



Romancing
PARADISE

KATE ASTER

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*To my U.S. Army Ranger husband who continues to inspire all
the heroes in my books. Hooah, my love. Rangers lead the
way!*

PROLOGUE



~ FREYA ~

My back aches. I reek of hand sanitizer. I'm smeared with grape jelly and a few other things that I don't recognize. And don't get me started about what I saw in the tiny bathroom on the plane.

Yeah, it will take me at least a week to un-see that.

But there's a light, salt-scented breeze tousling my hair and the sound of 'ukuleles playing some relaxing tune. Nearly everyone around us is donning a Hawaiian lei. And I can hear the low, rhythmic sound of the ocean waves in the distance as we wait in line to check into the resort.

I'm in paradise.

"So you're under Colonel Pickering at Regiment?"

"Yeah, you know him?"

"Know him? He ran the counter-ISIS JSOTF I was in, out of Mosul."

I look at my husband, Mason, who is apparently immune to the effects of traveling four thousand miles with a small child in tow, as he contentedly holds up his end of a conversation with the man behind us in line who introduced himself as Matt.

“I’ll be damned. I was his planner for that, the year before. I’m surprised we didn’t cross paths.”

“When were you at Fort Liberty?”

*I suppress a sigh as my daughter and I watch Mason caught up in the usual game military men play when they first meet, which I affectionately refer to as *Who-do-you-know-and-where-have-you-been?**

I should be taking more interest in this man behind us.

He’s normally the kind I can’t resist targeting. His strong, classically chiseled features should be made into a mold and recreated in chocolate. Piercing chestnut eyes boast tiny flecks of burnt sienna, reminding me of a perfectly roasted turkey. Bulging muscles that protrude from his fitted t-shirt are reminiscent of the challah bread our neighbor makes us for the holidays.

Damn. I just realized how hungry I am.

But regardless of his appearance—which, for the record, I can’t begin to appreciate the way an unmarried woman could—I haven’t even bothered to look for a ring that would put him off limits for me.

I’m just too tired to play matchmaker yet.

My daughter reaches for me—a gesture I find endearing until she tugs on the bottom of my shirt. Hard.

“Mama, when are we gonna be in our roooooom?” she whines, drawing out that last word in a way that makes my ears ring.

I can't really blame her. I'm wondering the same thing.

“As soon as they give us the key, honey,” I assure her. My sweet Astrid has actually been wonderful, considering the fact that it's past midnight back home and she's just approaching her fifth birthday.

“I bet you're excited to be in Hawai'i,” Matt directs to Astrid, which makes me take a little more notice than it should.

“Uh-huh,” she says.

“If you wake up early tomorrow morning and walk along the shoreline, you'll probably see dolphins,” he tells her.

Her eyes light. “Really?”

“Really. And you'll see whales here too... and sea turtles. And if you're really lucky, you might even see a monk seal.”

Just like that, my daughter's enraptured by him.

I'm kind of enraptured myself. I have a soft spot for men who are nice to my daughter.

I sense my husband watching me. He knows what's going through my mind as I let my eyes linger on Matt a little longer, my gaze making a path from his charming smile downward... to that fourth finger of his left hand that is remarkably naked.

Suddenly—tired or not, hungry or not—my brain is flipping through images of appropriate women for him.

I wonder who's single at this wedding we're attending.

My eyes track upward again to his face, but his gaze is entirely different now. His eyes don't have that adorable sparkle they did when he was talking to my daughter about the animals she loves.

This time, as he looks over my shoulder toward something in the distance, there's heat in his eyes, so intense, so... captivated.

He's not looking at something. He's looking at someone. And the effect on him has elevated the temperature in this open-air lobby by ten degrees.

I'm just about to glance over my shoulder to see who's capturing his attention, when I hear my husband blurt, "How about Captain McConnell? We did a joint mission with his team. Hell of a leader."

I practically groan. Leave it to Mason to play mood killer.

Matt's eyes shift over to Mason's. "What?"

"Captain McConnell? Do you know him?"

"No, I uh..." His eyes dart back over to where he'd been looking before. But then I see a flash of disappointment laced with frustration as his gaze urgently searches the area.

Now I'm beyond curious, looking over my shoulder too. "You look like you saw a ghost," I say to him.

His eyes are still searching. "I'm sorry. Yeah. I just, uh, thought I saw a woman I knew."

"Was it one of your officemates from the Pentagon? You said that's how you knew the groom, right?" Mason asks.

He shakes his head. "No. It was... God, I don't even know where I remember her from. But she's... we..." His voice trails and his vacant stare tells me his thoughts are anywhere but here. "This is gonna drive me nuts."

It was an old flame, I decipher. A love from his past. An attraction so powerful that it pulled them together again, right here in Hawai'i. I should know. I write about this stuff all the time.

My smile perks upward, liking this story as it reveals itself to me. I am a romance novelist, after all.

The recognition in his eyes when he saw her. The near panic when he couldn't find her again. The unsolved mystery of her that still lingers in his thoughts as he resumes an ever-so-boring conversation with my husband.

Destiny has whisked this man across the ocean to a remote island where he'll see a woman from his past, a siren capable of enrapturing this hardened warrior from a mere fleeting glance across a room.

Oooh. I like that. I should write that down when I get to the room. It belongs in my next book.

Seems to me that my matchmaking skills aren't needed for Matt. I guess I should be disappointed.

It's okay, Destiny. You can have this one. I'm on vacation anyway.

CHAPTER 1



~ LILY ~

Panic wraps its claws around my heart and squeezes the oxygen from my lungs. I take two steps backward, lightheaded, then do a perfect 180-degree turn and dart down the hall.

At the elevator, I stop briefly, reaching out to the wall to steady myself as I struggle for a breath.

No, it can't be Deo. It's been nearly ten years since I saw him.

It must just be the way the military haircut on that man I saw accentuates the way his face is sculpted, with prominent cheekbones and a wide chin, looking like a blend between all-American quarterback and Roman god.

But those eyes...

How could I not recognize those eyes?

Logic has me shaking my head in denial. I'm on a remote tropical island in the middle of the Pacific, the week before my best friend Maggie's destination wedding here in paradise.

When I met Deo, I was four thousand miles from here in a crowded city.

The chances are... slim to none.

I turn on my heel, headed back toward the hotel lobby where I saw the man. I peek around the corner and spot him again, this time with his back turned toward me as he talks to Maggie's friends, Freya and Mason.

Whoever he is, he must be here for Maggie's wedding, same as I am, or he wouldn't be talking to *them*.

I can't see his face now or those eyes—the same eyes I've looked at every day for the past ten years since my daughter was born.

I can only see his wide back and shoulders clad with muscles that show clearly through his fitted t-shirt. With the buzz cut, from this angle, he looks like every other military guy I've met since I arrived here for the wedding next Saturday.

But when he turns his head slightly and glances back toward the seat near the concierge desk where I was waiting for Maggie just moments ago, I see his eyes again—the familiarity of them unnerving to me.

And I feel the same seemingly magnetic pull between us that I remember from that night ten years ago.

Then, it had been inescapable.

Today, it's no different... and I resent it.

Deo. His name meant “godlike,” I came to discover later. Had I known the meaning ten years ago, throughout those passionate hours we spent together, the name would have been fitting since everything about him seemed too perfect to be human.

But my judgement was a little skewed that night, under the influence of a dangerous mix of appletinis and the charm that oozed from his pores. Because there’s nothing perfect about the guy who gave me a fake phone number that morning after we had hooked up, making him unreachable when I finally got the nerve to tell him I was pregnant.

Dread snares me again, stealing my breath.

I have to leave. He probably didn’t recognize me in that single moment when our eyes locked. But if we talked—if we spent more than a minute together—there’s too great of a chance.

“*Lily. Like the flower?*” he had asked me that night. As I look at him now, I can still remember the low timbre of his voice, so soothing.

“*Yeah,*” I had answered.

“*I like that. It suits you.*”

A shiver flows through me at the memory as I stride back to the elevator, tapping the button with no other intention but to retreat to the safety of my hotel room and pack for the first plane off this rock.

“Lily!”

I turn to see my best friend approaching me—my best friend I was supposed to meet in the hotel lobby so that we could go enjoy our first margarita together in paradise. The wide grin on her face quickly shifts to concern when her eyes meet mine and she sees my panicked expression.

I try to calm myself. She’s a bride-to-be and shouldn’t be dealing with my drama right now.

“Are you okay?” She touches my arm, stopping me before I enter the elevator when its doors open. “I thought we were going to meet for a margarita.”

“I—I’m just really tired and... jetlagged.” My words come slowly to me as I debate whether I should tell her. I don’t think I’ve ever lied to Maggie in the thirteen years she’s been my best friend. “I should go back to my room.”

“Oh, don’t. It’s your first night here. You just need one of those nice, sweet drinks you love so much. They have a pineapple margarita at the beachside bar you’ll love. It’ll totally get you into vacation mode.”

“Yeah, I—”

How do I say this?

How do I tell my best friend that I came all the way to Hawai‘i for her wedding, but I’m bailing on her within three hours of arriving? “Maggie, something’s come up. I—I have to get home.”

She pales. “Oh my God. Is Melody okay?”

Something warms inside of me, just like it always does, simply knowing that there is someone else in the world who

loves my daughter so much.

I couldn't give Melody the father she deserves. But I definitely gave her a wonderful godmother in Maggie. "No, no—she's fine. It's—oh God..." I feel tears sting my eyes, not from sadness exactly. Just from this sense of being overwhelmed.

She takes me by the elbow and guides me down the open-air hall... and I let her only because the direction we're headed is further from where I had spotted *him*. As we approach a couple chaise lounges just within sight of the ocean, the smell of the salt air fills my lungs.

It should calm me. Back home in California, it does every time. But right now, it only reminds me that I'm an entire ocean away from my child.

She sits me down and takes a seat beside me. "Okay. Tell me what's going on."

"I'm—" I'm unable to even finish the sentence for at least a half-minute. "I just saw Melody's dad."

"What?" She looks as shocked as I feel. "Oh, there's no way. You're in Hawai'i. That was in New York."

In my mind, I see the face of the man again... and Melody's eyes. "It was him, Maggie. I—I'm so, so sorry to dump this on you right now, but it was him and I think he's here for your wedding."

Now she's clearly incredulous. "Why do you think he's here for the wedding?"

“He was talking to your friends—Freya and Mason. And it makes sense, really. He was in the military when I met him, remember?”

“Oh, hon. The military is huge. There’s just no way,” she says again, this time shaking her head adamantly. “Besides, I know everyone who’s been invited. No one is named Deo.”

Deo. Funny how I haven’t heard that name spoken out loud in so long. Usually when Maggie or I talk about my daughter’s sperm donor, we replace his name with something like lying rat-bastard or two-faced dickwad.

I frown. “Maggie, the guy gave me a fake number after we hooked up. Is it that much of a stretch to think he might have given me a fake name too?” I bristle, disgusted. “*Deo,*” I say with an affect in my tone. “Perfect fake name for him. I’m so stupid. Hell, he could have told me his name was Thor or Captain America back then and I’d have believed him.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“Well, I’m not stupid enough to stick around here so that he can upend my life like he did ten years ago. I—I have to go.”

“Go? Where are you going?” she asks.

“Home. I’m so sorry. You know I love you, and I want so much to be here for your wedding. But I can’t risk anything with my daughter. Just tell everyone I had an emergency, okay?”

“Lily, you’re just panicking. And that’s natural,” she adds quickly. “But you don’t even know it’s him.”

“I’d know those eyes anywhere, Maggie.”

“Okay, so... if it was him—and I still don’t think that’s possible, but *if* it was—then maybe it’s a good thing.”

“A good thing?”

“Well, yeah. You tried to track him down when you were pregnant years ago.”

“Sure. But that was before I found out he gave me a fake number. I have no interest in bringing the kind of dirtbag who gives a woman a fake number into my daughter’s life. Not after ten years of raising her on my own. If he found out he had a kid...” I shudder at the thought. “...he could start demanding time with her. His family might start making demands. I don’t know him, and I don’t know *them*. Who knows what baggage he could dump on my daughter? He could be a criminal or a woman hater or just an asshole,” I finish, deciding the last option is already a sure thing. “I can’t take that risk,” I continue. “I *won’t*. I’ve worked too hard to raise a strong and confident and happy daughter to suddenly bring some guy into her life who could unravel it all.”

“Okay. I get that. I really do. But I just can’t imagine it’s him.” She slaps her hands to her thighs and then stands.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m buying you a margarita and we’re going to sit here by the water and drink.”

“I—”

She raises her chin stubbornly. “If you’re going to really desert me the week of my wedding, the least you can do is

have a margarita with me before you go.”

As she disappears to the bar, I see a wave crash against the black lava rocks along the shoreline. The sound somehow calms me. The small house I bought when I could finally afford to move out of my parents’ home is a forty-minute drive to the water’s edge. But Melody and I spend as much time as we can at the beach. I’ve always been drawn to the sound of the waves, like most people, I suppose.

Maggie returns with two margaritas.

“Here.” She hands me one. “Drink up. You’ll feel better.”

Eagerly, I take a sip and immediately love the way the salt along the rim mixes with the sweet taste. “This is strong,” I notice, never quite as grateful for the alcohol as I am now.

“Two shots. I figured you needed it.” She waits until I’ve had a couple sips before speaking again. “This is the first time you’ve been away from Melody overnight. *Ever*,” she adds for emphasis, as though it’s something she can’t possibly relate to while she’s still childless.

“I’ve been away from her before.” I can’t help the defensiveness in my tone because I hate the way her statement makes me sound like a typical helicopter parent.

“When?”

“She’s been to a few slumber parties.”

She offers a knowing look. “It’s not the same, hon.”

I puff out my cheeks. “No. No, I guess it’s not. But that has nothing to do with this. I really *did* see Deo,” I feel this need

to reiterate, in case my best friend thinks I'm teetering on the edge of insanity. "You don't believe it's him."

"I have no doubt that you saw someone who *looks* like Deo. A *lot* like Deo. But everyone's got a few doppelgangers out there, right? I mean, is this really the first time you've seen someone you thought was him?"

I ponder that for a few moments as I drink, not liking the answer that forms in my head.

There were a few times I've run into men who, at first glance, looked like they might be him. But not like this guy. Even now, with the welcome effects of alcohol, I remember his eyes. I can picture them in my head so clearly.

Or is it just my daughter's eyes I'm picturing right now?

My thoughts whip around like a cyclone.

And there was that unmistakable connection I felt pass between us in that split-second that our eyes met.

The last time I felt something this strong, I ended up spending the night with him and waking up beside him feeling like I was exactly where destiny wanted me to be.

And we all know how that story ended, the little voice in my head reminds me.

Oh my God. I'm losing my mind.

"It must be really stressful, being away from Melody," Maggie says at my silence.

"It is."

She takes my hand and the warmth of it soothes me. I've held this hand often in my adult life. Maggie is the sister I always wanted.

“And I can't thank you enough for coming all the way out here for the week,” she continues. “I wish she could have come too. This would have been so much easier for you. Stupid school schedules,” she adds, sounding a little like Melody.

She's right. I probably would be less stressed if I didn't have to leave Mel at home with my parents all week. But even they encouraged me to come here. *“It's been too long since you've had some time to yourself,”* they had said.

It sounded so simple when I booked the plane ticket. Melody would get some time with her grandparents—she's missed bonding with them like she used to when we lived with them. And I'd get some alone time in Hawai'i.

Why does it seem so much more complicated when I'm sitting here on the opposite side of the ocean from my daughter?

“You're right. It is harder without her,” I admit.

“I should have thought about that before I booked it. I should have checked with you,” Maggie laments.

Guilt presses into my chest. “You shouldn't be thinking about anything except you and Ryder right now. And I can't imagine a better place to get married than here.”

She squeezes my hand. “But this is hard on you. I didn't want that. And if you want to go home early, I want you to

know it's okay with me."

"I don't *want* to," I rebut quickly. "But that guy... I just can't risk anything."

"Of course. And I get that. But the chances of it being him are so remote. Maybe your mind is just playing tricks on you."

"You think I *imagined* him?"

"Not at all. But it's like you're always telling me—these military guys look so much alike. Big frame. Short hair. I think it's possible that you saw someone who *looked* like him, and since Melody is on your mind, you saw her eyes in his."

I think back to that moment in the lobby. "But I *felt* something when I saw him," I admit, hating the words that come out of my mouth. "This...I don't know. It's like this weird pull toward him that tells me it's him."

She's silent for a moment and I glance over and see that she's fighting a smile.

"Or," she begins cautiously, "maybe you were actually just *attracted* to a guy for the first time in ages, and since he happens to look a lot like how you remember Deo..."

"...I assumed it's him," I finish for her. I hate—I absolutely hate—that it makes perfect sense to me. "But I've dated a little since Mel was born," I remind her, again on the defense.

"I'm your best friend, Lily. I know how those dates went and how few they were."

Annoyed, I take another long sip of my drink.

“Think about it,” she continues. “You’re away from your daughter for a week for the first time ever. You see a guy you’re attracted to. And your brain immediately whips up a reason for you to hightail it back home.”

I tuck my chin in toward my chest. “So, you think I’m crazy.”

“Absolutely not. I think you’d be crazy if you *weren’t* going through something like this. And *anything* you want to do is okay with me,” she reiterates. “You don’t have to stay if you’re feeling uncomfortable for *any* reason.”

“I’m not...” My voice trails because she’s right. I *am* uncomfortable right now. So uncomfortable and unsettled that it suddenly makes perfect sense that I’d conjure up a reason to fly right back home, even after only a few hours on this island.

I gaze at the sunset in front of me. The sun has already set back home. My mom has tucked my daughter into bed and right now, she’s probably sound asleep, dreaming of the pecan pancakes that I’ll bet Mom promised she’d make for her in the morning.

“She must be on your mind constantly,” Maggie offers sympathetically.

“Yeah. Yeah, she is. I honestly had no idea it would be this hard—being away from her.” I shake my head, trying to draw up the image of that man in my mind again. But now, all I see is my Melody. “God, maybe I *am* going crazy. Maybe it wasn’t Deo at all.”

“How about this? Give it a little time. Sleep in tomorrow. Maybe even skip that helicopter tour we’re doing with some of the other wedding guests in the morning. Maybe you need to just have a day of me-time, you know? Talk to Mel. Facetime with her. Let yourself reset.”

“But I should be with you at all the events this week.”

She slices a hand through the air. “There are only a handful of other guests who even came this week prior to the wedding. I can handle them. I want you to just relax, catch up on some sleep, and talk to your daughter every moment you want. And at the end of the day, if you’re still uncomfortable, you can fly home.”

“You’re the best friend I could ever ask for.”

She grins. “Right back atcha.”

I take a lengthy sip of my drink again, watching the sun melt into the horizon.

A sigh expels from me. “It really wasn’t Deo I saw, was it?”

“You know what I think?” Maggie asks. “I think it *was* Melody’s eyes you saw in his. And you’ll see her dark hair in the lava rock, and her smile in the plumeria flowers that grow on the trees here, and you’ll hear her laughter in the waves. Because she is always on your mind.”

She’s right, I decide as I sip the last of my margarita, set down my glass, and let my eyes flicker shut, listening to the familiar sound of the waves. I could doze off right here with the ocean stretched out in front of me, once again seeing my

daughter in my mind and feeling the presence of my best friend at my side.

Sleep tugs me downward just as Maggie's hand takes mine again.

What a blessing she is. And my last thought is a silent prayer that my daughter will one day find a best friend for herself like I have in Maggie.

CHAPTER 2



- MATT -

Being in the military is like living in a small town. Except you're always moving, and the small town follows you.

It's always baffled me. I can move to the other side of the country, or even be deployed to the other side of the world, yet I'll still see familiar faces.

So I'm used to this feeling I'm having right now as I spot the same woman I saw last night.

This time, she's sitting by herself in the resort's oceanside restaurant, staring out at the waves as she talks to someone on the phone.

I'm certain I know her. I just can't quite pin down from where.

She's pretty non-descript—medium build and brown hair cropped just below her chin. She could be military or a defense contractor. Logic would tell me I worked with her at some point in my career.

But the whispers of a memory I hear in the back of my head when I look at her—of loud music and crowds—don't mesh with the idea of her in a uniform.

I take a glance at the buffet and when I turn toward her again, she's set down her phone in front of her.

I shouldn't intrude. But my curiosity gets the better of me, and I stride toward where she sits.

"Excuse me," I say, and her eyes fling upwards toward me. They widen as soon as her gaze locks onto mine, and all color drains from her face.

Odd. I'm a big guy and have been told I look intimidating enough that no one would want to run into me in a back alley. But in this setting, as I wear a ridiculous Hawaiian shirt that I couldn't resist buying on my last trip here, I can't imagine I look like much of a threat.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you," I say quickly when she looks like she's ready to bolt. "But you look so familiar to me."

Her lips part slightly. But other than that, she's statue-still, staring at me with that classic deer-in-headlights expression.

I cringe. "I just realized that sounds like a pick-up line. But I saw you yesterday when I was checking into the hotel. Are you by chance with the same military wedding that I am?"

There's an uncomfortable silence between us—almost long enough that I'm wondering if she even speaks English.

"What wedding is that?" she finally asks.

“Ryder and—” I stop to note that her expression is finally changing.

“Maggie’s,” she finishes for me. “Yes. I am.”

And again, the silence that returns makes me wonder if I should take a couple steps backward. Instead, I extend my hand.

“I’m Matt D’Amato. I worked with Ryder at the Pentagon for a couple years.”

Her eyes track down to my hand for a beat, as though she isn’t sure what to do with it.

Then she takes it, and the feel of her hand in mine unleashes something in me that I can’t quite name. Familiarity maybe? Attraction or curiosity? No standard description seems to fit.

“Matt.” She repeats my name with a hint of disgust, as if she has some relative or co-worker who is also named *Matt* and the thought of the guy is unwelcome here in paradise.

Strange.

“I’m Lily,” she finally says. “Holt. Lily Holt.”

“Lily,” I find myself repeating.

And the pieces fall into place. The warmth of her skin against mine... the way her name sounds as it passes her lips... and a memory that is suddenly so crystal clear it’s like I’m right back there, dancing to pulsating music in that crowded night club in New York City.

“Lily. Like the flower. It suits you.”

Holy crap.

And suddenly I'm transported back to a time before...
everything.

I hooked up with Lily after meeting her at a club in New York that weekend after I graduated from West Point. A few of us grads had chipped in and gotten a hotel room. Lily and I were the only ones who actually made use of that bed. I didn't see the others until around ten a.m. the next morning.

My breath almost catches at the memory of a night that was good enough to cement itself into my brain for quite a while.

I gave her my phone number. I hadn't expected that she'd call me right away. I had explained that I had six weeks of leave before I had to arrive at Fort Moore for the Basic Officer Leadership Course—BOLC, we call it—and was headed up to Canada with some of my friends for a camping trip.

But—call it hubris or ego—I kind of expected that I'd hear from her when I got back on the grid. She never called though. And I found myself thinking about her rejection way too much in those months that followed... all the way up until I deployed later that year with lieutenant rank on my uniform.

"I *do* know you. I met you in New York," I say.

"Really?" she asks, surprisingly oblivious.

"Yeah. At a club. The Blue..." My voice trails, trying to remember. "The Blue Something. You don't remember?"

"No. I'm so sorry."

I'm suddenly doubting myself. Could that night have been really that forgettable to her? Maybe it's not her. She *does* look different from how I remember her. But nothing so drastic that a ten-year absence wouldn't explain it. "Were you in New York at all? Maybe ten or so years ago?" I ask.

Her lips form a *no*. I'm certain that's what she's about to tell me. But then she surprises me with, "Yes. I went to school there. I'm just so sorry I don't remember you... *Matt*." She tacks on my name with that same measure of distaste I had sensed earlier.

"My ego literally got knocked down at least ten pegs," I say lightly with the intention of making her laugh or at least smile. But I get neither out of her.

"Well, it's a big city. I met a lot of people," she tells me.

Ouch.

"So... what have you been doing for the last decade?" I ask, curious as memories swirl inside of me, seeming to transport me to a time when my life was so much simpler.

She had much longer hair back then. I remember the way it flowed along her shoulders as she danced. And she's dressed so differently—just a t-shirt and shorts which are a sharp contrast to the clingy, scant dress she wore in that club when we met.

There's a measured beat during which she gives me a cold, hard stare.

"Just—the ordinary stuff," she responds.

I'm not really sure what *the ordinary stuff* is, seeing as my last ten years have been anything but ordinary. But I don't volunteer this since she's looking at me like she'd rather have a root canal than a walk down memory lane with a guy she forgot completely.

Taking the hint, I step backward. "Well, it was nice seeing you again. I'll see you at the wedding, I imagine."

"Actually, I'm leaving early. I—uh—just got a call from work and there's a bit of an emergency."

"Wow, that's... terrible," I can't help saying. "Well, I hope you can at least get on that helicopter tour this morning before you go," I suggest. "Should be fun."

"Uh, no. I'm skipping that."

"Me too. I hate helicopters. It's genetic," I joke.

She looks at me as though I just told her I have a third ball. "Genetic?"

"Yeah," I chuckle. "Three generations of my family can't stomach the sight of one."

"Really?" Her face is screwed up in the oddest way when I say it. And somehow, I feel like I'm being insulted by it.

This is normally when I'd tell her that my grandpa and dad wore the Ranger scroll on their uniform the same as I do now. So, to us, the sound of a helicopter usually means we're headed somewhere unpleasant. And who'd want that on vacation?

But she's staring at me with this combination of curiosity and horror, as if I just told her that three generations of my family eat puppies for Thanksgiving dinner.

"Well, I'm gonna get some chow and head down to the beach," I say, grateful to have come up with a plausible excuse to end this deeply unsatisfying conversation. "You, uh, have a safe trip home."

After she nods a goodbye, I make a beeline toward the coffee stand near the water, deciding to skip breakfast altogether because I'd swear that I still feel that woman's gaze boring a hole into the back of my head.

Was she this strange when I met her ten years ago?

Or was I too drunk to notice?

As I wait for the barista to hand me my cup of Kona coffee, my eyes soak up the view. The shoreline at the Plumeria Resort and Spa is mostly rocky—that jagged, hardened lava that reminds me I'm on an ever-changing island. But there's also a small, protected bay where white sand beckons me.

When I got the wedding invitation from Ryder, I didn't really think I'd choose to attend. Even though we shared an office with a few other people for a couple years, it's not like he's one of my closest friends. Besides, growing up broke made me spectacularly practical when it comes to money, even though I'm doing well now.

But I love the Big Island of Hawai'i and couldn't resist.

I've been here twice before, each time with the Army footing the bill because my battalion was training at Pōhakuloa just up the mountain from here.

This place—it's as close to paradise as I've ever found in all my travels in the Army. And God knows I've turned looking for paradise into my personal obsession these past couple years—trying to find that one place I'll want to return to after I put away my uniform for the last time when I plan to retire at twenty years.

I've yet to find it.

I thrust a few dollars into the tip jar and take my coffee from the barista. She's put a mountain of whipped cream on top of my drink even though I didn't ask for it. I'm pondering how I feel about that as I turn to head toward the water.

Rangers don't do whipped cream on their coffee.

But when I take a sip and the taste has me smiling, I decide it's a good way to start the first day of my vacation. After that interaction with Lily, I could use a little extra sweetness to balance the scales.

I shun the more comfortable chairs and plop myself directly onto the sand simply so I can get as close to the water's edge as possible. The rhythm of the waves flowing in and out are almost enough to soften the downward curve of my lips.

Lily. I don't like thinking about that woman on my vacation. And I'm not sure why I even still am. Guys are supposed to bounce back quickly when women reject them.

And all these years later, seeing her again shouldn't make me feel... anything at all, really.

Lord knows enough happened in between now and then that should make the one night I spent with Lily barely register as a memory at all.

But the connection between us felt uncanny. It was probably just this urge inside of me to remember that point when life was simpler, *kinder* than it actually is. To pretend I'm there again, smack dab in the middle of my naïve twenties.

That's probably all it was I felt between us this morning.

Then she opened her mouth and ruined everything.

Get over it, Matt, my inner voice whispers, hating the odd prickle of awareness I felt when I saw her a few moments ago.

The same prickle I'm feeling again right now.

"Hi again," she says, sneaking up behind me.

I whip my head around.

She pauses, gazing down at me, and for a moment, I'm convinced she's going to turn around and bolt away as if she just noticed that I have a quarantine sign taped to my chest.

"I was, uh, just curious about something," she finally continues. "That, um, genetic thing you mentioned..."

I scrunch up my brow. "Genetic thing?"

"Yeah. I, uh, I've never heard of that before. What is it?"

My brain whirls around in some sort of jetlag-fueled confusion. "I'm so sorry, but I just don't know what you're

talking about.”

“You said you don’t like helicopters and that it’s genetic. Is it some kind of motion sickness you get? Like maybe an inner ear problem? Something mechanical?”

Clarity inches toward me at a glacial pace without a full dose of caffeine in my bloodstream yet. Then I remember what I had said to her. “Oh—no, no. I was kidding. It’s a running joke in my family. My dad and grandpa were both in the military like me. So helicopters are like... well, *work* rather than fun, I guess. They make us feel like we should be all kitted up in uniform. So we joke that it’s genetic. Make sense?”

I’d swear I see honest-to-God relief in her features.

“Oh. Yeah.”

I cock my head. “Why the interest? Are you a doctor or geneticist or something?”

“No. Just... curious.”

“Huh. Well, I can blame plenty on bad genes. But the helicopter thing is a completely separate issue,” I say with a chuckle because humor is my go-to in awkward conversations.

From the look on her face, though, I’m starting to feel like my brand of humor is lost to her.

She glances at the sand next to me and surprises me with, “Do you mind if I join you?”

I hesitate. Then I pour about half of my coffee down my throat before I reply, hoping the caffeine will help me come up

with a good excuse to end our conversation because no guy wants to hang out with a woman who apparently finds him forgettable.

Come on, coffee. Help a brother out.

But all I find myself saying is, “Don’t mind at all.”

Damn whipped cream must have diluted its effectiveness.

“So, uh, you were saying?” she asks.

My brow lifts at her question.

“About bad genes,” she reminds me.

Now *I’m* looking at *her* with curiosity. “You really shouldn’t ever take an Army guy literally. Well, unless we’re telling you to duck.”

As before, my joke flies right over her head.

“Oh. It wouldn’t be unheard of if you did—you know, have bad genes,” she barrels on with the laser-sharp focus of a sniper. “Like... I have diabetes in my family.”

“You’re diabetic?”

“No. Just my grandpa. So I’m always on the lookout for that. Do you have that in your family?”

Okay. This is a first for me.

“Uh, nope,” I say uncomfortably. “Just flat feet and nearsightedness,” I finish, hoping that if I throw her a bone, we can move on to a more pleasant topic.

“You’re lucky.” She takes a breath. “And I lost two grandparents to heart disease. I mean, I barely knew them. But

still...”

I wish I could see the look on my perplexed face right now. Someone could make an emoji out of it.

I pull my eyes from her and gaze at the glorious view in front of us. It’s nothing short of breathtaking. It’s the kind of view that... heals, really. And I could use some of that. Hell, it’s half the reason I came here, booking myself a last-minute ticket.

But the present company is killing the vibe. “Yeah, heart disease gets a lot of people.”

I sense her back straighten next to me, and I glance over. Her eyes are lit with interest. “You have heart disease in your family too?”

“Sure. I think everyone has it in there somewhere though, right?”

“Who?”

“Everyone,” I repeat.

“No, I mean, who in your family had it?”

“Oh, uh... my grandpa, I think.” Death and my grandpa’s heart disease. Just the topics I wanted to discuss here in Hawai‘i. “You know, for small talk, I usually go for the weather or sports. Not deadly diseases.” I’m shooting for a jovial tone, but I’ve just crossed the border into feeling irritation.

And gratitude, actually. Because I’m suddenly so damn grateful that this woman never called me all those years ago.

Clearly that connection I felt way-back-when was nothing more than a combination of hormones and a lack of good judgment.

But what I can't explain is this connection I feel *right now*, sitting next to her, at a point in the conversation when I should be literally running from her.

Yet here I am. Strange.

Her face falls. "You're right. I'm not good at small talk anymore, I guess."

Her eyes are distant then. Not quite sad, though. Just distant, as though the years have been hard on her.

Anymore. That word she says does something to me, like a little punch in the gut. It makes me remember who I used to be back when I met her, and how life changed me. And I can't help suddenly feeling sympathy for whatever happened to her in this past decade to change her.

God knows I'm not the person I was in that nightclub ten years ago either.

Aw, shit. Now I feel guilty.

"You know, that could be a good thing," I offer.

"Why do you say that?"

"I lived in DC while I was stationed at the Pentagon. And the social scene there was the fakest I've ever seen. Just a bunch of people asking all the right things and giving all the right answers. It was exhausting." I practically bristle at the memory. "You know what, Lily? You want to talk death and

disease for small talk? Go for it. You do *you*, Lily.” I smile—a little forced, but determined.

When I do, her eyes lock onto my mouth. And if the bulk of this conversation hadn’t been unpleasant, I’d swear she was about to lean in and kiss my lips.

But I’m sure that’s not the case here.

“What?” I ask.

She gives herself a little shake. “Oh—sorry. Your smile. It just reminds me of someone.”

Maybe my smile reminds her of *me*, I wonder, from way-back-when.

But I don’t say it. Because now she’s tacking on, “How about cancer? That’s another big one that runs in families, right?” She looks at me as if she merely asked me whether I caught the latest Mets game or what I think of Ford’s newest electric car.

But the mention of that nefarious C-word is just enough to help me break free from this strange pull she has on me. Because it’s starting to feel like a stranglehold.

“Not in mine.” I glance at my watch and feel rescued by the time I see displayed. Rescued, which seems ironic to me, seeing as where I’m headed this morning.

