crying out loud.

But Riley doesn’t seem to mind. In fact, he seems quite literally turned on by my chaos.

I tried so hard to be perfect for Patrick. Always neat, always working, always available.

With Riley, though? I don’t have to try at all. And he still wants me to

stick around.

“Don’t make me a drink.” I head for the door. “Whatever you’re having is fine.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I throw him a look over my shoulder as we head back to the bedroom. “So polite after being so *very* rude.”

He grabs my ass, giving it a hard pinch that makes me yelp. “You ain’t seen rude yet, princess.”

My nipples tighten. I’m getting turned on all over again. Guess six months of no sex—and years of so-so sex—will do that to you.

In the bedroom, I bend down to pick up my dress and underwear while Riley pulls on his shorts and zips up the fly. He shakes his head when he sees me putting on my bra.

“Nu-uh. You can put on your panties, but that’s it. You’re at my place, you’re not wearing clothes.”

Pressure builds between my legs. I hold up my lacy thong. “I only get to wear this while you wear those?” I nod at his shorts.

He lifts a massive shoulder. “Life ain’t fair.”

I feel very naked, and very turned on, as I follow him to the kitchen. He pops the tops off a pair of Topo-Chico bottles and nods at the cozy looking sofa beneath his infamous bookshelf.

“Sit facing the wall so I can get at your back.”

I do as he tells me, body lighting up at the prospect of having his hands on me again. This time for a back rub.

He hands me the Topo-Chico. I sip, listening to the rain. It’s coming down in sheets now. A steady, soaking summer shower.

I nearly hiss with pleasure when he puts his hands on my lower back. Closing my eyes, I drop my head as he presses his thumbs into my sore muscles, drawing slow, steady circles with deepening pressure.

The pleasure is so exquisite it makes my toes curl. Literally.

“What’s all this tension about?” he asks.

I bite my lip when he hits an especially sore spot. “Where do I begin?”

“Start with the blonde hair.”

Going right for the heart of the matter, then.

For a second, I hesitate. Close my eyes. This is all happening so fast. Should I open up to Riley? Should I believe him? Yes, I bared my body to him. But am I ready to bare my soul too?

I need to be smart. Play it safe. I just got badly burned by a man I trusted with my whole being. I need to have my guard up.

Then again, isn't having my guard up—closing myself off—letting Patrick win?

Isn't believing the worst about people letting fear win?

And the more I think about it, the more I realize I wasn't able to be myself around my ex. I can't remember the last time he asked about how I was feeling, or what I was thinking. He was always so busy. Distracted.

It's really, really nice that Riley is asking about my interior world. I'm shocked—and not shocked at all—to find I'm bursting with things I want to say.

Or maybe I just want to be seen after not having been seen at all for what feels like forever.

“You were right. Patrick—my ex—he liked me better blonde. So I've been blonde for, gosh, six years now?”

“Y'all dated for that long?”

“Pa introduced us right after—gah, that feels *good*.”

Riley presses a kiss to the nape of my neck. “That's the point. Relax, honey.”

I scoff. “Trust me, this is the most relaxed I've been in years.”

“I can tell.”

“Patrick and I—we were introduced to each other after I graduated and started working at The Gibbes Group. I'm an event planner there.”

“You like it?” His thumbs move up the furrow of my spine.

I hold onto the back of the sofa. “It's fine. I'm good at it. I keep getting promoted, which is nice. I feel like I'm a really good employee. A really good girlfriend too. *Was* a really good girlfriend.”

“Sounds like you've worked your ass off to make everyone else happy.”

My heart skips a beat. I turn my head to look at him over my shoulder. “I have, yeah. And it hurts, you know? Because when I think about it, I'm not sure *I've* been very happy trying to be this perfect, shiny person.”

His eyes bore into mine. “Maybe because that's not who you are.”

Lord, give me the strength not to climb this man like a tree.

“Shiny isn't real, Lu,” he continues. “It ain't very interesting either.”

“But everybody likes shiny me. My parents, my boss. My ex. Or so I thought.”

“What do you think about that person? The shiny one?”

I search his eyes. There is truly nothing sexier than a man who *gets it*.
Gets you.

“She’s tired. And hungry, despite being full of shit.”

One side of his handsome mouth curls into a smirk. “There’s the Lu I know and miss.”

He pauses. I know he’s waiting for me to correct him. Call him out.
I don’t.

His hands shape my waist, fingers flexing as he gently guides me to face him. His gaze darts to my breasts, and a muscle in his jaw ticks. “You’re beautiful, you know that?”

I thumb his chin so his eyes meet mine again. “Thank you.”

“Still hate me?”

“Ha.” I bite my lip. “You know what’s crazy?”

“Everything? All of this? The fact that I thought you were about to slap me upstairs on the deck, but instead you put your hand down my pants?”

I laugh. “I put my hand *on* your pants.”

“Tell me what’s even crazier, then.”

“When you came to Charlotte three years ago, you saw me with Patrick and thought we looked so happy. I may have looked happy in the moment, but I’m starting to realize the ‘good thing’ you’re talking about wasn’t all that good. At that point, Patrick and I were all smiles on the outside, but we were barely having sex, and we never talked about anything real.”

Riley frowns. “Wow. I’m really sorry, Lu.”

“You weren’t wrong to say the world’s been chipping away at who I really am. Patrick was part of that, I think. If I had known you were there—I mean, to be fair, I hated you, so there’s no telling if I would’ve actually heard you out. But if I had—”

The unspoken words hang between us.

How terrifying to think we would’ve never had this conversation if I hadn’t come back to Bald Head, purely by chance, for Goldie and Coop’s shotgun wedding.

I’m a big fan of the idea that timing is everything. Relationships. Jobs. Family. Those things work out, or don’t work out, according to where you’re at in life and what you’re looking for. It’s nice to think the universe has our back that way.

Scary too, knowing we have so little control.

“We’re here now,” Riley says quietly. “What happens next—that’s up to

us. You, really. It's up to you."

"Ha. I was just thinking about how little control we have over everything."

He grins. "You and me bein' thrown together like this? Totally out of our control, yeah. But once we're in it, in this little situation the universe has cooked up for us, I believe it's up to us to finish the story. She begins it. Gives us the prompt. But we're the ones who actually write the words."

I tackle him.

Literally throw myself at him like a lunatic fangirl. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I tip my head and plant a hard kiss on his mouth. I climb into his lap and melt my center onto his. My nipples meet with the hard wall of his chest. His skin is warm. The whorls of hair there tickle my breasts and make me hungry for more friction.

For him.

He laughs against my mouth. "I knew I was good, but not that good."

"You called the universe she," I pant.

"The feminine"—he licks into my mouth—"is divine."

I dig my hand into the hair at his nape and give him a tug. "So is the masculine."

He puts his hands on my hips and presses me down on his erection.

"Ask me to make you yell God's name, Legs."

I get butterflies at the old nickname. "Please." I roll my hips, pussy throbbing.

"No." His mouth moves to my neck. My head falls to the side to give him more access. "But I'll make you yell mine."

fifteen

. . .

Riley

Pussy Magnet

I GRAB Lu's hand and suck the pad of her thumb into my mouth. Flavor explodes on my tongue: spice, sea, skin.

"That is *good*."

Her eyes are a little hazy when she replies, "The shrimp? Or me?"

"Both." I drop her hand and nod at the plate between us. "Now eat."

She goes for her second shrimp, then takes a hunk of bread and swirls it in the pool of buttery sauce on the plate. Putting it in her mouth, she closes her eyes and moans as she chews.

Sylvan Esso plays softly in the background. Part of an Indie Rock playlist featuring my all-time favorites. Tom, after I let him out of his crate, is—where else?—at our feet, begging for scraps.

"That *is* good."

"You made it. Probably from scratch, right?"

She grins. "Yes."

"Means it's fucking delicious."

My cock thickens, despite fucking Lu not twenty minutes ago on the sofa across from the table we're sitting at.

She chews slowly. Savoring the bite.

Makes me think she hasn't enjoyed food this way in a while.

The fact that she's allowing herself to enjoy it with me makes my chest

swell.

And yeah, the sight of her tits is no hardship either.

I still can't wrap my head around the fact that Lu Wade is eating dinner in my kitchen. Naked. Just-fucked hair everywhere.

The hungry, haunted look she had in her eyes when I first saw her yesterday is gone.

Replaced by satiation.

Pleasure.

The soft feeling in my chest migrates to my stomach. Floods my skin.

Fuck.

Fuck, she's got me in deep.

Less than forty-eight hours since she tripped and fell into my arms, I really am falling for this girl all over again.

Head first.

Yeah, this was all part of my plan to undo the damage I did ten years ago. But still, Tuck was wrong. I am afraid.

I'm scared shitless.

Lu wasn't the only one destroyed by our breakup ten years ago. It was the start of a quick, hard slide to rock bottom for me. If things don't work out with Lu this time around, there's no telling I won't end up there again.

It's not just me now either. I have dozens of employees. Several businesses who rely on my funding, which comes from profits my companies generate. People depend on me to show up. I let myself down ten years ago, but I refuse to let the people I love down.

Which means I can't fuck this up. And even if I do everything right, there's no guarantee Lu will stick around. The world kept us apart once before. It can happen again.

And this time, we both have so much more to lose.

But then Lu is holding out a hunk of bread to me. Her eyes smile when I take it, and this time the flavor I get is *home*.

Comfort.

Things I've been looking for since the home I grew up in imploded a decade ago.

"The shrimp and the salad and fuck, that bread—those gotta be in the cookbook."

"I didn't make the bread." Lu grabs a napkin and uses it to wipe her mouth before taking a long, thirsty sip of Topo-Chico. "And you keep

bringing up the cookbook.”

“Because you have to do it.”

She laughs. “I know next to nothing about publishing. Or writing, for that matter.”

“We’ll learn together.”

Lu cuts me a look, holding the bottle midair. “I told you, I have a job. And a life. I don’t know where I’d find the time.”

“You make time for the important shit.”

The indents appear between her eyebrows. “Maybe.” Sip. “I guess.”

“How do you feel when you’re cooking? Eating with friends?”

“It’s my favorite thing in the world.” She sets down the bottle. Picks at the damp label with her thumbnail. “But spending time on a cookbook—I mean, it’s silly, right?”

I shake my head. “Don’t let the world make you feel ridiculous for wanting what you want. Trust yourself. It’s only when I listened to other people that I got turned around and fucked up.”

“That’s exactly how I feel.” Her eyes meet mine. “Everyone told me how life should go. Like, get good grades, go to a good college. Get a good job and a nice boyfriend. He’ll buy you a ring, and together you buy a house. I made all the right choices at the right times.”

“And?”

She scoffs. “My mom is happy. Well. Not happy that I’m going through a horrific breakup. But I felt like she was proud of me. Everything I was doing, it’s what she did when she was my age.”

Ah. The break-up with her fiancé. Another reason why this could very well just be a short-term fling, and not the forever kinda commitment I’m looking for.

“But you feel turned around.”

Her eyes toggle between mine. “Yes. Right now, though . . .” A beat. Another. I feel the pull between us, the tension, in my core. “I’m so sorry things went down the way they did that summer. Seems like such a waste now. Everything we missed out on . . .”

“Don’t you dare apologize for sins I committed. That shit’s on me, all right?” My voice is rough. I palm her breast, making her breath catch. “Let me keep making it up to you. Stay.”

“I should go.”

“Stay, Legs.”

Her cheeks go pink at the endearment. “But my mom—my aunt—they’ll wonder where I am—”

“Tell them you’re spending the night with me.”

“Seriously—”

“You’re almost thirty, Lu. You’re allowed to have sex and sleep at other peoples’ houses. How about you do what you want for once and not think about anybody else?”

She puts her hand on my chest. “I need a little time to digest everything.”

“Far enough. But tomorrow, bring an overnight bag to the bachelorette party.” I thumb her nipple. “Actually, don’t. Clothes not allowed after sundown. I got an extra toothbrush if you need it.”

She smiles. “Of course you do.”

Despite the fact that Lu did indeed come on my dick not once, but twice, I still have a hard time convincing her to take the new golf cart and the Stevie Nicks tickets.

I zip on the cart’s rain panels and make the short drive to her family’s house with her to make sure the cart ends up where it belongs. Tom insisted on coming with us, so I put on his rain jacket and helped him up onto the backseat. Then I put the tickets back into the cupholder.

It’s dark now. Rain’s still coming down, hard. Rhianna is on the radio. I’m pulling up to the Gibbes’s house, careful to keep the headlights out of the windows.

My body still rings with lust at the memory of being on top of hers.

I feel as wild and alive and content as I did at eighteen. Like everything is possible.

Anything can happen.

Beside me, Lu scoffs. “Everything and nothing’s changed.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.” I turn the cart off when we’re in the driveway.

Rain pelts the cart’s roof. My heart is pounding.

Keeping my hands on the wheel, I turn my head to look at Lu. Even in the dark I can see how swollen her lips are.

“Is this real, Riley?” she whispers.

I dip my head and begin to bounce my knee. “It is for me.”

Her gaze moves to my legs. “What’s wrong?”

“I wanna touch you bad, honey. But I know your mama’s probably looking out them windows up there”—I nod at the house—“and I wanna do this right. Which means no makin’ out with you in your parents’ driveway.”

She grins. “Fuck that.”

And then she grabs the back of my head and pulls me in for a kiss. Tongue and everything.

Laughter erupts in my chest, even as my dick twitches. Goddamn, am I ever gonna get my fill of this girl?

“Bow chicka *bow* wow!”

I go still at the sound of the cat call. Turning away from Lu, I see Aunt Lady waving at us from the front porch, a shit-eating grin on her face.

“Jesus Christ,” Lu groans, hiding her face in my chest. “Boundaries. My family needs some.”

“Sorry, y’all, I had to! I’ll leave you alone now,” Aunt Lady is calling.

“She’s lying,” Lu says.

I kiss the top of her head. “I’ll walk you in.”

“I apologize in advance for anything she says.” Lu tilts her head at her aunt, who’s now holding up her wine glass to us.

I grab the umbrella I had Tuck leave in the cart, and I hold it over Lu’s head as we scurry toward the porch. Along the way I manage to slip the tickets into Lu’s pocket. I’m pretty sure she notices, but she pretends not to. Tom whines from the backseat, but by some miracle he stays put. I don’t want him out in the rain any longer than he has to be.

Lady’s waiting for us on the porch. She’s smiling.

“Well, hello, you two. Don’t you look . . .” Her eyes catch on Lu’s wild hair. “Like you just had lots of sex on Riley’s pussy magnet of a boat.”

“Lady!” Lu hisses as she hops up the steps.

Laughing, I follow her. I fold up the umbrella once we’re on the porch. “Hey, Lady.” I kiss her cheek. “*Dolly* sure is sexy, isn’t she?”

“I’d drop trou for a ride, sure.”

“Oh my God,” Lu is saying.

“Always a pleasure to see you, Mr. Dixon. Y’all have fun? Wait, why even ask that question? Of course y’all had fun.” She narrows her eyes at a spot on my neck. “Is that a hickey?”

I run a hand up the back of my head. Face burning. “Yes ma’am, I believe

it is.”

“Well done, Louise!”

“Thank you. But we should get inside before you say anything even weirder.” Lu loops her arm through Lady’s and offers me a smile. “Thanks for the cart.”

“And the orgasms!” Lady adds.

I laugh. Lu cringes.

“Lady, I think we need to get *you* laid,” she says.

Lady pops her eyebrows. “Like I said, I’m ready to drop trou anytime, anywhere.”

Making a mental note to reach out to Joe—I’ve seen him chatting up Lady recently—I lean in and give Lu one last peck on the cheek. Chaste as I can make it. “I’ll see what I can do. Night, y’all.”

“Night, Riley.” Lu gives me a little wave goodbye.

It’s fucking cute.

But it’s the last time I ever wanna see it.

This time tomorrow night, she’ll be falling asleep in my bed. I know Lu’s gotta go back to Charlotte in a couple days, which unfortunately means we’ll be doing this good-night shit again. But I’m ready to stop saying goodbye to her.

Instead, I wanna be the first to say good morning to her when she wakes up next to me.

I wanna be the first name on her lips when I make her come.

Morning sex is my favorite for a reason.

What a mind fuck to think I get to do it again with Lu.

sixteen

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Lu

Hard Left

“I PROMISE, I won’t tell a soul.” Lady carefully rinses my hair using the kitchen sink’s sprayer. The warm water feels delicious on my scalp. “But wow, Riley loves you. Like, really loves you.”

“What on God’s green earth are y’all doing?”

My heart stutters at the sound of Mom’s voice. Lady’s hand goes still on my head.

It wasn’t hard telling Lady about Riley and me. In fact, it was fun. She and I stayed up way too late last night as I filled her in on all the details, both of us struggling to muffle our squeals of delight and swoony sighs so we didn’t wake up my mother.

But telling Mom? For whatever reason, that feels like a much more daunting task. Maybe because I know part of her is hoping I ultimately end up with a guy like Patrick? Because choosing Patrick mirrored *her* choices, but choosing Riley means I’m taking a hard left where Mom went right?

Or maybe because I know how hurt she’ll be that I kept such a big secret from her. Mom and I are different in many ways, but we’ve always been close.

“Don’t tell me”—Mom’s slippers scuff to a stop on the hardwoods—“oh, no, Louise, you didn’t!”

My stomach twists. I have exactly zero regrets about hopping in my brand-new golf cart—I’ve affectionately dubbed her Julia—first thing this morning to grab hair dye from the Maritime Market. But I’ll always hate

disappointing my mom.

Aunt Lady turns off the tap and helps me wrap my dark hair in a towel. I feel a distinct pinch between my legs when I straighten, blinking at the onslaught of morning light.

Riley was there. Heat blooms in my cheeks.

“It was time for a change.” I put my hand on my face. “I like being a brunette better.”

Mom is staring at me, incredulous. “Since when?”

“Since forever.”

“But you looked so pretty as a blonde!”

Aunt Lady cuts my mom a look. “Katherine, leave her alone. Lu is gorgeous with any color hair.”

“Lu?” Mom grabs onto the countertop. “Not that again.”

I went back to Louise after Riley dumped me. Again, it felt like sticking it to him. Didn’t hurt that Mom always preferred to call me Louise. The good girl in me liked making her happy.

I think Riley killed that good girl last night when he demanded I get on my hands and knees and I obeyed, ending up with the best orgasm of my life in the process.

Yeah, I’m done being good.

I like being real—messy—better.

“I need to get ready.” I pick up my coffee mug from the counter beside the sink and brush past Mom. “I told Goldie I’d help her bring the gifts she got everyone to Riley’s boat for the bachelorette party.”

Lady grins. “The pussy magnet. How fun.”

“What in the world is going on with y’all today?” Mom’s jaw is practically on the floor at this point. “Louise, we need to talk about this!”

“Let her go,” Lady says. “She’s got people to do.”

“What?”

“Oh, I meant to say *things*. She has *things* to do.”

“Does this have anything to do with Riley Dixon and that golf cart he dropped off yesterday? What happened with that, by the way?”

“Julia’s staying!” I yell as I turn a corner and make a dash for my room.

“Julia?” Mom asks.

Even though my hair’s probably going to be a disaster two seconds after I get outside thanks to the humidity, I still blow it out and use some product. Then I use my curling iron, finally brushing out my waves so they’re tousled

and beachy looking.

I smile, hard, at my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

I fucking *love* the new hair. The color's not exactly right—I'll have to get my stylist to help me out when I'm back in Charlotte—but it's still better than the blonde.

I feel more like myself than I have in forever.

I pick out my outfit next. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun getting dressed. Probably because I'm not picking out my clothes based on what Patrick likes, but what I like. I put on my favorite bikini. It's not my skimpiest, but it's the one I feel best in. It's a shade of watermelon pink that's bright and looks great with my brown hair. The bottoms are high waisted, and the top has these sexy, barely-there straps that are surprisingly comfortable. I won't spend the whole day tugging at them, which is always a plus.

I try on several different cover-up options, but end up going with a block-print sarong that I tie around my waist. Then I top it off with some gold jewelry and cute gladiator sandals.

Packing my raffia tote bag, excitement blooms in my core at the thought of not wearing a damn thing I pack for tonight's possible (who am I kidding, probable) sleepover with Riley. I still throw in some shorts, a shirt, and a bra, plus the book I'm reading.

I also grab the bag of cheesy bachelorette things I ordered for today. Because Goldie is Goldie, I went heavy on the penis theme. I bought penis-shaped straws, sunglasses, and a pink sash that says "Same Dick Forever."

She's going to love it.

"Hey, gorgeous. Should we expect you for dinner?" Lady asks when I emerge from my room to grab Julia's keys.

"You should not."

Mom's coffee cup goes still mid-air. "Louise."

"Yes?"

"Should I be worried about you?"

"You should not," I repeat.

"All right. Just text me to let me know you're okay. You do look beautiful, by the way," she replies. "If you like the hair, then I like it too."

I lean in to kiss her on the cheek. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"Have fun!" Aunt Lady wags her eyebrows at me.

On the ride to Goldie's rental house, I turn Julia's stereo all the way up. I sing along to No Doubt at the top of my lungs and let my hair go wild in the

breeze.

I have no idea what happens next. Maybe Riley's for real. Maybe he's playing games. But the memory of last night—and yesterday afternoon, and morning, and the day before that—keeps filling my chest with light.

Makes me realize how dark things have been for me lately.

It's a risk, allowing myself to feel hopeful right now. But I do it anyway.

You make time for the important shit.

And it feels important to enjoy this feeling while I can. No one knows better than I do how quickly things can change. For the worse, yes.

But also for the better.

“Holy shit.” Goldie stares at me for a beat before grabbing my arm and yanking me inside the fabulous beach house she's renting. “Holy shit, Louise, who are you? What happened? And how did you go from puking at the sight of Riley to having sex with him?”

“How'd you know I had sex with him?”

“The hair! And your face! And that bikini!”

Coop enters the room, a half-eaten bagel in his hand, and nods. “Yeah, you and DR definitely did the dirty. Good for y'all.”

“We should load up the golf carts—”

“Hell no. You're telling me everything while Coop loads the carts.”

Goldie literally screams when I tell her Riley dumped me not because he was into someone else, but because he was so into me he felt I deserved the world—which he couldn't give me back then.

“You lucky bitch.” She shakes her head. “It's funny, but I've always wondered why Riley's never had a steady Betty. Coop hasn't really seen him date anyone seriously in all the years he's known him. And—wow—it's because he's been waiting for you.”

She screams again when I tell her about the sex.

The excellent, toe-curling sex we had again. And again.

Which means I have to tell her about the sex I wasn't having with Patrick.

“First orgasms I've had with a guy in over a year.” I feel like I'm going to cry again, so I put a hand on my face for what feels like the ten thousandth time today. “I honestly don't know how to process it. So I'm just . . . yeah, doing what feels right and hoping for the best.”

She puts a hand on my leg. Lowers her voice. “Why didn't you tell me you and Patrick weren't having sex?”

“Because.” I shrug. “Felt like I was betraying him, airing our dirty

laundry in public. I didn't want to embarrass him—”

“So you isolated yourself instead.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Just shows how disconnected we were, even though everything looked perfect on the outside. I mean, God,” I scoff. “I even tricked myself into thinking we were fine, even though we clearly weren't. I thought it was just a phase, you know? Patrick was trying to make partner and he was working like crazy. I was trying to keep my head above the water.”

“I wish I could've been there for you.” Goldie frowns. “No one should have to go through that alone.”

I grab her hand. “You have been there for me. And seeing you and Cooper—I think it's showing me what I really want. What I deserve. You guys seem to have so much fun together.”

“You seem to be having lots of fun with DR. You think it's for real? Like, could this be a long-term thing, or . . .?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Goldie, the man I was going to marry broke up with me two weeks ago. Gimme a minute.”

“Two and a half weeks. Be honest. Did you think about Patrick at all today? Up until just now?”

“No.”

“What about yesterday? Last night?”

“I mean, I talked briefly about Patrick with Riley last night. But only in the context of explaining why I'd gone back to blonde. I didn't really think about him after that.”

She smiles. Squeezes my hand. “What if—and I know this sounds crazy, but hear me out—what if you'd already fallen out of love with Patrick when y'all broke up? You guys weren't having sex, and you just heavily implied you weren't having fun with him. You weren't spending that much time together at all, really. Maybe you were just refusing to face the music?”

Ugh, I'm crying again.

And again, I don't know if it's because I'm sad or happy or overwhelmed or what. All I know is that I'm brimming with feeling in a way I haven't since I was young, stupid, and in love.

Oh, God.

“It's happening too fast,” I manage.

Goldie squeezes my hand. “Is it? Riley seems to know you—truly, deeply know you—in a way Patrick never did. You're writing that cookbook, by the

way.”

“Y’all and the cookbook!” I laugh. “I’m sorry. This is your day. I’ll get it together—”

“Don’t you dare. Whatever you’re feeling, it’s a lot, yes. But it’s lighting you up. I haven’t seen a smile like the one I saw on your face just now for ages. Whatever’s about to happen—Louise, I think you should let it happen.”

Sniffing, I manage a smile. “He calls me Lu, which I always liked better than Louise anyway.”

Goldie cackles with delight. “Lu, I think Riley fucked some sense into you. *Hallelujah*.”



The sun is high in a big, blue sky when we pull into a parking spot at the marina.

The door to Riley’s dock is open. Music floats on the breeze—Maggie Rodgers, *yes*—along with the scent of something delicious.

My pulse takes off at a sprint. Adjusting my bikini top, I take a deep breath and climb out of the cart.

Coop and I grab the cute monogrammed tote bags Goldie stuffed with all kinds of cute goodies for each of her friends attending today. Walking down the dock, I notice the buzz of activity that surrounds *Dolly*. People in white shorts and polo shirts scurry across her deck. Some are carrying trays. Others murmur into walkie-talkies. Tom bounds toward us, his tail wagging a hundred miles a minute.

“It’s not Vegas,” Goldie says as she leans down to ruffle Tom’s ears. “But dare I say, this might be better?”

Coop laughs. “Do you know anyone else who’s had their bachelorette party on a yacht?”

Despite the bags I’m holding, I manage to bend one knee so I can kiss Tom’s head. “I don’t.”

“Having rich friends definitely doesn’t suck,” Goldie replies.

Speaking of rich friends, Riley appears on *Dolly*’s stern. He’s wearing a blue swimsuit and those gold-rimmed aviators. A backward baseball hat.

Nothing else.

No shirt, no shoes.

Big problem. Because my whole body rises on a wave of arousal—giddiness—when he sees me and smiles. A devastatingly handsome flash of white teeth and full lips that almost distracts me from the glistening muscles of his chest and arms.

Almost.

He stands at the top of the steps that lead to *Dolly's* deck and looks at me, hands on his hips.

“You’re back,” he says.

“I am.” And I mean it.

The old me—the real me—who I was before Patrick, before I buried the dreams and relationships that defined the first part of my life—she’s here.

And she’s ready to have a good time.

seventeen

. . .

Riley

Showtime

IT'S the dark hair and lit up expression on Lu's face that makes me smile.

But it's that fucking pink bikini that makes me short of breath.

I feel a sudden, sharp surge of hunger as I stare, somehow managing to keep the smile plastered on my face. Her tits fill out the top nicely. I can just glimpse an enticing slice of ass through the sheer wrap she's got tied around her waist.

My hands itch to grab her. Give that ass a squeeze before I kiss her mouth, throw her over my shoulder, and take her back downstairs to my bed.

"You all right, sir?" Kurt asks.

I blink. "Nicorette. In my bathroom."

"On it." He glances at Lu. "Lordy. I'll bring the whole box."

"Thank you kindly."

I feel everyone's eyes on me as I climb down onto the dock. Coop's smirking. Goldie's watching me with unabashed curiosity.

Even the stews seem to slow their hustle, sensing the crackle in the air.

It's obvious Lu told Goldie about what happened last night. Secret's out.

Everyone wants a show, I'll give 'em a show.

I stride over to Lu and take the bags out of her hands. Set them on the dock. The scent of her coconut body wash fills my head.

Her eyes follow me as I straighten. Her smile sends sparks flying inside

my chest. “Hi.”

I wrap my arms around her waist. Pull her against me in a tight hug. The kind that has her going up on her tippy-toes. That has me burying my head in her neck.

Bare skin against bare skin. She wraps her arms around my neck. Electricity courses through me, gathering with an insistent heaviness in my balls.

“Hey, Legs,” I murmur into her neck.

“Did he just call her legs?” Goldie whispers.

“I did.”

Goldie claps her hands. “That’s hot.”

“Y’all need a minute?” Coop asks.

I chuckle, tilting my chin so my stubble catches on Lu’s skin. She shivers. I smile so hard I feel like my face is about to split in two. “More’n a minute.”

Lu pulls back. Gives me a wicked little smirk. “That’s being generous.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “You want it quick? ’Cause I can make it quick, Legs. We’ll just have to go hard.”

“I am so here for this,” Goldie says.

Coop grabs the bags and ushers her onto the boat. “Y’all just . . . yeah, be safe.”

I reach up and run my finger underneath the strap of Lu’s bikini top. Goosebumps break out across her skin, making the heaviness in my core pulse so fiercely it nearly makes me choke.

“You know I have to host twenty people on *Dolly* today, right?”

Lu digs her teeth into her bottom lip. “Very cool of you, yes.”

“And you thought I’d be able to do that with you wearing a fucking bikini? Especially *that* bikini?”

She lifts a shoulder. “I can always take it off.”

I laugh, happiness flooding my body. “You told your mama you ain’t coming home tonight, right?”

She’s biting her lip again.

I groan. “Four fucking hours until this thing is over. I may have to steal you away for a little mid-party nap. I promise it’ll take less than a minute.”

Now she’s laughing too. For a split second I consider leaving the party altogether and taking Lu somewhere else for the afternoon.

Back in the day, we’d fuck anywhere and everywhere we could without getting caught. Backseats. Beaches. Boats we stole.

But then I see Tuck approaching from the parking lot. I do a double take when I see our friend Abel walking with him. Didn't think Bald Head's busiest builder—and broodiest bachelor—would show. Mostly because he never shows up to anything.

But he and Coop are close, so makes sense why he'd come today. They're expert fishermen. They also love golf, but are fucking terrible at it.

I lean in to whisper in Lu's ear. "Later."

"Later," she says with another shiver.

"In the meantime"—I glide my hand down her arm and twine our fingers—"come say hi to my friends. It's been a while."

Lu pauses.

