

USA TODAY BESTSELLER
BECKY MONSON

The Wedding Fixx



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The
Wedding
Jinx

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BECKY MONSON

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Dedication

*To all the brides whose weddings I used to DJ,
I wasn't very good at it, and I'm sorry.*

One

Mila

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY acknowledged that a woman in possession of a job must have a work bestie.

It's not even a truth, really. It's an undeniable fact. Having someone you can talk to, gossip with, go to lunch with, compare outfits with, have inside jokes with, mock people with ... all while at work? It's the best—and probably fastest—way to get through the day.

I've had the same work best friend for close to two years now, and I've come to rely on her like no one else in my life. We've laughed together, cried together, hated on the same people together. We've even taken this thing outside of work, and the friendship remained standing.

But, despite all that—despite knowing the days will be so much harder to endure without her, that my very *life* will be harder without her—I'm going to have to cut my work best friend loose.

“Please, Mila?” my soon-to-be-former bestie asks, her deep-brown eyes pleading with me. Her impeccably styled bun, which is neatly holding her dark-brown hair in place, remains immaculate as she fidgets around, anticipating my answer.

She already knows my answer: not only no, but *hell* no.

She pounced on me just as I arrived at work—before I could even get settled in my office, in my little corner space with the exposed brick—and is now sitting across from me, an L-shaped desk between us, the massive diamond on her ring finger and her bronze skin glowing under the recessed lighting. My nearly-ex-friend glows under any light source, truly. With or without makeup. The brat.

It's important to note here that her beauty is not the reason I need to unfriend her at this time. Nor is the fact that she looks amazing in the black sheath dress she's currently wearing. I'm envious of her flawless looks, but

not shallow.

I take a deep breath. “Nadia Singh, you know how I feel about weddings. Especially *being* in a wedding.” I hate both, which I’ve explained to her many times. I’ve promised myself I’ll never have to go to another one, unless it’s my own wedding, and in that case, it will be a very simple ceremony at a courthouse with absolutely zero hoopla.

“I know, Mila Banks,” she says, her tone mocking, her head cocked to the side with a very *Why are you like this?* look. “But you have to be up there with me. I need you by my side when I do this.”

By *this* she means marrying the very handsome and ridiculously rich Shane Richardson. They met at a casual after-work gathering we went to nearly a year ago. Shane doesn’t work for AppInnovate, where Nadia and I are employed, but his best friend, Grayson Manning, is the CEO.

Side note: Grayson (who I nicknamed BILK—Boss I’d Like to Kiss—because Boss I’d Like to Father My Children was too long and BILFMC just doesn’t work) also happens to be the star of 94 percent of my romantic daydreams, with the other 6 percent featuring Henry Cavill. I’ve tried desperately to get him and his white button-down shirts out of my head for so many reasons. First and foremost, he’s my boss. Secondly, he’s my *boss*. And thirdly, HE’S MY BOSS. There are more reasons, obviously, but those are the top three. I think to truly get him out of my brain, I’d have to quit my job. And I actually love this job, despite the woman sitting across from me right now, asking me to do harrowing things.

But back to Nadia and the obscenely rich Shane. It was basically love at first sight for the both of them. Their eyes met from across a crowded room. There was an instant connection before they even said hello. Actually, this is how Nadia likes to tell the story, but I was there, so what really happened is our boss, Grayson (the BILK), brought Shane over to the high-top table Nadia and I were sitting at and introduced us to him. I know for a fact Nadia hadn’t noticed Shane before that, because at the time she was still my work bestie, and she would have said something if she had. Nadia does not gatekeep hot-man sightings.

Anyway, Grayson introduced us, and then it became extremely clear that Shane only had eyes for Nadia because he basically ignored me and immediately started up a conversation with her, leaving me and the BILK to talk, and, well, very awkward things happened. But that’s another story.

So now, Shane and Nadia are getting married in Oahu at the Four Seasons

(I did say Shane was filthy rich, didn't I?), and even though they just got engaged a couple of weeks ago, the wedding is next month. Because, according to Nadia, when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want that life to start as soon as possible. I'm fairly confident that's a line from a movie, but she claims she came up with it. The real story goes: they were told there was a cancellation, and they figured, why not?

As of yesterday, when she informed me of these new and unexpected wedding plans, it was just going to be a small affair because it was happening so fast. Just Shane, Nadia, and their families. This was good news for me since, as I previously mentioned, I hate weddings.

But then, sometime last night, Nadia decided she didn't want that cozy family wedding. She wanted a big wedding. And of course, since Shane's backbone magically disappears in her presence, he now wants to make all her wedding dreams come true.

"You don't need me by your side when you marry Shane," I tell her. "You'll have your sisters. And ... I'm like a foot taller than all three of you. I'd be the lone pale and lanky white girl up there." Nadia's parents are from Guyana and have Indian roots—they are an entire family of beautiful people. "Not to mention the fact that you're all gorgeous and I'm just ... you know ... me." I run my hands down my longish torso to accentuate my words. "I'll ruin your pictures."

This feels like a really solid excuse, and I'm actually quite proud of myself for coming up with it just now. Nadia isn't having it, though.

"What?" she scrunches her perfect button nose at me. "Please stop with your dumb excuses. You couldn't ruin the pictures, Mila, you're gorgeous. Also, no one with boobs like that could be called lanky."

Ah, yes, the one thing I have that Nadia claims to be envious of: my chest. I can't help that I inherited it from my mother, may she rest in peace. It's important to note here that she's not actually dead. She and my dad recently moved to a retirement community in Boca Raton, which is much too far away from Colorado—specifically Denver, where I was basically born and raised and where I've lived most of my adult life, except for a three-year stint in Seattle. So, because she is no longer a quick drive away and left me here alone with only my brother, Everett, his wife, Gwen, and their three crazy boys, she's now dead to me.

Except we just got off the phone twenty minutes ago, as I was driving to

work. And *I* called *her*. Well, I'm just going to have to restart my estrangement over again. Starting right now. I should probably admit that I had to start over yesterday as well.

My eyes move back to Nadia. "I *am* pale, though." Maybe this excuse will be enough. It's not a reach either. I've got the coloring of a vampire. I'm even wearing my favorite red A-line dress today because I couldn't believe the washed-out ghost that was staring back at me in the mirror this morning. I thought matching my lipstick color to my dress was a solid choice, except now I just look like a washed-out ghost wearing red.

Nadia gives me a small, acquiescing nod and a quick shrug of her shoulders. "I'll give you that. Would it kill you to get a little sun?"

"I burn easily," I tell her. Curse you, Scandinavian ancestors. I get that from my traitor-that-moved-away mom's side, and my blue eyes too. My medium-brown hair and tall, but maybe-not-so-lanky body, however, is all from my dad's side. My dad left me and moved away to Boca Raton too, but for some reason, I don't blame him as much. Probably because the whole thing was my mom's evil idea.

Nadia shakes her head at me. "That's not an excuse, Mila. I'm not letting you out of this. You have to be my maid of honor. You were there the first time I met Shane. You have become one of my dearest friends, and my wedding party won't be complete without you."

My gosh. I didn't peg Nadia as such a clinger. Not quite a level ten, but she's hovering around five or maybe even six right now. Unfriending her is going to be much harder than I anticipated.

"I really don't think—"

"Mila," she cuts me off. "The only answer I'll accept is: *It would be my honor to be in your wedding, Nadia. Thank you for asking me.*"

It is an honor for Nadia to ask me to do this. It's a big deal. I know because I've been asked to be in seven other weddings in the past five years. This is a lot, I realize, and it doesn't include the other weddings I've attended as a guest, which was considerably more. Way too many weddings, if you ask me.

The hardest part, and the reason I'm giving Nadia so much push back, is that during each and every one of those seven weddings, something disastrous happened. I'm not talking *the bride lost the groom's wedding band* bad (although that did occur once); I'm talking *the bride fell into the pool we were standing in front of during the ceremony* bad. That happened during

wedding number five, and it was *my* foot that caused it.

It was after wedding number five that I began to suspect something: I was the common denominator at all these events. When wedding number six took place and turned out to be an even bigger disaster than the previous five (also my doing), my suspicions started to morph into something more like certainty. And then there was the ultimate wedding catastrophe: number seven.

We don't speak about number seven.

It was after that final one that I realized whatever bad juju I had going on didn't need to be spread to any other nuptials, especially for my loved ones. Because I'm clearly a jinx. It's been just over two years since the last wedding, and I haven't been to one since. Not even just to attend the celebration as a guest, even though that hadn't seemed to cause any disasters in the past. I apparently need to be *in* the wedding party for things to go awry.

I'm happy to report that in the last two years, during my wedding hiatus, any weddings I've been invited to and *haven't* attended (thanks to the various excuses I've come up with to get out of them) seemed to go off without a hitch. Well, people got hitched, but you know what I mean.

Now I just need a decent excuse to get out of Nadia's wedding because, clearly, unfriending her is not going to happen. She's not going to allow it, and truthfully, I don't really want to. I love my Nadia. She's my fiercely loyal and unfiltered confidante—someone who'll willingly get in the trenches with me and will also tell me when I have food in my teeth. Friends like that come around once in a lifetime. I just can't be in her wedding. Bringing my bad mojo to her happy day is not a good idea.

She doesn't know the whole of it—I've only told her some of my wedding woes. I've even said the word *jinx*, and each time she's laughed it off, chalking it all up to coincidence—which, believe me, I've tried to do too—and then tells me I'm being ridiculous (a word she commonly uses to describe me, which isn't unfounded; to be honest, I *can* be ridiculous sometimes). But at the end of the day, it's *way* too much coincidence. Maybe if I told her everything, she'd believe me. But I haven't. Because to do so, I'd have to admit some things I'd rather not.

Nope, not going there right now. Because right now, I need to figure out a way to get out of Nadia's wedding. Which is proving to be hard as she sits across from me, her dark eyes staring me down. I need a good excuse. Maybe I say yes and then, I don't know, try rock climbing and hope I break my leg?

Jump out of a moving car? Throw myself down some stairs? Or maybe I could go along with it and then fake a nasty virus right before? Maybe a very contagious strain of pink eye? Does she really want everyone in her pictures with red, itchy eyes? It wouldn't be the first time I've brought a virus to a wedding.

Oh gosh, I need to get out of this.

"Can't I just be a guest?" I ask.

"No."

"An usher?" This feels like a compromise. I could be in the wedding, but on the outskirts. Maybe I'd be less of a jinx that way.

"Do I need ushers?" she asks, her eyebrows pulled together.

"Of course," I say. I actually don't know. But it seems legit.

"Well, crap." Picking up her phone, she taps the front, bringing it to life, her manicured nails making clicking sounds as she navigates around her screen. She quickly types something, most likely adding it to a list. Nadia is known for her list making.

"It's settled, then?" I ask, hope swimming in my belly.

"No," she says, her eyes back on me as she sets her phone down. Then she sighs, her shoulders falling. "Mila, I know weddings aren't your thing and you've had some bad experiences."

I almost scoff at this, but then stop myself. She doesn't know the half of it.

"But I promise it won't be that way at mine. It's going to be the best day, and I want you standing right next to me when it happens."

"I just don't think—"

"Meeeeela," she says, drawing out my name. Her patience has worn thin.

I sit back in my seat, my eyes going to the picture on my desk, the one I photoshopped myself into with a man I refer to as Fake Dave. Well, I only refer to him that way around Nadia. To everyone else in this office, he's just Dave. Fake Dave came to be after that awkward encounter with my boss the same night Nadia met her betrothed. He probably should be a reminder of my idiocy, but we've become sort of friends, Fake Dave and me. He's a bodyguard of sorts, mostly to save me from myself.

I stare into his lovely, ocean-blue, stock-model eyes. *Get me out of this, Fake Dave.*

A throat clears from the open door of my office. Nadia and I both turn our heads toward the sound to find Quentin, one of the developers who works

with us.

He pushes his large, rimmed glasses up his nose.

“Grayson is wondering if you two are coming,” he says in his normal whiny-sounding tone.

“Crap,” Nadia says as I pick up my phone to see the time, since my desktop screen has timed out. We’re ten minutes late for our weekly meeting. *What the hell, Fake Dave. That’s not how I wanted you to get me out of this.*

“We’re coming,” I say to Quentin as both Nadia and I scramble to our feet, grabbing our phones as we hurriedly head out of my office.

I really thought I could survive without my assistant, Britain, who’s taken yesterday and today off, but it’s become very clear that I can’t function without her. She would have never let me be late for this meeting.

“It’s your fault we’re late,” I say to Nadia in a low tone as we follow Quentin down the hall of the open space with beautiful wood beams and brick interior walls toward the conference room.

“It’s *your* fault,” she says, her voice a half whisper. “Because you’re being such a big whiny baby.”

“I am *not* a baby.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Just be in my wedding already.”

“You can’t make me.”

She gives me a thumbs-up, and I give her one back. It’s our workplace replacement for the middle finger. It comes in handy, especially when Jason, who works in development, tries to overexplain something—or mansplain, as the kids are calling it these days. Although, I’ve been womansplained to on occasion, so maybe we need a more inclusive word. This is Jason’s MO, though. And when he does it to me—the overexplaining thing—in that know-it-all tone, I respond with a big smile and a thumbs-up, and he has no idea that I’ve just flipped him off.

I should probably also mention that our nickname for Jason is Sir Condescension, which is too long to say, so we just call him Sir Jason.

“Nadia, Mila,” Grayson says in that deep voice of his. He nods toward us as we walk through the doorway of the conference room and both take seats next to Vik at the oval-shaped table. “Glad you’re here.”

“You know, the Tuesday meeting always starts at nine o’clock,” Sir Jason says, two seats down from me. Without even coordinating it, Nadia and I

both give him a thumbs-up.

“Sorry,” Nadia says for the both of us, her words directed at Grayson and not Jason.

For Grayson’s part, he just gives us a closed-mouth smile and then focuses on his iPad, not even an inkling of annoyance on his facial features. It’s a rare moment that I’ve seen Grayson Manning be angry since I started working at AppInnovate. It’s probably one of the reasons I can never seem to tamp down my ever-growing crush on the man. He’s never done anything to put me off, which should be annoying in and of itself. I know he’s not perfect—nobody is. But if I could just see for myself. Like maybe if he could just throw an adult tantrum, or maybe have dirty fingernails (but they’re always perfectly cleaned and trimmed), or even like an accidental fart or something, maybe I could move on from the man. It doesn’t help that the BILK’s got dreamy green eyes and thick honey-colored hair. He could easily pass for a Hemsworth (more Chris than Liam).

It’s very unoriginal of me to have a crush on this man. It’s kind of my thing, crushing on my boss, or manager, or someone who has even the slightest bit of authority. It’s happened more than I care to admit. Out of the six male bosses I’ve had since entering the workforce at the young age of fifteen, I’ve had a thing for four of them. Of the other two, one was married, and the other was as old as my dad (not my thing). I haven’t stopped there, either. I caught feelings for a trainer at the gym I worked at between high school and college. I was also a little infatuated with one of my professors in college. He totally had a young Harrison Ford vibe going on. I wasn’t alone in that crush.

There’s just something about an intelligent, disciplined man who’s good at taking control of things that I can’t help being attracted to. I’m not alone in this either. There are movies, television shows, and a plethora of books featuring the boss romantic trope. It’s a thing.

However, my biggest conundrum has always been: Is the attraction real? Or is it just a thing I tend to do—a pattern I fall into? I finally put it to the test and dated my manager at my last job. It didn’t end well. My whole life was upended because of it, so that was fun.

I think it’s safe to say it’s just a pattern I fall into. Possibly one I should get therapy for. Regardless, it’s not a real attraction, and I’m going to stick with that.

I’ll just continue to try to push away these pestering butterflies that take

flight in my stomach anytime I'm around Grayson and his incredibly green eyes. Even when those eyes catch mine just as he starts the meeting I'm supposed to be listening to. Even when he sort of skitters over his words as he starts the meeting, like he's had a momentary lapse in memory or something.

I have to save myself from ... myself.

Two

Grayson

SHE'S WEARING THE DRESS. THAT red dress that drives me freaking crazy. It should come with a warning label, or she could at the very least notify me when she plans to wear it so I can conveniently work from home on those days. I'm having a hard time tearing my eyes away. I swear, every time she wears it—and yes, I've shamefully kept count—my brain goes haywire.

The first time she wore it was to that crucial meeting with the localization company. The one I desperately wanted to impress to make our travel app, GlobeTrotter, go global. Thanks to Mila in that dress, I managed to call the app TrottGlober not once, but twice. Then I drooled water down my shirt. It wasn't actually drool—it was the ice water that somehow didn't make it to my mouth and instead went right down the front of my white button-up. Thankfully, despite my inability to function like a normal human, they took the account. I think it was more Mila's doing than mine.

Then there was the time she wore it to that meetup after work. The one where I finally got up the gumption to see if I wasn't alone in my attraction. That's not what happened, though. No, I made a fool of myself instead. Not one of my best moments and also one I tend to replay in my head quite often—mostly while in the shower—and then chastise myself for being such an idiot. In my defense, how was I to know she had a boyfriend? I've never met Dave, but he sounds like a tool.

That experience should have tainted the dress, reminding me of my idiocy, and yet here we are again, with the dress making a triumphant comeback, and me having to fight my own eyeballs to stop looking in her direction. I force them to move to the iPad sitting in front of me with the agenda I worked on last night pulled up.

“Let's, uh ... get started?” Dammit, that was not supposed to sound like a

question.

I shake my head, trying to clear the fog clouding my mind. It's the weekly leadership team meeting, for crying out loud. I'm the owner of this company, and I should be running this meeting with confidence. Every week. Like clockwork.

I need to snap out of it, but my eyes keep gravitating toward Mila. That red dress she's wearing is my kryptonite. It's not just the dress itself, although it does hug her in all the right places. It's how beautiful she looks in that color, her milky-white skin with her long brown hair and those insanely blue eyes.

Before you judge me for being shallow, it's not just her beauty I find attractive. She's also whip smart, and incredibly witty. I was impressed with her from the moment I met her two years ago, when she sat in the white leather chair in my office for her interview. She was remarkable, and so was her résumé. She'd made it through an extensive phone interview before coming in, and even before meeting her, I'd already made my mind up that she would be a good fit to manage GlobeTrotter.

She was the easiest hire I've made since starting this company. Now that we've worked together, my initial attraction has only gotten worse. By worse, I mean more. Bigger. There's something so enticing about Mila. She's funny and loyal and smart—all of that. But she's also the kind of woman who makes you wish for things. Like even just some time to talk to her, to get to know her on a deeper level. Or maybe to go back in time and rearrange things so we could have met at a different place in life. A different time. Maybe when my life wasn't so stressful, or when she didn't have a boyfriend named Dave. Dave, whom I've never met before, but would like to give a wedgie.

It's a good thing she's got a boyfriend because it's not like I could have a relationship, even if I wanted one. I'm not in any position for that—timewise, or financially. I shouldn't want to give Dave a wedgie—I should want to give the man a hug. He's saving me from myself. Because how I feel about Mila could have me throwing caution to the wind, even knowing it wouldn't be good for me right now.

You know what else isn't good for me right now? That dress. Can I ban red attire from the office? Coming up with a valid excuse for it might be hard. Saying I can't handle it when Mila wears that dress would be downright ridiculous and most likely an HR violation. Could I say it's offensive to bulls or something? Why am I even thinking about this?

Pull it together, Grayson.

Okay, right. I need to stop this insanity and focus on the task at hand. I clear my throat, attempting to shake off any distracting thoughts. I direct my gaze toward Jason. Yeah, that's a safe place to look—a little reality check for my overactive hormones.

My head of development is definitely not someone I'm attracted to, and on further inspection, it would appear Jason is currently picking his nose. *Good hell, man.* He's trying to pass it off as inconspicuous, but let's be real: everyone in this room is well aware of that maneuver.

I take a breath and move my eyes back to my iPad. It seems to be the only safe view for me right now.

“All right, team, tell me something good that happened this past week,” I say, miraculously sounding like the owner of this company, rather than some lovestruck fool who can't keep his eyes off the woman in the red dress.

This is how I kick off our weekly meeting. We go around the conference table, each of us sharing a win from either our professional or personal lives.

I originally started this good news piece in an attempt to get my team more aligned, to help us get to know one another. Despite having worked together for a while now, I've kept it on the agenda. It's my way of staying connected with the seven people on my leadership team, since I'm the kind of person who tends to become consumed by work and can easily lose sight of the fact that there is a world beyond these company walls. Also, the chance to hear a little about Mila's life every week is an added benefit, pathetic as it sounds.

I direct my attention toward Vikram, my head of quality assurance, who's seated in the first chair to my left. He's been here longer than most everyone sitting at this table, so he's a safe place to start. I know and trust him implicitly.

“What ya got for us, Vik?”

Vik's gaze drops briefly to the table before meeting my eyes again. “I've got some big news, actually,” he says with just a hint of a British accent. “We found out a few weeks ago that my wife is pregnant,” he announces, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. The room instantly erupts with congratulations. “We got to see the ultrasound yesterday and everything is looking good.”

“That's great news,” I tell him, once the happy praise from everyone else has calmed down. “If you're looking for name ideas, Grayson's a strong

one.”

I get a few chuckles for my feeble attempt at humor, and my gaze instinctively shifts toward Mila in hopes I’ve coaxed a smile from her. Yep, there it is, that gentle smile, accentuating her perfect, full lips—which I’m now realizing are the same color as her dress. Is she trying to kill me?