I toss back the rest of my coffee and wipe an embarrassing amount of whipped cream off my top lip.

“You’re leaving?” she asks.

“Yeah. I have an appointment in Kona,” I stand up.

“An appointment?” She stands too, brushing off the sand from the back of her shorts.

Don't follow me. Please don't follow me.

But she's following me.

“To spend some time with a rescue dog,” I add. “The shelter there lets tourists take their dogs on field trips to help socialize them.”

“The *dogs*? Or the *tourists*?” she deadpans, but there's a glint of amusement in her eyes.

My God. A joke from her? She's capable of humor, after all. “Maybe a little of both.”

“That's a fun thing to do on vacation,” she says.

“You're a dog person?” I ask.

“Ah, now *you're* the one bringing genetics back into the conversation.”

“You think it's genetic?”

“Absolutely,” she says decisively. “My mom is a cat person, and my dad is a dog person.”

“So what does that make you?”

“Confused,” she replies with the first laugh I've heard from her all morning, as slight as it is.

I like the sound of it. It seems to tug me backward in time to that night in New York again. “You're probably like my sister then. She goes both ways. I mean, with dogs and cats, that is,” I add.

“You have a sister?” She stops briefly, her features softening in the strangest way.

“Yeah,” I say. “She loves all animals. Dogs, cats, rabbits, goats. She’s always welcoming someone new into her family, but it’s always furry—much to the dismay of my mom.”

“Why is that?” she asks.

“She’s the stereotypical mom who’s desperate to be a grandma.”

She presses her lips together and is silent for a moment, before saying, “My mom’s the same way. Fixated on being a grandma, I mean.” She glances toward the opposite direction from where I’m headed, telling me we’re about to part ways.

Thank God.

Grateful that this strange situation is about to come to an end, I can’t resist suggesting, “Well, if you want to make her a grandma, maybe you should start talking to men who are less forgettable than I am.”

Her eyes on me are almost... searching for something.

“Yeah,” she breathes out, almost in a whisper, then adds, “I, uh, you—you *do* actually remind me of someone. But your name is wrong,” she says, then pauses, seeming to mull something over before adding, “His name was Deo.”

The name makes my eyebrows hike up an inch. “Deo?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you mean, *Teo*?”

She only cocks her head in reply.

I burst out laughing. “That’s me. I used *Teo* when I was trying to impress women.”

“You used a fake name?”

“No, that *is* my name. Mateo. My family always called me Matt, but I thought Teo sounded cooler. You know how it is when you’re younger.” I shrug. “I gave it up after Ranger School. I figured if being a Ranger wasn’t enough to impress people, a cool name wasn’t going to matter.” I catch my mood lifting. “Well, my ego is a lot less bruised now. Glad this came up.”

I feel some measure of relief... until I notice that she’s staring at me with that same blank face that kicked off my morning earlier.

I look at my watch again, the little voice in my head telling me to end this on a high note. “I better run, or I’ll be late. It was nice seeing you again. You have a safe trip home today.” I reach out my hand.

And when she takes it, that strange feeling returns. It’s like a heightened awareness passes through me.

It’s that same feeling you get when you can’t find your keys or your wallet or your phone—like there’s an important piece of you somewhere and you don’t know where it is.

God, that’s weird. Maybe I just need another coffee.

“Thanks,” she says and bolts away from me like I just whipped out a canister of pepper spray.

An appropriate end, I suppose, to the strangest interaction of my life.

CHAPTER 3



~ LILY ~

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, allow me to defend myself.

I can't help thinking it as I sit in my hotel room, listening to the sleep-inducing music coming from my phone while I wait on hold with the front desk.

After all, at any moment, Maggie will return from that helicopter tour, and I'm going to have to explain my rationale for voluntarily spending my morning with the man I told her I wanted to avoid.

But, he had me at "genetic."

That one simple word tossed into some sentence about helicopters unleashed a myriad of memories of time spent in doctor's offices with my daughter and the form I'd dread the most:

The family history questionnaire.

"Please check off below any health conditions experienced by family members of your child," it would predictably read at the top, as though to remind me that no matter how thoroughly

I filled out the form, I could only offer my daughter fifty percent of the picture.

It always made me feel... lacking somehow. As if it wasn't bad enough that I couldn't give her a father. I couldn't even give her a thorough family history.

So that one word—*genetic*—had my eyes lighting with opportunity.

I cement into my memory every nugget of information he offered me this morning—from flat feet to his grandpa's heart disease.

That was the goal.

I should feel like a success. But instead, I feel confused.

For ten years, I've been thinking of him as the asshole who knocked me up and gave me a fake number.

I don't want to think of him as the guy who's taking time out of his vacation to take a rescue dog on a field trip.

I don't want to think of how his mother always wanted a grandchild... or about his sister—my daughter's *aunt*—and how much stronger my child's support system might be if she had a loving aunt in her life the same way she has a godmother in Maggie.

And I definitely don't like thinking that I misjudged him about giving me a fake name. I had *loved* the way it lined up with everything else I believed about him.

“Thank you for holding.” The voice on the phone snaps me out of my inner dialogue. “I checked with my manager, and

she said it would be fine for you to leave early.”

“I won’t get charged for the nights I’m not here?”

“You won’t. It’s whale watching season. We’ll probably be able to fill the room with someone else.”

“*Thank* you,” I breathe out with vigor, imagining that I must be the only person who has wanted to leave paradise *early*. “I really appreciate it.”

After I hang up, I glance down at the text that just came in from Maggie telling me she’s back from the helicopter tour.

“*Can you meet me in the hotel restaurant in ten minutes?*” I tap in with some confidence, knowing that Deo—or Teo or Matt or whatever the hell he calls himself—is off with a rescue dog at least for a while.

I’m hungry, and this will probably be the last food I get that doesn’t come from an airport until I get home.

Grasping the handle of my packed suitcase, I give the room a final once-over to make sure I didn’t leave anything behind before heading out the door for the last time.

When I step out, the open-air hallways allow me to listen to the ocean waves in the distance and the faint sound of a slack key guitar playing somewhere.

I feel sad that I have to leave at a time when I should only feel the urgency of it.

But this is such a beautiful place. I loved the idea of being able to come here on my own for a while—to be able to experience something new, something different from the

carpool lines and rush to and from work. Different from the daily grind of fixing meals and grocery shopping and wondering at what age us moms get to stop using that ridiculous term, “playdate.”

As the hostess seats me at a table for two, the sweeping ocean stretches out in front of me—a glorious assault of turquoise and indigo and a million other shades of blue that I’d swear only exist here.

Then I hear birds that I’ve never heard before, their high-pitched trills blending with several other distinct songs, almost hypnotic in nature.

“What kind of birds are those?” I ask the hostess even though she’s already at least two steps away from me.

She turns and looks around the restaurant. “Birds?”

“The ones I hear.”

She listens for a moment and then finally answers, “I have no idea.”

As I watch her head back toward the front of the restaurant, I listen, enjoying the way the birdsong blends so beautifully with the sounds of the waves and the whisper of the palm fronds fluttering in the breeze—like the way various voices come together in a *libretto* in an opera.

Stay, their song seems to whisper to me. I feel this tug inside of me. Right now, with all this beauty around me, filling my senses, I don’t want to leave—to miss my best friend’s wedding—all to avoid this man I’ve detested for so long.

This man who still has some kind of power over me, just like he did ten years ago. The entire time we were sitting on the beach together, the urge to nestle into the crook of his shoulder as I took in the view was almost instinctive.

And wouldn't it have been interesting if I had? "*So, tell me more about your grandpa's heart disease, and while you do, do you mind a quick snuggle?*" I laugh a little at the scene I draw up in my mind.

"Lily!"

Maggie's voice tugs my eyes away from the view.

"Maggie!" I breathe out in relief when I see her walking toward me. I couldn't be happier to see my best friend right now.

"Hey!" Her face is bright until she glances at the suitcase alongside our table. "Oh, damn. You're leaving?"

"I have to. I ran into him this morning, Maggie."

"What?" she gasps as she sits across from me. "And it's really him? Son of a..."

"Yeah. And he *is* here for your wedding. Matt..." I pause for a moment, remembering. "...D'Amato, he said his name was."

"*Matt?*" Her jaw gapes for a moment. "Matt is *Deo?*"

"No. I mean, yes, it's the same guy. But his full name is Mateo. He used to go by Teo." I shrug. "We were in a loud nightclub when we met way back then. I must have heard him wrong."

“Mateo? I always figured Matt was short for Matthew. Did he recognize you?”

“Yes.”

She presses a hand to her chest. “Oh my God. What happened?”

“Well, at first, I played it like I didn’t remember him. I didn’t want him to suspect that I’ve been thinking about him at all, you know? But then at the end, I was just too curious about the name. That’s when I found out.”

She reaches across the table and takes my hand. “That had to be so hard. I’m sorry that I’m the one who made this happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“I let Ryder invite him. If I had any idea, I never—”

“That’s not your fault. But I can’t risk anything more. I’ve already checked out of the hotel, and I’m going to fly standby on the first flight home that I can get.”

“Did you tell Melody or your mom you’re headed home yet?”

“No. I’ll call them when I get there. They’ll ask questions and honestly, I’m not sure how I’m going to answer them yet.”

She crosses her arms and raises a single eyebrow. “This isn’t some elaborate scheme to get out of singing during my wedding ceremony, is it? Because I told you I’m fine with you not doing that.”

“Of course not,” I deny.

“I’m kidding. I’m totally kidding,” she assures me. “Just... trying to lighten the mood.”

“It’s not working,” I grumble.

“Tell me about it. I can’t believe I’m not going to have my best friend with me on my wedding day.”

“I’m sorry.”

She reaches out and squeezes my hand again. “It’s not your fault. But, well, are you really sure you don’t want to tell him?”

“Tell the guy who gave me a fake number that he has a perfect, precious daughter he sure as hell doesn’t deserve? Hell no, Maggie.”

“It’s just that—it doesn’t sound like him. He’s probably changed.”

I hate that I’ve been wondering that ever since our conversation on the beach this morning. “I really *might* tell him. One day. Maybe even soon. But this is something that would affect my daughter’s life. I need to—step away. Get some clarity, you know? I can’t do something on an impulse that will affect my daughter.”

“You’re right. And Ryder has his contact information. So when you’re ready to tell him—”

“*If*,” I feel the need to interject.

“Of course. *If*. But if you decide to, it’s not like you won’t be able to find him now.” She turns her gaze to the water and bites her bottom lip for a moment, then looks back at me. “But

I can't help thinking that maybe if you just stayed a day or two longer to get to know him—”

I cut her off. “I can't. It's—just draining, really. Being around him.”

“Draining? Was he rude to you or something? If he was, I'll—”

“No,” I cut her off quickly, hating that doing so means I'm coming to his defense. But I can't help it. He was so patient with me as I grilled him about genetics. I kept waiting for him to walk away or at least tell me to mind my own business. But he just took it. And then, when he told me to be myself—to not ever feel like I had to ask the right questions or say the right things, I *hated* that my first thought was how good the same advice would be for my daughter.

Our daughter.

Our daughter who's just hit that age where she feels the pressure to always say or do the right thing to impress the other kids around her.

“He was actually nice. He just...” My voice trails, unable to come up with the right words to explain what his presence does to me.

Or rather, not liking the words that *do* explain it.

“Oh my God. You're still attracted to him.” Her eyes are saucer-sized.

“No! I mean...” My shoulders slump. “He's gorgeous. I'll give you that. And anyone would be, right? Attracted to him, I mean?”

She grimaces. “I don’t know. If he knocked me up and gave *me* a fake number, I’m not really sure I’d feel attraction.”

I press my hand to my forehead. “I know, right? What’s the matter with me? I look at him, and I—I feel something. And it should be utter complete hatred. But it’s not. It’s like... *ugh*.”

“It’s like how it felt when you met him ten years ago.”

I wish I had the energy to deny it. “How effed up is that, Maggie? It’s like my brain keeps reminding me of what he did to me, but my heart is right back there in New York City again, with all the stupid feels.”

Her expression warms. “Maybe that attraction is just telling you to stay for another day or two. Get to know him better. Find out if he might actually be a good influence on Melody. Ryder’s pretty picky about his friends, Lily.”

“I love Ryder for how well he treats you, Maggie. But I’m not ready to entrust my daughter’s future to your fiancé’s judgement when it comes to friends. And honestly, I’m not ready to entrust my daughter’s future to *my* judgement of this guy either. The pull he has on me—this attraction or whatever you want to call it...”

“It’s messing with your brain?”

“Completely. And if I do decide to tell him, I need to do it with a clear head. Besides, if I stick around any longer, there’s too big of a chance that someone will say something that will help him figure it all out.”

“I can tell Ryder to keep quiet about Melody when he’s around Matt.”

“But your family knows Mel,” I remind her. “They might slip up and mention to him that I have a ten-year-old back home.”

“They’re not arriving until later this week. I really don’t think there is too much risk if you just stayed a day or—”

“Hey, guys!”

Freya’s voice as she approaches us has my spine straightening. Maggie’s eyes widen before she pastes a grin on her face and looks over her shoulder.

“Hey!” We greet her in unison.

Freya glances to my side. “Why the suitcase?”

“Something came up with work and I have to get home,” I tell her quickly.

“No way! That’s terrible news,” Freya replies. “You can’t even stay for our girls’ night tonight at the lū’au?”

“No. I’m flying standby, so I need to get to the airport early.”

“Bummer. I barely even got the time to get to know you.”

Maggie laughs. “More like, you didn’t have the time to set her up with someone,” she says pointedly to Freya, then adding to me, “Matchmaking is kind of Freya’s thing.”

Freya plants a fist at her waist. “I set you up with your future husband. Where’s the gratitude?” She giggles, but then her face droops. “Though I’m having a hard time doing my matchmaking at your wedding so far. Everyone who’s shown up is married or taken. Well, except you,” she points out,

looking at me, “and Matt. Have you met him yet?” she asks me.

“Uh...”

Then she shakes her head, cutting me off. “Well, don’t bother. Because I think destiny already has someone else in mind for him.”

My breath catches uncomfortably and I’m not even sure why. I watch Maggie’s brow lift.

“What do you mean?” she asks with an air of feigned innocence.

“Oh, Matt didn’t tell you? It’s crazy. Mason and I were in line with him when we were checking in last night. And Matt saw someone from his past.”

“Probably just someone he used to work with,” Maggie says flippantly, slicing her hand through the air. “Happens all the time in the military.”

“I know. But this—was different. The look on his face...” Her voice trails. “It was intense. There was something there, I’m telling you. I’m betting there’s a classic second chance romance blossoming right here in paradise—at least *I’m* hoping for that.” Her eyes flash.

“Second chance romance?” I ask, mildly perplexed.

“You know, guy meets girl. Guy loses track of girl. Destiny brings them back together and the flame reignites.” She beams at us as though this is her favorite topic.

Maggie sighs. “Freya’s a romance novelist. So watch what you say to her or you’ll end up in her next book.”

I literally cringe at the thought.

Freya lifts her hands. “You invited me. You knew the risks. And you also know that I don’t mess with destiny. So Matt’s off-limits for me... for now.” Her gaze shifts to me, and she frowns a little. “Too bad, actually. You would have looked cute with him, Lily.” She gives a little shake, seeming to pull herself back to reality. “Well, anyway, I’m really sorry to see you go.”

“Thanks. It was nice meeting you, Freya.” I force a smile.

“Same. Hey, Maggie—I might be a little late tonight. Is that okay? Mason signed us up for a snorkeling trip this afternoon. We’re supposed to be back in time, but just in case, I thought I’d let you know.”

“No worries. We’ll hold your seat for you.”

“Kay. Thanks. See you then. And keep in touch, Lily,” she directs to me. “I might still have a chance to work my matchmaking magic on you,” she adds.

“I will.”

I won’t.

There’s a measurable beat of silence after Freya leaves the restaurant as we both stare at the empty space where she once stood. My eyes eventually drag over to Maggie.

“You’re right,” she says ominously. “If you don’t want Matt to figure anything out, you better get out of here quickly.”

Freya's trouble. And I'll make sure Ryder and my family don't mention Melody to Matt or *anyone*."

"I hate to say I told you so, but—"

She cuts me off with, "You told me so. Yeah, you definitely told me so."

CHAPTER 4



- MATT -

Glancing at the sandals peeking out from between two oversized potted tropical plants, I decide right now that Lily would have made a hell of a sharpshooter. Because she's got a talent for finding good camouflage.

In fact, if it wasn't for this weird sensation that I always seem to get when I'm near her, I probably wouldn't have even noticed her.

"Lily?" I glance down at her suitcase. "You headed to the airport?"

"Oh, God," she says after glancing up from her phone with a start. "You scared me. Sorry. Um, yeah. I was just trying to get an Uber. It's a lot harder here than it is back home."

"Yeah, everything's on island time here," I say contentedly because I like the vibe.

Common sense tells me to step away. Our last conversation was strange enough. But I hate this feeling I get when I'm around her, this whisper in my head telling me that

there's something left undone between us. I have enough unresolved issues. I have no need to add to them. So I hear myself asking, "You need a ride? I'm heading down to Kona anyway."

"Oh, no thanks. Maggie already offered. But she's got some errands to run and then a girls' night planned at the lū'au. I'm fine with an Uber," she finishes, glancing at the app that's showing on her phone and then back up to me again. "I don't need to be at the airport until—" She pales mid-sentence as her eyes track just over my shoulder...

...and then she crouches down slightly at the sight of Freya and Mason heading across the lobby.

I suddenly can guess why she's hiding in the plants. "Is Freya trying to set you up with someone? Ryder warned me about her."

She looks at me with relief in her eyes. "Actually, I *am* trying to avoid her."

"Maybe you should take that ride with me, after all?"

"Which way is your car?"

I start to point. "That—" *-way*, I finish in my head because she's already grabbed her suitcase and is a few strides away from me.

Damn. Freya must really be a relentless matchmaker. When I was warned about her, I immediately assumed she'd target me. Everyone I know tries to set me up with some neighbor's cousin's former boss or best friend's aunt's dogwalker. And since I lost Kirsten, their efforts have tripled

as though the only way to heal the ache of a lost love is by finding a new one.

FYI, it doesn't work that way. At least not for me.

But oddly, even though I've bumped into Freya a few times today since meeting her and Mason in the line yesterday at check-in, she hasn't tried anything.

I'm not sure if I should be relieved or insulted.

"You've got a hell of a pace," I say when I catch up to Lily. "You must still live in New York City."

"No," she answers, glancing past me and to where Freya and her husband were.

"Where did you end up?"

"The West Coast," she says, and I find the vague answer strange as hell. But considering our last conversation, I guess I shouldn't be surprised by it.

"Ah. Cool. That's a... good coast," I finish awkwardly, not really knowing how else to respond. Most people will respond with their city or at least their state, which can inspire a little more small talk. But her answer leaves me without an appropriate follow-up. "*Ah, the West Coast. Great tectonic plate you've got there*" sounds as awkward as her answer to me did.

Her conversational skills are as lacking now as they were this morning. I hope to God we don't have to talk more about Grandpa's heart disease or it will be a long ride to the airport.

“This is me here,” I say when we arrive at my Jeep. As I put her suitcase into the back, her eyebrows rise at the sight of some of my dive gear.

“Are you going diving later?” she asks.

“Yeah. I’m doing a manta ray dive down in Kona after the sun sets.”

“A manta ray dive?”

“Yep. They put lights under the water, and it attracts the plankton that manta rays eat. It’s amazing.”

“You’ve got a lot of time until the sun sets,” she says before I shut her door for her.

I climb in next to her. “I like it down in Kona. It’s—more *real* than it is up here with all the resorts. So you didn’t rent a car?” I ask.

“No. I’m trying to do this on a budget.”

I nod with a measure of approval even though I’d never recommend to anyone skipping a car rental in Hawai‘i. This is one of those places where you really need to get away from the resort and explore.

Just the same, I tell her, “I can relate to that. In my twenties, I drove a beater, owned a burner phone, and never had cable TV.” I rattle off the line like I say it plenty. Because, well, I do. I’m pretty proud of how hard I saved and invested back then because it put me in a good place right now.

“Why’s that?”

I shrug. “My parents were always living paycheck to paycheck. It was like watching them on a hamster wheel—always working, never getting anywhere.”

“I can relate to the hamster wheel.” Her voice sounds distant as I back the car out of my space and head toward the road.

“Yeah. So I was pretty practical.”

“That’s not the impression I got ten years ago,” she responds.

I laugh, lifting my hands briefly from the steering wheel in surrender as we hit an open stretch of road. “Well, everyone tries to be someone else when they’re in a New York City nightclub, right?”

I glance over and swear I can feel a chill rolling off of her suddenly. It’s like my off-the-cuff comment turned her into the Ice Queen. “And that weekend was kind of an anomaly for me anyway,” I feel the need to add.

“Why’s that?”

I flick on my turn signal and turn south on the Queen K highway toward the airport. “I had just graduated from West Point so I was in celebration mode.”

“You had just graduated? I don’t remember you saying that back then.”

“I probably didn’t. I didn’t like people asking me why I was a couple years older than the rest of my classmates.”

Her eyes on me are curious. “Why would you be sensitive about that?”

“I enlisted in the Army right out of high school, same as my dad and grandpa did. But then a commander found out how well I did in school and suggested I apply to West Point.”

“Good for you. You should have been *proud* of being older than the others then. Not sensitive,” she counters.

“Thanks.” Her tone is warmer now, less Arctic Circle. “And you’re right. But there’s... I don’t know... conflict sometimes that comes from starting off as enlisted. Especially when I was younger. New officers—they’re famously arrogant. And some of them think that if a guy started off as enlisted, then they can pull rank on you, even though you might be an officer yourself now. You know?”

“That’s pretty immature.”

“Hey—the Army can train a lot of things out of guys at West Point. But immaturity isn’t always one of them.” I see her look at her watch. “What time is your flight?” I ask.

“Seven. At least, that’s the one I’m hoping to get on.”

“Nineteen hundred hours?” My face scrunches up. “That’s over six hours from now.”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you want to get there so early?”

“Well, I’m flying standby, so they said I’d be smart to get to the airport a few hours before their first flight to LAX.”

“Oh. You live in L.A.?”

“Uh, yeah.” She almost looks chagrined as she says it, as if she hadn’t intended to let that slip.

Odd. But very little *isn’t* odd about her. I’ve never known someone to easily divulge that diabetes and heart disease run in her family, but then clam up when it comes to sharing where she lives.

“Six hours early is a little overzealous, don’t you think?”

“I had to check out of my room at eleven anyway and was just hanging around the hotel. And then, well...”

Realization occurs to me. “You decided it was easier to sit in an airport than to have to listen to Freya tell you about some guy she wants you to meet. Wow. Mason should really rein her in a bit.”

“She means well,” she says diplomatically.

“Well, I sure as hell wouldn’t let her cut off my time in Hawai‘i. You can have a ton of fun here in a few hours. You know—” I cut myself off momentarily, questioning the sanity of what I’m about to ask her. But I can’t resist. Sharing this island with a newcomer is almost a reflex to me. “You’re more than welcome to tag along with me. I was just going to pick up Bonnie again and then head to the Ali‘i Gardens Marketplace for a few hours before my dive. Buy a few souvenirs for my sister and parents. It’s not far from the airport. I could still get you back in time.”

“Bonnie?”

“The dog I took out this morning from the animal shelter,” I specify.

“That’s—really kind of you,” she says.

“Taking Bonnie out again or letting you tag along?”

“Both actually. But—” She hesitates. “I really don’t mind hanging around the airport. Thank you, though.”

I suppose her answer shouldn’t surprise me. After all, ten years ago she didn’t call me. She didn’t want to extend her time with me back then either.

“You sure? She’s a great dog. And you’d at least get a little local flavor before you had to leave.”

“No. Thanks though.” She shifts in her seat. “Do you think they’d let you adopt?”

“Who? Bonnie?”

“Well, I’m not talking about the manta rays,” she replies with humor in her tone.

“They do allow off-island adoptions. But I can’t.” I have to force those last three words from me. “I deploy too often.” My heart literally feels a tug. Because I wish I could. I think of the past couple years and how much I would have benefitted from having the support of a dog to sift through all that was going through my head.

All that *still* is going through my head, actually.

“What kind is she?”

“She was a stray, so who knows? But they think a mix of greyhound and husky.”

She sputters. “Well, *there’s* a mix I’ve never seen.”

I smile. “Pull up my photos if you want to see her.” I nod toward my phone which rests in the cup holder.

She takes my phone as I had suggested and starts looking at the photos I took of Bonnie this morning. “She’s adorable.”

“Yeah. Helluva puller though. I think that might be standing in the way of getting her a home. So we worked on our leash skills at a state park this morning. I figured since I was headed to Kona tonight again for the dive, a few more hours on a leash might help.”

“How long has she been in the shelter?”

“Six months.”

Her brow furrows. “No wonder she pulls so hard on a leash. I’d be anxious to get out too, if I lived in a shelter for six months.”

I grin, liking that she gets it. If a person likes shelter dogs, I will excuse poor conversation skills any day of the week. I glance her way just in time to see that she’s slid just past the dog photos on my phone and is looking at a picture of my parents.

After a beat, she says in a rush of breath, “Sorry. I swiped too far.” She sets down my phone so quickly, you’d think she just found naked photos of some past ex.

“That’s okay. Those are my folks in the photo. They met me in Seattle during my layover.”

“How nice of them. Do they live there?”

“Nope. Oregon. So I wasn’t expecting it. Drove three hours just to have coffee with me.”

Almost cautiously, she reaches for the phone again. “You have your mom’s eyes. And... your dad’s smile.” Her tone is almost wistful as she says it.

“Do I?” My eyes briefly flit over from the road to the phone in her hand.

“Yeah. They look like nice people.”

“They are.”

Just as the airport comes into sight, a rainbow appears.

I hear her gasp slightly at the sight of it. It’s perfect—the kind that would make even a naysayer want to search for a pot of gold at the end of it. “I’m not sure if that’s a sign that you’re supposed to *stay* in Hawai‘i or *leave*,” I say with a chuckle, even though I don’t believe in signs.

“I don’t believe in signs,” she says, surprising me by uttering the same words that were scrolling through my head.

“Me neither,” I agree, and somehow her statement makes me remember more about that night we spent together so long ago. Not just the sex part of it, because honestly, when I was a new officer in my early twenties, sex was available enough for me that it was pretty much copy-and-paste. But I remember how much we seemed to have in common.

“This was really nice of you,” she says as I flick on my turn signal.

“It was on my way, like I said.”

I note a curious expression on her face. Her eyes are fixed on my phone where the photo of my parents still stares back at us. There's this look in her eyes—confusion maybe? It makes me think of all I don't know about her. All the years and experiences that have shaped her these past ten years since we first met.

Because, for better or for worse, these years have shaped the hell out of me.

“Do you want me to park so I can help you get your luggage checked?” I offer.

“No. I have to keep it with me since I'm flying standby. You can just... drop me off.” She sounds strangely regretful.

“Okay, there's a drop-off lane where I can—”

“Wait.” She cuts me off. “Maybe... you said you were buying some souvenirs somewhere. And uh, that I could tag along?” She finishes it like a question.

“Yeah.”

“Is that offer still on the table?”

“Of course.”

She's silent at my response and with the turn-off approaching, it's make-or-break time.

“So you want to come?”

“I'd...” She pauses again. “I'd really like to. If you're sure.”

I start a U-turn. And I smile. I'm not sure why, but I do.

CHAPTER 5



~ LILY ~

Against my better judgement, I've now found myself watching a huge, lanky dog peeking her furry head between the front seats and licking Matt's neck as though her best friend has just bailed her out of jail.

"Ready to go, girl?" he asks her.

Her entire body wags in reply, not just her tail.

"Then let's go have some fun!" he says, putting the car in reverse to pull out of his parking space.

I'm not sure who is more adorable in this moment—the dog or Matt.

How did I find myself here, feeling an undeniable warmth in my heart for the same man who knocked me up and gave me a fake phone number?

I can't claim that the idea of waiting in an airport for hours for a plane intimidated me. I'm a mom. Half my life I'm sitting around, waiting. Waiting for the carpool line to start moving. Waiting for dance class or soccer practice or band

rehearsal to end. Waiting for our name to be called at the doctor's office.

Waiting—that's just what moms do.

In fact, if I'm really honest with myself, I had even *liked* the idea of waiting in the airport for a while. There, I could find sanctuary. There, I wouldn't have to worry about bumping into anyone with the wedding. I could just sit and calmly know that in a matter of hours a plane would rescue me from this convoluted situation I've found myself in. I had even been looking forward to it.

If Freya hadn't unintentionally forced me into the Jeep with Matt, right now I'd be blissfully counting down the minutes to when I could feel the comfort of my daughter's embrace—which I've heard I won't be able to enjoy as often now that she's in her tween years.

I need to get *away* from Matt. To take a breath and figure out what to do.

But then I saw that damn photo of his parents.

And they looked... so nice. So much like my daughter too. So much that in that instant, the urge to learn more about them was pure instinct.

"Maybe your parents could adopt Bonnie?" I suggest, hoping to steer the conversation.

"My parents?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think they'd want a dog right now."

“Why not?”

“They’re approaching retirement age. They keep saying that they’re going to do some more traveling then, since neither of their kids have given them grandchildren to spoil,” he adds with a snicker.

Yikes. I didn’t mean to pull the conversation in this direction.

“Do they like to travel?” I ask.

“I don’t think they even know. I mean, our idea of a vacation was heading to my grandparents’ house a few hours away. How about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Do you like traveling?”

“I guess. It’s been a while since I did much traveling. This is the first real vacation I’ve had in a long time.”

“With *your* job,” he says, “I guess I can understand that.”

“My job?” I don’t even recall telling him what my job is.

“I mean, it must be pretty brutal if it’s pulling you away from Hawai‘i.”

“Oh—yeah.”

“What is it you do?”

“I…” My voice trails. I don’t want to be talking about myself. My blood pressure is still ten points too high from when I let it slip about how I live in Los Angeles.

“You don’t have to tell me. I know some people like to keep their work to themselves.” He glances over and then his grin slides upwards as he adds, “I’ll just assume you’re a CIA operative or something like that.”

A laugh escapes me. “It’s nothing as interesting as that. I actually work in the practical effects industry,” I decide to divulge because silence might only increase his curiosity.

And I definitely don’t want that. Besides, there are plenty of practical effects companies in Los Angeles.

“Practical effects?”

“Yeah. It’s a type of special effects. But actual physical things rather than CGI. You know, like when an actor playing a surgeon has to slice into a beating heart or you see a head explode? That’s the kind of stuff we build.”

“That’s got to be the coolest job I’ve ever heard of.”

I snort a little. “I don’t know about that.”

He taps a hand on the steering wheel lightly as though recalling something. “You know, I think I remember you saying back when we met how you had majored in something artsy like that.”

“Uh, not that kind of art. And I’m just the office manager. I don’t really create anything except spreadsheets and purchase orders.”

“Oh. What kind of art *did* you major in?”

“Opera. I went to Julliard.”

He snaps his fingers and points at nothing in particular. “Julliard. That’s right. I knew it was something impressive like that. And you work in practical effects now?” He cocks his head. “Do they have heads exploding in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* or something?”

My eyes widen as I gaze at him. “Are you a fan of opera?”

He laughs. “No. Just a fan of Bugs Bunny. You know—the old classic cartoons? That’s the opera he and Elmer Fudd sang.”

I feel myself smile. I love his honesty. *Huh*. I wonder when he gained that characteristic because he sure as hell didn’t have it ten years ago.

“I never saw that one,” I admit, trying to muster up some of that old resentment. But it’s so damn hard, sitting in a Jeep with him and a rescue dog, talking about Bugs Bunny.

As we drive a narrow road marked with signs that read “tsunami evacuation route” and we eventually turn into an open-air market filled with food trucks, Hawaiian shirts, and every souvenir imaginable, he tells me about how when he was younger and home sick from school, he’d always watch old cartoons—Bugs Bunny and Road Runner. How afterward, he’d look up things like “*What opera was Bugs Bunny singing?*” or “*Is the Acme Corporation in Road Runner real?*”

It makes me think of Melody’s curiosity... always asking why and how and when. I’ve never known a child as curious as my daughter. She certainly didn’t get it from me.

Because she got it from *him*.

“What do you think?” he asks, holding up a Magnum PI-style Hawaiian shirt.

Half stooped over to pet Bonnie, I cringe a little unintentionally when I look upward. “Well, it’s certainly bright.”

“Yeah. That’s the way my dad likes it. Bright. Loud. The kind of shirt that would embarrass the hell out of his teenage son.”

My hand stills at his words, and immediately, Bonnie moves to press her wet nose against my palm as if to tell me to keep petting her. “Your dad has a teenage son?” I ask, immediately picturing a young uncle in my child’s life.

He chuckles. “No. I’m talking about me—as a kid. My dad is the one who’d sit on the sidelines of every baseball game yelling at the coach, ‘Put my son in the game!’”

“Ahh. Your dad is *that* guy.” I’ve seen dads like that when Mel was taking a stab at soccer last year. But I don’t share *that* with him.

“Yep. That’s my Pop.” He pays the man for the brightly colored Hawaiian shirt, and we walk to the next vendor’s booth filled with dresses and scarves. “So, what made you give up singing?” he asks out of the blue.

“Oh, no one ever really gives up singing. Not so long as there are showers,” I joke.

“I mean professionally. Opera. Like you studied at Julliard.”

I shrug. “You take the job you get. Not the job you want, right? And opera is a tough business. You have to give one hundred percent to it.”

“And you couldn’t give one hundred percent?”

“No,” I say, my tone guarded as a little trickle of anger seethes inside of me.

Yes. This is *exactly* what I need right now to counteract the effects of his charm and good looks. I need to remind myself of all the dreams I had to give up because I found myself pregnant and raising a child on my own, all because he made himself unreachable.

Bastard.