"Too soon?" I ask, holding my breath. Lu met Tuck and Abel briefly that summer ten years ago when the two of them and I were Biggers' deckhands on a fishing charter her granddaddy hired out. I talked to her about them often. But because she only met them in passing, and because it's been so long, I'm basically asking her to meet them all over again.

She grins. "I'd love to see them."

Abel, being the asshole he is, lets out a low whistle when he sees Lu and I holding hands. "How in the world did I miss this?"

"Everyone did. Don't take it personally. Abel, you remember Lu, Goldie's maid of honor and an old friend of mine? Lu, this is Abel. He's a prick on the outside, teddy bear on the inside. We hope he is, anyway."

Lu takes Abel's hand and gives it a solid shake. "Y'all are still close, huh?"

"Yep. Now he owns the land." Abel tilts his head toward me. "I build on it. Been at it, what, five years now?"

I nod. "Abel here's also a big reader. We're both fantasy fans."

"Really!" Lu's eyebrows pop up. "I actually just read an awesome one. *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros."

My heart skips a beat. I fucking love how Lu's so into shit. Makes her interesting. An excellent conversationalist too.

Abel doesn't smile, but the skin at the edges of his eyes creases. "Haven't heard of it, but always like trying new things. Maybe we read it for our book club next month, Riley."

Lu turns her stare on me. "Y'all have a book club? That reads romantasy?"

"Course we have a book club," I say. "And because you introduced me

to both fantasy and romance, hell yes we'll read it."

Tuck shrugs. "Never read romance before, but I'm game."

"I loved how complex the heroine of *Fourth Wing* is," Lu replies. "She isn't perfect—she makes lots of mistakes. We still root for her though, you know? Maybe that's *why* we root for her, because she keeps going, even though she doesn't always get it right."

Abel pulls his brows together, clearly surprised. "A flawed character is definitely what keeps it interesting for me."

"Same. Makes the escape feel more real, and the story feel more satisfying."

Tuck glances at me. "She's good."

"No shit," I reply.

I give Lu's hand a quick squeeze. She glances at me and smiles. I'm gripped by a strong sense of joy.

I can't wait to talk about flawed characters with her later after we fuck. And eat.

Please don't let this blow up in my face again.

Because it's not even noon, and this is already the best day I've had in a really long time.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. Kurt, with the Nicorette.

I pop a couple into my mouth. The tightness I feel everywhere releases bit by bit as the nicotine hits my bloodstream.

"So, Tuck." Lu looks up at my beast of a best friend. "My aunt talks a lot about your dad and his shrimp."

Tuck grins. "I think Joe's got a big old crush on Lady."

"I think Lady's got a crush on Joe. I feel like we should do something about that."

"Let's talk."

I let her hand go as she and Tuck head for *Dolly*, heads bent in conversation. For a second I stand on the dock and watch them.

It's surreal, seeing two totally different parts of my life finally collide. I had to keep them separate for obvious reasons a decade ago. But it's a relief—and yeah, a joy—that I don't have to play that game anymore.

"You're fucked."

I glance at Abel to see him looking at me intently. Reaching up, I adjust my hat on my head. "Yeah."

He claps me on the shoulder. "You've worked really hard for a really

long time, Riley. It made you rich—”

“Made you rich too, motherfucker.”

He grins. “Sure did. But all that work, I’m not sure it made you happy. Today, though?” He searches my face. “You look happy.”

A swell of emotion rises in my throat. “And that’s why I’m fucked?”

“You laid eyes on her three days ago for the first time in a decade—”

“How’d you know that?”

He rolls his eyes. “Dumb question. This is Bald Head. You know better’n anyone how well we play telephone. Point being, you’re already looking at this girl like you wanna put a baby in her.”

“Maybe I do.” I pop another piece of Nicorette into my mouth.

Abel raises his eyebrows. “Wow.”

“I thought I was over her, but clearly I’m not.” I watch Kurt hand Lu a glass of champagne. “I gotta make it work this time around.”

Lu is chatting with Tuck and Goldie now, looking cute as hell in her little bikini and a pair of oversized sunglasses.

Like she knows I can’t stop looking at her, she glances up. A smile breaks out on her face when she sees me.

“Then let’s go make it work.” Abel nudges me with his elbow. “After you, lover boy.”

For a second, I just stare at my friend.

“What?” He rubs the back of his neck.

I shake my head. “You’re just . . . being unusually and helpfully insightful right now. Hell, I’d almost say you’re being *friendly*.”

“That’s too far.”

I laugh. “Fair enough. Thanks for listening, though. I mean that.”

Back on *Dolly*, I check in with Lu. Make sure she has everything she needs.

Then I check in with Kurt, telling him to locate whatever bag Lu brought with her and put it in my cabin. I also tell him to arrange for a tender to transfer guests back to the dock at the end of the day.

Lu and me, we’re gonna go for a private sunset cruise.

Guests begin to arrive in a steady stream. Goldie’s friends from high school. Her friends from college. Cooper’s fishing buddies. It keeps Goldie and Coop and me busy, greeting everyone, pointing them in the direction of drinks and food.

It’s a little after one by the time we pull out of Harbour Village. The bride

and groom requested a day of sun, food, and swimming, and that's exactly what they get. To Goldie's delight, Lu breaks out various penis-shaped paraphernalia. To my delight, Lu takes off her sarong. Her suit is on the cheeky side. Pun intended.

I have my captain take us on a tour of Bald Head's coastline. I point out all the important landmarks. Old Baldy. East Beach. The eight-thousand-square-foot waterfront home Abel and I are building together on the Gibbes's street, Row Boat Row.

"We call it the 'Whale House' because the main floor is built to look like the inside of a whale," I explain. "We put in high ceilings and did some really cool architectural work with beams."

Lu holds a hand up to her forehead and looks at me. "How many companies do you own, exactly?"

"Twelve." Tuck sips his beer.

Lu stares at me.

I sip my water. "I only actively manage three of them, though."

"You did it." She laughs, shaking her head in disbelief. "Everything you said you'd do—you did. And then apparently you did extra credit because you've an overachiever like that."

I did it for you. "Now it's your turn."

We have lunch on the boat. Everyone compliments the grouper sammies. When I share that they're a recipe of Lu's, and that she wants to write a cookbook, everyone tells her she definitely has to include it.

She flushes with pleasure, even as she swats my arm. "You're shameless."

"You're wearing too many clothes." I toy with her bikini bottoms. "Should we go for a swim?"

"Good God, yes." Goldie is fanning herself in the shade. "My pregnant ass would love to float for a bit."

We drop anchor near a secluded beach just north of Bald Head. It's accessible only by boat, and today we have it all to ourselves.

On the swimming platform at the back of the boat, I can't help but notice how Lu's (mostly) bare ass looks as ripe and delicious as a fucking peach. My mouth goes dry as I watch her adjust her bottoms, running her fingers inside the seam to smooth the fabric over her backside.

She catches me watching her—*again*, I'm officially a creeper—and her nipples harden to tight, visible points that poke against the thin fabric of her

top.

My body pulses. I reach for her, roughly grabbing her hip. “You’re the one who’s fucking shameless.”

Lu bats her eyes. “Who, me?”

“You best mind that smart mouth of yours.” My eyes flick to her lips. “Or I’m gonna do something about it.”

Her tongue darts out to skate along her bottom lip. “I’d like to see you try.”

And then she gives me a hard shove, sending me into the ocean with a belly full of laughter.

eighteen

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Lu

Hot for Teacher

THE SUN IS BEGINNING to set when *Dolly* approaches the marina. A pair of smaller boats wait just outside its entrance.

“Tenders,” Riley explains. “They’re going to take everyone back to the dock.”

I’m confused. “*Dolly* is staying out?”

He looks down at me. My stomach flips at his nearness. His handsomeness. He got color on his nose and cheeks today. The thick amber light catches on his stubble, turning it to bronze.

The scent of Coppertone and saltwater rises off his skin.

He nudges me with his elbow. “You and me are staying out.”

“Just us?”

“Just us.”

The need that’s simmered between my legs all day flares to vibrant life. “You can handle *Dolly* all by yourself?”

“We’ll stay moored out here. We’re far enough out so no one can see me doing what I been thinkin’ about doing to you all day, Legs.”

I catch Goldie watching us. I quickly look away, focusing my gaze on my feet. Between the heat, the sun, and the sexual tension, I’m sure my face is bright red.

Then again, do I care? The idea of having Riley to myself all night is . . .

yeah, kind of the best. We can do anything we want.

Literally anything. And there's so much I want to try. So much I've missed.

The fact that I get to try it with the man standing next to me—the one with the gorgeous body and filthy mouth—makes my heart skip around inside my chest.

Goldie gives me a hug as she's heading for the tender.

"He is legit obsessed with you," she whispers in my ear. "Did you see him looking at you all day? Because we sure as hell did."

I laugh. "I may have noticed, yeah."

"Good luck. And thank you for the loveliest bachelorette party ever." She holds up a handful of penis-shaped straws. "I'm keeping these forever. Also, sorry I was kinda lame."

"Please." I roll my eyes. "You and I both know you were the life of the party."

"So was your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Not yet."

Goldie's not wrong on any of those counts. Riley really was the ultimate host. Not only did he have enough food and booze to feed and water an army, he also chatted up every single person, and made sure everyone was comfortable with enough towels, sunscreen, and Aperol Spritzes to last a lifetime. He was gracious without being fussy. Relaxed without being negligent.

And so damn hot in his sunglasses and backward baseball hat I literally had to stay in the water most of the day to keep from spontaneously combusting.

A shiver darts up my spine when Riley puts his hand on the naked small of my back. We wave to the last tender as it departs with the crew.

His palm is warm. Dry. Calloused.

I *love* the feel of it against my skin.

And then it really is just us. Well, us and Tom, whose tail swishes against my legs.

The three of us, a purple-orange sky, and the dappled plane of the ocean. The water plunks against *Dolly's* hull as she rises on a wave. Falls.

My damp hair dances in the warm breeze. Riley tucks it behind my ear. The gentleness of his touch is a startling contrast to the words that come out

of his mouth.

“You drove me fucking crazy all day with this bikini”—his hand moves up to untie the knot at the middle of my back—“and that mouth. I’ll make you pay, Legs. But first, lemme put the dog up. Like his namesake, he’s liable to jump on couches and shout like a lunatic the second he sees a pretty girl naked.”

Riley’s back a minute later. His fingers make quick work of the knot at my nape too, and my top falls to the ground. I close my eyes against the arousal that rips through me.

“Someone might see us, you know,” I pant.

He grins. “I know.”

I gasp when Riley cups my breast, kneading it in his hand before plucking the nipple between his thumb and first two fingers.

“Fuuck you’re delicious.” His jaw tightens before his eyes meet mine. “Tell me how wet you are for me.”

I bite my lip against a moan when his hand moves from my breast to my belly. “You tell me.”

His other hand finds my neck. He wraps his fingers around my throat, his thumb resting just beneath my ear.

Eyes locked on mine the whole time.

He knows.

He fucking *knows* what I like. What turns me on. And he isn’t judging me for it.

He’s giving it to me—the hand on my throat, the dirty talk—without me even having to ask.

“Show me,” he growls.

“But I said—”

“I said fucking show me.” The hand on my neck squeezes. Spots break out in my vision. The need between my legs coils tighter. “Now, Lu.”

I find his hand on my stomach. Cover it with my own and guide it down, down, moving our twined fingers inside the front of my swimsuit bottoms.

He curses when we hit my pubic hair. I nearly jump when our fingers glide between my lips and skate easily over my clit.

I’m swollen, slick. And already so close to coming I could scream.

Riley’s eyes go feral. That muscle in his jaw jumps against his tanned skin. “How long you been like this?”

“A while.” I swallow, and his grip on my throat loosens. “All day. Since I

left last night.”

“You touch yourself in your bed?”

I nod, panting. The fingers around my neck grip me harder again.

“You came without me?”

“I thought of you. Only you.”

He slips a finger inside me. I tighten around him. He grits his teeth.

The ocean rushes around us. Breeze tickles the hair that curls out from underneath his hat.

“Show me how you touched yourself.”

I guide his finger deeper inside me. Then I press my own finger to my entrance.

“Like this,” I whisper. “I like it when you fill me.”

He curls his finger, drawing it over my G-spot as he slides it out, in.

Out. And in.

He presses the heel of his palm against me.

Against my clit.

My hips buck. He smirks, withdrawing his hand.

“What the fuck?” I breathe.

But Riley is looking down, focused on untying the strings at my hip. My bottoms join my top on the ground.

His expression is ferocious as he takes in my body. He looks. And looks. Heartbeat after unsteady heartbeat passes.

“Riley—”

“No.” He squeezes my throat. “Lemme look. I been wantin’ to do this all damn day, and you ain’t gonna rush me.”

Drawing a reverent hand up my hip and over my side, at last he looks me in the eye. “You’re fucking beautiful, Lu. More beautiful than ever.”

My body is taut with need, everything inside me hard and eager. But my heart? That goes soft.

The combination—the juxtaposition—is overwhelming.

“You are too,” I manage.

His gaze rakes over my face and lands on my mouth. “You still suck dick like you’re dyin’ for it?”

The pulse between my legs blares. “Why don’t you find out?”

Smirking, he lets go of my neck and pushes me roughly onto my knees. The deck bites into my kneecaps, but I’m too distracted watching Riley pull himself out of his swim trunks to notice. “I finally get to shut that fucking

smart mouth up. Open, honey.”

He doesn't take off his swimsuit. Just pulls it down a little, allowing his dick to jut obscenely from the sculpted planes of his hips.

He's huge, his cock heavy as he fists it and gives himself a quick, hard tug. Brow furrowed like it hurts.

“I said *open*. Don't make me ask again.”

Looking up at him, I do as he tells me. The sight of him like this, so obviously on the edge, so hungry for me, sends a new wave of arousal coursing through my skin. This version of Riley—the one with the filthy mouth and obscene demands—is totally different from the sweet, thoughtful Riley I know outside the bedroom, and I am totally here for it. We played around with this stuff as kids. I loved it then, but I *really* love it now, because Riley's graduated from PG dom to capital-R dom.

It's the sexiest thing I've ever witnessed.

I reach down to touch myself. Riley's eyes follow my hand, then flick to my face.

“You don't come until I say you do. Understood?”

I nod, placing my tongue flat on my bottom lip. He cups the back of my head in one hand and lines himself up at my lips with the other.

I play with myself as I take my first taste of him. Kissing his tip, I draw my tongue over the slit on the underside of his head as I swirl my fingers over my slick pussy.

Riley watches me with a hard expression. I draw him inside my mouth a little, letting him know I'm ready, and he uses the hand on the back of my head to push himself in even more.

Slowly.

His brows curve upward as he begins to fuck my mouth, rolling his hips back and forth in a tiny thrust. He makes a sound, desperate, needy, and I roll my lips over my teeth and swallow.

“*Fuck*. Fuck, Legs. Fuck. You're so fucking perfect.” Holding my head, he fucks my mouth a little harder, rolling his hips so he goes that much deeper. “Lemme have you. Lu, I have to fucking have you.”

The salty taste of his precum coats my tongue. I bob my head, and together we find a rhythm that has him biting his lip.

I'm dying to come. To press my fingers to my clit and fly apart. But I want to make this last. I want to see how far he takes me—how far I can take myself—before I can't stand it anymore.

I want to cross every line. Push every boundary.

I want more of this *freedom*.

“Look at you,” he’s saying. “Look how pretty you are, playing with yourself while you suck me off.” He grits his teeth and gives my mouth a vicious thrust that makes me gag. “I want you, Legs. All of you.”

Take me, I tell him with my tongue. My mouth.

My body.

Please, God, take me someplace new.

And he does.

“I’m going to come on your tits,” he says matter-of-factly. “And then I’m going to make you come too. Understood?”

My eyes are watering, but I somehow manage to communicate my emphatic *yes* with a single look.

Reaching up, I wrap my hand around his root, and together we guide him out of my mouth.

“Spit,” he says, working his wrist as his hand curls over his dick again and again. “I need a little more.”

The sound I make when I do as he tells me is rude.

It’s also hot as hell, watching him use my saliva as the lubrication he needs to finish himself off.

His hips jerk, and ropes of cum explode from his dick. It covers me: chest, breasts, and belly. Part of me thinks it’s obscene, but another part is really, really turned on by it.

His stomach caves. Chest heaves. He’s huge, gasping, the fading light limning the strong lines of his shoulders and arms in a halo of gold.

My knees are killing me. Thighs are trembling with the effort to hold myself up. But then Riley is reaching down and using his thumb to swirl cum over my nipples, and all I feel is *yes. Please. More.*

“Damn,” he whispers. “You’re still *really* good at that.”

Electricity bolts from my nipples and lands in my clit. “I had a good teacher.”

“What else can I teach you?”

“What else do you know?”

He gently helps me to my feet. Then lifts me by the hips onto the nearby platform so I’m sitting in front of him.

“It’s funny.” He parts my legs. His nostrils flare when his eyes land on my pussy. “Usually you’re the one showing me new shit.”

“Give yourself more credit. You’ve shown me a lot of new things too.”

Riley drops to his knees, one leg at a time. “Like?”

“Like how good it feels to be—*oh*.” I see stars when he uses this thumb to open my slit wider, then rolls the pad of that finger over my clit. “To be myself. Not the perfect version I show the world.”

He looks at me. Keeps his gaze locked on mine as he leans in and licks me. My hips rise to meet his mouth, and he presses his tongue inside me, his hands going to my ass to hold me up against him. He sucks on my clit.

I grab onto his hair, legs shaking. The tension in my core is unbearable. The hunger for release—for *more*—makes me wild.

I want to experience everything with this man. No more vanilla anything. I want to die knowing I left nothing on the table. I tried it all.

Propping myself up with one arm, I reach down with the other to grab Riley’s hand. I guide it to my ass cheek. Then guide it a little farther, so his fingers meet with my crease.

His mouth goes still on my pussy. “You sure, Legs?”

I nod.

Riley grins. “All right then. Lie down.”

I do as he tells me, anticipation zipping through my veins. Staying on his knees, he places my feet on the platform and spreads them wide.

“Tell me if it’s too much.” He’s rolling his thumb over my clit again. Then that thumb moves down my slit, gathering moisture as he goes lower.

Lower still.

He gently presses it against my rim. Pleasure ripples through my core at the unexpectedness of it. The lewdness.

I cup my breast and play with my nipple. It’s the sweetest torture, baring myself to him this way. Feeling the prickle of the sun on my skin. I’ll be sunburnt tomorrow, but I don’t care.

He circles his thumb, increasing the pressure. At the same time, he leans in and sucks on my clit.

I cry out.

“More,” I pant.

“Yes ma’am.” He presses inside me just the tiniest bit. Mouth still on my pussy.

My legs are shaking violently. I squeeze my eyes shut, but the sun still burns through my closed eyelids.

“*More.*”

Leaning back, he brings his other hand to my pussy and slaps my clit.
Literally slaps me.

Then he soothes the sting with his tongue.

I come apart. The orgasm thunders through me, and my entire body rises on the wave. It wrenches every thought from my head, the control I have over my limbs.

I have no choice but to surrender.

I'm gasping for air when I feel him climb over me. He slants his mouth over mine, capturing my pants in a bruising kiss that simultaneously sucks all the oxygen out of my body and fills my lungs with life.

The kiss I give him is messy and wild, my teeth catching on his. He laughs into my mouth, the sound a welcome balm to the riot happening inside my skin.

My chest.

My heart.

I'm still sticky with his cum, but he presses his torso to mine anyway. I feel his dick nudging my belly.

"Holy shit." I reach down to find him. "Are you hard again?"

He nuzzles his nose against mine. "Getting there. Please tell me you've been tested recently."

I go still. Open my eyes to see him looking intently at me.

What he's asking—it should terrify me. I had a narrow miss with the headaches unprotected sex can bring. I was scared shitless, and for good reason.

I never want to be in that position again.

Only the idea of having nothing between Riley and me is arousing in the extreme.

Am I stupid to trust him? Or does this feel right because it *is* right?

Rummaging around inside my gut, I'm surprised to find certainty. Certainty that Riley wouldn't ever put me at risk the way Patrick did.

Don't forget they both broke your heart.

But maybe Riley is the one to put it back together.

Or maybe *I'm* the one doing that by letting him in. Trusting him. Showing him what I like, what I want, without worrying about him abandoning me.

"I have. Very recently, as a matter of fact." I let out a mirthless chuckle. "And I'm on the pill."

He smiles. "I was tested last month. You're the first person I've been with

since then. We good?”

My heart drums inside my chest. “We’re good.”

nineteen

. . .

Riley

Head over Feet

WE MAKE out until I'm fully hard again. Doesn't take long. The idea of fucking Lu bare gets me there in no time at all.

I nudge her legs open with my knee and line myself up against her entrance. She's still soaking wet and soft, and I glide inside her easily on a slow, easy stroke that has both of us gasping.

It's absurd, how good this sex already is. Like we picked up right where we left off a decade ago when we were horny teenagers.

"You feel so good, Legs." I begin to fuck her in earnest, reveling in the feel of her bare pussy, hot and tight around me. "So. Fucking. Good."

She grabs onto my ass to guide me deeper, raising her hips. "You too. Riley—God, I'm so . . ."

I kiss her mouth. "So what?"

"So happy." It comes out as a whisper against my lips.

Grabbing onto her hip, I roll us over so I'm on the padded platform on my back and she's on top. I somehow manage to yank off my hat. It makes me slip out of her, but Lu doesn't miss a beat. She gets up on her knees and guides me back to her center. Then she sinks onto me, hands on my stomach as she adjusts to the feel of me.

I take one of those hands in mine. Help her use it to gain a little leverage so she can rock her hips.

My orgasm is coming fast and hard, but I grit my teeth and offer up a silent prayer to make this last.

The heat of the day is fading. I still sweat. How could I not, watching this beautiful girl ride my dick like she was born to do it?

Her tits bounce as she moves. My cum shimmers on her skin. It's drying, becoming a pearlescent glow.

I didn't think I was usually into that kind of thing. But seeing how unafraid Lu is to try new things—how open-minded she is—made me want to give it a go.

And yeah, some caveman part of me wanted to mark her. Make her mine in a primal way I don't quite understand yet.

All I know is my heart's beating loud and strong inside my chest. A drumbeat of desire. Joy.

Then she's getting on all fours. I slip out of her and groan at the loss of contact, following her to get back inside her as quickly as possible. Lu throws me a saucy look over her shoulder. I pull open her ass cheek and use my thumb to play with her rim. She bites her lips, arching her back so her ass presses into my touch.

"You ever been fucked here before?"

Her eyes are heavy-lidded when she replies, "Be my first?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. Hang my head.

"What?" she asks. "Riley, I didn't mean—"

"Stop." I hold up my hand. "I'm just—I'm struggling not to come all over the place. I'm so into you being into . . . well, that. We're just gonna need lube. And I'm gonna need to get you ready. Later?"

Lu grins. "Later."

I notch myself at the entrance to her pussy and push inside. Three strokes later I come, pulling out on the last pulse so I can watch my cum leak out of her body.

I use my other thumb to spread it over her pussy. "So beautiful. Think you can come again?"

"Worth a try," she pants.

Using my cum as extra lube, I play with her clit until she shudders and falls onto her elbows. I catch her with an arm around her middle, and pull her up against me so I can hold her while she comes.

She breathes hard, her back to my front. Her hair is everywhere.

So is my semen.

I kiss her shoulder. "Let's go for a swim. Get you cleaned off."

She nods, still breathless. "We're so messy when we do this."

"The mess is what makes it good."

I smile when Lu doesn't even try to put her bathing suit back on. She knows better. Instead, I watch her dive naked into the ocean. An arc of golden skin and lean muscle.

She emerges from the water and smiles at me. One eye screwed up against the sun that glints off the ocean. It's like a sheet of glass now, calm. A mirror that reflects the incredible sunset happening on the distant horizon.

"I can't get you messy again if you don't get clean first!" she calls.

Smiling, I jump in after her. A cannonball that sends a wall of water into her face. The water is just cool enough to be refreshing.

"Jerk!" She splashes me back.

I reach for her face, licking the salt off her lips. "A little payback for almost sending me into cardiac arrest."

"The butt stuff?"

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I hold her against me, staying afloat by kicking my legs hard. Her bare tits are slick against my chest. "And the head. And letting me come all over you."

"You're welcome." Now her eyes are smiling too.

I nip at her neck. She giggles, swatting me away. "Thank you for trusting me."

She searches my gaze. "Thank you for having such a beautiful dick."

I burst out laughing and so does she. Then she's climbing onto my shoulders and shoving me under the water. I take her with me. I glide my hand up the furrow of her spine. Her hair floats into my face, brushing my cheek.

For a long beat we linger beneath the water's surface. I hold her and she lets me, our legs tangled as we kick to keep from sinking.

It's quiet. So quiet the only sound I can hear is the thump of my pulse.

I hold her against me. Pray like hell this ain't the last time we get to do this.

We come up for air together. Open our eyes at the same time. Her hair is plastered against her head.

She's naked and she's smiling. We're swimming in the same stretch of ocean we'd escape to all those midnights we stole.

Only this time, I know better than to let the world push me around.

I know better than to let a girl like her go.

Later, when it's dark, I call the crew to take us back to the marina. While we wait, I bring Lu below deck to one of the guest bedrooms.

Her eyes go wide when she takes in the neat stacks of books set out on the bed.

"What's this?" she asks.

I put a hand on the small of her back and gently push her closer. "I scoured the bestseller lists this morning and ordered you the top fifty cookbooks. Thought they'd be good inspiration. Probably come in handy as research too."

Lu is quiet as she runs a hand over the cover of Chrissy Tiegen's latest release. Giada smiles at us from the next cover, holding up a bowl of pasta.

Lu opens Gwyneth Paltrow's cookbook. Flips through the glossy pages. Still quiet, eyes a little unfocused.

My pulse begins to march. "You not like them, or . . ."

"Of course I like them." Lu glances at me over her shoulder. That's when I see she's crying. "Riley, I *love* them. I love that you thought of me, and that you did this because you . . ." She wipes away a tear. "You care about my dreams in a way no one else ever has. Hell." She laughs. "You might care about those dreams more than I do."

I wrap my arms around her waist and drop my head into the crook of her shoulder. "That's not true," I murmur against her neck.

She reaches up to play with my hair. "Thank you. Sincerely. This is . . . so thoughtful and, like, ridiculously extravagant. How the hell did you get them all delivered on the same day you ordered them?"

"I know a guy."

She laughs. "Of course you do."

On our cruise back home, I'm not at all surprised to see Mom and Marsha waving to us from the deck at Stede's. Tom goes wild, barking his head off in a bid to get their attention. I see Mom laugh. Marsha smiles.

"Mom's wife," I explain.

Lu waves back to them. "You said your mom remarried. I'm happy for her. She was always so kind. She deserves someone great."

“Marsha is definitely great. Mostly because she makes my mom laugh a lot.”

Lu looks at me. “Should we have them over for some food?”

Tom whines. His version of *pretty please*.

“I already sent Kurt home with the leftovers from the party—”

“I’ll make something.”

My stomach dips. “You really don’t have to.”

“I want to.” She puts a hand on my chest. “You go get them. I’ll grab one of those cookbooks you got me, then I’ll see what you have in your kitchen.”

Butterflies.

I feel fucking butterflies at Lu’s invitation. Her eagerness to hang with my mom and her wife.

And yeah, the fact that she’s making herself at home on my boat sure as hell don’t hurt either. I see it now, how she asks Tom to head to the kitchen with her, promising him a bite of whatever she makes as a reward.

Stay forever, I want to tell her.

“Okay,” is what I say instead.

Doesn’t take much convincing to get Mom and Marsha to follow me back to *Dolly* for a late dinner made by Lu Wade.

Marsha puts a hand on my shoulder as we walk down the dock. “So Lu is . . .”

I laugh. “An old friend, like Mom said.”

“Only you’ve never invited us over to meet an ‘old friend’,” Mom replies.

“Lu is a *special* old friend.”

Marsha wags her eyebrows. “Special friends are the best.”

“They are,” Mom adds with a grin. “Especially if they make my son smile like that.”

“Like what?” I ask, despite the fact that my face hurts from smiling so hard.

“Like you just got laid,” Marsha says. “Multiple times, if I had to guess.”

Mom laughs. “I don’t want to know!”

“What? We all see it. I’m just saying it.”

I hear the whirr of a blender as I help Mom and Marsha onto *Dolly*. Lu must’ve figured out the sound system too, because Alanis Morissette is playing softly in the background.

“Y’all hang tight!” Lu calls. “I’ll be right there with an appy.”

Mom looks at me as she takes a seat at the open-air table on *Dolly*’s deck.

“I remember Lu liked to cook. But she must be a very special friend if you’ve let her take over your kitchen.”

I run a hand over the back of my neck. I can’t stop smiling no matter how hard I try. “How ’bout I pour y’all some wine?”

“Sounds great,” Marsha replies.

I head down the stairs at the same moment Lu is heading up, Tom at her heels. Our eyes meet and she grins. She’s holding a pitcher of something red and a stack of plastic cups. In the light of the cabin, I can make out a smattering of new freckles on her nose and cheeks. All thanks to a day spent in the sun.

“Gazpacho, courtesy of my favorite, the one and only Ina.” She holds up the pitcher. Tom sees Mom and Marsha and bolts onto the deck. “I remember your mom being a big tomato fan. Those tomato sandwiches she’d make us? So good.”

I can’t.

I can’t fucking stand her. Her sweetness. Her lips, still swollen from all the making out we’ve done today.

Her radiance when she talks about the things—people—she loves.

I grab her chin and give her a quick, hard kiss. I slip my tongue inside the seam of her lips. She licks into mine, sending a stab of desire straight to my groin.

“Don’t make me all horny again,” she whispers. “We have company!”

I suck on her bottom lip before letting her go. “No shit. You’re killing me, Legs.”

I offer to take the pitcher and cups, and Lu hands them over. “I heard you offer them wine. I’ll get that, you get this.”

How do we already make such a great fucking team?

And how do I not fall head over heels in love with this girl after three days together like a fucking chump?

Back up on the deck, Mom introduces Lu to Marsha. Lu immediately wraps her in a hug.

“So how did y’all meet?” she asks when we’re all seated. The table is set with cups of Lu’s delicious gazpacho and glasses of ice-cold white wine, Mom’s favorite. I stick to Topo-Chico.

Tugging at one of Tom’s ears, Marsha grins at Mom. “In France of all places.”