And back to my iPad.

“How about you, Nadia?” I ask my head of sales, who’s sitting next to Vik. I make sure to keep my eyes glued to the screen in front of me and tap a finger on it randomly, so I look like I’m doing something other than trying to keep my focus from wandering back to Mila, who’s seated next to Nadia.

“Well, I’ve got some big news myself, actually,” Nadia says. “Shane and I have set a date for our wedding and it’s next month.” My eyes instantly move away from my screen and dart to hers, my brow furrowing.

“Next month?” I ask, confused. Is that why Shane called me so early this morning? I missed his call when I was out for a run. I haven’t had a chance to call him back.

“June twenty-third,” she says, her smile grand. “It’s on the beach in Oahu. You’re all invited, of course.”

More congratulations go around the room.

“That’s ... great news,” I say as a heaviness lands in my gut. June 23rd? That’s less than a month away. This is *not* great news, actually. Shane, my closest friend, someone I’ve known since college, is getting married in less than four weeks to one of my best employees. I introduced them, for crap’s sake. Am I expected to be there? He’s already asked me to be his best man, and I said yes. But that’s when I thought we were at least a year away, maybe two. What’s changed?

Whatever the reason, this couldn’t be happening at a worse time. We’re in the final stages for GlobeTrotter, and I need every moment of the next three months—and every person in this room—to get ready for the launch scheduled on September 5th. We’ve already had to push back the release date twice; we can’t afford to lose any more time. Not with the possible competition that’s right at our heels. And especially not now with the app summit in New York that I’ve pulled major strings to get us into. I don’t want to think of the work relationships I might lose if we aren’t ready by then.

I can’t afford to miss a weekend of work, or even a day right now. There’s too much on the line, and it all has to go just right. If this app doesn’t hit big ... then ... well, I can’t think about that. It just has to.

What can I do, though? I can't be the douchebag that tells Nadia she can't have the time off to get married and that her coworkers can't go. Why Hawaii, though? Why so far away? Why not like a backyard or Red Rocks or something? We have plenty of beautiful places in Colorado, especially in the summer months.

"Grayson, you'll be there as the best man, yes?" she asks me.

"I—"

"Weddings should really be planned more in advance," Jason interjects, in that way he does. Like he knows everything. It's his MO, really, and while I normally find it annoying, I'm kind of with him on this one. Plus, he spared me from answering.

"Yes, thank you for that, Jason," she says, a scowl on her face. If looks could kill, Nadia would be a powerful weapon. "Not that it's any of your business, but we don't want to wait. And weddings are pulled off quickly all the time."

"I'd love to be there if I can swing it," Simone, my head of HR, says in that raspy tone of hers. I was sort of hoping Simone would pipe in with something about staggering our time off so I don't have to look like the ass here. She's always been too nice.

"My wife's pregnancy is high risk, so I don't know if we can go," says Vik. I should feel terrible right now that this bit of information fills me with relief. But of all the people at this table, Vik is probably the most essential right now. His team is doing all the testing on the app to make sure everything is working properly.

"I probably can't go either," Mila says, and Nadia gives her a murderous glare. Daggers from her eyes. Okay, that's another person who really needs to be here. As project manager, Mila's the one pulling all the strings to make this happen. This might work out okay after all.

Nadia shakes her head at Mila and then turns her focus toward everyone else around the table. "Mila's kidding. That's actually *her* good news this week," she says with a smirk on her face. "She's going to be my maid of honor."

"That's still being decided," Mila quickly replies, her eyes on the table, a fake smile plastered on her face.

"I think it's been decided," Nadia says, her eyes also on the table.

"No, it hasn't. No decisions have been made," Mila quips, angling herself toward Nadia.

“Yes, they have.” Nadia turns her head toward Mila.

“No, they haven’t.”

“Mila Banks, you’re being ridiculous.”

“Nadia Singh, no I’m not.”

Do I ... intervene? I look at Simone, but she seems more interested in seeing how this plays out than putting a stop to it. Isn’t that her job? She really is too nice.

Mila and Nadia are now giving each other squinting eyes, back and forth, arguing with their eyeballs. And there’s some scrunching noses too. Oh, and yep, Mila just gave a thumbs-up to Nadia, who gives her one in return. I’ve seen them do this before. I don’t think it means what it usually means. Not in this context. Definitely not when they give one to Jason, although he’s too thick to notice.

Call me crazy, but it seems like Mila doesn’t want to be in Nadia’s wedding. Why is that? It’s been my observation at the few weddings I’ve been in that being in the bridal party is something that elicits squeals and excitement. When my younger brother, Josh, got married five years ago, the five bridesmaids of my sister-in-law, Jeanine, had all acted like they’d won the lottery. There was so much screaming.

But Mila doesn’t look excited at all. She looks more like she might reach over and pull Nadia’s bun out in some kind of rage.

“Okay, well, that’s a lot of exciting news today. What about you, Jason? Can you top it?” I ask, doing my best to move on from the awkwardness that just landed in the room. At the very least, it gets Mila and Nadia to stop whatever they were doing.

Jason can’t top it, thank goodness. His good news is that he was able to reinforce some potential security vulnerabilities Vik found after some recent testing. As always, Jason’s good news is about work. Like he needs to really hammer it in that only work brings him joy. It’s kind of annoying, and a little patronizing.

Then Quentin, Jason’s right-hand man, who shouldn’t really be in this meeting but somehow always is, tells us he rescued a captured NPC in his Dungeons & Dragons game over the weekend, and we cheer, even though I don’t think any of us know what that means. Sebastian, the CFO, hit a streak of five hundred on Wordle this morning. Ryan, who runs marketing, finally found a company to do our SEO the right way, and rounding off the group, Simone says that she finished the blanket she’s been making for her niece’s

new baby.

“Sounds like we had some real wins this week,” I say.

“What about you?” Jason asks.

“Me?” I point to myself, like a moron.

“Yeah, what’s your win?” Simone pipes in.

I blink. Once, twice. Three times. What *is* my win this week? I’ve got nothing. I usually have something thought up before I get here. Something on my agenda, so I don’t have to come up with it off the top of my head. And often, I make it up, or exaggerate the truth. But I didn’t do that last night. In fact, that’s what I was trying to think of when Mila came in late in that red dress and short-circuited my brain.

What can I say? I don’t have a lot of wins right now. I *need* some wins, and desperately, where this app is concerned, but we aren’t quite there yet. My personal life isn’t very winning right now either. It’s mostly a mess. I haven’t talked to my parents in a while. I haven’t even spent time with them because I’ve been so caught up with GlobeTrotter. Also, there’s some guilt there too. A lot of guilt, actually. Josh and I haven’t talked in nearly three years. I haven’t magically repaired that relationship in the past week. I haven’t been on a real date in who knows how long, not that I’d use that for my good news if I had.

The truth is, I do the same freaking thing every day. Get up, run, go to work, go home, eat dinner, work some more, go to bed. Day in and day out.

The whole team is looking at me. *Think, Grayson, think.*

“I ... ,” I start, trying to rack my brain for something. I tried a new protein powder this morning? Is that a win? It wasn’t very good, so I’m guessing not. I made it to work without hitting all the lights on Lincoln. No, that’s dumb. I look down at my iPad, willing it to give me an answer, and then I go with the only thing that finally comes to me—though it’s not actually a win for me and, in fact, could end up making things very difficult. I look at my team, all waiting for my answer. “I guess ... I’m also going to be in a wedding next month.”

Nadia’s fists shoot up in the air, a big smile on her face. “Yeah, you are.”

Three

Mila

“IT’S TIME FOR YOUR ONE-on-one,” Britain says from the entrance to my office. I look up to see she’s just peeked her blond head in, a warm smile on her pink lips.

“Yes, great. Thank you,” I say, getting up from my chair. I adjust my black pencil skirt and re-tuck the front part of my cream dress shirt into it.

“You look great,” she says as I walk out the door, laptop in hand, as if she could read my mind and know that I was feeling insecure about my clothing choice today.

I’ve had my suspicions, but I think Britain might have psychic abilities. Or it could also be that I wear my heart on my sleeve, and anyone with half a brain would know how I’m feeling at any given moment. But I like to think I’m pale and mysterious, and my assistant has supernatural tendencies.

I don’t know why I’m feeling weird about my outfit choice today. I’ve worn it before. I guess I’m feeling sort of weird about everything in my life right now. Nadia’s wedding is like a big black cloud over my head. My stomach sinks every time I think of it. I know how ridiculous that sounds, but I promise whatever you’re imagining, as far as my wedding mishaps go, it’s worse.

The thing is, I’m doing this for her. She has no idea the crap storm I bring with me to weddings. I have a seven out of seven record. Undefeated. Well, I’m actually the loser here. So, undefeated loser.

She’s given me until Monday to tell her yes because, according to her, that’s the only acceptable answer. The only reason I’m getting five days—six if you include yesterday—is because she left for a family reunion last night and won’t be back until Sunday night. She’ll be in my office first thing Monday morning to hear my resounding “*Of course I’ll be in your wedding!*” She even gave me tips on how I should do it. Like one of those

promposal answers that are all the rage these days. A big, colorful sign and balloons were suggested.

I have hateful feelings toward my best friend. There. I said it. I kind of hate Nadia. Except I also love her. I don't have time to contemplate these new contradicting feelings because it's time for my one-on-one meeting with Grayson, which I also have mixed feelings about. It's one of the best and worst parts of my week.

"Hey there," I say, with a quick knock on the door of Grayson's office. My stomach does a little somersault when he looks up from his laptop with those beautiful green eyes, his dark-blond hair tousled like he's just run his fingers through it. He gives me a closed-mouth smile, his eyes warm and welcoming.

Why does he have to be so pretty? Why couldn't he be ... I don't know ... just more unattractive. He's kind, too. I hate this for me. He could at least be a hot jerk. Or a nice, unfortunate-looking man. Why both? I honestly thought it was some sort of cosmic prank when I met him at my interview. Especially after my last job and everything that went down there. Seriously, universe? There wasn't even a waiting period for the attraction to come, like has happened previously. It was instant magnetism.

This is my conundrum and why I have mixed feelings about this meeting. It's my favorite part of my week because I get to meet with just Grayson, only the two of us in his medium-sized, minimally decorated office. It's my least favorite because I am constantly battling with myself to not hop over his desk and right into his lap. I've actually pictured this ... a lot. I'm thinking of it right now, even.

"Come on in," he says, interrupting my little fantasy. He gestures toward the white leather contemporary chair in front of his desk. "How are you?"

"Good," I tell him. He always starts out the meeting with a little informal chat, and I've always liked this part. Other people I've worked under would mostly get right to the topic at hand, like I'm just a workhorse here to do their bidding. But not Grayson. He's been that way since the beginning, and he does it with everyone. I initially felt sort of smug that he was taking my life into account, like he wanted to know more about me and thought I was special. But then I found out it's a thing he does during all his one-on-ones with the leadership team. So that was kind of a happy-balloon-popping realization.

It's made me a better leader, though. Because I've done the same when

interacting with my coworkers, and it's brought us closer. I know things now, like Simone has nine siblings and is close to every one of them, and about the fertility problems Vik and his wife have gone through. I've also learned some unfortunate things about people. Like about Dane, for instance, who works under Vik in QA and who likes to bike to work pretty much every day (unless there's too much snow), and who once educated me extensively on his reasoning for going commando in his cycling gear. So that was fun. Especially because the crux of that story was that he'd forgotten to bring underwear to put on under his work clothes. Oh, and his zipper was down, which was how the conversation started, and ... I saw some things, or rather, some *thing*. I didn't realize what I had seen until he told me the story. It's hard for me to look Dane in the eyes now. Nadia's and my nickname for him isn't Wiener Schnitzel for nothing.

"Glad to hear it," Grayson says. "You ..." He stops himself, looking down at the iPad lying on the modern, light-colored wood desk in front of him.

"Yes?" I ask, feeling an urge to know what he was going to say.

He looks up at me. "You didn't seem all that excited about Nadia's wedding ... uh, yesterday in the meeting."

"Oh," I say. Right, *that*. "I ... I just, well, I ..." I stop talking because I'm not sure what I want to divulge here. That I hate weddings? With no context, that makes me sound callous. But do I even want to tell him my reasoning? To go into all that? Or even a portion of it? *You are correct, Grayson. I don't want to go to Nadia's wedding because, as it turns out, I'm a jinx. A wedding jinx. It's a thing ... that I do. I have lots of proof.*

Grayson leans back in his chair, fidgeting with the band on his watch. He lets out a breath. "It's really bad timing for me," he says. "Even to take a day or two off from work, much less a weekend. I want to be there, of course. But I don't know if it would be smart of me right now to leave. You know?" He looks up at me.

"Of course," I say. "We've got to get everything ready for user testing, work out the bugs with the UI. Not to mention fixing the optimization issues we've been having."

There's so much more. The part I'm most worried about is what kinds of issues the user testing will discover. If they're big enough, it could push back our September release date, and I haven't said this to Grayson, but at this point we are already cutting it close. The user testing needs to go almost

flawlessly, which has never happened since the invention of phone apps. This is an assumption on my part. Maybe it has happened. I highly doubt it, though.

But we have to get it done on time. The App Growth Summit in New York is scheduled right after the launch and we've got an opportunity to be featured there, which would be huge. *Really* huge. The truth is, none of us can afford to take time off right now, except for maybe HR, for obvious reasons, and Nadia's team, since they can only do so much until this app is ready to go to market. Her team's main focus is AppInnovate's first app, TourSpotter, an attractions and sightseeing application.

Wait. Did Grayson just give me the best reason ever to not go to Nadia's wedding? A real, tangible reason? Why didn't I think of this? It's absolutely true that we need every moment to get this app fully up and running by September. This isn't even an excuse—this is reality. It's fact. *This* is how I can save Nadia's wedding from my bad juju.

The feeling of relief rushes through me so quickly, I feel like I should throw my fist in the air, or maybe stand up and do a cheer, or perhaps jump over this desk and onto Grayson's lap.

There I go again.

"I don't think it'd be good for either of us to go," I say, folding my arms and purposefully pulling the corners of my lips downward. Should I give him sad puppy-dog eyes as well to sell my regret? No, that's too much. I'll just stick with the frown. "We've got too much on our plates right now."

Grayson nods. "Exactly," he says. "I really don't want to miss it, but I feel like I have to."

"Yeah, of course," I say, nodding my head up and down in rapid little movements. "I want to be there too ... of course." Dang it, I said *of course* twice. I'm overselling.

"Was that why you didn't seem excited? Because of everything we have going on here?"

"Um, yeah," I say. "That was a big part of it." This is a lie. I hadn't even thought of it. But it's the best freaking excuse, and I could just kiss Grayson for coming up with it. I won't, of course. But I'll be sure to entertain the thought after I've left his office.

"Well, I think we both know what we need to do, then," he says.

I do know what I need to do. And I now have an excuse. A real one. Nadia won't be thrilled, but I might have just made it so her wedding will go

perfectly, so she should really be happy. She should be thrilled. Regardless, I'm happy enough for the both of us.

Four

Mila

“YOU’RE GOING TO TURN DOWN a wedding in Hawaii at the Four Seasons?” My sister-in-law, Gwen, is, in a word, flabbergasted. “Are you crazy?”

“It’s all expenses paid, too,” I tell her while I sit on a barstool in my normal weekend attire of jeans and a white tee, spoon-feeding some pureed peas to a not-so-happy Owen, my little eight-month-old nephew. Out of their three boys, Owen looks the most like Everett with his dark-brown hair and blue eyes, which means he looks the most like me. Five-year-old Mason and three-year-old Jackson take after their mom. Both have brown eyes and curly dark-blond hair.

I don’t know why I tell Gwen it’s a free trip to Hawaii—it only makes it sound worse. Part of Shane’s plan to give Nadia the dream wedding she’s always wanted (except that her dream wedding was actually a ranch so she could wear cowboy boots with her dress, but let’s not split hairs here), was to pay for everyone in the bridal party to go. I have no idea how much money Shane has, but I think it’s uses-fifties-to-wipe-his-butt kind of money. I don’t think he actually does that, but I think he could if he wanted.

Yes, I’m crazy to not go to this wedding ... crazy excited. I’m thrilled to be missing an all-expenses-paid beach wedding at the Four Seasons in Oahu. I feel downright giddy about it, in fact. I don’t have to be a jinx at another wedding. That’s the most important part of all this.

“Can I go in your place?” Gwen asks, her curly dark-blond shoulder-length hair bouncing playfully on her shoulders. I like Gwen. I’ve never had a sister—it’s always been just me and Everett.

She gives my brother a cool factor with her laid-back vibe. And Everett is not cool. He’s a moron. A moron that I love very much. I still don’t know how these two got together. Everett is all *things need to be a certain way*,

please don't touch my perfectly ironed pants, and Gwen is all *let's make a fort in the living room and eat spaghetti with our hands*. They are opposites in almost every way, yet they make it work, and they do it well.

“Mom!” Mason screeches. “Jackson is picking his boogers.”

“Jackson,” Everett scolds, two lines forming in that spot between his brows. “Go wash your hands.”

It should be noted that Everett does most of the scolding around here. Gwen is more of the peace and love kind of parent.

Jackson stomps his way over to the guest bathroom of the large modern home with the open floor plan my brother wanted, which has been decorated in what can only be described as boho chic, which is all Gwen. It doesn't work, but it also does. Or maybe I'm just used to it.

They live in Castle Rock, about thirty minutes from my apartment in Denver, and Gwen teaches second grade at the elementary school while Everett works in banking ... or investments ... Actually, I'm not entirely sure what he does. He's told me before—honestly, he's droned on and on about it. But I tuned him out like a good little sister does. Anyway, it's not like he knows where I work.

“Everett, where do I work?” I ask him to test my theory. He's holding a pair of grilling tongs and wearing a black apron that says *Mr. Good Looking is Cooking*, which is most definitely a gift from Gwen.

He gives me a confused face, his mouth downturned and his brows pinched. “Why? Did you forget?”

“Ha ha,” I say, dryly. “I'm just curious if you know.”

“You work at AppInnovate. You've been there for two years and you're the project manager for a travel app called GlobeTrotter. It's going to revolutionize the travel industry.” He says the last part with a little extra flair, throwing his head back, his voice going higher. Gwen giggles.

Okay, I guess I've given them both my spiel more than I realize, although I don't think I sound anything like Everett's terrible impression of me. I guess he does know what I do, which means I better hurry and change the subject before he asks me how much I know about him.

No need, because Everett doesn't bother asking. He simply clicks his tongs at me twice, a know-it-all look on his face, before going outside to flip hot dogs.

On Sunday nights in the summer, the Banks family grills. It's been a thing since we were kids and has continued into adulthood. I missed out on it

for a few years when I was in Seattle. I really wish I could just put a big black X through that part of my life. Pretend like it never happened. All that time I wasted on Montgomery Allen Prescott III, when I could have been spending it here in Colorado with my family. It should be noted that I didn't recognize how douche-y his name sounded until after we were long broken up and Nadia pointed it out. In my defense, he introduced himself as Monty, and that's how I thought of him. Monty. *My Monty*. I hate him with a fiery passion.

And yes, he was my boss. Technically, he was my manager, but that's the same thing in this instance. He had the ability to fire me, and that's exactly what he did after I broke up with him. Well, it was under the guise that the company was eliminating my position, which was very convenient timing. Anyway, many valuable lessons were learned. Like, for example, don't date your boss ... or a guy named Montgomery Allen Prescott III.

Anyway, I wondered if we'd keep up the summer Sunday dinner grilling tradition after our parents moved to their fancy-schmancy retirement community back in March. But it's the fourth of June, a beautiful evening with the sun hanging just above the Rocky Mountains, and here we are grilling.

"Time to eat," Everett yells when he walks back into the house carrying a plate of burgers and hot dogs. Jackson and Mason come running into the room, Jackson making a very high-pitched screeching noise.

Owen makes raspberries with his lips from his highchair, and I feel something wet land on my face. It's pureed peas. Owen can't say words beyond *mama* and *dada* yet, and even those words are just sounds. According to Gwen, he doesn't actually know what he's saying. But what he can't say, he makes up for in actions, and right now he's saying: *Stop force-feeding me this crap*.

"I know, little Owey," I tell him in a hushed voice, after I've wiped the gunk off my face. "Peas are gross." I look to see if Gwen is watching before covertly dipping the spoon I've been using to feed Owen into the chocolate pudding dessert that's been sitting near me on the counter and was made for the sole purpose of bribing the other boys to eat their dinner.

I give baby Owen a little taste, and watch as his eyes go wide with delight. "That's right, kid. Stick with your aunty Mila. I'll make all your sugary dreams come true," I say to him in a half whisper.

"Evvy, should we renew our vows someday? Maybe in Hawaii?" Gwen says to my brother, after we've all dished up plates and taken seats at the

round wooden table with the mismatched-on-purpose chairs. Baby Owen has been given a handful of those yogurt melts that aren't half bad tasting (I snagged one to try) to keep him occupied.

"I'd love nothing more," Everett says, giving her the adoring smile he often does. It's so full of warmth and tenderness and so not like him. I've never seen him look at someone like he does Gwen. It's sweet, but also off-putting. Because he's my brother and, as I previously stated, he's a moron.

"Just don't invite me if you ever do," I say, batting my eyes and giving them an extra superficial smile.