“I get that,” he replies, his tone thick with meaning. “When we’re young, the world seems full of endless possibilities, doesn’t it? Then shit gets real.”

Yep. Shit sure got real, I can’t help thinking.

I take a deep breath, all the years of pent-up anger seeming to give me strength to resist this magnetic pull I feel toward him.

I’m not here to become best buds with the guy who knocked me up—even if he *does* have incredible taste in dogs, I’m reminded when Bonnie thumps her tail against me as she wanders a few steps ahead of us to sniff something curious.

I’m here only because I saw that photo of his parents and want the kind of information about his family that Google simply can’t provide.

I glance his way as he takes a dress off a display and force a joking tone as I ask, “Is that for your dad too? Because if he wore that, I’m thinking he might totally embarrass your teenage self.”

He laughs in response. “No. For my mom. She wanted me to pick up a mu‘umu‘u for her.”

“A mu‘umu‘u?”

“That’s what they call this type of dress. They’re really popular here. Though I personally can’t picture her wearing this as she picks up groceries. There are just about six or seven days in Oregon when the weather is right for a dress like this.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. “What’s she like?”

“Mom? Oh, typical mom, I guess. Loves you so much that it gets her in trouble sometimes. Forgets I’m a grown man. You know the deal. Isn’t your mom the same way?”

“Yeah. Actually, she is.”

As Matt helps the woman fit the massive dress into a too-small bag after he pays for it, I take Bonnie’s leash from him, and feel the warmth of her leaning against my leg as though to lay claim to her human.

Mine, her body language seems to say. *You’re mine now.*

“What about your sister?” I ask, trying to stay on task and fight this urge to find a carryon bag big enough to smuggle a fifty-pound mutt.

“Yeah, I’m not really sure what to get her. I think the only thing she’d want me to bring home from Hawai‘i for her is

Bonnie.”

“No, I mean, what’s your sister like? And don’t say she’s typical like you did with your mom. Because I don’t have a sister, so I don’t know what typical is.”

“Ah. Only child?”

“Yep. Unless my dad’s got some unknown spawn lurking somewhere on this planet.” I pale, realizing what I just said. Definitely not the appropriate joke right now.

“Well, if I were younger, I’d probably tell you that you were lucky to be an only child. She’s older and was merciless when I was a kid. But I guess she’s kind of grown on me.”

He smiles, and I swear it takes my breath away. This time, not from how much it reminds me of my daughter. Instead, I’m remembering the first time I saw it in New York, and how it made liquid heat flow through my bloodstream. How the act of simply looking at this man seemed to set my world to rights back then, as if I’d been teetering on a tightrope stretched between two skyscrapers and suddenly, he had lifted me up and set me down on solid ground.

It’s stunning what his smile did to me back then.

And now.

“What about your family?” he asks me suddenly.

“My family?” I say, practically sounding defensive. I don’t want to talk about my family. It’s too dangerous.

But then he surprises me by tacking on, “Yeah. Seen anything that they might like here?” he asks as he reaches for

Bonnie's leash.

“You mean other than Bonnie?”

Recollection lights his eyes. “That's right. You said your dad is a dog person.”

And my daughter, I fight the need to add. She's wanted a dog for so long. But one mouth is all I can feed right now.

I swear to God, I'm going to walk away from this experience with whiplash—one minute letting myself feel all the warm fuzzies that come from being around a guy who looks like *him* and volunteers with rescue dogs in his free time. And then the next minute, I'm snapped back to that place of anger and resentment—feelings that ironically are so much more comfortable for me when I look at Matt.

We move along to another booth filled with leis. They're made with fake flowers, but so much nicer than the cheap bright pink plastic leis that I see online.

I reach out to touch one. It's so realistic—and boasts the soft pink color that's my daughter's favorite. Almost a perfect match to the color she picked when we decided to paint her room last summer. She'd wanted a more mature color now that she was a tween, she had told me.

My daughter chose the exact color of this variety of plumeria. I find myself grinning, as though I can hear her voice pointing the same thing out to me. “*Mom, my room is this color. I'll hang it from my bedpost,*” she'd tell me.

That's exactly what she'd say, verbatim, if I bought her this.

“See something that caught your eye?”

“They’re plumerias,” I say. “Like the hotel’s name.”

“Pretty realistic, aren’t they? They make live leis out of plumerias, too, you know. You might be able to get one at the airport when I drop you off. I’m not sure it would survive the plane ride though.” He nods toward the fake one. “You want to get it?”

“No,” I say quickly, letting go of the lei. The idea of being reminded of this time I’ve spent with Matt every time I step into my daughter’s bedroom is less than appealing. I’ll buy her one of those stuffed animals I saw at the airport.

Again, this sweet, loving dog seems to sense in me what no human ever could. She tugs on the leash in Matt’s hand until she’s next to me, leaning against my leg in response, in that way that says, *I’m here for you*.

I’m falling in love with this dog at the same time I’m falling in *like* with Matt. And neither emotion is appropriate. I’ve spent almost a third of my life hating Matt. And as for Bonnie... I can’t adopt her. I’m flying standby, for Pete’s sake. You can’t fly standby with a dog.

The onslaught of emotions sends my blood pressure upward, almost making me lightheaded as I hear the thump-thump-thumping of my heartbeat.

“Do you know where the restrooms are?” I ask, needing a little privacy to collect my composure.

“Yeah, sure. They’re just over there.”

As he points them out, I bolt toward them.

Blessedly alone in the bathroom, I clutch the side of the sink to steady myself. I glance at my watch and, in my head, calculate the time it is back home, like any other mother would right now. I just talked to Melody this morning, but I miss her so badly right now.

I pull out my phone and text her. “Just thought I’d check on my kiddo. How r u?”

Barely an instant passes before she taps in, “Gr8. Ordering pizza. GTG.”

Not exactly the text version of the warm hug I desperately need right now, but it’ll do.

Feeling stronger from the reminder that I have a life back home that I’ll soon return to, I suck in a breath for bravery and head back out.

Matt is crouched over, filling his hand with water from a bottle as Bonnie slurps it up. The sight is so endearing—this big, muscle-clad man taking such care of a gangly but equally adorable mutt.

After he spots me approaching them, he sends me one of those smiles that makes my knees wobble, and as we check out some more of the booths, I buy a few cheesy souvenirs since I had told him that’s why I wanted to tag along.

Then, we grab something called a “plate lunch” from a food truck and eat beneath the shade of a tree as I learn more about Matt and his family.

And through it all, I keep my emotions locked up in my chest like a champion.

Yet it all feels *wrong*. Everything inside me aches for a deeper connection with this man, as if I'm supposed to forget that feeling of betrayal when I learned he gave me a fake number and move on as though it never happened. I can't break free from that feeling, especially at the end of our time together as he drives me back to the airport.

Bonnie's wet nose keeps poking at me as she peeks her head in between the front seats of the Jeep. I hear her tail thump behind me.

"So, you're taking her back to the shelter before your dive?" I ask.

"Yeah. I plan to visit her again this week, but I hate leaving her there. I wish I could smuggle her into my hotel room."

I smile. "Well, you managed to do it ten years ago with *me...*"

He bursts out with a guffaw. "I guess you're right."

As the airport comes into view, I hate how unsettled I feel.

"Matt, thanks for letting me tag along. It's been—good to get to know you better." Strangely, my voice cracks a little as I say it. To cover it, I turn to Bonnie, "And you, girl... I'm going to miss you like crazy." I try to pet the top of her head, but she just keeps moving so that she can lick me instead.

"We're glad you came." He puts the car in park after pulling into the drop-off lane and gets out to unload my suitcase. Then he pulls a small bag out from the back seat. "And here. For you. To remember Hawai'i."

I open the bag and see the lei that I had considered getting for my daughter.

For *our* daughter.

And I feel the sting of tears in my eyes at the idea that he just bought his child a gift and he doesn't even know it.

"Oh no," he says when he sees me brush away a rogue tear. Then he lifts his finger to my other cheek and brushes away another. "You know, it's just a lei," he points out. "Nothing to cry over."

I shake my head, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. And thank you. It's not the lei. It's hard—leaving Maggie during her wedding week," I finish, hoping I sound convincing.

"Makes sense. Hell, I might cry if they made me leave this place too right now," he says, his tone joking.

I laugh at the thought. It's hard to even picture. "Not you. You're too tough to cry."

A look passes across his face. Barely even for a moment. But it's there—an unmistakable pain in his eyes so intense that I'm then surprised when his expression changes again in less than a heartbeat's time.

"It takes a lot," he says, eyes bright again, but smile forced. "But it's possible."

And in that moment, I'm reminded that I really don't know this man at all.

"Well," I open my arms slightly, deciding that anything less than a goodbye hug might seem suspicious after spending

an entire afternoon together.

And when I feel his warmth against me, I regret it because it's as though the sensation of his arms around me even for a moment erases the past ten years... and I'm right back in New York again—young, energetic, passionate, fearless.

All the things I often feel I lost along the path of motherhood.

I pull away quickly and say, “You have a great dive tonight.”

“I'm sure I will. Oh—and let me put my number in your cell in case they can't get you on a flight. I'll be driving right by here after my dive and can get you back to the hotel.”

“There are three flights to LAX tonight. I'm sure they'll get me on one of them.”

“I'm an Army guy. Best way to *avoid* needing a backup plan is by *having* one.” He extends his hand and I awkwardly give my phone to him.

“Kay.”

He taps his number into my contacts list. “Maybe this time you'll actually call me.” His eyes spark with humor as he hands my phone back to me.

I feel my face screw up. “*What?*”

He casually slices a hand through the air. “Just a joke. Since you didn't call me way-back-when.”

My eyes narrow as I slide my phone back into my pocket.

“I *did* call you,” I say, noticing how defensive my tone is—such a sharp contrast to how I sounded only a few seconds ago.

“No, no. You definitely didn’t.”

I *hate* how easily a lie rolls off his tongue just like it did ten years ago. I look at his eyes—so sincere that I wonder if he’s one of those people who starts believing all the lies they say just to make themselves feel better.

I’m suddenly grateful that I’m being so cautious with my unsuspecting daughter.

But I’m sure not going to let him think that I’m falling for his bullshit. Not this time.

“I called you,” I insist, “and got some woman who didn’t know who you were.”

He tucks in his chin. “Really? You must have misdialed.”

Exasperation bubbles up inside of me. “I didn’t misdial. I even told her the number I called, and she said I got it right.” I remember it all—every detail. How couldn’t I? But I keep that part to myself. He wouldn’t understand why that moment in my life is so significant that every aspect of it is cemented into my brain.

He cocks his head. “When did you call me?”

“A few months after we met,” I say vaguely. “Life got a little busy after we met. But—”

“Oh, well, that explains it,” he cuts me off. “I deployed after class at Fort Moore, about six months after I graduated

from West Point. And like I said, I just had a burner phone back then.”

“So?”

“So when I’d deploy, the number would die out. Go to someone else. The places I went, I couldn’t use my phone anyway. Why pay for a monthly plan while I’m away, right?” His eyes on me are curious, seeming to not understand why this is so important to me. And I suppose that makes sense.

But then he chuckles and adds, “I *told* you I was cheap in my twenties,” as though he’s trying to lighten the mood.

And my mood definitely needs lightening.

Then his expression changes, and his eyes widen with realization. “Oh, shit. You thought I gave you a fake number?”

“Um, yeah. Yeah, I did. I mean, guys do that sometimes.”

He lifts his hands a little. “Not *this* guy. That’s definitely not my style.”

I’m dead still—dead silent—as I realize that I believe him.

I actually *believe* him.

And that changes... everything.

The sound of a bark from his Jeep snaps me out of it.

He glances over at Bonnie’s nose poking out from the window of the car. “Well, listen, you’ve got my number now, so feel free to call if they don’t get you on a flight tonight.”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

He takes a couple steps toward his car door.

“You take care, Lily,” he says, then adding, “like the flower,” with a cheeky grin as though he’s wondering if I’ll remember those words he said to me so long ago.

I lift my hand. “Bye,” I say softly, the word seeming empty at the same time it is full of weight.

Because I know now, it’s not goodbye at all.

CHAPTER 6



- MATT -

“So how was the dive?”

Driving the roads of Hawai‘i is always a little surreal after dark, especially in the remote areas where you’re always on the lookout for a goat in the middle of the road or in some places, the glow of lava in the distance.

Hopefully in the distance, that is.

But it’s even more surreal tonight, after seeing one of the most spectacular underwater ballets put on by some massive and hungry manta rays.

Definitely one of my top ten favorite experiences.

Just good enough, in fact, that I couldn’t help calling Ryder on the drive home.

“Bruh, it was incredible,” I answer him. “You should make it a group event this week. You’d be crazy not to do this.”

“I don’t think I can. There’s so much to get done before the wedding. But it was cool?”

“Beyond cool. It was—” I shake my head, words escaping me. “Perfection.”

“Sounds like you finally found your paradise,” he comments.

“My what?”

“Dude, what you used to drone on about at work,” he reminds me. “Your piece of paradise where you’ll retire. No more Mother Army telling you where to live.”

His words jostle a memory free. “Forgot I told you guys that plan.”

“Sounded like some New Age bullshit at first, but you got me sold. I mean, if I survive twenty years of getting jerked around by the military, I like the idea of finally landing where *I* want. No more compromises.” He chuckles. “Only problem is, I think *my* paradise would be to live in a vintage car dealership. I’d test drive those bad boys all day. Don’t think Maggie’ll be down with that plan.”

“Well, see if you can at least sell her on a manta ray swim. It was bad ass. And you don’t need to be dive certified to do it.”

He lets out a slight grunt. “Maggie’s got our week pretty booked. But I’ll run it by her when she gets back.”

“She’s not there?” I flick on my turn signal and merge onto the Queen K Highway, grateful for a little more light on this busier road.

“Nah. She has a girls-only event tonight. They went to the resort lū’au and now are having drinks.”

“Ah, yeah. I think Lily said something about that.”

“You met Lily?”

“Yep,” I tell him. “I drove her to the airport. She needed to get back to work, I guess.”

“That was weird as hell, the way she left. But she’s got—”
He cuts himself off.

“What?” I ask.

There’s a long beat of silence, the kind that has my face screwing up.

“She’s got what?” I find myself in need of repeating.

“Uh... a lot of stuff she juggles,” he stammers oddly.
“That’s all. So, uh, yeah...”

His voice trails in a weird way, making me think he’s been hitting the minibar in his hotel suite.

“Glad you at least got to meet her though,” he adds.

“Actually, we met a long time ago. Crazy, right?”

“Wait—what?”

“Yeah. I met her in a nightclub in New York City.”

“No shit? When?”

“Maybe ten years ago or so.”

“No way. Damn... what are the chances of that?”

“Pretty remote,” I reply. “But anyway, it was nice to see her again. She was a little—odd in the beginning, but we kind of hit it off after we spent some time together.”

“Cool. Well, thanks for driving her to the airport. Was nice of you.”

“I’m a nice guy.”

“Eh, some days you are,” he concedes. “So you really think this manta ray thing would be a good group event?”

“Hell, yes. But do it before the Admiral arrives.”

“Why?”

“He’s intimidating, bruh. The mantas won’t get anywhere near him.”

Ryder laughs. “You know, if you worked a little more closely with Admiral Shey, you’d find out he’s just a normal guy.”

“A normal guy with three stars on his uniform,” I mutter, but it’s really all for show.

In reality, Admiral Shey helped pull me through one of the darkest times in my life. Sure, he’s intimidating. He’s also wise AF, and the day the Navy loses him after he retires, they’ll pretty much have lost their soul, as far as I’m concerned.

But I’m just an Army guy.

“How long is it?”

“The dive?” I glance at the time now and pause thoughtfully. “I guess we were out there four or five hours. They have much shorter ones, though. But it’s south of Kona, so tack on more time for the drive to and from.”

He sighs. “Damn. I don’t see it happening on this trip. Not with all there is left to do.”

My mouth curves downward, remembering my own wedding, years ago. It was a helluva lot easier to pull off than Ryder’s. But we had very different priorities than they do. “You’ll do it next time,” I assure him, hoping to make him feel better. “You gonna be up when I’m back at the resort? We can meet for a drink.”

“Hell no. I’m still jetlagged. I don’t know how you’re up driving right now.”

“You SEALs are softer than us Rangers.”

“Fuck you, man.”

I grin. “Fuck you back. Oh, and be sure to tell Maggie that I drove her friend to the airport, okay? I’m hoping it will give me points so I don’t have to do any more wedding-related chores this week,” I joke.

“Pfft. I’m engaged, but I’m not blind. Lily’s cute. I don’t think you’d find it a chore. Especially since you knew her from...” His voice trails again.

Damn, he really *is* jetlagged.

“You all right?” I ask. “Sounds like I’m losing you.”

“No. I, uh, you knew her ten years ago, you said?”

I pause, confirming the blur of years in my head. “Ten-ish. Maybe eleven. I don’t know. Why?”

“Just curious. And uh, you were... close back then?”

I snort, finding it amusing to hear him dance around the obvious. “Close to what?” I ask, feigning innocence.

“Not *that* kind of close. Dude, do I really have to spell it out?”

My grin widens at the change in Ryder. Before Maggie came into his life, this conversation would have been a hell of a lot more direct with him simply asking, “*Did you hook up way-back-when?*” while finding a way to drop a couple f-bombs within the brief question.

Yet with a woman’s influence in his life, he’s aiming for more subtlety.

“Well, I probably wouldn’t have remembered her if we just had a drink together, Ryder,” I admit, aiming for at least as much subtlety as him.

My answer is met with dead silence. “You there, dude?” I ask.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry. I’m kind of dozing off a little. It’s wild that you bumped into each other again. That’s all.”

“Stranger things have happened.” I shrug the coincidence off. I have to. Because if I think too much about Lily, I’ll linger too long on that feeling I had when we parted ways—like something was missing or lost—a feeling so strong I couldn’t help checking my pockets for my wallet to make sure I hadn’t left it at the marketplace where we had been shopping.

But instead of mulling over that, I suggest, “Might want to avoid the minibar until you’re over your jetlag. Your reaction time is not exactly up to SEAL standards in this conversation.”

“I haven’t been drinking,” he mumbles. “But you’re right about the second half of that statement. Speaking of booze, though, we’re still on for bourbon tomorrow, right?”

“Course.”

“Cool. I’ll make sure Maggie doesn’t book me for anything. I’ll, uh...” He pauses strangely again. “...see you then.”

“Get some sleep, Ry. You don’t sound so good.”

But he’s already hung up the phone.

Weird. How the hell does he handle missions if he gets jetlag this bad?

In the distance, I see the lights of the airport and it makes me wonder if Lily is still there, waiting for a plane to take her home. I’ve flown standby plenty, but usually in uniform. The airlines are pretty good about getting military onto a flight if they’re in uniform. But as a civilian, I’m betting they’re less accommodating.

Maybe I’ll text her to make sure she got on the plane. Only out of concern. Compassion. That’s all.

It has nothing to do with this feeling I get every time she leaves my side—like something is left undone between us.

I feel a frown, despite the light scent of the saltwater still on my skin which usually keeps me in a good mood. After a dive like I just enjoyed, I should feel nothing but content.

But I don’t. And for the life of me, I have no idea why.

CHAPTER 7



~ LILY ~

A million thoughts and emotions swirl through me as I drag my suitcase across the small airport to a different gate for the third time tonight.

All night, people have been barking orders at me. Baggage, TSA, even the Department of Agriculture—because that’s apparently a thing here in Hawai‘i airports. And I’ve somehow managed to comply... completely on autopilot because only one thought has the spotlight tonight.

He didn’t give me a fake number.

How do I reconcile that with the reality that I thought I knew for ten entire years as I raised his child... alone?

I’m nearly stumbling by the time I’m at my final gate tonight, armed with the *second* single-serving bottle of wine that I bought from the little deli-style restaurant just past security.

I glance at my phone. My phone that now has his number. A real number that I can call. A real number that *my daughter*

can call if she ever has questions about the father she never knew.

The father who apparently isn't the lying bastard I thought he was.

Suddenly, as I check in at the gate and am told that they'll call my name if they are able to get me on the flight, I'm asking myself a question that I never even considered before.

What would have happened if I had called him sooner after learning I was pregnant—soon enough that it would have been *his* voice who answered my call?

When I found out I was pregnant, I needed time to think. To plan. To figure out what *I* wanted before I made myself vulnerable to being pressured by a man I barely knew.

I was so damn afraid he'd want me to give up my child—a child I knew instinctively was meant to be in my life.

So I waited until I had a plan before I called. And Lord knows it took me a while to put it all into place—to find a person to take over my lease in New York, to talk to my parents and let them make room for me and the baby I was about to have, to say goodbye to the city I loved and the career I knew I'd never have.

And then, when I felt more certain of the path I was taking with or without his support, I called him.

And got a sweet older woman named Loretta who had no idea who *Deo* was.

As I wait to hear my name called, I stare at my phone, wondering what time Maggie might be done with that girls'

night out I was supposed to attend tonight. I desperately need to talk to my BFF—the woman who knows me better than I know myself sometimes.

I picture her, watching hula dancers and drinking margaritas with her other, less fucked-up friends.

I had been looking forward to that—to bonding with other women over an experience that has nothing at all to do with children.

I have some women I've met in carpool lines and a few people at work that I consider my friends. But the idea of meeting people who have nothing to do with my life back home was so intriguing to me.

Yet here I am, clinging to my tiny bottle of cheap wine rather than a nice margarita, hoping that this final plane might have space for me.

The flurry of activity around the gate abates, and a new rush of anxiety cinches up like a tightly wound ball of twine lodged in my gut. I walk up to the attendant.

“I'm sorry—I don't mean to rush you or anything,” I say cautiously. “But I haven't heard my name called yet, and just wanted to make sure you saw me on the standby list.” I give her my name and show her my original reservation number from the app on my phone.

“Ah, yes, I do see you on the list.” Her eyes hint of sympathy. “But this is a sold-out flight. And unfortunately, everyone showed up.”

My brow furrows. “Are you sure? I’ve been waiting for three flights now. And the woman I spoke to on the phone thought I’d be able to fly standby.”

“Normally, we can get you on a flight. But I wouldn’t cancel your original departure flight until you get home, because that might be the best you can do. This is whale watching season, so we’re pretty booked up. You can try stand-by again tomorrow, if you like.”

“Tomorrow?” I glance around me at the hard seats that are destined to be my bed tonight, and then to my watch. It’s going to be *tomorrow* in just an hour, so this might not be as bad as it sounds. “What time?”

“Our first flight to LAX is at four p.m.”

“Four *p.m.*?”

“Yes.”

I nearly stumble backward as though her affirmation has struck me. “Please... I can sit anywhere on the plane. It’s really urgent that I get home. And I already checked out of my hotel.”

“I’m so sorry,” she says. Then her mouth perks upward and she chirps optimistically, “Maybe you’re destined to stay in paradise a little longer.”

My face falls. “Destiny has never been my ally.”

I plop down on a hard chair and hold back tears. Between the jetlag and the fact that I barely slept last night after I first saw Matt, I’m painfully tired now. I long for my own bed, surrounded by the familiarity of a life I’ve worked so hard to

build. And aching—truly aching—to just hold my daughter in my arms because that always gives me the strength I need.

Always, for the past ten years of my life, it was Melody who strengthened me simply by her presence in my life.

Mel... whose life is poised to change completely.

Blinking back tears of frustration and confusion, I see the time displayed on my phone and do what any other independent, confident woman would do when her reality has essentially been shattered.

I call my bestie.

But when my call goes to Maggie's voicemail, I realize it's not something that I want to try to summarize in a thirty-second message or a text.

Instead, I decide to head back to the hotel and beg for my room back in person. As desperate as I look now, surely they'll find a place for me to stay.

I pull up the Uber app and sputter when I see the word "unavailable" pop up on my phone.

My face contorts. An Uber is *unavailable*? Am I in some alternate reality? That's a message I've never seen, living in Los Angeles.

I remember what Matt had told me about "island time" here.

Matt... whose life would have been totally different if he'd had a normal cell phone like every other twenty-something I knew back then.

A burner phone? I thought only drug dealers bought those.

I look back on the ten years I've been raising Mel—the hardest years of my life, no doubt. But so many joyful moments. So many milestones and achievements.

And none that can be recreated for him.

For all the years I've been angry with him, this new reality presses down on my very soul, making me ache for him for all he missed of Melody's life.

If only I had called him earlier, before he deployed.

If only. I add that to a dozen other *if onlys* that churn inside my mind.

Now that I don't think of him as the guy who gave me a fake number, I know I need to tell him. But how? When? And will he reject Melody or will he want to be a part of her future?

I hate how that latter option scares me the most because it is fraught with the unknown.

In my purse, my phone vibrates with a text, and I pull it out, hoping that it's Maggie.

But it's from Matt.

“Just about 2 pass the airport. Hoping ur on a flight. But thought I'd make sure u didn't need a ride.”

Damn, he's a nice guy.

For all the times I've said I don't believe in signs, for all the times I've thumbed my nose at the idea of destiny, I find

myself giving into the idea just enough to tap in the words,
“*Still here. Yes, a ride would be very appreciated.*”

My finger hovers for barely an instant, and then I tap *send*.

CHAPTER 8



- MATT -

“I’m so sorry. We’re booked solid.”

As the words from the woman in a crisply-pressed hotel uniform settle in, Lily is leaning against the high counter of the front desk as though it’s the only thing that is preventing her from collapsing.

“B-but I was just here,” she practically stammers. “Do you think maybe my old room just isn’t showing up in the system yet?”

Lily waits anxiously as the woman taps something into her computer.

“No. That room has been cleaned and someone is occupying it now. I’m so sorry,” the woman repeats. “Rooms go pretty quickly this month. It’s the height of—”

“Whale watching season,” Lily finishes for her grimly. “Yeah. I’ve been hearing that a lot today.” She looks around at the soft couches in the lobby. “Is it all right if I just hang out in the lobby tonight until I can get back to the airport?”

“I’d love to say yes. But security won’t allow people to loiter in the lobby if they’re not guests. Is there someone you can stay with?”

Lily cocks her head. “Only the bride and groom of the wedding they’re having here. And me camping out in their room won’t make it very romantic for them.”

The woman drags her gaze from Lily... to me.

Yup. Looks like I’ve got a bunkmate for the night.

I wave my hand slightly. “Forget it. I have a suite. I have plenty of room. You can stay with me.”

Lily’s eyes widen. “No, Matt. That’s kind of you. But I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Hey... it’s not like we haven’t done that before,” I joke.

She sputters, perhaps not appreciating the humor of the situation. I’m not sure.

“And I’ll even take the sofa bed this time,” I add quickly. “I hate to tell you, but you’re kind of out of options. It’s my place or you’re pulling a threesome with Maggie and Ryder.”

Her shoulders deflate, and I hate seeing how defeated she looks. But she follows me toward the elevator saying in a broken voice, “This is really nice of you.”

“Why do you always looked shocked when I do something nice?”

After we step in, the mirrored elevator doors shut in front of us just in time for me to see her eyebrows rise in the

reflection.

And then I remember. “Oh, yeah. For ten years, you’ve been thinking I gave you a fake number.” I shake my head. “I’m really sorry about that.”

“Why be sorry? It’s not your fault.”

“It kind of is. Punishment for being such a cheap-ass in my twenties.” I hear her stomach growl. “Did you eat at the airport?”

“Uh...no. I just had a couple bottles of wine.”

“You drank two bottles of wine at the airport?” Her liver must be clad in steel.

“No—I mean, they were those tiny single serving ones.”

“Ah. Well, the restaurants are closed in the hotel. But help yourself to the minibar in the room. There are plenty of snacks in there.”

“Thanks. I’ll pay you back for anything I eat.”

“I’m not worried about that. I’m more worried about you collapsing on me,” I tell her in all sincerity. “You look like you might.”

“It’s been a stressful day.”

I open the door to my suite and roll her bag through.

She nearly gasps when I turn on the lights—the same reaction I had when I first saw this place. “Wow. Is this where they put the people who were cheap in their twenties?” she asks, her tone only seeming to be half-joking.

I laugh a little. “Maybe. I wanted an oceanfront room, and they only had suites available since I kind of booked last-minute.”

“Wow,” she breathes out again, heading straight to the sliding glass door. “Can I open this?”

“Of course. Make yourself at home. I gotta wash this saltwater off me from the dive.”

She offers me a tepid smile as I shut the bathroom door behind me, and it seems to tug me backward in time.

I remember seeing that same smile on her when I had given her my number ten years ago—the caution in it. The apprehension that naturally comes on a stereotypical “morning after.” Funny how I remember that so clearly now—such an inconsequential moment in my life, really, that apparently was tucked away somewhere in my brain.

I *hate* that when she called me, she thought she’d been given a fake number.

I hate guys who pull that kind of shit with women. And for ten years, she was thinking I was one of them.

As I shower off, the air around me fills with the salty scent of the ocean as the hot water cascades down my skin. It was a hell of a dive tonight—the kind of experience that makes me glad I came here early for the wedding. Between the dog and the rays, I’d pretty much chock this up to one of my best days ever, except that I’ve just volunteered to sleep on a sofa bed.

Yeah, that puts an odd twist on my day.

After I'm clean, I put on some fresh shorts and join her on the lanai.

When I see her, I notice her face looks like she's straining to hear something.

I listen to the waves for a moment before sitting in one of the chairs. "It's like the best white noise machine ever, isn't it?"

She glances at me, and her eyes widen, fixating briefly on my chest and abs.

I should throw a shirt on, but I've paid a lot of money for this waterfront lanai, and I enjoy the way the ocean breeze feels against my skin.

And yeah, I work just hard enough on my body to enjoy the hungry look she's giving me too.

Flustered suddenly, she gives a slight shiver and looks back toward the water.

"It is. But there's another sound I keep hearing," she replies. "I think there's something alive out there—in the water."

I chuckle. "There's a *lot* that's alive out there."

"I mean. A sound. I can't figure out what."

Curious, I stand again and take a couple steps toward the edge of the balcony. I can tell the waves are gentle tonight, just like they were earlier during my dive. I can't see them at all with a new moon and the low lighting ordinances they have on

the Big Island. But I can hear them. And the sound makes me long for the feel of the cool saltwater against me again.

I love the ocean. But I suppose everyone does.

“What kind of sound did you hear?” I ask.

“It was a thud. A loud, rhythmic thud.”

I scoff a little. “Are you sure it was coming from the ocean? I think there are a couple of honeymooners next door to me.”

She giggles. “I’m sure.”

We’re both silent for a moment, waiting. Listening.

“That’s it. Did you hear it?” she says suddenly.

I focus, then I hear it—and a smile spreads across my face. “That’s a whale breaching.”

We hear the sound again.

“But it doesn’t sound like a splash,” she notices.

“It’s because it’s too far in the distance. The impact is loud, but the splashing part of it isn’t loud enough to travel that far. So we’re just hearing the thud—just like you said. Kind of like when a JDAM explodes two miles away. You hear the explosion, but you don’t hear the rubble crashing to the ground.”

In the low light that’s pouring out from our hotel suite, I see her frown.

“A JDAM?”

“Joint Direct Attack Munition.”

There's a trace of amusement in her eyes. "That's an unusual analogy."

I shrug. "I'm an Army guy. That's all I've got."

Incredulous, she listens again and then shakes her head when she hears it. "That can't be a whale breaching. No way."

"It is. When the sun's up, you can confirm it. What's cool is that you'll see them breach in the distance, but then it's a second or two before the sound even hits you. It's incredible."

Her brow furrows with disbelief.

"I'll bet you dinner it is," I challenge.

She tucks her chin in, considering it. But then she says, "Hopefully, I'll be on a plane tomorrow night around dinnertime."

"Then it's a safe bet for you, isn't it?" I point out.

"Okay, you're on."

We shake on it and when her skin meets mine, I try to tug a word from my brain that can describe how I feel every time our skin touches. There's a sense of familiarity there that simply shouldn't exist, considering all the time that has passed between us.

"Easy win for me," I say, ignoring that fleeting sensation. "You're pretty tuned in."

"Tuned in?"

"Yeah. I'd bet at least ninety-eight percent of the people who sit out on their lanais here never even notice that sound. Or at least, they don't give it much thought."

“I’m a music person. My ears are always tuned in.”

“Too bad you can’t stick around for longer than one more night. I’d take you over to the other side of the island and you could listen to the lava coming up from the earth. It’s... otherworldly, really. And the birds here are cool too.”

“I heard them this morning.” She cocks her head. “You seem pretty tuned in, too.”

“I’m a Ranger. We’ve gotta keep all our senses on alert all the time. Like—” I lift my nose toward the sky like I saw Bonnie doing today. “Smell that?”

She sniffs. “That’s lovely.”

“Plumerias. I know guys aren’t supposed to say they like the smell of anything but bacon. But I’m comfortable enough in my masculinity that I can say, plumerias smell pretty damn good.”

“So good that they have this resort named after them,” she points out.

“You’re right.” As my eyes adjust, I gaze out toward where she heard that sound, and the Milky Way slowly becomes more distinct above the water, offering its own kind of light. “It’s terrible that your work is pulling you away from all this,” I add sympathetically as I glance back at her.

She looks almost confused for a moment, as though she forgot why she spent hours tonight sitting in an airport trying to fly stand-by. Then recognition lights her eyes. “Oh, yeah. It is terrible. I imagine you get that too, with your work?” she

tacks on, and as before, I keep getting this feeling like she doesn't like to talk about herself.

“Sometimes. It depends on what's going on in the world.”

“Do you like it though?”

“The Army? I love some of it. I didn't sign up just because it's what my dad did or my grandpa did. I did it because I really love the *ideals* of our country. It's not perfect. But when it's at its best, it's pretty amazing. And I like to travel. I mean, some of the places they send me suck. But when I'm somewhere that people *aren't* trying to kill me, it helps me figure out where I might want to settle one day permanently. You know, after I retire.”