“I’d always wanted to go to the brocantes over there, and Riley was kind

enough to take me. You know, the—”

“Flea markets. They’re famous.” Lu looks at me, bewildered. “Another thing you did, taking your mom abroad.”

I told Lu often how much I wanted to see the world with Mom. Mom had always dreamed of traveling but couldn’t afford it.

Mom glances between us, brow furrowed. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I’ll explain later, Mom. Keep going with your story.”

Her eyes linger on me for half a heartbeat before she turns back to Lu. “The brocantes are famous for good reason. We found so many lovely things there. Anyway, I’d wanted to go to Paris for as long as I could remember. Six years ago, Riley bought us plane tickets for my birthday. And who do I sit next to at breakfast in our hotel when we land?”

Marsha grabs Mom’s hand. “Me!”

“Love at first sight,” Mom says.

Marsha lifts her gazpacho with her other hand. “It was for me. By the way, Lu, this is delicious.”

“How romantic. And thank you. I thought it’d hit the spot with this heat, so I just threw together a batch with what Riley had in his kitchen. Luckily he likes vegetables.”

“He does.” Mom’s brow is still furrowed.

Marsha runs her thumb over the back of Mom’s hand as she finishes what’s left of her gazpacho. “You just threw this together? Pretty excellent for something you made on the fly.”

“It’s the sherry vinegar. And the delicious tomatoes,” Lu replies.

I turn my head to look at her. Bump my bare foot against hers underneath the table. “It’s you.”

And I mean it. The gazpacho is delicious. Just the right balance of refreshing and flavorful.

“You have a talent, my dear,” Mom says.

Lu bites her lip as she slides her foot over mine. “Thank you.”

“Y’all are *cute*,” Marsha says.

She and Mom are smiling at us. I’m not one to blush. But damn if heat don’t flood my face at their attention.

I look at Lu. She looks back. Judging by the playful glint in her eye, she knows they’re watching us too.

I fight the urge to lean in and kiss her. I don’t think she’d mind, but we still haven’t talked about where we stand. She’s comfortable getting cozy

with me, sure. But kissing in front of other people? I can't say. She may think PDA equals a relationship, and since she just got out of one of those—since we're so new—she may not be comfortable with that.

There's our history to consider too. Mom doesn't know we dated, and I'm pretty sure Lu's picked up on that fact. Makes me think Lu might feel weird throwing it all out there, all at once, in front of my mother.

Whatever the case, we have footsy. And the rest of the night, thank God, to get handsy.

"So y'all live on the island?" Lu asks.

She listens intently as Mom and Marsha talk. They live in a cute townhouse right here in Harbour Village. It's close to Marsha Marsha Marsha, which of course Lu asks about.

She shakes her head. "What a dream come true."

"It really is." Mom looks at Marsha. "Took a long time to get here, but the detours were worth it."

Lu leans an elbow on the table, running a hand through her hair. It's dry now, dark waves everywhere. Looks sexy as hell as it brushes over the bikini straps on her shoulders. "I'm starting to wonder if the detours *are* it. Where we learn what we need to know."

"Where we learn who we are." I refill Lu's wine glass. Marsha's too.

Lu picks up the glass and sips. "And who we aren't."

"Knowing that is just as important," Mom says.

Marsha holds up her glass. "To the detours. For helping us get where we needed to go."

My stomach grumbles audibly. Lu looks at me and frowns. "Still hungry? Here, let me see what else I can—"

"Stop." I put a hand on her arm. "I'm okay, really."

"You're hungry. How can you be okay? You had some sweet corn down there that looked good. Y'all just give me a minute."

Lu stands and I do too. "At least let me help."

"You've done enough today." I don't miss the tiny smirk she gives me.

"You ain't spending time in the kitchen while I sit here on my ass." I put my hand on the small of her naked back. Christ, this bikini is driving me up the goddamn wall all over again. "C'mon, I'll be your sous."

Mom waves us away when Lu glances in her direction. "We'll be fine. Y'all take your time."

Lu looks at me. "You sure?"

“Sure as you were earlier today.”

She bites her lips. Eyes lit up.

I literally attack her when we're in the galley. Yank her against me. Palm her ass. Wrap my other hand around that pretty fucking neck of hers. Tom's tail bats against my calves. I ignore it.

“You're driving me crazy.”

Her hand finds my stomach. “How do you think I feel? Ordinarily I'd never ask you to put a shirt on, but . . . yeah, for the love of God, put a shirt on!”

“Never.” I kiss her mouth. “Now what are we making?”

Lu's only been in my kitchen a few times now. She's never cooked it in it, other than taking fifteen minutes to “whip up” that gazpacho after browsing through an Ina Garten cookbook I bought her. But she learns its flow quickly, grabbing a knife from the drawer beside the sink, opening the fridge to pull out a block of cheese and a bag of leaf lettuce.

I'm always thanking Kurt for keeping my kitchen well-provisioned. I'm more grateful than ever for his help.

Lu nods at the ears of corn in a bowl on the counter. “Why don't you shuck those for me, then cut the kernels off the cob? I'm thinking I'll do a twist on a seven-layer salad.”

“Yes ma'am. I don't know what that is, but sounds tasty.”

I get out a pair of cutting boards. Hand one to her and keep the other for myself. We stand side by side in my kitchen and prep the salad together. She wiggles her hips to Alanis's “Head Over Feet” as she gives me instructions. I hand her bowls. Measure the ingredients for the dressing. Halve a pint of cherry tomatoes. I give Tom nibbles of bacon and cheese.

In between, we sing along to one song. Another. She grins at me when I nail a particularly complicated part of “Thank U.”

The salad comes together beautifully. I watch as Lu assembles the ingredients in neat lines—lettuce, cheese, peas. Crumbled bacon and those corn kernels and tomatoes.

Seeing the satisfied smile on her face when she steps back to survey her work, my dick twitches.

“Okay, now that is one big, beautiful salad,” she says.

I take her hand and put it on my half-chubby. “No shit.”

“Salad makes you horny?” She laughs. “Who knew?”

“How many times I gotta tell you it's *you* who makes me horny?”

Especially when you're bossing it up like this. Not gonna lie, I kinda wish Mom and Marsha would get on their way so we could—"

"Do more butt stuff?" Lu gives my dick a squeeze.

I sputter. "Are you an angel sent from heaven?"

"Definitely no angel." She shakes her head. "But I'll make you feel like heaven."

We burst out laughing at her cheesy line. Her eyes are watery with happiness. Skin golden from the sun. She's working her magic in my kitchen.

Working her magic on Mom and Marsha. Just like she did with Tuck and Abel and all my other friends today.

Dolly's been alive with activity for days now. I haven't felt alone once since Lu showed up on the island. I didn't have to be alone today. And I'm definitely not gonna be alone tonight.

I'm also not working, and I don't miss being in the office one damn bit.

I'm hit by another wave of joy. Terror hot on its heels.

I *want* this. Friends and family around. Work in its proper place. Not front and center the way it's been for the last decade.

I want this beautiful woman making beautiful things in my home every night. I wanna make 'em with her.

I want to participate in life. No more hustling my way through it. Stop-and-smell-the-roses type shit.

But what if she decides she doesn't want any of that? What if we have this magical week together, but she ultimately decides to go back to her life in Charlotte? Sounds like she's got a great thing going on there, her rat bastard of an ex notwithstanding.

Losing her will crush me all over again. And I ain't prepared for that.

Lu puts a hand on my stomach again. "You all right?"

I look down at her. The familiarity that already exists between our bodies—how they touch, respond, move together—makes my chest twist.

I press a kiss to her jaw. "I'll be okay. Let's eat."

"Wow," Mom says when I set the bowl on the table outside. I even have to swat Tom out of the way.

I hand out plates. "Right? It's a work of art."

"You really do have a talent." Marsha says, helping herself to a big scoop of salad. "Thank y'all for having us. What a fun impromptu double date."

Lu's eyes flick to meet mine. I'm worried she'll be put off by the word *date*.

But instead, her expression is soft as she eats. Sated.

She turns the conversation back to Mom and Marsha. She asks about them and they ask about her. We laugh. They drink more wine. Finish every last bit of Lu's gigantic seven-layer salad.

By the time our guests get up to go, it's the kind of dark I haven't seen in what feels like ages. Midnight dark. Stars are scattered across the sky. A full moon hangs heavy above the marina, creating a glittering white alley on the surface of the water.

Mom wraps me in a tight hug before she goes.

"I want to know everything," she whispers. "Call me tomorrow?"

"Always do."

"Love you, honey."

"Love you too."

My heart feels like it's about to burst right out of my chest when it's finally just Lu and me again. Together we clean up the table. I tell her to get ready for bed as I do the dishes.

"I can help," she says.

I shake my head. "You cooked. Go get your jammies on. And by jammies, I mean your naked jammies."

Her cheeks flush. "Yessir."

"I like it when you call me sir." I pivot my hips away from the sink so she can see the hard-on tenting my bathing suit. "Now get to it, Legs. You best not make me wait."

twenty

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Lu

Coffee in the Morning

THE LIGHT POURING through the cabin's windows is pale and thin when I wake up.

It's early. I feel the gentle rise and fall of the boat. Hear the seagulls looking for their breakfast nearby.

Riley is on his back beside me, his chest billowing out in deep, even breaths. He's got one arm bent over his head on the pillow. His stubble is dark in this light.

My knee is pressed against his thigh underneath the covers. My body floods with arousal at our nakedness.

I can smell the sex we had on the sheets.

So. Much. Sex.

We went through two more rounds after dinner last night. I came both times. The realization hits me that I've had more orgasms in the past three days than I have in the past year.

My heart does a neat pirouette inside my chest. I knew Patrick and I had a problem with intimacy. But I also thought maybe that part of me had just died—the erotic part. The one capable of feeling sexy.

Of *wanting* sex.

I'm happy to report she's back. And she's back in a big way.

Smiling like an idiot, I stretch, arching my back. I'm sore everywhere—

especially between my legs—but that doesn't stop me from wanting more.

I should be exhausted. Plugging my phone in a charger I borrowed from Riley last night as we were finally going to sleep, I saw it was nearly one A.M. If I had to guess, it's not even seven right now.

But instead, I feel energized. Like I've already had my cup of coffee.

I blame the handsome slab of a man sleeping peacefully beside me. My stomach dips at his indecent gorgeousness. Everything about him—his face, his hands, the way his body is put together—is beautiful.

I blink, resisting the urge to pinch myself. *Is this real? How did I end up sleeping with this man on this yacht? And how did it happen so quickly?*

Fear, familiar and fierce, creeps in. This has been fun. Really, really fun. But fun doesn't equal forever. And is forever even what I want after what I went through with Patrick? Of course I still want to find my soulmate and have kids *someday*.

But now I'm also thinking a lot about that cookbook I'd planned on writing. What if I wanted to focus on that instead for a while? What if I made that dream come true before committing to any others?

Then again, Riley's the one that kept that dream alive, even when I was determined to let it die. I meant that much to him.

And Lord, I think he's already starting to mean a lot to me too.

He stirs, turning his head on the pillow to face me. He sleepily blinks his eyes open, meeting mine. His face immediately creases into a gigantic grin.

My heart lifts. Skin heats.

Rolling onto my side, I put a hand on the muscled plane of his stomach. He groans when I toy with the happy trail of dark hair there, moving my hand lower until I meet with his erection.

I cock a brow. He cocks one too.

I read the question there, clear as day. *You ready too?*

Wordlessly I drape my leg over his torso and take one of his hands in mine. I guide it to my pussy, wiggling my hips to open myself wider to his touch.

Together we glide our fingers through my slickness. He sucks a sharp breath through his nose.

Groaning again, he throws off the cover and uses the bulk of his body to roll me onto my back. Neither of us says a thing as he hikes my leg over his shoulder and enters me on a gentle, deep thrust.

My breath catches at the feeling of fullness. He begins to move. Our eyes

catch as we instantly find a steady, controlled rhythm.

We go slowly. This angle feels sharp at times, especially when he hits me at the top of his thrusts. But I like it. I like the edge of pain. How his root falls just short of brushing my clit.

I reach between us and play with myself. He looks down to watch and sputters, hips jerking. His control is slipping.

Good.

I roll my fingertips over my clit. I feel my pussy flutter around him as my orgasm approaches. He must feel it too, because he ducks his head and sucks my nipple into his mouth.

I gasp.

He moves to the other nipple, nipping at it with his teeth.

It sends me over the edge. I close my eyes and come with a soft moan. Everything about this orgasm is soft—how it comes, how it recedes. The feeling it gives me in my chest and between my legs.

Riley growls, the sound rumbling in the barrel of his chest. He pumps himself into me and comes too. I feel him emptying himself inside me, thrusting again and again until he lets out a long, low breath and rests his weight on top of me.

Makes me feel breathless, his body pinning me down this way. I'm at his mercy, filled with him in every sense of the word.

I open my eyes to see him hovering above me. His eyes are open and wide awake. My head trapped between his massive forearms.

Taking in my face, his full lips quirk into a smirky grin-smile thing that's so hot and so genuinely *joyful* it fills me with that feeling too.

I'm going to burst. My chest brims with things I'm not ready to name, things I'm not sure I should be feeling at all.

Help. I've fallen and I can't get up.

I forgot how much of a cheeseball I am when I'm with Riley.

A mushy, sentimental cheeseball. One he doesn't seem to mind hanging out with one bit.

He kisses my mouth. I grab onto his forearms, like that might keep me from falling.

"Morning." His voice, gravelly with sleep, invades my skin and makes goosebumps break out along my legs and arms. "Sleep okay?"

I nod. "You?"

"I did, yeah." He rocks his hips, pulling out of me the tiniest bit. I feel his

cum leaking out between us. “Fuck, I love makin’ messes with you.”

“I’ll strip the bed—”

“Nu-huh.” He leans in to draw his mouth over my neck. “You stay right here. You drink coffee?”

I bite my lip. There’s that brimming sensation again. Like my body can’t possibly contain the enormity of how much I like this guy. “I do, yeah.”

“I’ll make us a pot.”

“I’ll make eggs, then.”

He smiles. “Not gonna lie, I like the sound of that.”

Riley gets out of bed first and pads to the bathroom. I throw on one of his shirts—a broken-in Bald Head Island tee I find neatly folded in a drawer—and a pair of clean underwear I packed. Then I take a few to freshen up when Riley’s done in the bathroom.

I hear Tom before I see him. He greets me with a furry, slobbery kiss right to the mouth. Laughing, I smooth the hair out of his eyes. “Good morning to you too, Mr. Cruise.”

The velvety smell of freshly brewed coffee hits me when Tom and I walk into *Dolly’s* kitchen. Riley’s standing at the counter in a pair of shorts. No shirt. His hair sticking up every which way as he fills a pair of mugs with steaming hot coffee. The muscles in his back bunch and release when he glances over his shoulder at me.

His expression contracts. “Aw, Legs, I like you in my shirt. That, you’re allowed to wear.”

“Good. I remember what happened last time I was in your kitchen naked, and my body needs a break.”

His brows snap together. “You sore? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It’s a good sore. I’ll be fine, nothing a little rest can’t fix.”

“You’ll tell me if it’s ever too much?”

“Of course.” I nod at the coffee pot in his hand. “Smells delicious.”

“You take cream and sugar?”

I grab onto the edge of a nearby table. The motherfucker looks good enough to eat. Happy and at ease.

He is *making me coffee*.

“Both.”

He grins. “Me too.”

He stirs a good splash of cream and one heaping teaspoon of sugar into each of our coffees, the spoon clanking pleasantly against the mugs. Then he

sets down the spoon on a napkin and turns to me, holding out a mug.

My hand shakes when I take it.

Riley frowns. "You okay?"

How do I explain what I'm feeling?

The gratitude for him thinking of me.

The rage over the fact that not only did Patrick never offer to make me something, anything, but that I also didn't think it was fucked up that I made everything and anything for him.

I thought it was normal, me waiting on my future husband. It's what I saw my Mom doing. Granny too.

I hated it, even as I emulated the pattern. I didn't do it on purpose. It just sort of . . . happened.

The idea that I could start over with Riley if I wanted to is a relief. Mostly because he's never taken advantage of my eagerness to please. I can also be intentional about things. Mindful in a way I wasn't capable of before.

"I'm just thinking about all the expectations that have held me prisoner over the past few years." I blow on my coffee, then give it a sip. It's just hot enough to sting my lips. It's also really freaking delicious with all that cream and sugar in it. "Yum."

His grin is back. "Deep thoughts for a Thursday morning. Care to flesh out that idea on the deck upstairs? It's gorgeous outside."

"I'd love to."

He isn't kidding. There's a crispness to the air, that first hint of fall I love so much. The sky is bright blue and clear. A cool breeze moves over the water as we settle onto a pair of chairs in the shade. Tom, never one to miss a gathering, joins us.

"If only we had this weather tomorrow," I say. "I checked my phone this morning, and it is not looking good for the ceremony or the reception. They're forecasting rain *and* wind."

Riley winces. "We'll figure it out. Now tell me more about these expectations you're tryin' to leave behind."

He listens as I explain myself to him. He's patient, doesn't interrupt, and asks intelligent questions when I pause to drink my coffee. We talk. And talk. The air grows warm. This time it's my stomach that grumbles.

Since Riley insists on helping me with the eggs, we make them together. I do a spin on a BELT, or bacon, egg, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. I sub pimiento cheese for the mayo and use slices of sourdough bread Riley told

me they make over at Stede's in the wood-burning oven. Shockingly, Tom isn't into the eggs, but he does devour the bacon and bread.

We eat and talk some more. A lot more, actually. Only when I look up at the sky and realize it's probably almost noon do I come up for air.

"I should check my phone." I squint against the sun. "No doubt Goldie is freaking out. And we still have to finalize the seating chart for the reception."

Riley runs a hand down his bare chest. "Can I fuck you first?"

A lightning bolt of lust cracks down my middle at the casual, confident way he says it.

"If your pussy is too sore, I could play with your ass a little. Loosen you up so we could try anal after the welcome party tonight."

JesusfuckingChrist.

"I want to," I manage. "So bad you don't even know. But we start that, and I have a feeling we'll never leave your bed. How about a quickie instead?"

His mouth curls into a devilish grin. "You're sore. I won't fuck your pussy, but I'll eat it. How about that?"

My mug hits the table with a *thud*. "Yes. Please, God, yes."

And that's how I find myself slipping through the front door of my family's house with the taste of Riley's cum still in my mouth. He went down on me and gave me an orgasm so good it left me shaking.

Felt only fair to return the favor.

I put a hand on my face as I creep up the stairs. My skin is still hot to the touch.

It was Riley's hand there a minute ago. *You answer when I call or text.*

I'd given him a *yessir* that made his jaw tick.

I swear, the man's turned me into an animal. I should feel like a dirty little stay out, sneaking home after one P.M. in the same clothes I was wearing yesterday.

Instead, I feel like a human firework. Sparking with heat and excitement. Anticipation.

I'd texted Goldie on my short walk home.

LOUISE WADE

I'm so sorry I'm constantly running late this week.

GOLDIE SMITH

You have more important things to do [winky face emoji].
Seriously no rush. Mom is here now and she's been a huge
help/huge pain in the ass. How's the D? Please tell me, I need
the distraction.

I'm still smiling when I reply.

Capital D Delicious.

“Well, good morning! Or should I say good afternoon?”

I jump at the sound of Mom's voice.

“Hey! Hi!” I parrot like an idiot.

She's sitting in her usual chair in the family room, an open magazine in her lap. Taking off her reading glasses, she nibbles on the temple arm and looks at me.

My heart thumps. I don't know why I'm nervous.

No, scratch that. I'm not nervous because Mom clearly knows I slept at a guy's house last night.

I'm nervous because she might not approve of my choice of said guy. He's not Patrick. And she loved Patrick.

Really, she loved that I was with someone safe and stable, so I could live a safe and stable life. A life like hers, with a man like my dad.

My ex-fiancé was familiar to Dad in so many ways. He holds down a big job at a big firm. His family moves in the same circles as mine. He spends his days climbing the corporate ladder and encouraged me to do the same, which is what Mom did at my age.

But Riley? He's encouraging me to chase after dreams that are not at all familiar to Mom. She doesn't love books the way I do. She cooks, and she has an appreciation for good food. But only inasmuch as it feeds the family she's dedicated her life to. And in her mind—Dad's too—a job's primary aim isn't to fulfill you. It's to provide security and stability.

Life as an author or a restaurant owner is the least stable thing I can think of. Would I embarrass my parents by choosing that path? Worse, disappoint them?

Riley may be rich as sin, but that doesn't mean he's a safe choice. Or a stable one, considering our history.

I know I'm leaping twenty steps ahead. I haven't even thought about quitting my job at The Gibbes Group. But what if I did grow a pair and write the cookbook?

What if it does well?

"Fun party?"

I blink, shaking that terrifying—thrilling—thought from my head. "Very, yes. Goldie and Cooper were so happy. A good crew showed up, and we obviously got a gorgeous day."

"I'm worried about the weather they'll get tomorrow." Mom frowns. "Do they have a backup plan?"

I suck in a breath through my teeth. "Not really. The ballroom at the club is already booked for another event. The event manager said they could tent everything, no problem."

"With the wind they get out there at Frying Pan Shoals?" Mom grimaces.

"I know."

Mom's eyes flick to my bikini. "And Riley? How are things with him?"

"Good." I plop into the chair beside hers. "Really good."

Mom opens her mouth, then closes it. Opens it again. "I don't mean to judge—"

"But you think I'm moving on too quickly from Patrick." My face is on fire now. "Mom, I spent one night at Riley's. It's not like I'm jumping into another relationship."

Am I, though?

"Two. Two nights. You took an awfully long time coming home night before last. Don't think I didn't hear Lady catcalling y'all."

She has a point. I inhale. Blow out a breath.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

"So, listen. Riley and I—we dated the entire summer he lived here ten years ago. We were in love, but we kept it from everybody because we didn't want his mom getting in trouble. He broke it off at the end of the summer, which is the real reason why—"

"You never wanted to come back to the island. Wow." Mom's mouth hangs open. The magazine slides off her lap as she reaches over to cover my hand with her own. "Wow, Louise, I . . . don't know what to say."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "You don't have to say anything. I'm just telling you now because that might explain why I'm spending so much time with him. He said he made a big mistake breaking up with me. He

thought he didn't deserve me. Then he spent the next ten years trying to win me back. Everything's different now, and I think—" I swallow again, tears pricking my eyes. Damn it, I am annoyingly in my feelings this week.

So. Many. Freaking feelings, all of them big and scary and *real*.

"Think what?"

"I think he's helping me find my way back to myself." My voice cracks. "Being with Patrick—I got lost."

Mom scoffs. "Lost? But you've been doing so well, sweetheart. Everyone loves you at work, and you have your beautiful house and all your friends—"

"It looks perfect. But it feels . . . not great if I'm being honest."

"You're only saying that because Patrick broke your heart."

I shake my head. "That's not it. Well, that's not the only reason I feel the way I do. Riley—he's made all his big dreams come true. Really wild stuff we came up with, he's made happen. It's reminded me I haven't even scratched the surface of the things I said I'd do."

"Like what?" Mom scrunches her brow. "Your life looks pretty dreamy to me."

"It is dreamy. I'm just not sure it's entirely *my* dream."

"Not everyone can live on a yacht, Louise."

I sniff, wiping away a tear. "Riley never set out to live on a yacht. He just wanted control of his life. He wanted to make Bald Head a better place. Better food, better shopping. Great service and beautiful homes. And he did all that. *Dolly* is just a happy by-product."

"So what do you want to do that you haven't done yet? What dreams haven't we made come true for you?"

I scrunch my brow. "This isn't a dig at you, Mom."

Mom sighs. "You're right. I'm sorry if I'm getting defensive, you're just taking me totally off guard."

"I know." I'm crying in earnest now. "I should've told you this stuff. It's my fault you have no idea about the cookbook I want to write, or that I dream about owning a restaurant—I've always secretly nurtured this fantasy of being, like, a southern Ina Garten. Ridiculous, I know, but . . . yeah. It's what I wanted. What I think I still want."

"You've never mentioned any of this to me." Her eyes are wide and watery.

I nod. It's hard to breathe around the moon in my throat. "I'm scary good at hiding things, aren't I? I was worried you wouldn't get it. That you

wouldn't approve because it all sounds so ridiculous. I know it's not the life you pictured for me, and I hate the idea of disappointing you."

Mom is quiet for a long beat. "We just want you to be safe, your father and I. Safe and happy. As much as I love the idea of you being the next Ina, what you're talking about would be a big change, Louise."

I clear my throat. "It's Lu now."

"You know Louise is a special name to me." Mom purses her lips. "Like I was saying, this new path you're talking about would be a huge change. And I'm not sure the timing is right. A lot has happened in the past few weeks, and maybe you just need to . . . take a breath? Take some time to yourself and heal before committing to something—*someone*—else."

Again, she's got a point. Am I being willfully reckless, jumping headfirst into whatever this thing is with Riley? Revisiting dreams I gave up on years ago?

Or am I doing what I should've done all along?

My stomach is in a knot. I'm panicking, I know I am, because I hear the disappointment in Mom's answer. In her apprehension.

We both look down when my phone chimes in my lap. A text, from Riley.

RILEY DIXON

Think I can pick you up early tonight? Say around five? I have a surprise for you. We can drive to the rehearsal together after.

Despite the knot in my middle, excitement streaks through me. I can't wait to see him again. I have no idea what the surprise might be, but honestly, it doesn't matter. I just left his place, and already I can't wait to go back.

"Riley was always a hard worker, I'll give him that." Mom squeezes my hand. "Promise me you'll be careful?"

"When have I ever not been careful?"

Maybe that's the problem. I'm careful, and more than that, I'm always careful with other people's feelings.

Everyone's except my own.

twenty-one

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Riley

Blue Balls

I RAP on the door at five 'til five. Sliding my hand into the pocket of my slacks, I smile when I realize I've only been waiting ten-plus years to do this.

Pick up Lu Wade at her front door.

It's simple. Kinda stupid. But I still get a full body rush that I'm finally able to do it. More than any other milestone—first company, first deal, first million—this is the one that makes me feel like I've arrived.

The door opens. Lu stands inside. She's in a slinky pink dress and heels, her dark hair parted down the middle and slicked back in a simple, sexy updo. She's wearing big gold earrings and a huge smile.

“Hey!”

The smile. The eyes. That dress, it's elegant and insanely hot at the same time—

She didn't invite me in, but I step inside anyway. I put my feet on either side of hers on the wood floor Mom used to scrub. I cup Lu's face in my hand. Press my body against hers. And I kiss her.

Her mouth is hot and soft. Same as the little moan she gives me when I suck on her bottom lip.

“Hey, Legs.” It comes out as a growl. “You look beautiful.”

Her hands find my waist. “Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself, handsome.” She hooks a finger through my belt loop. “I kinda like you

dressed up. Not as much as I like you shirtless, of course. And the baseball hat is always hot too—”

“You love a hat, but I’m pretty sure you’re not allowed to wear them to fancy wedding events.” I grin. “I clean up okay, right?”

“You clean up more than okay.” Aunt Lady is coming down the stairs. She’s dressed up too—she and Mrs. Wade are invited to tonight’s cocktail hour after the rehearsal—and she lets out a low whistle when she takes in my linen suit and Gucci loafers. “Riley, you are pure fire.”

“She’s the fire.” I nod at Lu. “I’m just playin’ backup.”

Lady gives me a hug. “Y’all make quite the pair.”

My gaze darts to Lu. How does she feel about Lady’s implication that we’re a couple?

There’s a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. One that makes my stomach twist. But she’s still smiling, blushing a little too. That’s gotta be a good sign, right?

“Thanks for letting me borrow her a little early tonight.”

“You’ve been borrowing her quite a lot this week.” Mrs. Wade makes her way down the stairs. Her eyes catch on the finger Lu still has looped in my pants. “I wondered why she’s been smiling so much.”

I wait for Lu to drop her finger. Instead, she gives it a tug, pulling me closer to her. She looks at me, her expression sly. “It’s all the sunshine.”

“And the dick.”

Mrs. Wade’s eyes bulge. “Lady!”

Aunt Lady inhales loudly through her nose. “It must be something in the air, Lu. I’m feeling it too—the need.”

I laugh. To my surprise, Mrs. Wade does too, even as she shakes her head. “All right then. We’ll see y’all at Stede’s a little later?”

Lu looks up at me. Digs her teeth into her bottom lip. The hesitation in her eyes is gone, replaced by sharp, intelligent eagerness.

Excitement.

I’m smiling down at her now like an idiot. Still can’t get over the fact that she’s giving me another shot. Or that I can make a beautiful, smart woman like her light up.

A total one-eighty from the drawn, tired girl she was when she fell into my arms at the beginning of the week.

Lu leans her shoulder into my chest. “Sounds like a plan.”

“I can’t wait to hear what this surprise is.” Mrs. Wade rubs her hands

together. “Riley, you’ve had all of us in a tizzy trying to guess what it might be.”

Aunt Lady smirks. “Could it be more dick?”

“Wow. Okay. We’re leaving.” Lu curls her arm around mine and tugs me out the door. “That was . . . not appropriate. I’m sorry.”

I laugh. “You know it don’t bother me one bit.”

Lu’s turn to scoff. “At least you know where I learned all my ladylike ways.”

“Thank God you’re not ladylike.” I glance over my shoulder to wave as Lu and I descend the front steps. Mrs. Wade is watching us, a funny expression on her face. Her mouth is twisted to the side, but her eyes—same shade of brown as Lu’s—go soft when she sees her daughter smiling.

I ain’t perfect. But I’ll do anything to make Lu Wade happy.

Case in point: I turn Stede’s over to her.

Or, in more practical terms, I offer it to her as a place to develop recipes for her cookbook with the help of a top-notch team of kitchen professionals.

I hold open the door to the prep kitchen and gesture her inside. “Go in.”

“Riley.” She looks at me.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not going to give me any hints here?”

“Nope.” I swat her ass. “Now get inside.”

She steps into the kitchen and immediately draws up short. It’s empty. Quiet. On the counter in front of us, there’s a stack of notebooks, pens, and folded linens.

This was a huge ask of Chef. Especially on a night we’re pulling out all the stops for a fifty-person party. But Chef, being Chef, was all too happy to provide an assist by not only offering to help write a cookbook, but also by clearing out the kitchen for the ten or so minutes I need right now.

My pulse thunders as I watch Lu take in the kitchen. My hand—the one wrapped around hers—feels clammy. I’m putting myself out there in a way I never have before.

Scary shit.