Gwen snorts a laugh out her nose. "But then who'd do a dance with Everett? Oh my gosh, should we recreate it? What do you say, Evy?"

"I think it would be safer if we didn't," he says, smiling smugly at me. "Especially for Mila."

"Ha ha, you two are hilarious," I say, with no humor in my voice. How do they find a way to bring this up every time we're together? "The best thing you could do for this possible future vow renewal is not have me there."

"But you made it so memorable," Gwen says, giving me a wink.

She can say that now, but she wasn't so thrilled back then.

THE WEDDING (

Everett Owen Banks

&

Gwendolyn Ann Kai

SEVEN YEARS AGO

THIS WAS THE FIRST WEDDING I'd ever been asked to be in. I'd been to other weddings, of course, but I'd never been *in* one. I was flattered that Gwen, who'd been dating my brother for about two years, but whom I hadn't had all that many interactions with, wanted me standing up there with her.

There were five bridesmaids in total, and Gwen had picked colors in deep reds, pale pinks, and greens. Similar to her mismatched chairs, the bridesmaids got to pick their own dresses—they just had to fit into her color palette. I'd picked a light pink A-line chiffon dress that went down to the ground, long enough that I needed to wear heels so it didn't drag on the floor. Remember this part—it's important to the story.

A week before the wedding, Everett approached me with the idea of doing a dance for Gwen during the reception. He'd seen someone else do it on YouTube. He originally wanted to do it as a family—a choreographed number with all four of us involved. After responses of "I'd rather die" from our dad and "I have that plantar fasciitis in my left foot" from our mom, it was down to him and me.

Not one to back down from a challenge, and also because the whole thing was so out of character for Everett, I felt it was my duty to be there for him as

his sister.

It should be noted that I'm not very good at dancing. There's a reason my mom enrolled me in dance at the age of eight and then promptly unenrolled me after the first recital. I believe the words "can't find the rhythm" were tossed around by my instructors. My sweet mother tried to shield me from it, but I heard what they said, and even at that young age, I knew that tracked. Beats were hard for me. At the school assembly when the police officers came to talk to us about not doing drugs, I was that girl who would somehow clap to the offbeat when they played that catchy tune I still can sing to this day. And not on purpose. The truth is, I didn't like dancing and I very much hated being on the big stage with everyone watching.

But I took on this challenge, even with my rhythm issues, because I promised my brother I'd do this dance with him. I practiced anytime I could. I'd just finished my junior year of college at Colorado State University, where I was studying business administration with an emphasis in management and innovation. Very spellbinding stuff. I had a lot of opinions on business ethics and corporate social responsibility that could make even the kindest of people find a reason to walk away. "*What was that? Sorry, Mila! I think someone's calling my name. Lovely chatting with you!*" I was doing a summer internship that wouldn't start until after the wedding, so time was on my side.

I practiced day and night, with and without Everett. To the point that I can still do the dance to this day. It's imprinted on my brain. I'm happy to report that after all the time I invested, I was actually not ... terrible. I could keep up with the steps, not lose my footing, and stay on rhythm. This was a personal triumph for me.

The wedding was very Gwen: lots of beautiful flower chains hanging on everything, lots of draped fabrics blowing in the soft late-June breeze in the beautiful Rocky Mountains. Her dress was fitting for her style, and even if we have very different tastes in decor and clothing, I absolutely loved it. It was ivory with half sleeves, a deep V back, a natural waist, and flowing tulle with a frosted embroidered appliqué overlay. Her hair was half pulled up with perfect ringlets framing her face, and she wore a crown of large roses and pale-pink yarrow with eucalyptus leaves and baby's breath. She looked amazing.

She and Everett said *I do* in a small clearing with massive mountains as a backdrop. Afterward, we took approximately 1.5 million pictures, and after

that we headed to the reception, which was in a beautiful log cabin building overlooking a lake.

Up until that point, the wedding had gone pretty perfectly. After a buffet-style dinner (because Gwen felt the sit-down variety was boring) where toasts were given in between a playlist full of Ingrid Michaelson, Alexi Murdoch, and Amos Lee, a space toward the front of the room was cleared and it was time for the dancing.

They did all the expected dances: their first one together as a married couple (“Crazy Love” by Van Morrison), then Everett with my mom and Gwen with her dad. After that, everyone was invited to the dance floor to really get the party started. Since most everyone had been enjoying the open bar, it wasn’t long before the dance floor was full, and a little crazy.

“Should we do this?” Everett had asked me, his face drained of color, right before the DJ was going to make the announcement that everyone needed to step away from the dance floor for a very special surprise dance number.

“Of course,” I said, with a big smile on my face. In truth, I kind of wanted to tell him no. I was actually feeling a little sick about the whole thing. In all the time I spent practicing, I’d forgotten one important factor about myself: I hate performing. I’ve never liked being the center of attention. I don’t want to let any part of my freak flag fly in front of anyone but my close friends and family.

But I’d practiced so much, and I didn’t want to let it go to waste. Plus, I was excited to see the look on Gwen’s face when my brother did something so unexpected for her. It was honestly a true act of love for Everett.

I plastered on a smile, and after the DJ made the announcement, Everett and I walked onto the dance floor and got in place. One look at Gwen, who was standing just at the edge, directly in front of us, covering her mouth in complete shock, and that was enough for me to think we’d made the right choice.

The music started, and Everett and I began our practiced steps. It wasn’t long before people were whooping and cheering us on, and I could feel the energy in the room. It was palpable. I watched the surprise on my parents’ faces, and my closest cousin, Amelia, jumping up and down, her hands in the air as she watched. The best part was Gwen, who was cheering and clapping and laughing. That euphoric expression on her face made it all worth it.

But then we got to the section that, even though I’d practiced, I was

dreading. It was a part in the choreography where Everett and I were supposed to do some freestyle dancing, and as I have previously mentioned, dancing is not my thing. I don't freestyle. I don't *any* style. Yes, I went to school dances, but I chose to sit with my friends and only participate in slow dances and random mosh pits (because jumping as a collective group isn't really dancing). So, including the stint when I was eight, this was only my second foray into real dancing.

I was completely immersed in this routine and had, so far, completely nailed every move, which you can see in the professional wedding video. I just wish they had stopped the tape before the next part.

I was feeling confident, so I really gave it my all with the freestyle part. I twirled and jumped, and the onlookers clapped and whooped, which only urged me on. It was at this moment that I got a little overly confident and mistakenly thought, *You should really do a couple of kicks right now, Mila*, which I'd never in my life attempted before.

My first high kick attempt didn't go so well. In horror, I felt my block heel connect with the hem of my dress, and everything happened so fast, there was nothing I could do to stop it. I stumbled and instinctively reached out to grab on to anything that could prevent me from face planting. Unfortunately, the only thing I could grab was a large man who happened to be nearby. He was sturdy enough to take the impact; however, he was also holding a glass of red wine, the contents of which ended up spilling all over the bride, who was standing next to him. That's right, all over my new sister-in-law, Gwen. The crimson liquid seeped into her dress, resembling a scene straight out of the movie *Carrie*.

I was horrified, of course, and Everett was so busy doing his freestyle dance, it wasn't until a scream came from either me or Gwen—no one is sure—that he realized what had happened. The look on his face was burned into my memory forever. I had ruined his carefully planned surprise for his bride.

Gwen tried to comfort me, letting me know she was okay and that it wasn't a big deal. But I'd single-handedly ruined her big day, and we both knew it. Everyone knew it. The other bridesmaids helped Gwen clean up as much as they could. But the pictures of the cake cutting and the bouquet toss all feature Gwen in her beautiful dress with a massive red stain down the front of it.

I should have realized right then and there that weddings and I were not a good combo. Unfortunately, there were more lessons coming my way.

Five

Grayson

SHANE: DRINKS AT ROOSEVELT AROUND 6?

I huff out a breath after I read the text. It's Sunday, and except for a trip to the gym, I've been working nonstop all day trying to troubleshoot a bug Vik's team found, an issue with synchronizing real-time flight information from all the airlines' APIs. It has the potential to hurt our release timeline if it isn't fixed. Yes, I have people on my staff that could do this, but they don't have as much riding on this app as I do, and my bachelor's degree is in computer science, so I know what I'm doing.

But right now, I can actually feel my brain hurting. I've been working on this for so long. I could use the break. There's also the detail that I need to let Shane know that going to his wedding won't be possible, and I'd rather do it in person than over the phone. But taking a break isn't really a luxury I have right now.

Balancing my laptop on my thighs, I lean my head back on my old black leather couch that I've had for over ten years now—the same one I've needed to replace for about nine years. The quality was subpar at best, and now it's got so much wear and tear, it hardly looks like the one I bought all those years ago. Not to mention the springs are barely working at this point. Come to think of it, is this piece of crap even leather? I was going to buy a new one after TourSpotter hit big—and it did hit big. By all standards, TourSpotter was a success. It just wasn't enough of one to get me a new couch or pay off all my debt.

My phone beeps again.

Shane: Come on. You need a break.

This isn't one of those he-knows-me-so-well things. Anyone who knows me would guess correctly that I've worked my way through the weekend, like I've done the last ... I don't know how many weekends of my life. I could use a break. A long one. And I will take one once GlobeTrotter takes off. And it has to, because I have no other options.

Another sound from my phone.

Shane: Don't make me come over there

I look around my sparsely decorated apartment in lower downtown Denver, or LoDo as we call it around here, where I've lived for the last five years. It was supposed to be temporary—I only signed a six-month lease—yet here I am, in this mediocre, over-priced living space, that I've never quite settled into as home, sitting on my piece-of-crap couch, my butt aching from the lack of cushion support. This place looks like a stereotypical bachelor pad, not exactly how I pictured where I'd be living at the age of thirty-five.

Maybe I do need a break. Roosevelt is just a ten-minute walk. I could sneak away for a bit. No, I can't. I have to keep working. I've got way too much that needs to get done.

Beep.

Shane: Having second thoughts

Well, now I'm curious.

Me: About what?

Shane: The wedding

What? I can actually see my eyebrows, I've pulled them down so low, as I stare at the words on my screen. Shane is questioning marrying Nadia? I've known him for nearly seventeen years now, so I know when Shane is determined to do something, and he's been very determined to be with Nadia. Second thoughts aren't Shane's style once he knows what he wants. And yet ...

Me: I'll meet you in 30

I've neglected many of my relationships while trying to get this new app off the ground, and Shane has taken the brunt of it. I've hardly seen my closest friend, and it's obvious he needs to talk. This is how I'm rationalizing taking a break, with an attempt to assuage the guilt I'm feeling right now. Although, really, guilt has been my constant companion for the past five years.

I take a quick shower, throw on a pair of dark jeans and a light-gray short-sleeve button-up, and I'm out the door, my hair still damp, and walking down the street to meet up with Shane.

The light June breeze feels great as I walk the four blocks it takes to get to the bar. There are quite a few people outside as I walk along Larimer, taking advantage of this warmer night. June evenings in Colorado can go either way. Sometimes it's hot, most often it's still chilly, and sometimes it's even been known to snow.

I feel the weight on my shoulders lighten as I put one foot in front of the other and realize that this is exactly what I need right now. Some time outside, a little break from the stress of my life. This was a good choice.

In no time I've arrived and walk in to find Shane is already sitting at the bar, a glass of whiskey—his go-to drink—in hand. We've been coming here for a while. It's not a typical-looking bar—the space is well lit and has classic and modern decor with accents of library bookshelves and old typewriters.

I greet Shane with a quick pat on his back, noticing that besides the darker color of his T-shirt, we're dressed pretty much the same. This happens often. Although his clothes are probably from some upscale place, and mine are usually from the sale rack at a department store. The fact that Shane and I tend to dress alike, and also have the same color hair, is probably why people often ask us if we're related. My own brother doesn't look half as much like me as Shane does.

I take a seat next to him and signal the bartender, who's chatting up someone farther down the bar.

"Good to see you, man," Shane says as I settle into the high bar chair, a bright smile on his face. Not exactly the smile of a man who's questioning his life choices right now. But Shane is usually pretty guarded with his feelings. Something we also have in common.

"So, what's going on?" I ask, getting right to it. We've known each other too long to do the small talk thing.

"With what?" he asks me, a confused look on his face.

I give him one back. “Your wedding?”

“Oh yeah,” he says, his face suddenly falling. It’s almost too dramatic for Shane.

“You’re having second thoughts,” I say, a feeling like something fishy is going on creeping up my spine.

“Oh yeah, lots of them,” he says, his focus on something on the bar and not on me.

“Why? What happened? What’s changed?”

“I mean, well, it’s just the whole ... marriage ... thing,” he says.

“What part of it?”

“I don’t know, exactly—just ... marriage, man.” His gaze is still on the bar.

“Is it the commitment thing? The timing?” It’s been a whirlwind. I think that would be the thing I’d be questioning. But then again, I’ve never been impulsive like Shane. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to do something spur of the moment.

“I think it’s just all of it,” he says, the right-side corner of his lip doing a little twitching thing.

I study his face. I’ve known it for a long time. It almost feels like his words don’t match his mannerisms.

“Are you actually having second thoughts?” I ask after a few seconds of silence.

Now he’s puckering his lips, an attempt to keep himself from smiling. “Totally,” he says, his voice sounding sort of strained.

I close my eyes and shake my head. “There are no second thoughts, are there?”

He lets out the laugh he’d clearly been holding in as he grabs my shoulder and squeezes it. “Sorry, man.”

I look to the ceiling, my head leaning back. “I’m an idiot.”

“I needed a good reason for you to meet me,” he says. “Don’t deny that you needed a break.”

I run a hand through my still slightly damp hair. “You realize I’m not going to trust you the next time, when you might have a real emergency, right? You’re the boy who cried wedding.”

“Nah,” Shane says, shaking his head back and forth. “You’re one of the good guys, Manning.”

“I’m not really,” I say. “I kind of want to punch you right now.”

He laughs, loudly. “But aren’t you glad you got out?”

I take in a breath and look around the room, the bottles of liquor lining the wall behind the bar, the soft chatter of people. I’ve been sitting in my apartment all weekend staring at a computer screen. I’d almost forgotten what the real world looks like.

“Yeah, I guess,” I say. “I’ve just got a lot hanging over my head right now.”

The bartender, a man in a black T-shirt and dark-colored jeans, approaches and takes my order. I go for a craft pale ale, the only drink I’ll be having tonight. Now that I know I don’t have to talk my friend off a ledge, I need to get back to work sooner rather than later.

“To the good guy.” Shane raises his glass at me.

“And to the not-so-great one,” I say, giving him a half-hearted disdainful look. I should be mad at Shane, but it feels pretty good to be here right now, and I really did need a break. I won’t be telling him this, though.

“You still beating yourself up for everything?” he asks.

I lean back in my chair, folding my arms. We haven’t talked about this in a while. Mostly because we haven’t seen each other very frequently, but also because I don’t like talking about it and usually shut it down.

“Yes, until I fix things,” I say.

“Most people would have walked away by now, or borrowed money from their BFF,” he replies, eyebrows lifted.

“Did you seriously just say *BFF*?”

He nods, unapologetically. “I did, BFF.”

“Are we thirteen?”

“I’m perpetually fourteen, so not far off.”

“That tracks.”

The bartender sets my drink down in front of me, and I give him a quick lift of my chin in thanks.

Shane turns himself so he’s sitting sideways in his seat, his legs toward me. “Why won’t you ever let me help you? It’s hurtful that I, your BFF, have all this money and you won’t take a penny of it.”

I shake my head. This is the other reason I don’t want to talk about it with Shane. He’s always trying to bail me out. “I already owe too much money to too many people. I don’t want to add you to the list.”

He waves my words away with his hands. “Let me invest, then.”

“Too big of a risk.”

“But it’s a risk I’d be willing to take,” he says.

“No money manager in their right mind would tell you this is a good investment.” Fortunately, for now, I can make ends meet with what TourSpotter brings in. I’m able to pay employees and barely keep myself afloat. But that won’t last forever, especially with the decline the app is starting to make as newer apps come on the market. Besides that, it’s never been enough to get ahead or pay back the debt I foolishly took on. I need GlobeTrotter to do that. If we pull off what we are intending to do, it has the potential to change the way people travel, having everything you need in one spot. All the basics—flight, hotel, car rental, activities—but customized and tailored with personalized recommendations and suggestions, as well as a collaboration feature for group trips. Not to mention offline capability, map integration, and language assistance.

If all goes right, it would be a great investment for anyone, but I can’t afford to take on any more debt before then. Because if it doesn’t work ... well, I can’t think about that. It has to. I’ve made promises.

“The offer stands,” Shane says. “Say the word.”

“Thanks, man,” I say, knowing I won’t take him up on it.

I grab my drink from the bar and take a large gulp, tasting the malty sweetness and feeling the bubbles on my tongue.

“So, about my wedding,” Shane starts.

“Did you develop second thoughts since I got here?” I ask, and then purposefully pull my lips into a flat line.

He snickers. “No, not even one.”

“I can’t believe I fell for that,” I say. I’m not even sure why I jumped right on his text. I should have seen it for the crap it was when he sent it. Maybe my subconscious wanted to believe it so I’d get some real air instead of the stale stuff in my musty old apartment.

“I haven’t officially gotten a chance to ask you, but you’ll be my best man, right?” Shane asks with raised eyebrows.

I let out a breath—time to tell him. “You know I’d love to be there, but the next three weeks are crucial.”

“I totally get it,” he says. “No pressure from me. You know I’d love you to come, though. But I know it’s soon, and not much warning.”

“If I could swing it, I would,” I tell him.

“You know, Mila will be there.” He cocks his head to the side when he says this. “I’m surprised you wouldn’t jump at the chance to spend some time

with her.”

“She’s got that stupid boyfriend,” I say. He knows this well because it was his grand plan that fateful night at that after-work party for me to introduce him to Nadia so I could have some time with Mila and act on the feelings I’d been having. But what ended up happening is that Shane fell hard for Nadia, and I thankfully didn’t get to act on anything before Mila informed me that she’s dating Dave. Freaking Dave. I’ve never felt so much animosity for a guy I’ve never met.

It was like she really wanted me to know, too, because that next week, suddenly there was a picture of her and this Dave guy on her desk. He looks like a douchebag, in my humble, not jealous, opinion. With those crystal-blue eyes and that dark hair. And yes, I’ve shamefully taken a closer look at the photo when no one else was in the office. He’s got one of those chin dimples that so many find attractive. Well, I don’t. I think it looks like a butt. Dave has a butt chin.

Shane waves my words away with his hand. “She’s not engaged.”

“I’m not that kind of guy,” I tell him. It goes without saying, really. Shane knows this about me. It’s interesting that he used to say “*She’s not married*” before he got engaged to Nadia. Apparently, now that he’s got a fiancée, he’s realizing the seriousness of it all.

“Maybe I should get Nadia to set up a double date, just to see what this Dave is like. Nadia hardly ever talks about him. Maybe the guy is a tool.”

I shake my head. “Don’t do it on my account. It’s not like I have time for anyone in my life, even if she were available. Anyway, I don’t think Mila can go either. She’s also got too much to do.”

Shane lowers his brow at this. “You told her she couldn’t go?”

“No,” I tell him. I didn’t, right? I wouldn’t do that. I rack my brain, trying to remember how the conversation went down at our one-on-one on Wednesday. Wasn’t it her that said that neither of us should go? And she seemed pretty relieved by it? What was that all about, anyway?

“Nadia’s not going to like that,” Shane says. Reaching up, he rubs his brows with his thumb and middle finger like he’s suddenly developed a headache.

We’re silent as I take a drink of my beer and Shane looks to be working something out in his head.

“Where are you with this app?” he finally asks. “What are you working on now?”

“We’re in the final stages. Testing, finding and fixing bugs, making sure the UI is functional. Then it’s on to user testing.”

Shane nods like he understands, but I know it most likely went in one ear and out the other. I can tell by the glaze over his eyeballs. At best he knows the basics of the app, and that’s probably because I tend to drone on, since it’s taken up the top tier of my brain.

“What does user testing look like?” he asks, after taking a sip of his drink.

“We have companies we hire that send it to users—real people—to test and make sure it’s functional and easy to use, and they send us feedback.”

“When do you think you’ll be ready for that?”

“We have to be ready in a month,” I tell him and feel that hard pit drop into the base of my stomach when I think of the timeline and how it will take a miracle for us to get this done and ready for New York. And it has to be done by then. The future of this company and my reputation are on the line. There’s beta testing, functionality testing ... as well as usability, performance, compatibility and security ... so much freaking testing.

“Your face is green,” Shane says.

“I just realized how much has to be done before then.”

“Any way to speed it up?”

“I don’t think so.” I look down at my half-empty beer on the bar and reach up to run a finger down the condensation gathering on the outside of the glass. “We’re set to do some beta testing of our own, before we go to user testing. It would help if we could speed that part up.”

“Beta testing?”

I nod, appreciating his participation in this conversation, since this isn’t his favorite topic. “Do you want to test it at your wedding in Hawaii?” I ask him, my tone teasing.

He tilts his head to the side, contemplating. “Why don’t *you* test it in Hawaii?”

I chuckle. “I wish.”

“I’m serious,” he says, the look on his face indicating that he really is. “What if you went out a couple of days before and put the app to the test? Hear me out,” he says when he sees me shaking my head. “I may not know how all this works, but wouldn’t Oahu—a tourist trap—be a great place to do the testing?”