“Someplace like this, maybe?”

“Maybe. I don't know. As much as I love it here, I feel like there's...” My voice trails for a moment, trying to express an idea that even *my* brain can't quite grasp—this feeling like my life is a jigsaw puzzle and if I can just land myself in the right spot, that final piece will slide into place.

“Like there's what?” she prods.

“I don't know. Someplace that fits me better, you know? My... paradise,” I find myself finishing, remembering what Ryder had said earlier tonight, and chuckle at the way it sounds before adding, “Which makes no sense, because if *this* isn't paradise to me, then what the hell *is*, right?”

“Actually, it does make sense to me.” She tries to hide her sudden yawn behind her hand.

“Am I boring you?” I ask, amused.

“Not at all. Your voice is just so soothing.” Her eyes narrow. “You know, I remember that about you.”

“Good. I’ll keep talking then, until you’re ready to sleep.” I lift my eyebrows. “I never thought I’d have *that* as the goal if I was sharing a hotel room with a woman.”

Then, I talk, and don’t feel the slightest bit insulted when I see her eyes flicker from time to time.

I tell her about how the manta rays seemed to dance around me tonight, about my time at Pōhakuloa back when I was training there, and the food trucks I’ve discovered. I tell her about the dogs I’ve walked down in Kona over the years, remembering each of their names. And the stars—the stars she’s too tired to appreciate tonight, but if she decided to stay longer, they’d make all other night skies pale in comparison.

The topics come and go and shift into new ones, and it makes me remember that night ten years ago, how we left the nightclub to get late-night pancakes at one of those 24-hour diners they have in Manhattan. We had talked for hours until we finally retreated to my hotel room.

When she didn’t call me, I categorized the entire night as nothing more than a hook-up.

Then, I met Kirsten, and my mind erased all other women in that way it does when you’re in love.

There was only Kirsten then—Kirsten and me, and all the dreams we were determined to make come true together.

Until it wasn’t just us anymore.

I fight the downward curve that tugs my lips as I tell Lily about the best place on the island for shave ice and malasadas, and I watch her eyes flicker shut again. This time, she stills completely, and her breath becomes shallow and slow.

I watch her for a moment. Pretending.

Pretending it's ten years ago.

And when I know she's deep in a slumber, I lift her out of the chaise lounge and stretch her out on my bed, tamping down all the feelings that it brings me as I do.

For the past couple years, I've been trying to convince myself I don't want any of that again. Caring about someone. Eventually loving someone. Guys like me don't like the vulnerability that comes with it.

I don't want to be broken like I was once before.

Yet somehow, looking at Lily, I feel this urge to resurrect the man I once was... or at least parts of him.

Despite the memories that inevitably follow.

CHAPTER 9



~ LILY ~

I wake up to the sound of the hotel room door opening. Forgetting momentarily where I am, my eyes fling open, and I lurch upward in the bed.

The bed that is *his*.

Uh-oh.

“Hey! I didn’t mean to wake you up,” Matt says, carrying a box of something as he comes toward me. “You were out like a light when I left.”

My head is spinning, trying to simultaneously figure out how I ended up in his bed while processing the image of Matt wearing a t-shirt that is molded perfectly to his broad shoulders.

“I—last night...” I stammer.

Even in the near darkness with the blinds pulled, I can see him smirk playfully.

“You mean last night when I slept over there?” His hands full, he nods toward the opened sofa bed with its unkempt sheets.

Only then do I notice what I’m wearing. My shoes are off, but I’m still fully clothed in the same shorts and t-shirt I wore to the airport yesterday.

Thank God. Because the memories of last night are nothing more than a haze to me right now.

“Yeah. I—I don’t even remember getting into bed,” I say.

“I carried you in. You fell asleep out on the lanai.”

“Thank you.” My brow creases as I’m suddenly aware of the silky sheets on the best mattress I’ve ever experienced. “I could have slept in the sofa bed.”

He shrugs. “I sleep like a log anywhere. Here.” He extends a box toward me. “I picked up some malasadas from the food truck up the road from here.”

“Malasadas?”

“Yeah. They’re like... little donuts. Everyone eats them around here. You don’t remember me telling you about the malasadas food truck last night?”

“I—it’s all a blur, really.”

He opens the box and sets it down next to me. “Man, I have to up my conversation game. No wonder it took you months to try to call me way-back-when.”

As he pops a malasada into his mouth, I feel the twist of his words in my gut. *No wonder...* he had said.

Does that mean that he *is* wondering?

Does that mean he's trying to piece together why a woman would fall off the face of the earth and then suddenly call him months later?

I find myself greedily eyeing the cup of coffee he just set down in front of him.

"Do you like cream in your coffee?" he asks over his shoulder.

"That's for me?"

"Well, it's sure not for me. I had some of the sludge they serve in the lobby. Too much of this Kona stuff would spoil me." He frowns a little. "I need some light in here. Mind if I open the curtains?"

"Not at all."

When the bright morning sun pours through the sliding glass door, I feel like it's more than my eyes that are trying to adjust. It's my brain too—as though there's this piece of me that wants to believe that everything that happened yesterday was just a dream.

But it wasn't, I'm reminded as he opens the door and lets the cool ocean breeze fill the room.

Yesterday, I discovered that everything I believed about him for the past ten years was wrong. And yesterday, I realized I couldn't delay telling him.

But how do I say this? *Can I have two sugars in that coffee, and by the way, would you believe you have a ten-year-*

old daughter?

Instinctively, I reach for my phone. I need to talk to Maggie. *Now.*

My face falls when I see the text message from her that waits for me.

“Morning! Figure ur back in Cali. Headed on a hike w/ Ryder so might not have a signal. I’ll call when we’re back at the hotel. Miss u already,” she wrote me sometime this morning, adding a sad face emoji at the end.

“Still here in Hawai‘i,” I tap in. *“Call me when ur done. Need to talk to u ASAP.”* But then I delete that last sentence.

Scale back the drama, I remind myself. This is *her* week. Not mine.

“Sugar?” Matt’s voice pulls my eyes away from my phone.

“That would be great. This is really nice of you. Please let me pay you back for it,” I say automatically.

I don’t like owing him. I already owe him for two car rides, one plate lunch, and a night in his hotel suite.

Oh yeah, and one sperm donation.

God, this is so insane.

“Hey. When a woman spends the night with me, I have a general rule that I at least buy her breakfast in the morning.”

“Even when she had you sleeping on a sofa bed?”

“To be honest, I’ve never had this experience until last night.” He bends slightly to stir in the sugar, and I can’t help

approving of how the snug fit of his t-shirt seems to show off the wealth of muscles on his torso.

Yeah, I'll *bet* he's never been asked to sleep on a sofa bed. If I hadn't been so damn tired, I'm not sure even *I* could have resisted this guy. I certainly didn't establish a good track record that night in New York.

I nibble my lip, remembering how my body reacted at the sight of his bare chest last night, giving me a front row seat for an eight-pack I simply don't remember him having ten years ago.

It unleashed hormones in me that I thought were extinct.

"Try one," he encourages as he glances over his shoulder at the box of malasadas.

The way I feel right now, putting something in my stomach is the last thing I want. But when he hands me one, I feel like I don't have any choice but to put it in my mouth.

No regrets. The damn thing has transported me to heaven.

"Oh my," I breathe out. "These are so good."

"I know, right? Here." He hands me the coffee. "Even better with coffee."

On auto-pilot, I reach for another malasada. The light crunch and the cinnamon seem to tease me, and the way it blends with the coffee as I take my first sip has made me a full-blown addict. "So good. And this coffee..." I take another sip.

"Best in the world, some people say."

“Some people? But not you?”

He offers me a grin. “Guys who had burner phones in their twenties are also fine drinking instant coffee.” He gives a nod in the direction of the door. “You should drink it outside. It’s gorgeous out.”

He disappears onto the lanai.

I stare at the empty space where he once stood. My daughter’s father has turned out to be the kind of guy who lets me share his suite, sleeps in a sofa bed, and brings me a breakfast that will make all others pale in comparison.

When I step outside to join him, I’m greeted by an extraordinary sight—the Pacific stretched out in front of me. It’s the same ocean I see in California. Yet the waves are much calmer than I’m used to back home, and the color is so rich that I feel my eyes lapping up the sight of it.

“I can see why you sprang for the suite,” I tell him. “For the record, my room overlooked the parking lot.”

“Yeah. My place back at Hunter is like that.”

“Hunter?”

“Hunter Army Airfield. Where I’m stationed now with 1st Ranger Battalion in Savannah, Georgia.”

“Are you there permanently?”

“No. There’s not much permanence in the Army,” he says with some amusement. “They’ll be sending me to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, next for ILE. It’s the training they give

you when you get promoted to major. Look!” he adds suddenly, quickly pointing toward the horizon.

In the distance, I see a whale propelling itself from the ocean, followed by a splash. And then...

The sound.

“Oh my God.” My jaw gapes. I’m not sure if I’m more stunned by the sight of an entire whale leaping out from the ocean or from the sound that suddenly strikes my ears two beats afterward. “That’s the sound from last night. I never would have believed it.”

“Yeah. If they breach closer into the shore, then it sounds more like you’d think it would, you know? But out there in the channel all it sounds like is a JDAM explosion, two miles away.”

“Well, since I’ve never heard a JDAM explosion, I’ll have to take your word for it. I guess I owe you dinner.” Again, I see a whale breaching, and I’m about to say how incredible it is. But when I see Matt—his broad back to me as he leans slightly on the balcony rail—I get distracted.

As strong as he looks to me right now, how could I not wonder how his presence might somehow help my daughter? *Our* daughter.

Every mother wants a vigilant protector for her child. I’m no different.

A whirlwind of thoughts exhausting me, I retreat to the chaise lounge and sink into its soft cushions.

He joins me there, just as another sound distracts me. It's a birdsong—different from the ones I heard yesterday morning at the restaurant as I waited for Maggie.

This one is low—a cooing, almost gurgling sound that reminds me of a *vibrato*.

My lips curve as I stand again to look for the bird. “I’ve never heard a bird like that before.”

“Like what?”

“Listen...” The birds sound almost ethereal as the *vibrato* shifts into something that resembles a vocal trill I heard once beautifully performed in *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*. “I wonder what kind of birds those are,” I ponder.

“They don’t cover that at West Point. Are you into birdwatching?”

“Not really *watching* them. But listening to them.” I giggle a little at a memory. “When I was a kid, I did pretty good bird imitations. I think it’s how I got into singing, really. I was...” I pause. “...a little weird.”

His grin widens. “So... I want to hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“Your best birdsong.”

“No way.” I feel myself blush, but remember how when I was younger, I would have met his request by belting out my best birdsong without delay, no matter how many people might hear me. “I haven’t done that since I was a kid.”

“Come on. You’re leaving Hawai‘i before I even get to collect on that dinner you owe me. I think I should get to hear at least one decent bird imitation.”

“For the record, I plan on still buying you dinner,” I inform him. “I just won’t be around to enjoy it with you.”

I hate that I feel this sting of regret about that second part. I wish I could stay and learn more about this man who is, if he chooses, about to become a part of my daughter’s life.

Then the thought occurs to me that after I tell him, there’s really no reason to leave.

“Please?” His playful tone tugs me back to reality.

I sigh, realizing he won’t give this up. “Well, when you ask me nicely like that...” I look to either side of me, hoping no one else is sitting out on their lanais this morning. Then I take a long sip of my hot coffee to loosen up my vocal chords.

Then I belt it out—my favorite—the high-pitched call of a white-throated sparrow.

When I see his jaw gaping, I immediately regret it.

“Holy crap!” he says. “I was expecting you to *whistle* it. Not *sing* it.”

Wincing, I feel myself flush with embarrassment. “Sorry. You asked for it.”

“Don’t be sorry. That was amazing. I mean, I know you’re a singer but... *damn*. I didn’t know a human could make a sound like that.”

I laugh. “Then you’ve never been to the opera. I was about twelve when I first went.” I look toward the horizon, letting the memory take my hand and pull me backward in time. “It was the first time I heard humans make sounds that were as impressive as bird song.” I smile at the picture in my head—of me, wide-eyed and sitting on the edge of my seat in the opera house, attention fixated on the performers, and wondering how sounds so beautiful could be coming from mere humans. “It was... otherworldly to me. And I *so* wanted to be up on that stage, making music like I was hearing that day.”

“So... you wanted to sing like a bird. What a cool way of finding your career.”

“Except that it’s not my career.”

“From what I just heard, it should be,” he says, a challenge in his tone. “You should stick around and sing at Maggie’s wedding. I bet she’d love that.”

I groan at the reminder. “She actually asked me to sing something while she walked down the aisle. But... I don’t perform anymore.”

“Why not? You just performed a pretty awesome sparrow,” he says with a tease in his voice.

“That’s a little different from singing an entire song in front of a crowd. And my voice is so out of shape now,” I add, despite the temptation I recall feeling when she asked me a few months ago. But singing—performing—that was in a different lifetime.

“You didn’t sound out of shape to me.” His eyes rest on me with a touch of sympathy. “You must miss it.”

I feel the surprise on my face. He reads me so well. “I do sometimes. And it’s hard—working where I do.”

“Why’s that?”

“In practical effects, I work with a bunch of artists, you know? Truly masters at what they do. They’re so talented. And passionate. It makes me envy them for being able to make a living doing what they love.”

“I hope you’ll get back to it one day. Opera, I mean.”

For a few minutes we’re silent, listening to the birds again. And in the silence, I let myself momentarily imagine being back on the stage, singing all the *librettos* that I still hear in my dreams.

It’s easier to visualize it when I’m with Matt, as though being around him makes me remember the woman I once was.

There’s another reason I gave up the opera, Matt. My brain toys with the words rolling around in my head—the perfect segue to the truth I need to say.

I take in a breath for courage and open my mouth.

But then he leans forward suddenly and slaps his open palms against his muscular thighs like a thought just occurred to him.

“You know,” he begins, “if birdsong inspires you, then there’s probably something you should hear before you head back to the mainland tonight.”

“What’s that?”

He looks thoughtful, and then says, “It’s a surprise. Trust me?”

Looking at his warm and steady gaze on me, I can see with newfound clarity everything that attracted me to him back then.

I could fall in love with a guy like this. I remember thinking those exact words the morning after, when I woke up before he did. I remember watching him as he slept, enjoying the fluttering of his eyelids and the steady sound of his breath. I remember resting my head against his chest and hearing his heartbeat, and noticing how it seemed as though my own heart changed its pace to match his.

I remember it all now.

I could fall in love with him, I had thought. How could I not think it then?

My eyes lock onto his, and I see the patience in his gaze on me as he waits for my response.

I answer him with a certainty that surprises me.

“Yes. I trust you.”

CHAPTER 10



- MATT -

There's a Hawaiian phrase I've learned in the few times I've been on the Big Island.

Holo holo.

I love that phrase. It's hard to even translate because we don't really have an exact equivalent on the mainland. It means, essentially, to wander without any agenda at all.

I love that concept. For a guy who's usually either *on* a mission or *training* for a mission, I like the idea of simply wandering, mission-free. It's also the best way to experience this island.

That's how I found this place we're headed to this morning. Because if she likes birdsong, this experience is going to blow her mind.

"You're sure it's okay that we're driving off the road like this?" she asks uneasily.

I glance at the concern in her eyes. "Promise. Off-roading is a religion here. It's the only way to get to the best beaches."

“That beach at the hotel is pretty nice,” she reminds me.

“Too crowded for our purposes.”

I chuckle at her wary expression as she looks over her shoulder toward the main road that disappears behind us.

“You’re not going to go all serial killer on me now, are you, Matt?”

I love the way the humor in her tone contrasts with how she sounded when we first met.

I *hate* that she hated me all those years.

But I’d bet my left kidney that this morning’s experience will make it up to her.

“Promise I won’t,” I answer.

The shallow, sparkling waters of a small bay come into view as our Jeep rumbles along what people around here call a “road.” But it’s really no more than a path of broken up rocks, worn down by time and the tires of countless locals who enjoy this place.

Her eyes light at the iridescent waters ahead of us—the kind of water you simply *must* get into. And I’m betting right now she’s happy I told her to wear her bathing suit for this adventure.

The people who stay on the Queen K highway only see the darker blue from that distance. But from closer, the turquoise waters along this shoreline are worthy of a postcard.

After I park and we get out of the Jeep, I smile when I see that the water is as calm as I had hoped.

“Wow...” She breathes out. “They should build a road out to this place,” she suggests.

I cringe. “I hope they never do. The crowds bring the noise. And then we wouldn’t be able to do this.”

She pauses for a moment and looks around. “To do what, though? I thought you said something about birds. But I don’t hear any.”

Ignoring her question, I pull my snorkel gear out of the Jeep. I only have one set, but she’s welcome to it. I can hold my breath long enough to do what we’re going to do. “Have you ever used snorkel equipment before?”

“A couple times.”

I tug off my shirt and toss it into the Jeep before I shut the door, and try to overlook the way it feels when her eyes linger for a while on my eight-pack. I can’t bother feeling attraction for a woman who’s leaving in a matter of hours, I remind myself.

I hand her my snorkel mask.

“We’re snorkeling?” she asks the obvious.

“Well, technically, only you are. But I’ll be there to make sure you don’t get sucked out to the ocean. The bay looks calm but there can be a pretty strong undercurrent sometimes.”

Her brow furrows. “That’s not very reassuring.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you drift off. Ryder and Maggie would be pissed off if I did,” I point out.

We step into the water and as we get deeper, I see her balance falter as a retreating wave tugs at her calves. She barely wobbles from it, but I find myself using it as an excuse to reach out to take her hand.

When we're just deep enough that she has to kick her feet a bit to stay afloat, I lift my finger. "Now hold on a sec," I say and dunk my head under the water's surface while still holding one of her hands so the current won't pull her away from me.

With my eyes shut under the water, the darkness allows me to focus only on what I hear. I shut out the cavitation-like sound of countless tiny bubbles popping around me, the gentle swooshing of the water, and the sound of millions of grains of sand brushing against each other as they are tossed about. I listen past all of it, to the sounds that come from beyond this small bay.

I don't even have to wait long before I can hear it—a low, haunting moan, and then, after a few seconds, I hear the higher pitched response.

Whale song.

Damn. Even under the water, I still feel chills from it. But there's something else stirring inside me too.

I wish I could have taken Kirsten here.

I hate that I think it. Two years later, and I'm still thinking it.

I hate even more that I feel the urge to release Lily's hand, as though touching her right now, as innocent as my intentions, is still somehow a betrayal to a memory of

someone I lost. But the pull of the ocean urges me to hold fast to Lily's grasp. I'm her tether. I can't let go.

I push past the wave of emotions inside of me and pop my head back out of the water. "Perfect conditions. Put your head under for a while."

She eyes me curiously. "Why do I have the feeling we're not here to listen to birds?"

"Just go under for a while. You won't ever be satisfied with just birdsong again."

She lifts her eyebrows in question, but she sinks down below the water's calm surface. After barely a minute, she springs up from the water, the excitement in her eyes even showing past the drips on her snorkel mask. "Are those *whales* I hear?"

"Yep. Best song ever. Am I right?"

She doesn't even answer. She immediately dunks her head again and I join her.

But this time, as I listen, as the sounds echo through my body, I'd swear they heal me inside.

This time, I don't feel like I'm betraying Kirsten by sharing this with someone else. Below the waves, I feel like I've entered a different plane of reality, one without loss or regret. Or guilt... God, the guilt I've felt over the past two years has been heavier than any body armor I've worn or rucksack I've carried.

It's the guilt that hurts the most—always thinking that I failed to find that one thing that would heal her the same way

this whale song seems to be healing me.

My eyes are shut, so when I feel two hands squeeze mine, for an instant, I'd swear to God it's Kirsten. They feel *that* familiar to me.

But when I fling my eyes open and feel the sting of the saltwater, I see Lily looking at me, wide-eyed through her snorkel mask.

Only this time, I don't fight the feelings that come from looking at her, from holding her hands like this, or from sharing a moment beneath the waves that feels nothing short of otherworldly.

I come up for air, and she follows.

She's still holding both of my hands as she gasps, releasing her snorkel from her mouth so that it dangles from the side of her mask.

"That's amazing," she breathes out. "But I don't see them."

"No. Whale song travels for miles. From how loud it was under there, though, I'm betting they're not too far."

"I've heard whale song," she says, "on TV or in movies or whatever. But it's different underwater. I was literally vibrating from it. It's like it flows right into your soul. And there's so much... resonance. They're like Mother Nature's mezzo-sopranos."

I grin at the thought. "First time I came here, I was like you—not expecting it. I just came here to snorkel. And all of a

sudden, I'm hearing these sounds. That's why I didn't want to tell you. The surprise is half of it, you know?"

"Best surprise I've had in a while. Well, outside of discovering you didn't give me a fake number."

"Discovering I wasn't an a-hole ranks above hearing whale song? Man, I must have pissed you off back then," I chuckle, but hate that her expression changes at my words, suddenly looking apprehensive. I didn't intend that. "Let's go back under," I suggest. "You need to get your fill of it before you leave here tonight."

The apprehension I saw an eyeblink ago shifts into something I can only define as regret. I don't blame her. If I had to get on a plane just a few hours after I heard whale song underwater for the first time, I don't think I could do it.

As we listen, we spend the next hour swimming closer to the rocks so that she can see some of the colorful fish that find hiding places there.

The whales' volume increases when we reach a nearby reef, and I'd swear I can imagine a mother and her calf around the bend, exploring the ocean just like we are.

I wonder if they can hear us, the way we are hearing them. I wonder if they're as curious when they hear Lily squeal from behind her mask when she spots a nearby turtle or the sound of my kicking when a wave wants to push us too close to a sharp pile of lava rocks.

After a while, the whales sound like they've moved on to another destination, and it reminds me that Lily is about to

move on as well.

Damn. It kind of sucks. I enjoy being around her.

When she's chest deep in the water, she pulls the mask upward to her forehead, using just one hand to do it, as though she doesn't want to let go of me any more than I want to let go of her. Her smile is the widest I've seen on her, even in my memory of her ten years ago.

Her chest rises and falls, struggling for breath.

I reach out with my free hand and hold the side of her arm to steady her. We're a bit of a drive away from civilization. Not the best place to hyperventilate.

"You okay?" I ask.

"That was just—exhilarating. I—haven't experienced anything like that in my life." She lifts a hand. "Look at that. I'm *literally* shaking from it. And I'm not sure if it's from excitement or just from the way that sound was vibrating through me."

"I knew you'd like it."

"*Like* doesn't cover what I feel. It was... the second most incredible experience of my life," she says pointedly.

"The *second* best?" I crack a smile. "Now I'm wanting details about the first."

Her face is guarded as she presses her lips together for a moment. "I'll tell you about it before I leave," she finishes, and the weight of her words makes me curious.

Then she hugs me—just a hug of gratitude. I know that’s all it is.

But when she loosens her hold on me quickly, I find my arms still wrapped around her, not wanting to let her go.

Or is *she* not letting *me* go?

I’m not quite sure.

It’s barely an instant I hold her like this. Yet I feel like it’s unleashed a million emotions inside of me. And when a gentle wave nudges us closer together, lifting her up almost to my height, I suddenly feel her warm lips on mine.

I’m not even sure who started the kiss. I don’t even care. I just savor it—the feel of where our skin touches, the pressure of her lips against mine, the way her soft, satisfied moan vibrates through me like the whale song did not long ago.

Her lips still pressing against me, she releases her hold on me for a moment. I hate the way it feels when she does—until she drapes both of her arms over my shoulders, tilting her chin further upward, seeming to demand more.

Her lips part—and I swear the taste of her is familiar to me, even after all these years.

Reason escapes me as I thread my fingers into her wet hair and in response, her body fuses with mine, so close, yet still not close enough.

Urgency sears me as though I’ve been starved for her—for this—and I’m eager to feel more. Her breath against me is jagged, thick with need. Her back arches, and her breasts press

against me, the pebbles of her nipples telling me that she wants me as much as I want her.

If there weren't other people here, I'd lift her into my arms and take her right now.

But the fact is, there's a family with small children that I'll have to walk past to get to my car. And as a pretty big guy, the parents probably wouldn't appreciate me emerging from this water with a raging hard-on.

So I school my body to fight this desire even as she moves her hands downward to the waistline of my swim shorts... then pulls away from me suddenly.

"Oh my God," she says with a start, utter shame in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Matt."

"Just sorry you're leaving tonight, I hope," I offer, hating the regret I see in her eyes.

It was just a kiss. A kiss between consenting adults. I'm not sure why she's reacting this way.

"No—I mean, yes. But—" She shakes her head, killing the vibe of the moment.

Dammit. Because, like any well-prepared Ranger, I've got condoms in my suitcase back at the hotel. And since we're headed there next, a guy can't help but hope.

"You all right?" I ask.

"I am. But..." Her eyes shroud over with something I can't begin to define. "I can't leave," she finally finishes.

I offer a sympathetic nod. “I don’t blame you. First time I came to this beach, I was ready to put up a tent and stay forever.”

“I’m... No. It’s not... there’s just...” Her words and phrases come out disjointed—almost staccato—as though she can barely complete a thought right now.

I glance down at my watch. “We’d be pushing things if we stayed here too much longer, if you still want to get to the airport early for that flight.”

“No—I mean, that’s just it. I don’t want to leave Hawai‘i. I think...” She gives a barely perceptible nod, probably more to herself than to me. “I think I need to stay.”

“I thought your work—”

“Well, it’s... not as important as this.”

“This? You mean, Maggie’s wedding?”

She looks at me, perplexed, like her eyes are asking me, “*Maggie? Maggie who?*”

I frown. I’ve been told I’m a hell of a kisser. But I’ve never seen it affect a woman in this way.

“Uh, yeah,” she replies after a confusing beat. “And... I need to... I mean... I owe you dinner anyway, Matt. And I’m a woman who pays her debts.”

I smirk. “After that kiss, you can consider the debt paid in full.”

I’m glad to hear that comment tug a giggle out of her.

“Just the same, are you... free tonight?” she asks.

“Well, I don’t know.” I fake a lack of enthusiasm. “I was going to have a bourbon with Ryder. But I *guess* I can change my plans.”

“Did you play this hard to get ten years ago?” she asks, her lips hinting of a smirk.

“I think you know the answer to that.”

CHAPTER 11



~ LILY ~

“Then you *kissed* him?”

At the end of my long-winded confession, I watch my best friend’s face contort in a way that I can’t even interpret as she blurts her question, then tacks on, “So, hold on a sec. I’m still trying to catch up. First, he gives you a ride to the airport that turns into an afternoon together with some dog.”

“Bonnie. Such a sweetheart. Maybe you and Ryder need a dog? I have photos.”

She lifts a finger in reprimand. “Don’t distract me with doggo-cuteness. Then, you find out that he didn’t give you a fake number all those years ago. Then you miss three flights ___”

“I didn’t miss them. I was denied entry onto them,” I feel the need to specify as if that makes a difference.

She ignores me. “And then you spend the night with Matt, go swimming the next day with him, and *kiss* him?”

I cringe. “It was a very busy twenty-four hours.”

“*I’ll* say. And I’m only hearing about all this now?”

Defensive, my jaw tightens. “Hey, I called you from the airport and you didn’t pick up. And then this morning you texted that you wouldn’t have much cell coverage.”

“Geez, Lily. Next time, send smoke signals if you have to. This is epic.”

“An epic disaster you mean?”

“It depends on how you look at it.” Her eyes narrow on me for a moment. “You could have stayed in *our* room, you know. We’ve got a sofa bed.”

“No way. It’s your wedding week.”

“Ryder and I don’t have to have sex in our room every night we’re here.” She pauses. “Well, we don’t *need* to,” she corrects and then thrums her fingertips on the table between us. “So... since you took *Matt’s* offer rather than spending the night with *me*, I can’t help thinking that maybe you *wanted* to spend the night with him.”

“I didn’t.” Then I cringe, uncomfortable. “Oh, God, do you think I did? I mean, maybe... I did kind of convince myself that it would be good to spend more time with him. It *is* smart, right?”

“To spend more time with him, yeah. But *kissing* him?” She shakes her head. “Or did he kiss you?”

“I’m not sure,” I waffle and then feel my shoulders slump. “It’s like we were just in the water together, sharing this amazing experience, and then suddenly, this wave comes along, and we’re lip-locked.”

“Was it just like... a quick kiss or swapping bodily fluids type of kiss?”

“You have a way with words,” I say, raising a critical eyebrow.

She grins. “You’re deflecting. Answer the question.”

“What do you *think* it was? I mean, it’s just been so damn long, Maggie. I don’t get to kiss many guys.”

There’s pity in her eyes. “And I never understood that.”

I glower. “Says the woman who isn’t a single mom. I mean, Melody and I lived with my parents for five years. And even now, if I manage to find the time to go on a date, he usually bolts the instant he hears I have a daughter.”

“And there you were, in a remote lagoon in paradise with a man who looks like an aftershave commercial. Yeah... I guess I could see how that kiss could happen.”

My head falls backward on my shoulders. “Ugh. I just kept trying to steer the conversation toward what needs to be said. *Really*, I did,” I add more to convince myself than her. “But my brain doesn’t work right around him.”

“You know, I don’t think your *brain* had anything to do with it.”

“Hey.” My tone is warning since it sounds like an insult.

“I’m serious. I think it’s your *heart* that’s doing it. Because maybe all that attraction you felt for him way-back-when is just as strong now as it was ten years ago, and you’re falling for him. Hell, who wouldn’t? Maybe you two are *meant*.”

“Meant. For what?”

“For each other, idiot.” She gestures as though she’s going to smack me. Then her expression shifts from playful to serious. “You need to tell him quickly though.”

“I know.”

“No... I mean, you really need to tell him *quickly*,” she repeats, sounding ominous.

“What are you not saying?” I eye her suspiciously.

“Well, for starters, Ryder figured it out.”

I feel all the blood drain from my face. “About Matt being Melody’s dad?”

She rolls her eyes. “No. The meaning of the universe,” she says sarcastically. “*Of course* about Matt being Mel’s dad.”

“When?”

“Last night. After you and I talked yesterday, I told Ryder to not tell Matt that you had a daughter back home. He didn’t think anything of it. He actually thought you were attracted to Matt and didn’t want to drop the kid-bomb on him until you knew him better. But then they talked last night—”

I feel my gut twist. “When exactly?”

“I don’t know. I was out at the lū’au. I’m guessing it was before he picked you up at the airport. And Matt mentioned that he knew you from about ten or so years ago. And... well, Ryder did the math and realized how much Matt looks like Melody.”

“Do you think he’ll keep his mouth shut?”

“Sure, but he’s a crappy liar, Lily. I think it’s from all those polygraphs he has to take for his security clearance. So if Matt starts asking him questions, things could get complicated real quick.”

I nibble my lower lip, thinking. “We’re going out to dinner tonight. I’ll tell him then.”

“In public?” She practically flinches. “Oof. Not a good idea. I think it might be better with a little privacy. Maybe order room service?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“And, uh, I think you should spend the night with Ryder and me after you tell him, okay? Matt will need some time to sift through his emotions, same as you did ten years ago. So call me when you’re done.”

“Pfft.” I make a sound of disbelief. “You just don’t trust me in the same room with him for too long.”

She snorts. “The real question is, do you trust yourself?”

I think back to the kiss today, playing in my head those glorious moments when I was in his arms as if the memory is a scene in my favorite movie and I simply can’t get enough of it.

“The look on your face gives me your answer,” she says wisely.

“Yeah. This attraction I feel for him is like... quicksand. The more I struggle to pull myself out, the deeper I get pulled in.” I let my cheeks puff out in a sigh. “You’re sure Ryder won’t mind me staying with you two tonight? I called the front

desk and they put me on a wait list in case there's a cancellation. But I'm not feeling confident since it's —"

"—whale watching season," she finishes for me. "I've been hearing that, too, every time I try to book some wedding activity. And Ryder won't mind you on our sofa for as long as you need it. It's his last chance to have two women in his hotel suite at once." She giggles at her joke and then takes my hand. "You know, if you didn't share a child with Matt, this whole thing between the two of you would actually be romantic."

I scoff. "This would *not* be a good plotline for that friend of yours."

"Freya?" She laughs. "I'm not so sure. Hell, she could turn Armageddon into a romance."

CHAPTER 12



- MATT -

I'm no different from other men. Women confuse the hell out of me.

So after that kiss we shared, when Lily suggested she order room service tonight rather than going out to a restaurant, I was pretty happy to connect the dots and envision where this night might lead.

Then she drops the bomb that she'll be spending the night with Ryder and Maggie, and confusion ensued.

No complaints, just confusion.

I'm okay with it. I genuinely enjoy spending time with Lily now that she doesn't think I'm an a-hole. Regardless of when or whether we have sex, I think there's something worth exploring here.

But I'd probably prefer to eat at a restaurant if she wants to keep tonight G-rated. I'm not into torture. And God knows that kiss we shared shook me to my core.

It reminded me... I can *feel* again. And that's something I feared I had lost forever. Like when you're too close to mortar fire and you can't hear people for a while afterward. Then suddenly, you hear voices... sounds... and there's this rush of relief in knowing you aren't irreparably damaged.

So it's no wonder that hearing Lily suggest room service had me feeling like a puppy who just heard the word "treat," until I learned she'd be headed back to Maggie and Ryder's room afterward.

But regardless of how this evening will end, I'll admit that having a steak on my lanai is ten times better than eating in some crowded restaurant.

"You really didn't have to buy me dinner, Lily."

"You won it, fair and square."

The conversation—as light as it is—never lulls as we eat. Sometimes we talk about the scenery in front of us—a view that is nothing short of breathtaking. We talk about Bonnie and all the other dogs we saw at the shelter yesterday, and how as the sun sets, it's hard to think of that sweet girl all by herself in her kennel. We talk about places I'd love to show her on the island, and about Maggie and Ryder and the wedding that I'm glad to hear she's planning on attending again.