“Virginia Woolf said that in order to write, a woman needs an income and a room of her own.” I choose my words carefully. “I’d like to provide the room. More specifically, the kitchen. Chef Penelope and a few select members of our team have offered to help you develop recipes for your cookbook right here at Stede’s. I’ll compensate them, of course, but y’all will

have to decide how you want the attribution to work.”

I step forward to grab an apron off the stack of linens on the counter. I hold it out to Lu, her face lighting up when she sees her name embroidered in bright pink on the front. “Welcome to the kitchen, Chef.”

My heart leaps when Lu takes it. She covers her mouth with her hand and lets out a laugh. Tears spilling everywhere when she looks up at me.

“This is—Riley, this is *insane*.”

I firm my touch on her back. She’s shaking. “I always hoped to hand the restaurant over to you. It’s yours if you want it, Lu. Come every day, or come once a year. My only request is that you finish the cookbook. Even if you don’t end up publishing anything, you’ll be glad you tried.”

Lu laughs again, turning her head to look up at me. “But really, Riley. This is way too much. I don’t want to interrupt service at your restaurant—”

“We’ll work out some times,” I reply. “Mondays we’re closed, so we can always gather then. We also don’t open until five on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so mornings on those days are open.”

Lu just shakes her head. “It’s still too generous. And what if I, like, lose my mojo, or can’t come up with anything? Then I’ll be wasting everyone’s time.”

“What if you get your mojo back?” I counter. “You won’t know until you try. That’s all I’m asking, Lu.”

She laughs again. “That’s it. You just want me to *try* to write a cookbook in your incredibly beautiful, incredibly successful restaurant’s kitchen. No biggie.”

“It’s your restaurant.” I reach down to thumb away her tears. “Always has been, Lu. You know that. And since you know that, you know there’s no pressure.”

Her chin wobbles. My chest goes soft. I grab her chin between my thumb and forefinger, steadying her. Running my thumb over her lips.

“I can’t believe this is real,” she whispers.

“No pressure,” I repeat. “But I would like to see you make Virginia proud.”

Lu offers me a watery grin. “No pressure.” She blows out a breath. “Okay.”

My heart leaps. Eyes sting.

“Okay,” she says again, laughing hard enough to make me laugh too. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to get in here, but I will definitely try. Jesus,

Riley, I'm just—I'm overwhelmed. And ridiculously excited." She grabs my face and kisses me. "Thank you."

"Can I help?"

She cocks a brow. "Only if you show up shirtless."

"Pretty sure that's a health code violation, but I'll make anything happen for you."

Alex hands us drinks in plastic cups as we exit Stede's a few minutes later. Mine is virgin, Lu's isn't.

"Don't worry, it's not the rum punch," he says to Lu, making her laugh. "I went light and refreshing this time—not strong at all."

I sip it. It's sweet and a little tart. "Sex on the beach?"

"I heard the rumors." He smirks as he tosses the cocktail shaker into a nearby sink. "Y'all have fun."

Lu leans her head against my shoulder as we walk to my golf cart. "But we haven't had sex on the beach."

"Not yet."

"Right answer."

I glance up at the sky. I'm glad Alex poured us a refresher. The sun is still hot, the breeze humid.

"Feels like a Sheryl Crow kinda night, doesn't it?" I reach for Lu's drink and put it beside mine in the cart's cupholders.

"Yes."

Climbing into the cart, I gesture to her phone. "Do your thing."

She scrolls, finding a playlist. "All I Wanna Do" comes on as I put my hand on Lu's thigh and pull out of the marina. She sips her cocktail. Raises her arms when "If it Makes You Happy" comes on, belting out the lyrics.

She is so fucking sexy. The dress. The tan. The joyful, ridiculous way she sings, like she doesn't give a shit who's watching.

Her abandon is infectious. I join in, giving the lyrics everything I've got. Lu grabs my free hand and holds it up, hollering. People stare as we pass. Lu just sings louder. I do too. Her voice cracks on a high note, and I cover for her in a falsetto I didn't know I was capable of.

She laughs, hard, and suddenly I'm laughing too. The kind of laughter that makes my sides ache and my eyes water.

"We're terrible," she gasps.

"*You're* terrible. I'm Mariah fucking Carey."

She gives me a shove, laughing so hard it becomes silent heaves as she

buries her head in my shoulder.

“Stop making me laugh!”

“You stop making me laugh.” I wipe my eyes. “We need to get it together, or Coop and Goldie are going to think we did something crazy on the way over. Fucked in public or something, right here on the side of the road.”

Lu falls back on her seat, hand on her forehead. “If only.”

“Soon, Legs.” I reach for her thigh and give it a squeeze. “Just say the word if you wanna disappear for a minute or two tonight. I wasn’t lyin’ when I said I can make it quick.”

“But can you make it dirty?”

I cut her a glance. “Like you even need to ask.”

We’re right on time when we pull into The Ocean Club’s parking lot. Coop and Goldie are already on the terrace. Their parents are there, along with a gaggle of nieces and nephews. Abel is in attendance—he’s one of the groomsmen—while Tuck is providing whatever muscle Marianne’s team needs.

Interestingly, Tuck’s sister Jen is here too. His daughter, Katie, is running up and down the boardwalk that leads from the club to the beach.

I introduce Jen to Lu before pulling her in for a hug.

“Tuck asked me to help out with Katie so his nanny could have a break,” she murmurs. “But really, I think he needed a break from the serious case of blue balls she gives him.”

“I heard that, and it’s not true,” Tuck grunts. He’s on a nearby ladder stringing bistro lights across the terrace. “Maren had to study.”

“That why you’re so grumpy?” But Jen is smiling as she turns her gaze toward Abel. “He must be hanging out with you.”

Abel, who’s been watching our exchange, glowers. “Blue balls is no laughing matter, Jen.”

“Sounds like you’re an expert in that area, Abel.”

“You got no idea.”

Jen laughs. “Did I finally figure it out? Why you’re always in a bad mood?”

“I’m not always in a bad mood,” he growls.

“Also not true.” Tuck climbs down from the ladder, wiping his face on his sleeve. “Abel gets laid plenty, though.”

“So do you,” Abel shoots back.

Lu glances at me, lips twitching. “Sounds like everyone on this island’s getting laid quite a lot these days.”

Jen sighs. “Maybe I really should move here.”

Tuck leans down to pick up Katie. “Only been asking you to join us for how many years now?”

“Hi, Katie.” I give her a wave.

She waves back. “Hi, Uncle Riley.”

“I think I actually might do it this time,” Jen says. “Make the move. Why not?”

I don’t miss the tick in Abel’s jaw. “You’ve said that for years now.”

“Maybe I mean it this time.”

Abel runs a hand over his face. “Always getting our hopes up.”

Then he pushes off the dock and abruptly walks away.

Lu looks between his retreating back and Jen’s wistful expression. “I know I’m new here, but I think he might be into you.”

“Oh, he’s definitely into her,” I reply.

Tuck gives me a dark look. “Don’t.”

“You know I’m a thirty-year-old human adult, right?” Jen asks him. “I’m allowed to . . . ahem, have fun with other adult humans. The male ones.”

“Have all the fun you want. Just don’t do it with Abel.”

Jen rolls her eyes. Lu grins. She’s enjoying this as much as I am.

“What’s wrong with Abel?” Lu asks.

“Everything,” Tuck and I reply in unison.

“Abel is mean,” Katie adds.

“You been through enough, Jen,” Tuck says. “Don’t add that guy’s bull s-h-i-t to your plate. You deserve better’n that.”

Lu leans toward Jen. “He is really cute, though.”

“Hey!” I say.

“Don’t,” Tuck repeats. He hands Katie to Jen. “Here, y’all go swim or . . . something. Stay away from the rip current. And from Abel.”

Coop claps my shoulder. “This sounds interesting. Abel perving out on Jen again?”

“Y’all.” Tuck grabs his ladder. “I’m outta here.”

“He says that like we all don’t know he’s the one perving out on his nanny.” Coop shakes his head. “Besides, you’re an usher, so you have to stay here.”

Jen heads for the beach. “Y’all have fun.”

“Is Abel, like, trouble, or . . .?” Lu asks.

I shake my head. “At his core, Abel is a good guy.”

“A complicated one,” Cooper replies. “But a good guy nonetheless.”

Tucker grimaces. “Would you want him dating your sister?”

“I wouldn’t be friends with him if I didn’t,” I reply.

“That’s a lie,” Tuck says.

Cooper grins. “You’re right. I’d rip his fucking head off if he even touched one of my cousins. Much less a sister.”

“Bro code?” Lu asks.

Tuck shrugs. “Sorta. It’s not like I’m trying to be a caveman. But it’s disrespectful, a friend coming on to a family member like that.” He glances at Abel, who’s far enough down the boardwalk to be out of earshot. “Especially when you know what that friend is capable of.”

“But you’re still okay with setting your dad up with Lady, right?” Lu asks. “If my aunt drops one more horny innuendo, I’m going to scream.”

Tuck holds up a hand, which Lu slaps. “Damn right we’re making it happen.”

Cooper glances over my shoulder. “I think we’re about to start—Goldie’s waving at us. Y’all ready to do this thing?”

“I got the rings.” I pat my front pocket. “Not really, but that’s where I’ll keep them tomorrow.”

Tuck folds his arms. “I got the shotgun.”

“That’s everything, then.” Lu claps her hands. “Let’s do it.”

twenty-two

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Lu

Missing Thumbs & Shotguns

“I MEAN, not gonna lie, I’m going to be bummed if it monsoons like they say it’s going to.” Goldie offers Alex, Stede’s bartender, a tight smile as he hands her a frosty mocktail. “But it is what it is at this point.”

I rub her shoulder. “You’re allowed to be bummed. Totally legit response to rain on your wedding day. But the forecast says there’s only a seventy percent chance—”

“Ninety. They just updated it. And not just rain, thunderstorms. Lots of them.”

“Aw, Goldie. I’m sorry. The weather here changes quickly. It could be monsooning one minute and sunny the next.”

“Not before that monsoon blows away all the tents we’re having set up.”

“Lucky for us, your husband-to-be has a friend the size of a tank who can set them all right back up.”

That makes Goldie crack a smile. “It’d be a Tuck wet T-shirt contest.”

“I don’t think anyone would mind that.”

“At least the rehearsal was beautiful,” she replies with a sigh.

It really was. Everyone showed up on time, and everything went smoothly. Goldie and Coop both teared up when the minister, a man from a church over in South Port, gave everyone a sneak peek of the ceremony. We all laughed when Coop went in for a kiss well before it was time. Against the

backdrop of an epic sunset, the whole thing was magical.

“Listen.” I sip my water. I have to be good tonight. Mostly so I’m not a wreck tomorrow for the wedding. But also so I’m not too tipsy to have lots of sex with Riley later. “Whatever happens, we’ll make the best of it. We’ve done some pretty amazing things with tents, and all it takes are some fairy lights and extra flowers. It will be fabulous.”

Goldie puts a hand on her belly. “I have a feeling you’re lying to me because of my delicate condition.”

“I would never.” I grin. “Have faith. If mother nature refuses to work her magic, I’ll work mine.”

She leans her head on my shoulder. “Thank you, friend.”

“Whatever the weather, you still get to marry your baby daddy. That’s the important thing.”

“You’re right.” Straightening, she smiles. “I am really, really excited to marry Coop.”

My heart squeezes. “I’m excited for you. And I promise, your beautiful love story is already getting the beautiful weekend it deserves. It’s happening right now, Goldie. So let’s enjoy it.”

Taking a deep breath, she squares her shoulders. “Okay. Speaking of enjoying the weekend, fifty bucks says Lady and Joe will be making out by the end of the night. You can feel the sexual tension from here, can’t you?” Goldie reaches into a nearby dish and pops a cheese straw into her mouth. “Jesus Christ, those things are good. Are they yours?”

“Kind of.” I glance at my aunt, who’s standing on the other side of the bar at Stede’s. She’s chatting up Goldie’s parents, but apparently I’m not the only one who noticed the way she keeps looking at Joe across the room. “I didn’t make them, the restaurant did. But they use the Gibbes family recipe I taught Riley way back when.”

Goldie wags her eyebrows as she sips her cocktail. “*Your* restaurant. The one Riley just freaking gave you.” She lands a light punch on my shoulder. “Can you believe it?”

“He didn’t give me the restaurant. He’s just letting me use the kitchen to experiment with some recipes whenever I’m in town.”

“And how often is that going to be?”

My stomach clenches. Part of me is thrilled to pieces by Riley’s incredibly generous offer. What’s not to love? I get to cook in a state-of-the-art kitchen with an A-plus team of professionals, all while writing the book of

my dreams.

It's laughably, wonderfully insane.

I am seriously considering writing the book. But I'm just not sure what I want that process to look like.

I'm not sure what I want my *life* to look like. I got out of a committed relationship all of five minutes ago. I don't disagree with what Goldie said about me falling out of love with Patrick well before our engagement ended. But that doesn't mean I'm ready to jump head first into a very serious, very intense relationship with Riley right now.

It's obvious he's not interested in keeping it casual. I don't think I am either. But I can't kick the feeling that I need a second to breathe, like Mom said. To think. To maybe be on my own, so I can make smart, clear-headed decisions about building a brand-new life that's true to *me*.

I'm pretty sure it will include Riley. But maybe he comes in a little ways down the road. I have to make lots of decisions in the meantime, and I can't afford distractions.

Riley is a glorious distraction, yes. But a distraction nonetheless.

Do I want to stay in Charlotte? How much time do I want to dedicate to the cookbook? I don't love my job at The Gibbes Group, but I don't hate it either. I've worked really hard over the past eight-plus years to get where I am. Would I have to give it all up if I did leave Charlotte? No one in my group works remotely. I have some savings, and if I sold the house I own with Patrick, I'd have enough money to live on for a few months.

But if I sell the house, where am I going to live? I know if I mentioned any of this to Riley, he'd immediately tell me to move in with him. But again, that'd require me jumping into a committed relationship with both feet right away.

It's not like I want to date other people. But maybe I don't want to be beholden to anyone for a hot minute. I know firsthand how the expectations that come with a relationship can fuck with your head.

Just seems stupid—impulsive—to make all these decisions now.

"I don't know how often I'll be coming back to Bald Head," I answer Goldie honestly. "This thing with Riley, it's amazing. But I don't know what the future holds. I'm not sure I'm ready to commit to anything right now."

"All great points. But I have to ask, how does the idea of leaving Riley behind make you feel? Because I know you're supposed to head back to Charlotte on Sunday."

Honestly? “Like dying. But I’m also weirdly excited to start life over on my terms, you know?”

Goldie looks thoughtful for a minute. “I get that. I just want to make sure you’re doing what you *want* to do, instead of what you think you *should* do.”

I suck in a breath. “That hits.”

“It should. Think about it.”

“I will.” I hold up my glass. “Thanks for listening. I’m sorry I keep—”

“Seriously, stop apologizing.” She taps her drink against mine. “Boy problems are fun. I kinda miss them.”

“No you don’t.”

She puts a hand on her belly. “I could be getting the biggest boy problem-slash-blessing ever.”

“You still think it’s a boy?”

“I do. Coop swears it’s a girl, but I’m smarter than him, so.” She sips on her straw. “All right, go get Lady laid already. I give you permission to disappear with Riley so you can get laid too.”

I grin. “How generous of you.”

“Only because I’m getting laid myself tonight. I’m telling you, pregnancy is worth it for the orgasms alone.”

“So you’ve said.”

She tilts her chin to the right. “I have a feeling you’ll find that out sooner rather than later.”

I turn my head to see Riley approaching, one hand in the pocket of his perfectly tailored trousers, the other holding his second virgin sex on the beach. His blue eyes are full of laughter and they’re locked on me, a wicked little smirk curving his full lips.

He looks so damn good in his tailored suit and scruff it hurts.

Literally makes me ache everywhere. My chest, stomach. In between my legs.

Am I really going to be able to leave him Sunday?

“The patio is empty and the sun is setting,” he says casually, like he didn’t suck all the air out of the room with his handsomeness. “I think it’s the perfect opportunity for Lady and Joe to have a little one-on-one time.”

The smell of his skin surrounds me. “Okay. Great. Does Tuck know?”

“I do. You get Lady, I’ll get Joe?”

“Look at that teamwork,” Goldie says. “It’s almost like y’all have been working closely all week.”

Marsha and Mrs. Dixon stop me on my way to get Lady, wrapping me in hugs.

“You look gorgeous,” Mrs. Dixon says.

“So do you,” I reply, and I mean it. She’s wearing a silver dress dotted with rhinestones that sets off her silver hair.

Abel is at the bar beside them. The bartender is handing him something that looks suspiciously like a sex on the beach.

“Copycat,” I say.

“What?” He sips. “There’s a reason it’s called that. And that reason is it’s fucking delicious.”

Chef Penelope ducks out of the kitchen then, giving me a quick smile and wave before darting toward the exquisite spread of food set up along the restaurant’s back wall.

I smile. My stomach flutters. All these faces—they’re becoming familiar.

More than that, the people they belong to are becoming friends.

Wild how quickly that happened. Then again, Riley knows everyone on Bald Head. Apparently employs them too. Makes sense they’d become part of my life when I’m already so enmeshed in his.

Might as well call a spade a spade. I don’t know where Riley and I are going, but now I know where we’ve been. And that history—and everything else we have in common—ties us together in a way that can never be undone.

It’s romantic. It also stings—the memory of our breakup, knowing we robbed ourselves of so many years together.

I find Lady still standing at the bar with Mom.

“The sunset is absolutely gorgeous.” I slip an arm through Lady’s. “Let’s go watch it.”

Mom picks up her wine glass off the bar. “That sounds lovely.”

“Oh, Mom, um—why don’t you—?”

“Come get some food with me?” Tuck appears at Mom’s side. He’s showered and changed into a suit, his tattoos peeking out of the sleeves of his blazer and over the collar of his shirt. His hair is neatly parted and combed, and he smells like lumberjack sex: smoke, cedar, and sin.

He’s a bad boy gone good, and judging by the way Mom, Lady, and I stare at him, we do not mind it one bit.

“Hello there,” Mom says slowly.

He offers her his hand. “I’m Tuck, Riley’s friend. I dropped off your new golf cart a couple days back?”

“Like anyone could ever forget,” Lady says.

“So I hear you’re a big fan of your daughter’s cooking.” Tuck holds out his arm. “Did you know tonight’s menu is inspired by it?”

Mom looks at me. “I noticed some familiar dishes, yes.”

I meet Tuck’s eyes and offer him a silent *thanks a million*. “Why don’t you go with Tuck and find out?”

“I’d love to.” Mom takes his arm. “So Tuck, I remember you and Riley going way back, right?”

Then it’s just me and Lady, who’s sucking down her rum punch like her life depends on it.

“I know you’re setting me up with Joe,” she explains. “I need some liquid courage.”

I lift a shoulder. “I have to do something to redirect that, er, *earthy* energy of yours.”

“Let’s do it.” She sets her empty glass on the bar and smacks her lips. “So he can do me.”

Riley and Joe are already on the patio. They stand at the railing overlooking the water. Its calm surface has caught fire, reflecting the vibrant colors of the setting sun: pink, amber, violet.

“So you’re telling me you found your thumb fully intact in his stomach,” Riley is saying, shaking his head. “Wow.”

Joe chuckles. “They had a time of it, sewing my thumb back on. Now I can’t really bend it, and I don’t have much sensation. But it’s better than nothing, which is what I would’ve had if I let that bastard win.”

Aunt Lady sidles up to the railing next to Joe. “Wrestled an alligator?”

Joe immediately perks up, his deeply tanned face lighting up with a smile. “Shark.”

“And you won?”

“I didn’t mean to get into it with him, but he wouldn’t leave me alone.”

Riley’s eyes sparkle when they meet mine. “The shark picked the wrong fisherman to fuck with.”

“I am known to be a badass upon occasion.” Smiling, Joe slips his hands into his pockets. “Hello, Lady.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear. “Hi, Joe.”

“Lady here’s her own kind of badass,” I say. “She once shotgunned a beer out of an alligator’s mouth.”

Joe’s eyebrows pop up. “Color me impressed! Care to share the story?”

“I’d love to.” Lady places her elbows on the railing beside Joe. “It all began in a swamp outside New Orleans.”

“As all good stories do,” Joe says.

“Louisiana’s the best, isn’t it?”

“Second favorite state for sure.”

A server appears with a tray of frosty longneck beers. The labels tell me it’s a pilsner from a local brewery in Wilmington.

“Oh, wow, would you look at that.” Riley plucks a pair of beers off the tray and hands them to Joe and Lady. “Sounds like y’all like beer?”

“I have yet to meet a drink I don’t like,” Lady says, and holds out her beer to Joe.

Joe taps his against hers. “Cheers to that. I will say I’m in my sparkling wine era—”

“Stop!” Lady gasps. “I love bubbles. They go so well with—”

“The catch of the day.” Joe laughs and sips his beer. “Nothing better than sipping excellent white wine while eating excellent white fish.”

“Orgasmic, truly.”

Joe laughs again, his cheeks flushing. “You tell it like it is, don’t you?”

“You have no idea,” I deadpan.

Passing me a beer, Riley takes my hand. “If y’all will excuse us?”

“Godspeed,” Lady replies, keeping her gaze on Joe.

“So this alligator, how’d you get him to hold the beer can?”

“There’s a trick to it. First, you have to find a gator that’s the right size, about yay big . . .”

twenty-three

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Lu

The Storm

THE COCKTAIL PARTY IS A SUCCESS, the crowd staying well past the official ten P.M. end time. No surprise there: the food and drinks are excellent, the service impeccable. Joe and Lady spend the entire night on the patio talking, then disappear together a little after nine o'clock.

I know the majority of Goldie and Cooper's guests, so I'm busy catching up with people, getting stopped by Goldie's mom or Cooper's brothers whenever I try to hit the restroom or grab a bite to eat.

All the while, I feel Riley's eyes on me. He shows up with a plate of food when I'm about to pass out from hunger. He slips into a conversation I have with Mom and Goldie, and a big glass of water appears in my hand twelve seconds after I say I'm thirsty.

I watch him too. He moves through the crowd with an ease and confidence that's sexy as hell. Mocktail in hand, blue eyes kind yet wicked in their beauty. A few women openly stare, but I don't hold it against them because I stare too.

Is that man really mine?

The majority of guests who are coming to the wedding also came tonight, so Goldie and Cooper were able to chat with pretty much everyone they invited for the weekend.

“Now the pressure’s off,” I say as I pull Goldie in for one last hug after the last guest leaves at quarter past midnight. “You and Coop can actually enjoy the wedding instead of spending the whole time catching up with people, because you already caught up with everyone tonight.”

“I do want to dance,” Goldie says. “That is, if we all don’t get blown away into the Atlantic first.”

Cooper meets my eyes over Goldie’s head. I give him a thumbs up. *We’ll make it work.*

“Baby, I’m gonna bump and grind with you tomorrow if it’s the last thing I do.” Coop ushers Goldie through Stede’s front door. “Thank y’all again for a truly epic night. Don’t stay up too late, you hear? We got an early start tomorrow.”

Goldie harrumphs. “Coop, they’ve been eye-fucking each other all night. You really think they’re not going to bang each other every hour, on the hour, for the next eight hours straight?”

“Can I bang you?”

“Yes, but not eight times. My back hurts. And my feet! God, look at my ankles. They’re the size of grapefruits.”

“Aw, baby, I love your cankles.” Coop shoots us a grin over his shoulder as he and Goldie head out into the night.

“No you don’t. But I love you.”

“I love you too, baby.”

Goldie sends a glance my way. “Lu, I’ll see you at eight? Mom will have coffee and bagels for us. Hair and makeup start at eight thirty.”

“I’ll bring some champagne and orange juice for mimosas.” I hold up a hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll get sparkling cider for you.”

Goldie smiles. Her eyes are tired but I can tell she’s happy. “Thanks, friend.”

“Get some rest. We’ll see y’all in the morning.”

The door closes, leaving Riley and me alone near the empty hostess stand. He looks at me and smiles.

The kind of handsome, hungry smile that knocks me in the backs of my knees.

“My place?”

“Nah, I think we should hook-up at my grandparents’ house. That way Mom and Lady can hear exactly how hard you make me come.”

Riley’s eyes go feral. He pinches my ass, making me yelp. Heat pools

low in my core. “I’m not sure Lady is coming home tonight either.”

“How cute was she with Joe? I love that they hit it off.”

“Just needed a little push in the right direction.”

I glance over his shoulder at the restaurant, where staff is busy cleaning.

“I feel like we should stay and help.”

“Ordinarily I’d agree.” His hand is cupping my ass now. He lowers his voice. “But I don’t know how much longer I have you for, so I ain’t about to waste time.”

The words—spoken and unspoken—hang between us. He’s not pressuring me for an answer about what we are. What my plan is. Not yet.

But I know if I gave him one, he’d welcome it.

“I’m also hard,” he continues when I don’t say anything, “so there’s that.”

I bite my lip. “Sounds urgent.”

“I think you’re going to like it. Anal.” His fingers inch closer to the crease between my ass cheeks. “How ’bout we find out?”

Clouds have moved in after the sun set, and thunder rumbles overhead as Riley unlocks the gate to the dock.

It’s dark. Quiet, save for the thunder. The salty air has a metallic tang to it.

“Lightning.” Riley curls a hand around the nape of my neck as we head toward *Dolly*. “You can taste it. Much as I hate to say it, I’m not hopeful for tomorrow’s weather.”

“Goldie’s worried.”

He gives my neck a squeeze, making my blood jump. “Nothing we can’t handle. We put on a good show tonight, and we’ll do the same tomorrow.”

It’s the *we* that gets me.

Said in that casual way of his, like it’s a given he and I are a package deal. Like it’s been that way forever.

The ache inside me pulses. I feel like I’m coming out of my skin, needy and raw and so very full of feeling.

More thunder.

And this time, lightning too. Heat lightning, the kind that crackles through the clouds and illuminates them from within.

In a sky this big, it’s a breathtaking sight.

Awareness tingles from the place where Riley palms my skin down the length of my spine. My nipples pebble to hard, aching points.

I cross my arms over my chest, shivering. Goosebumps break out on my

skin.

“You cold?” I hear the frown in Riley’s voice.

I shake my head. “Just turned on.” *And overwhelmed.*

He glides his hand down my neck and across my shoulder, reaching for my hand. He holds me steady as I board *Dolly*, following close behind.

And then, in the darkness, he’s on me.

His hands are on my hips, his body pressed into mine. He uses his legs to back me against the boat’s solid side. I can feel the heat of the wood, still warm from the day’s sun, seep through the thin fabric of my dress into my back.

I shiver.

Riley growls, crowding out the night with his body as he ducks his head and captures my mouth in a hard, deep kiss.

“Your staff,” I manage.

“Sent them home. I don’t usually keep anyone here overnight anyway.”

“Tom?”

“He’s spending the night at his grandmothers’ house.”

His hands are moving up and down my arms now. I grab the lapels of his jacket and pull him closer, losing myself in the taste of his mouth. The smell of his skin.

His erection presses into my stomach, the heat between my legs becoming acute. I reach for him, both of us moaning when I stroke him through his pants.

“You serious about trying it?”

I suck on his bottom lip in reply. “Yes.”

“Then none of this”—he swats away my hand—“or I’m going to come before we get to third base. Inside. Now.”

He grabs my wrist and yanks me after him. Laughter bubbles up inside me as he hauls me down the stairs, down the hall, and into his cabin.

As always, the bed is neatly made up. Windows open.

Fresh sheets and fresh air.

It’s dark inside the room. Riley digs a box of matches out of his nightstand and lights the same candle he had burning the other night.

The scent of coconut blooms between us.

“That smells so good. Tropical but not overly fruity. It’s elegant.”

Riley crosses the room to pull me against him, palming my ass as he buries his head in my neck. “I had Mom come up with the scent based on that

body wash you always used. Still use.”

My heart twists. I scoff, glad it’s dark. Maybe Riley won’t see that my eyes are wet. “Riley Dixon, are you obsessed with me?”

“How obvious I gotta be, Legs?” He draws his nose up my neck. The scrape of his scruff against my skin sends a burst of arousal straight to my clit. “Trust me?”

Like I could say no with his hands on my body and his mouth on my throat. “Yes.”

Thunder booms, making me jump. Riley stills me with his hands, pressing my crotch against his one last time before his hands head south. Kissing my mouth, he fists the fabric of my dress in his hands and draws it up over my hips. His tongue licks into my mouth for one deep, slow stroke before he pulls back and tugs the dress over my belly and breasts. I hold up my hands and let him pull it over my head.

He steps back. His eyes reflect the candle’s flame as they rake down my body. I’m wearing a boring nude strapless bra—no choice there with the dress I wore—but an absurdly tiny thong. Black lace, cute bows at the centimeter-wide strings that wrap around my hips.

Riley’s Adam’s apple bobs. He reaches down to adjust himself.

I reach behind me and unhook my bra. It falls to the floor at my feet.

“Fuck.” His gaze moves to my bare breasts. “*Fuck*, honey. You got the prettiest tits I ever seen.”

Grinning, I take one in my hand and circle my thumb over my nipple. His jaw ticks.

God, I love getting a rise out of him.

“You gonna come play?” I tease. My pussy throbs as I move to my other nipple. “Or are you just going to stand there and stare?”

His expression sharpens. He lunges for me. Loops a finger into the strap of my thong and gives it a vicious tug. There’s a small tearing noise, and then the thong’s at my feet too, most likely mangled beyond repair.

His fingers skate over my pubic hair as he looks me in the eye. Lips curled in a smirk, eyes hot. The picture of male cockiness.

“I’mma play, princess.” His fingers part me. I go up on my toes as he glides his fingertips into my arousal, sucking in a breath. “In ways you never played before. Get on the fucking bed.”

I roll my hips against his hand. He’s pressing the pad of his middle finger against my clit. “I want—”

“I know what you want. *Get on the fucking bed*, Lu, and spread your legs so I can give it to you.”

And then, just as he circles my clit more intently, more firmly, he pulls his hand away. I cry out. His smirk grows as he presses a hard, scruffy kiss to my mouth.

I want to smack that smirk off his face.

Instead, I find myself crawling onto his bed. I want more of whatever he was just about to give me, and if obeying him is the way to get it, so be it. The duvet is soft and cool, an arousing counterpoint to the white-hot need coursing through me. Sitting up against the pillows by the headboard, I do as he tells me and let my legs fall apart.

He watches me from the foot of the bed. I watch him as he shoulders out of his jacket, then unbuttons his cuffs and rolls up the sleeves of his crisp white shirt.