I shake my head. “I swear if I could make it work, you know I’d be at your wedding.”

“That’s not why I’m saying this,” Shane says. “I want you to be there, of course, but wouldn’t this be a great way to do it? I’m already paying for everyone to come to the wedding, so it would save you money, too. It’s a win-win. Bottom line and all that.”

“What do you know about bottom lines?” Shane was born into money and took over the family real estate development company when his dad retired. He’s never had to worry about money his entire life.

He shrugs. “It’s a term I’ve heard thrown around before.”

“I appreciate the idea, but I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“Promise me you’ll think about it.”

“All right,” I tell him. “I’ll think about it.”

Six

Mila

“DOES THIS FACE LOOK SAD enough to you, Fake Dave?” I say to the picture of me and my beautiful, blue-eyed, stock-photo, pretend boyfriend. I’ve been trying out regretful looks as I practice telling Nadia I can’t come to her wedding.

I texted her as soon as I sat down at my desk, and she said she’d be here in five. I’ve been using the time to work on my sad looks and my speech. I’ve got to really sell this because I should actually be sad. But I’m not. Not at all.

My plan is to first gently tell her why I can’t go and then present her with the perfect idea—to have both her sisters be maids of honor. I’d recommended giving one of them my spot before, but she didn’t want to have to choose between them and cause any hard feelings. I don’t think she’s realized there’s an option B here. Give them both the title. I’m a genius, really.

“Mila Banks, you look gorgeous today,” Nadia says as she walks into my office, a big, beautiful smile on her face, holding two mugs of steaming coffee. She hands me one.

“Why thank you, Nadia Singh,” I say, giving her a little shimmy of my shoulders in the knit tweed, knee-length dress with the square neck, puff sleeves and ruffled bottom. “You’re looking lovely yourself.” I give an approving nod at her white jumpsuit with the draped bodice and a belt tied at the waist.

“Thank you,” she says, doing a modeling pose with her hip jutted out to the right, her lips doing a little puckering thing, before sitting down in a chair on the opposite side of my desk.

It should be noted that we don’t have a dress code at AppInnovate. We can wear pretty much whatever we want. One particular developer named Mike wears pajama bottoms most days and no one cares. But Nadia and I like

to dress up, mostly for each other. I have absolutely no idea how it started, but it's become a thing we do on the regular. Even when we dress down, it's still usually with some sort of style or added flair, like a cute belt or fancy earrings.

Okay, fine. I know how it started. It was because when I started here, I liked to dress up for a certain boss of mine, which I realize is stupid, because I've already established that I tend to fall for my bosses, which ended in disaster at my last job, and so even if my outfits caught Grayson's eye, nothing was ever going to happen.

As it turns out, my outfits are how I first bonded with Nadia. She'd compliment mine, I'd compliment hers, and a beautiful friendship was born. So, it was all meant to be.

"How was your weekend?" Nadia asks before taking a sip of her coffee.

"Uneventful," I tell her. "How was your family reunion?"

"So great," she says. "Shane came for a bit and everyone loved him. My auntie Shay was obsessed. Especially with his biceps. She kept trying to grab on to them, and at one point I had to practically pry her fingers off."

Oh, right. Shane. I'd temporarily forgotten the bad, but also sort of good—well, good for me—news I need to share with Nadia. I won't be able to attend her wedding. Cue sad face.

I clear my throat and fold my arms. Time to get down to business. "Speaking of Shane," I start, but then someone knocks on my open door.

Both of us look up to see Grayson, the BILK, standing there filling the doorway quite nicely with his built physique, wearing a pair of jeans and a button-down white shirt, a version of the outfit he wears most days. Sometimes he switches it up with a blue shirt that makes his green eyes pop. Why does he have to be so gorgeous? It would make my life so much easier if he looked like a troll.

"Pink," he says by way of greeting, almost as if he's blurted it out without thinking. "Your dress is pink." He closes his eyes and then swipes a hand down his face.

"Yes, it is," Nadia says, scrunching up her perfectly shaped nose at him. She turns the same face at me, her facial expression saying, *What's up with this guy?*

"Sorry, it's ... been a long day," he says.

"It's just after nine," I say.

"Exactly." He gives us a weary smile. "Uh, can I talk to you in my office,

Mila? Just for a minute.”

“Of course.” I stand up from my chair and follow him out the door, but not before looking back at Nadia, who’s doing a ridiculous arm pumping thing, squinting her eyes and biting her bottom lip. I should have never told her about my boss attraction. But that was also something we bonded over when we first met, and also how BILK came to be. Once upon a time, before Nadia only had eyes for Shane, she, too, found Grayson attractive. She also breathes and has a pulse, which is the prerequisite for recognizing his gorgeousness.

I give her a dirty look and a quick thumbs-up before following Grayson down the hall. I make sure my eyes are on the door to his office ahead of us and not on his lovely backside. I made that mistake before and tripped on my own feet. All around, not my best moment.

He stops at the threshold of his open office door, stands to the side, and gestures for me to go in first. I sit in the white chair in front of his desk, contemplating for much too long what I should do with my hands as he walks around to the other side of his desk and takes a seat. I settle for placing them in my lap.

“Sorry to pull you away,” Grayson says, placing his defined forearms on the armrests of his large black office chair.

“No worries. I was just about to tell Nadia that I won’t be able to go to the wedding.” I smile but then drop it quickly because, as has already been established, smiling at this juncture is not appropriate. Must. Be. Sad.

“I’m glad I caught you, then,” he says, and then weaves his fingers together and places his hands on the desk.

“Oh?” I ask, my stomach doing a little dropping thing. “Did you change your mind ... about not going?”

“Well, I had a meeting with Vik just before I came to see you. We both decided that it would be useful for some of us to do some real-world testing on the app before it goes to user testing.”

I dip my chin once, confused. “Of course—that’s already on the docket.” You can’t send an app blindly to users to test. That’s unheard of.

He nods. “I know we were going to do it locally, but we, well Vik, thought testing in a more touristy area would help us get a true grasp of how things are working.”

“Colorado is touristy.”

“During ski season, yes.”

“That’s ... true,” I say. “California? New York? Orlando?” I’d even suffer through the humidity of a central Florida summer for this. Anywhere other than where I’m pretty sure he’s going to say.

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly. “That would work, but seeing as we both have a wedding to attend in Hawaii, what if we tested it there?”

And there it is.

“We?” I ask, pointing to myself and then to him, in case he meant the royal we, which I’m praying he does.

“I know it’s not conventional,” he says. “Vik suggested that you and I could do some testing there before the wedding. Sort of a win-win.”

More like a lose-lose-lose-lose-LOSE.

“But ... I have so much to do here,” I tell him, trying to hold back the desperation I’m suddenly feeling on the inside. It’s not a lie—I’m the project manager on this app; I need to be managing all the things I manage.

“So do I,” he says, his lips curling up on one side, the echo of a dimple on his cheek. “I figure we can work while we’re there. In between trying some of the activities GlobeTrotter suggests.”

“Activities?”

He shrugs one shoulder. “Yeah, maybe snorkeling, go to a luau or something. Maybe a hike, so we can test the map feature. Have you ever been?”

“No,” I say. “Have you?”

He shakes his head. “Blind testing will be even better.”

I twist my lips to the side as I peer out the windows of his office that overlooks downtown Denver. I need an excuse, a reason, something ... anything.

My eyes dart back to Grayson when my brain conjures up an idea. “Simone is going. Couldn’t she do the testing with you?” So far, she’s the only other person on the leadership team that can go.

He gives me a closed-mouth smile. “Simone is in HR. You’re the project manager. It makes more sense if you do it. Besides, she asked for the week off to make a trip of it with her husband. I just approved her vacation request.”

Freaking Simone. How dare she want to spend time with her husband on a tropical island.

“This is outside our budget.” I jump right in with my next excuse and feel a tiny ping of hope in my stomach because this is a good one. The budget for

GlobeTrotter has been tight. Part of my job is to make sure we stay within it. This would definitely be outside the amount we've allotted.

"I was worried about that as well, but seeing that Shane is paying for our flights for the wedding, we should be okay."

Stupid Shane and his bags full of money. Why can't he be broke like the rest of us?

"This is terrible news," I say, and when Grayson laughs, I realize I've said it out loud.

"I mean, it's not the best timing, but it makes going to the wedding feasible," he says, placing his hands in his lap.

I don't want it to be feasible. I want it to be impossible. I can't tell him this, though. How would that even sound?

I know I seem like a terrible friend right now, doing everything I can to get out of going to this wedding. But I cannot express enough that I am seven out of seven for ruining weddings. I am a wedding ruiner. The best place for me to be is *not* at a wedding. I vowed to never be in another one as long as I lived, and I really want to stick to that. It's for the betterment of society.

Grayson's brows pull inward, concern washing over his face. "Are you ... not comfortable going with me?" He presses an index finger to his chest.

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead. "No," I say emphatically. "I mean yes. Or, no." I close my eyes and let out a breath before looking at Grayson again. "What I mean to say is, I'm comfortable with it. Super comfortable. All the comfort."

Oh, Mila. It would be great if a black hole would just open up underneath me right now and save me from myself. As an added bonus, I'd also get to miss Nadia's wedding. That would be a *real* win-win.

My heart does a little sputtering thing when I return to the present and realize what he's just said. I've been so stuck on the fact that because of this new twist I'll probably have to go to the wedding that I didn't comprehend what this all means: I'd be going on a work trip to a tropical island to test a vacation app with my boss. A.k.a. the BILK, a.k.a. the star of 94 percent of my romantic daydreams. What did he say we'd be doing? Snorkeling? Hiking? Oh ... gosh ... I'd have to see him in swim trunks. SWIM TRUNKS.

And then, like, what if we were swimming and those swim trunks just happened to fall off and ... Heaven help me, it suddenly feels twenty degrees warmer in this office.

This can't happen. None of this can happen. Oh my gosh, I'm actually

going to have to throw myself down some stairs, aren't I?

"Are ... you okay?" Grayson asks, that concerned look on his face again. Obviously, my internal struggle was making an outward appearance.

"Totally," I say, sounding totally not okay with the word barely audible through my clogged-feeling throat.

He scratches the side of his face in a sexy way. I don't know why it's sexy—it just is. "It's ... a work trip, so that'll be okay with Dave, right?" he asks.

"Dave?"

He angles his head slightly to the side. "Your ... boyfriend?"

"Oh right, Dave," I say and shake my head like *silly me*. "My boyfriend. Of course. Whose name is ... Dave." I let out a very fake-sounding chuckle. "Um, no. He'd be fine with it."

Wow. I sound like a true idiot.

That could have been a good excuse, though, that Dave wouldn't like me going on a work trip with my very handsome boss. But I don't like the idea of my fake boyfriend sounding like one of those ridiculous jealous types, or Grayson thinking I'd go for that type of guy. Anyway, Fake Dave deserves better than that. He's been working hard to save me from myself, after all.

"So, we're good to go, then?" Grayson asks, his eyebrows moving up his forehead.

"I ... guess we are," I say, sickly butterflies swimming around in my stomach. I'm not sure if they're there because if I don't quickly come up with an ironclad reason not to go, I'll not only be going on a trip with my crush-worthy boss, but it will also make it possible to attend Nadia's wedding. Or is the sick feeling because if I don't come up with a good excuse, I'm going to have to get up the nerve to throw myself down some stairs?

It's all a lose-lose.

THE WEDDING (

Ethan Brady Mitchell

&

Amelia Jane Reynolds

SIX YEARS AGO

THE SECOND WEDDING I WAS asked to be in was for my cousin, Amelia, who was marrying her neighbor and high school sweetheart, Ethan. And Ethan was a bit of a douchebag. I can say this now because their marriage only lasted four years. He cheated on her, which wasn't a surprise. The surprise was that someone else was willing to have sex with Ethan. We're all still a little shocked by that.

Amelia was my best cousin friend—my BCF, as we called each other growing up. Our moms are sisters and Amelia's parents were divorced. Every summer my mom would pack Everett and me up and we'd go visit her and my aunt Tammy and cousin Cade (who was Everett's age) in Nebraska. Those summers were some of my fondest memories from my childhood. When we were younger, Amelia and I spent the summer making up skits and games to keep us occupied. We played in the field behind her house, spotting animals (mostly birds), flying kites, stargazing at night, and during one particular picnic, finding out we were both allergic to carpenter ants.

When we got older, we spent most of our time trying to get the attention of dumb boys. Like the summer before our freshman year when we spent it spying on Ethan (he lived two doors down), “accidentally” throwing balls in

his yard, and, one night, heart attacking his door with notes from his “secret admirer.”

It should be noted I thought Ethan was a butthead from the beginning. Especially when he came over to Amelia’s house the day after we taped hearts all over his front door and was bragging that he was sure the most popular girl in school, Kate, was the person behind it. Ethan, as already established, was no catch. And was obviously full of himself. But love is blind, and Amelia was heartbroken. She got over it, because by the next summer they were dating, and I got to spend my vacation being a third wheel. Summer visits were never the same after that.

The day of Amelia’s wedding, things started out pretty well. Just a couple of normal hiccups—the DJ was late due to traffic, even though everyone else who attended the wedding got there in time. And for a bit, we couldn’t find the veil, and Amelia had a small panic attack until it was found hanging just behind the maid of honor’s dress, where no one thought to look. As far as weddings go, it all seemed minimal to me.

Amelia’s dress was gorgeous. It was A-line and sleeveless, with a lace overlay on the bodice, and the skirt was layers and layers of tulle. She looked like a princess. Remember the tulle, though—it’s important to the story.

Like I said, everything was great, but then her maid of honor happened. It’s a well-known fact that the maid of honor’s job is to mediate conflict among the bridal party, but unfortunately for Amelia, her maid of honor *was* the conflict.

For privacy’s sake, we’ll call her Stephanie. Okay, fine. That was her real name, and you had to say all three syllables because Steph-a-nie “would rather die” (her actual words) than be referred to as *Steph*. Anyway, Stephanie got very tipsy on wine as we were getting ready for the ceremony, and tipsy Stephanie can be quite belligerent. Amelia knew this, since they were BFFs, and yet allowed her to keep topping off her wineglass.

The first thing she did was hide the veil. That’s right—it was Stephanie’s doing, and she’d even pretended to help us look for it. She said it was all for a bit of fun, but when no one found it funny, she told us we were a bunch of babies and refilled her glass of wine.

The next thing she did was berate the makeup artist, saying she looked like trash, wiping off all her makeup and redoing it herself. Mind you, it looked worse in my opinion. Then she went after the hairstylist, telling Amelia she’d wasted her money on novices.

She didn't stop there. She also chewed out the wedding coordinator and spilled wine on the floor of the bridal suite after tripping over something (she blamed it on another bridesmaid, but my money is on her own drunk feet) and refused to clean it up.

My cousin has a kind heart, with the fact that she somehow agreed to marry douchewaffle Ethan as strong evidence. She made excuses for Stephanie, but when I saw her wipe away a couple of tears, I decided right then that I'd do whatever it took to make sure her day went perfectly.

Little did I know I'd make it even worse.

Before I get to that part—Stephanie had a couple more moves in her reign of terror. First, she decided as we were lining up that she couldn't walk down the aisle with the best man, for reasons unbeknownst to everyone else (and perhaps even herself), so I quickly switched partners with her.

Thankfully Stephanie decided not to ruin the actual wedding part, because after that, she behaved herself. The ceremony went on without any problems, and everything seemed to be looking up from there.

Except that between the ceremony and the reception, there was a little cocktail hour for the guests while the bridal party was supposed to be taking pictures. But no one could find Stephanie or the best man, whom Stephanie had recently decided she hated. It didn't take a detective to figure out where they were and what they were probably doing, and not wanting Amelia to know, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

I gathered the photographer, Amelia, and Ethan and dragged them over to a beautiful tree I spied in the distance—away from the rest of the bridal party as they tried to find Stephanie.

We'd been there for about fifteen minutes, snapping pictures of Amelia and Ethan together, and bridal shots of Amelia on her own. It truly was the prettiest spot, and the photographer kept complimenting me for finding it. I felt like patting myself on the back because it was a completely lucky move on my part. That was until Amelia started squirming and jumping and making little screeching noises.

"Something's biting me," she yelled, and then, grabbing up her skirts, she hightailed it away from the tree.

They were on an anthill. A carpenter anthill, to be precise.

To avoid her crazy maid of honor, I'd sent my cousin to an anthill, where hundreds of ants had crawled into the layers of tulle on her dress, and a bunch of others were crawling up her legs and biting her. And ... she's allergic.

Big red hives started to form on her legs. We tried to get rid of all the pesky bugs that were basically everywhere in the skirt of her dress. I had to be careful because I'm also allergic, but at this point, she was screaming, and we were working so hard to remove the hundreds of little red ants from the tulle that I had to just deal. I walked away with only a few bites, which felt sort of unfair since this was my doing.

In the end, we had to race her back to the bridal suite and take off the dress while someone found some Benadryl. It took a bunch of us—Stephanie not included—about thirty minutes of working together to remove as many of the bugs as we could. During the reception, she kept finding and removing ants from her dress.

Amelia called me not too long ago to tell me that when she got that dress out of storage after her divorce, to give it away or possibly burn it, she found—even after having the dress steam cleaned—two ant corpses still in the tulle.

Seven

Mila

YOU KNOW WHAT I FORGOT? Everything the maid of honor is required to do in preparation for the wedding.

I thought because we were fast tracking this thing, some of the usual traditions would be left out. But no. Nadia wants it all. I don't blame her, really—I'd just rather not be in charge. Or, you know, go at all.

I still haven't found a way to get out of the business trip with Grayson, nor have I gotten up the nerve to throw myself down a staircase, so for now I'm playing the part of a not-fully-committed maid of honor. I mean, I'm doing all the things; I'm just holding out for a miracle.

The best-case scenario would be for me to attend the wedding as just a guest. It feels like a fair compromise, since I never want to go to a wedding again and Nadia is adamant that I be her maid of honor. It's like meeting in the middle. But Nadia didn't like it.

"Please, Nadia?" I'd begged her one last time after I told her about Grayson's plan to test the app in Hawaii. She gave me a mission to see the BILK in swim trunks and report back immediately if he has the six-pack we've always assumed he has.

"No way. I'm not letting you just come as a guest," she said, that firm look on her face, a line between her brows creasing. "You are too important to me."

She's important to me too, and maybe if I told her everything, she might understand. But then again, maybe not. It feels like one of those you-had-to-be-me scenarios. Plus, there are things I don't want to admit, things I still haven't really told anyone. When I broke up with Monty after that final wedding fiasco (a.k.a. wedding number seven, which shall not be talked about), I moved back home to start fresh. Nadia knows bits and pieces, but not everything, and that was by design. Besides, even if she knew every dirty

detail, I doubt she'd let me out of this.

"Fine," I said, feeling the despair of really having to be Nadia's maid of honor fill my gut. "If I'm going to do this, I probably should know if there's any chance you're allergic to ants."

Her brow furrowed. "What?"

"Never mind," I said, waving the words away with my hand. "I just really hate you right now."

"And I hate you," she told me, a big, beautiful, non-hate-filled smile on her face.

She hugged me, and then immediately sent me a text with a list of things she'd need me to do as her maid of honor, and I sent her back a thumbs-up emoji. Yes, there is an actual middle finger one on there, but I like to stay on-brand.

Her list included things like going dress shopping, helping her find bridesmaid dresses, planning a bridal shower, seeing Grayson in swim trunks and reporting back, and making arrangements for the bachelorette party. Except we're doing a combined bachelor and bachelorette thing, so I get the pleasure of planning *all* that.

It's nothing new. I've done all this before. I'll just add *accidentally do something to ruin the wedding* to the bottom of the list, because that's inevitable.

What's sad is, in my head, I keep telling myself it can't possibly happen again. I mean, what are the odds? Maybe this time will be different? Maybe I won't do something to ruin Nadia's wedding? The thing is, the odds are not in my favor, and as before, I'll do everything I can *not* to ruin Nadia's wedding. I won't be doing any dances, I won't make her stand in an anthill, I'll try hard not to give the groom a concussion ... and I'm just going to stop right there because I don't want to have a panic attack in this bridal shop, which is where we are currently waiting for Nadia to come out in another dress.

With the wedding in less than two weeks, we have to do everything at lightning speed. So, this morning we're doing the dress shopping, and later this afternoon we're having a bridal shower—a cozy gathering at her parents' house. Luckily her mom, Shanti, and her grandmother, or nani, as Nadia and her sisters call her, took over the decor and food. I just had to do the inviting. The last-minute inviting, as it were. All in all, fourteen people RSVP'd yes, which I thought was great, considering the short notice and the fact that I had

to send out the invites electronically.

We found a bridal shop that was able to get us in. They were also able to guarantee that they could make alterations in the next ten days, as long as they were simple. Basically, Nadia would have to pick something off the rack and make it work. No custom gown for her.

“Oh, Nadia,” her mom, who looks like an older version of Nadia, says when Nadia comes out of the dressing room in a strapless, off-white, mermaid-style gown with a floor-length bow sash on the back. It’s a classic look, like something Marilyn Monroe would wear, and Nadia looks fabulous in it.

Melissa, the saleswoman who’s been working with us, leads Nadia over to the round carpeted platform situated in front of three large standing mirrors so the bride can see the dress at all angles.

“I think this is the one,” Nadia declares after she’s stared at her reflection in the mirrors for a bit.