And we talk about the past ten years—the things we've done, people we've met, places we've seen.

And it's when we talk about this, that I notice how the flirtation in her eyes dissipates and her brow pinches with worry.

“Matt... I...”

Then her voice trails.

She looks as serious as a heart attack, as my dad always says.

“What?”

“You know, I, uh, I had really wanted to call you, way-back-when. You had said you were going on a camping trip with your friends, and you’d be off the grid for a while.”

I smile at the memory. “That was a hell of a trip—a ton of fun until we got back in the car together and realized how bad we smelled.”

She laughs, but it sounds forced. “Yeah. I was waiting until that was over. I didn’t want you to get a message while you were with your friends. I was afraid I’d look... clingy.”

“I get it. I remember those rules of dating we all stuck to in our twenties.”

“Yeah. But then, after you got back from your trip...” Her eyes drift out to the water, and when I hear that sound of a whale breaching, I find it curious that it doesn’t seem to bring her any joy right now.

I shrug. “Things got busy. I understand. Look, you don’t need to feel guilty about not calling right away. That was a lifetime ago.”

“A lifetime. Yeah. It was. A lifetime.”

Damn, she needs to lighten up. “Don’t beat yourself up about it,” I add. “Besides, now that you’re sticking around this

week, you might discover I'm a much better catch now."

She blushes. "Well, that was a pretty impressive kiss."

"I was thinking the same thing. Being around you kind of makes me feel like I can erase the last ten years of my life. I like that idea."

Her pensive expression shifts and her mouth curves downward. "I wouldn't want to erase them. I mean... I'd love to have the energy that I used to. The ambition. But there have been some things..." She pauses. "There have been *a lot* of moments that I wouldn't trade for anything."

I envy how certain she is when she says that. "Opposite for me. I'd trade anything to erase a whole helluva lot of moments," I let slip and then shake my head, hating that I said it. But it's true. For all the good times with Kirsten, I'd trade every one of them to erase the bad times. For me. But mostly for her.

Her eyes are curious. "Really? What is it you want to erase? Something that happened when you deployed?"

I scoff a little because people always assume things like that. "No. It's nothing having to do with the Army. I, uh, I got married."

Something clouds her expression. "Married?" she asks.

I see her automatically glance down to my naked ring finger.

"I met her a few years after I graduated. We were engaged and then..." My voice falters, remembering the moment when

we took our vows with no one to witness the event except our parents and an Army chaplain. “We got married.”

“Do you have kids?”

“No,” I answer quickly, hating the sting of regret I feel when I do. After I lost Kirsten, there were many times I had wished I had a child with her. Someone to give me purpose. Someone who would make me feel like all of her hadn’t been lost forever. “Uh, that would have been impossible, actually. She was going through some pretty intense chemo treatments throughout our marriage.”

“Chemo?”

“Yeah. We got engaged and then about six months later, she was diagnosed with cancer. We got married that following year while she was still going through treatments. We didn’t want to wait anymore.”

I find it odd right now to realize that this is the first time I’ve talked to a woman about this other than my mom or sister. I suppose it makes sense that it would be Lily. She knows the man I was before. She’s probably detected the changes in me that have come with life experience.

“After a five-year battle, she finally lost,” I say.

“Oh, Matt. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks,” I reply. “Kirsten,” I add, feeling the need to share her name because I never want her to be regarded as nothing more than a statistic, an unfortunate casualty in the war against cancer. “Her name was Kirsten.”

There are tears in Lily's eyes. "My God, Matt. I had no idea."

"Yeah. Cancer is fucking brutal. And frankly, so are the treatments. So to see her go through all that... yeah, I'd erase it all if I could. And I'd trade anything—give up every good memory I had with her—hell, I'd give up more than that—if it meant that she could have dodged that bullet."

Scooting closer to me, she takes my hand and I notice how soothing her touch is to me. Her hand in mine feels almost restorative somehow, like the way it felt when the whale song was flowing through me.

I dislike how Lily has whittled her way past my tough guy exterior. "I guess no one comes through life unscathed," I add. "But I thought *I'd* be the one getting battle scars. Not her."

"I'm just glad she had you, Matt. She needed you. *She* needed you more than..." Her face clouds over. "Matt, I—"

She reaches for my other hand and there's pain in her expression—pain that I don't want to see.

"What?"

"My, uh, my life hasn't quite been like yours these past ten years. But they've been kind of... difficult in their own way and..."

When she pauses and I see agony in her eyes, all I want to do is make it disappear for her.

"And maybe I was brought back into your life now because *you* need me," I suggest, touching my palms to her cheeks and realizing that the *opposite* is true.

I need *her*.

The feel of her skin against my hands, so warm, unleashes something much hotter inside of me. Desire. Desperation. And something more—something deeper that just isn't appropriate to feel for a woman I barely know.

But whatever it is, it fuels a kind of surge that demands me to taste her again like I did earlier today.

I search her eyes for any hint of caution in her gaze on me that would make me think I should stop. But I see nothing but a raw need that seems to match my own.

So I lean into her.

The kiss we share is tentative. Yet still the brush of her lips against mine unwittingly sends me a shock of heat that makes all my blood drain south.

Gentlemen, start your engines.

Then our mouths explore each other, first ever so cautiously, and then with a searing passion.

Her hands rake through my hair, pulling me closer, as though to tell me that she can't escape this pull between us any more than I can.

And when I feel the silky tresses of her hair, it's eerily familiar to me. How can I remember so clearly now the way her soft hair felt between my fingers so long ago? Such an intricate detail of that night that seemed to be lost in all the noise of this past decade. Yet when I cradle her head in my hands like this, I remember it so clearly.

There's no reluctance I sense from her now, and certainly none from me. It is inexplicably primal—and urgent in a way that stuns me. I should have more control than this. I'm not that kid in my twenties she once knew. But when I'm with her, I feel like I'm transported backward to a time in my life when instinct drove me to simply feel and take and savor.

So I give into it completely, my hands finding the nape of her neck, angling her slightly so that when my tongue presses against her lips to part them, I can explore her more fully.

She tastes different tonight than she did this morning. There is no saltwater on her lips. No chill of the ocean that lingers on her skin. This time, I can taste the Chardonnay she's been drinking, the bacon-wrapped scallops that she's been raving about, and that underlying essence of her that I swear hasn't changed in ten years.

Her hands stray to my back, which is all the inspiration I need to lift her onto my lap, and the pressure of her ass against my cock makes me want more from her. So much more.

I'd give my last breath to feel her beneath me.

Our tongues tangle. Our hands explore. Our heat fuses us together in a way that eclipses anything I've felt before. *Anything...* and I should feel as though I'm betraying Kirsten's memory by thinking that.

But I don't. I can't.

I feel like all the stars have shifted just so that they could align for this moment, so that we can explore the kind of connection between us that I can't even put into words.

The privacy of our balcony allows my hand to slide up her shirt, first touching nothing more than the bare skin just above her waistline. But when she angles her body, I seize the opportunity, brushing my fingers against the lace of her bra, and I flick a thumb against the hard pebble of her nipple.

God, I want to kiss her there, to draw a circle around her nipple with my tongue before taking her in my mouth and making her purr and moan so much more than I can with just my fingers.

I need this, my body demands so fervently that I'm not even sure I didn't say the words aloud.

So when she parts her lips from mine briefly and whispers, "Want to go inside?" I'm ready to swear that every cell in my body is doing a fist pump.

Without a word so that I don't accidentally shatter this moment, I stand from my chair with her still snug in my hold and take her inside to the bed I'm hoping she'll share with me... all night.

CHAPTER 13



~ LILY ~

This is wrong.

I can't let this happen.

I need to tell him first.

All the words that should be in the forefront of my brain right now have been relegated to its deepest corners. And I nudge them away further still, their voices becoming fainter until I can barely hear logic at all.

All I can hear is the whisper of a demand—words that tell me that he needs this as much as I do. The words might be my own or his—I just don't know. But they scream inside my brain.

My heartbeat quickens in my chest as he sets me down on the bed and blankets me with his body. I can feel his erection behind his shorts and instinctively, my pelvis arches, aching to press against him, searching for a satisfaction I haven't felt from a man in so very long.

As his mouth parts from my lips and traces a line of kisses along the curve of my jaw to my ear and then down to my neck, stopping just above the neckline of my shirt, I'm thinking I should have listened to Maggie years ago.

For all the times she pressured me to get out more—to “use it or lose it” as she'd tell me with a giggle—right now, I'm wishing I had.

Because then this wouldn't seem so surreal that I'm lightheaded, with thick, hot ropes of desire tangling themselves in my brain as his hand slides up my shirt and cups a breast, kneading my flesh.

But Maggie could never understand how hard it is for a woman like me to find... *this*. This feeling I get as he lifts my shirt and then toys with my nipple with his tongue through the thin material of my bra.

This... this is different from what I generally get on the rare dates that I've had this past decade.

I could count on one hand the number of sex partners I've had since becoming a mom.

No, worse than that.

I can count on one thumb.

And that one brief, exceptionally dull relationship certainly didn't inspire me to search for more of the same after he decided he didn't want to raise someone else's child.

It was, in fact, more of a relief when we parted ways.

There was never this kind of heat. And there certainly was never this sense of urgency that has me parting my legs like I am right now, bending one knee so that I can savor the pressure of that ridge of Matt against the center of my need.

Given the options of men around me back then, and the vibrator I keep in my nightstand, celibacy honestly wasn't that hard for me.

Until now.

As this slow seduction makes my brain flicker and senses fire, I'm realizing that anything less than sex with Matt right now is simply unacceptable.

The lace of my bra feels itchy, annoying suddenly, and wanting myself free of it, I move to unfasten it and toss it to the side of my bed. And I'm rewarded with his mouth and hands exploring me in a way that I simply can't replicate in those desperate evenings I've spent with technology between my legs.

Yes, I need this. And at this moment, I can't remember a single reason why I wouldn't just feast myself on the buffet he's offered me.

He strokes my cheek with one hand and leans slightly to my side as his other hand moves away from my breast—*No, don't stop doing that!*—and then opens the button and zipper of my shorts—*Yes, please do that!*

His fingers slide beneath my panties and the moisture between my legs betrays me. There's no playing hard to get

now. He knows exactly how much I want him. He finds my clit and...

Oh my God!

His thumb stays planted just there, pressing into me with a glorious rhythm as another finger moves downward more, and then slides into me.

I gasp from the immediacy of the orgasm it triggers, crying out wantonly. My pelvis presses upward wanting so much more of him inside of me than just his fingers. As I buck shamelessly, his mouth suckles on my breast, licking, nipping, making every neuron fire in my brain from the onslaught of sensations.

I'd swear the climax he pulls from me is going to last forever, holding me firm in its grasp for longer than I thought possible. But when I finally seem to fall downward from the clouds, the craving that gushes through me is only for *more*.

More of this.

More of him.

And when I look into his eyes, I know he feels the same. For all that he's gone through this past decade we've been apart, it seems like he needs this as much as I do.

I'd let him do anything—*anything*—to my body right now. I'd sign away all my rights for just this one night when I can feel him inside of me.

When he tugs his shirt over his head, I trace downward along the hard ripples of muscles to the waistline of his shorts, and I unfasten them to tell him exactly what I want.

He reaches into his pocket to get a condom before tossing his shorts on the floor to the side of the bed. And I see him—and oh my, I had forgotten how big of a man he is.

I need this. I hear the words in me again, and as he slides on the condom, I swear he's thinking the same thing.

The air stills between us as his body covers mine, and I feel the pressure of the tip of him at my entry. Don't rethink this, I want to say to him. Don't ask me questions. Don't say anything at all... or my mind might suddenly recall why this shouldn't happen right now.

Why was that, anyway?

I can't remember. I like it that way.

I lift my head upward, needing to close the gap between us. Needing to press my lips against his so he won't say anything that I don't want to hear right now.

But he doesn't kiss me. Instead, he asks me the unexpected. "Do you need this as much as I do right now?"

Perfect. I can answer that. "Yes," I say, and in reward I feel the slow but powerful thrust of him inside me, stretching me, making me gasp in a way I haven't in so long.

Yes. Yes! One thousand percent, yes, I need this.

My head swims in unexpected emotions as his cock presses deep inside of me, then slides outward, and into me again.

His rhythm stays slow, controlled, as he dips his mouth to a breast. I rake my fingers into his short hair, holding him

there, wanting this flood of sensation to never end.

When he lifts his lips from me to speak, I want to weep. I don't want him to stop. But then the words he says light another fire inside of me at a time I am already consumed by flames.

“There are so many ways I want to make you come tonight, Lily,” he whispers. “So many ways...” His voice trails and then, when he's at his deepest, he presses even harder, his body adding pressure against the tiny nub of me that is the center of my need.

When he does it, my channel tightens up around his cock, as though to pull him in even deeper, and I feel myself climbing up a spiral of heat.

Again, he slides outward and then into me so deep I gasp. It hurts in the most glorious way—taking him in as thoroughly as this. And each time my clit feels the pressure from him, my breath quickens, and I claw my way toward a climax. Then, just as I'm about to explode, he slides outward making me whimper with unrequited need.

It's a slow, sumptuous tease, each time bringing me closer to the peak of my desire, then denying me the chance to reach the apex. He watches me as he does, seeming to enjoy the way my eyelashes are fluttering, my breath is coming in sharp pants, and the way I lick my lips in invitation, hoping to feel his mouth on me again.

When he dips his tongue into me, he slams into my body one more time, his groin grinding against me until I scream into his mouth as an orgasm splinters through me.

Still deep inside of me, I feel my channel seize up around him, pulsating, riding the wave and enjoying the way it's prolonged by him still so painfully hard inside of me.

I cry out his name as I buck, wishing he'd come right along with me, wanting that sense of connection that comes with perfect timing.

But he holds out, his eyes seeming almost content to simply watch me right now as the last aftershocks of the climax flow through me.

"Why didn't you...?" Breathless, I can't even finish the question.

He takes his time in answering, planting light kisses to my lips, my cheek, my ear, my shoulder.

The delicate caress of his lips is so incongruent to the rigidity of him inside of me, and I swear even *that* thought makes more moisture spill from me.

He senses it, and moves in and out of me again, slowly at first, as though to give me time to recover. Then faster, with a sense of urgency in his eyes, he starts to take me again.

"Why didn't I, you had asked?" he reminds me. Then he grasps one of my hands, kisses it on the inside of my palm and then moves my hand to one side of the pillow. He does the same with the other, so that I'm pinned down by him in a way that makes my desire heighten to a point I didn't think possible.

I'm trapped by him. Blessedly, beautifully trapped.

I whimper, helpless to free myself and enjoying every second of it.

“I *told* you I was going to make you come in so many ways,” he finally reminds me.

He slides out and in again in that primal, ancient rhythm that my body knows instinctively. But this time, when he’s deep in me, he shifts slightly, and I feel the tip of him press into that elusive G-spot I had always assumed was more legend than truth.

I gasp, stunned that he could manage to pull another orgasm from me so quickly after the last one. When it finally frees me from its clasp, I breathe out, “And that’s one of the ways, I take it?”

Warmth trickles through me as I see the slow smile appear on his lips.

“One of many,” he answers, loosening his grip on me as we tumble one way and then another.

I’m on top briefly, then him, then me again, until we’ve tangled ourselves in the silky sheets. I almost laugh at one point when I realize that our heads have ended up at the foot of the bed. But then, when he kisses me again, all the amusement melts away and is replaced by a searing heat.

I feel him throbbing inside of me, and desire whips through my veins again.

I pull him closer and wrap my legs around him, locking my ankles together, and I savor the sensation of him thrusting into me again, as though to possess me.

There is only raw need now from him. No gentle kisses, no patience. Just the feel of being taken by him.

“There are so many ways I want to make you come tonight, Lily,” he had said to me. And I can’t help imagining all of them, and hoping for even more than my imagination can conjure.

I can give myself tonight. I can give myself *to him* tonight. All night.

“Faster. Harder.” I breathe out the ragged words because it’s easier to say them than to express what I *really* want. *I want to feel you give in the same way that I’ve experienced tonight. I want to feel your body react to me so that I know that you need this as much as I do.*

And he gives me what I want, driving himself into me until I’m slick with sweat, with my soul seeming to ride up on one of those glorious ocean waves I’ve been enjoying here.

Riding it, letting it tug me to its crest, until I cry out at the same time he does with one final hard thrust.

My soul sinks back into me even as the tiny aftershocks inside of me continue to tug at his cock.

It’s minutes until he speaks. Yet as surreal as the concept of passing time is to me right now, it might have been hours.

“I’m thinking that was *better* than it was ten years ago. Agreed?” he asks me with a wide, satisfied grin.

His words rattle me to my core—the mere mention of what we shared ten years ago making me think of the child that resulted.

My daughter.

Our daughter. My brain, still fogged with hormones, struggles to form an answer. But at my silence, he shifts his body, making a path of kisses from my mouth... downward. In between each kiss he lifts his head to speak.

“Your silence...” He plants a kiss along the curve of my breast.

“... tells me...” Another kiss, this time on a nipple, making my breath suck inward.

“... that I have more work to do.” He teases me with another kiss, this time just below my navel.

And he parts my legs...

...and makes me forget absolutely everything.

CHAPTER 14



- MATT -

I feel a Cheshire cat smile spread across my face before I even open my eyes.

Pure fucking bliss.

Outside, I hear the ocean waves along with the songs of those birds Lily loves. A cool morning breeze tickles my skin, reminding me that we left the door to the lanai open last night. And the salty aroma of the sea makes my nose twitch slightly—the same scent I love that makes me wonder sometimes why I didn’t choose to join the Navy rather than the Army.

My body is Jell-O, with every muscle pliant in a way that can only be the result of a night of unbridled sex.

Shit—and I nearly didn’t even *come* to this wedding?

Bumping into Lily has turned this into one of the best vacations of my life.

I *like* her. Funny, that. When guys look back on the sexual conquests they had in their twenties, they generally furrow their brows wondering, “*What was I thinking?*”

But after this time with Lily, I feel a ridiculous amount of pride. Even back then, I had damn good taste in women.

Eyes still shut, I slide my hand along the soft sheets. When I feel that Lily's side of the mattress is cold and empty, my eyes fling open, struck by a momentary thought that maybe I was just dreaming.

I mean, our situation *is* a little hard to believe. I bump into a woman from ten years ago on a remote island and then end up having a night of earth-shattering sex?

Hell, that sounds like the kind of romantic tripe that I catch my sister watching on TV anytime we're both visiting our parents for the holidays.

But then I spot several condom wrappers scattered near me.

Nope. I definitely wasn't dreaming.

Another breeze blows in, making me glance toward the door to the lanai. She must be outside. So I find my shorts on the floor, slip them on, and join her.

When a guy has sex with a woman seven times in one night—maybe eight, but I lost count—there are a lot of expressions he hopes to see on her face the morning after.

Satisfaction, of course.

Exhaustion, showing I did my job thoroughly.

Desire, because there's more where that came from.

But what I'm seeing on Lily's face right now is none of the above.

She looks like someone just shot her dog. Her elbows are on her knees and she's cradling her forehead with her two hands.

What the hell?

"Lily? You okay?"

She gasps a little as her back straightens, clearly not expecting my presence just then. And with her face lifted toward mine, I can see remnants of tears on her cheeks. "Oh, God. Matt. I'm sorry. I thought you were still asleep."

I sit beside her and take her hand. "Hey. What's wrong? Bad news from home?"

I'm immediately thinking of that job that tried to pull her away this week. Hope she didn't get fired because she stuck around here in Hawai'i.

"No. No, I'm so sorry. I—didn't mean for you to see me this way."

"You know, we just had sex a few hours ago. Seeing you in tears now is not doing much for my ego."

She makes a sound that is reminiscent of a laugh, but not quite. "No, it has nothing to do with that. Oh God..." She's dead silent for at least a full minute. "It actually has everything to do with last night," she finally says, her tone bereft. "And... ten years ago even. And the fact that I clearly have as little control around you now as I did back then."

"That's a good thing from where I'm sitting," I offer, hoping the sentiment will be contagious. But from the look on her face, it apparently isn't.

“I needed to take things slow with you. And I didn’t.” She shakes her head furiously for a moment. “No. I needed to not let this happen at all, slow or not.”

“The kind of chemistry we have together is a little hard to fight. But—” I pause. She wants to take a step back. That’s doable. We did kind of slam our foot to the accelerator. “I get it. Let’s rewind a bit. Take things slower.”

“Rewind...” Again, her voice trails as though that word means something more to her than it does to me.

I wait for a follow-up, but when I hear nothing, I squeeze her hand and suggest, “I kind of kept you up last night. How about you take a nap this morning? You can have the whole suite to yourself. You can have a little space.”

Her brow pinches. “No, I... I mean, maybe. But I need to tell you something first. You’re... a really great guy, Matt. I never would have guessed that.”

“Seeing as you thought I was the kind of guy who gives a fake number to a woman after a hook-up, I can kind of understand that.”

“But even before that... before I called you... I didn’t know you very well.”

I shrug. “There’s only so much you can learn in one night. I didn’t know you very well either.”

“Yeah. Because if I had, I would have called you sooner than I did.”

Her tone is unnerving.

“Well, I was kind of an idiot in my twenties,” I say, hoping to lighten her mood. “So you didn’t miss much.”

Her eyes shut, and her lips press together tightly, forming a thin, straight line. She reaches into her pocket, pulls out her phone, and taps a few times.

“But you did,” she says softly and hands her phone to me. “You did miss a lot.”

I look down and see a photo of a girl, her brown hair pulled tightly into a ponytail, and dark eyes that seem to dance with humor. I have no idea who she is or why I’m looking at her right now. Bewildered, I ask, “Who’s this?”

She takes in an audible breath and then says, “She’s my daughter.”

“You have a daughter?” I glance down at the kid again, and then back up to Lily. Okay. This was unexpected. But certainly not a dealbreaker. “That’s great. I’m sorry you didn’t think you could tell me about her.”

“Matt.” She says my name like it’s a complete sentence. Then there’s frustration in her eyes. “Matt, she’s ten. Well, almost. But she likes to round up.”

I chuckle. “Smart kid. I used to do the same when—” I stop suddenly and feel this ache in the pit of my gut as though someone just punched me.

No.

No way.

Palms suddenly sweating, I look at the phone in my hand again. The image of the girl reminds me of those old pictures I've seen of my mom when she was younger. She even reminds me of my sister.

And me. Her eyes are exactly like mine.

“Oh my God.” I breathe out the words slowly, softly, finding myself unable to pull my gaze from the phone for at least a few moments of dead silence. In that time, questions simmer inside of me until they reach a full boil. I look at Lily for answers.

Her eyes are filled with tears. “I found out I was pregnant while you were still on your camping trip with your friends. I was so scared. Confused. I didn't know you. I couldn't guess what you'd say. And I didn't want to hear you tell me not to have her or to give her up.”

“I *never* would have said that. Never,” I insist.

“But we only spent hours together. And you were so young—wanting adventure and travel and a career in the Army.” Her eyes are distant, lost in a memory. “And *I* was so young. I was terrified of how vulnerable I felt. How easily I could be influenced. Because ever since I found out, I just *knew*—it's like I could picture her, Matt. It's like I knew she was meant to be in my life. And I was so scared that someone might tell me otherwise. It took two months for me to even tell my parents. And then when I finally got the courage to call you...”

“Someone else answered the call,” I finish for her.

The pages of my memory flip backward, remembering where I must have been then. I was in the Middle East—my first deployment as an officer. I was high on adrenaline and ego. I won't deny that. I was entirely focused on my career and the mission and staying alive, which sometimes was as much as I could handle.

I glance down at the photo.

And I missed... *this*.

"She's mine," I say, not really to Lily. More to myself or to the destiny that stole her from me for ten years. Because with those eyes, there's no denying it. God *damn*. She has my eyes exactly.

"Yes. I mean, if you want a DNA test, we can—"

"No!" I cut her off quickly. "God, no. I—I know she's mine. And there's no way I'd ever let *her* think that I had any question of it." I set down the phone on the small table in front of us, my eyes still fixed on her image.

I thread my fingers into my hair and press both my palms against my skull as though to keep my head from exploding. "That's why you were going to leave early. You weren't going to tell me."

Anger trickles through my veins at the realization. I'd already missed the first ten years of her life. Was Lily really going to let me miss more?

"I thought you were the same bastard who gave me a fake number. When I got home, I planned to do some research. Find out more about you."

“To figure out if I was worthy of my daughter?”

Her features harden. “You’re damn right I wanted to find that out. For ten years, I’ve been hating you. Every night of no sleep when she was a baby. Every emergency room visit. Every bill that came in that I struggled to pay. Every year—the first five years of her life—that I had to live with my parents because otherwise I’d be having to choose between food and rent. I hated you through all of it. You—you were the man who knocked me up and gave me a fake number.” Her back straightens defensively. “I raised a strong, smart, and confident girl—one who’s surrounded by acceptance and love. There was no way I was going to just let the kind of guy I *thought* you were into her life without at least thinking about it.”

Her gaze on me is stiff, cold—warrior-like. And suddenly, strangely, all I feel is this wave of gratitude. “You were protecting her.”

“Yes,” she practically hisses. “Like any mom would.”

“You’ve been protecting her for ten years.” On your own, I add in my head, feeling shame from it, as though something in me should have known instinctively that I had a child who needed me.

Emergency room visits, she had said? Shit. What was I doing while my kid was in the emergency room, I wonder? What was I doing all those times my daughter might have been crying? Or needed a ride somewhere? Or when some kid bullied her at school like they did to me when I was her age?

I pick up the phone again and stare at the image silently until I manage to conjure the words, “Thank you for that.”

“What?” She looks bewildered.

“Thank you. You’ve obviously been a great mom for her.”
I press my lips together.

“I try,” she says, sounding exhausted and overwhelmed. “I really do.”

“I’d like to be in her life,” I say cautiously.

“Her home is in Los Angeles. With me. With the only family she’s ever known,” she replies with knee-jerk swiftness.

Annoyed, my eyes unconsciously roll. “Don’t get defensive, dammit. I’m not that guy, remember? I’m not the guy you thought I was,” I remind her. “Of course, she stays with you. In Los Angeles. With the only family she’s ever known,” I repeat her words back to her, hating the truth in them—hating that my daughter hasn’t even met my parents or my sister. God, they’ll be both elated and heartbroken at this news. “But I’d like to see her. I’d like to be a part of her life and support her.”

“Thank you, but... we’ve done fine on our own.”

I frown, remembering how my parents used to struggle with bills. “I know that,” I tell her. “But I don’t want you feeling like you’re alone anymore.”

She opens her mouth to reply, but snaps it shut again until she says, “Um... the front desk said they’d call me if they have a cancellation. And Maggie said I could stay with them until a room opens up.”

My brow furrows. “Why would you feel like you need to do that?”

“You deserve some time to process this, Matt. And... so do I.”

I understand it. But I hate that she wants to be apart at a time when everything in me wants to keep her close. I might tell myself that it’s just because I want to learn more about my daughter. Right now, having Lily near me—talking to me, maybe even showing me more photos of the years I missed—is my best chance at recreating in some small measure a piece of what I lost.

Yet it’s more than that.

I want to keep Lily here because she’s been through enough alone. It’s time for her to know there’s someone else on this team.

But apparently, as I look at the stubbornness in her eyes, I’m not on that committee.

She presses her lips together tightly for a moment before saying, “I should have told you before we...” Then she falls silent, glancing in the direction of the bed through the sliding glass door. “I tried. I really did. What is it about being near you that just makes my brain shut down?”

Despite everything, I feel a slight smile curve my lips. “As you might recall, my brain wasn’t exactly in control either. But—I hope you don’t regret it. Because I don’t,” I find myself admitting. “It was the first time I felt like maybe I was ready to start a new chapter in my life.”

Her expression changes, and I'm not sure if it's a grin or a wince. Maybe a combination of both. "Bet you didn't guess that next chapter would involve a ten-year-old," she says wryly.

"No. I never would have guessed that one." I stare into the girl's eyes again. And it's like my entire life shifts—as if the landscape of my future is wiped clean and replaced with something new, something foreign.

I have a child.

A daughter.

"I'm so sorry, Matt. I wish I had called you earlier, ten years ago."

I scoff. "And I wish I had bought a normal cell phone back then like everyone else." My brow creases. "But I promise you this—I'm going to make things easier for you. For you and for...oh my God. I don't even know her name."

"Melody."

Melody. The word sucks the breath from my lungs as though putting a name to the photo now has made it so much more real.

"What does she know about me?" I dare to ask and brace myself, worried I won't like the answer—and already counting down to the moment when I can prove to my daughter that everything she knows about me is wrong.

CHAPTER 15



~ LILY ~

I sit on the beach and stroke Bonnie's fur, the sensation of it so soothing—so necessary—as I feel Maggie's eyes on me. She reaches over the dog in between us and touches my back in support.

“You're going to get through this, Lily,” she tells me—words I swear I've heard from her before.

How strange it is—and yet how natural—that Maggie is with me for this. I can't help thinking it. She's been with me for all the big moments. When I tried to call Matt ten years ago. When I told my parents. When I packed all my belongings and had them shipped back to Los Angeles.

It almost seems fitting, I suppose, that Maggie is here when I've found Matt again.

Bonnie leans against me, showing her own brand of support.

My instinct to have this dog with me today was spot-on. There's little in this world more comforting than a dog, I'm

discovering.

After we talked a while longer and I shared more photos of Melody, Matt and I parted ways today—both of us needing some space this afternoon.

I needed to see my best friend and inform her that I can now safely attend her wedding without fear of my reality being upended. Because, well, my reality already *is* upended.

And Matt? He needed a bourbon.

“I notice you seem to be avoiding the elephant in the room,” Maggie says.

“The elephant? You mean other than the one about me telling Matt that I had his child ten years ago?”

“Yeah, the other elephant. You had sex with him, didn’t you?”

My eyes widen, and I blush. Dammit. I didn’t want to talk to her about this yet. I look at her in question. “How the hell did you know that?”

“I’m your best friend. You don’t think I could tell?”

“That’s borderline creepy. I can’t tell when you’ve had sex with Ryder.”

“Well, duh, because it’s always happening. The post-sex glow is the norm for me since he came along. But you—you’re looking a little too limber and flushed this morning for a celibate woman. So, you either took up yoga or you had sex with him.”

“I had no idea it showed.” I touch my cheeks. “It—it shouldn’t have happened.”

“How can you say that? Well, unless it sucked, of course. Did it?”

I say nothing, unable to admit just how amazing the sex was last night.

“That good, huh?” Maggie says with a giggle at my silence.

I breathe out a slow sigh. “That *great*. I remember thinking he was good way-back-when. But he learned a thing or two—or twenty—since we were last together.” My shoulders sag as I look out to the ocean. “But I didn’t want things to happen that way. I was going to tell him at dinner like I planned. Just like I knew I should. But we ...”

I think about how he confided in me about his wife’s cancer. The struggles and the pain of it. I think about how much I wanted to help him forget.

Bullshit.

It was also *me* who wanted to forget. Everything. All the worries and the responsibilities I’ve collected through the years. For just one night, I wanted to be that person I was ten years ago—a woman who could focus on what *I* needed, a woman who could follow her impulses and desires.

“You both had needs that had to be met,” she finishes for me, reading my mind in that way that best friends can.

“Guess so.”

“And did he meet them?”

A blush heats my cheeks. “I lost track of how many times.”

She lets out a low whistle.

“But as soon as morning came, the coach turned into a pumpkin again for me. And I went out on the lanai and just started bawling. He came out and...” I press my palm to my forehead.

“How’d he take it?”

I remember the sense of loss in his eyes. “Better than most men would, I imagine, anyway. He says he wants to be a part of her life, but promises he won’t let it be a total upheaval. And I trust him.” I’m surprised by the certainty in my tone. I lean into Bonnie and enjoy her warmth against me. “How could I not? Bonnie trusts him. And she’s a pretty good judge of character, aren’t you, girl?”

Even sitting down, she wriggles excitedly, and her tail swishes back and forth on the sand behind her.

My face drooping, weighed down by guilt, I glance at Maggie. “Does it make me a bad person to wish that I hadn’t told him yet?”

“What do you mean?”

I’m contemplative for a few moments, sifting through the feelings inside of me and this sense of shame I feel from them. “I mean that, for ten years, my life has been all about Melody. And I’m not complaining about it. I’m really not. Being her mom is the best thing in the world.”

“You don’t have to convince *me* that you feel that way,” she assures me.

I nod, grateful she knows me so well. “But last night... it was the first time I really felt like I was doing something just for me. It felt indulgent. Like the ice cream sundaes we used to get across from Central Park after finals when we were at Julliard. We didn’t talk about calories or fat or cholesterol. We just devoured them.”

She laughs. “Yeah, I may be happily engaged, but I *have* noticed that Matt is a three-scoop sundae with extra toppings.”

I grin and it feels so good. “And now, at a time I should just be thinking about Melody, I’m wishing I could have *more*. More of that feeling he gives me.”

“So why can’t you?”

I puff out my cheeks and release a breath. “You didn’t see him, Maggie. This is a lot for him to deal with.”

“And for you. You’re dealing with it, too. Sooo...” She draws out the word and shrugs. “Wouldn’t it maybe be convenient to deal with it together?”

I open my mouth to answer, but snap it shut when I hear her phone chime in her purse. She pulls it out and smiles broadly in that way that tells me the text is from Ryder.

I feel an unwanted pang of jealousy. After experiencing what I did last night, I can’t resist wanting a man in my life who makes me smile like that. She taps something into her phone and then sets it down next to her.

“Do you remember what you said to me that day after you and Matt had hooked up back in New York?” she asks.

I furrow my brow, curious. “No. What?”

“You said, ‘Maggie, last night I met the man I’m going to marry.’”

I tuck my chin inward. “I said that?”