His shoulders strain against the fabric. The white makes him look especially tan. Especially proper.

But knowing the *improper* things we’re about to do—

“Hot.” I can’t help it. I reach down and touch myself. “You’re so hot, Riley. Everything you do. I’ve never been more turned on in my life.”

His lips twitch. “Thank you. Now stop fucking touching yourself. You don’t come until I’m inside you. Then—I promise—it’ll be the best orgasm of your life. But you gotta be patient.”

“But you just said you didn’t want to waste time—”

“Wasting your time and taking your time are two totally different things.” He kneels between my legs. Palming my knees, he guides them even wider. “So let’s take our time. Ain’t no rush.” He leans in to kiss me. Takes deep pulls of my lips and mouth while he cups my breast. Plays with my nipple. Then he brings that hand to my face. Thumbs my bottom lip. “Open. I’m going to put my fingers inside, and I want you to suck on them.”

I do as he tells me, the arousal in my core swirling to new heights when he gently thrusts his first and middle finger in and out of my mouth. “There we go. Get them nice and wet.”

Riley pulls them out. Still kneeling between my spread legs, he moves his arm down and glides those fingers through my pussy. I arch into his touch. Pant his name when he slips one finger, then the other inside me, stretching me.

I’m drenched, so his fingers move in and out of me easily. He removes

his fingers, swirling that moisture over my clit. I see stars.

That's when his fingers move lower.

Lower still, bringing moisture with them as they whisper against my hole.

My body pulses, even as a frisson of anxiety erupts in my center.

Not only about trying something so . . . taboo. I've heard there's some pain involved.

But also about having another first with Riley Dixon. I think I was already in love with him when we had sex for the first time ten years ago. Losing my virginity to him was the best and worst thing to ever happen to me. The best, because the sex was *good*.

The worst, because it was so good, I fell even harder. The kind of love you apparently never come back from, because here I am again—naked and aching for more—in Riley's bed.

It's the kind of love that can destroy you.

What if Riley destroying me isn't the risk, though?

What if he's not a distraction, but a direction? A gigantic neon arrow pointing me in the direction I want to go?

I gasp at the feeling of pressure when Riley presses his blunt fingertip more firmly against my rim. My pussy flutters. I want to come, but I also want to wait, like Riley asked me to. See if he's right when he says how incredible it'll feel if I hold off my climax until he's inside me.

"Feel okay?"

"Yeah." I close my eyes and try to breathe. "Just different. Keep going."

His slick finger slips inside me the tiniest bit. My body lights up, a constellation of interconnected points of sensation. Lips, nipples. Clit. And now asshole too.

It's an awakening of a place, a need, I wasn't aware of until now.

"Keep *going*."

Riley chuckles. "That's my girl." He pushes his finger farther. My breath catches. There's a tiny burn as the pressure increases.

My clit is screaming for attention, but I bite my lip and try my best to stay focused.

I open my eyes and look down. Riley's finger is halfway inside me. It's lewd and a little scary and so fucking hot I feel another soaking wave move through my center. I rock my hips, making his finger sink a tiny bit more inside me.

"You're so goddamn tight." His voice is threadbare. "I cannot wait to

fuck you here.”

He gently moves his finger out, then back in. Moving deeper with every thrust until he’s all the way inside me.

The intrusion feels . . . like more pressure. The kind that burns a little but is addictive.

He continues to thrust. I feel myself stretching around him. Taking him more deeply each time with less pressure, less pain.

“Please,” I pant. “I need to touch myself.”

“No, honey. But I will.”

He thumbs my clit, rolling the pad of his finger over my slick softness. My hips buck off the bed, pleasure coiling tightly inside my center.

I swivel my pelvis against his hand. Sensation rockets through me, and my head falls back on the pillow. He takes his time, his touch gentle but insistent. His patience with me, the care he’s putting into this, how safe that makes me feel—

My chest is mush, even as desire pounds through me.

“I think you’re ready,” he says. “That being said, this is going to feel weird and maybe uncomfortable at first. But I promise you’re going to like it. If you don’t, we stop. Talk to me, okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

And then he’s standing and taking off his clothes, thunder rumbling as he pulls a bottle of lube out of the nightstand drawer. His dick is enormous, heavy with need. Even in the dark I can see him leaking, his pink head glistening with pearlescent liquid. He lubes himself up with quick, short strokes of his wrist. His abs ripple. Jaw ticks.

Riley puts his hands on my hips and tugs me farther down onto the bed so I’m on my back.

“Grab the backs of your knees. That’s it. Open up nice and wide for me, honey.”

The mix of arousal and anticipation in my blood has my heart beating so hard I’m shocked he can’t hear it. I do as he tells me, feeling exposed as I spread myself wider than I ever have before.

He looks at my slit and his nostrils flare. He climbs onto the bed, the mattress sighing beneath his weight, and fists himself. Then he guides his head to the apex of my pussy, massaging my clit. I arch my back, eager for that kind of touch, of pressure. Then he notches himself at my entrance and, covering my body with his, leans down and kisses me at the same moment he

sinks to the hilt inside my pussy.

Bare.

Slick.

Huge.

The feeling of fullness is *everything*.

“Wrong hole,” I breathe into his mouth.

He chuckles, a dark sound that rumbles inside his chest. “Told you I’m takin’ my time.”

His accent is thick as molasses. He plunders my mouth, my body, and I grab onto his ass so I can feel the way his muscles flex as he pumps into me. It’s maddening, the slow, steady pace he sets.

It also makes me tingle from head to toe.

I’m covered in him. His smell, his feel. His heat. My nipples brush against the wiry hair on his chest as he moves, making my pussy clench with every thrust. Sweat breaks out on my skin, his too, my entire being ringing with the need for release.

Riley kisses my neck, then curls his hand around my throat. He pulls out of me at the same moment he gives my throat a quick, hard squeeze.

“I’m dying,” I manage. “I have to—*please* let me come.”

But he only smirks as he reaches down to guide his dick to my rim. “Soon, princess. Now hold the backs of your knees again and look at me. I wanna see your face when I fuck you here for the first time.”

He presses his head against me. Already the pressure is enormous. My heart is beating inside my skin now. He keeps pressing, *pressing*, until I feel a bite of pain.

“Oh! Are you—did you just push inside?”

“Not yet.”

My stomach dips. “Maybe this is a bad idea. I’m not sure—”

“Trust me. I’ll stop if you need me to. I’d never, ever hurt you, Lu.” He goes still. Looks me in the eye. His are dark, focused. Full of the same sharp hunger I feel thrumming through my body.

I nod. “Okay.”

“Give it a minute to feel good. I promise, it will.”

“Okay.”

And then—

And *then*.

He rocks his hips and pushes inside me.

The pain is immediate. It burns, a stretch so extreme it feels like I'm being torn apart from the inside.

I drop one leg to grab onto the duvet. "Riley," I whimper.

He feathers kisses over my cheeks. Keeps his hand on my throat but loosens his grip, fingertips working gentle circles on my skin.

"I'm sorry, honey. It will get better. Give me a minute."

He stays very still for what feels like a small eternity. The burn slowly subsides, fading into a fullness that's not altogether unpleasant.

In fact, it feels . . .

"Good," I pant. "Getting there."

"I'm going to go a little farther then, okay?"

"Okay."

He sinks deeper. There's the burn again, but it fades quickly this time. I rock my pelvis, swallowing a little more of him.

He groans, dropping his forehead on mine. "You're heaven."

"Told you."

Another chuckle. He sinks deeper still. My breath catches. My pussy is fluttering at the memory of him filling me there.

I like that he's filling me here now. Slow, slow, slow.

Meanwhile, my pulse is sprinting.

As if Riley can read my mind—body—his thumb finds my clit again. At the same time he draws back his hips in a small thrust, then surges forward.

I cry out. Legs shake.

The fullness has a bite to it, one that sends the pressure he's putting on my clit on a rocket ship to outer space.

I'd assumed he was buried all the way inside me, but he presses in a little bit more until I feel his groin meet with my ass. Heat floods my eyes. My pussy.

"Oh, God," I choke out.

He's trembling now too. Trying to hold back, but I know he wants to fuck me the way he usually does: hard and deep and *well*.

Still, he takes his time, staying put inside me. The heat in my eyes spills over.

"Oh, honey—"

"I'm crying because it's good." I tilt my chin to kiss his mouth. "So good, Riley."

Our kiss tastes like pineapple and salt water. He finally begins to move,

pulling out of me, pushing back in. Little thrusts at first that make me bite my lip. But then I stretch, pain blooming into a kind of pleasure I've never known before.

Obscene, incredible pleasure. Riley's massive torso tenses deliciously as he moves over me. His mouth catches on mine, releases. Catches again.

He's drawing manic, magic circles over my clit with his thumb now. The throb there becomes unbearable, egged on by the fullness of him in my ass.

My pussy flutters. Riley spears me on an especially vicious thrust, my tits bouncing. He presses his thumb against my clit, hard.

The orgasm detonates deep inside me. My walls pulse around him, muscles clenching as the wave hits, and hits, and *hits*.

I come utterly, completely apart.

More tears. If I thought I was overwhelmed before, I'm drowning now.

I squeeze my eyes shut in a last-ditch attempt to rein it all in—the orgasm, the mushiness in my chest. The exquisite feeling of being ripped from my thoughts and forced to live in my body. In the present.

I feel Riley's lips on my face.

My stomach drops when I realize he's kissing away my tears.

Thunder crashes outside. Or maybe it's my heart that makes that sound.

Maybe it's been on a collision course with Riley's this whole time.

twenty-four

...

Riley

Hope Floats

LU'S ORGASM ripples through us both.

Her ass contracts around me, milking me to the edge of my own orgasm.

She let me in.

She trusted me.

And now I'm in deep. Literally and metaphorically. I'm kissing the tears off her face while my heart does that thing where it goes apeshit.

I can't breathe.

I can't stop.

I just hold her, both of us shaken as I pump my hips in a blind search for relief.

Godfucking*damnit* she feels good.

I'm inside her. Bare. Aching. And there's a feeling in the pit of my stomach that becomes sharper the longer we fuck.

We haven't discussed what happens after the weekend is over. It's absolutely not fair on my part to claim her. But I'm going to jail if I find out someone else has her the way I'm having her right now.

I'm so fucked it's not even funny.

I grit my teeth. Close my eyes.

Pray like hell she doesn't go back to Charlotte on Sunday and forget me forever.

I come inside her ass with a shout. Pulse after pulse of cum. She rocks her hips, taking me deeper, and I swear to Christ I die and go to heaven for a full beat.

The rush subsides, and I can hear both of us struggling to catch our breath.

I open my eyes. See her looking at me, a stunned expression on her face.

Even in the flickering light of the candle, I can see she's flushed everywhere. Chest, cheeks. The imprint of my hand is visible on her neck.

I made a mess of her.

She let me. No judgement. No hesitation.

I hang my head.

"Hey." She snakes a hand between us and puts it on my face, her brow furrowed. "You all right?"

I'm in love with you, but I don't know if you're ready to hear that.

I don't know if she's ready for what I want.

I want to shove that thought aside. Keep the faith, hope floats, all that shit. I've done everything I can to make her feel safe and adored. But that same gut feeling about wanting Lu all to myself tells me she's just not ready.

Doesn't mean it's the end. But it does mean I'm gonna have to let her go when the weekend's over, and who knows when she'll come back?

I press a kiss to her throat. "Let's get you cleaned up, okay?"

I stay up all night listening to the rain. It's loud, the downpour's heavy and constant. But not loud enough to drown out the sounds Lu makes when she sleeps. Her breathing. The slide of her hair on the pillow when she turns her head.

She moans, once, just as the darkness begins to thin to grey. I wonder if she's dreaming about all the shit we've done in my bed this week.

There's so much more we can do.

So many new things to try together. We have ten years of lost time to make up for. My chest hurts knowing we might not get that chance.

My phone vibrates. It's a text from Coop.

COOPER EASTON

Hate to be the bearer of bad news, bro. I know you've been working hard to pull this off and I appreciate it. But the wind took down the tents on the boardwalk overnight. They're calling for more wind today. Goldie just puked up her coffee. SOS.

Careful not to wake Lu, I roll out of bed. Pull on a pair of shorts and a T-

shirt, then head to the bathroom, where I grab some ibuprofen and a glass of water. I set them on the nightstand on Lu's side of the bed before padding to the kitchen.

I shoot off a dozen texts by the time coffee's ready. The breeze coming in through the windows is cool. Chilly, even. While the windows are shielded from the rain by the decks that wrap around *Dolly* on the outside, the cold air definitely still gets in. Closing the windows, I stand in the kitchen and sip my coffee. My gaze slips to the pot on the counter.

I always make a full one, even though it's just me drinking a cup or two alone ninety-nine percent of the time. Sometimes Kurt and the staff will grab a cup as they're hustling to get their work done. But Mom and/or Marsha love reading on their screened-in porch in the mornings, so they don't typically stop by this early. Tuck's got Katie.

Feels like everyone has a life but me.

Then Lu showed up, and suddenly I have someone to have coffee with. Even better? I get to fuck Lu before *and* after said coffee. And then I get to pick her brain. Take her swimming. Cook with her in my kitchen.

How in the span of one short week she made herself right at home in my, well, home, I don't know. But she did it. I already feel fucking wrecked knowing she won't be here Monday morning.

Taking a deep breath, I continue to caffeinate as I wait for the replies to my texts. Abel is first. Then Marianne and Tuck. Mom is next; after her, I hear from Woody at Baity's.

Interestingly, Joe and Lady respond within thirty seconds of each other. Probably because they're reading their phones together in bed.

I smile at the thought, even as I feel a pinch in my chest. I ain't the jealous type. But yeah, I'm jealous of the fact that they live close enough to one another that they don't have to make any big decisions yet. They don't have a fucked-up history to contend with. Sins to atone for.

They get to be together, simple as that.

If only it were so simple with me and Lu.

Could be.

I'm able to cobble together a kinda-sorta plan for the wedding by the time I finish my first cup. Time to call Coop.

He picks up on the first ring. "Dude."

"I know."

"Dude."

“I know. This sucks. But I have a plan.”

Cooper lets out a long, low sigh. I can see him pulling his thumb and forefinger across his eyes. “I can’t thank you enough. We’re in . . . bad shape over here.” He starts to whisper. “Can’t tell if Goldie’s nauseous because she’s nervous or it’s the baby or what. But I need a miracle.”

“You need me. Take care of your blushing bride. With your permission, I’ll handle it from here.”

“You got it. Let us know what you need?”

“Start a phone tree. Text bush. Whatever the fuck they’re calling it these days. We have a change of venue—we’re moving the wedding to 12 Row Boat Row.”

“Why does that sound familiar?”

“It’s one of the projects I have going with Abel.”

“Projects? As in, it’s an unfinished house?”

“It’s mostly finished. Just—trust me, we’ll make it spectacular.”

It’s ballsy, asking my friend to trust me with the entirety of his wedding. But I guess I’m emboldened by Lu’s trust. I sure as hell delivered on every promise I made her last night.

I can deliver on the promises I’m making Coop too.

He sighs again. “If you say so. I’ll never forgive myself if Goldie doesn’t get the wedding day of her dreams.”

“I’m on it. Now go make yourself a Bloody Mary.”

“That doesn’t sound good.” Lu leans her shoulder into the wall beside the kitchen. “Well, the Bloody Mary part sounds great. But the rest . . .”

I stare at her, mouth going dry. She’s in my shirt again. Just-fucked hair everywhere. There’s a spot on her chin that looks suspiciously like beard burn.

“Morning, beautiful.”

She comes to stand in front of me. Goes up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to my mouth. “Morning, handsome.”

“Can I make you some coffee?”

She grins. “That’d be wonderful. I’ll make eggs again.”

“Maybe you should sit. Sore?”

Her cheeks flush pink. “A little, yeah. Thanks for the Advil.”

“It’ll kick in soon.” I nod at the table. “Sit.”

“I will, preferably on your face. But only after breakfast.”

I make her coffee the way she likes—lots of cream, lots of sugar—and

hand her the mug. She's already busying herself at the stove, grabbing a pan from the cabinet to the left. Opening the fridge and immediately grabbing the eggs, milk, and butter because she knows where I keep them.

She's gorgeous. My shirt rides up her thighs as she moves. My dick perks right the fuck up when I glimpse her bare ass cheek.

No panties, then.

But it's how at home she is that takes my breath away.

You belong here, I wanna tell her.

"I need your help today," I say instead, taking the bowl of eggs she's working on and giving it a whisk with a fork. "The Club is a no-go for the wedding."

She looks up from melting the butter in the pan. "Jesus."

"Weather's way, way worse than they were calling for. I think we can make this work to our advantage, though. As long as you're as good as you say you are at—"

"Everything?" She grins. "I'm that good, yes."

I pinch her ass, my chest lighting up when she laughs. "Don't you start gettin' me all hard'n shit when we don't have time to fuck this morning. We got a whole house to decorate—"

"A house?" Her eyes go wide. "Seriously?"

"All my rentals are occupied. But Abel's finishing up a house on your street, and it's empty. Obviously. It's not perfect, but I think we can make it great with a little help from our friends."

Her eyes are practically bulging out of her head now. "That big shingled house with the whale inside?"

My turn to laugh. "That's the one."

"It's beautiful. Like, stunning. But does it have, I don't know, working toilets?"

I grimace. "Abel says it will by five o'clock. In the meantime, I thought you could help Marianne with the decor and tables and . . . stuff."

Lu scoffs, taking the bowl of eggs from me and pouring them into the pan. "You know that 'stuff' typically takes months to plan and execute, right?"

"We've got ten hours." I put my hands on the counter on either side of Lu and melt my body against hers, my front to her back. Kiss the nape of her neck. "But lots of helping hands. We can do it, as long as we don't get sidetracked."

She tilts her head to the side, granting me access to her throat. “That will definitely happen if you don’t stop humping me like this and kissing my neck.”

“I’m not humping you,” I say, even as I press my growing erection into the cradle of her ass.

She stirs the eggs with one hand. Reaches back with the other to cup my face. “I’m supposed to hang with Goldie all day—get our hair and makeup done. I don’t want to just blow her off.”

“She’s apparently not feeling great. I’d give her a call and see what she says. I have a feeling she’ll be happy to lend you to me for the day if it means getting the wedding of her dreams.”

Lu scoffs again. “No pressure.”

My phone pings. Sighing, I step away from Lu to grab it.

“Oh boy.”

“What?”

“The preacher’s house flooded. He isn’t going to be able to make the ceremony.”

Lu goans. “That’s really not good.”

“I’ll think of something. Actually, I think Mrs. Underwood might’ve been a pastor in her former life. Let me call—”

“Who’s Mrs. Underwood?”

I grin. “The village’s resident romance writer.”

“Ah. Every town needs one of those. Small towns like their sex almost as much as they like their secrets.”

“You kidding?” I harrumph. “We like sex way, way better. It’s why we’re so good at it.”

She laughs. The buttery smell of scrambled eggs fills the kitchen. Mom picks up and tells me Mrs. Underwood is indeed an ordained minister.

The weather outside’s awful. But that don’t mean we can’t make magic happen.

That don’t mean I can’t enjoy Lu’s company for one more day.

Even if it is our last one together.

twenty-five

...

Lu

Oreos Make Everything Better

GOLDIE GIVES me her blessing to help Riley pull off the last-minute change of venue. But she still sounds absolutely miserable on the phone.

So after I help Riley clean up from breakfast, I have him drop me off at my grandparents' house for an outfit change before I drive to the Maritime Market for groceries.

Then I head to Goldie and Coop's rental house.

Thank God I have Julia, my sprightly new golf cart, because the weather is probably the worst I've ever seen it on the island. The rain comes down in sheets, a steady, constant downpour that floods the streets. It's chilly, the temperature hovering right near sixty-five degrees, but somehow the air is clammy at the same time. My hair, already a mess thanks to Riley's ministrations last night, immediately frizzes in the humidity.

My heart aches for Goldie and Coop. This wedding has been a bear from the start; they were disappointed to have to push the date up, largely because it meant so many of their friends and family weren't able to make it. I'm sure they're doubly disappointed now that the weather isn't cooperating either. You'd never think of Goldie as a romantic, but the Jane Austen fan in her lurks just beneath the surface. She loved the idea of a sunset ceremony on the beach—a warm breeze, epic lighting, the background noise of waves

crashing.

I'd be devastated too if I had to trade that for something significantly less sexy. Riley said Cooper told Goldie the new venue is a "big, beautiful new house." What he didn't tell her is that the house is not finished, and there's not a stick of furniture or single light fixture to be found inside.

We certainly have our work cut out for us.

First, though, I need to check in on my friend.

"I come bearing gifts," I singsong as I let myself into her house. "How's everybody doing?"

It's a little before eight, so the hair and makeup people haven't arrived yet. Goldie is on the couch, remote in hand, a glazed-over look on her face as she stares at an episode of *Below Deck: Mediterranean*.

"Riley's boat is so much cooler than the ones on this show." She snuffles.

My chest twists. "*Dolly's* the best. I'm sure Riley would let you take her to the Mediterranean for your honeymoon."

"At least we have that," she replies glumly.

I set down the grocery bags on the counter. Plucking a package of Double Stuf Oreos from the pile, I plop onto the couch beside her. "Feeling any better?"

"The nausea went away, so that's good." She lifts a shoulder and sighs. "Sorry. I know I'm being a drama queen, I'm just—yeah, so bummed about the weather and everything."

I open the package and hold it out to her. "Like you keep telling me—stop apologizing. You've been looking forward to this day for a while, and it's not turning out how you pictured it would."

"I'd like to catch *a* break. Just one. Something has to work out." She bites down on an Oreo and looks at me. "Maybe that something will be you and Riley."

"Ha." I pop a cookie into my mouth.

"You're scared," she says softly.

I nod. "Very."

"Have you thought about how you're going to leave it? Like, are y'all going to casually keep in touch, or . . ."

"I'm not sure we're capable of doing anything casually."

"You did bone him, like, five seconds after you saw him." She picks up another Oreo. "And he did offer to help make all your super-secret, super-cute dreams come true with his millions of dollars after confessing he fucked

up and swore to undo all his wrongs so you'd see he never really got over you."

I shake my head, simultaneously feeling like I'm going to cry and smile. "What if the timing's not right, though?"

"What if the timing's perfect?"

"This is your wedding day. Let's stay on topic and talk about you, okay?" I wipe my hands. "Still think you're going to wear your hair down?"

Goldie searches my face for a beat. "We can move on to wedding stuff. But you know running away from your problems—your feelings—isn't going to solve them, right?"

"What kind of idiot runs away from their problems?" I ask, not meeting her eyes. "And I like feelings."

"Then talk about those feelings with Riley! Only seems fair when you think about the considerable pants feelings he gives you."

"He knows how great I think the pants feelings are."

She nudges me with her toe. "Don't let this guy slip through your fingers, Lu."

"I won't." I get quiet. "I just need to figure out . . . a lot of things first."

"That's fair."

"Can we talk about you now?"

"You know I love talking about me."

"You sure you're okay without me today?"

"I mean, I'll miss you." Goldie smiles. "But it's not like we can tie one on anyway. I'll put my feet up and hang with my mom and cousins. I'll reserve the last hair and makeup slots for you if you want?"

"Sounds like a plan." I grab her knee. "As for the wedding—y'all are in good hands. It's going to be beautiful."

"Or a total dumpster fire. Either way, it'll make for a great story."

I laugh. "Because having a shotgun wedding after the guy you met less than a year before knocks you up isn't enough of a great story as it is."

"I am a good time, aren't I?" Goldie laughs too.

I wrap her in a tight hug, promising I'll be back to see her get dressed. Then I get up, my breath catching. I am *sore* in a way I've never been before.

"Oh my God." Goldie looks me up and down. "Y'all did butt stuff last night, didn't you?"

Of course Goldie's mom walks into the house at that exact moment. "Butt stuff? Don't tell me you girls came down with a stomach bug!"

My face goes up in flames. Goldie laughs so hard she cries.

There's a line of golf carts and trucks parked outside 12 Row Boat Row. Despite the rain, men wearing T-shirts and tool belts ferry between the trucks and the house. I glimpse Marianne directing traffic from the front porch.

The house itself is a cedar-shake stunner. It's enormous, with three stories, deep porches, and ocean views for days.

The front yard, however, is a muddy, sand-strewn mess. A dumpster, overflowing with building material, sits front and center; there are tire tracks everywhere, not to mention the port-a-potty blocking the sidewalk.

My gut seizes. I know Riley is a talented guy with lots of connections. But even he might not be able to turn this mess into a dream wedding venue by five P.M.

Lady approaches from the other end of the street, a box on her hip. From the way the box rattles, she's carrying the mason jars I asked her to bring. Mom is hustling beside her, her head covered by the hood of a bright yellow slicker she's stuffed with the fairy lights Granny and Pa would use to decorate the house at Christmas.

"Well, if what they say is true about weddings and rain," Mom pants, "Cooper and Goldie are going to have the best luck ever as a married couple."

I grab the box from Lady and head for the front door. "Thank y'all so much for coming. We have our work cut out for us. I know Riley's called some people—"

"Lots of people." Mom glances at the trucks. "Let's see what we're working with inside. I've been wanting to check this place out."

Marianne greets us with a tired smile. "Thank goodness you're here. Riley's in the kitchen—he's been looking for you."

I notice two things when I step inside the house.

First up: it is nowhere *near* as close to finished as Riley said. The sound of a drill echoes off the spackled sheetrock walls and ceiling. Sawdust covers the floors. The windows are dotted with stickers and permits.

Second, there are a ton of people here. So many I wonder if Riley asked every single resident of Harbour Village to lend a hand this morning. Mrs.

Dixon is measuring the length of a nearby room, while Marsha runs a shop vac over the hardwoods (they tell me they left Tom at home so he doesn't step on any nails). A man who looks like he could be in ZZ Top—beard, biker boots—lugs in a stack of coolers, each one marked with BAITY'S TACKLE & MORE est 1991 in peeling blue ink.

Meanwhile, Marianne's people, all wearing the same uniform of a black T-shirt and pants, haul a little bit of everything inside: tables and chairs, stacks of china, wilted floral arrangements.

"The florist had to drop them off yesterday afternoon," Marianne explains with a frown. "He's located in South Port, and he was worried he wouldn't be able to get over here on the ferry with the weather being so bad."

Mom pulls back her hood. "I'm on it. Lu, bring those mason jars over. Let's see if we can't revive these poor flowers with a little rearranging."

"I got this." Riley appears, smiling as he takes the box from me. "Morning, y'all. We really appreciate you comin' out to help."

"Least we can do." Lady goes up on her tiptoes. "Is Joe here by chance?"

Riley smiles. "He's helping the electricians finish up some wiring in the primary bath."

"Oh, great. I'll . . . go wipe down the counters in there."

"That'd be helpful, thank you." Riley turns to Mom. "Oh, thank God, you brought lights! I guess Coop and Goldie weren't going to use anything but candles and those bistro lights at the club, so Marianne didn't reserve much from the tent company. And as luck would have it, the people who are building this house didn't want to install overhead lighting, so we'll need all the extra illumination we can get."

We head into the soaring main living area. Heavy beams crisscross the space, and I get how it will eventually look like the inside of a whale.

Right now, though, it just looks like a construction site.

Tuck is on a ladder to my left, trying to hang a swag of ivory organza across the length of the room.

"Still way too tight," a tiny woman in a pair of high-waisted shorts and a sweatshirt is saying from the bottom of the ladder. "Seriously, Tuck, just let me do it."

"No fucking way you're gettin' on a twenty-foot ladder. I got it." But when Tuck glances down at the woman, his grip on the organza slips, and it slumps almost to the floor. "Damn it."

"You know, if you'd just let me—"

“No.” He tugs on the organza. “Tell me how it looks now.”

“Like shit.”

“Jesus Christ, Maren, could you give me some guidance that’s helpful for once?”

“I am tryin’ to help, but you won’t let me!”

Tuck glances at her over his shoulder. “You know, you got a big mouth for someone so little.”

“I do know.” Maren folds her arms. “I also know you like it.”

Tuck grins. “Is that so?”

I grab Riley’s arm. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“They been like this all damn morning.” He sets the box of mason jars on a nearby bookshelf. “It’s cute, right?”

“So cute.”

“Too bad she’s his nanny.”

“That’s a problem?”

“Yeah. For that reason and plenty others, he won’t touch her.”

“Honestly, I think the nanny/single-dad thing is hot.”

Riley slides a hand into the back pocket of my jeans, pulling me close. “Also gets in the way.”

“I hate when things like real life and real employment get in the way.”

His eyes meet mine. “Me too.” He takes his hand out of my pocket. “Here, come meet Maren. Maybe you can convince her to make the first move, because Tuck sure as hell won’t. Maren! This is my friend Lu.”

“It’s so nice to meet you.” I take her hand. “And thank you for helping Goldie and Coop out.”

“Appreciate your help, sincerely,” Riley says.

Maren smiles. “Tuck said it was all hands on deck. Katie had a playdate this morning at a friend’s house, so I was free. And this beats the hell out of studying.”

“You’re in school?” I ask.

She nods. “Getting my master’s. Luckily my classes this semester are mostly virtual, which means I get to stay on Bald Head and torture this guy”—she points to Tuck—“with my little body and big mouth.”

Even from twenty below, I can see Tuck’s jaw tick. Same way Riley’s does when he’s turned on, angry, or both.

“You got no idea,” Tuck says.

“Do you know how much of that organza we have?” I ask.

Maren nods. “You’re looking at it. Apparently it’s leftovers from another wedding they’re having in the ballroom at the Club today. Marianne gave us instructions to hang it, but . . .”

“It’s not going as well as we’d hoped.” Tuck wipes his brow.

I tug my lips to the side as I survey the room. My eyes catch on the sad-looking flowers, which Mom and Lady are busy setting out on the kitchen island.

The florist went heavy on the snapdragons and zinnias. They’re pretty, but their long, tubular stems mean they easily (and quite literally) get bent out of shape.

Unless, of course, you hang them upside-down from those stems. The vision hits me, fully-formed and so beautiful I literally suck in a breath. I saw it done once in a magazine. A wedding in the Hamptons, I think. No clue if it would work here. But if it did, it could be spectacular, and just the sort of dramatic visual we need to distract from the unfinished ceiling.

“I have an idea,” I say, grabbing onto Riley’s arm.

A spark ignites in his eyes. “Listen up, y’all.”

My heart flutters. God, I love how he takes me and my ideas so seriously.

I love how he creates space for me. Makes me feel like I can breathe again.