The rest of us—her sisters, Aisha and Leela, as well as her mom, her nani, and I—are all sitting on white tufted couches as we watch. I love that her family is here with her, even if it makes me slightly envious because my parents are so far away and I’m no longer speaking to them. Well, I did speak to the both of them earlier today, but I swear it will be the last time.

The group collectively holds its breath as we watch Nadia, because this is the sixth dress that she has immediately said “*I think this is the one*” about, but then found something to nitpick soon after. It should also be noted that she’s looked flawless in every single one. I should hate her for this, but I already hate her for putting me in her wedding and I just can’t have that much hate in my heart right now.

“What do you all think?” she asks as she turns toward us and Melissa moves behind her, laying the short train out so we can get the full effect.

Okay, this is new. This is the first time she’s asked for our opinions. This feels like a step in the right direction.

“You look beautiful, Beta,” Nadia’s nani says, her mostly gray hair pulled back into a low bun at the nape of her neck, her small, wrinkled hands in a prayer pose as she looks at her granddaughter. We all add in our praises as well.

She really does look stunning. Of course, Nadia is stunning in any regular old dress. But put her in all white, with that beautiful bronze glowing skin of hers, and she looks like something out of a magazine.

The good news is that Nadia makes the dress, not the other way around. Which means she will still look amazing if I accidentally pour red wine down the front of it.

“What do you think?” her sister Aisha tentatively asks as Nadia turns back toward the mirrors. Nadia is the oldest, followed by Aisha, and Leela is the baby. I wasn’t exaggerating when I said they are a family of beautiful people and I will look like a pale Neanderthal in the pictures. Maybe I should reiterate this to Nadia—give it one more shot.

“I think ... I think this really is it,” Nadia says, her smile growing wide in the mirror in front of her.

“I think so too,” her mom adds. Ever so slightly, she turns her head toward the rest of us and gives us a quick little nod, her eyebrows raised, nonverbally telling us to all agree so we can get this show on the road.

“I love it,” I say quickly.

“It’s stunning,” adds Leela.

“Absolutely gorgeous,” chimes in Melissa, the salesperson. I think she, too, was worried we’d have to start over again.

“Okay,” Nadia says, a breathless quality to her voice. “This is it, then.” I can see tears pooling in the base of her eyelids as she looks at herself. “This is the dress. I’m ... getting married. I’m getting married!” She does a little clapping and dancing thing, as much as can be done in the fitted gown.

I look over to see her nani and her mom tearing up as well. Her sisters look more relieved, which is how I’m feeling, yet I can’t help but be touched and happy for my best friend, even with all my negativity right now.

One thing done. Now on to the bridal shower.



“OMG, DOES SHANE HAVE A brother?” says Fiona, one of Nadia’s Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority sisters from when they attended CU in Boulder. This is after Nadia has regaled everyone at the bridal shower with the tale of how she met Shane, with her added embellishments of course. This time she said she knew he was the one after that first meeting in the bar, when in reality, later that night, she’d told me that he seemed like he could be a “fun summer fling.”

We’re sitting in Nadia’s parents’ living room, with Nadia front and center

in a floral armchair, and the rest of us squishing onto the two matching sofas and the dining room chairs that have been set up to form a sort of circle in the room. She's already opened gifts, and almost every single one was a different style of barely-there lingerie. That was super fun to open in front of Nadia's nani. She didn't seem to mind, though.

I'd like to say I was different and got her something practical, but I'd also bought her lingerie. Although, it was tasteful—only because I knew her family would be around when she opened it, so the purple G-string panties and the matching bra went back on the rack.

“He's got two sisters,” says Nadia, a pleasant smile on her face. I'm not sure how she does it—she's been smiling and laughing all evening. Ever the pleasant hostess. I, on the other hand, can feel an actual burning in my cheeks from all the fake laughing I've been doing.

I should note that there has been some real laughter too. It's just that I have PTSD from anything wedding related, so I'm also just sort of going through the motions right now.

I've met some of Nadia's friends before, and I'm not just saying this because I'm one of her best friends, but she has good taste in the people she's closest to. I haven't felt one ounce of animosity or envy from any of the people here tonight. It might be that some of them are already married or in long-term relationships. Regardless, they all seem genuinely happy for her. I am too; I just would like to be genuinely happy for her in a different role than as her maid of honor.

“Bummer,” says Brittany, another sorority sister. I actually think every person besides Nadia's family and yours truly is from her sorority.

I've been doing reconnaissance work, trying to find out who here tonight would be a better choice for maid of honor. Out of the fourteen women attending the shower tonight, only a handful can make the wedding. Both Brittany and Fiona will be there, and I think either would be a good bet. Right now, Fiona gets my top vote, with her long red hair and the kind of freckles that some spend hours trying to fake. She's a wellness coach and a short, petite thing who will not stand out as much as I will in Nadia's pictures, nor be a wedding jinx.

“He does have a very handsome best man, though,” Nadia says, her eyes moving briefly over to me, where she gives me a quick, almost imperceptible wink.

“Ooooh.” Brittany and Fiona look at each other and coo at the same time,

and some of the others echo the sentiment.

“He’s actually my boss. The CEO. And he’s single.” Nadia says that last part in a singsong voice. Now even more ladies chime in.

“The CEO? Is he looking for a wife?” a woman I think is named Shar asks, and giggles fill the room.

My stomach does a little flipping thing. Suddenly I’m seeing a very clear picture of one—or a few—of these women dancing and flirting it up at the wedding with *my* Grayson. I mean, not *my* Grayson. Just Grayson. There’s no *my* anything. However, despite that important distinction, I can’t help the prickles of red-hot fury that push up against my breastbone.

“He’s a workaholic, though,” I say, the words spilling out of my mouth. “He’s like always working and never has time for anything ... because he works.” Yes, yes. Good job, Mila. You said *work* a lot. Super convincing. Also, what the hell are you doing? The BILK isn’t yours, and you don’t want him to be yours either. You’re just attracted to him because he’s your boss. But also, he is, in fact, attractive. In both looks and personality. It’s so unfair.

To my surprise, Nadia nods her head in agreement, almost as if she, too, wants to keep her friends away from him, even though it seemed like she was just reading off his dating résumé. “He’s definitely always working.”

Fiona lifts a petite shoulder and lets it drop. “Workaholics are my brand of man,” she says. “Nothing serious can come of it.” Some of the others snicker at this.

With that comment, the tiny prickles now feel more like a large fire poker in my chest. Poke, poke, poke. I’ve just decided Fiona has moved from the top of my list of potential maids of honor to the very bottom. Brittany has my vote.

But now I’m picturing lovely Brittany with her silky, soft-blond hair and her ripped arm muscles (I’d ask her what she does for her workout, but I’d never do it, so that would be a waste of both our time) walking arm in arm down the aisle with Grayson, palm trees and the Pacific Ocean as the backdrop. Or sitting together at the head table, making googly eyes at each other as they clink their champagne glasses together. I don’t even know if there will be a head table, but this is my bad dream, so this is how I’m picturing it.

Maybe I should tell them he’s not into flings. I’m not even sure that’s true, but it feels like it is. It doesn’t seem like a Grayson thing to do. I could also tell them that even though he’s the CEO, I get the idea that he’s not

rolling in the money. He drives an older car, never talks about where he lives or about going on lavish vacations, or any vacations really. I can't actually remember a time when he's taken a vacation since I started working for him.

In the end, I don't have to say anything because Nadia's mom, Shanti, asks everyone if they're ready for cake, and that seems to move them away from the topic.

I'm still hanging on to it, though. Perhaps I've been looking at this the wrong way. Sure, if I go, I have a 99.999 percent chance of doing something to ruin Nadia's wedding. I'd say 100 percent, but there's still that small part of me that's holding out hope. But if I don't go, I could be throwing Grayson into the lion's den—and yes, I just compared beautiful, intelligent women to lions on the prowl. Not one of my better moments.

Let's be honest: I'm probably not going to get the nerve to throw myself down some stairs, and even if I did, with my luck, I'd probably twist an ankle or something that wouldn't keep me from going on this work trip. So, since I already have to be there for that, I might as well be in the wedding, even if it's just to save Grayson.

Eight

Grayson

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” SHANE asks me as we stand side by side looking in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors of the custom shop where Shane has purchased us suits for the wedding. Because that’s what he does. We couldn’t rent tuxes like normal people; nor could they look like something you’d find in a tuxedo shop. We have to wear some brand that I’ve never heard of. This is how the other half live. Or the 1 percent, in Shane’s case.

They’re not custom because we didn’t have time for that. We had to go with what they had in stock that could be easily altered. I came in last week for a quick try-on, and now we’re just making sure all the alterations are good—a task I could have done without since it was hard enough to get me over here the first time.

“I think that this is the kind of clothing you don’t want to wear on a tropical beach,” I say, smirking at him in the mirror.

“You’re telling me,” Shane says, lifting his chin at his reflection while he runs his fingers along the lapels of his jacket. “At least you don’t have to wear the coat.”

We’re both wearing matching gray linen pants and vests, and luckily for me, as the groom, Shane will be the only one sporting the jacket. He’s not a tie guy, so we’re both wearing only white button-up shirts in some ridiculously expensive-feeling material under the vests.

The linen material of the suits is supposed to be breathable, and we were told it would be best for an outdoor wedding in a humid climate. But I’m already feeling warm in this air-conditioned store that I will probably never set foot in again. It’s all massively overpriced in my opinion. The overstuffed leather furniture, the polished hardwood floors, and the modern art on the walls. I feel like we’re in an art gallery rather than a custom suit store.

I know I said I wouldn’t be taking any money from Shane, but I saw the

price tag on this getup and I'm going to let him pick up the tab just this one time. I'd definitely have to put it on a credit card if I were paying. Besides, it's probably etiquette for the groom to pay for the suits. Not that I'd know anything about wedding etiquette. I've been in a couple of weddings, but they were for family, so it was different.

Funny how both of those family weddings were for people I don't really speak to right now. Aaron, the cousin who left me high and dry (and in huge amounts of debt) with AppInnovate, and my brother, Josh, who doesn't want to talk to me due to the fact that I somehow let the previously mentioned cousin talk me into some poor decisions.

Shane lets out a heavy breath, turning toward me. "I'm getting married," he says and then looks back at himself in the mirror.

I grin at his reflection. "Did it just hit you now?"

"Yeah," he says, a small smile on his face. "It feels real. I'm ready, though. Right now."

"You've got ten days left, big guy," I say, reaching over and patting him once on the shoulder.

"Yep, and it's all thanks to you," he says, turning away from the mirror and toward me.

I shrug. "I just brought you over to talk to her."

He lifts one eyebrow. "Is that how we're telling the story?"

"That's how *you* tell the story," I say, lifting an eyebrow back.

"True. It's how Nadia thinks it happened, anyway," he says, turning back to the mirror, tugging on the bottom of his jacket with both hands.

"And that's okay with you?"

He lifts one shoulder at his reflection. "How I got there doesn't matter. The fact is that once I started talking to her, that was it for me."

I shake my head. He makes it all sound so simple ... and cheesy. "I suppose the real reason is a lot less romantic."

He turns his head to look at me. "Oh, so you're going to admit it?"

"I'll admit that you're the worst wingman in the world."

"I did my job," he protests. "It's not my fault you botched it."

"I didn't botch it," I say.

"You did," he says, a sarcastic frown on his face.

I did botch it, actually. I'm not even sure what happened. I'd been wanting to talk to Mila outside of work to maybe explore more between us, even though getting into a relationship—or even attempting to—was (and

still is) not in my best interest. I also don't know if ethically it's the best idea. Dating someone you work with just seems like a recipe for disaster. But there's just something about her that makes me kind of not care. And anyway, I'm not even sure she'd want anything, but that's what I was trying to find out that night—whether the attraction was mutual.

Because I'd mentioned her more than once to Shane, he was quick to pick up on my feelings. It was also pretty obvious since she was wearing the red dress that messes with my brain that night, and I couldn't stop my eyes from traveling over to where she was sitting across from Nadia at a high-top bar table, some kind of pink frilly drink in front of each of them. Shane kept nudging me with his elbow and bobbing his head in their direction.

"Come on," he'd said that night in the dimly lit bar. "Why don't you introduce me to your employees?"

"Nah," I told him. "It's probably not a good idea."

"Probably not, but we should do it anyway." He gave me a devious smile. "Take me over there; I'll talk to the friend, and you can chat it up with Mila."

It took him a few more nudges before I finally acquiesced, despite my better judgment. We walked over to their table, I made the introductions, Shane started talking to Nadia, and there I was, having a not-at-work conversation with a woman I had a hard time not thinking about.

"You know what?" Mila said after some stilted talk about the weather, where I realized she was maybe a little tipsy. "I like your shirt."

"Thank you," I said.

"You wear white button-downs a lot."

I looked down at the simple white shirt and then back up, smiling at her because she'd noticed what I'd been wearing. This felt like a good start.

"I ... like white," I said, and yes, it was a dumb comment. She was wearing the red dress, remember?

"I gathered," she said, giving me an exaggerated wink.

"I ... I-like your dress," I told her, developing a stutter I'd never had in my thirty-four years.

She thanked me, and then the conversation moved to silence. One where we both kept awkwardly smiling at each other and then finding other places to look around the room because looking at each other felt strange. At least, that's how it was for me.

We carried on like this for a while—stilted conversation mixed with confused eye contact—before I finally got up the nerve to make a move.

After taking a deep breath, I opened my mouth and uttered the following words that will likely haunt me forever: “I’m dating.”

Yes, that’s correct. That’s what came out of my mouth. I’m ... dating. I meant to say something like “*Are you dating anyone?*” or “*Is there someone in your life?*” to fish around and see if she was available or even interested, but those weren’t the words that came out of my mouth to the woman that I’ve felt more attraction to than anyone in my entire life.

Maybe I’d had a small seizure, or some kind of brain blip, because none of it made sense—the timing, the context, the absolute absurdity of my wording. As I’ve already stated, I haven’t dated anyone in years. My sole relationship is with AppInnovate. So why would I even say that? Was it karma? The universe trying to save me from myself? Even now, I still can’t wrap my brain around it. And to top it off, I couldn’t come back from it.

I’ve replayed it in my head so many times. At that point I could have laughed it off and then followed up with “*What I mean to say is ...*” and then fixed it. Instead, I did a weird sort of cough/snort/laugh thing, and before I could try to take it all back, Mila said, “Oh, me too. I’ve got a boyfriend. It’s ... Dave, actually. His name is Dave. Good ole Dave.”

“Dave?” I was confused. She had never talked about a boyfriend before. Not once. Maybe it wasn’t that serious. This sadly gave me hope.

Then she said, “We’ve been together for a while now. Like six months or nine months or something. We’re super in love. I think he might be the one, you know?”

“That’s great.” I gave her what I’m sure was a constipated smile and an okay sign. That’s right: a freaking okay sign. Does anyone even use that one anymore? “I’m happy for you and ... Dave.”

I wasn’t happy, though. It felt sort of like I’d been punched in the gut. But there was this voice in the back of my head telling me this was probably all for the best. She’s dating someone. I can now move on from all this attraction and get on with my life.

That’s not quite what happened, though. Life moved on, and my attraction stayed and maybe even got a little stronger, if I’m being honest. Turns out Mila having a boyfriend didn’t help. My feelings weren’t like a switch that could be turned off. All that came of it was a sudden hatred for some guy named Dave.

“Thanks,” she said. “We met at a bar in RiNo. It was like a love-at-first-sight kind of thing.”

“That’s ... so great.” I was repeating myself, but I didn’t know what to say and honestly didn’t really need or want the details. At this point, I was trying to think of a way to walk away and lick my wounds.

“Who are you dating?” she asked, reminding me of how we got started down this path in the first place.

“Oh,” I responded. “I ... well, nothing serious. Not like you and ... Dave.”

She nodded. “Well, keep trying. It took me a while to find my prince.”

This was getting worse. At this point, I looked to Shane for help, a way to get me out of this, but his eyes were completely glued to Nadia, and it was like I didn’t exist anymore to him. Now I know that’s exactly what was happening. At least something good came of it.

“Well,” I said, bobbing my head with no real intent or idea of where to go after that.

“Well,” she echoed. Then she picked up her phone and looked at the screen. “Speaking of Dave—I’d better call him.”

“Sure,” I said, grateful for a reason to get out of this.

“I’ll just pop outside.”

She must have underestimated the chair height or something, because in the next moment I heard her say, “Oof,” and then she was suddenly sprawled out on the floor in front of me.

“Are you okay?” I asked, quickly squatting down to assess how badly she was hurt.

She rolled to her side, covering her face with her hands. “No,” she said, her voice muffled.

I sort of panicked then, searching behind her head for blood, looking at her arms and legs to see if they were intact. “Are you bleeding? Did you break something?”

She shook her head, her hands still covering her face. “I’m fine. I just kind of want to die right now.”

I smiled then, feeling relieved she was okay and finding her embarrassment more endearing than anything else. “Come on,” I said, nudging her, feeling the warmth of her skin under my hand and trying to focus on something else. “Let’s get you up.”

She reluctantly pulled her hands from her face and then placed one in mine. I helped her to stand. Once upright, she let go quickly, adjusted her red dress, and then pulled the bottom of the skirt down—a movement I had to

basically force my gaze from. I purposefully looked at Nadia and Shane, only to find that neither of them had any idea what had just transpired. They hadn't even noticed Mila falling off her chair.

“Uh ... thanks,” Mila said, looking mostly recovered from her fall, except for the color of her face, which nearly matched her dress. “I’ll just be ...” She didn’t finish the sentence; she just nodded toward the exit and stalked off that way.

The next week, a picture of Dave and his butt chin showed up on her desk, and that was that. I keep telling myself it’s all for the best, but it feels more like I’m making up excuses. Even though as far as time for romantic relationships goes, I couldn’t be in a worse position.

“Well,” Shane says, bringing me out of my memory. “Maybe you can make up for all that in Hawaii.”

“That’s a work trip,” I say, giving him a side-eye glare.

“And then a wedding,” he says.

“Of course,” I say, rolling up the cuffs of my shirt, hoping it might feel a little cooler.

“You’re welcome, by the way.”

“For?”

“For my winning idea to test the app before the wedding.”

I side-eye him again. “Yes, thanks for that,” I say, even though it was really Vik who convinced me to do it.

I wasn’t considering it until I talked to Vik the morning after I’d had drinks with Shane, and he was making his last-ditch effort to get me to his wedding. Even when Vik proposed a similar idea, my first instinct was to say no, but then he said the words that made me second-guess it all: “*You could take Mila with you, since she needs to be there too. Test it out like a couple on vacation.*”

Like a couple on vacation.

My mouth had literally gone dry when he said it. The idea went from not so great to having some merit. A lot of merit, actually. My brain had immediately started coming up with an entire checklist of reasons to go. It’s true that testing it in a touristy spot is a good idea, and also true that we both could attend the wedding that way.

My brain also couldn’t help but conjure up pictures of Mila and me on a tropical island ... together. Well, Mila and me and a bunch of other tourists. But I started to envision us doing the tourist thing together, getting a chance

to spend time with one another. In a friendly, totally platonic way, of course.

That's what I keep telling myself. But maybe subconsciously I want to spend time with her so I can burst the bubble that is Mila. Maybe knowing her more will make me want her less. Somehow, I doubt that. It will probably make it worse, and then where will I be? She's got a boyfriend, and I'm basically in a relationship with my job, with no end in sight.

I need to stop thinking about it because regardless of how I feel, this is a work trip, and Mila's got butt-chin Dave. Also, when I told her about the testing before the wedding plan, she wasn't thrilled about it. I thought she'd be happy she now has a way to attend Nadia's wedding, but she didn't seem excited at all. I then thought maybe it was because of Dave and how he might feel about the whole thing, but she stamped that out. So then, does that leave me? ... Am I the reason?

Whatever it is, what's done is done. Plane tickets have been purchased, hotel rooms and a rental car have all been reserved using the app. So far, so good. Great, even. Not a glitch or an issue in sight. It needs to stay that way.

"Should we grab a beer?" Shane asks once the tailor has come over and made the necessary tweaks Shane wants. I'm not sure what he needs fixed. Everything looks great. Then again, expensive suits and weddings are not my forte. As I mentioned, I've only been in a couple of them, and I've never been married myself. I haven't even been close to it. My last long-term relationship was eight years ago, and there's been nothing since. Well, except for this long-term thing I'm in with AppInnovate. Which, from an outside perspective, is probably a bit toxic. A lot of love/hate going on between the both of us.

I've been working too much. Which is evident by the fact that I'm thinking about my company like it's an actual person.

"I can't," I tell Shane, giving myself one last look in the mirror. Just being here is a stretch for me right now. I've got to get back to my dysfunctional relationship.

"Yeah, okay," he says with a half-smile. "I knew I was pushing it."

"Once I get GlobeTrotter off the ground, I'll have more time."

"You said that when you were working on TourSpotter," he says, a mocking smile on his lips. Then his smile drops, and he gives me a fake serious look. "It's like your work is coming between us. Am I nothing to you anymore?"

"Uh, I believe I became chopped liver the moment you set eyes on

Nadia.”

“Yeah, you’re second best now, buddy. Sorry.”

“It’s how it should be,” I say, giving him a quick lift of my shoulder.

“You’ll always be my number two,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting up.

“Just what I’ve always wanted to be,” I tell him.