“You did. And then some weird-ass circumstances pulled you two apart for ten years. It’s kind of like Freya said. This is a second chance. I’d hate to see you—”

I cut her off. “We need to focus on Melody and what’s best for her right now.”

She cocks her head. “Hate to point out the obvious. But Melody’s not here.”

I look out to the water, hoping the gentle sound of the waves will soothe me like it always seems to on this island.

Maggie picks up her phone again and is tapping something in. After I hear the swoosh sound when she hits *send*, she slips it into her purse and gives me a long-suffering sigh. “Well, if avoiding Matt for a while makes you free tonight, I actually could use some help with some wedding prep stuff,” she says.

“You name it. Anything.”

“I need you to make some leis for the wedding party. Ryder and I booked a lesson in the resort’s cultural center tonight. But we’ve got so many other things to do.”

“Consider it done.” I feel relief at the distraction she presents me with and give Bonnie a squeeze that elicits a long,

wet lick from her on my cheek.

Maggie giggles at me as I wipe off my face, and then scratches the fur beneath Bonnie's collar. "You know, I think I need to keep you on a leash," she says.

"She *is* on a leash," I point out.

Maggie's eyes flash with exasperation. "I mean, *you*, Lily. Because every time you get away from me in Hawai'i, you get yourself into trouble."

"Must be something about paradise."

"Must be something about *destiny*," she counters.

And when my breath is stolen by the sight of a whale breaching in the distance, followed by the sound I've come to expect a beat afterward, I can't find the energy to argue her point.

CHAPTER 16



- MATT -

“Well, uh, here’s a toast to the new father.” Ryder’s tone is hesitant as he lifts his shot glass half-heartedly, then winces a little after taking a sip. “Damn. That’s not something I pictured saying to you in Hawai‘i.”

“It’s not something I imagined *hearing* in Hawai‘i.” I take a long, slow sip of a particularly strong bourbon. The taste—and Ryder’s irony—don’t quite fit the setting, here in a picturesque tiki-style pool bar at a time of day when I still smell the remnants of fried eggs and bacon from the nearby buffet.

Who would have guessed they’d open the bar at ten? Though I suppose having the pool bar open this early in the day might be the definition of paradise for some.

Not for me. What started off as a promising day, with my body still thrumming from the effects of sex, has spiraled into a clusterfuck. And I’m not sure how I can wrap my head around any of it.

“I can’t help noticing you don’t seem happy about the news.”

“Hearing that I missed ten years of my daughter’s life? No. Not happy about that at all,” I snap, hoping he knows my anger isn’t directed at him—or at anyone in particular at all. Still, I soften my tone. “But at least Lily didn’t say a lot of bad shit about me over the years to Melody.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I asked her about that. She said Melody started asking questions in kindergarten about her dad. But Lily just told her we lost touch, and she couldn’t find me.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “So Lily didn’t tell her daughter you’re a lying stack of shit who knocked her up and gave her a fake number?”

I narrow my eyes. “And why do I think that’s what Lily told *you* about me?”

“*She* didn’t. Maggie did.” He has the gall to laugh. “Who would have thought that all that time in the Pentagon, I was sharing my office with the infamous Deo?”

“Deo,” I sputter, shaking my head in that way you do when you taste something bitter. “She didn’t have a working phone number for me. She didn’t have a last name. And even the first name she had was wrong. If you and Maggie have a son, use my life as a cautionary tale for him. If he hooks up with a woman, he might want to give her his full deets before he leaves. Emergency contacts. Maybe a set of fingerprints too,” I scoff, but only half in jest.

“Hopefully, my theoretical son won’t have the need. So, are you telling anyone else at the wedding?” he asks.

“No. Well, except for the Admiral, probably. He has a way of getting people to talk without even saying a word. But don’t mention it to the other guys from our office. Or that friend of yours... the one with the crazy wife.”

“Mason. And his wife Freya’s not crazy. Just thinks her life is a rom-com on the Hallmark Channel.”

“What do *you* know about the Hallmark Channel?”

“I have three sisters. Remember?” He pauses for my affirmation, but then cuts me off when my mouth opens. “But you’re smart not to tell Freya. She might slip up and then the whole wedding party will know. When she starts up with that romance shit, she gets diarrhea of the mouth.”

I wince. “Dude. I’m trying to enjoy a good bourbon here. I don’t need the visuals.”

“Sorry. So are you telling Melody or Katharine yet?”

My eyebrows knit together. “Who the hell is Katharine? Do I have another kid running around somewhere?”

He laughs. “No. That’s Lily’s mom.”

“Oh. No. Not yet. When I meet Melody the first time, we thought it would be smartest if we just introduce me as an old friend, you know? Let her get to know me. Find out I’m a nice guy.”

“Are you?”

I sigh. “Fuck off, Ry.”

“And her mom? When is she going to tell her?”

“Lily wants to wait till she gets home.”

He winces. “Shit. I hope you’re not going to be present for that conversation.”

I trace my finger along the rim of my glass. “I’m not sure if I’m invited. I’m not sure about anything. Like, when do I get to meet my daughter? How often am I allowed to visit? What kind of role do I get to have in her life?”

“Dude, you just found out. Take a breather. You guys need time to figure all this out.” His frown deepens. “I should have warned you.” He grinds it out, confession-style.

My eyes widen. “What the hell, Ry? You *knew*?”

“I suspected the other night when we talked after your dive. Maggie had asked me not to mention to you that Lily had a daughter. I thought it was because Lily was into you, and she didn’t want to tell you she had a kid yet and kill the vibe. But then when you said you knew her from ten years ago, I started to piece things together.”

“Thanks for the intel, twenty-four hours too late,” I mutter. “And they let *you* work at the Pentagon?”

“Hey, I didn’t get confirmation from Maggie until this morning. She and Lily are like this—” He crosses his fingers. “They’re each other’s ride-or-die. So I try to stay out of all that. It’s safer.”

I nod internally. I guess I can understand that. “Well, I’d tell you to keep your mouth shut about it now. But apparently, you’re pretty good at that already.”

He lifts his hands. “Hey... what was I supposed to say to you that night when we talked? ‘Yo, dude, when *exactly* did you hook up with her because she’s got a kid that looks a lot like you?’”

“Yeah, actually, that would have sufficed.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

I toss back a hefty gulp of my drink and enjoy the burn of it in my throat—a short-term distraction from the knot in my gut that the bourbon hasn’t yet managed to loosen. “She showed me photos on her phone,” I say suddenly. “Tons of them. When Melody was a baby. A toddler. When she started school. All these things I missed.”

“Geez. Is Lily trying to torture you?”

“I *asked* to see them,” I say, suddenly feeling defensive of the woman who raised my child. It would almost be easier if I thought any of this was her fault. This need to be angry at someone—to blame someone other than just some mystical force people call destiny—is so strong. But I can’t. “And I’m nowhere in the pictures. Nowhere.”

“Ten years is a long time. But you know what’s longer?”

“What?”

“The time you have in front of you,” he replies with a more serious tone than I usually hear from Ryder. He extends his hand out, past the tiki bar and toward the ocean. “I mean, if a view like this doesn’t make you think of the decades of memories you can still make with your kid, I don’t know what will.”

I watch the way the sunlight sparkles on the water, trying to find comfort in his words. A whale breaches in the distance. I can't hear it this time because of the 'ukulele music playing somewhere nearby. But it makes me remember how much joy it gave me to share the sight of it with Lily. I recall how much fun it was taking her down to Kona and introducing her to Bonnie. And I remember her delight when she heard the whales underwater for the first time.

I catch myself smiling. How cool would it be to share these same things with my daughter?

My daughter.

Suddenly, I want to show her everything.

My mind darts around to questions I need to ask Lily about Melody. Has she been on a plane, a train, a ship? Hot air balloon maybe? I missed so many "firsts," but there must be some left for me if we just dig deep enough.

"Damn, bruh. You're right," I concede.

My friend's eyes widen, and he rushes to pull out his phone. "Can I record you saying that? I never hear that from Maggie," he jokes, then sets his phone on the bar in front of us.

My slight grin disappears. "What if she hates me?"

"Mel?"

"Melody. You call her Mel?" I tack on, hating that I didn't know people call her that.

Ryder slices his hand through the air. “She won’t hate you. Even *I* don’t hate you, and you went to West Point, Navy’s archrival.”

“Thanks for that. Seriously, though. When parents have a baby together, they can screw up a lot in those first years and the kid won’t even remember it. But Melody’s *ten*. She’ll *know* when I screw up.”

“Bruh, don’t worry so much. She’s actually got good judgement for her age.”

“You *met* her?”

“Of course. My fiancée is her godmother.” He pulls out his phone and shows me a photo of the three of them together standing with a seven-foot-tall Hello Kitty.

“Where’s that?”

“Universal Studios Hollywood. Maggie and I went out there to visit them.”

I throw back the remainder of my drink and think, *I hate that you have memories of my kid, and I have none.*

“Well, you’ve got the rest of your life for making memories,” he points out.

I look at him, confused. “I said that out loud? Shit. That bourbon was my last.”

“You’re a lightweight this morning.”

“Yeah, well, I only got about an hour or two of sleep last night,” I admit.

“Why? You didn’t know about your kid then,” he points out.

I pause, trying to come up with a tactful way of telling him, since I’m sure he’ll hear it from his wife after she and Lily talk. But as his face transforms, I realize I don’t have to.

“Oh, shiiiiit.” He draws out the word as though it’s got six syllables to it. “You and Lily hooked up? *Again?*”

“Yep.”

“I guess I should have seen that coming.” He chuckles. “So, this was before you knew.” He says it as a confirmation.

“Yep.”

He expels a slow breath. “At least you know you didn’t hook up with her out of gratitude.”

“Gratitude?”

“She’s done a kick-ass job raising Melody, dude. Imagine how you’d feel if you had found out your kid had been suffering for ten years with a mom who was awful or something.”

Damn. I never thought of that.

“Listen, you want to know what I think?”

I reach for my shot glass, then glower when I see it’s empty. “I have a feeling you’ll tell me, no matter what I say.”

“You’re right about that.” He finishes off his shot. “I think that when you get back to the mainland, your whole life is going to change. This is your only chance for you and Lily to

just be the two of you. So if you still have chemistry with her, you should explore it now while you have the chance.”

Tempted, I ponder for a moment. “I kind of think Lily wants to take a step back. Slow things down.”

“Dude, a step backward is the absolute last thing she needs. Because if there’s a spark between you and Lily, now’s the time to see if it can turn into something.”

“It’s a little more than a spark. More like a bolt of lightning.”

“Apparently.” His phone lights up in front of us. “Who said lightning never strikes in the same place twice?” he asks as he retrieves his phone and glances down at it, then smiles in that way that tells me he just heard from his fiancée.

Lucky bastard. Texts don’t make *me* smile like that.

Then he taps it just once and slides it into his pocket.

“Gotta run?” I ask.

“Probably should. That was Maggie.” He signals the bartender for the check. “Hey, uh, since you’re taking a break from Lily, does that free you up to help us out making some leis for the wedding party tonight?”

My face screws up. “Leis? Like the flower kind?”

“Yeah. And the kind they make with ti leaves for the guys. It’s, uh... for our rehearsal dinner.”

“You know, you can just buy some. They have a ton of vendors at the airport.”

“Maggie thought this would be more personal. We booked a lesson tonight with the cultural center here. But some other stuff came up and now we could really use some help.”

Fiddling with flowers is not exactly my forte. Still, I guess it could be a cool thing I could teach my daughter one day. Prove to her I’m a Renaissance man.

“I’ll probably suck at it but, sure. I kind of owe you, after all.”

“Owe me?”

“Yeah. I sort of stole your thunder. The focus should be on you and Maggie, not me and my newborn ten-year old.” I puff out my cheeks at the absurdity of the statement.

“Don’t worry about it. And...” He gives the bar a couple thoughtful taps before finishing, “...don’t let this time with Lily slip away. If there’s still something between the two of you, you should go for it. That feeling... it doesn’t come around too often.”

I think of how rarely it’s happened to me in my life—feeling this kind of explosive chemistry between myself and someone else. I’m a Ranger. From the moment that scroll was sewn on my uniform, sex wasn’t exactly hard to find for me. But *this* kind—this *connection*—it’s rare. The last time I felt something this strong, I slipped a ring on her finger—and then got my heart torn out of my chest by an enemy I couldn’t defeat with all the military training in the world.

Do I even want to set myself up for something like that again at a time I should be focusing on the daughter I never

knew I had?

But Ryder barrels on, “And when you get back home, there won’t be time to figure out the *two* of you. You’ll need to focus on the *three* of you, you know?”

He makes sense. Yet still, I find myself shaking my head. “It’s too much of a risk. We share a daughter now. What if things don’t work out?”

He cocks his head a little. “Yeah. Maybe. But what if they *do*?”

CHAPTER 17



~ LILY ~

The Plumeria Resort's Hawaiian Cultural Center is an open-air bungalow adjacent to the beach. I've seen events going on there a couple times since I arrived—hula and 'ukulele demonstrations, and lei making classes—like the one I'm going to tonight, I'm assuming.

I'm actually looking forward to it. I need to get my hands busy with something that will occupy my thoughts for a while, and the setting is spectacular, with the amber sun making its slow track toward a sparkling, blue horizon. And there couldn't be anything more soothing to me now than listening to the lovely mix of tropical birdsong coming from a cluster of nearby palm trees.

Thank you, Maggie, I silently say. My best friend always seems to know what I need, sometimes better than I know myself.

On instinct, I reach for my phone and touch the display to Facetime with my daughter, wanting to share all this beauty with her. When she answers and I see her appear on my

display, it's like my depleted soul fills up again. It's only been two days since I've Facetimed and we've shared plenty of texts in the meantime. But seeing her now reminds me how much I miss my daughter.

“Hey, baby!”

She rolls her eyes. “Ugh. Don't call me that, Mom. If you called me that around my friends—”

“Your entire world would shatter. I know, I know. You having fun with your grandparents?”

“Would be more fun if I didn't have so much homework. How's Aunt Maggie?”

“She's good. Excited to get married. And missing you, just like I am. But this place, Mel—I promise you I'm going to bring you here, okay? Maybe next Christmas vacation.”

Her eyes light. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I decide just now, unable to even wait until I've figured out how the hell I'd pay for such a trip. I *will* make this happen. “I want to share it with my girl.”

“Can I see the place now?”

“Sure.” I touch the display to turn the camera around and then show her the magical setting just as a man in a hotel uniform passes and lights a few nearby tiki torches, signaling that the close of the day is approaching.

“So pretty. We need tiki torches in the back yard, Mom.”

“I like that idea.”

“What's that there?” she asks as I turn.

“The beach.” I pan slightly to the right. “And there’s a restaurant that I haven’t eaten at yet. And next to that is where I’m going tonight to learn how to make leis.”

I freeze suddenly, looking at the bungalow where I’m headed. There’s only one person there—an image appearing as nothing more than a silhouette against the setting sun. He turns his face toward me as though he sensed my approach.

It’s Matt.

Oh, shit. I quickly tap the display to point the camera in my direction again.

“Aww,” she says. “I want to be there. I hate school, Mom.”

“Don’t worry. Hawai‘i will still be here next Christmas. And this way, I can find all the good things to do on the island before you even get here,” I offer diplomatically.

“Yeah. I guess so. Well, I better get back to my project. It’s due tomorrow and it looks awful so far. I hope they don’t make us make shoebox dioramas in middle school. It’s so lame, Mom.”

“It’ll be great. I’ll call you tomorrow after school, okay?”

“Kay. Bye.”

I touch the display and her image disappears, just at the moment Matt stands up, seeing me approach, and says, “Lily?”

That was close.

“Matt,” I reply when I step up to the bungalow.

He looks as surprised as I feel. “You signed up for the lei-making class?”

“No. I mean... well, Maggie asked me to come here. Said she needed me to make some leis for the wedding party.”

He frowns. “Funny. I heard the same thing from Ryder.”

We stare at each other for a few moments, as though there are a million things that need to be said, a million questions to be asked, thoughts to be revealed. But neither one of us knows how to start.

Or *whether* to.

I look around. “Are we early? I had the impression that someone would be teaching us.”

“You’re about to be disappointed. All I found here when I arrived was this.” He extends his hand and I take a few papers from him with “*How to make leis*” typed at the top.

I glance from the papers to two piles on a table—one of delicate magenta orchids and the other of green ti leaves.

Suspicious, I narrow my eyes. “Why do I feel like we’ve been set up?”

“Because we have.”

Resolute, I give a nod to the two piles of flowers and leaves. “Well, I’m going to get started. I’d love to contribute something to this wedding other than a soap opera-level drama.” I sit down on the bench and skim over the instructions. “The ti leaf leis seem harder to do. Want me to do those?”

He gives me a look of reproach. “Are you assuming that just because I’m a man, I can’t do arts and crafts? That’s a little sexist.”

Hearing his joking tone feels good somehow, a contrast to how heavy and serious things have felt since our talk this morning. “No. I’m just assuming that you’re not quite as used to projects like this, since you weren’t an elementary school room mother for four years straight.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

From his tone, I sense regret.

“But I’m pretty handy,” he adds. “I can make a flotation device out of a pair of pants, build a one-rope bridge, and improvise a boat from two rucksacks. I’ll bet they didn’t teach you *that* as a room mother.”

I laugh. “No. Making trick-or-treat bags out of pillowcases is about as complex as we got.”

He sits next to me, facing the setting sun like I am. “You saw Bonnie today?”

“How did you know?”

He brushes a finger against the shoulder of my t-shirt. “You have the evidence all over you,” he says, picking a few fluffs of fur off of me. Somehow the gesture seems intimate—the touch of his fingertips against the fabric of my shirt. It almost bridges the gap between us.

“She does shed a lot,” I notice. “How about you? What’d you do today?”

His hand moves from my t-shirt to the instructions in front of us. And after glancing at them briefly, he grabs a small handful of ti leaves. “Other than find out I was a dad?”

I’m grateful for the chuckle he tacks onto that question.

“Oof.” I can’t help making the sound, remembering the blow this day must have been to him. “Yeah, other than that.”

“Well, I drank bourbon and researched college funds.”

My eyes widen. Not exactly what most people do on a vacation to Hawai‘i. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’d like to start one for Melody, if you don’t mind. I sure as hell don’t want her having to join the military like I did for my education. That’s one family tradition I’d like her to at least have the *option* of breaking. So, consider college covered. Wherever she wants. I’ll make it happen.” He starts to weave the leaves the way it shows in the directions.

I’m barely able to let his words sink in before he adds, “Though with my genetic material, I wouldn’t plan on Harvard.” His back straightens suddenly and his fingers still on the leaves. Concern in his eyes, he glances over at me. “Genetics. Shit. That’s why you were grilling me about genetics that day we first talked.”

I feel small suddenly, hating how I hid so much from him. “Yeah.”

“Is there... anything wrong with her? I mean, medically? Something I can help with?”

“No, no! She’s great. I just thought it might have been the only chance for me to get a better family history for her.”

He gives a single nod, relief in his eyes. “Ah. That was smart. Even though I thought you were a little... strange, for lack of a better word. No woman ever seemed so damned interested in my grandpa’s heart disease.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

He lifts a hand and then surprises me by taking mine. And the feel of his skin against me makes my breath catch.

“Let’s stop saying we’re sorry to each other,” he says. “Because none of this is your fault... or my fault. You didn’t wait to call me back then out of spite, and I didn’t cancel my cell phone while I deployed to avoid you. It just is what it is. And we were doing things the best we could.”

His hands busy themselves with the ti leaves again. He’s actually quite good at it, making me wonder how he’d be at making shoebox dioramas with Melody. Because I definitely haven’t been a help there.

“You know, I really wish you’d reconsider staying in my suite,” he says suddenly. “We can dial back... *this*. I’m fine in the sofa bed again, if that’s what’s holding you back. Because if Maggie and Ryder went to this much trouble to set us up tonight in front of a romantic sunset...”

My brow creases. “... then they’re probably hoping that I don’t join them in their suite tonight,” I finish for him. “Yeah. Yeah, you might have a point.”

His eyes brighten. “Besides, it will give me time to learn more about Melody. I want to hear everything—feel like I’m less of a stranger when we meet.”

When we meet. We had only lightly discussed how we'd introduce him to her. We didn't dive into the details of the where or when.

Maybe he'll want to do that tonight.

Okay. I can handle that. What I *can't* seem to handle is this strange disappointment I feel from his words. I had so enjoyed feeling like a man was looking at me as something other than strictly a mom.

Sometimes I feel like the world around me forgot that I'm also a woman. A single woman. A single 32-year-old woman who, according to every stupid article that I catch myself reading online, has just hit her sexual peak.

I think about what Maggie had said to me earlier today.

Second chance.

This could be our second chance.

"There are so many questions I want to ask about her," he continues, his words making hope deflate inside of me.

To him, I'm simply Melody's mom now. And while it's the most important job title I'll ever hold, there's not a damn thing sexy about it. "*I totally want to bang Melody's mom,*" said no one ever.

I force a smile and say, "Ask away."

Then he slowly pulls stories out of me, like little snapshots of my daughter's life. The time she had croup and went to the ER. The Independence Day parade when she rode her bike and won third place in their bike-decorating contest and then the

other Independence Day parade when she fell off her bike and broke her arm in three places. That awful Christmas she figured out that Santa was nothing more than Mom.

I tell him about her third-grade school play and how she got the lead. How she found a violin in a thrift shop and started teaching herself to play using nothing more than YouTube videos. How she took up soccer and dislocated her knee making the winning goal but ending her elementary school soccer career.

When I finally pause, just as the sun is melting into the water, my gaze shifts toward him, and I couldn't ever quite describe the look in his eyes. It's... wonderment, I suppose.

"She's fearless," he says. "Like her mom."

Something about those words makes me crack inside. "I'm not fearless. I'm full of fear. All the time."

"Not from what I can see."

"I am." I have no idea why I feel the need to stress this, but I do. "At every one of those moments, I was so afraid," I tell him. "Afraid she'd get hurt. Afraid I'd allow her to do the wrong thing. Afraid I'd make the wrong decision. Afraid that I wouldn't be enough for her. Fear's become a religion to me because when you're a single mom, you've got no one else to blame but yourself when things go wrong. Even now, I'm afraid."

"I promised you that any involvement I have in the life you built for her will only be good, Lily. I'll make sure of that. You don't have any reason to be afraid."

“That’s not what I’m afraid of, Matt,” I let slip.

“Then what is it?” He takes my hand like he did earlier tonight. But this time, I don’t let him go.

I take in a breath and look out to the distance where an outrigger canoe is rowing toward the horizon. I can’t meet Matt’s eyes now. I can only enjoy the feel of my hand in his.

For all the reasons I could give him, there’s only one that seems capable of passing my lips. “I’m afraid I’ll never get to feel like I did last night—like I could just focus on what *I* needed for once. I’m afraid that when you look at me now, you’ll only see me as the mother of your child.”

Oh God. Did I say that out loud?

I look over at him and his eyes are intense, locked onto mine.

Dammit. I *did* say that out loud.

“I do see you as the mother of my child now, Lily,” he admits, breaking my heart. I’d swear I can hear the tiny, shattered pieces of it clattering to the ground.

Then he adds with a gruff, almost menacing tone, “Do you know how fucking sexy that is?”

Whaaa—?

I feel his hands clasp around my upper arms as he lifts me from the bench and pulls me onto his lap. His fingers channel into my hair, then I feel the slow, seductive slide of the pads of his fingertips against my cheeks, my neck, and then upward again until he’s eased my face toward his.

Shock sparks inside of me as we kiss, a glorious mix of surprise and anticipation that crackles through me, making me shiver.

Did he really just say that he still finds me sexy? That's generally not a word I expect in a conversation riddled with words like "mom," "kid," and even "college fund."

I must be dreaming. I must... because in the real world, I wouldn't be feeling something as extraordinary as I do right now, as the brush of his lips caresses me.

His fingers trace along my skin, exploring me —almost cautiously—as though he doesn't want to rush this.

And I'm not complaining. Because on the off-chance that this *is* real, I know that I'll never be able to replicate a sensation this marvelous.

The heat of him, and the hard ridge of him I feel as I sit on his lap, brings a swirl of memories for me—not of our night together in New York this time. But of last night. And for all the passion that consumed me then—the thrill of indulging in something I knew I simply shouldn't—this time, this kiss, is even better.

I wouldn't have thought that possible.

But as the pressure of his lips against me increases, making me moan with a need I won't try to suppress, I feel this sense of closeness to him that I didn't expect.

There is nothing hidden between us any longer. There are no more dread conversations to be had. No more lies of omission that drown me in guilt.

It's only him and me and this sense of completion inside of me as his tongue slides past my lips and tastes me.

Heat pools inside of me and a moisture that aches for him.

More of this. Please more of this, my soul seems to beg.

My chest rises, longing for his touch there. He lowers his hands along the sides of me with the pads of his thumbs lightly brushing against my breasts.

I tilt my head so that I can taste him more thoroughly and feel that lovely slide of his tongue along my teeth as I devour him like I never thought I'd be able to again.

His mouth parts from mine and I want to cry from the chill I feel on my lips. How easily I've grown accustomed to the heat of him against me—the softness, the gentleness of his lips that contrasts the rest of his body.

“Want to get out of here?” he practically growls.

“Uh-huh,” I stammer, unable to form any more of a response than that. Then he lifts me into his arms and I giggle, realizing that this man is going to carry me clear across the resort to his suite and everyone we pass will know exactly what is going to happen when we get there.

I love the feeling that comes with it.

But something catches my eye—the piles of orchids and ti leaves that still need our attention.

“The leis?” I ask, any more words simply unable to formulate in my brain under the influence of a flood of sex-charged hormones.

“I’ll buy some in the morning,” he replies with a defiant grin and then carries me toward his suite.

CHAPTER 18



- MATT -

Zero hesitation.

Funny how that is. A stalemate—a pause for each of us to collect our thoughts before we proceed—that felt so logical, so necessary, a few hours ago seems ludicrous now as I lower her onto my bed.

She reaches for the bottom of her t-shirt to pull it off. I shake my head. “You know the kind of kid I was, growing up?” I ask.

Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are plump from all the attention of my kisses. She lifts her eyebrows at me in question.

“The kind who unwrapped his gifts slowly at Christmas,” I reply.

She giggles. “I hated kids like that. Why delay getting what you want?”

A smile slides upward to my cheeks as I kiss her, making a path from her mouth to just above where the neckline of her

shirt begins. “How about I show you why?”

Her breath catches as my hand moves from her side up to a breast, brushing against it lightly and then squeezing—gently at first, then harder as I feel her pelvis arch against me, seeking pressure from my cock. Again, she reaches for the bottom of her shirt and tugs upward, but I take her wayward hand and pin it to the pillow. “You really *don't* have patience, do you?”

“Not with you I don't.”

“Then I guess it's lucky *I do*,” I counter, taking her other hand and pressing it against the mattress, then kissing her breast with the material of her shirt still between my lips and her skin.

I edge downward to the small span of bare skin at the bottom of her shirt and kiss her there slowly, enjoying the sight of the spray of goosebumps that appear before my eyes as my breath warms her.

I want to taste her. All of her. I want to explore her in every way imaginable.

My hand slides along the exposed skin, and my finger traces a circle around her navel before my tongue dips in, wanting so much more. Wanting to give in to the impatience I had just accused her of.

Because I *could* be impatient with her. And selfish. Fast and hard and completely greedy.

But not this time. Not now—knowing that the past ten years of her life, she's been unable to be greedy. It's her turn

now.

I lick a path upward, slowly revealing more of her skin to me, and slide my hands between her back and the sheets to unsnap her bra. Then I lift it just from one breast, taking her into my mouth as my hands knead her softness.

She threads her fingers into my hair and clasps me against her. “Oh, God, you feel so good, Matt.”

With my mouth moving from one breast to the other, I love the way the vibration of her words tickle my lips as she speaks.

She thinks *this* feels good? She has no idea just how good it’s going to get.

As I explore her with my tongue, I lift her t-shirt completely off her and her body seems to sigh beneath me with relief. And when I move my mouth downward, she arches again, fueled by instinct.

My fingers reach the button on her shorts and I release it, then slowly unzip her, kissing her there as I do. Then I slide my fingers in between her shorts and her panties—so deliberately, prolonging each step in this seduction. I savor the heat of her against my fingertips and the moisture I feel even through the material of her panties.

I let one rogue finger slide past the fabric between her legs and dip into her. “I’m going to taste you there, baby.”

She only whimpers in reply.

I tug her shorts downward with a patience that’s starting to gnaw at me. One leg free, and then the other, as I kiss her calf,

then her thigh, then her inner thigh... and then upward until I've reached the line of elastic along the bottom of her panties where I can taste a hint of her moisture.

God, she tastes like heaven to me. It makes me want more.

But slowly. Patiently. Selflessly. All the words I don't want to hear, I force into the forefront of my mind.

My mouth and fingers continue their path upward until I'm tracing the line of the top of her panties, then I slide my hand beneath the thin material and thread my fingers through the tiny thatch of curls.

She sucks in an audible breath. And this time, when her hands reach for the sides of her panties to slide them off, I let her.

My pulse quickens at the sight of her—my reaction different from last night, I'd swear it. Stronger—almost as though the raw honesty of the day we shared makes the electricity crackle between us even more acutely.

I plunder her with my mouth, finding the center of her need and tracing a light lick along the nub with the tip of my tongue. I slip a finger inside of her and love how her channel immediately tightens around me. My cock throbs behind my shorts, demanding that I take her now, wanting to feel that same sensation with more than just my damn finger.

But again, I force myself to hold back.

Later tonight, I'll show her another side of me. Later tonight I'll pound into her, hungry and selfish, knowing that I can make her come just as hard when I'm driven by greed.

But this time, I want to tease her until she begs. I want to hear her whimper... like she is right now as my fingers part her flesh while I take her clit into my mouth and moan, letting the vibration of it tug her upward toward a climax.

“Oh, God. Oh, God. Don’t... don’t stop.” Her words come out staccato, with tiny pants in between each word as her legs open wider.

Then I feel it—the warmth of moisture spilling from her into my mouth as she cries out, bucking beneath me, pressing her body against me as I slip a third finger into her, stretching her out even more.

“Yes!” Her scream is filled with relief and release... at the same time her body still arches hard against my mouth, wanting even more.

When her climax slowly sets her free from its grasp, she relaxes into the bed.

“Your turn,” she breathes out, her tone thick with need.

“Not yet,” I murmur, my mouth still against her heat. Then I lift her out of the bed.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“Shh. Just trust me,” I say, taking her into the bathroom and setting her ass down on the cool marble vanity. I bend and turn on the hot water in the bathtub.

Then my eyes lap up the sight of her, naked and gorgeous, as I pull off my shirt first, letting her hands trace along the muscles and battle scars. Then I pull a condom out of my pocket and set it down on the counter for later. But not now.

Even with my cock standing at full attention and ready to explode after I take off my shorts, I want her to see herself as I see her.

I pull her off the vanity and face her toward the mirror as I stand behind her. Then I slide one hand to a breast and the other to the heat between her legs.

“Lean against me,” I murmur against her neck. “I won’t let you fall.”

Then I toy with the tiny nub of her as my other hand massages a breast. She’s feverishly hot as her eyes slam shut.

“Open your eyes, baby,” I urge. “I want you to see how gorgeous you are when you come.”

She looks like she’s struggling with that command, her eyelashes fluttering as her breath quickens. I slide my hand down further and curve a finger so that it can enter her as my thumb rubs tiny circles around her clit.

“Feel that, baby,” I say as my hard cock rubs against her ass. “Feel how hard you make me?”

“Yes,” she breathes out, her tone dripping with desire.

Then I see the moment when she explodes again, the way her eyes flash as she looks at her own reflection with my arms wrapped around her like this, and the way her hips thrust, searching for even more pressure from my hand. Her channel tightens up around my finger as though it wants to pull me in, deeper, harder.

I could bend her over right now and take her. I want to. I’m not sure if I’ve ever wanted something so much in my life.

“Take me right now,” she says, even as the orgasm has her in its full grasp. “I can’t wait. Please.”

“I promised you patience.”

“Shut up and fuck me, dammit,” she cries out.

I suppress a laugh. Well, I did, after all, want her to beg. I grab the condom off the vanity and slide it on. She starts to turn toward me, as though she expects me to take her back to the bed. But I don’t. I make her face the mirror again, bend her over, cupping her ass with my hands, and slide into her moisture.

“Oh my....” Dripping with satisfaction, the comment seems slowly pulled from her lips. Her hands are splayed against the cold marble of the vanity as I thrust into her. I reach around her with one of my hands to prolong this climax for her while she’s still in its tight grip.

I love being inside her like this. She’s so hot and slick, and all I want to do is pull this damn condom off and enjoy her even more thoroughly.

What would that be like, I wonder? To thrust into her knowing that we might have a second child?

It seems incongruent to be thinking it now, in a fully lit bathroom with a mirror in front of us, driving myself into her as she pants wantonly. There’s nothing tender about this moment. There’s only raw need from both of us.

Yet it’s all I can think about as I take her, my rhythm fast and desperate, just like the murmurs of satisfaction I hear from her.

I think and I wonder and I even *want* there to be something between us that lasts long enough that one day I might slide into her and feel her with nothing between us at all.

The folds of flesh around me grip me like a vise. My heart pounds and blood surges. She's intoxicating—but not the kind of intoxication that dulls the senses and slows the mind. The other kind.

The kind that makes you feel invincible.

The friction of our bodies heightens my senses, and I thrust into her again and again, each time savoring the contented moans that come from her. My body shudders, struggling to hold back even as hers seems determined to pull an orgasm from me, timing be damned.

I should have more control than this.

But there's something about her—maybe it's that connection that always makes me reach for her, aching for the feel of her skin against mine. Or the magnetism that makes my skin prickle with awareness when she is near. Maybe it's whatever force of nature saw fit to pull the two of us together again on this remote island.