“I’m going to need those Christmas lights and some wire. Lots and lots of wire.”

The ZZ-top looking guy raises his hand. “Would fishin’ line work?”

“That’ll do.”

“I think I know where you’re going with this.” Maren’s eyes slide from the flowers to the organza and back again. “I’ll find scissors. And an extra ladder.”

“I’ve got the measuring tape!” Mrs. Dixon appears, holding said measuring tape above her head.

Riley pinches my ass. “I got whatever you need, Legs.”

“Sounds kinky.” Abel crosses the room, an enormous length of PVC pipe slung over his shoulder. “Water should be on in twenty.”

“Yay for toilets!” Marsha says.

I look at Riley. He looks back and smiles. “If all else fails, at least we have that.”

I smile too.

Then we get to work.

twenty-six

...

Riley

Dancing Queen

GOLDIE TAKES one step into the room and bursts into tears.

Tears that quickly become loud, heaving sobs.

“Oh my God, y’all.” She puts a hand on her chest. “This is—I have no words.”

I catch Lu’s eye as she curls an arm around Goldie’s middle and pulls her in for a side hug. A tear slips down Lu’s cheek, and all of a sudden I’m sniffing too.

I’m in good company, though, because Coop’s actively wiping his eyes beside me. To be fair, I think he’s been crying since he and Goldie had their “first look” a few minutes ago in the front hallway. They both look like a million bucks. Goldie’s in an elegant, curve-hugging ivory dress that shows off the barest hint of a baby bump, and Coop is wearing a classic black tuxedo that matches my own.

“Y’all.” He swallows. Grabs onto my shoulder. “*Y’all.*”

“We’re good.” Lu grins. “We know.”

Goldie gestures to the makeshift ceiling that floats over the open portion of the house’s first floor. “Just—how?”

I discreetly roll my left shoulder back. My arms are killing me. “Took a village.”

Rain pelts the two stories of windows on the far wall, but you wouldn’t

know it thanks to the “sky” of flowers, fairy lights, and swags of organza that hangs above our heads. It makes what was a big, empty space this morning feel intimate and beautiful.

No wonder, considering there’s an entire botanical garden hanging from a grid of miles of fishing line. Took Woody, Tuck and me a solid two hours to construct the damn thing. Lu led a team of ladies behind us, all of them working feverishly to tie stem after stem of flowers and greenery to the grid.

After Abel cleared the mess that was the house’s front yard, he helped us with the lighting, hauling in a portable generator. We plugged in as many strands of white lights as we could find and threaded them through the grid, allowing the ends to dangle alongside the flowers.

The expression on Lu’s face as she surveys her work—it’s pride.

As it should be. Her vision is what helped us make magic out of a hot mess. Marianne and her crew helped out too, of course. She made the call to mix up table shapes so we could fit as many as possible into the front foyer and dining room. With Mrs. Wade’s help and some candles snagged from Marsha Marsha Marsha, Marianne reworked the table settings. Since Lu used most of the flowers for the ceiling, Marianne ended up setting the tables with a mishmash of what Mom and Marsha had available at the shop: planters of preserved moss, plus antique silver and brass votives, which now flicker with candles.

“Riley means that literally.” Lu guides Goldie further into the room. “I think every single person in Harbor Village pitched in today.”

Goldie shakes her head, hand on her mouth. “Should we move here, Coop? We should move here. I mean, most of these people don’t even know us, but they helped out anyway. You told everyone they’re invited to the wedding, right?”

I laugh. “We did, yes. And you should definitely move here. Tuck says it’s a great place to raise kids.”

Cooper grabs Goldie’s hand. Lu releases her, coming to stand beside me. She threads her fingers through mine. My heart skids inside my chest.

I want her. So damn bad. She looks gorgeous in a little black dress and sky-high heels. She was able to sneak away from the house to get her hair and makeup done last minute, and now her lips are glossy and her eyelashes are a mile long.

She smells like coconut and chocolate.

“Oreos,” she’d explained. “They’re Goldie’s favorite.”

“You’re my favorite.”

She licked her lips. “I am delicious.”

My torso cramps. A fierce craving that hits me hard enough to hurt.

Fuck. Me.

I wish I knew what happens next. I wanna skip the bullshit. Dive right into the deep end with Lu. I worry we’ll fall apart if we stay in the shallows too long. We both hurt too much over the years to survive anything but certainty this time around.

But I got a feeling Lu isn’t certain. Not yet.

I know it’s only been a week, not even a full seven days. But when you’ve been in love with someone for over a decade, you’re done being patient.

You’re done waiting for answers.

“I’m not gonna lie, y’all,” Goldie says, “this just might be better than what our wedding was going to look like at the club. Color me impressed. Seriously, Lu, we can’t thank you enough. And Riley—”

“You always, always come through.” Coop offers me his hand. “Couldn’t have asked for a better friend or best man.”

I shake his hand, and then he’s pulling me in for a hug.

“Goldie’s thrilled,” he murmurs in my ear. “Which means I am too. I owe you one, brother.”

“You owe me nothing. Now let’s get y’all married.”

There’s not a dry eye in the room when Goldie walks down the aisle to a classical cover of Clapton’s “Wonderful Tonight.” She’s transcendent. Big smile, eyes bright. She’s flanked by both her parents, who are wearing happy, wobbly smiles themselves.

Lu, Cooper, and I watch from the front of the room in awed silence. Mrs. Underwood shuffles on her feet between us, her long black preacher’s robes swishing above the music. I asked her to keep the ceremony relatively clean, but we’ll see what her definition of “clean” is these days.

Glancing at Lu, I see a big old smile on her face. Tears slipping down her cheeks.

Because she’s smiling, I doubt she’s thinking about her ex. But makes me

wonder if she's thinking about me. The guy she's hopefully going to walk down the aisle to one day.

Or maybe she's not thinking about guys at all. Maybe she's thrilled for her friend, pure and simple, and she's lost in the romance of the moment.

How it should be.

I nudge Coop with my elbow. "She's beautiful, man."

"She is." He wipes his eyes. "DR, this is the happiest moment of my life. Make it slow down."

I chuckle. "That, I can't do."

The ceremony begins. Mrs. Underwood has a surprisingly magnetic presence, with a strong, clear voice and a calm delivery of her unsurprisingly filthy sermon.

"When you marry someone, it's not enough to say 'I love you.' You must also *like* each other, so that it becomes 'I love you, and I like you, and I really like you naked'."

The crowd laughs along with Goldie and Coop.

"You'll know it's love *and* like when you feel comfortable walking around in that birthday suit of yours," Mrs. Underwood continues. "Not only because you're turning each other on. But also because it shows you feel at home with each other. There's no fear of judgement. No sense of shame for showing one another your truest, messiest, horniest selves."

Goldie curves her hand over her tiny baby belly. "Guilty."

More laughs. Lu looks at me with full, wet eyes.

"Home is about belonging. Safety. Friendship. And because you've found your belonging—because you feel safe enough to allow yourself to be seen in both the biblical and metaphorical sense—now you're free to joyfully live the rest of your life being who you truly are, as you are. You're free to explore. Learn. Nourish. And you get to do it all with your very best friend, the one who cracked your world wide open."

My vision blurs. I blink. Lu's looking at me again. Her lip trembles.

I don't know how she did it, but Lu showed me the world in the space of a single summer. She really did crack it open, allowing me to experience a way of living I didn't know existed. She's shown me what it's like to be seen. To be loved for who I am, not who I could or should be.

I love the way I do because I loved *her*.

Still do.

Always will.

Mrs. Underwood leads us through the I dos. I hand Cooper the ring. He kisses his bride. It's a hungry, horny kiss that suits the sermon and the crowd, which erupts in thunderous applause.

"The ceremony has ended." Mrs. Underwood closes her Bible, which she clearly didn't reference. "Let us go in peace to party."

And it is one hell of a party. After dinner, guests crowd the makeshift dance floor while I scoop ice-cold beers out of the coolers Woody let us borrow and hand them out like candy. The rain doesn't let up, and neither does the band. Cooper and Goldie were hesitant when I told them to hire a band from a honky-tonk in Wilmington, but The Drive-By Shuckers are predictably on fire. They play everything from Tim McGraw and Usher to Taylor Swift and The Four seasons. They're the kind of songs you forgot you knew every word to.

Goldie grinds on Coop. Joe and Lady make out to "September," and they keep making out when "Love Shack" comes on. Even Tuck and Abel, who came stag, dance like idiots.

Lu lets me twirl her around. We're totally in sync during "The Electric Slide," but end up in a sweaty, smiling heap on the floor at the end of "Twist and Shout." We sing along to "Call Me Maybe." Shout the lyrics to "Poker Face."

But it's when she loops her arms around my neck and presses her body to mine when the band plays a Norah Jones cover that does me in. She's happy. Touchy-feely, her fingers straying into my hair. I put my hands on her waist and sway with her, my shirt sticking to the sweat on my chest and back. We stay in each other's arms when a Pharrell song comes on, bringing Tuck and Abel back onto the dance floor.

She bites her lip. "We fucking did it."

"How fucking good are we?"

"The fucking best."

"How are we still awake and on our feet?" I lean in to nip at her jaw.

Her body curves into mine. "Adrenaline. Although my feet are killing me."

"Even without the shoes on?" I glance at her bare feet. She kicked the heels off as soon as the ceremony ended.

She nods. "Heels like that cause the kind of pain that lingers."

"You sayin' I need to carry you home?"

"I'm saying I need to put my feet up when we get there." Lu fists her

hand in my hair and gives it a small tug. An earthquake erupts low in my core. “Maybe up above my head.”

I groan. “That visual is . . . inconvenient.”

“I love torturing you.” Her eyes bounce between mine. They’re teasing but soft. Trusting.

I’m too tired to keep partying, but not tired enough to keep my dick in check. I palm her ass and press her against me, not caring who sees.

“I love being tortured. Actually, I hate it, but my dick doesn’t.”

“I heard that,” Tuck says.

“Go away,” I reply.

Abel rolls his eyes. “He’s jealous. And sexually frustrated.”

“Fuck off.” Tuck tips back his beer.

“Love you too, boo.” Abel turns to Lu. “Worst date ever, am I right?”

Lu laughs. “Cut him some slack. He worked hard today!”

“We all did.” Abel offers Lu a fist bump. “You were a rockstar. Any chance you’re free the next month or two? I could use some help finishing this place up.”

But instead of giving Abel the bump he’s looking for, she pulls him in for a hug. “We were all rockstars. Thanks for making my friend’s dreams come true.”

I don’t miss how Lu dances around Abel’s proposal. Makes my chest twist.

“Our friends,” Abel replies. “I’ve known Coop for . . . yeah, way too long now.”

She smiles. “Our friends.”

I look away. It’s all too good. Too perfect, watching my girl get along so well with my boys. I almost wish Lu didn’t hit it off with my friends. That’d make letting her go so much easier.

The song ends, and The Drive-By Shuckers’ lead singer tells us it’s time to send Goldie and Cooper off to wedded bliss.

Thankfully the rain finally stopped, and we’re able to light sparklers on the street outside and wave them at the bride and groom as they dash for a waiting golf cart. Goldie trips on her dress, but Coop is there to catch her. He lifts her into his arms and climbs into the cart. Laughing, they wave to us as Woody, our volunteer driver, pulls away.

Lu, who put on a pair of flip-flops she brought with her, sighs. “I can’t believe it’s over. Went by fast, didn’t it?”

“Whole week went by fast.” I glance over my shoulder at the house. “Why don’t I drop you off at the dock? I’ll join you after I help clean up.”

“I’m not leaving you to clean up.” Lu screws up her face. “I’ll stay.”

Tuck appears at my elbow and shakes his head. “Neither of y’all is staying. We got this. Abel’s around, and Marianne has a whole crew already cleaning up inside.”

“Seriously.” Abel is already shouldering out of his jacket. “If you stay, I’m gonna be pissed. Someone around here has to get laid.”

“That someone is me,” Lady says as she and Joe scurry down the sidewalk. They were part of the last-minute invites after they pitched in to help today.

I look at Lu. “They don’t have to ask me twice.”

“Will you call if you need anything?” she asks Abel.

He waves us away. “Y’all get gone. ’Night.”

My body thrums on the walk to the dock, Lu’s hand in mine. I’m exhausted. Elated. Anxious.

Turned on.

“I think they’ll make it,” Lu says, breaking the silence between us. “Coop and Goldie. I buy how into each other they are.”

Digging the key out of my pocket, I unlock the dock’s entrance. “He’s crazy about her. I buy that, because Goldie’s excellent. They’re good for each other.”

“She calls him out on his bullshit.”

“He’s grounded, but he doesn’t try to change her. Make her into something she’s not.”

“Exactly.” I meet his eyes. Yes, we’re talking about Goldie and Coop. But in a way, we’re also talking about ourselves. Our relationship.

The lights on *Dolly* are on, but the crew is nowhere to be seen. Tom was supposed to come back tonight, but on account of the rain, Mom and Marsha decided to keep him another night.

Stepping on board, Lu and I immediately head below deck. We both sigh with relief when we’re hit by a wave of cold, crisp A/C.

Then, finally, it’s just us.

One more night.

One last chance to make her mine.

Lu kicks off her flip-flops and collapses onto the couch. Seeing her sprawled out like this, comfortable and at home, my heart squeezes.

“What?” She puts a hand on her stomach.

Shaking my head, I yank at my bow tie. “I like you bein’ here.”

Her expression softens, eyebrows curving upward. “How could I not like being here? Your life . . .” She scoffs, glancing around the yacht’s interior before her gaze lands on me. “You. It’s all a dream.”

My hand goes still at my neck. Do I do this right now? Put myself out there? I’m exhausted. Hard as fuck.

Ain’t exactly in a clear state of mind.

Then again, I’m too tired to be anything but honest.

“It’s not a dream.” I walk over to Lu. Put a hand on the side of the couch and lean in, my heart thumping. “It’s real. What I feel for you is real. I know you gotta get back to your life tomorrow, but I’d be lyin’ if I said I didn’t want you to stay.”

Her throat works as she searches my eyes. “Riley.”

“Legs.”

She smiles. Reaches up to put a hand on my chest. “It’s been five days.”

“I know.”

“I just got out of a *years*-long relationship.”

“I know. You still got feelings for him?”

“What? No! No, that’s not the issue. I’d love to stay, I just . . .” Her eyes are wet. She scoffs. “God, you’re overwhelming.”

I duck my head and kiss her neck. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is when I’m trying to make good decisions.”

“I am a good decision.” I pull back to look her in the eye. “You think otherwise, lemme keep proving you wrong.”

Lu blinks. “What you’re asking . . .”

“I’ll clarify.” My heart’s in my throat now, making it difficult to breathe. My voice comes out in a rumble. “I want you to stay, but I understand why you gotta go back to Charlotte. I’m not asking for an answer now. I’m asking you to think about it—a relationship with me. And while you’re thinking about it, I won’t be sleeping with anyone else. Hope you won’t be either.”

She scoffs again. “So we are in a relationship. Just a long-distance one?”

“If that’s what you wanna call it.” I lift a shoulder. “What we got, I’m not sure it needs a label. I feel it, and I’m pretty sure you do too.”

“Of course I feel it,” she replies softly. “And I don’t want to sleep with anyone else. But I think it’s the right call to take things slow. Patrick and I . . . you know, I talked to Goldie about it, and I think I fell out of love with

him a while ago. And while I know, rationally, the perfect life we had was shallow—like, a total sham, obviously—I still need a minute to get my bearings. If I’m going to do this thing with you, I want to do it right. If I’m going to write the cookbook, I want to do that right too. And jumping in headfirst without a thought for the consequences . . . isn’t that what tripped us up the first time?”

Her eyes are imploring. Like she’s begging me to understand.

I do.

And that’s what kills me. The fact that she’s right.

What if I’m right too, though?

I glide my free hand to her throat. “I’ll wait, long as you need. But I’m all in, Lu. You’re everything I ever wanted. Even at eighteen, I knew what we had was something special. Bein’ with you this week drove that point home. My cards are on the table. You just gotta decide when you’re ready to show me yours.”

“Give me time,” she whispers.

I nod. “I said I’d wait. But if I’m honest, I’m worried you’re going to get your head turned back in Charlotte. Not by other guys. But by the notion of how you think your life should look, all perfect and shiny. That’s not who you are, and I’d hate to see you take a step backward.”

She brings her eyebrows together. “The pressure to be perfect is real, I’m not going to lie. But just abandoning my life there seems like the coward’s way out. If I’m going to set it all on fire, I want to be there to watch it burn. Face the wreckage so I can make sense out of it, and hopefully do better next time around.”

My turn to swallow.

Of course Lu wouldn’t take the easy way out.

Of course she’d start over with the integrity that was missing from her previous life.

I’m pierced by a searing ache. As if I couldn’t love this woman more.

My hand shakes as I move it from her throat to her face.

“Let me be your next time,” I say hoarsely.

Let me be your forever.

twenty-seven

...

Lu

Mixed Up

RILEY LEANS in and kisses me.

Next thing I know he's scooping me into his arms, sinking his teeth into my shoulder as he carries me to his bedroom.

The desire that's simmered between my legs all night long bursts to vibrant, almost painful life. He sets me on my feet in the darkness. Plunders my mouth and unzips my dress. It falls to the floor easily, leaving me in my bra and thong. We reach for my bra at the same time, laughing when our fingers collide on my back.

He unhooks the bra, tosses it aside.

Then his hands are all over me. Riley's a touchy-feely guy, so that's nothing new. But the reverent way they move over my skin as he sinks to his knees? How they linger on every plane, trace the length of every curve, like he's memorizing my shape?

That *is* new.

Then he's curling his fingers into my thong and pulling it down. He presses a trail of kisses down my breasts and belly, my pussy igniting at the tender way he sucks my nipples into his mouth before biting at the skin along my hip bones.

The ache inside me pounds when he noses my slit, taking a deep inhale. He puts his hands on my thighs and leans in to kiss me. His tongue slips

between my legs, and I gasp at the full-body shudder that moves through my body when he circles my clit.

My eyes are adjusting to the dark, because I see his when they flick to my face. “I’m gonna miss how you taste, Legs. You’re always so wet for me.”

My heart wells with feeling. Eyes well with tears.

I know I’m doing the right thing by going back to Charlotte. I know I’m making the right choice by asking Riley for time.

But knowing I have to leave Bald Head behind, even for a week, a month, still hurts.

What the hell else can I do? I’m an adult now, with adult responsibilities I can’t fall down on. I can’t just run off into the sunset with Riley Dixon. Not without disappointing a whole lot of people, myself included.

If he and I are meant to be, it’ll work out.

So I close my eyes and let my head fall back as Riley licks my pussy exactly how I like it. When his hand finds my ass, giving it a squeeze before his fingers move down the length of my crease, my blood jumps.

No shame.

No judgement.

Only roaring pleasure as he sucks on my clit at the same moment he feathers a fingertip over my rim.

There’s nothing I can’t do with this man.

Nothing forbidden, which means I can ask for anything I want.

I can be who I am.

“You’re so good,” I manage. “You’re too good at this, Riley. But I think I ___”

“Wanna come on my dick.” He presses one last kiss to my pussy before pulling away. “I know you like that best.”

Fuck him, knowing me so well.

Fuck *him* for making this so good. He’s doing it on purpose, showing off, taking his time, because he knows I’m becoming addicted to how hard and how often he makes me come.

I hate him.

I *adore* him.

I want him naked, right now.

I grab the collar of his shirt and pull him to his feet.

His mouth is on mine in two seconds flat. I reach for the buttons on his shirt. It takes me a small eternity to work the first two through their

buttonholes because my hands are shaking so badly. Frustrated, I tear the shirt open. Buttons fly everywhere.

“I’m sure that was expensive.” I lick into his mouth. “I’ll replace it.”

His lips are soft, hot, as they pull at mine. “No you won’t. Got plenty.”

He reaches over his head for the collar of his undershirt. Breaking our kiss, he pulls the undershirt over his head in one obscenely sexy move. I reach for his fly and he lets me unzip it. Together we push his pants and briefs down, releasing his hard cock.

His head presses shamelessly against my belly, slick with pre-cum. Riley moans at the contact.

I push him onto the bed, where he kicks off his pants.

“Finally.” I climb on top of him, reaching down between us to wrap my hand around his dick. Meeting his eyes, I lean in and lick his head. “I’m going to miss the way you taste.”

I’m using his words against him. Judging by the way his lips twitch, even as the sinews in his neck draw tight, he knows it.

“Then fuckin’ stay, honey. *Please*,” he says.

Something catches in my chest. A feeling that closely resembles regret.

I grab onto it with both hands. Well, I grab onto *him*. I pump his dick once, twice, before guiding it into my mouth. Riley hisses, the rude sound making my nipples pebble to hardened points.

“That *mouth*,” he growls, putting a hand on the back of my head. “You gonna let me fuck it, honey?”

I take him deeper in reply.

“Aw, yeah.” He lifts his hips at the same time he presses my head down. It’s a gentle thrust, but he still hits the soft tissue at the back of my throat, making my eyes water. I don’t pull back. “That’s it. Jesus Christ, Lu.”

The combination of being in control yet being at Riley’s mercy is the most delicious mind fuck there is. I pump my hand in time to the movement of my head, drawing him in, letting him out.

His chest heaves. Hips jerk up and then jerk back down. I take the opportunity to swirl my tongue over the slit in his head.

“Stop.” His fingers flex in my hair, pulling it. “There’s no way I’m not comin’ inside you.”

Next thing I know he’s pulling out of my mouth and flipping me onto my back. He glides a hand up my side, cupping my breast, and then settles his broad body between my legs.

My body throbs. Riley's mouth is on my collarbone. My neck. My lips.
He lines himself up at my entrance. The pressure is exquisite, and exquisitely maddening. He pauses there. I wait.

Wait some more.

I only realize my eyes are closed again when I open them. Riley is sweeping his gaze over my face. I can't read the expression there. Pain? Need?

Love?

My chest contracts at the same moment he pushes inside me. Being full of him makes the fullness in *me* spill over. Something tender and terrifying spreads through me as he sinks to the hilt on a long, luxurious thrust. Eyes still on mine, he takes my hand and tangles our fingers. He draws our joined hands over my head, using the position to deepen the angle.

Rocking his hips, he pulls out, pushes back in. The thrust is careful but not at all neat. The feel of his body working over mine, the interplay between how his muscles release on the down thrust, tense on the up, is the most erotic thing I've ever experienced.

My pussy contracts. He draws his eyebrows together, a furrow appearing between them like he's concentrating.

Holding on for dear life.

I can relate.

My pulse thunders in my ears. I slide a hand down to my pussy and roll my fingers over my clit. Electricity crackles inside my skin. My fingers work faster. Frantic and messy.

Riley captures my gasp in a kiss. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Ever." He thrusts, also frantic and messy, the kind that makes my breasts bounce and my breath catch. "Change."

Lights.

Out.

I come, the joy inside my chest obliterating everything else. Riley comes too, but somehow still manages to kiss away my cries, drinking deeply of my mouth as I sink into the sensation of how good it feels to pulse around his length.

How good it feels to be held by him. Cared for by him.

Loved by him.

We don't sleep much.

An hour here and there, maybe, in between all the times we make love. Because that's what this is now. It's not fucking. It's not even sex. It's so much more than that.

The sun is up when he lifts my top leg and rubs his dick over my clit. We're on our sides, my back to his front, and just as he makes me come, he slips inside me from behind.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out. I'm raw in every sense of the word. Riley kisses my shoulder blades. Cups my breast in his hand and plucks at my nipple, prolonging my orgasm.

He comes just as my alarm goes off.

I reach for my phone and hit the cancel button. There's a text from Mom, no doubt making sure I'm awake. We have a ferry to catch.

Real life to return to.

An elephant sits on my chest at the thought of leaving this bed. I'm covered in Riley. His body literally surrounds mine. Heat and skin.

My own skin is tight on my back and stomach. It's covered in his dried cum.

The filthy perv in me loves it.

"You really gotta go, huh?" Riley draws his scruff over my nape.

I nod, throat welling. "Eleven o'clock ferry."

"You're not ridin' the fucking ferry, Lu. I'll take you and your mama to South Port."

Reaching behind me, I run my fingers through his hair. "Thank you."

We're quiet as we shower. The rain is back, and it drums on the roof above our heads as we drink our coffee in the kitchen. Mrs. Dixon and Marsha stop by with Tom in tow, who looks ridiculous—and ridiculously cute—in his rain jacket.

I feel a potent surge of joy when he makes a beeline for me, jumping onto the sofa and crowding me like he's a ten-pound lap dog.

"Best hello ever," I say, laughing.

Riley reaches for him. "Tom—"

"Don't. I want to get one last snuggle in before I leave." Tom settles his head on my leg.

"We're sorry to see you go," Mrs. Dixon says.

Marsha nods. “No pressure, but we hope you’ll be back again soon.”

“That’s not putting too fine a point on it.” Riley shoots his mom and Marsha a look.

Mrs. Dixon holds up her hands. “We’ll get out of y’all’s hair. Lu, it was so good seeing you.”

I get up to hug them, making Tom whine.

“You jealous too?” Riley teases. “Join the club, buddy.”

After Riley’s parents leave, I join Tom on the couch again, and Riley pours me another cup of coffee.

“So.” Of course he’s shirtless, and of course he looks as hot as hell in his shorts and backward baseball hat. “Can I ask when I get to see you again?”

I swallow my coffee, willing the burn in my eyes to subside. “Tonight, when I FaceTime you to have phone sex.”

“We’re having phone sex?”

“Of course we’ve having phone sex.” More coffee. *Please, God, let this cup make me feel less like dying.* “I know it’s just a band-aid until I figure my shit out. But could be fun to try something new.”

Riley nods, his bicep flexing when he lifts his mug to his mouth. “I’m in. Always. I’d like to come visit you in Charlotte too, if you’ll have me.”

“You’re welcome anytime, Riley. That’s a given.”

He keeps nodding, but the muscle in his jaw is jumping. “I wanna give you your space, though. If time is what you need from me, that’s what you’ll get. Just—keep talkin’ to me, okay? I wanna know what’s going on in that head of yours.” He sips. “I wanna know how you’re feeling.”

My eyes flood with tears. I wipe them with the sleeve of Riley’s sweatshirt. It smells like him, sunscreen and coconut. Tom licks my face and puts a paw on my thigh.

“This is ridiculous,” I say, laughing. “It’s not like I’m moving to a different planet. I’m going to come back, probably sooner rather than later. It’s a quick drive from Charlotte, even quicker during the week . . .”

Riley’s eyes get soft. “It’s okay, Lu.”

I don’t feel okay, though, as I pack up my things while Riley drives a cart to the house to get Mom.

I don’t feel okay watching Riley help her board *Dolly*, the two of them laughing about Aunt Lady and Joe’s epic make-out session last night.

I definitely don’t feel okay when Riley wraps me in a tight hug when we de-board in South Port.

He helps Mom and me pack up her car. It's still spitting rain, so we're rushing, even though my legs feel like lead weights. By the time Riley closes the trunk, he's soaked, despite being in a Dixon Carts & More rain jacket.

"Y'all good?" he asks, opening the driver's side door for Mom before hustling to the other side of the car to open the passenger door for me.

"We're great." Mom climbs in and buckles her seat belt. "Thanks for the ride over, Riley. And thank you for all you did for Goldie and Cooper this week. You are a true gem."

I meet eyes with Riley underneath the hood of my jacket. The space between us thrums.

I want to simultaneously suck his face and throat punch him.

Why'd you have to go and make me fall in love with you all over again?

"Get something to eat at McIntosh's," he murmurs, grabbing my hand. "You'll feel better after a bagel."

I nod and look away. "We'll stop there, yeah."

"Hey." He squeezes my hand, making me look up. "I ain't going anywhere, you hear? You know where to find me. Now get inside the car. And don't forget to call me tonight."

Mom and I make it to the bagel place, a whopping two miles from the marina, before I start to cry.

I don't stop until I fall into a fitful sleep later that night.

twenty-eight

...

Riley

THE SILENCE inside my office is deafening.

Did Mondays ever suck this hard? I pound viciously on my laptop's keyboard in an effort to distract myself from the quiet. And the seasick feeling in my stomach. And the fact that I feel like I'm coming out of my skin, a sensation that all the Nicorette in the world can't seem to fix.

I blink when the F key flies off the keyboard and hits me square in the nose.

"God *damn* it," I growl. I turn to the left. Then to the right. Don't see the fucking key anywhere. Tom, who's lying at my feet, cracks open an eye. Closes it.

It's almost like he's the one who's beat from a week of nonstop sex and partying.

I slam the laptop shut on the email I was drafting and spear my hands through my hair. Glance at my phone.

I have twenty-two texts. None of them are from Lu. I haven't heard from her since we had phone sex last night. The sex was good. Really good. Even if cleaning up alone in the silence of my boat was depressing as fuck.

So much silence *everywhere*. I hate it.

How is it only 10:23 A.M.?

I'm dying to reach out to Lu. Text her something flirty about Julia Wolf or butt stuff. But I said I'd give her space, so that's what I'm gonna do.

I'm also going to need to steal another pack or three of cigarettes from Woody during my lunch break, or I'm gonna lose my fucking mind.

"Everything okay in here?" Tuck's head appears in the doorway. "I heard

a bang.”

Tom, the traitor, immediately comes to life upon hearing my best friend’s voice. He gets up and greets Tuck, thwacking his tail against Tuck’s knees.

“You bummin’ out too, sweet boy? You and your daddy are in bad shape, huh?”

“He’s fine. I’m fine. We’re all fine.” I rest my elbows on the desk and dig my thumbs into my eye sockets. “I’m dying a slow, miserable death. But otherwise okay.”

Tuck steps into my office and closes the door behind him, taking a seat in a chair against the wall so he can pet Tom. “Dude, I only say this because I’m concerned, but you really don’t look good.”

I glance up at him. “Neither do you.”

He’s got dark circles underneath his eyes. He always keeps his beard carefully trimmed, but today it’s overgrown, making him look like a scruffy biker.

“It was . . . a long weekend.” He crosses his massive arms over his chest. The back of his head lands against the wall with a dull *thud*. “I’m beat.”

“Care to elaborate?”

Tuck shifts, clearly uncomfortable. “No.”

I inhale a long breath through my nose. Wait.

Finally he sighs and says, “I had sex with Maren.”

“Whoa.” I stare at him. “Can’t say I’m surprised. Y’all clearly got chemistry. But—”

“It’s a fuckin’ mess. I know.” He pulls a hand over his beard. “I’m terrified she’s gonna quit on me now. Katie loves her, which means I love her. Not love her, love her. But you know what I mean.”