THE WEDDING (

Daniel John Anderson

&

Scarlett Elizabeth Foster

SIX YEARS AGO

NOT MANY PEOPLE GET TO say they ended up in the emergency room right before their wedding, but my friend Daniel can.

This was the second wedding of that summer for me, and I hadn't realized my jinx-ness quite yet. However, I feel like this one was the result of both Daniel's and my stupidity, so I'm not fully to blame. It was my idea. Daniel just didn't have to go through with it.

The wedding was in Boulder on this twenty-acre property, in a beautiful field surrounded by picturesque mountain ranges and foothills. The building itself was older, with a sort of country inn vibe.

The bridal room was upstairs, and it was freaking hot in there with the bride—Scarlett—and six bridesmaids all getting ready at the same time. We had fans running to help, but it wasn't enough. So, when my hair and makeup were done, I went outside to get some fresh air.

I hadn't expected to run into Daniel, whom I found pacing outside the smaller building we were getting ready in, wearing an untucked tux shirt and black pants, his shoes on but not laced up, his nearly black hair combed back and sprayed to a crisp.

I was in a robe and slippers because not only was I not expecting to run

into Daniel, I wasn't expecting to run into anyone. Besides the bridal party, only the staff was there setting up for the wedding scheduled later in the afternoon.

"What are you doing out here, Daniel?" I asked him, walking toward him with my arms folded in front of my chest because I wasn't wearing a bra. Scarlett had us in strapless dresses (in teal, no less), and the bra I brought to wear was super uncomfortable. So, the less I wore it, the better. However, I'm quite endowed in that area, so it's not one of those things I can just get away with. Again, I wasn't planning on seeing anyone on this little jaunt. It felt akin to walking around naked, to be honest. The robe was one of those silky kinds that can easily come undone. Remember this, because it will come back to haunt me later.

"Hey, Mila. I'm glad you're here. I need your help," Daniel said when he saw me.

"With what?"

"I want to give something to Scarlett before the wedding." He tapped the front of his pocket where I could see the shape of something that looked like it might be a jewelry box. "I forgot to do it last night at the rehearsal, and I want to give it to her before the wedding."

I held out my hand. "I'll do it."

"No," he said. "I want to do it. It's something from me."

"You two are ridiculous," I said. Honestly, I'd never met two people more perfect for each other as Daniel and Scarlett.

Scarlett was my first roommate in college, and we bonded right away, admitting all our deepest secrets. Along with our other roommate, Harper (you'll hear more about her later, because I also ruined her wedding), we would stay up late playing gin rummy and watching all versions of *Pride and Prejudice* and could make each other laugh until we cried. The RA in our dorm had to respond to complaints more than once. At twenty-eight, I'm now the person who would have complained and am appalled by past me. Sleep is important.

I introduced Daniel to Scarlett. He was in my physics study group, and one time while we were in the library studying—or rather, not studying, as those groups tended to go—Scarlett ran into us. I made introductions; she mentioned he was cute later that night when we were back in our room, and Daniel asked about her the next time I saw him in class. It was very clear what I needed to do. I gave her his number, she texted him, and that was the

start of it all.

“Please, Mila? Can you help me?” Daniel asked.

I shook my head. “She’s not going to want to see you until she’s walking down the aisle.”

Scarlett is a traditional gal—definitely a can’t-see-the-groom-before-the-wedding type. I knew this about her, but I also knew that she’s a big fan of grand romantic gestures. Which is why Daniel asked her to marry him at a Rockies game, on the big jumbotron where people cheered, and the mascot handed her flowers. It was on the news.

This is why I knew, despite her desire to do everything the traditional way, if Daniel did something romantic, she’d love it even more.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. Then I told him the plan, which he immediately loved, and I walked him over to just under the window of the room where Scarlett and the rest of the bridal crew were getting ready.

“Grab some of these pebbles,” I instructed him, pointing at the driveway we were standing on.

Daniel grabbed a handful and then started throwing them, one at a time, toward the window.

At this point, I’d forgotten two important key things: One, Daniel had a terrible arm. I’d learned this in college when we’d go outside and throw a Frisbee sometimes. And two, it was so loud in that room with the fans that there was no way Scarlett was going to hear it if he managed to hit the window.

“It’s not going to work,” I told him, explaining the noise thing and leaving out the fact that he’s a sucky thrower. He’d only hit the window once so far, after attempting at least fifteen times.

“So now what?”

I looked around, wondering if we could find a ladder or something to get him up to the window. Then I noticed an older-looking trellis covered in some ivy that went up the side of the wall.

“You could climb that,” I said, pointing to the wooden structure.

“You think?”

Doubt had started to creep in at this point. Or maybe it was my intuition warning me, because I looked at Daniel, who was fairly tall, and had a medium to large build, and then at the trellis and said, “Maybe not.”

“I can do it.” Daniel walked over to the trellis, yanked on it to test the sturdiness, and then, feeling confident, put his foot on the bottom of the

wooden structure and reached up to pull himself upward.

“I think we could find another way,” I said, feeling slightly panicked.

“I’ve got this,” he said, moving farther up. And to his credit, and I suppose the credit of his pseudoladder, he did seem to be doing it. The anxious feelings subsided. I stood there, arms folded over my chest, watching him as he made his way up.

He was about halfway to the top, where the window was, when we both heard a definite crack.

“Um, Daniel? I think you should come back down,” I told him.

“I’m almost there,” he said, through heavier breathing. Daniel wasn’t exactly out of shape, but he wasn’t exactly in it either.

“Daniel,” I said, my voice a warning, feeling the rush of worry run through me when the structure made another cracking sound.

He stopped and looked down at me. “Maybe I should come back down,” he said.

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“I’m so close, though,” he said, looking up at the window.

“Just come down,” I said. “We’ll think of something else.”

We would later learn two important lessons about trellises. First of all, trellises are not built for humans to climb. Which, in hindsight, seems sort of like one of those things that is pretty obvious. Secondly, climbing down is trickier than climbing up.

Daniel took one step down, and that was apparently the straw that broke the trellis’s back, because in what felt like a split second, the whole thing wrenched from the wall and Daniel and the trellis came tumbling down.

Daniel landed on his back with a very lovely crunching sound. The trellis landed in pieces all around him, but mostly on top of him.

“DANIEL!” I screamed, and running over to him, I started pulling all the wood shards off him, then knelt down, the pebbles from the gravel road digging into my knees.

He was out cold, but I could see his chest rising and falling, so at the very least he was alive. Of all the stupid things to do on your wedding day.

My scream must have been loud enough to be heard over the fans in the room where Scarlett and the other bridesmaids were getting ready, because I heard the window open and looked up to see Scarlett’s curler-clad head pop out. Luckily, it was just as Daniel’s eyes opened.

“Daniel!” she screamed when she saw him on the ground. “What

happened?”

“He was trying to climb up the trellis and fell off,” I said.

“I’m okay,” said Daniel. Still kneeling by him, I put a hand on his chest to keep him from sitting up.

“You might have broken something,” I said.

“Why was he trying to climb up the trellis?” Scarlett yelled down.

“To see you,” I said. “He has something to give you.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s so romantic,” she said. Of course that’s where her mind would go. Not to the fact that her almost husband was on the ground with a possible head injury or broken bone, or both.

“You stay here,” I said, getting up on my feet. Then to Scarlett I said, “I think we need to call an ambulance.” At this point, some of the staff and a few of the groomsmen had come out to see what was going on.

“No,” Daniel protested, sitting up on his own.

“You need to at least be looked at,” I said, staring down at him.

“It’s fine, I can get up.” He rolled over to his side and attempted to rise, but clearly he was dizzy from the fall, and to try to balance himself, he grabbed on to whatever was near, and that happened to be my robe.

With one quick yank on the end, the silky belt easily untied, and the whole thing came off me like a magician pulling the tablecloth out from under an entire setting, and there I stood in nothing but Spanx.

I screamed, Scarlett screamed, and Daniel—still clutching my robe in his hand—fell back again, unable to stand. I quickly grabbed my robe out of his clutches and, using it to cover me like a flimsy shield, ran back toward the building where I should have stayed with Scarlett and the other bridesmaids.

In the end, Daniel was taken to a local urgent care, was told he had a concussion but was deemed okay to walk down the aisle and was only thirty minutes late for his own wedding.

Every time we get together the story comes up, but it always seems to be half-naked me that’s the highlight, and not idiot Daniel who tried to climb a trellis.

Nine

Mila

“THIS WAS NOT PART OF the plan,” I say to Nadia as I give her a thumbs-up in the dimly lit bathroom that she’s dragged me into.

We’re in an upscale steakhouse in LoDo, where I was able to reserve a private dining room for the eight friends of Nadia and seven friends of Shane for this combined bachelor and bachelorette party. And okay, it was actually Britain who made the reservation.

The night has gone perfectly well so far. We’ve dined on steaks and lobster, drunk fancy wine, and laughed and chatted. It’s been a dressy affair, per Nadia’s request, as well as an expensive one, per Shane’s. He didn’t say “expensive,” exactly, but he requested the restaurant, and it’s definitely a pricey one. But he’s footing the bill, so he gets to choose.

The plan was to eat dinner, drink wine, have dessert, roast the bride and groom (we all got some good verbal jabs in there), and then part ways afterward. This would get us home at a decent hour because even though it’s Saturday night, I’ve got tons to do tomorrow with dinner at Everett’s and packing for next week because I leave for Oahu to test GlobeTrotter with Grayson on Tuesday. Oh, and I also get to unwillingly be in a wedding and probably (read: most likely) mess it up. I’ve been trying not to think about that. Some people might call that denial, but I like to think of it as compartmentalization. It hasn’t been hard because I’ve been so busy doing wedding stuff and work stuff that the whole traveling to a tropical island with my hot boss and attending Nadia’s wedding part hasn’t even felt real.

Also not real: the way Grayson is looking tonight. When he showed up in that slim charcoal-gray suit with a light-pink button-up underneath, I nearly choked on my drink. Actually, that’s exactly what I did—there was no *almost* about it. I took a sip of water just as he walked in, my ovaries did a little jumping thing, and the liquid went down the wrong tube, causing me to

cough until my eyes watered. What a great way to kick off the night. I do love a man in pink, and oh my, can he pull it off. My life would be so much easier if Grayson looked more like a goblin.

I wasn't the only one to notice his beauty. Nadia's sisters went slack jawed when they saw him, and Brittany and Fiona have both made it very obvious they are interested, which I knew would happen and is why I had preplanned the seating for the dinner with Grayson on one end and Brittany and Fiona on the opposite. And yes, it was petty and childish, and no, I don't regret it.

But as it turns out, this perfectly planned elegant dinner wasn't enough for Nadia. She'd expected dancing. It should be noted that she never mentioned this when I first told her what we'd be doing. She loved the restaurant idea and thanked me and Britain for planning it. She didn't believe for a second that I did it on my own. But apparently, she's now decided that all along she wanted to go dancing, and because—as has already been stated—Shane will do anything to please her, he made a call, and now a big stretch limo is on its way to come pick us up at the restaurant and take us over to some nightclub on the other side of town.

“You're being ridiculous, Mila Banks,” she says, giving me a thumbs-up in return before turning toward the ornate mirror to touch up her lipstick. “This is my last weekend as a single woman. Dancing the night away is exactly how I want to spend it.”

“The night away?” I can't help the horror in my tone. I wouldn't be dancing at all if I could help it.

She waves the words away with a swipe of her hand. “I swear, for twenty-eight, you are more like fifty-eight.” She stands back from the mirror and adjusts the straps of her black wrap dress with the high slit.

“I see nothing wrong with this,” I tell her. If being in bed before midnight and falling asleep to *The Great British Bake Off* is wrong, then I don't want to be right.

Her phone lights up, brightening the room. “The limo's here,” she says, seeing a text from Shane, a big grin on her face. “Come on, Mila—let's go have some more fun.”



I AM NOT HAVING FUN.

I tried, honestly. I decided in the super fancy limo on the way here that I was going to make the most of it. This is my best friend's wedding, after all, and I haven't been to a nightclub in a while. It's possible this could be the last one I ever go to ... if the wish I made on a star through the glass sunroof of our transportation comes true. At least I think it was a star. It could have been a plane. That would be my luck.

So, when we walked into the swanky club with the shiny tile floors and the plush velvet seating and were escorted over to a VIP section that's been roped off (still not sure how Shane scored that), I felt like I should do my best to have fun because I had deemed it the last night Mila would ever be in a nightclub. Cue happy face.

Except that I forgot some important things. First of all, I don't dance. My dancing career began and ended at Everett's wedding. It's been a rare occasion that I've been on a dance floor since then, and usually it's because I'm at a wedding and there's some kind of bridal party dance I'm obliged to be a part of. And secondly, the last time I was in a club was with Monty and my old gang from LogicSphere in some flashy place in Seattle. While that wasn't a bad night per se, the memory of who I was with taints it all, which in turn gives me a bad taste in general for nightclubs.

So here I sit, in the VIP area, in my dusty-blue A-line dress with the spaghetti straps and the fuller skirt, a glass of something red in my hand as I watch everyone on the dance floor. Everyone, including Grayson. Brittany was the one to coax him out there. My plan to keep her and Fiona from my boss was moot once we got here. Now they're both dancing and smiling with him, and I'm sitting here like a loser. By choice. I'm a loser by choice.

I guess as far as nights go, sitting here watching the BILK's excellent dance moves (because of course he can dance) isn't the worst thing I could be doing tonight. And I suppose that for a nightclub, this one is pretty cool, with a matrix of LED lights on the dance floor and a DJ that's not playing house music, but rather songs we all know.

The song ends just as another one starts playing, and I see Grayson making his way through the crowded dance floor and toward the VIP area. He checked his jacket at the door on the way in and is now walking toward me with the sleeves of his light-pink shirt rolled up. I'm not sure when the man finds time to work out because it seems to me, and everyone else in the office, that he's always working, but it's clear he does some kind of exercise

by the definition in his forearms alone. And also by the way his biceps push up against his sleeves. My gosh, the man is beautiful. I know I keep saying this, but trust me, most breathing humans would agree.

“Hello,” he says as he enters the roped-off area.

“Hey there,” I say, giving him a small tip of my drink as an added greeting. I think I was going for cool, but when the wine nearly sloshed over the side, I remembered that being cool is not really my forte.

He takes a seat next to me on the high-backed purple velvet tufted love seat. The couch is smaller than expected and he’s so close we’re touching from hip to knee. I can feel his body heat from all the dancing and smell his cologne.

It should be noted that there are two other love seats and a couple of armchairs in the space, but he chose to sit next to me. Which is ... nothing. It’s *nothing*. I will make nothing of it because I have Dave. And okay, he’s fake, but we’re in a relationship. A fake one.

“How come you’re not out there?” he asks, leaning toward me so now our arms are touching, and I can feel his breath on my neck as the heavy bass of a song I don’t recognize gets louder.

“Dancing and I aren’t really friends,” I tell him, leaning my head toward him so he can hear me.

“Really?” he asks, pulling his chin inward. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for that.”

“Oh,” I say, eyebrows raised, turning my head so we’re looking at each other, our faces mere inches apart. “Do I give off dancer vibes?”

“Absolutely,” he says, the corner of his lip quirked upward.

“Did you miss me tripping into the Tuesday meeting? Because that was a dead giveaway.”

I blame the stupid tan leather strappy sandals with the stiletto heels I’d thought looked cute with the white ankle pants I was wearing. I mean, it did look cute, but what wasn’t cute was me tripping as I walked into the leadership team meeting that morning and barely catching myself on the conference room table, stealthily preventing myself from falling on the floor. Sir Jason was there to witness it and told me that “it’s best to put one foot in front of the other when walking.” He is, and always has been, a tool. I told him thank you once I’d righted myself, and then gave him a thumbs-up.

It was unfortunately not one of those things that you move on from and get over. I replayed it in my head over and over the rest of the day and still

can't seem to let it go.

If that isn't enough to convince him, to add further proof, I could also bring up the chair I fell out of that fateful night at the bar where Nadia and Shane first met, but I'd rather not.

Grayson chuckles next to me. I can barely hear him over the loud music, but I can see the smile on his face and feel the shoulder that's touching mine as it shakes slightly.

"So, no dancing at all?" he asks.

"Nope." I shake my head slowly back and forth.

"I'm not really much of a dancer either."

"You looked pretty good to me," I say, the words popping out of my mouth without thinking. I turn my head away from him so he can't see the *what the hell* face I'm making at myself. *You looked pretty good to me?* Wow. I've basically just told him I've been stalking him with my eyeballs.

"Well, thanks," he says, taking it in stride. "So why don't you like to dance?"

I take a breath. I'm not actually going to tell him, but I need a second to think of a good reason. "Years ago, my brother asked me to do a dance at his wedding as a surprise for his bride."

Okay, so I guess I *am* going to tell him. Well played, Mila.

"Yeah?"

"And let's just say it didn't go well."

"What happened?"

"I went for a kick, caught the hem of my long dress with my heel, lost my balance, and grabbed on to the nearest thing I could, which happened to be a man standing next to the bride—my new sister-in-law—causing him to dump an entire glass of red wine on her white wedding dress."

Grayson eyes the glass of red wine in my hand and purposefully leans away from me. This couch is small, though, so he can only lean so far.

"You should honestly be worried," I say, my voice a little louder so he can hear me.

He leans back toward me with a smile on his face.

"And that's what's kept you from dancing ever since?" he asks, his head near mine again so we can hear each other over the music.

"Well, that, and I'm honestly not any good at it," I tell him.

"I don't believe you."

"Well, you should."

“Doesn’t Dave take you dancing?” he asks, searching my face with his eyes, like he’s looking for some kind of answer in my expression.

“No.” I shake my head. “Dave and I have never been dancing.” And I can say this with full honesty.

Grayson’s mouth opens like he’s going to say something else, but the DJ interrupts him.

“How’s everybody doing tonight?” the DJ asks over the speaker, and the crowd on the dance floor screams. I look toward the sound and catch sight of Nadia with her head thrown back as she joins in, a smiling Shane standing close by.

“I said how’s everybody doing tonight?” the DJ asks again, his voice booming through the sound system, and the crowd screams even louder. “That’s what I like to hear. We’re going to do something a little different tonight at Elevate,” he says. “I heard we’ve got a celebration going on tonight. Someone told me that Nadia and Shane are getting married next week.”

Now Nadia is jumping up and down, and the rest of the bachelor/bachelorette party have thrown their hands up in the air.

“And so, to celebrate them, we’re going to slow it down and play a little love song,” the DJ says, his voice going extra low when he says the last part. The crowd whoops and hollers. “This one’s for you, Nadia and Shane.”

The acoustic guitar intro to the song “Fall Into Me” by Forest Blakk begins to play, and I’d bet everything I own that Shane was the *someone* who asked—okay, bribed—the DJ to play the song, because it’s the one he and Nadia plan to dance to at their wedding. I know because Nadia made me listen to it twice last week. It’s a catchy song about love at first sight, which wasn’t exactly how her first meeting went with Shane, but it’s also a much better story to tell the grandkids.

I watch as Nadia puts her arms around Shane’s neck, and he pulls her toward him. They’re looking at each other with so much love, it practically oozes from them. Other couples join in, wrapping their arms around one another as they sway together to the slow, rhythmic song.

I feel Grayson lean in toward me so his lips are near my ear. “Do you at least slow dance?” he asks, his warm breath sending little pinpricks of electricity down my spine.

“I ... I haven’t in a long time,” I tell him. I actually can’t remember the last time I slow danced. It surely wasn’t at the last wedding I attended. We

never got to that part.

“How about giving it a try right now?” he says.

I look over at him. “With you?”

“Well, yeah. Or I could find you someone else out there.” He gives a chin lift toward the dance floor.

“No, that’s okay.”

“No, you won’t dance with someone else, or you won’t dance at all?”

I take a breath. I really, really want to dance with Grayson. But I shouldn’t, should I? He’s my boss. And also ... my boss. Yes, I know that’s the same excuse, but it’s a very important one that I need to keep reminding myself of. I am attracted to bosses. It’s a thing I do. And also, I’ve dated a boss, and it didn’t go well. So, the fact that he’s my boss is doubly important here. Trust me on this.

He stands up and holds out his hand. “What do you say?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek for just a second before setting my wineglass down on a little side table next to the couch, standing up, and putting my hand in his. Clearly, I’ve decided to go against my better judgment, which has become my mission statement as of late. Mila Banks: she’s got a remarkable knack for zigging when logic says zag.

My hand feels dainty in his as he wraps his fingers around my palm, and I reciprocate. I’ve never held hands with Grayson like this. I know because I’ve never felt this bolt of electricity move up my arm at the firmness of his grasp. Not overly tight, but just enough to make me feel safe and taken care of. I knew I was attracted to the man, because I’m a breathing human being and also because he’s my boss and that’s what I do. But this feels like a whole other level of magnetism.

He guides me over to the dance floor, and for a moment, I wonder what to do with my hands. Do I wrap them around his neck, like Nadia did with Shane? Stare into his eyes? That feels a little too intimate.

So, when Grayson takes my hand that he’s holding and sets it on his shoulder and then sets his hand lightly on my waist, I let him. He then grabs my other hand and holds it up with his. We’re in a more formal dance pose, like we’re getting ready to do a waltz or a rumba. But he slowly rocks back and forth on his feet and I follow along.