Whatever it is, it steals the last semblance of control from me as I drive into her again, hard and deep, both of us crying out in ecstasy. My body quakes, giving in just as she does, and I feel her channel pulsate around me until she slumps onto the marble.

Still standing, but barely, I wrap one arm around her, keeping her backside snug against me as my other arm holds

us up, bracing us against the vanity. I savor the tiny aftershocks of her climax as my breath heaves.

I somehow manage a chuckle. “So much for control.”

She giggles. “You had a lot more than me.”

Sliding out of her—and hating the feeling that comes from being separate from her again—I glance to our left just as she notices, “The tub’s full.”

“Perfect timing.” I guide her into the bathtub and then join her.

The warm water soothes me, but not nearly as much as the feel of her resting her back against my chest.

“You know,” I can’t help mentioning, “I was planning on telling you that a warm bath is the best way for you to recover. Turns out *I’m* the one who needs to recover.”

As I kiss her cheek and then her neck, she takes one of my hands and presses it against a breast.

Right on cue, I feel my cock perk up as though to remind me it’s still there.

“Apparently, Matt,” she purrs, “you don’t need too long.”

CHAPTER 19



~ LILY ~

When I wake up, the feel of the five hundred-thread count sheets against my skin is nothing short of addictive. That—and this warmth from knowing that when I open my eyes, I’ll see Matt beside me.

It’s like a dream—this time in paradise with him. This time when I can revel in all the glorious feelings that come from being with a man who fuels such passion inside of me.

And if it is a dream, then I don’t want it to end. Right now, with my eyes still shut, I dare to wish for all this to continue long past the moment my plane touches down in L.A.

I want this with him for longer than just until the wedding is over. And while I know that Matt wants to be a part of Melody’s life now, I can’t resist also wishing that he’d want to stay a part of my life somehow too—like *this*.

I hear myself sigh.

Sleep beckons me. I’m not cut out for the lack of sleep I’ve been having on this trip, even if I am thoroughly enjoying

myself in my waking hours.

Something inside me knows instinctively that it's late. Maybe it's the rumble of my stomach that tells me I've skipped breakfast entirely.

I've slept in—every mom's dream—and I have no regrets at all.

In fact, I could drift off again right now, but I sense Matt's warmth close to me and it makes a lazy smile touch the corners of my lips.

Then I feel Matt's warm breath against my face.

And a long lick from his tongue that stretches clear from my chin to my forehead.

What the...?

My eyes fling open, and I see Bonnie's nose barely a half-inch from mine, and her big, dark eyes staring at me. I burst out giggling and hear Matt's laughter nearby.

I glance toward the sound. Matt is standing on the other side of the suite, mixing sweetener into a coffee that I'm betting is for me.

Because that's just the kind of man he is.

“How did you get here, girl?” I ask Bonnie, enjoying the feel of fur beneath my fingertips first thing in the morning. Just another wonderful sensation I could get used to.

“You were out like a light,” Matt tells me. “So, I went down to Kona to buy some leis for Maggie and Ryder since we

kind of dropped the ball last night. And while I was there, I couldn't resist picking Bonnie up for the day too."

"You snuck her in here?"

His eyes spark with mischief. "Someone reminded me I'm good at sneaking females into my hotel room. And..." He shrugs. "...she *is* a girl after all."

"And such a good girl," I say, letting her cuddle up against me in a way that tells me she hasn't slept in a human bed in her entire life. "I missed you."

He grins. "Hope you miss *me* as much when we have to go home to different coasts."

Frowning suddenly, I hate the reminder of it. It's too early in the day to consider the weighty questions we keep avoiding—like how all this will work when we get home, and what *all this* will even look like.

"Don't bring that up," I say quickly, not wanting to ruin my perfect mood. "Let's just enjoy our time here and deal with everything else later."

"Later. Yeah." His mouth curves downward slightly. "Since you'll be pretty busy tomorrow with bridesmaid stuff before the rehearsal dinner, I figured maybe Bonnie and I could show you more of the island today."

I brighten, even though I find my thoughts still lingering over the disappointment I sensed from him a moment ago.

He needs answers, I can tell. He must be so anxious to meet Melody and see how his life can fuse with hers

somehow, if that's even possible with him on one coast and us on another.

Ten years ago, I came up with a plan on my own for Mel and me. This time, he needs to be a part of that process.

But first... coffee.

"That sounds fun," I say and then murmur my thanks as he hands me my drink. I take a needy, greedy sip of it, and almost immediately, my brain starts working again, making me recall, "I just need to be back at the hotel this evening."

"You and Maggie doing something?"

"No. I, uh, I was hoping to Facetime with Mel at dinner time and it works better if I'm near Wi-Fi. She had to turn in her diorama today, and I want to see how it went. She really stresses over anything art-related."

His brow furrows. "What's a diorama?"

My eyes widen. "You don't remember those? From elementary school?"

He shakes his head.

"You make them out of shoeboxes, usually. Create a little scene inside of it."

"I remember now. I *hated* making those," he grumbles.

I laugh. "Well, she got it from you then."

His broad shoulders—usually so rigid and statue-like—almost droop for a moment. "It's weird. Thinking about things like that."

“Things like what?”

“Dioramas.”

“You’ve lost me.”

He sits beside me on the bed. “When you first told me, I was so busy thinking about all the big moments I missed. First days of school. Birthdays. Holidays. Things like that. But now it’s the little things I find myself missing. Like building dioramas. It’s like—” His eyes look distant, fixating on some point in the room, yet seeming as though they see nothing but what’s in his mind right now. “—like every day of my life, all these little things were happening to my kid, and I didn’t even know it. While I was building my career, deploying, or even trying to help Kirsten battle cancer, I had a child out there. It’s baffling to me.”

There are a few beats of silence between us until his eyes track over to mine. “Have you... given any thought to when I can meet her?” he asks, his tone tentative.

I press my lips together at his words. So this is happening... and *now*.

I gulp my coffee down, hoping it brings me clarity. “I—I sure wouldn’t want it to be on Facetime today. I hope you understand that. I know we agreed to just introduce you as a friend first. But she’s a smart kid, Matt. When she sees the resemblance, she really might figure things out quickly. And I don’t want to be on the other side of the ocean if that happens.”

“I get it. I do. And I’d prefer to meet her in person anyway.” He pauses. “But... well, considering the nature of my job, I’d really kind of like to meet her sooner rather than later.”

“Why do you say that?”

He cocks his head. “I’m in the Rangers, Lily.”

“I know. But why...” My words trail for a moment. Stupid me. “Oh, yeah. Of course,” I say, unintentionally breathless as reality hits me in the gut.

Sooner rather than later, he had said. He wants to meet Melody *sooner* because *later* is too uncertain with a job like his.

Anxiety curls my insides into knots.

After spending ten years hating Matt, I never pictured myself here, in this moment, worrying about him. Worrying about *my child* worrying about him.

How does Maggie deal with this? And how does she reconcile all the love she feels for Ryder with all the fears he brings to her world as a SEAL?

“Sunday,” I suddenly blurt. “You’re flying home Sunday too, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What if we could try to get you on the same flight? I mean, I don’t have the best luck with standby. But we could try.”

The hope I see in his eyes erases the sucker punch of reality that I felt a moment earlier.

“I’ll show up at the airport in uniform,” he suggests. “Uniformed military always gets treated pretty well by the airlines when we need to fly standby.”

“You brought your uniform?”

“Yeah, my dress uniform. Wasn’t sure if Ry was going for a military wedding or not. But he’s keeping it more casual than that. So, it’s pressed and ready to go. I think we’d stand a chance.”

His smile widens as though he’s picturing it all in his head—that moment when he’ll get to meet his daughter.

“It’ll be perfect, actually,” I force. “We’ll introduce you to her as my friend who had a layover in L.A. Maybe we’ll go out to dinner somewhere.”

His eyes flash with an idea. “Like at Disneyland maybe?”

“Disneyland?” I eye him. “Are you trying to buy my child’s love?”

“Absolutely,” he admits, then kissing me, blanketing my body with his. It should be romantic—this moment—but Bonnie launches herself at us, smothering us in dog kisses.

My heart feels an unwelcome tug. “I don’t know how I’m going to say goodbye to this dog when I leave, Matt.”

He shrugs. “So don’t say goodbye. Adopt her.” He pets her and the predictable flurry of fur ensues. “If I wasn’t in the Army, I sure as hell would.”

I scoff at the silly, impractical idea. “I’ve got a daughter. A full-time job. A mortgage that I still feel like I’m getting used to even though we’ve been in that house for five years.”

And I have a yard. A fenced-in yard. Small, but still perfect for a dog, I hear the little voice in my head whisper.

I bristle at the illogical idea. “Besides, I don’t even know how to get a dog over the ocean.”

He waves a hand dismissively. “I know a former Air Force guy who runs a cargo company that flies pets in and out of here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Most airlines won’t let animals fly in the cargo hold when the weather might be too hot or cold. And even in good weather, a lot of people don’t like the idea of their pets crammed in with all the luggage, you know? So he started a company to fill the need. If he’s got a plane going out, I know he’d find a place for her. I can check.”

“Sounds expensive.” My shoulders deflate at the reminder. “Kind of like vet bills and dogwalkers during the day since I work full-time. Bonnie deserves the best, and I don’t know that I could give it to her.”

He props his head up with his fisted hand. “But you’re not alone in things anymore. I know there’s not a ton I can do when I’m stationed so far away from you. But money’s not something you need to worry about.”

I sit up in the bed and Bonnie rests her soft head on my lap. “Matt, I know you’ll want to chip in with Melody. And

I'm grateful for that. Especially with college. That's a load off my mind. But you have your own life, too. Your own expenses. And we've been doing fine."

His expression seems to dismiss my statement. "It's time for you to start getting what *you* want out of life."

I lift my hands. "I'm a mom. All I want is for my child to be safe and healthy. That's good enough for me." The words pass my lips—words I've said a thousand times—yet only now do I realize how they make me sound like I'm playing the martyr. I hate the thought of it.

He looks at me thoughtfully. "Okay. So, what did you *used to* want from your life?"

"Used to?"

"Yeah. Before I very thoroughly knocked you up." He says it with a sly grin. "You wanted a career in the opera, I know. Right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't do much about that. But what else?"

I struggle to remember. It's as though all that transpired has erased so much from my memory. But then an idea flashes into my consciousness. "I always wanted to go to Italy."

"Italy?"

"Yeah. It's the birthplace of opera. I always wanted to see some of those old opera houses like the Teatro La Fenice or the Verona Arena. Can you believe that the Verona Arena was

built in 30 A.D., but they still perform operas there?” I expel a long, slow breath, in awe at the thought. “I’d love to see that.”

“Impressive. I’d actually love to go there too.”

Surprise widens my eyes. “Really?”

“Yeah. Not for the opera, though. I just love Italian food,” he admits.

I laugh.

“What else?” he pries.

I pause, feeling silly to even let my mind wander toward the impractical like this.

“Come on,” he urges. “There’s something else. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Well, I guess I always wanted to fly first class,” I admit.

He gives me an appreciative nod. “I’m six-three and was crammed into a coach seat with *these* legs for fifteen hours to get here. I’m totally with you on that one. Those seats look so damn comfortable.”

My eyes flash with agreement. “I know, right? When I was back in college, I used to fly back and forth from New York to L.A. to visit my parents sometimes. And I hated how I’d have to walk past everyone in first class when I got on board. They always looked so... content. Them with their stupid glasses of champagne and those little warm towels they get when they step on board.”

“Warm towels? I never even noticed that.”

“*I* have. And just once in my life I want to get on a plane and be greeted with champagne and a warm towel.”

He chuckles.

“How about you?” I ask. “What is it you wanted back then?”

“But that’s just it, Lily. I got to shoot for what I wanted. I didn’t have a child to support on my own like you did. So whatever you want now—I’d like to make it happen, if I can.”

I notice he’s evading my question. “But what is it *you* wanted?” I repeat.

“It doesn’t matter what I wanted. I got to *try*.”

Bristling slightly, my back straightens, and I pull away so that I can turn toward him fully. “What *was* it?”

Giving in, he sighs. “I wanted the trifecta, you know? Army career. Wife. Children. I wanted to be one of those Soldiers who somehow manages to keep all three in the picture. Then after I lost Kirsten...” He stops for a moment, looking thoughtful. “I just wanted... I don’t know. To find a place where everything just felt better—felt *right*, I guess. The Army moves us around so much. A PCS is what they call it. Permanent Change of Station.”

I nod. “I think I’ve heard Maggie use that term.”

“Yeah. So I’d hear guys talk about how they’d PCS sometimes and end up somewhere that just suddenly felt *right* to them. A place where it all made sense. That feeling of *home*. My dad was in the Army, too, remember? So I didn’t

have that much as a kid. That gave me something to focus on after Kirsten died. Trying to find that for myself.”

“Your paradise. I remember you said that to me that first night we were together here.”

“Yeah. Just a place that would kind of make me feel...” His voice trails for a moment. “A place that would make me *feel*, period, really. Because I was pretty convinced that I couldn’t feel a damn thing for a while there.”

At a loss for words, I take one of his hands in my own. But he gives a shake of his head, as though he doesn’t want to let memories consume him right now.

Instead, he leans over toward me and when he kisses my neck, I can feel the curve of his smile against my skin.

“So what is it you want, Lily?”

His words against me tickle, making tiny goosebumps cascade over my arms.

“Because I know what *I* want right now,” he adds, his voice thick with seduction.

I giggle, my own temperature rising until I feel a cold, wet nose pressed against my bare thigh and my eyes turn toward Bonnie. “Not in front of my dog, Matt.”

He pulls his face away from my neck, eyebrows hiked up an inch on his face.

“*Your* dog?”

“Yeah,” I say, my eyes lighting with the realization of it. Half of me is stunned that I gave in this quickly to an idea so

impractical, while the other half of me wonders why I ever hesitated in the first place.

I know what I want.

Bonnie belongs with me. With us. And if Matt can help me figure out the logistics of getting her across the ocean, then I'm sure not leaving without her.

My grin widens even as I press a firm kiss against Matt's lips before repeating words thick with meaning. "Not in front of *my* dog."

CHAPTER 20



- MATT -

Another spectacular sunset stretches out in front of me as I sit at the tiki bar. I'm not normally the type to drink alone, so I'm kind of hoping some of my old Pentagon officemates show up like Ryder said they would.

I hadn't expected to join them tonight. I have so little time with Lily before we leave here. I'd prefer to be watching this sunset with her.

Just the same, I didn't want to be around when Lily Facetimes with Melody. As much as I'm aching to hear my daughter's voice a little more than I've heard in the brief videos I saw on Lily's phone, I don't trust myself to not leap into the camera's view. *"Hi, Melody! I'm your dad and I can't wait to meet you!"*

I wince, imagining it. Yeah, that would not go over well.

"What can I get you?"

The bartender's voice pulls me out of the scene I was picturing, and I open my mouth to order a bourbon like I

usually do. But I stop for some reason.

Yesterday when I drank with Ryder, bourbon seemed appropriate. But my mood is completely different this evening.

“I’ll have one of those,” I say, nodding toward a curious-looking drink I see, served in a coconut.

“Coming right up.”

As I wait for my drink—or from the look of the damn thing, maybe I should just call it my dessert—my eyes watch the way the sky transforms along the horizon. Clouds are billowing up in the distance, and their color changes from moment to moment—pink in one instant, orange in the next, and then to a more ominous steel blue. The changes in them seem to reflect the way my life shifts here in Hawai‘i—so quickly.

I imagine Lily feels the same way, especially now.

Funny, that. I’ve gained a daughter and she’s gained a dog.

And me. She’s gained *me*, too. I wish she didn’t look so uncertain every time I remind her of that.

This day wasn’t quite the whirlwind tour of the Big Island that I had hoped to give her. Instead of checking things off our to-do list like volcanoes, tropical rain forests, and black sand beaches, we were driving to every pet store on the island, searching for an airline-approved dog kennel big enough for Bonnie and trying to track down Josh, my old friend who left the Air Force to start that pet cargo company. Then, when we dropped off Bonnie back at the rescue, we picked up the vet

records she'll need for the flight and signed the adoption paperwork.

Tomorrow, while Lily is embroiled in bridesmaid activities with Maggie, I'll be getting Bonnie onto her first flight of her trek toward home. She'll fly to O'ahu first, stay overnight there in what Josh assures me will be the lap of luxury, and then she'll be headed to L.A., arriving shortly after we do.

The day was a success on all fronts, and my daughter is about to get the dog she always wanted.

And damn, it feels good to be the one who is making that happen.

Is this how parents feel when their kids squeal with delight when they see a Christmas tree buried in presents or a stack of gifts alongside a birthday cake?

If it is, then I think I'm gonna like being a dad.

When the bartender brings me my ridiculous-looking drink, complete with one of those tiny umbrellas, I don't even feel shame as I take a sip from a cotton candy-colored straw...

"D'Amato."

...until I do.

The voice I hear behind me, calling me by my last name the way commanders do, has me standing at attention on instinct alone and really wishing I ordered a drink more befitting a Ranger.

"Admiral Shey."

He offers a curt nod, adding, “Loosen up, Matt. You’re on vacation.” He eyes my drink. “Is that for your date?” he asks, and from the glint in his eyes, I know he’s joking.

“No, sir. I just felt like ordering something a little more fitting for the surroundings than my usual bourbon. Did you just arrive?”

“A few hours ago. You?”

“I got here earlier this week.”

He nods his approval. “Good for you. You deserve some leave time.” His words—and his eyes—are filled with understanding.

I worked on the J3 staff in Admiral Shey’s office in the Pentagon during the final months of Kirsten’s battle with cancer. I had requested a position that would keep me home for a while and put her close to good hospitals that we hoped might have new options for treatments.

They did... each one slowly turning her into nothing more than a shell of what she once was. And it was a shell that wasn’t strong enough to hold in the beautiful soul she was, apparently.

Although Admiral Shey is a legendary SEAL commander and as tough as nails, he was surprisingly the man who always knew the right thing to say to me during those final months. While Ryder and the other guys in the office would offer a listening ear and a shot of bourbon from time to time, the fact is, most men try to deal with shit through distraction rather than facing something head-on.

Not so with Admiral Shey. So I kind of owe the man for helping me keep my sanity in those months.

I look around the bar. “Did Mrs. Shey come with you?”

“She did. But she’s giving a free financial planning seminar this evening down in Kona.”

“Wow. That was really nice of her.” Vi Owens-Shey is famous enough that even *I*’ve heard of her. She’s written a few bestsellers about financial planning, and her face pops up on TV a lot, especially when the stock market is in a tailspin.

“Yeah. But with Vi, I wonder sometimes if she’s doing it so she can deduct her plane ticket. You never know with her,” he says with amusement, though his eyes reveal his admiration for his wife.

When the bartender comes, Admiral Shey orders a glass of wine which never ceases to confuse me. The guy looks like he could throw back a bottle of Scotch and still be able to pass the PT test.

Of course, I guess *I* don’t look like the kind of guy who’d sip a drink from a coconut.

I cock my head when the Admiral mentions the name of a local vineyard to the bartender. “You’re familiar with the wine scene here on the Big Island, sir?”

“Ryder brought me back a bottle of their Pinot Noir when he was last here.”

Ass-kisser. I make a mental note to tease Ry about that later.

“So, I hear congratulations are in order.”

My mouth gapes. *Son of a bitch*. “Ryder told you I’m a dad?” I shake my head. “That guy needs his clearance yanked.”

The Admiral holds up a hand. “Wait a minute. I was talking about your promotion to major.”

I sit there, slack-jawed for a moment. “Oh. That. Yeah, thanks, sir.”

There are a few moments of silence as he just stares at me in that intimidating way he has until he says, “Are you going to tell me, or am I just supposed to leave it at that?”

I frown. I don’t mind telling him, but I haven’t yet figured out how to succinctly summarize the events of the past few days. “Uh, so... I ran into someone I knew from ten years ago here at the wedding. She’s...” I’m almost embarrassed by the cheesy smile I feel forming on my face. “...amazing, actually. We lost touch back then and, well, turns out, I have a ten-year-old.”

There’s a beat of silence—the first time I’ve ever seen this man struck speechless. “Well, congratulations, Matt. So...” His eyes are curious. “...did you know this woman from when you were training at Pōhakuloa?”

“No. I met her in New York City.”

“And you ran into her here? Holy...” This time he ends his statement with a slow, disbelieving shake of his head. “What are the chances?”

“Yeah. Crazy, right? And we’re not telling many people about this, so if you could keep it on the down-low.”

“Of course. Have you thought about next steps?”

I know what he’s inferring. Leave it to the Admiral to cut to the chase.

“I have. With my promotion to major, I’ll be headed to ILE at Fort Leavenworth next.”

He spares me a nod. “That’ll be an easy year for you compared to what you’re used to,” he points out.

“Exactly. And it’s a lot closer to California than where I am now. Half the flight time. So I’m hoping I can use that time to get to know my daughter more.” I pause for a moment, thinking about Lily rather than Melody this time.

Anytime Lily and I talk about the future, we skirt around the topic of this *thing* that’s developed between us, for lack of a better word. Hell, she might get back from Hawai‘i and want as little to do with an Army guy as possible. We come with a fair share of baggage and in my case, I’ve probably got a lot more than average.

“After that,” I conclude, my tone suddenly wary, “I’m not sure what’s ahead.”

He chuckles. “Oh, hell, none of us ever know what’s ahead,” he tells me in that quintessential commander tone. “The minute we think we do, that’s generally when destiny pulls the rug out from under us.”

Surprised, my eyes widen. “Didn’t ever think of you as a destiny kind of a man, sir.”

“Son, I’ve seen Goddamn miracles save people I thought I had lost, at the same time fate turns its back to others who are just as deserving. I’ve delivered good news to families waiting back home, and the worst news imaginable to others. I don’t understand any of it. Half the time I don’t even like it. But I know *something’s* there.”

The sun touches the horizon, its rays melting into the ocean, followed by that rare, fabled green flash, as though to punctuate the Admiral’s statement.

Maybe he’s right. I might say I prefer to believe only in things I can see and touch. But if I really didn’t believe in destiny, then I wouldn’t be shaking my fist at it when things go wrong.

“You know,” he adds, looking thoughtful, “the Army doesn’t have much presence in California. But there are a few joint jobs on Navy bases there that might benefit from an Army perspective on things. Be sure to drop me a line when you’re done with ILE. I’ll make some calls.”

“That would be incredible, sir.”

“Attention on deck!” We hear a voice behind us shout, and the Admiral turns to see Ryder and a couple of my old officemates doing overly exaggerated salutes, all with wide, cheesy grins that tell us they know it’s completely inappropriate.

The Admiral gives me a look. “We’ll talk more later about this. Company’s arrived.”

CHAPTER 21



~ LILY ~

An overwhelming, borderline suffocating, cloud of anxiety shrouds me as I search for our table at Maggie's rehearsal dinner this evening.

My day didn't start off this way.

When my day kicked off, I was enjoying being snuggled into Matt's arms, even if I was rudely awakened by my alarm so that I could meet Maggie and the other bridesmaids for breakfast.

I hated the fact that I couldn't be there to see Bonnie off as she boarded her first flight. But at the same time, I felt this wave of gratitude that Matt was able to do everything for me, so that I could finally be a dutiful bridesmaid today.

It was the first time I really felt like someone had my back. My six, as Matt put it. *He had my six.*

It was so wonderful that he could take that off my plate.

But now, as I spot him across the sea of tables and he stands to greet me with a kiss, I'm wishing there's something

else he could take off my plate too.

Something else entirely.

He gives me a quizzical look as he pulls my chair out for me, and I join our table, set for eight. “You okay?” he whispers, camouflaging his words with a light kiss to my cheek.

“Later,” I whisper back just as the waiter arrives, asking for our drink orders.

Two delicious piña coladas later, and with my belly full of mahi-mahi and crème brûlée, I’m listening to Ryder’s inebriated cousin make a toast that lasts about five minutes longer than it should.

My eyes inadvertently glance toward Matt, and our gazes lock onto each other in that way they have through this whole dinner. His eyes are full of questions and mine are full of answers that I simply can’t give him in the presence of people I don’t know.

After way too many toasts, a white-gloved waiter takes away our empty dessert plates and I feel a hand touch my shoulder. I turn to see my best friend beaming at me.

“Did I work you too hard today? You look exhausted,” Maggie notices. There’s really no hiding anything from her.

I laugh. “I can’t blame you for that. I’m getting so little sleep on this trip.”

Nibbling her bottom lip for a moment, her smile reaches her eyes as she looks at Matt. “I think that’s *his* fault,” she says, nodding toward him.

“Hey,” he says simply in reply with a mock warning tone.

Her eyes track back to mine. “Some of us are going to the pool bar after this. I feel obliged to invite you, though if you joined us, I’d probably tell you that you have your priorities wrong.”

“Yeah, um, actually, I think I’d like to get some alone time with Matt.”

“Don’t blame you one bit.” She lowers her head closer to mine and whispers, “Why don’t you slip out now? The toasts seem to be at a break, thank God. But Ryder warned me that his SEAL team will probably start up next, and *their* toasts get practically competitive. So it could be a long night.”

“Thank you,” I reply, quickly standing along with Matt and my eyes flash with meaning as I add, “I owe you.”

She waves a hand through the air and then gives me a hug. “Nah. I owe *you* for what you’re going to do for me tomorrow.”

And when she says it, that damn cloud of doom is enveloping me again.

Like two kids released from detention at school, we practically scamper away... if a tough Army Ranger could ever manage to scamper, that is.

“What was she talking about?” he asks as we head toward our suite. “Indebted to you for what?”

“Ughhh.” I draw out a moan, grateful to finally be able to talk about this to him. Now that no one is around us, I do a

head-exploding gesture that pretty much represents my looming anxiety.

He gives me a quizzical look. “I thought it was just a bunch of errands and arts and crafts projects she had lined up for you today.”

“It started off that way,” I tell him. “We met with the photographer first to go over something he called their *wedding story*, whatever the heck that means. Then she, her sister, and I made wedding favors for all the guests. And after they left, Maggie and I met with the wedding coordinator and the guitarist.”

“Doesn’t sound too terrible yet.”

I hold up my finger. “But wait! There’s more!” I say, infomercial-style. “Then we’re told that the singer they hired is down with strep throat.”

“Strep throat?” His face contorts. “That’s not good. Can they get a DJ?”

I shake my head. “They have a DJ for the reception already. But Maggie wanted someone to sing while she walks down the aisle.” I pause, purely for dramatic effect. “So, of course, every eye in that room swings right over to me as if I’m even halfway capable of singing tomorrow.”

He beams. “God, that would be great.”

“No, Matt. No, it absolutely *wouldn’t* be great,” I counter. “Then the guitarist asks me if I know *A Thousand Years* by Christina Perri. And Maggie *knows* I know it because we sang it at karaoke back in college. So how could I say no?”

“You sang karaoke?” His eyes are wide with interest, looking over his shoulder at me as he presses the button for the elevator. “I wonder if they have a karaoke night here,” he ponders.

“You’re missing the point.” I sigh. “She already asked me to sing for her wedding months ago. But I turned her down. I’m too out of practice.”

“I seem to recall a bird song that would tell me otherwise,” he points out.

“That was a five-second bird song. This is different, Matt.” I groan as I watch him pull the key from his pocket when we arrive at our door. He doesn’t understand how four years of studying opera at Julliard elevated my expectations of my voice to a level that I simply haven’t maintained. “I don’t want everyone’s memory of Maggie’s wedding to be hearing me trying to sing again like I used to.”

Finally alone in his suite again, he takes my hand and tugs me toward him until I feel the warmth of his body flush against mine. It almost makes me feel better. Almost.

“So *don’t* sing like you used to. Sing like you do *now*. This isn’t the—what was that opera house you mentioned? The Venice Arena or something?”

“Verona Arena,” I correct, oddly warmed by the fact that he even half-remembered that.

“The Verona Arena,” he says with a soft nod, then cradles my face with his hands. “Don’t sing like it’s an opera. Sing like it’s to your best friend.”

Then he brushes the faintest of kisses against my lips before he pulls back, and I watch his smile spread across his face.

“I’m just excited that I get to hear you sing.” He flashes his eyes at me. “So excited, in fact, that I might not be able to sleep tonight.” He swoops me into his arms with such ease that it makes me breathless. “I wonder how I’ll kill the time.”

I giggle when he presses a kiss to my ear, to my neck, and then lifts my hand to his lips.

“Actually, I could kind of use a distraction myself,” I admit, and he lowers me onto the bed.

Above me now, his lips trace a path along my neck downward to the tiny buttons along the front of my dress. They looked so dainty and feminine when I bought this dress, but now they only annoy me with the sheer number of them.

I’m tempted to tear it off of me, but he seems to be almost enjoying them, kissing the skin that is revealed each time a button falls open. It makes me remember what he said about being the kind of person who opens his gifts slowly, carefully.

Melody definitely did *not* get that trait from him.

Scooting the dress off me, his lips trace along the soft curve of my shoulder, and then I feel the blessed relief of him releasing me from my bra.

The cool air from the air conditioning strikes the bare skin of my breasts, giving me goosebumps.

My blood simmers as he splays his hands against me, kneading the flesh of my breasts as my nipples pebble beneath

his touch.

“What do you want tonight?” he asks, and from the way his dark lashes fall low on his eyes as his cock throbs against me, I know he’s not asking whether I want pizza and a movie.

“Just you,” I breathe out. Because that is all I want tonight. I don’t need warm baths or sex that steams up the bathroom mirror. I don’t need him to go down on me until I scream his name. I don’t need him to show me all the sumptuous positions he can mold me into as his mouth plunders me.

I’ve already had that on this glorious escape from my reality. And right now, as I feel the weight of passing time making every moment with him count a little more than usual, I simply want *him*.

He curves his hand, sliding it past my panties to see I’m moist and ready for him. His gaze on me is tender now, not the fiery passion I’ve seen so often these past few days. And right now, it suits me perfectly.

“Then you’ll have me,” he says as he tugs off his clothes and puts on a condom, and I get to feel the full length of him slide into me, bringing me a satisfaction that I can’t put into words.

He’s so gentle with me this time, almost peaceful... the kind of sex you’d expect in a setting like this, with the soft sheets beneath us and the tropical breeze making the curtain flutter. Our lithe bodies move together in a sort of choreography that comes from a perfect blend of instinct, need, and patience—because this close to the end of our trip, a rush to the finish line is the last thing we want.

Tonight, I dare to think we're making *love* to each other... a word I'd never say out loud yet. But there it is, in my mind, inescapable.

We're *making love* tonight, I ponder, the words rolling around in my head.

No. More than that. I'm *falling in love* tonight.

And as he and I pull each other up toward the apex of desire, the idea of it doesn't even scare me. Not at all. It seems so natural and expected, because it would be impossible to not love someone who makes me feel like this.

So I enjoy the moment thoroughly, giving in to the passion and casting away any worry of the heartache that might wait for me around the bend. And when I hear his name pass my lips with a satisfied whimper, my soul sinks back into my body, and I whisper it again... the name of the man I love.

CHAPTER 22



- MATT -

The morning sun peeks out from the profile of Mauna Kea behind us, and in front of us, the expanse of the Pacific seems to dance with light.

Toes in the sand.

I should hate Ryder right now for making all of us get up so early for this wedding. But right now, with sand beneath the bare feet of their guests, just like Maggie and Ryder wanted it, I'm having a hard time hating the guy.

This setting couldn't be more perfect for a wedding.

As a slack key guitar begins to play, I've found myself in the second row with the Admiral and his wife sitting on one side of me, and Mason and Freya on the other. There's a light breeze blowing in from the ocean, just enough to tousle Lily's hair as she walks down the aisle with a small bouquet of plumerias in her grasp.

She looks gorgeous. I almost feel bad for Maggie because Lily is totally going to upstage the bride.

She doesn't take her place next to the other bridesmaids when she reaches the end of the aisle. Instead, she stands in front of a microphone with the slack key guitarist behind her. Her eyes are searching the crowd for a moment.

She's terrified right now. Even though she appears calm, confident—performer that she is at heart—I know how she *really* feels because she told me at least a dozen times last night.

Each time she told me, I attempted to kiss away her fears.

And when that didn't work, I resorted to other methods... all of which I enjoyed thoroughly.

I shouldn't be able to relate to this. I'm a Soldier, not a performer. *Definitely* not a singer. But I remember when I first enlisted, I deployed pretty quickly. Then, when I got accepted to West Point, I had four entire years when I was stateside.

No deployments. No action. No risk. Just a lot of studying and training.

After I graduated, I was set to deploy again. Yet this time, even though I should have felt better prepared as a West Point grad and officer, I feared I'd lost my edge. There's a world of difference between *learning* about what to do in a firefight and experiencing one firsthand, and I worried that somewhere along the path of getting my degree I had forgotten how to be in the action.

Would I crumble under the pressure?

When her eyes meet mine, I wonder if that's what's going through her head now. I give her my most reassuring look and

a confident nod.

Funny how much I want to relate to this for her... *with* her. As though I want to understand all the intricacies of Lily that I simply can't learn in just a handful of days together.

I want more time with her. And at the same time, I'm feeling like no amount of time will be enough.

At the cue of the Navy chaplain performing the ceremony, everyone stands for the bride, and I hear the gentle sounds of the guitar begin again. This time, I swear every organ in my body suddenly knots itself into a giant twisted mess as though I'm up there with her.

I want her to *love* this, for some reason.

I want this to inspire her to start dreaming again.

Then her voice—as pure in essence as the white gown of the bride—fills the salt-scented air around us.

And Lily takes my breath away.

I've never heard this song before. But the words of it as they pass her lips—so heartfelt—stir something inside of me.

There are tears in her eyes as she sings. I can see them even from my chair in the second row. And I know she's singing this love song to her best friend—her ride-or-die, as Ryder once put it to me earlier this week.