I grin. Wrong I’m relieved I’m not alone in my relationship problems? “Sounds like you love having sex with her.”

He shakes his head. “You ain’t getting any details from me.”

“But you want to do it again.”

Tuck scoffs. All the affirmation I need.

“Was it awkward this morning?” I ask.

He scratches his beard. “She wasn’t awkward.”

“But you were.”

“I mean, come on. Forgive me if I don’t know how to act around her. It’s the first time I’ve fucked my nanny.”

“But you fuck a lot of people.”

“Not nannies whose hot little rocket bodies I have to see up close and personal every damn day. Riley, she lives with me.”

I lift a shoulder. “Sounds awful convenient.”

“It’s not.” He finally meets my eyes. “Makes me feel like a bad parent, putting everything at risk like this.”

“C’mon, Tuck. You’re the best damn daddy ever. Anyone on this island would attest to that fact.”

“I know. Still, I need to—” He bangs his head against the wall. Tom barks. “I gotta keep my hands to myself.”

“Which is easier said than done when your nanny is a smoke show.”

“Your words, not mine. But yes.”

I rise to my feet, my desk chair rolling across the floor. “Let’s ditch this miserable fucking day and go surfing.”

Tuck pops a brow. “You do know we have a billion-dollar business to run, right?”

“I’m going to break more than my laptop if I stay here any longer.”

“No one wants to surf more than I do. But I got a ton of things to catch up on after being out most of last week. I imagine you do too.”

That’s the thing.

I do have a shit ton on my plate. I got calls with my bankers. Spreadsheets to review. Some personnel bullshit to deal with here at Stede’s. Emails and project updates and strategy meetings with my business development and marketing teams.

Ordinarily I’d tackle it all gladly. Nothing energized me more than making moves. Making money.

Seemed like a good way to stay busy.

Now busy just seems . . . empty. The dreams I worked so hard to make come true feel fucking empty without the people I love in them.

This gaping hole in my chest—it’s always been there. Being with Lu just made me aware of it. She also taught me how to fill it.

Work and money are never, ever going to fill it on their own.

“What’s the point?” I blurt.

Tuck’s eyes go wide. “Of working?”

“Of life. It can’t be work. Or just work. Like, the point of *why* we work so hard—it’s so we can enjoy life, right? Enjoy the dreams we made come true. And I am not enjoying any of this one fuckin’ iota without Lu here.”

He’s staring at me now. “Okay,” he says slowly. “Do I need to call 911?”

I'm worried you're having an episode." Tuck glances at Tom. "Your daddy been acting strange? Complaining of chest pains, numbness, and/or hallucinations?"

"I worked hard. Now I wanna enjoy the fruits of my labor with the woman I love. Only, I'm not sure she's in love with me."

"She is." Tuck's tone is definitive. "Are you kidding? Lu's head over heels for you, dude. We all saw the way she looks at you. Sounds like she's just in a weird place right now. You want her, you gotta be patient."

I tug my hands through my hair again. "And if I die in the meantime?"

"You ain't gonna die."

"What if she decides she loves me, but she can't do it? Make a life with me? I got money, but I'll never be a part of the world she grew up in back in Charlotte. Her pedigree opens doors to country clubs and alumni associations and board rooms that would never in a million years welcome a high school graduate like me with no family connections. That world, it has this pull on her. Her parents. Her friends . . . they're all part of a club I'll never, ever belong to."

"She chooses that world, you're better off without her. But knowing Lu, she's gonna choose you. Be. Patient."



I chain smoke cigarettes on the way to Marsha Marsha Marsha. The storm finally cleared out overnight, leaving behind blue skies and a cool breeze.

Perfect walking weather. And swimming weather. And cruising weather, and fucking weather . . .

"You smell like an ashtray." Mom pulls back from our hug, nose wrinkled. "Please don't tell me you're smoking again."

I drape an arm over her shoulders. "Okay. I'm not smoking again."

"I see that pack of Camels in your back pocket!" Marsha calls from behind the register. "Throw them away this instant, Riley."

Mom frowns. "I'm going to have to speak to Woody about selling you those cancer sticks."

"He didn't sell them to me. I stole them. I paid for them, of course, but Woody wasn't exactly there when I visited the store."

"A gentleman thief!" Mrs. Underwood appears beside the candle display.

“How very Thomas Crowne of you.”

I chuckle. “Pierce Brosnan would beg to differ. Beautiful ceremony on Saturday, by the way, Mrs. Underwood.”

“Thank you. It was such a lovely wedding, wasn’t it? You’re awfully good at making them happen, Riley.”

“For other people,” I reply.

Mom squeezes my arm. “For everyone who *wants* one.”

“Welp, I’m starving,” I lie. “It’s been real, y’all. Mom, let’s go grab a sandwich.”

We head for the little deli beside Marsha Marsha Marsha. I pick at my pimiento cheese sandwich on the patio outside.

“So.” Mom wipes her hands on a paper napkin.

“So.”

“Lu is back in Charlotte.”

“And I’m here.”

“And y’all are going to see each other again . . .”

“I wish I knew.” I lift the bread off the sandwich. “It’s killing me, Mom. Not being in control.”

Her eyes are kind as she looks at me from across the table. “One of the best things about you, Riley Dixon, is that you’ve always known what you want. You’ve also been very, very lucky in that you’ve been able to get what you want. Granted, you’ve worked very hard for it. But ultimately, you’ve gotten what you asked for. Now, though . . .”

I swallow. “I’m not sure I’ve ever wanted anything more than I want Lu.”

“Oh, honey.” She grabs my hand. “I can see you’re hurting. I’m very sorry.”

“Could I have done something differently? Something that would have made her stay?”

Mom shakes her head. “Knowing you, you did everything just right. I get the feeling that Lu leaving has nothing to do with you, but everything to do with Lu. I spoke to her mother at the wedding—”

“You did?”

“Of course I did! I adore Katherine Wade. But she told me about the whole situation with Lu’s fiancé, which sounds awful. It happened so recently too. Which brings me back to my point. You’ve always known you wanted Lu. I think Lu’s always wanted you too, but after she was forced to give you up how many years ago, she had to start over. And she did a great

job of it from what I understand. She built a big, beautiful life on her own, which is how it should've been."

"It *never* should have been that way at all." I feel a flash of rage. "No one should have to suffer the way we've suffered."

Mom frowns. "Of course not. But you have to trust Lu to make the right choice. And you have to trust the universe that you'll be okay no matter what that choice ends up being." She pats my hand. "This isn't the first time you've come up against a major obstacle, Riley. Trust *yourself* to come through on the other side. You always have."

That's the thing, though. I've come through, but not unscathed. Losing Lu the first time fucked me up so bad I almost lost my life. Making my way in the business world, a place I definitely didn't belong, taught me a lot but also took a lot out of me too. I lost years to my laptop and phone. Lost sleep. A little sanity too at times.

From the outside looking in, I've won. I have plenty of money. I get to report to the office in flip-flops. I have every toy.

But now I'm realizing my own big, beautiful life isn't so beautiful without the people I love in it.

twenty-nine

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Lu

Hot Mess Express

IT'S BEEN four days since I left Bald Head, and I feel like I'm losing my mind.

I can't eat. I hardly sleep. Exhausted doesn't begin to describe my state of being. Every night, I promise myself I won't FaceTime Riley and get all hot and bothered.

I promise myself I'll take the space and time I told him I needed to figure out what I want.

But then flowers arrive on my doorstep Monday. Then Tuesday. Each one with a note containing the lyrics to some of our favorite songs, each with a decidedly Riley Dixon twist. *Dive bar on the east side of the sea/Let's make it a date, just you and me.*

It's cheesy and adorable and I love it so, so much.

I text him to say thanks, and then he's texting me back, and then we end up texting all day. That means I'm thinking about him all day. All night too, so much so that I can't fall asleep. Luckily Patrick moved out of our house while I was gone, so at least I lie awake all night in my own bed. Doesn't help that I'm back in the house I shared with my partner of six years. Seeing the remnants of the life I lived up until mere weeks ago just adds to how mixed-up I feel.

Wednesday morning, two enormous boxes appear on my doorstep beside

the flowers (an extravagant bouquet of zinnias in a gorgeous glazed white pot). Turns out Riley shipped every single cookbook he bought me—all fifty of them—right to my house.

You can be my leather/take from me, these books (so you can stay inspired), his note said.

I am so touched by the gesture—so overwhelmed by his thoughtfulness—I can't sleep that night either.

By the time Thursday rolls around, I am dead on my feet. My vibrator is dead too. I literally killed the thing—death by overuse.

I want to go back to Bald Head this weekend and see Riley. But I feel like I haven't come any closer to answering anyone's questions—his or mine. And because I'm still in limbo, and because Riley clearly isn't, I don't know if it's fair of me to show up at his door. Dock. Whatever.

Yes, I'm obsessed with him.

Yes, I want to write a cookbook, and I want to do it in the gorgeous kitchen of his gorgeous restaurant.

No, I do not miss Patrick. At all. He had the balls to call me on Monday. I sent it straight to voicemail, where he asked how I was doing and if I had fun at the wedding. I will not be returning his call.

But him reaching out brought a fresh anxiety to the forefront: can I really trust myself to choose the right path and the right guy? The man I was about to marry cheated on me *for years*, and I had no idea. Was Patrick that good of a liar? Or was I that much of a sucker?

Am I sucker for believing Riley when he says he broke up with me for noble reasons? For believing he regrets it and would never, ever do it again?

He said he didn't want to hold me back. That he didn't fit in my world. But if that was true, why did he let things go so far that summer ten years ago? He would've known from the start we were headed for disaster. And a good guy wouldn't have told me he loved me and then taken my virginity if he felt deep down we weren't compatible. He wouldn't have dreamed up a forever with me filled with books and music and food.

I probably should've been asking these questions earlier, when Riley was explaining himself to me this week. Then again, I was so swept up in the romance of it all that my rational brain must have fallen by the wayside.

Now that I am thinking about all these questions, I can't make any of it make sense.

I can't stop missing him.

So I do what I always do when I can't tell up from down. I go see Granny during my lunch hour.

Laurel greets me with a smile at the assisted living facility. "She's playing mah-jongg with her cocktail club on the back porch. Tread lightly—they're drinking whiskey today."

"She's part of a cocktail club? That meets at lunch?"

"It's their first meeting. She's the founding member."

Laughing, I shake my head. "Of course she is."

I make my way down the familiar hall to the back of the facility. Sure enough, Granny is seated at one of several tables, each one tricked out with a colorful mah-jongg set.

I take a second to watch her. She's sipping on what looks to be a whiskey sour, laughing at something the gal on her left says. Her eyes are lit up. Shoulders relaxed. Granny didn't love coming to the facility after Pa died, but I have to say she's really thriving here.

Or maybe she's thriving being a single lady for the first time in sixty years.

"As they say, you gotta smoke 'em if you got 'em." Granny sets her tiles face up. "Mah-jongg, y'all!"

The ladies at her table erupt in applause and laughter. Like an idiot I clap too, making Granny look up.

"Lulu." She smiles at me. I feel like crying. "I didn't know you were coming."

My throat is impossibly tight as I reply, "I missed you."

"Here, let's go inside. You want a cocktail? I made a whole pitcher."

And that's how I end up in her living room with a very strong cocktail in one hand and my heart in the other.

"You look like you're about to cry." Granny peers at me. "Let it out, sugar."

I sob. She frowns, hobbling to my side to pull me in for a hug.

"That Patrick really worked a number on you, didn't he?"

Wiping my nose, I shake my head. "It's not Patrick. It's Riley Dixon."

Her eyes go wide. "He hurt you?"

"No. No, the opposite. I think we fell in love. Again."

I wait for Granny's eyes to pop out of her head and land on the forest green carpet at our feet.

Instead, she goes very, very still.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles to life. “Granny? Why do I get the feeling—”

“That I already know about you and Riley falling in love years ago?” She searches my eyes, then reaches up to tuck my hair behind my ear. “Because I do know, Lulu.”

My stomach lurches. Tears spill out of my eyes. “What? How? We were so careful!”

“I know because your grandfather caught y’all almost necking and lost his goddamn mind. That afternoon in the kitchen—you were making cheese straws, if memory serves. I guess Jimmy glimpsed y’all touching and put two and two together . . .”

The words land like a bomb, detonating a kaleidoscope of emotion inside me. I’m crying, but I’m laughing too.

I’m shaking, but I’m curious enough to push Granny for more information. “Pa never said a word to me!”

“He didn’t need to. He had a word with Riley and then some.”

The saliva in my mouth thickens. Pulse drums in my ears. My thoughts race as I scramble to put the pieces together. “Wait, wait. First of all, it’s hilarious you call it necking.”

“Pa and I necked plenty. It’s fun, isn’t it?” She sighs. “I don’t miss being young, but I miss that.”

“We call it making out, but yes, it really is a lot of fun. I’ve missed it too. But you’re saying Pa caught us touching and then confronted Riley?”

Granny’s expression softens. She looks almost contrite. “He told Riley to stay far, far away from you, or he was going to let his mama go and make sure she never got another job on the island. Your Pa didn’t think Riley deserved you.”

The memory materializes, clear as day: the heat of early August. The smell of cheese straws in the oven, and Riley loading the dishwasher before turning to me.

Ten years later and my body still responds, an ache blooming in my center at the memory of his Coppertone-scented skin.

Two days later, I was on that fateful ferry back to the mainland when Riley’s text came through.

RILEY DIXON

Hey. Not sure how to tell you this, but there's someone else.
This summer's been great but I think it's best if we both move
on. Good luck at Wake

It didn't make sense at the time—the fact that he texted instead of called, how curt and impersonal the message was, the cheating—but it does now.

Perfect, awful sense.

Riley didn't break up with me because we were “from different worlds.”

He did it because my grandfather *forced* him to break up with me.

Even better? Or worse, I guess? Riley could've made Pa look like the grade-A asshole he was by telling me what went down between them.

Instead, he took the high road. Yes, he didn't tell me the whole truth last week about his reasons for breaking my heart. But he did spare the somewhat rosy memory I have of my grandfather. He spared Pa's reputation too.

Basically, Riley did Pa a solid he definitely doesn't deserve. All because Riley wanted to protect *my* feelings and *my* family.

My family, the one that threatened the survival of his.

Lord above.

My eyes burn so badly I have to close them. I cover my mouth with my hand and sob silently into my palm, tears streaking down my face and over my fingers.

“Why do you think I've stayed so busy over the years?” I hear the ice clink against Granny's glass. “Your grandfather was . . . well. We'll call him a piece of work.”

“He didn't think Riley deserved me?” I struggle to catch my breath. “Why not?”

“Your grandfather was old school, sugar. Riley wasn't the type of boy he wanted you to end up with.”

No, Patrick was. And we all know what a dickhead he turned out to be.

“That's horrible. And sexist. And just . . . God, it's plain ugly, Granny. And all the while you knew. You knew and you didn't tell me. That hurts. All the pain this caused . . . to think how senseless it was, how easily it could've been avoided if you'd stepped in . . .”

She presses a tissue into my hand. “There's nothing I can say to make up for that. I was wrong not to tell you, sugar. But God as my witness, I thought you were over Riley. You say you were careful—I know you were, because I had no idea the two of y'all were an item in the first place until Jimmy told me! And you never mentioned him again after that summer. Not once. I

sincerely believed you'd moved on. You'd gone off to college, and you were so busy with your life there. Then you met Patrick, and everything seemed to be falling into place for you. I didn't want to meddle."

"You could've asked me about Riley."

"I could have done a lot of things differently. But your Pa, he never let anyone forget he was the man of the house. I was such a little mouse around him." Granny pauses. I open my eyes to see her looking intently at me. "I see now how that hurt everyone, even though I thought I was doing the right thing at the time."

I manage a rueful smile. "But y'all were so perfect and shiny together. Married sixty years!"

Granny harrumphs. "And now you see it wasn't so perfect after all."

"Jesus, why doesn't anyone talk about anything?"

"Because we're all scared out of our goddamn minds, that's why! The truth can be terrifying."

"Apparently it will also set you free."

Granny points her finger at me. "So go be free, sugar. I'm finally free to be me, and my only regret is I didn't start doing it sooner." She sighs. "I'm sorry, Lulu. Really and truly sorry."

How do I process the fact that Granny fucking knew about this but didn't say a word until now? Her betrayal is a knife through the heart.

I swallow. "I love you, Granny, but this is . . . all kinds of fucked up. I lost a decade of time with him. Riley. All because you kept secrets from me."

"Don't forget that you kept secrets of your own."

"I had no choice!"

"What can I say?" She throws up the hand not holding her cocktail. "I made a terrible mistake. But lucky for all of us, you have a second chance. Take it, Lu."

"So Pa didn't approve of Riley, but all of a sudden you do?" I scoff. "Is that because he's rich?"

Granny shakes her head. "It has nothing to do with money. I just want you to be happy. And you don't look very happy being away from Riley." She's smoothing back my hair again. "You're liable to fall right over, aren't you?"

"I can't sleep, yeah. Mostly because I've been tying myself in knots trying to finish a puzzle I now know I didn't have all the pieces to."

"Better late than never." Granny blinks. "Go to him, sugar. Don't waste

another minute.”

thirty

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Lu

Burning Bridges

I'M THROWING shit in a bag when my doorbell rings.

I ignore it, scurrying into my bathroom to pack my toiletries. But then it rings again. I hear a knock. My phone dings, and I see a text from Mom saying she's outside and she forgot her key.

I roll my eyes. Dealing with Mom is the last thing I feel like doing right now. I'm about to make a mad dash back to Bald Head in an attempt to catch the six-thirty ferry, and I am in no mood for her judgement on my decision to be with Riley.

Really, truly be with him. Just the thought gives me butterflies. I have no idea what I'll do about my job. I don't know what our living arrangements will be.

But I do know he loves me for me. He worships the person I am when nobody's looking. The self I've hidden from view while I showed the world the polished person I felt pressured to be in an attempt to make myself lovable, and wanted, and accepted.

Lo and behold, trying so hard to be someone I'm not got me nowhere.

Nowhere I want to be, anyway.

Being with Riley probably means I'll have to start over. I'll have to build a whole new life from the ground up on the ashes of my old one.

A life that looked a lot like Mom's. Granny's too.

They've never known anything different. Neither do I. Pa would clearly be horrified I traded Patrick for Riley. The Gibbes Group for Stede's.

The thought makes me smile.

I'm sure Granny called Mom the second I left the assisted living facility a little less than an hour ago. Granny and I didn't exactly part on great terms, so I bet Mom is going to lecture me about that too.

But I can't ignore her. I can deflect, I guess? Better yet, I can be honest. The end result might not be pretty, but I'm done dancing around her feelings.

I am who I am. And that person definitely isn't Pa's sweet little girl anymore.

I dash downstairs to open the door, only realizing I'm still holding the toiletries bag I was packing when Mom's eyes dart to my hand.

"I'm glad I caught you. Can we talk for a minute?"

My stomach does a backflip.

Stick to your guns.

I open the door wider. "Sure. Of course. Come in."

Resisting the urge to apologize for the shitshow that is my house, I lead her back to the kitchen.

"Want something to drink?" I set the toiletries bag on the counter and open the fridge. "I have sparkling water, Diet Coke . . ."

Leaning a hip against the island, Mom peers over my shoulder. "Is that some Chardonnay I see? I'm joking, but I just got off the phone with your grandmother. What she told me—"

"Made you want to take a bottle to your face?" I scoff. "Same here. Did you know? About Pa forcing Riley to dump me out of some classist, sexist notion that he wasn't good enough for me?"

Mom shakes her head. "I did not, I swear. What your grandfather did was wrong, and if I had known about it—"

"Would you have intervened?" I close the fridge. "Or would you have done what Granny did and turned a blind eye to it?"

"Louise!" She looks like she's about to cry.

"I'm sorry. Emotions are just . . . running high right now. That was unfair to accuse you."

Mom swallows. "You know, I'll never forgive myself for not knowing you were in love with Riley that summer. I should've been there for you. Should've been talking to you about all that stuff. But I didn't, which meant I didn't know how heartbroken you were when it ended, and I'm sorry about

that. I can't imagine how alone you must've felt."

"Low point, definitely." My turn to swallow. "I didn't want to stress anyone out or get Riley into trouble, so I never said anything."

"Oh, how awful."

"It was."

Mom wipes her eyes. "I feel like . . . like I don't know a whole side of you. Between the cookbook and the apparently torrid romance you had with Riley . . ."

My eyes are hot with tears, but I still manage to laugh. "You've been hanging out with Mrs. Underwood a lot, haven't you?"

"She's a riot, isn't she? Her books are"—Mom fans herself—"very good."

I laugh some more. So does Mom. For a second the tension between us evaporates.

"I guess I was worried you wouldn't accept that side of me. The creative, impractical side whose dreams were not at all safe or stable. They definitely aren't socially acceptable." I sniffle. "I thought you wouldn't understand it, so I hid it. I just wanted you to be proud of me, and I felt like my dreams might embarrass or disappoint you."

Mom crosses the kitchen and wraps me in a hug. "You know I'll love you no matter what, right?"

I nod against her chest, feeling the hurt in my own ease ever so slightly.

"I think we've both felt alone a lot in our lives," she continues. "I don't want that for you."

"I don't want that for you either."

"Well." Mom sighs. "Let's try to understand each other a little better then, yeah?"

"Yeah. It's just . . . I don't want you to hate me if I don't make the same choices you did."

She smooths my hair. "I could never hate you. But if I'm being perfectly honest, I'd be disappointed if you did make the same choices."

I pull my head up. "Really?"

"Really." She sighs. "It hurts, don't get me wrong. But it also shows me I did a good job raising you. Your grandparents were many things, but open-minded wasn't one of them."

I scoff. "No kidding."

"Think about how I was raised, then. I grew up thinking I didn't have a

choice where I ended up. I wanted you to grow up knowing you did. I didn't always get that exactly right, but I tried my best."

A fresh wave of tears clogs my throat. "That's awful and . . . sweet?"

"Don't hide who you really are because of me. I may not always agree with what you do, but I could never—" Her voice catches. "I couldn't live without you, Lu."

I don't miss how she finally calls me by my name.

The name that feels the most like me.

I pull her against me fiercely. "I couldn't live without you either, Mom. I love you."

"I love you more than you'll ever know."

We stand like that in my kitchen for a while. The ache in my throat passes, leaving in its wake a cliff of exhaustion so sheer, I feel myself start to nod off on Mom's shoulder.

"Lu?" She gives that shoulder a gentle break.

"Yeah?"

"You're snoring."

I make an exaggerated snort-laughing sound. "I'm just a little tired."

"Maybe it's not the best idea to make the drive to Bald Head today."

"Are you trying to talk me out of going?" I pull back to eye her.

"Lu, the fact that that man had you laughing and dancing and cooking mere *days* after what Patrick did to you tells me everything I need to know about Riley. He's the one."

My breath catches. I hadn't let myself even think those words. But now that they're out there, I realize just how true they are.

"I think he's always been the one," I reply quietly.

"Then of course I'm not going to talk you out of going to him. I just don't want you to die in a fiery car wreck in the process. Did you take the rest of the day off?"

"My boss wasn't happy, but yes."

"How about this? You go finish packing and take a nap. I'll run to the grocery store and get the ingredients for some goodies we can whip up for you to take with you tomorrow. Maybe you can surprise Riley with a picnic basket of y'all's favorite things? We can talk about some ideas for that cookbook of yours too."

Joy grips me and doesn't let go.

thirty-one

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Riley

Riding You into the Sunset

I'M SUCKING WIND, and Abel and Tom ain't afraid to let me know it.

"Hurry your ass up! Seriously, what happened to your sub seven-minute mile? We're just about to hit"—Abel checks his watch—"eight-fifty! Jesus Christ."

Tom looks disdainfully at me, hitting me in the legs with his tail. He's annoyed, and he wants me to know it.

"It's the," I pant, "cigarettes. I think?" Or the lack of sleep. The garbage I been eating in an effort to force something, anything down. Or, quite possibly, the thirty-nine cups of coffee I've consumed since I got out of bed this morning. Can't remember the last time I drank any water. Tuesday? Maybe?

"You gotta quit that shit."

"You gotta quit sticking your nose in other peoples' business."

We're running on South Beach, the wind at our backs and the sun on our faces. Any other Friday, I'd be crushing the 5K Abel and I run during lunch. Weather's great, and the weekend's about to begin.

But Lu isn't coming to visit, and that means I'm still stuck in hell. She didn't say she wasn't coming, and I didn't press her because I'm trying to give her space. But she did blow off the FaceTime we'd planned to have last

night. Said she was beat and she'd text me in the morning.

We traded pleasantries at around seven. She asked what I had going on today. I asked what she was wearing as I poured my fourth cup of coffee.

The conversation was a little horny and a lot painful. Mostly because it got me keyed up for a weekend of food and sex and music that isn't going to happen.

What the fuck am I gonna do with myself? I kept Saturday and Sunday wide open. Even booked a pair of masseuses for a couples' massage on *Dolly* tomorrow morning. Maybe Tuck and Maren would be interested? He hasn't mentioned her all week, which leads me to believe they're definitely still fucking, even though he swore he'd keep his hands to himself.

I glance at Abel. He's a big guy, six two, with the kind of build girls like. Several of the women we've passed on our run today have openly stared, especially after he yanked off his shirt and tucked it into his back pocket.

He's unfazed by the attention. Makes me wish I had that kind of ice in my veins. Maybe that'd make life hurt a little less.

We cruise into Harbour Village a little before noon. Well, Abel cruises. I'm practically limping to our invisible finish line in the parking lot at Stede's.

I bend over and put my hands on my knees in an attempt not to barf everywhere. Sweat pours into my eyes and drips onto the pavement. I take off my baseball hat and wipe my forehead. Tom yawns.

Abel just shakes his head at me, grinning. "You headin' back to the office?"

"I guess so, yeah. You? Any interest in fishing later?"

"I would, but I got plans tonight."

I put my hat back on. "You're really gonna leave me alone in this state?"

"I'm going to Wilmington to grab a beer with an architect. I guess I could skip it, but—"

"I'm kidding." Kind of.

To be fair, my friends and family have done a good job of keeping me busy this week. Mom and Marsha had me over for dinner on Monday, and Tuck took me out in South Port for Taco Tuesday with Katie. Wednesday I was at the restaurant with Chef Penelope working on this weekend's specials. Last night, Woody and I went crabbing in the marsh behind Keeper's Landing.

I love them all. Dearly. But they all went back to their lives, their homes,

and I went back to mine on *Dolly*. The boat I worked my ass off to be able to afford.

The boat that's still empty, years after I bought it with the intention of filling it with friends, family, laughter. Babies.

Doesn't matter how much money you have. Going home alone to a silent house sucks, period.

"You sure you're okay?" Abel asks.

I wave him away. "I'm fine, really."

"How 'bout we surf tomorrow? I got to meet my cabinet guy over at Row Boat Row in the morning, but I could meet you after?"

I head for the dock. "You're doing it again.

"Doing what?"

"Being nice. What's up with you lately?"

"Nothing," he says a little too quickly.

I keep walking. "Whatever."

"She came back once, she'll come back again!" he calls after me.

I wouldn't be so sure.

I really should shower and go back to the office. But I don't want to go back to *Dolly's* silence. I don't want to sit at a desk all afternoon, a computer my only company.

I'm also burning up.

Swimming isn't allowed in the marina, so I drop Tom off at my boat. Grab a small tender and head out into the open ocean for a swim. I pass an approaching ferry on my way. Weather's supposed to be great this weekend, so it's no surprise the decks are packed.

My chest twists. I know Lu needs time. But I can't shake the feeling that she's supposed to be on that ferry.

She's supposed to be here. She's supposed to be going for a swim with me.

The air outside is crisp with fall, but the water is still warm with summer. Feels good to dive in and float on the waves, the sound of the ocean filling my head.

Drowns out everything else. For a little while, at least.

Once I cool down, I head back to the marina.

I carefully guide the tender through the marina's narrow entrance. The homes of Harbour Village come into view first. Then Stede's. Woody's too, the shingled shack busy with newly disembarked visitors. After that, I

glimpse the boats in their slips on the dock.

Then, her. A head of short, dark hair dancing in the wind. She's waiting at the entrance to the dock.

My heart hits a wall. The impact is loud, brutal. It knocks the wind out of me as I squint, not trusting my eyeballs. Did I finally lose it? Did my brain, deprived of essential nutrients and oxygen, conjure a mirage?

She sees me and her face lights up with a huge smile. She waves, going up on her tiptoes to make sure I see her.

“Riley! Hey! Hi!”

Are my ears malfunctioning too? The tender's outboard engine *is* loud. Maybe it's making me hear things?

She's wearing a short dress and flip-flops. Dark hair wild in the breeze. I notice there's a soft-sided cooler slung over her shoulder.

It's a no-wake zone inside the marina, but I gun the tender's engine anyway. Someone shouts at me from a nearby boat to slow the fuck down.

“Get the fuck off my dick!” I shout back.

I see Lu laugh. “Be careful!” she calls.

I nearly collide with the dock, but manage to jump off and catch the tender just in time. Knotting the line on a nearby cleat, I sprint for the entrance gate.

It's her.

Far as I can tell, she's really here.

Holy shit.

“You should've called,” I say as I fumble with the lock.

She shrugs. “Sorry for just showing up—”

“Don't you dare apologize.”

“—but I wanted to surprise you. I was actually going to drive down last night, but we were worried I'd fall asleep at the wheel. I, like, legitimately can't sleep without you next to me.”

The fucking gate finally opens. Then I'm grabbing at her and she's fisting my shirt in her hand and we're kissing. Mouths colliding. She laughs against my lips, clearly amused by my eagerness, but I couldn't give two shits.

It's only been five days since I kissed her last, but it felt like a fucking lifetime.

This kiss, it's the kind that's inappropriate for daylight hours. For any kind of public consumption, really. I drink her in like a man dying of thirst. My hands find her ass. I work the seam of her mouth open with my tongue. I

press her into my growing erection, which, considering I'm only wearing my swim trunks, is likely—profanely—visible.

But Lu just giggles, rising into the caress.

I feel my body, my mind, coming back to life. Hunger surges through me. I'm starving in every sense of the word.

I don't know if she's here for an hour, a night. A lifetime.

I don't know if she's made any decisions.

But right now, just being here is enough to fill me head-to-toe with joy.

"Come home with me," I murmur, pulling back. "I wanna lay you down, Legs."