He gives me a soft smile, and I’m quick to give him one back, realizing I’ve had a very serious look on my face since we got here. Because it feels serious. There’s a tension between us that feels like it’s growing tauter by the

second, and at any moment it could break and then ... Well, I don't know what happens after that. Maybe spontaneous combustion? It seems like a possibility; the feeling is almost too strong.

The hand that was at my waist moves to my back, and he pulls me closer so we're touching torso to torso now, and he leans his head in so we're now dancing cheek to cheek.

"You can totally dance," he says into my ear.

"That's because I haven't stepped on your feet yet," I tell him, my voice coming out breathy.

I can hear the chuckle in my ear and feel his body move with the gesture.

This is so ... nice. No, *nice* isn't the word. Good. This is good. It feels like the right place to be, dancing with Grayson. And despite all the thoughts running through my head right now, all the back and forth fighting I'm doing in my brain about how he's my boss, and I shouldn't be doing this, and how it's a recipe for disaster, and how I know that firsthand, I can't seem to bring myself to care. Instead, I lean into it—I lean into *him*, and my body sighs with pleasure as he reciprocates.

One thing's for sure: I don't want this to end.

Ten

Grayson

“I WARNED YOU,” MILA SAYS into my ear as we’re dancing cheek to cheek, her warm body pressed up against mine.

“Couldn’t even feel it,” I lie. As far as stepping on toes goes, I could definitely feel it. Not like it hurt, though. I’d let her step on my toes all night if it meant we could stay like this. My hand is on her lower back, her soft cheek on mine. I hadn’t planned to dance this close to her. It just happened.

“Liar,” she says, and I chuckle.

It feels like we’re in a bubble, just she and I. Right now, I’m not the boss and she doesn’t work for me. We’re just two people, dancing together.

This isn’t how I expected this night to go. I expected to bail out early, telling Nadia and Shane I had too much work to do. I *do* have too much to do, but then when Nadia announced that we were going to a club, a picture entered my brain of Mila and me on the dance floor. Not dancing like this, because I can’t think of a time I’ve ever slow danced at a nightclub—not that I’ve spent much time in places like these—but just dancing. Spending time with her.

So, I thought, I’m already out, what’s a little more time? Plus, I hadn’t even gotten a chance to talk to Mila at dinner with how we were seated. And I wanted to. That was the part I was looking forward to the most tonight. But there wasn’t much of a chance with me at the end of the table and her toward the middle. That didn’t stop me from admiring her glossy brown hair, curled and hanging around her shoulders. Or the blue dress she’s wearing and how it hugs her in all the right spots.

Against my better judgment, I went to the club, hoping to get some time with Mila. Even knowing that I’ll get plenty this next week in Hawaii. But that’s supposed to be work, not dancing. Then it turns out she doesn’t dance. That was an unfortunate revelation. But it didn’t matter. I got my chance

when I saw her sitting by herself on that purple couch and quickly made my excuses to leave Nadia and her crew on the dance floor, and now I've got the woman who takes up too much of my brain space in my arms. I'd say this night has gone way better than I could have hoped.

I'll have to scramble to finish the work I needed to do tonight, and there's also laundry to do for next week. It'll all probably catch up to me later, but right now I couldn't care less.

She steps on my foot again. The other one this time.

"Having regrets?" she asks.

"Not yet," I tell her. What I really want to say is "*Never*," but that would make me sound like a lovesick teen and not a man in his mid-thirties who's got so many things hanging over his head. Not that I'm thinking about any of that right now. I've only got Mila on my mind.

"I've probably scuffed up your shoes. I'll buy you new ones," she says into my ear. "Unless they're, like, stupid expensive."

I laugh. "Don't even worry about it." I won't tell her that they were cheap and from T.J. Maxx, as is most of my wardrobe. The suit pants and jacket I'm wearing tonight were a more extravagant purchase that I bought last year when I needed something smart to wear to a meeting with people I needed to impress. It's the only nice one I've got. Well, except for the one I let Shane buy me.

"This is weird," she says.

"Dancing with me?"

"No," she says. But then sighs. "Well, yes. I guess that's weird. But it should probably feel weirder than it does. You know?"

"I do," I say. She has no idea.

"But what I really mean is to be slow dancing at a nightclub."

"That's definitely different. Something I've never done."

"In your many years of nightclub experience?"

"More like very little experience. I'm not really the nightclub type."

"You should be," she says. "You're letting all those dance moves go to waste."

I like that she noticed my dancing. I'm not all that great, but I can do the basics. It's come in handy a time or two. Like right now, for instance.

"I'm not wasting them right now," I say.

"You might change your mind when you see the state of your shoes."

"They're just shoes."

She pulls her cheek away from mine and leans her head back so we're face-to-face, her eyes searching me. I don't loosen my hold on her, even though right now would probably be an appropriate time.

"You don't care about things like that, do you? Material stuff."

I shake my head slowly. "Not at all."

"Why?"

"It's just never been a priority for me. I've got other things to think about."

"Like work?"

I nod once. "I probably shouldn't be here tonight," I hear myself say.

"So why are you?"

"Shane's my closest friend. I've known him since college. He's important to me."

And you, I want to say. I wouldn't be in this nightclub if it weren't for Mila. Best to keep that to myself.

"You're a good friend," she says.

"You are too," I say.

"Nadia and Shane are lucky to have us."

"They really are."

We smile at each other, and then her smile falters a bit as she looks away. I don't know why, but the look has me pulling her in even closer, like I can protect her from whatever thoughts she's having right now. Not that I think Mila needs me to protect her. I just want to.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She gives me a thin, sad-looking smile. "Nothing," she says.

"You sure?" I prod.

"I just hope everything goes okay at the wedding," she says, her eyes not meeting mine.

I furrow my brow, worried that maybe she knows something I don't.

"Why wouldn't it?"

"It's a wedding. I've been in enough to know that things never go as planned."

"How many have you been in?"

"Too many," she says.

I smile because her wit is one of my favorite things about her. But when she doesn't reciprocate, I realize she's being serious.

"Well, if you're anything like you are at work, I'm sure they've all been

incredibly fortunate to have you,” I say.

She closes her eyes and shakes her head. “I highly doubt any of them would say that if you asked them.”

I can tell there’s a story there, but I don’t ask. It doesn’t make sense to me, though. The way Mila thinks, the way she manages GlobeTrotter, I have no doubt she’s been anything but an asset.

I’ve never seen this vulnerable side to her. I know Mila is fully capable of taking care of herself, but I wish there were something I could do to reassure her she’s nothing short of amazing—without sounding like a man obsessed.

“Well, I’m fortunate to have you,” I tell her. I realize I should add a work clause here, that I mean I’m fortunate to have her at AppInnovate, but it’s more than that, so I just leave it.

Her eyes meet mine then and she sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, releasing it before saying, “Thank you.”

“It’s the truth,” I say.

Our gazes are locked now, as we move slowly to the music. It feels like a moment. The kind where I want to kiss her so badly, as if there’s a voice in my head chanting it at me. *Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!* I could easily do it; our faces are only inches apart. I lean in slightly, feeling this intense desire to want to close the distance between us. When she doesn’t pull back, I lean in even more.

“Grayson,” she says, her voice barely audible over the music, as she tilts her head toward mine, our noses nearly touching.

Our breaths mingle and I can feel my heart rate picking up speed as my eyes travel down to her lips, the ones I’ve wanted to kiss since the day I laid eyes on her. But I’ve kept a professional distance because I kept telling myself it was the right thing to do, and maybe it is, but I don’t really care right now. I should, though, because she’s got Dave.

Dave.

Crap.

How did I forget about that? We were literally just talking about him when we were sitting in the VIP section.

I flinch and pull my head back and she does too, shaking her head like she’s been caught in a trance, her face looking as if she’s seen a ghost.

I don’t do this. I don’t go after another man’s woman. There are a lot of men out there who subscribe to that way of thinking, but I’m not one of them. Call me old school or whatever—it’s just not something I’m okay with. Of

course, I'm also not the kind of guy that ditches his responsibilities, which I totally did tonight. Mila messes with my brain in so many ways. How is this next week in Hawaii going to go when I can't keep my mind—or my hands right now—off her?

The song ends and we pull apart completely. I clear my throat and give her a closed-mouth smile that has to be awkward if the one she's giving me is any reflection.

She stands with her hands at her sides. "Thanks, uh ... for the dance," she says. Her eyes move down to my shoes. "They don't look too bad from here."

I look down at them too, for lack of a better place for my gaze to land. I couldn't care less about these shoes. "Look just fine to me." I give her my best reassuring smile.

"I'm gonna go back to my seat," she says with a head bob in the direction of the VIP section as the beginning of a Beyoncé song starts to play through the speakers.

"Sounds good," I say as she walks away. Part of me wants to follow her back there, to sit down on the couch with her and talk more. But I know what I need to do now. I've done enough tonight.

I tap Shane, who's now doing some sexy dancing with Nadia, on the shoulder.

"I'm heading out," I tell him, my mouth close to his ear so he can hear me.

"Why? Looked like you were getting cozy with Mila over there," he says.

I shake my head, wishing he hadn't noticed. "It was just a friendly thing."

"Didn't look friendly," he says.

"I'll see you next week in Hawaii." I give him a quick slap on the back as a goodbye.

Then, with a quick wave to Nadia, I grab the jacket I'd checked at the door when we arrived and pull up my Uber app to get home.

THE WEDDING (

Oliver Cruz Ramirez

&

Harper Elaine Walsh

FIVE YEARS AGO

THIS ONE WAS A DESTINATION wedding in Saint Thomas and probably one of the prettiest venues I've ever seen. With the white sandy beaches, the crystal-clear turquoise water, and the tropical climate, it made the most beautiful wedding backdrop for my friend Harper, who I met in college, and her fiancé, Oliver—who she also met in college.

Harper's parents were wealthy. Not Shane wealthy, but not far off. So, all the stops were pulled out for her nuptials. There was nothing the daughter of James Walsh could not have. The phrase "*Anything for my baby girl*" was thrown around multiple times.

We all went for the week, and both Scarlett (who'd been married the previous year and whose husband's concussion was partly my doing) and I were bridesmaids, so it was fun to be there with her and Daniel. Accommodations were paid for by Harper's mom and dad, and there were activities every day of the week leading up to the wedding. Private beach bonfires, a sunset catamaran cruise (which ended up being more like a booze cruise), a snorkeling adventure, expensive catered dinners, and glamorous spa visits.

It was, for many of us who were shoulders-deep in student loans, the most

extravagant vacation we'd been on in years, and for some of us (ahem, me), the most lavish one ever.

One of the groomsmen was a guy named Lorenzo, who was a cousin of Oliver's and was quite possibly the most beautiful man I'd ever seen at the time. It turned out Lorenzo had a thing for pasty, lanky girls with dark hair and blue eyes, because during the sunset catamaran cruise, we hit it off.

It was ridiculously romantic, something straight out of a fairy tale, honestly. He was handsome, funny, intelligent, witty, and handsome. Yes, I know I said that twice. It bears repeating. Picture a taller, buffer Michael Trevino from *The Vampire Diaries*.

There were long walks on the beach, swimming in the ocean together, staying up late talking, lots and lots (and lots) of kissing. Lorenzo definitely knew how to kiss. He was a dream. That's what it felt like: dreaming. I had visions of continuing this thing when we got back to the States. He lived in Las Vegas, which wasn't that far of a plane ride away from me. He talked like he didn't want it to end either.

Funny thing about dreams: some of them are too good to be true.

The day of the wedding, everything went great. Harper looked amazing, Oliver cried like a big baby as she walked down the aisle, and Lorenzo and I kept giving each other little flirty looks throughout the ceremony.

Afterward we took pictures on the beach, and then the reception began. It was a big affair, tons of food, lots of alcohol, and the centerpiece for the whole thing was a massive wedding cake sitting on a stand that made it nearly as tall as me. Harper's dad made sure we all knew that it was made by some super famous baker he'd flown out here just for the occasion. Because he'd do *anything* for his baby girl.

It should be noted that Harper didn't care about the cake at all and that it was totally her father's thing, which took some of the sting out of what happened later that night.

I was luckily seated next to Lorenzo at dinner, and we dined on lobsters and filet mignon and drank champagne from a fountain while a jazz trio played in the background.

When the dancing started, following Harper's and Oliver's first dance as husband and wife, Lorenzo wanted me to dance with him. But I lured him into a dark corner at the back of the venue to kiss me instead. It was a win-win. I didn't have to dance, and I also got to kiss him.

When a song came on that Lorenzo wanted to dance to, he guided me

toward the floor, where I realized I suddenly needed to use the bathroom. Convenient excuse, but not one I'd be able to use every time. I really needed to think of something better.

It was on my way back to find him that I saw him and one of the other bridesmaids, who was another cousin of the groom, having what looked like a heated argument over off to the side of the big, glorious wedding cake. Not one to interrupt, but also not one to pass up possible juicy gossip, I snuck around to a pillar near them and stood behind it.

"You're a pig, Enzo," the cousin whose name I think was Isabel said. I could see little drops of spit come out of her mouth in the stage lights behind her.

"I'm just having a little fun," he said.

"While your girlfriend is back at home with no idea," Isabel said.

I sucked in a breath. A girlfriend?

"We have an understanding," he said.

"Who? You and Monica? Or you and whatever her name is that you've been toying around with?"

"Mila's her name. And she knows all about Monica. It's just something to pass the time. We're on the same page."

"Actually, I don't know anything about Monica," I said, coming out from behind the pillar, my hands on my hips.

Lorenzo cursed under his breath.

"Enzo," Isabel said, pushing him on the shoulder. "You're really something else."

"I thought I told you," Lorenzo said, giving me a quick lift of his shoulders like it was no big deal.

I felt like the biggest idiot. To think I'd been hoping for some kind of future with this guy. How could I be so stupid?

Shocked and hurt, I turned away from Lorenzo and his cousin, covering my face from the sting of tears that had formed in my eyes, and in my hasty getaway, I walked straight into Harper and Oliver's beautiful cake. Like right smack-dab into it. The cake was on a grand stand, so it didn't fall over right away. When I pulled back, there was a perfectly shaped indentation of my torso and head right in the center of it, the stand wobbling in my wake.

And then it fell over. Cake and icing splattering on anyone within a ten-foot radius. This included the bride and groom.

Someone screamed, but I couldn't see who. Maybe it was Isabel, since

she was the closest. I was covered in frosting and cake, from my head to my toes.

“My cake!” yelled Mr. Walsh, his voice loud enough to be heard over the band playing “Uptown Funk” by Bruno Mars.

Much later, Isabel outed Lorenzo to Harper, telling her what he’d done, so he was given some of the blame for the mishap and it wasn’t solely on me. But I think, to this day, her dad credits me.

Last I heard from Harper, Lorenzo was on divorce number two. I felt quite smug when she told me this, and simultaneously grateful for small favors. Even if those favors came at the cost of Harper’s wedding cake.

Eleven

Mila

HAVE YOU EVER MADE A fool of yourself in front of someone and then had to take a flight to Hawaii with them three days later?

Let me tell you something—I don't recommend it.

I don't know what got into me on Saturday night. I'd love to blame it on alcohol, but I'd only had maybe two drinks. I'd claim temporary insanity, but I was fully in my right mind. Well, sort of.

Grayson and I nearly kissed. I think. I'm pretty sure, actually. And I don't know if he leaned in first or if it was me, but I think it might have been me. He'd made some comment about me being a good friend to Nadia, and then, like in a movie, a quick flashback of all the weddings I'd ruined came into my mind and I kept thinking, *What kind of friend am I to put Nadia in this position? To jinx her wedding? How did I agree to this?*

Then, when I'd told him I was worried, he'd pulled me in toward him, and I don't know ... it felt sort of like I was safe with him. Like he could see me—*really* see me. That's when my brain sort of left the building and my hormones took over, because all I could think about after that was his lips. How soft they looked, how I'd like to run my tongue over the bottom one, and then he leaned toward me like he was thinking the same thing and then I leaned in too. We were so close, I honestly thought it was going to happen before Grayson pulled away. Well, it was more like a jump-scare thing on his part.

Thank goodness he did pull away. This is what I keep trying to tell myself, but really, I feel kind of rejected. Which is dumb because he's my boss, and that whole thing is complicated—something I know firsthand.

The way he left, though—without saying goodbye—that hurt a little.

We definitely shouldn't have kissed. It was for the best. I have a boss thing, and he's my boss. It's best if we keep everything professional between

us. I'm just going to have to keep reminding myself of this. I'll do that while I also try to play it off like it never happened. I've thought about it since Saturday night and decided it's the best way to handle the situation.

My plan, which I thought about all day Sunday (I was even going to ask Everett for advice at dinner but then thought better of it since he never lets me live this stuff down) was to walk into work on Monday, my head held high, looking like the confident woman I am—even though I'll be faking that part—and act like Saturday was never a thing. I'm excellent at compartmentalization, so I will just put that night in a box in my head and set it toward the back to rot with the other boxes I've also been avoiding, like the one filled with everything involving Monty. I never want to open that box again.

But I didn't see Grayson all day. He was in and out of meetings, and so was I, both busy prepping everyone for the rest of the week. I've left Britain in charge, so my people are in good hands. Plus, this is a work trip and I'll be fully accessible, except for maybe during the flight (you can never count on the Wi-Fi working) and the four-hour time difference. And I guess the wedding on Friday. I doubt Nadia would want me working during her big day.

The only communication I had with Grayson yesterday was a quick message from him over Slack about meeting me at the airport this morning.

"Thank you," I say to the Uber driver as he starts to pull my luggage from the trunk of his blue Prius at the departures curb for Denver International Airport.

I help him because I'll be lucky if I'm not over the weight limit for this thing. It's packed to within an inch of its life. The zipper looks like it's barely holding it together. I didn't know what to bring, so I chose to overpack instead. Dozens of pairs of underwear and socks because I kept coming up with scenarios in my head about why I'd need them. Several bathing suits because it's Hawaii. Outfits for each day, pajamas, and my dress for the wedding. Where I really overdid it was the five different pairs of shoes I stuffed in, that I deemed essential.

I realized, as I was sitting on the bag to get it to zip shut, that I'd never make it on one of those survivor-type shows.

"Have a good trip," the Uber driver tells me. He's a nice older man with white hair and a bumper sticker on the back of his car that says, *I go to a great church*. I didn't ask him about the church, but I should have. I could

use some Jesus in my life right now. I need to pray for all the things. That I won't ruin Nadia's wedding. That I'll make it through these next few days with Grayson. That he'll have temporary amnesia and forget what happened on Saturday night. Or that I'll find a time machine and go back to Saturday morning, where I fake sick and don't go to the party at all. Easy stuff like that.

I wait just outside the United counter for Grayson, in a white T-shirt and joggers with my hair thrown up in a bun (I aim for comfort when flying), feeling like a ball of nerves as I wonder how it's going to be with him. Will it be awkward? Well, this is me we're talking about, so it will definitely be awkward. But will he be uncomfortable because of Saturday night?

The flight leaves at 11:09 with a two-hour layover at LAX (the best flight we could find with the short notice and the busy travel season), and then a nearly six-hour flight to Honolulu, getting us there around 5:30 in the evening. That's ten hours of possibly awkward travel time with Grayson. I'd like to amend my prayers to add being miraculously upgraded to first class so I don't have to sit with him.

The good news is I've been so worried about this part of the trip that I haven't had even a moment to worry about how I'm going to ruin Nadia's wedding. I'm telling you, there really is a bright side to everything if you look for it.

I feel my stomach do both a sinking thing and a butterfly thing when I spot him walking toward me with black aviator glasses on his face, rolling a black suitcase behind him. He's not in his normal white button-up shirt, but rather a black T-shirt and jeans.

To be honest, he doesn't look that great. He looks tired and worn out and I'm totally lying, he looks amazing. Why couldn't he resemble a gremlin? It would make this week so much easier.

"Hey there," I say as he approaches. The feeling of his hand on my back as we danced Saturday night flashes through my head, and I stuff the memory into that box I'm keeping in the back of my mind. The one labeled *Denial*.

"Hey," Grayson says, giving me a smile without teeth.

"You ready for this?" I ask, pretending to be the cool woman I'm not. So far, so good. Although we've only said a handful of words.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he says, reaching up to remove his glasses. "Did you check in on our app?"

"I did," I tell him. "No problems. Worked great."

This time, I can see his straight white teeth when he smiles. “Worked great for me too. Shall we?”

Okay, this isn’t too bad so far. I think if we only talk about work and never anything else, we’ll be fine.

We walk to the counter and check our bags. I’m one pound under the limit, so that feels like a win. Grayson did give me a curious look when he put the bag on the scale for me.

“Did you bring books?” he asks.

“What?”

“In your bag,” he says, pointing to the overstuffed monstrosity that was doing a teetering thing on the scale, ready to fall over at any second.

“Oh yeah, books. Can’t leave home without them,” I say, nodding my head in rapid movements.

In truth, I brought seventy-five pairs of underwear. Not really, but there’s way more than necessary packed in there. Honestly, the five pairs of shoes felt like the most gratuitous part. But I couldn’t leave home without them.

I hoist the straps of my carry-on bag—the one with my laptop—onto my shoulder, and we head toward TSA. The line isn’t too long for a busy summer travel week, and I say a prayer of thanks we don’t have a long line to wait in. The less time we have to talk, the better.

Soon we’re through security and taking the escalators down to the train that will take us to our gate in Concourse B.