Maggie was there for her for all those moments I missed. She was the shoulder that Lily cried on. She was the hand that she held. She was her rock during the time in Lily's life when I was nothing more than a memory.

A despised memory, come to think of it.

But one day, I'd love to hear Lily sing it to me.

By God, that's what I want.

Holy shit. I'm in love with her.

I've always been a practical kind of guy. Hell, so practical that I bought the freaking burner phone in my twenties that kicked off this insanity. You don't get much more practical than that.

But there's nothing practical about falling in love over the course of a handful of days.

Yet I am. I *did*. And I know that for all the ways that both of our lives will change after we get home, I want to be there for her, steadfast through it all.

After the last note of the song ends as clearly as the first, I can see the relief in Lily's eyes as she takes her place next to Maggie's sister.

But when her eyes meet mine, I see something else in them. It's excitement. I'm sure of it. That light I saw inside of her as she sang is still there, bright as ever, as if she's already looking forward to her next performance, wherever that may be.

I'll do whatever it takes to help make that happen.

The ceremony—the vows, the rings, even that moment when Ryder and Maggie kiss for the first time as husband and wife—doesn't quite compare, in my opinion, to the singer who kicked it all off.

But I keep that to myself until after the ceremony ends, when I finally get to see Lily at the end of the aisle, waiting for me.

The kiss I give her is almost reverent. “I hate to admit this,” I say quietly, “but your talent puts you way out of my league.”

A blush touches her cheeks. “I was so nervous.”

“You were the highlight of the entire ceremony. But don’t tell Maggie or Ryder that. I’m not sure why you ever hesitated to do this.”

“When you go to Julliard... it’s so competitive. I’d practice singing for hours every day and my voice was still not as spectacular as I wanted it to be.” A contented glow touches her cheeks. “But it’s just like you said—I needed to sing as her best friend. Not as an opera performer.”

She kisses me lightly, gratitude in her eyes that I don’t deserve.

“Thank you for that advice. It felt completely different than I expected. It felt wonderful,” she finishes.

I grin, feeling proud when she links her hand into the crook of my elbow.

“Lily.” We hear a voice behind us, and when I turn, I see the guitarist approaching.

“That was beautiful,” he says. “I don’t normally work with a partner, but if you ever move to Hawai‘i, I’d break my rule for you.”

Her face screws up, right along with mine.

“What do you mean?” she asks. “I thought your partner had strep throat.”

“Nah.” He waves a hand casually through the air. “The bride asked me to go along with it. Said it would be the only way to get you up there,” he replies, his eyes dancing with amusement. “It was worth it, you know.”

After he walks away, Lily’s face hardens. “I’m going to kill her,” she mutters.

“You can’t tell me you didn’t love every minute of it,” I point out.

She nibbles her bottom lip for a moment and then admits, “I did. I forgot how good it feels to perform.”

I chuckle. “I’m hoping I’ll hear the same words from you later when I get you alone in our suite again.”

We stuff ourselves on the usual brunch fare, but each dish prepared with a nod to the tropical setting. There’s coconut encrusted French toast, omelets topped with fresh Hawaiian avocados, pancakes drenched in pineapple syrup and then crowned with heaps of fresh, locally made whipped cream.

The guests eat and drink and laugh, and there’s even a little dancing, despite the early hour. Then eventually, people peel off from the crowd to spend the rest of their day exploring the island.

When Lily gets tugged away from me by Maggie and the other bridesmaids for some final selfies on the beach, I head to

the bar to indulge again in a drink I'll never order at home when I'm hanging out with my battalion.

I hear a familiar voice behind me.

"Last time I saw you drinking one of those you said it wasn't your *usual* drink."

I look over my shoulder at the Admiral and smile as he eyes the same kind of coconut drink I enjoyed yesterday. "I guess Hawai'i is changing me, sir."

"Or maybe *she* is." He nods in the direction of Lily, then lowers his voice. "Still planning on meeting your daughter tomorrow when you get back to the mainland?"

I grin ridiculously. "Yep. Lily thinks I'm flying standby, but I actually upgraded her ticket to first class and even got the seat next to her. It was the only way to make sure I was on that plane." I shrug. "Besides, she's always wanted to fly first class. I thought it would be a nice surprise."

"She'll love it." He squares his shoulders and gives me a nod of approval. "You're taking this in stride, Matt. Adapting to your new role. A lot of military men tend to be too rigid—myself included. At least until I met Vi. She's a force of nature." He glances in the direction of his wife.

"Thanks, sir. But this—this kind of change is easy, you know?"

"God knows you've had plenty of the hard kind the past couple years," he points out.

"Yeah." I frown slightly, my memory tugging me down a path that doesn't quite fit this setting. "When we got Kirsten's

cancer diagnosis, I remember thinking..." My voice trails for a moment. "...this is the end of my life now, as it was. Whether I like it or not, whether or not I have any say in it." I shake my head, a little of the old anger baring its teeth. "Whether or not it's fair, it simply is what it is. I have to grow the hell up and just deal with it."

There's a pause between us, a stillness in the air. The Admiral's brow furrows. "I've seen a lot of tragedy. But cancer is one enemy I haven't faced."

"Yeah. Makes some of the others look like a walk in the park. But this... it's the same lesson. Life is changing again. Completely out of my control. But this time, it's good. I get a daughter. I mean, that's pretty incredible when you think about it."

"Enjoy it, Matt. You deserve it."

"Thanks, sir." I look toward the beach where Lily was, and then my eyes search the crowd. "Lily seems to have escaped me."

"Better go find her. Don't want to lose that one, son."

"No, sir," I answer. *No, sir, I definitely won't.*

CHAPTER 23



~ LILY ~

Hearing Matt's statement, I stumble backward, the air rushing from my lungs.

"...this is the end of my life now, as it was. Whether I like it or not, whether or not I have any say in it. Whether or not it's fair, it simply is what it is. I have to grow the hell up and just deal with it."

The words burn as though they've been branded into me so that I can hear them echo again and again in my memory as clearly as I did a moment ago when they passed Matt's lips.

He doesn't want this?

I press my eyes shut, remembering all the enthusiasm and excitement I've seen from him as we've planned the moment when he'll meet our daughter. I think about the times he'd talk about the future. How he wanted to support our daughter. How he wanted to support *me* even, to see me get the chance to resurrect some of my old dreams.

My dreams... as though he cared for *me* just as much as he does the daughter he has yet to meet.

Or does he care for her at all?

My head is spinning, this tangle of thoughts in my brain so familiar to me during this past week—the same confusion I dealt with when I first saw his face, when I first heard his voice, when I first learned that he wasn't the man I thought he was.

Am I wrong *again* about Matt?

I slice my way across the sand toward our hotel room, *desperately* fighting the urge to talk to Maggie because this is the last thing she needs to hear only hours after she took her wedding vows.

Just before I turn the corner, I glance over my shoulder toward her, she's laughing and carrying on after one too many Jell-O shots for this early in the morning. And when I see Ryder whisk her into his arms, I feel the sting of tears in my eyes because they look as happy as Matt and I did only moments ago.

Except that maybe he wasn't happy at all.

Tears stream down my face and I turn quickly, disappearing into the resort toward the privacy I desperately need right now.

Once I'm back in his suite, the air conditioning feels like a blessed gift to my sun-soaked skin, refreshing me just enough to focus.

Melody. Focus on Melody. That's what always pulls me through.

This... this is not a tragedy.

Sure, my heart is broken.

Been there, done that. I'll heal.

I still will have a dog arriving at the airport tomorrow—a dog that will light up my daughter's world. I know it. And I have memories that fill me with a desire to perform again, to dream again. This time with Matt has reminded me that there is space in my life for the things that I've wanted.

I won't let those words that Matt just said steal that from me.

But I *can't* have Matt join me on that plane.

As if on cue, my phone chirps in my purse. I pull it out and see Matt's number. Then I hit the ignore button, my face hardening as I hear his words in my head again:

I have to grow the hell up and just deal with it.

Oh, hell no. If that's Matt's true sentiments about fatherhood, there's no way I'm letting him into my daughter's life just yet. He needs to settle into his new reality. And given time, I really hope he will. Because my daughter is a precious jewel that should be cherished, not something he has to grow the hell up and deal with.

My phone chirps again and I nearly ignore it. But when my mothering instincts have me looking at my phone again, I see the text that came in from Melody.

My Melody.

“Grandma wants to know if it’s okay if they take me to the Tar Pits today.”

I savor the smile her words bring me, even as my heart still aches.

“Absolutely!” I write back, wishing I was there right now, headed to her favorite museum—the La Brea Tar Pits—rather than here, dreading the moment when I have to face a man who’s been plunged, unprepared, into a role he doesn’t want.

I hear the door to our suite open.

“Hey...” he greets me.

I detest the happiness on his face, knowing that it’s all a show.

“You okay?” he asks, his brow furrowing at the expression on my face.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine, Matt. But—” How do I say this? For all the emotions billowing up inside of me right now, we still share a child together. I can’t let my anger spew out into the air between us and poison a relationship that I’m basically stuck with. Like it or not.

Like it or not, just like he had said to the Admiral.

I suck in a breath for courage. “I’ve been thinking and, well, I just want to fly home on my own, Matt.”

His face falls. “Why?”

“It’s just—too much. You know? Too much change all at once for me. For Melody. For *you.*” I pause for a moment,

hoping that those last two words were conveyed with as much weight as I was aiming for. Hoping that maybe they might trigger him to finally be honest about how he feels.

“What do you mean?”

“I—I still want you to meet her, of course,” I stammer a little, feeling awkward suddenly. “But I think you and I need a little time to catch our breath.”

He brightens. “I’ve had days to catch my breath. I’m looking forward to it—to all of this. Meeting her. Seeing her reaction when she meets Bonnie.”

My heart deflates. It seems unfair to me suddenly—taking away this opportunity for him.

Adopting Bonnie was *his* idea. He even bought the kennel, paid the adoption fees, and footed the enormous bill for the pet cargo flight. He really should be there for the moment Mel finally gets a dog.

But just as I feel myself wavering, I hear his words again in my head.

Whether or not it's fair, it simply is what it is. I have to grow the hell up and just deal with it.

The memory of his words grates at my soul. I despise how he can stand there, looking wounded, when it’s all fake. Hell, that was the *Admiral* he was talking to. Matt wouldn’t have told a three-star admiral something if it wasn’t the God’s truth.

“Well, I can video it on my phone,” I say, hating the cold tone I use. “And I’ll send it to you. Okay?”

There's an awkward silence between us. I search for some measure of relief in his eyes. He should feel that, considering what he said. I've pretty much given him a hall pass to go about with his life however he wants it to be.

“Okay.” His voice is stiff, hard, like his expression, and his back is poker straight. “So, when do I get to meet my daughter?”

“Anytime,” I answer quickly. “Really. I want you to know that.”

His forehead creases sharply again. “Anytime... but not tomorrow.”

I sigh. “It's just—a lot, Matt. I think we rushed things. We *are* rushing things. A week ago, you didn't even know you had a daughter. Now, you're suddenly meeting her. You need time.”

“Can you please stop telling me what I need? Because you're wrong.”

“Am I?” My frustration spills into my tone. “Can you really look me in the eye and tell me you're a hundred percent comfortable with all the changes that are suddenly happening in your life?”

He stares at me for a beat, and I find myself holding my breath for his answer. There's a part of me that just wants him to admit the truth. How can we both be a part of Melody's life if we can't at least be honest with each other?

But then there's this other side of me that aches for him to say something that will erase everything I heard him tell the

Admiral.

He scoffs ever so slightly. “Lily, change is rarely comfortable, but—”

“But that’s just it,” I cut him off. “I don’t want you to have to change anything.”

He looks exasperated. “Or maybe *you* don’t want to change.”

My back straightens. “What?”

“Maybe you’re the one not wanting to change, Lily. You’ve raised our child on your own. And you’ve done a great job of it. But maybe the idea of changing your life and fitting *me* into it doesn’t sound too good now that we’re down to the wire.”

I bristle, hating that what he says rings true. But I sure don’t welcome that reminder from him right now. “We just need to separate ourselves from all *this*—” I wave my hands at the air between us. “—so that we start thinking about things *logically*.”

“Logically? Hey, I may not have ten years of parenting under my belt like you do, but I think that it has more to do with emotion than logic.”

“Exactly!” I practically pounce. “And don’t you think that decisions like this shouldn’t be made when we’re so emotional?”

He holds up his hands. “You know what? You’re probably right. I’ll back off and start thinking about this logically. You

still want Bonnie, right? It's just *me* you want cut out of the picture."

"Yes. Of course." I cringe at the way that sounds. "I mean, yes, I want Bonnie. But I'm not cutting you out of anything."

"Sure as hell could have fooled me," he says and storms out of the suite.

I stand frozen for a moment, staring at the place where he once stood. I try again to hear those words he said in my memory—those words that made me rethink all that we've shared this past week. But I can't now, hating that my brain seems to be denying me the one thing that will assure me that I did the right thing just now.

The silence around me is deafening—but not for long. Because it's only a moment before I fill the room with my sobs.

CHAPTER 24



- MATT -

Some guys get angry better than others. Some guys practically get off on it. Not me.

To me, anger is exhausting. Which might be why I had no trouble falling asleep on this chaise lounge by the pool last night around zero-one-hundred.

Hell, if I had any idea these chaise lounges were so comfortable, I might have given up my suite to Lily at the start of all this and slept out here by the pool. Then at least we might have avoided the excess drama that comes when you inject sex into an already tenuous situation.

Sure, it was the best sex I've had in years. But worth this? Hell no. Not when I'm waking up to the day I thought I'd get to meet my daughter for the first time, and instead, I've now got a first-class seat on a plane sitting next to the woman who froze me out of my own suite and expects me to wait longer to meet the child whose first ten years of life I was denied by some twist of fate.

It makes me think of what the Admiral said about destiny. Yes, sir—I don't like it half the time either.

I pull my phone out of my pocket. I turned it off after getting a couple texts from Lily saying, "*I don't want you to feel like you can't stay with me tonight,*" followed by a predictable "*Where are you? Can you please call me?*" that pretends she actually gives a shit that she just tore my heart out of my chest.

But I'm kind of wishing that I hadn't turned off my phone when I see I missed three calls and one all-caps text from Ryder this morning.

"WTF DID YOU SAY TO LILY?" it reads.

The sides of my mouth pinch, annoyed. What is it about SEALs that makes them always put things in all-caps like that? I start to tap in a reply, but I'm stopped by a voice approaching.

"Where the hell were you last night?"

I look up from my phone and see Ryder glaring down at me.

"Right here." I toss out my arms dramatically as though I should be so fucking happy to have spent the night under the stars wondering if security was ever going to get the balls to ask me to leave. Then I scrunch up my brow. "Lily didn't bug you and Maggie on your wedding night, did she?"

"No. Maggie texted her this morning to see if they could meet for coffee." He folds his arms across his chest. "What the hell happened between you two?"

“Beats the hell out of me, bruh. I went back to the room after the reception and she’s all of a sudden saying that she doesn’t want me to meet my daughter yet. I don’t get it. Cold feet or something.”

“*Cold feet?*” For a moment, he looks like he’s about to explode, and I can’t figure out why. But then he sucks in a measured, audible breath. “No, asshole. She overheard you talking to the Admiral.”

Perplexed, I shrug. “And?”

“And you told him something about how... I don’t know exactly... something about how you thought this whole situation was unfair. And that you had to just basically... what is it you Army guys are always saying? Suck it up, Soldier, right? I mean, dude, I want to side with you. Really, I do. But no woman wants to hear that.”

“Are you high? I didn’t say that to the Admiral or anyone.”

“She even *saw* you saying it.”

“Dude, I know what I said to him and it sure as hell wasn’t that. In fact, it was the complete opposite. I was telling him how *excited* I was to see my daughter. To change my life. That I was ready for it. Hell, you can ask him.”

“You’re sure?”

“Ry, it doesn’t even make sense. If I was having doubts about my daughter, do you really think I’d tell the Admiral that? The guy would have beat the shit out of me and told me to man-up.”

He tucks in his chin. “Damn. You’re right.”

“He even said that I was dealing with this *well*,” I add, remembering. “I had told him how Kirsten’s cancer kind of prepared me for it because...” I swear I hear screeching brakes in my brain as I stop. “Oh, shit.”

“What?”

I dig into my memory and struggle to remember my exact words. Sure, my coconut drink looked like it belonged in the hands of a college-aged girl on her twenty-first birthday. But it actually *did* make everything a little hazy. “I said something about how Kirsten’s cancer had taught me that change is just something you have to deal with. That it doesn’t... oh, *shit*...” I say again with even more emphasis this time.

“What? It gets worse?”

“Yeah. I said that it might not be fair, and—oh, hell—I think there was something in there about life as I knew it being over.”

He sits on the lounge next to me. “Well, you sure blew that one. It’s not exactly something a woman who raised your child for ten years would want to hear.”

“But I was talking about cancer. Not *her*.” I stand up. “Do you know where she is?”

“In an Uber on the way to the airport, I think. Maggie saw her off a few minutes ago.”

I glance at my watch. “This early?”

“Yeah. She didn’t want to bump into you here. Can’t say I blame her,” he adds.

“Dammit.” I walk away from him without another word.

“Where are you going?” I hear him over my shoulder.

I don't break my stride or even turn toward him as I shout my reply. “To fix this.”

CHAPTER 25



~ LILY ~

Frowning, I stand on the curb with my suitcase for a moment and stare at the airport in front of me as I hear the Uber drive away behind me.

I got here way too early. But I had no interest in sitting around a hotel suite that wasn't even mine, waiting for a man who never came back last night, and knowing how angry he must be with me.

This airport is more familiar to me than it should be. I was just here a matter of days ago, trying to fly standby.

It's stunning how things have changed so much since then. Not even a week has passed, and my entire life has been flipped over like a steak on a barbecue, and then flipped over again just to burn me a little more.

Again, Matt's words haunt me, just like they did all last night.

"...whether or not I have any say in it. Whether or not it's fair..."

As I stand here, thinking of all that has changed for *me* since I was last here, the echo of his statement doesn't fuel my anger the way it did last night. Because I'm also thinking about how much things have changed for *him*.

With a sigh, I start to roll my bag toward the airport, familiar enough with the routine of this place that my mind can wander.

I remember how it felt when I first found out that I was going to be a mom. How scared I was. Overwhelmed. Worried. But then, there were these moments when the clouds would break and the light would shine through, leaving me excited. Exhilarated even.

Then the roller coaster would twist its path again, and I'd be right back to terrified.

Taking my place at the end of the long line to check my baggage, I picture Matt—with his broad, superhero shoulders that look like they could hold up the world.

But he's just human.

As I move forward in the line, my mind flits again back to my pregnancy and those first years of motherhood when everything was so new.

In that time, I learned that we're only as strong as the people holding us up when our knees wobble. And God knows my knees wobbled plenty.

When they did, my parents held me up. Maggie held me up.

And maybe yesterday, when Matt was feeling uncertain about the changes in his life, he needed someone to hold *him* up.

Like the Admiral.

Dammit.

I overheard something said *in confidence* and I used it against him. I never thought about it that way.

Was I right to get so angry? So defensive? So protective of my daughter?

Or was *he* right when he said that *I* am the one who is scared of change?

I hate—I absolutely hate the answer that forms in my head. I *was* panicking. I was latching onto his words like they were the loophole that would revert my world right back to the safe, stable, predictable life I had.

No more spine-tingling attraction that might break my heart. No more singing in front of audiences when it's a career I can't have. And certainly, no sharing my precious daughter with someone who might influence her in ways that I can't control.

I need to call him.

Now.

I reach into my pocket just as the line moves again and a baggage check agent signals me over. Begrudgingly, I roll my suitcase toward her and hand her my driver's license.

“How many bags?” the woman asks.

“Just one, thanks.”

I hand it to her, and she weighs it and then tosses it onto the conveyor belt behind her.

“Here’s your claim ticket.” She glances down at her monitor and then back up to me, her smile a little wider than before. “Next time, you can use the shorter line that starts over there.”

She points in the direction of the line for first class.

I laugh a little. “I’m definitely not in first class.”

Her brows pinch briefly as she looks down at her monitor again. “Yes. You are. First class window seat.”

“I’m not. Uh, can you check again? I can’t afford a mistake like that.”

“It’s not a mistake.” Her words are in stereo to me—coming not just from her, but from behind me as well.

I turn around... and I see Matt—in his dress uniform.

I feel my jaw gape at the sight.

“I upgraded you to first class,” he says, taking my hand and guiding me away from the counter. “It’s time for you to start getting the things you want in life.”

“Matt, what are you doing here?” I ask just as his words settle into me. “And... wait... what did you just say to me?”

He grins. “That’s two questions. But the answer’s kind of the same for both. I’m here because I’m on the same flight as you. I upgraded your ticket to first class and bought me a ticket next to you. I wanted to surprise you.”

My heart warms at the same time shame courses through my veins. “You did?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to risk not getting on that flight. Because despite what you think, I really do want to meet my daughter and be a part of her life.”

“But you’re in uniform,” I point out, my heart practically fluttering at the sight of him in it.

He grins. “Yeah. With a ticket rather than standby, I guess I don’t need it. But I figured it might look good for an apology.”

Guilt has my shoulders sagging. “Matt, you have no reason to apologize. I’m the one who should be sorry. I shouldn’t have said those things to you last night. You confided something to the Admiral at the reception and I overheard it,” I confess. “And then—you were right—I used it as an excuse to push you away because this is all so scary for me.”

“I’m sorry that you heard what I said to him,” he says.

“They’re valid feelings that you’re having,” I assure him.

“Maybe. But they’re not the feelings I have about you or Melody.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was telling him how I felt when Kirsten got her cancer diagnosis,” he tells me. “How it taught me that sometimes you have to just deal with things you hadn’t planned. But if you had stuck around to hear the rest, you’d have heard me say that this is something *good*. Something I *want*. Not just the amazing daughter I never knew I had... but *us*.”

“You want this? Us?” I don’t know if it’s his words or the lingering effects of exhaustion, but my mind searches for reassurance, as if I might be imagining all of this. “You and me?”

“Yes. You and me. Lily, I want to hear you sing again. On the stage. In the shower.” His smile widens. “And now that I know you used to karaoke, I want to hear that too. I want to go to Italy with you. I want to see an opera with you—not because I have any interest but because I’d love to see the joy it brings you.”

I feel the sting of tears forming behind my eyes at his words—his words about a future not just for him and my daughter.

But for him and *me* too.

“Lily, I want to take you to places to hear birds you’ve never heard before. And when we’ve heard them all, we’ll find more places where the whales sing. I want to know what kind of coffee you drink when it’s not from Kona, and I want to be the one there in the morning to make it for you. And I know all these things...” He shakes his head. “...all these ideas and dreams I have with you are too soon—too fast, just like you said last night. But that doesn’t make them any less real.”

He takes both my hands just as two tears drop from my eyes.

“I’m an Army guy,” he continues. “And that comes with a lot of uncertainty. And I know that we’ve still got so many things to work out between us. But there is one thing I am certain of. I’ve fallen in love with you, Lily-like-the-flower. I

started to ten years ago, and only now did I finally have the chance to finish the job.”

My breath is stolen from me. Not just from his words, but from how they reflect what’s in my heart. “I’m in love with you too.”

Then he kisses me with the kind of sumptuous sweetness I feel down to my toes. His hand touches the small of my back, pulling me closer—so close that I can feel the vibration of his heartbeat. And just like I remember it doing ten years ago, my own heart changes its pace to meet his.

He breathes out a contented sigh as our lips part.

Then, with a glimmer of mischief in his eyes, he takes my hand again. “Now how about we go get our champagne and warm towels?”

CHAPTER 26



- MATT -

I've done a lot of scary things in my life. I've lived through every one of them.

Sometimes barely.

So this—arriving at Lily's house to meet my daughter for the first time—should be a cakewalk.

Between Lily and me, Bonnie sits on the seat, still seeming a little shook up from the five-hour flight on a cargo plane. When she saw us after they pulled her kennel off the plane, I got to see the kind of energetic wagging that could power a city for a month. And when we hooked her onto her leash and let her attack us with her version of a whole-body hug, all I kept hoping was that the rest of this day would be equally as satisfying.

I blow out a long, restrained breath as the driver slows, turning into a quiet Los Angeles neighborhood with rows of tiny, well-kept bungalows.

I look over at Lily. "You're glowing," I observe.

Her eyes flash with excitement. “Of course. I haven’t been away from my daughter for this long in my life. I can’t wait to see her.” Her smile fades a little and she cocks her head. “You’re a little pale, Soldier.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Nervous?”

I lift my eyebrows. “I’m about to meet the daughter I never knew I had. Not to mention I’m about to meet your mom who I’m hoping won’t kill me when we eventually tell her who I am.”

She giggles as the driver stops the car. “Don’t worry. Mel will come outside first; I’m sure of it. So you’ll have at least three or four minutes to recover before you meet my mom.”

“Well, that makes me feel a lot better,” I grumble, my tone thick with sarcasm.

Lily gives my hand a squeeze. “Your daughter’s going to love you.”

“I’m not counting on that yet. But if she can just associate meeting me with the arrival of Bonnie, then that will be a step in the right direction.”

As if she knew we were talking about her, Bonnie gives my cheek a long lick to show her support as the driver gets out of the car and unloads our luggage from his trunk.

“She’s going to love you—” Lily repeats, but then adds, “—eventually. Just remember not to slip up. You’re an old friend, remember?”

“Got it,” I assure her. “I’m an old friend who is on layover on my way to Savannah. Not really a lie, you know.”

“Exactly,” she agrees as she starts to get out of the car.

When the front door of the house flies open, my breath gets caught in my throat when I see a young girl burst through it. Her smile is wide and radiant and her eyes—*my* eyes—seem to dance as she runs toward her mother.

Lily races into her arms...

...the arms of *my daughter*.

She looks surreal to me—so different from the images Lily shared on her phone because you just can’t capture that kind of spirit in a photo.

“My girl!” Lily says gleefully, holding Melody tight in a hug.

Alone in the car with Bonnie, I feel like I’m about to leap from a C-130 at six hundred feet into enemy territory.

“Okay, pup,” I whisper to the dog at my side. “Let’s do this together.”

Bonnie needs no encouragement as she tugs on her leash and pulls me out of the car.

“Oh! A dog!” Melody chirps happily, stooping over to pet Bonnie. Then she looks at me quizzically as though she just noticed the guy holding the leash.

“Lily, this is Matt, an old friend of mine that I ran into at your Uncle Ryder’s wedding. He’s got a layover here in L.A.”

“Oh. Nice to meet you,” she says politely before resuming her lovefest with Bonnie.

“And uh,” Lily continues, “he brought you back something from Hawai‘i.”

I did? I exchange a look with Lily in question. She’s letting *me* get all the credit for this? Lily beams back at me and gives me a slight nod.

Melody’s gaze shifts from me down to Bonnie, confused at first. “You did?” she asks quietly, almost as if she’s already hoping the gift I brought her is Bonnie.

“I did.” I manage to say my first words to my daughter—awkward as they probably sound. “I did. She’s a rescue dog from Hawai‘i.”

Her eyes widen with awe, looking from Bonnie to me, and then back to Bonnie. “You brought me a *dog?*”

Then I see it—my child’s eyes brimming with tears of joy.

“I’ve always wanted a dog. *Always.*” She breathes out the last word almost reverently, standing statue-still for a few beats as though she’s processing this just like I used to as a kid.

“Well, I think you’ll like Bonnie.” I dare to reach out to her to hand her the end of the leash, and I’m taken by surprise when Melody takes two long strides in my direction and...

...hugs me.

My God.

The feel of her in my arms steals my breath. Suddenly, I'm not thinking about all the firsts I missed in her life because this one makes up for all of it.

My first hug from my daughter.

“Thank you,” she says, still in my hold. It only lasts seconds—maybe two or three—that hug. But it manages to fill my entire soul. Then Bonnie jumps up on her, making Melody tumble to the ground in a fit of giggles as fur flies everywhere.

I feel the tentative touch of Lily against my back, and emotion swells inside of me at a realization. All the time I've spent searching for a place that was meant for me—that place I'd want to stay forever—I should have been looking for something else entirely.

This woman, this child, this moment.

I've finally found my paradise.

EPILOGUE



Two years later

~ FREYA ~

“I wonder if I’ve lost my touch.”

An inappropriate thing for me to say, I suppose, as the applause that followed Matt and Lily’s first kiss as husband and wife begins to dissipate, and they walk back down the aisle again... this time, together.

Forever.

It was, without hesitation, one of the most magnificent beachfront ceremonies I’ve ever witnessed.

When I first opened the invitation, I had hoped they’d be giving us another reason to return to Hawai‘i; another destination wedding there would have been welcome now that I’ve managed to block out the memory of just how hard it is to make the trek to paradise from our East Coast home.

But instead, we're on the California coastline, not too far, apparently, from where Matt and Lily just moved into a new house, perfect for their family of three.

Well, four, if you count their sweet dog in the mix.

"Lost your touch? What do you mean?" Mason asks, lifting a single eyebrow at me. "They're together. They're perfect. Why wouldn't you be proud of that?"

I'm smiling at the truth in his statement, but I also find myself shaking my head. "But that wasn't me at all, Mason."

A salty breeze caresses my skin, just strong enough that it cools the wedding guests without blowing sand in their eyes. Yep, destiny even did a good job with the weather today, offering a Tiffany-blue sky with just enough puffy clouds to look like a watercolor painting.

"What do you mean, Mama?" Astrid asks as she takes both of our hands and tugs us into the aisle as the guests head toward the nearby reception hall.

"Well, honey, I didn't do any matchmaking for this one," I admit. "Destiny did it all."

"But you're just as good as destiny," she declares and then starts running toward the shoreline where the photographer is taking pictures of the new family—and a pod of dolphins is magically photobombing them.

Too perfect for words.

No, my sweet Astrid, I ponder, watching her squeal with delight as the dolphins peek out from in between the waves.

I'm not as good as destiny, because I can't pull off something like that.

I smile, my eyes tracking from my daughter over to the joy I see in Lily's and Matt's eyes—and especially in Melody's. She seems so content now that her dad is an official part of their family.

It wasn't long after Melody and Matt met that she was told that he is her father—and according to Lily, the news elicited nothing but happiness from her, along with a few comments like "I knew it all along" which were conveyed in that special know-it-all tone that kids perfect around that age.

I guess I have a few more years before I hear that tone from Astrid.

Mason comes up from behind me and takes my hand. "You're not really serious about all that? About losing your touch?"

I shrug. "Kind of. Or... maybe I never had the touch in the first place."

He gives me a slight tug, making my gaze shift toward him as he narrows his eyes on me. "Who are you, and what have you done with the Freya I love?"

"I'm serious. Maybe all of you are right. I meddle too much." I sigh. "Think about it. If I had gotten involved, I might have stood in the way of destiny. If I had tried to set Matt up with someone... or Lily with someone, then this—" I nod toward the blissfully happy family. Their dog, Bonnie, is the only one who seems unaffected by the presence of dolphins

as the photographer captures the moment for posterity. “—this might not have happened.”

“But you didn’t.” He cocks his head, then pulls one of my hands up to his lips and kisses it. “We tease you. We do—and maybe we shouldn’t. But we all know the truth of it, Freya. You have a knack for this. An instinct. You knew right away that lightning was about to strike for those two, remember? You stood back and let it happen.” He looks thoughtful for a moment. “For that matter, I’d even say destiny chose you as a partner in all of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Matt told me that the only reason he and Lily are together today is because Lily saw you approaching in the hotel lobby. She took a ride with Matt to the airport just so she could avoid you.” His face pinches a little. “I actually meant that as a compliment.”

But he doesn’t need to explain, and it makes my face brighten, just thinking about it. “So, if I wasn’t such a nosy pain-in-the-ass, we wouldn’t be enjoying a wedding right now.”

“Exactly.”

I grin, feeling the warmth of the sun on my face as it makes its path toward the horizon this evening.

Astrid races across the sand toward us. “Did you see them, Mama? Did you see the dolphins?”

“I did, baby. They were so beautiful, weren’t they?”

“I want dolphins to be in my wedding,” she decides.

Mason puffs out his cheeks. “Sweetie, I’ll make sure you have the wedding of your dreams, but we can’t promise there will be dolphins in it.”

Astrid only briefly looks disappointed. “That’s okay. It’ll still be fun. And Mama can find me my husband. Because she’s good at that,” she adds, her tone sounding more reassuring than I’d expect from a child her age.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever find anyone perfect enough for my angel,” I tell her and lift her up, letting her wrap herself around me like she used to when she was smaller.

She’s so heavy—not the baby she once was. There won’t be many more times I can do this.

Mason reaches over to touch my back with Astrid in between us, still in my hold. I gaze at both of them, my heart filled with love, and watch how the rose and amber hues of the setting sun light their features.

“The sun’s so pretty, Mama. Look,” she murmurs.

“It is,” I agree.

But I don’t look, instead choosing to let my eyes soak up the sight of Mason and Astrid as they are right now.

I memorize their features, thinking about how time has changed them both over the years, just as it’s changed me.

I’ve seen other sunsets. But I’ll never have this moment again... with the two people I love most in the world.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Romancing Paradise* and letting me share with you a place that is dear to me—the Big Island of Hawai‘i—as well as the experience I had when I took a rescue dog on a field trip while on vacation there, inspiring the character of “Bonnie.” And I am glad to report that the rescue dog now is in a loving home, thanks to the hardworking people at [Hawai‘i Island Humane Society](#). Mahalo to them for all they do for the animals who bring our world love and joy.

If you enjoyed this book, I hope you’ll consider leaving a positive review. **As an independent author, five-star reviews literally help me sell books, so I’m deeply grateful for your support.**

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Thank you again for purchasing my books, for following me on social media, and for keeping my dream alive of giving up my “day job” and doing this full-time... one day!

In this crazy, crowded, busy world, know that I'm grateful for you and hoping you find your own happily ever after.

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