Lu moves her fingers through the hair at the back of my neck. Meets my eyes. Hers look lighter in the sun. Like honey.

"I'm in," she says simply.

My body pulses. Heart roars. "Are you talkin' about getting naked right now or—"

"I'm talking about everything. Us. You and me, being together. I'm in, Riley. One hundred percent in. I'm in love with you, and I want to be with you if you'll still have me. I never should have left. I don't need time. I need you."

I can only stare at her, my lungs burning with the need for air. My heart stopped working somewhere around *I'm in love with you*.

"Yes," I blurt. "To all of the above."

She puts a hand on my chest. "Granny told me about what Pa did to you. I'm really sorry, Riley. That was wrong of him, and so, so freaking unfair."

I clear my throat. "I appreciate that."

"I wish you had told me. If not ten years ago, then last week."

"I thought about it. But I—part of me felt like I should've told you, but another part didn't want to put you through any more pain. I know how close you were with your granddaddy. I felt like I already destroyed you once. I didn't want to destroy your memory of him too."

Her eyes well. "I was close with Pa, yes. But over the years—even back then, when you and I first met—I'd started to realize he and Granny weren't the perfect, infallible people I'd always thought they were. The image they showed the world . . . that they showed *me* . . ." She swallows. "It wasn't real. And so even though I loved Pa, the memory of the man I thought I knew was already tarnished."

"But not destroyed."

“I don’t know. Maybe that memory has to be destroyed so I can start fresh. And I want to make that fresh start with you.”

I keep staring. “But on Sunday, you said—”

“I didn’t know then what I know now. I thought I needed more time to learn how to trust you. I didn’t trust myself. But after Granny told me about Pa, it hit me that you and I—we were never the problem. The world was. And I’m done letting the world and all its bullshit determine who I am. Who I get to be with. I’m done letting it make me second guess myself.” She searches my eyes. “I know what I want, and it’s a life with you.”

I have no words. Only feelings. Big ones.

So I kiss her mouth. Her neck. She laughs, loud and real, and my heart soars.

“Take me home.” She puts her hands on my shoulders.

I nip at her earlobe. “Only if you promise never to leave again.”

“Never leave the luxury yacht you live on?” She laughs again. “That’s a real easy promise to make, Riley Dixon.”

“*Dolly* don’t feel right without you,” I murmur into her neck.

“Lucky for us, I don’t feel right without *Dolly*. You’ve ruined me for life, you know. Now I can never go back to a normal house on normal, dry land.”

By sheer force of will, I manage to let her go so I can lift the cooler off her shoulder. “Spoiling you was my intention from the start. C’mon, I’m starving.”

“You are?” Lu sounds disappointed as she follows me onto the dock. “I thought we’d get naked first, then have our picnic.”

“I shoulda clarified: I’m starving for you. ’Course we’re gettin’ naked first.”

She slips her hand into the crook of my arm. Rests her head on my shoulder and lets out a contented sigh. “I get to have all my favorite things today. Best Friday ever.”

“You.” I kiss the top of her head. “You’re my favorite thing. Now please tell me you’re not wearing panties.”

“What kind of prude do you take me for?” She teasingly rolls her eyes. “I’m not wearing panties *or* a bra.”

I grab her hand and start to jog.

“What happened to being patient?” she asks.

“Fuck patient.” I drop the cooler at *Dolly*’s slip and bend down to hike Lu over my shoulder. “This is gonna be messy.”

“Good.” She slaps my ass as I board the boat.

“Quick.”

“I don’t mind quick.”

“Hard.”

“I like hard.”

“I like you.” I trundle down the steps to the cabin. “And I love you. And I really love you naked.”

We do not emerge from the boat until the next evening, having cancelled the couples’ massage. I refuse to allow Lu to put any clothes on, so we eat all our meals in my kitchen. Do all our lovemaking in my bed, in my shower, on my floor and countertops, and against my walls.

Our walls.

Mine and Lu’s.

After a mutual masturbation moment in my bathroom that was so fucking hot I swear I went blind for a full minute while I came, Lu and I decide to take a stroll over to Stede’s for dinner.

I help Lu hop onto the dock just as the sun dips below the horizon. The sky remains on fire, however, wisps of orange and red clouds fading to a purple-blue background where the first stars are blinking awake. Air is warm. Water calm. Lu’s hand is in mine.

It’s the kind of night that makes you glad to be alive.

Tom darts between our feet, trotting like the happy little asshole he is. We allow dogs on Stede’s patio, so he’ll be joining us for dinner.

Speaking of the patio at Stede’s, voices rise and fall from that direction. I can just pick up the strains of a Fiona Apple song.

“You know what’s crazy?” Lu asks.

I scoff. “Where the fuck do I even begin?”

“Ha. But I was thinking about how romantic our summer together was when we were eighteen. You swept me right off my feet, Riley. I felt like I was living in a movie. Everything was exciting. Everything that happened felt important.”

“I remember that feeling well.” I give her hand a soft squeeze. “I was floating on a cloud.”

“Nothing that came after ever compared to that. I tricked myself into thinking moments here and there were romantic. But I never felt as floaty and happy and sexy as I did that summer.” She meets my eyes. “Until I tripped and fell into your arms last week. Since then, everything’s been romantic.”

There’s a fizzy sensation in my chest. “I’m good at setting the scene.”

“You’re great at making me feel like I’m the center of your universe. Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome, Legs. I feel like that’s something we should celebrate—our happy ending.”

She purses her lips, pretending to think. “How about an epic kissing scene?”

“I like epic kissing scenes.”

“Great. Here, you stay right there. I’m gonna run into your arms, and then we kiss the shit out of each other.”

I drop her hand and grin. This is fucking ridiculous, and I fucking love it.

“Sounds like a plan.”

Lu takes several steps back toward Dolly. Tom follows her. Then they both turn to face me.

“Ready?”

“Been ready ten years, Legs. Let’s go.”

She runs, pumping her arms. She’s adorable, already breathless with laughter by the time she launches herself into my arms. Tom sprints beside her, legs working, mouth open in the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on him. I lift her, my grip firm on her thighs, and she takes my face in her hands and guides my mouth up to hers for a hungry, happy kiss.

A week ago, Lu fell into my arms.

I’m holding her in them now. Plan to hold her for the rest of my life.

Tom, being Tom, barks at us, jumping onto my leg as a means of begging me to pick him up too.

Full circle never felt so satisfying.

Applause erupts from the Stede’s patio. Someone whistles. Tom keeps barking.

“Aw, yeah!” I hear Lady call.

Lu groans against my mouth, but I feel her lips curl into a smile. “She’s always so inappropriate.”

“Fine by me, ’cause I plan on bein’ real inappropriate with you after dinner.”

She laughs. “I didn’t know happily ever after could be so horny.”

“That gonna be a problem?”

“Hell no.” She presses her lips to mine. “I am more than happy to ride *you* into the sunset.”

THE END

epilogue

...

Lu

Sex on the Beach

Late November

THE BONFIRE CRACKLES, sending sparks into the crisp night air. I pop the last bite of my fried chicken sandwich into my mouth and lean into the fire's warmth, watching the flames as I savor the first recipe I've officially developed and perfected for my cookbook.

Fluffy potato bun: check.

Granny's crispy fried chicken, but kicked up a notch with the addition of a buttermilk marinade: check.

Mayo, pickles, melted white American cheese: check, check, and check.

"You gotta"—Riley licks his fingers—"be kidding me, Legs. That was *insane*."

Grinning, I lean my head on his shoulder. "Think it will sell some cookbooks?"

"Enough to put you on some bestseller lists for sure." He presses a kiss to my forehead. "I'm proud of you."

My heart flutters. "I'm proud of me too."

I mean that. Life has been absolute chaos lately as Riley and I figure out our new normal as a couple. Beautiful chaos, yes, but still chaos. While I love a lot of things about my life in Charlotte, I love Riley more. To that end, we

agreed we wanted to live full-time on *Dolly* (moored at Harbour Village Marina, as always). That isn't to say Riley hadn't visited me back in Charlotte over the past few months. He came several times, the most memorable trip being the one where we went to that Stevie Nicks concert together. Stevie was as iconic as ever.

So was the sex Riley and I had afterward.

I reached out to Marianne not long after, hoping to start networking with event planning firms in the Wilmington/South Port area. As luck would have it, The Ocean Club was looking to expand their event planning team. She offered me a job and, needless to say, I took it. I moved in with Riley a week ago, and I started at The Ocean Club a few days later.

It was and wasn't an easy decision. Dad was definitely disappointed that I'd be leaving The Gibbes Group. Mom cried when I told her I was moving. And saying goodbye to the perfect, shiny house where I was supposed to live my perfect, shiny (albeit fake) life still hurt.

But my own happiness—my own dreams—are my guideposts now. And nothing makes me happier than working on my cookbook and being with Riley here on the island. Since September, I've been on Bald Head often, squeezing in recipe development sessions in Stede's kitchen with Chef Penelope and her sous chefs whenever I can. Riley often accompanies me as my official taste tester.

"Best job ever," he says.

Twenty hours of kitchen time and countless fried chicken sandwich iterations later, we finally landed on a winner. We're calling it the BFCS of BHI: Best Fucking Chicken Sandwich of Bald Head Island.

It's a bold claim to make, sure. But after seeing Riley absolutely devour his sandwich tonight, I feel like my recipe lives up to its name.

"I can tell you're proud." Riley searches my face. "You've been smiling non-stop since we got out here."

To celebrate knocking out my first recipe for the cookbook, my boyfriend (I love that I get to call him that) suggested we have a picnic on the beach. I imagined a casual affair: I'd bring the food, and Riley would bring the blanket, the music, and maybe some sparkling cider. Tom too, of course.

But in true Riley Dixon style, he went all out. There's the private bonfire, which is surrounded by an enormous heart made entirely of bouquets of red roses. There must be hundreds of flowers, their fragrance mingling with the cozy scent of the fire.

He also brought a bottle of my favorite red wine, along with a crystal wineglass that's the size of my head. The blanket he wrapped me in is cashmere and about as cozy—and decadent—as it gets. Tom has burrowed into his own blanket beside me.

Not gonna lie, spoiling him has been a lot of fun.

Meeting Riley's eyes, their liquid surface lit up by the flames of the fire, I feel like I might burst with happiness.

"It's a really great feeling," I reply. "One I'm not sure I've ever felt before."

"The feeling of accomplishment?"

I lift a shoulder, pondering his question. "The feeling of accomplishment is nice, yes. It's really wonderful that all our work paid off. But I think the fact that I took a chance and created something I love—something I know is special, that I'm proud of—feels fucking awesome."

The skin around Riley's eyes crinkles as he grins. "The fruits of your labor are very, very sweet when that's the case."

"It's also made me realize how much freaking work it's going to be putting together an entire book. The recipe development piece alone will take ages. Never mind the styling and photography stuff."

Riley squeezes my thigh underneath the blanket. A familiar warmth flares to life between my legs. "We tackle one thing at a time, Lu. It'll get done. I'll make sure of it."

We. That's another thing I love about this man—how he makes me feel like we're a real team in making our dreams come true. I know he's got my back in the same way I've got his.

Such a nice change of pace, having that kind of unconditional support.

It's also a really huge turn-on.

I slip my hand underneath the blanket and work it across his groin. "Did you pay people to stay off the beach tonight? Because I haven't seen a single person pass by."

His eyes go hazy when I press my hand to the bulge in his jeans. "I . . . didn't?"

"Either you want to fuck me." I slowly stroke him. "Or murder me. Which one is it?"

His fingers find my throat. "There's a reason they call orgasms little deaths."

Beside us, Tom whines in his sleep. I grin. "Kid is conked out. Should we

give the little deaths a go?”

“Like you even need to ask.”

I laugh as Riley pulls the blanket over our heads. I can just make out his face in the semi-darkness, the light of the fire permeating the blanket’s buttery fabric. Our eyes meet and the space between us comes alive with desire. Understanding.

This is heaven.

Then he captures my mouth with his, a deep, hungry kiss I feel all the way to my toes. My skin comes alive, my pussy beginning to throb in time to my pounding heart.

I close my eyes and let him lay me down. It’s warm inside our little cocoon, and he unbuttons the front of my sweater, groaning when he slips a hand inside and plays with my breast. Arousal swells between my legs as he massages my nipple, drawing it to a hard, aching point against the lacy cup of my bra.

He pulls the cup down. Ducks his head to kiss my neck, my collarbone. Then sucks my nipple into his mouth. I cry out, rolling my hips. Chuckling softly, he flattens his palm between my hipbones and presses me back down.

The sand shifts beneath the blanket. The ocean roars.

Reminders that we’re on the beach.

A *public* beach. Riley has a far reach on Bald Head, but even he can’t pay off every single person currently residing on the island.

The idea that we could be caught is an even bigger turn on.

We finally get to have the sex on the beach we’ve talked so much about.

Riley’s already working on my leggings. He tugs them down, going back up to my mouth to bite my bottom lip when he discovers I’m going commando.

“I”—my eyes roll to the back of my head when he slides his fingers into my slit—“had a feeling this might happen. Easier access.”

He groans against my mouth. “If I had known—”

“We wouldn’t have made it through dinner.” I bite him back. Tug at the zipper of his fly as I kick off my shoes and then my leggings.

He plays with my pussy, slipping his middle finger inside me while pressing the heel of his hand against my clit. The friction is glorious. Frustrating too. I rock my hips against his touch, shameless and seeking.

His zipper undone, I tug the button through its hole. I reach inside his briefs and find him hot to the touch, the velvety heat making me shiver.

“I want,” I say.

He wraps his hand around my throat. “You’ll get. But first, you come.”

I’m already close. He thumbs my clit just the way I like. At the same time he gives my throat a squeeze. Bright spots erupt in my vision. The tension in my core becomes unbearable.

He gathers my clit between the knuckles of his first two fingers and gives it a hard, almost painful tug. His other hand moves from my throat to my nipple, tweaking it.

That’s all it takes.

Completion rocks me. Riley climbs on top of me as I come. Next thing I know he’s pressing the head of his dick against my entrance and pushing inside. I’m still coming, and the added pressure makes my orgasm go on for what feels like forever.

He whispers in my ear as he moves ardently over me, fucking me as hard and as ruthlessly as if this were our last night on earth.

You’re so right, he says.

You’re everything.

You’re where I want to be all the time.

And then, just before he comes: “You’re home, Legs.”

I smile. “I love you too, Riley.”

“I love you.” He hangs his head as he fills me in hot pulses. “So fucking much.”

I want to make out for hours when we’re done. But Riley, being the thoughtful boyfriend he is, insists we head back to *Dolly* so I can use the bathroom.

The guy thinks about UTIs even more than I do. I appreciate that more than words can say.

We head home. It’s a chilly ride back to the marina, so after I use the restroom, Riley and I hop into the shower for a long, hot rinse that inevitably ends in me giving him a blow job and him making me come again with the shower head.

I’m boneless, exhausted, by the time Riley puts the dog in his crate. Riley and I crawl into bed, naked as usual, where he loops an arm around my middle and pulls me against him, my back to his front. He buries his face in my neck and takes a deep inhale.

“She smells like you now,” he murmurs, his breath warm on my skin.

“Who?”

“*Dolly*. She smells like coconut body wash. When you’re in the kitchen, she smells like dinnertime after a long day.”

I grin. “That sounds nice.”

“Nicest thing I can think of.”

My heart twists. A year ago, I would’ve laughed at the idea of making a home on a boat with a billionaire. It’s ridiculous on every possible level.

But here I am, feeling more at home than I ever have anywhere else. More comfortable and at ease.

Probably because I can finally be who I want to be.

Perfect has no place here. But authenticity? Bravery? Truth, even when it’s messy or weird?

Yes, yes, and *hell* yes.

“Me too,” I whisper.

“Get some rest.” Riley kisses my shoulder. “I’ll have your coffee waiting when you get up.”

I’m turning my head to kiss his mouth when his phone rings. I go still.

Getting a call at midnight on a Saturday is never a good thing.

Riley rolls over to grab his phone. Slides his thumb across the screen before bringing it to his ear.

“Hey, man,” he says. “Everything all right?”

In the silence of the room, I can hear Tuck’s rumbly baritone. “I’m sorry to bother you so late. We’re all okay—well, not okay, but alive. And safe.”

“What’s not okay?”

A pause. My heart leaps into my throat.

“Maren’s pregnant.”

Need more Lu+Riley? You’re in luck! I wrote a [bonus epilogue](#) that may include some big news for them (and the birth of Goldie+Coop’s baby!). Happy reading, y’all.

I’m hard at work on Maren+Tuck’s story, [I WISH YOU WERE MINE](#). Find out how Maren got pregnant (spoiler alert: it’s sex!) by pre-ordering your copy. Releasing spring 2024!

thank you!

Thank you so much for taking a chance on Lu+Riley. I genuinely enjoyed writing their story, and I hope that shows. Be sure to pre-order Maren+Tuck's book, [I WISH YOU WERE MINE](#), coming spring 2024!

Jonesing for more southern studs who are superstars in the sack in the meantime? Check out [Southern Charmer \(Charleston Heat #1\)](#), my sexy, feel-y, hot-new-neighbor romance available for FREE! Keep reading for a steamy excerpt.

author's note

While Bald Head Island and Harbour Village are real places, I did take some literary liberties with the setting. The Ocean Club is a stand in for the real-life Shoals Club. The map at the beginning of this book is a (somewhat) accurate, but definitely simplified, lay out of the island.

Row Boat Row is a real street, but I made up the numbers for its houses.

I can't say definitively whether or not a billionaire who looks like Glen Powell lives on a yacht in the marina. If anyone can confirm this, please do let me know!

Unfortunately, the people who work the ferry must keep their clothes on in real life.

Stede's, Baity's, Surf's Up, and Marsha Marsha Marsha are all fictional places. However, I named Marsha Marsha Marsha after my favorite house on the island, which just so happens to be owned by one of my besties. It's a special spot!

southern charmer excerpt

Eli

“Olivia!” Can’t help it. My gaze flicks down her body. “He—*hey*.”

Of course.

Of *course* Yankee girl shows up to The Spotted Wolf looking hot as hell five seconds after I decide to *pump the brakes*.

What a sick fucking joke.

Thanks for nothing, universe.

Olivia, bless her, is wearing blue jeans that are tight tight *tight*. Her white button down would be prim if it wasn’t partially see through. The red lace bra she’s wearing underneath—

I can’t.

I focus my gaze on her feet instead. She’s wearing cute Chuck Taylors that are a little scuffed up.

Her hair falls in loose, unruly waves around her shoulders. I bite the inside of my bottom lip, hard, to keep from winding a lock around my finger. I imagine how silky it would feel. How her lips would fall open and her cheeks would flush when I gave it a tug.

I can smell her shampoo. Something clean and herbal.

She smells good enough to eat.

“I finished my chapter early today, so I thought I’d do some exploring. I saw the lights from the sidewalk and came in for a quick drink...” Olivia puckers her brow. “Eli? You all right?”

“Yep,” I bite out, blinking. “Sorry, I just—uh. Long day. Beer—”
Bullshit.

I go in for a hug. It’s awkward, all thanks to me. Olivia has to go on her tip toes to reach me, and I kind of half crouch, half bend over. My brain

screams *slow*. But my body—

Well. There's a reason I keep my crotch region bowed away from her.

I fall back. Luke gives me a not so subtle nudge.

"Don't be rude, Elijah," he says. "Introduce us."

I tug a hand through my hair. "Olivia, this is my friend Luke. Luke, this is my new neighbor, Olivia."

"Nice to meet you," Luke says, aiming his all-American-baseball-player smile at Olivia while extending his hand. "I hear you're new in town."

She takes Luke's hand. "I'm already smitten with it."

"Charleston's a great city. Only downside is that this grump lives here." Luke points his thumb at me.

"I'm not a grump," I bite out.

Luke shrugs. "See what I mean?"

I resist the urge to punch him in that handsome mug of his.

Grace gives Olivia a hug, and they chat for a minute. It's obvious they're friends, both of them laughing and gesticulating wildly as they catch up. I have to say that seeing how well they get along makes me feel all warm and mushy inside. Olivia's a natural conversationalist. Good listener, thoughtful talker. Grace shoots me a look, grinning.

I like this one.

Because Olivia wasn't great enough. Now she's got to go and be wonderful with my sister, too.

Yet another reason to think I might not deserve this girl. I'm gripped by the terrible idea that I have nothing to offer her. Which, in my rational mind, I know is ridiculous. I'm feeding her. Editing her book. Encouraging her to chase after this incredible career she wants. I'm inspiring her in the same way she's inspiring me.

That counts for something. It has to.

Has to.

"Let's get you somethin' to drink," I say to Olivia during a pause in their conversation. "What're you having?"

Olivia glances at my beer, then at the empty shot glasses on the bar. "That looks good."

Behind the bar, Jake nods, checking out Olivia before turning to grab the Fireball.

My grip tightens on my bottle. I am not a jealous guy. But all of a sudden I'm fantasizing about clocking every dickhead in this bar who dares to so

much as glance at Olivia.

I spear Jake with a look when he turns back around. He takes the hint, quickly pouring our shots and handing Olivia a beer before busying himself with the dishwasher.

She picks up the shot glass and gives its contents a sniff. "It's been a long time since I've taken a shot. What the hell is this stuff? Smells like candy."

"Tastes like it, too." Luke grabs his glass and taps it to Olivia's. "Actually, that's a lie. It kind of tastes like fiery death. But it gets the job done."

Olivia cocks a brow, smiling. "Fiery death. All right then. I'm in."

We take the shot together, my eyes glued to her face the whole time. She winces, blinking hard, after she swallows. Her eyes water a bit. I can tell she wants to sputter, or maybe gag, but instead she just shakes her head and grabs her beer, taking a long pull.

"Whew," she says, pressing the back of her hand to her mouth. "That is... interesting."

I'm smiling now, too. God damn she's cute.

"Yep. You're definitely gonna feel interesting tomorrow morning, that's for sure," Grace says.

The patio is really getting packed. People hang out in front of the stage, waiting for the band to begin. I look up when the lead singer from Buns 'n Roses introduces himself into the microphone. A beat later, the band bursts out into a loud, throbbing version of "Pour Some Sugar on Me" by Def Leppard.

Immediately the front half of the patio turns into a dance floor. Hands are in the air, there's hollerin' and hootin' and some pretty egregious dry humping going on.

I turn to Olivia, half hoping she's got a look of disgust on her face because she hates eighties music and/or Def Leppard. I need a reason to want her a little less. A reason to help me pump the goddamn brakes.

Instead, her face is lit up with a smile as she mouths the lyrics, nodding her head in time to the beat.

"You like Def Leppard?" I say, raising my voice so she can hear me.

Olivia nods, digging her teeth into her bottom lip. "Love 'em. Although Bruce Springsteen is probably my favorite. From the eighties, at least."

My uncle introduced me to The Boss when I was a kid. I've been obsessed ever since.

I meet Luke's eyes over her head.

Goodness.

I'm in big fucking trouble.

As if on cue, Buns 'n Roses plays "Dancing in the Dark".

Olivia looks at me. I look at her.

"Wanna dance?" I ask.

She chews on her bottom lip. My heart falls. She's gonna turn me down again. God, why do I keep doing this to mys—

"Would love to," she replies with a smile. She looks at Luke and Grace. "Are you guys going to be okay? I hate to leave you..."

"Y'all go have fun," Luke says, hardly giving us a glance as he turns to my sister.

I shoot him a dark look.

"You two behave." Then I nod my head toward the band. "Let's go, Yankee girl."

She follows me as I try to nudge my way through the crowd. It's slow going; the patio is *really* packed. I turn around to see some asshole cutting Olivia off, shouldering her aside.

"Hey!" I shout at the guy, stepping back. "Watch it."

Then I reach behind me and grab Olivia's hand. For a second, it stays lax in mine. I worry I've made her uncomfortable. But I don't want her to get lost in the throng. Shit—

But then she firms her grip, fingers curling around my palm. I glance over my shoulder and she meets my eyes.

"All right?" I ask.

She nods, her smile returning. "All right."

My pulse hiccups. Her hand feels small and warm in my own. She's *trusting* me.

I feel like I could fucking fly.

I turn back around and head for the stage, keeping Olivia close. Once, when I stop unexpectedly, she kind of crashes into me. I swear to God I almost bite off my tongue at the feel of her tits pressed against my back. Am I imagining that she lingers there for half a heartbeat?

I keep moving. I don't wanna do something stupid. We burrow our way to a spot in the middle of the dance floor. The lead singer has busted out a saxophone, and everyone around us is going nuts. Olivia comes to stand beside me, her hip brushing against mine when she shimmies.

I take a chance and give her hand a squeeze.

Olivia smiles, squeezing back.

I can't let her go. Not yet. I crave *this*. Whatever this feeling is.

I raise my arm and twirl her around. Then she raises her arm and attempts to twirl me, and even though I bend my back, I somehow manage to fuck it up, spilling beer all over the front of my button up shirt. Her eyes widen when they fall on the stain. She puts the flat of her palm over it. Over my stomach.

"Sorry!" she shouts.

My entire body warms at the simple contact. I don't wanna read too much into it. That she's the one touching me now.

But I do.

I *lean* into it. Into her palm.

Into her.

And she doesn't pull away.

"Don't give me an excuse to take my shirt off," I reply.

Olivia laughs, taking a step closer. "Like you need one."

I cock a teasing brow, my free hand going to the top button. "Should I?"

"I don't wanna get kicked out yet. Band's too good," she replies, swatting away my hand.

Her playful touching—her flirting—is driving me up the wall. It's such a fucking turn on. The blood inside my skin feels downright giddy.

I catch her hand, guiding it onto the back of my neck. Her eyes flash with heat, and she steps into me, sliding her other arm onto my shoulder. Pressing our bodies together.

The solid, soft feel of her against me is enough to make me wanna scream. Our bodies fit together perfectly.

Her curves are all over me.

My cock starts to feel heavy when she digs the tips of her fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck, gently dragging her fingernails across my scalp.

I curl an arm around her waist and hold her closer. Duck my head to murmur in her ear.

"I like that."

Olivia's nose brushes against the line of my jaw. I don't know if it's intentional or not. But it turns me on in a really big way.

"Thought you might."

Her voice is different. A little husky.

The band is playing “Jesse’s Girl” now. Olivia pulls away a little. Just enough to meet my eyes as she starts moving her hips, her body practically writhing against mine.

Don’t get a boner.

Do. Not. Get. A. Boner.

I’m terrified of scaring her off. She’s never been so open with me. So *free*. Her fiery side has finally come out to play, and I’m not about to send it back into hiding by poking her with my badly behaved dick.

So I twirl her a few more times, hoping to put some distance between us. But then she turns around and presses her ass into my crotch, rolling it to the beat of “1999”, the song the band plays next.

I brush her hair over her shoulder so I can lean down to her ear again.

“You tryin’ to kill me, Olivia?”

She shoots me the sauciest, sexiest, hottest look ever over her shoulder. For a second I can’t breathe.

“What? You really expect me *not* to dirty dance to Prince?”

Jesus, take the wheel.

By some miracle, I manage to keep my body under control. The night is warm and the music is loud, and Olivia and I dance like we have nothing to lose. No worries. No disappointments. It’s just us and Pat Benatar and U2 and Foreigner underneath a cloudy night sky.

At one point, I glance toward the bar. I let out a silent sigh of relief when I see Gracie there with her boyfriend Nicholas. Luke is MIA.

Good. Gracie’s in safe hands. I don’t have to worry. Which means I can focus on Olivia.

She’s one hell of a dancer. Never would’ve guessed the girl in the designer shades would act out the lyrics to “Addicted to Love” in public while taking slugs of Bud Light. But here she is, laughing, making *me* laugh, rolling her hips and biting her lip and throwing her arms in the air as she sings about one track minds.

Throwing her arms around *me*.

It starts to rain. Just a sprinkling of droplets. No one seems to notice. Least of all Olivia, who’s behind me now, hands on my hips as she encourages *my* ass to press into *her* crotch.

I oblige my lady, and give her as much booty as she can handle until I pull her around, her back to my front, and hold her against me, our bodies moving in tandem.

We're both sweating. Both breathless. My heart is going apeshit inside my chest. I feel like I've been plugged into a socket, blood electric, skin charged. Our chemistry is real.

My feelings for this romance writing, dirty dancing woman are real.

Feelings I would very much like to express physically. I'm too warm and too turned on. I want her too much.

It begins to rain in earnest, followed by an ominous rumble of thunder.

I look down at the back of Olivia's head. She's been raking her hands through her hair all night, making it messy.

Just how I like it.

The band calls it a night, blaming the thunder for their shortened set.

Without a word, I grab Olivia's hand and head for the covered bar. But we're not the only ones with that idea, and about five seconds later, the bar is packed and we're edging back out into the rain.

I notice Gracie is still here with Nicholas. I wave to her.

"You okay?" I shout.

She gives me a thumbs up.

"C'mon," I say, giving Olivia a gentle tug. "Let's get out of here."

"Okay," she replies, jogging after me.

We leave the bar, only to find ourselves on the crowded sidewalk. People are on their phones, trying to get Ubers. The rain is really coming down now.

I start to dig my phone out of my pocket, but Olivia tugs on my arm.

"Let's just walk. It's not that far. We're already soaked."

"You sure?" I ask. I move closer to her when I see I'm not the only one who's noticed her wet shirt is completely see through now. "I'm happy to get an Uber."

She grins. "I'm sure. Last one home is a rotten egg."

Then she takes off into the rain.

Want to read the rest of Eli and Olivia's story? Pick up [SOUTHERN CHARMER](#) today for FREE in KindleUnlimited!

acknowledgments

WOW, I have so, so many people to thank for helping me get this project off the ground. While Lu+Riley's story was NOT EASY TO WRITE, it was an absolute *joy* to work with an exceptional publishing team to bring this book to life.

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I also have to give a shout out to my little family. I've never worked harder in my life trying to balance my roles as mom and author, but I'm so

grateful I have a whole world outside my work to get lost in. I love you!

where to find jessica!

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about the author

Jessica Peterson writes romance with heat, humor, and heart. Heroes with hot accents are her specialty. When she's not writing, she can be found bellying up to a bar in the south's best restaurants with her husband Ben, reading books with her adorable daughters Gracie and Madeline, or snuggling up with her 70-pound lap dog, Martha.

A Carolina girl at heart, she fantasizes about splitting her time between Charleston and Asheville, but currently lives in Charlotte, NC. You can check out her books at www.jessicapeterson.com.