While we wait for the train, to avoid talking, I take out my phone and respond to a text I got earlier from Nadia, who left yesterday for Hawaii. I never even got to tell her what happened on Saturday night. And now I’m in my denial phase, so maybe I never will.

Nadia: You ready to see the BILK in his swim trunks this week? Do you think he’s a Speedo guy?

Me: Don’t you have other things to be thinking about right now?

The little dots appear as she writes me back.

Nadia: I’m sitting on the beach right now, listening to the waves. So, no.

Me: Must be nice

Nadia: You’ll be doing that soon enough

Me: I’m working, remember? No lazy days on the beach for me.

Nadia: Bummer for you

I send her a thumbs-up emoji and she sends me one back. I'm totally jealous of her sitting on the beach right now. What I wouldn't give to have my toes in the sand and listen to the surf crash against the shore. Maybe I could read one of the books I didn't actually pack.

The train arrives and I follow Grayson onto it and stand near one of the poles so I can hold on when it takes off because this is a standing-only train. I keep my eyes on my phone as we make our way to the concourse, and Grayson's looking at his. This is good; I'll just keep looking at my phone during any downtime, talk only about work when we converse, and things won't be awkward at all.

The only problem is things are already totally weird. It could just be me, but I swear I can feel it from Grayson too. Like he's also avoiding it. Or maybe he wants to bring it up and is just waiting for the right time.

But I don't want to talk about it. I want to pretend like it never happened. If he brings it up, my plan is to either ignore him or put fingers in my ears and yell "*La la la la la.*" Because I am nothing if not mature.

When we arrive at our concourse, I look up from my phone long enough to get off the train and take the two escalators up to the main area.

"I'm just going to grab some water," I say to Grayson when we arrive at the center of the concourse, where all the restaurants and stores full of souvenirs are located. "Do you want anything?"

He's looking at the big screens displaying all the gates and departure times, his brow furrowed as he studies it.

"Wait a second," he says.

"Okay," I say, drawing out the word, unsure why I need to wait around with him.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and looks at it, and then looks at the screen. Then he turns toward me.

"Our flight's delayed," he says.

"What?" I look at the screen, and sure enough, next to our flight, right next to the time, under *Status*, it says *Delayed* in orange lettering.

"I didn't get a message from the app—did you?" he asks.

I grab my phone from the pocket of my joggers and wait for it to open after the facial recognition. I pull up the app and click on the flight, and there's no notification.

“I didn’t get one either,” I tell him.

Grayson curses under his breath. It’s a bit shocking, to be honest. He rarely, if ever, cusses.

It’s shocking, although appropriate. We just found our first bug. And here I was hoping for a no-bug week. Maybe this will be the only one?

“I’ll call Vik,” he says. “I’ll meet you at the gate.”



“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, AS WE begin our descent into Los Angeles, please ensure your seat back and tray tables are in their full upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on items are stowed beneath the seat in front of you or in the overhead compartments. Thank you.”

We are nearly to LAX, after a delay of an hour in the terminal and then sitting on the tarmac for another one. As a result, we missed our connecting flight to Honolulu.

I spent the bulk of the waiting time and the flight using the app to try to get us rebooked on another flight, while Grayson worked with Vik on the bug over the plane’s Wi-Fi.

The good news is, I got us on another flight. The bad news is we’re both in middle seats, nowhere near each other. But that’s also good news because I don’t need five hours and forty-five minutes of awkward discussions with Grayson. I’ve been able to successfully avoid it so far because of issues with the app, and I’ll happily sit between strangers on any flight just so there’s no opportunity.

Can I keep this up forever? Probably not. Will I try anyway? Yes. Yes, I will.

The landing is smooth and soon we’re off the plane and walking toward our connecting flight. We barely have an hour until our next takeoff, so it’s off to the bathroom for me and then to grab a quick bite to bring on flight number two.

Hawaii, here we come.

Twelve

Grayson

THE THICK, WARM, SWEET AIR of Honolulu is a welcome change from the jet fuel smell of the plane. I can feel the muscles in my legs loosening as I walk down the Jetway to the terminal, my computer bag in hand. I did my best not to move around too much in my middle seat, so as not to disturb the sleeping baby in his mom's arms next to me—the same one that cried for the first hour of the flight. Or the older woman who sat on my other side, irritated by the space I was taking up in the middle seat. So I tried to sit without moving around too much, which proved to be quite challenging.

It would have been nice to have a seat with more room up in first class. I found myself wishing the app could take off just for the hope of affording that luxury, as I sat practically crammed in the second-to-last row of the airplane. And Mila was so far ahead of me, I never saw her once during the entire flight.

At least I wasn't sitting next to her. Not that I didn't want to. I'm just not sure how to navigate this whole thing. It's clear she's feeling weird about Saturday night, and I'd hoped to talk to her about it—to apologize—but it seemed like she was doing everything to avoid me, so I felt like I should do the same. Are we going to pretend the whole time that it never happened? I'd at least like to have a heads-up if so. I can't stop thinking about how she felt in my arms and what would have happened had I not snapped out of my stupor.

I find it ridiculous that after all these years, I finally feel a connection—probably the strongest one I've ever had—with a woman who has a boyfriend. It's like a sick cosmic joke.

All the awkwardness took a back seat once we found our first bug almost immediately. My sole focus shifted to that. As far as bugs go, it was a big one. It meant there was a connectivity issue between the application and the

airline's database. Vik was able to fix it, and both Mila and I began to receive regular messages about our flight from LAX to Honolulu. Luckily, that plane was on time.

A sweet floral scent fills my nose as I exit the Jetway and walk into the terminal with tan carpeting and overhead fluorescent lighting. I look around for Mila and find her off to the side, looking at her phone.

She's so beautiful. Even after a long day of flying. Her bun looks a little messier than it was this morning, and it looks like there's some kind of stain in the middle of her shirt, but she still looks amazing to me.

"Hey there," I say as I approach her.

She looks up from her phone. "Hey."

"How was the flight for you?" I ask, putting a hand in the front pocket of my jeans.

"I fell asleep and woke up with my head on some guy's shoulder, so ... not the worst flight I've been on."

I smile despite the instant jealousy I feel toward the stranger she fell asleep on. I tuck that away because Mila looks more relaxed, and it almost feels like some of the awkwardness between us has dissipated. Or maybe that's me being hopeful. But she does seem more like my Mila right now.

My Mila. If only.

"What about you?" she asks.

"I was next to the crying baby."

"Oh. You had it worse, then."

"Not the worst flight I've been on," I say, echoing her words.

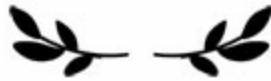
She smiles, and it makes my stomach do this strange bubbling thing.

"Shall we grab our bags and get out of here?" I ask, looking for the baggage claim sign. I find one to the left of us.

"Yes, please. I can't wait to get out of these clothes and into my pj's. I got chocolate on my shirt," she says, pulling out the spot where the stain is so I can see it, even though I'd already noticed.

"I could use a hot shower and a bed right now."

"Me too," she says, and I immediately stop my mind from boarding the train it wants to jump on—Mila in the shower—and instead follow her through the terminal.



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY suitcase isn’t here?” Mila asks, her voice sounding panicked.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am; it didn’t show up on the plane. I’ve tracked it, and I can’t be totally sure, but it looks like it went to Seattle,” the woman at the baggage claim office says.

Mila closes her eyes, bringing her hand to her forehead and rubbing. “This can’t be happening,” she says.

We’d waited until every bag had come off the plane and onto the carousel. When Mila’s didn’t come out, we went to the claim office to see if the bag was there, and I saw the panic on Mila’s face when it wasn’t. And now it would seem it’s in Seattle. An ocean away.

I feel at such a loss right now; I don’t know what to do. Do I put a hand on her back to comfort her? Do I tell her it will be okay? Hell, I’ll put an entire new wardrobe on my credit card if it means erasing that look on her face. I’ve never seen her so anxious.

“We’ll have it delivered to you as soon as it gets here,” says the woman. “I just need some information from you so I can file a missing bag report.”

“Will it get here by Friday?” Mila asks.

The baggage coordinator shakes her head as she looks at her computer screen, clicking on something with the mouse. “I’ll do my best to get it here as fast as I can.”

“My bridesmaid dress is in my suitcase,” Mila says, looking over her shoulder at me. Then she closes her eyes, her face doing a whole drooping thing like she’s just realized something bad. “Oh my gosh, it’s starting already.”

“What’s ... starting already?” I ask her, confused.

“Nothing,” she says, shaking her head.

Mila gives the coordinator her information, and she’s given some kind of bag full of toiletries to use until her suitcase arrives, which she tucks into the large tote she has with her. She thanks the woman for her help, and then with a heavy exhale, she turns toward the door and walks out, and I trail behind.

“I’m so sorry, Mila,” I say as I catch up with her and we walk toward the rental cars.

She gives me a little sad-sounding laugh. “I should have seen that one coming,” she says.

“Are you psychic?” I ask, mostly joking. But this is the second cryptic thing she’s said in the past five minutes.

“Not psychic, just ... a jinx.”

“A jinx? With traveling?”

“No ... It’s a long story,” she says, waving my words away with her hand.

“We can stop somewhere? Maybe get you a few things?”

“Let’s just get to the hotel. I’m exhausted. It’s almost one in the morning, Denver time. We can get some things tomorrow if my bag doesn’t show up.”

“Sounds good,” I tell her.

“We should add that to the app,” she says as we walk.

“Add what?”

“Baggage tracking.”

I nod. “It’s not something we can add just yet, but hopefully in the future,” I say. That kind of information is restricted by the airlines, so we can’t get access to it.

“Wouldn’t have saved me from this,” she says, giving me a small smile.

I shake my head. “Probably not.”



“YOU’VE GOT TO BE KIDDING me,” a pale-faced Mila says to the man behind the hotel check-in desk as the hits just keep on coming.

We got our car, a small SUV, and made the thirty-five-minute drive from the Honolulu airport to our hotel in Ko Olina, on the western side of the island. Mila practically made a beeline to the counter, ready to get checked in and put this day behind us. Her spirits seemed to pick up on the drive, but I could tell the missing suitcase was weighing heavily on her.

Now at nearly eleven at night local time, which is three in the morning for us, we’ve just found out that there’s only one room reserved at the hotel tonight under my name—an issue with the app, the complexity of which I can’t begin to imagine—and the hotel is completely booked, as are most of the surrounding ones. Mila searched for other options on the app and couldn’t find any available rooms near us.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience,” says the front desk agent, an older gentleman with a kind smile and a white-and-pink floral Hawaiian shirt. He looks at his computer. “We have some people checking out tomorrow, so we can get you another room then.”

“What am I supposed to do tonight?” She looks at the agent and then at me.

“You can take the room, Mila,” I tell her.

“What? No.” She shakes her head. “There’s nowhere else to go.”

“I can sleep in the car,” I tell her. “Or on one of these couches,” I say, gesturing over to the large, opulent lobby with the shiny tile flooring and the various couches and chairs filling the area.

“Actually, we don’t allow that,” the desk agent says.

“Then the car,” I say, pulling the strap of my computer bag up on my shoulder, ready to head out there now.

“No.” Mila shakes her head. “That’s ridiculous. We can just share the room.”

I stare at her. Share a room? With Mila?

“We’re both exhausted,” she continues when I don’t respond. “Let’s just get some rest tonight, and we can figure everything else out in the morning.”

I nod once, because sleeping in the car did sound kind of like a nightmare. But I would have done it, no questions asked. I’m not sure sharing a room with Mila is going to be very restful, but I’m too tired to worry about that right now.

I turn to the desk agent, and he hands me the keys and then gives us directions to the room. The one we’ll be sharing for the night.

I know it’s just one night and we’re both adults. I know nothing will happen. Still, if she knew how I felt about her ... maybe she wouldn’t want this. It’s not like I can tell her, though. I can’t just blurt out, “*I’m half in love with you, Mila. Sure you want to do this?*”

I follow Mila to the elevators and she presses the button. Once we’re inside, she lets out another heavy breath.

“I can’t believe this,” she says.

“Me either,” I say.

“I mean, it’s just so”—she pauses for a second—“ridiculous.”

The word comes out as sort of a squeak, and I swing my head toward her, wondering if maybe she’s crying. But she’s not. She’s ... laughing.

“Mila?” I ask, not sure if she’s really laughing or if she’s having some

kind of breakdown, with the way her shoulders are shaking and how she's holding her stomach, barely able to take a breath.

"I'm sorry," she gets out through her laughter, tears now coming out of her squinting eyes.

We reach our floor, and the elevator doors open. Mila is attempting to stifle her laughter, but she can barely keep it together. She makes little snorting noises as we walk down the hall toward my room—the room we have to share tonight.

She appears to have recovered from her fit of laughter as I open the door using the key card. I walk inside and turn on the light in the entryway. Mila follows me in, and the door shuts behind her with an audible click.

We move farther into the room, and Mila starts laughing again.

"One bed?" she manages to say through near hysteria. She drops the bag she's been carrying around all day onto the ground.

"I'll sleep on the floor," I say, finding the light switch for the room and turning it on.

"One bed," she repeats like she didn't hear me, falling onto her side on the king-size bed, laughing even harder than she was before. "I'm sorry," she says, wiping the tears from beneath her eyes as she tries to compose herself. "I'm so tired, and this day has been so stupid." Her words come out choppy and breathy.

"It really has been stupid," I say, and start to chuckle myself.

"No," she says, suddenly sitting up. "Don't start laughing. I won't be able to stop."

But it's too late. I'm laughing now too, and she starts up again, and pretty soon we're both on the bed, laughing so hard it hurts.

When the laughter finally subsides to just a snort (me) or a hiccup (her), we lie on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. A fan with tropical leaf-shaped blades spins slowly above us.

"I haven't laughed that hard in years," I tell her. Our heads are close together, our bodies angled away from each other.

"Really? Laughter is my favorite medicine," she says.

"It definitely helps." I'm not just saying that. I feel a lightness I haven't felt in years. Probably since I started AppInnovate, feeling its weight on my shoulders ever since. Even knowing that tomorrow we'll have to figure out what went wrong with the reservation for the hotel on the app, I don't seem to care so much at the moment.

“Do you have a T-shirt I can borrow?” she asks after we’ve lain in silence on the bed for maybe a minute.

“Yeah. Sure,” I say, rising. Mila sits up, folding her legs under her.

“I just don’t want to sleep in this,” she says, looking down at her outfit. “I’ve been in it all day.”

I grab the wooden luggage rack from the closet and set my suitcase on it, opening it up and riffling through, looking for one of the T-shirts I packed. I find a white one and hand it to her.

“Thanks,” she says, looking down at the shirt in her hands. She balls it up and walks over to her bag and grabs the toiletries the airline gave her. “I’ll use the bathroom first, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” I say.

While Mila’s in the bathroom, I quickly change out of my clothes and into some basketball shorts and a T-shirt. I normally sleep without a shirt on, but I don’t think Mila will appreciate coming out of the bathroom to find me half-naked.

I sit on the bed, feeling sort of nervous now that the reality of the situation has started to set in. Me and Mila, sharing a hotel room. It’s too bad there weren’t two beds. I could use a good night’s sleep.

I make a call to the front desk to see if they have a rollaway bed, but they’re all being used. So, I guess it’s the floor for me. I grab some pillows and drop them on the floor and then stare at the bed made up with just a thin white comforter and a sheet and wonder if there’s an extra blanket somewhere that I can use for the floor. Maybe I could call the front desk again and have one sent up.

“Hey,” Mila says as she comes back into the room.

I do a double take when I see her. Her hair is still in a bun but appears to have been redone, and her face looks fresh and clean. However, what’s truly left me speechless is seeing her wearing my shirt. *My* shirt. It’s oversized on her, draping down to her thighs. It’s astonishing how stunning she looks in a plain old T-shirt. Mila truly is so beautiful.

Not only that, but she’s been great tonight with all that’s been thrown at her. Sometimes when you travel with someone, you get to see a new side to them. And I have with Mila. But it’s only made her more attractive in my eyes.

“Bathroom’s all yours,” she says, a soft smile on her face. It’s then that I realize I’ve been staring.

“Thanks,” I say, looking away.

I’m fast in the bathroom, quickly brushing my teeth and splashing some water on my face. I give myself a quiet little pep talk in the mirror. *It’s just one night; you can do this.*

When I come out, she’s standing by the sliding glass door with her back to me, looking out at the night view, which doesn’t look like much from here.

She turns toward me, walks over to the bed, and then to where I’d thrown the pillows.

“What’s this?” she asks, pointing at the beginnings of my makeshift bed.

“I’m sleeping on the floor,” I tell her.

She cocks her head to the side, the bun on top of her head wobbling as she does. “Don’t be ridiculous, Grayson,” she says, picking the pillows up and putting them back on the bed. “We can both sleep in the bed. It’s big enough. And look—” She takes one of the pillows and places it longways in the middle of the bed. “This will be our barrier.”

“It’s fine,” I tell her. “I can sleep on the floor.”

She’s not hearing it, though. She walks around the room turning off the lamps until the only light in the room is coming from the hotel exterior lighting and the moon outside our window.

“Get in the bed, Grayson,” she says as she returns, pulling the comforter and sheets back, and sliding in under them. “I promise I’ll stay on my side.” She snuggles under the covers, pulling them up to her chin.

“Mila, I can—”

“Grayson, just get in,” she says.

I weigh my options. The bed really is large, and Mila is barely taking up any space on her side, and the floor is going to be extremely uncomfortable with the low-pile carpeting.

“Grayson,” she chides.

Finally, I pull back the covers and get in, then raise them up to my chest as I lie on my back.

It’s silent and I think she’s already dozed off, but then I hear her make a sort of laughing snort sound.

“What?” I ask.

“I just can’t believe I’m in Hawaii with no suitcase, sharing a bed with my boss.”

I snicker. “Not exactly how I saw today going.”

“Me neither,” she says, shifting onto her side so she’s facing me. “It’ll be

okay, right?" Her voice sounds quiet and small.

"It will," I say. I don't know if she's talking about her suitcase, or the app, or even just being in this bed together. But whatever it is, I swear I'll move heaven and earth to make sure it all works out. I'd do anything for this woman, if she'd just ask.

She reaches over and pats me twice on the arm. "Good night, Grayson," she says and then rolls onto her other side, her back toward me.

"Good night," I say, my eyes on the ceiling.

I have no idea if it will be a good night, because right now I'm wide awake.

THE WEDDING (

Matthew Nelson Phillips

&

Chloe Grace Mitchell

FOUR YEARS AGO

WHEN MY CLOSEST FRIEND FROM high school, Chloe, asked me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding, I was kind of confused. It had been years since we'd spent time together. We went to separate colleges, and while there were occasional phone calls or texting sessions to catch up, we primarily kept up with each other through social media.

I watched the entire progression of her relationship with Matt (Chloe is a bit of an oversharer), from their first date during her second year of college, every date they went on after that, to their engagement, and pretty much every detail leading up to the wedding. Her updates didn't stop there. Currently, she's expecting their first baby, and anyone following her on Instagram knows every emotion, craving, and doctor's visit she's had. It's a boy, by the way.

At the time, I'd suspected Chloe was doing this to have memories to look back on. Even though it was annoying, I could understand. Not something I'd ever do, but to each their own. It turns out there was a much more sinister motive behind it—especially the part detailing everything about her relationship with Matt—which I discovered during the bachelorette party.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

So, when she'd called me that November to tell me she'd gotten engaged (which I already knew because of the aforementioned social media oversharing) and asked me to be in the wedding the next August as one of her bridesmaids, I was pretty shocked.

"I know we haven't seen each other in a while," she'd said. "But you are still one of my best friends."

"You're one of mine too," I'd told her. This felt kind of weird coming off my tongue. She was definitely my closest friend in high school, but like I said, we hadn't stayed all that close since. Surely there were other closer friends she'd made since then who would be better candidates for her bridal party? I found out later there weren't. In fact, it was only me, her sister, Lilly, and a cousin I'd never met before (who was the maid of honor) standing up there with her. But more on that later.

"It would mean the world to me if you were up there with me," she'd said.

Oh, sweet and foolish Chloe. She had no idea what she was asking. Neither did I at the time, but I really wish I had. For multiple reasons.

I accepted her invite, and because I'd just started working at LogicSphere only a few months prior to her call, I had to manage most things from Seattle. This also meant I couldn't actively participate in all the preparations leading up to the wedding, except for the bachelorette party that took place just a few nights before.

Turns out, it was for the best. Had I known the kind of person Chloe had become since we'd graduated from high school, I probably would have backed out of the wedding. But since I didn't find out until the bachelorette party—which wasn't your typical single ladies' party given her mom, sister, and grandma came along because pretty much everyone else had turned down the invite—I felt sort of stuck.

To make a long story short, I found out at the party, from her sister no less, that Chloe had stolen Matt from her college roommate, Trish. And then posted their entire relationship online to basically throw it in Trish's face.

Chloe, it seemed, had turned into a man-stealing hag.

I can see how someone might read this and think that if Matt was so easy to steal away, then maybe Trish was better off. And I'm sure she was, but that doesn't make it right. You might also be thinking there are two sides to every story, and I would agree. However, Chloe's actions the night of the bachelorette party confirmed she was, in fact, a hag. She acted spoiled and

entitled and was basically a whiny brat the entire night.

I'm not going to go into all the details but trust me on this. Gone was the shy, sweet friend from school. The most damning evidence was the fact that no one wanted to come to Chloe's last party as a single woman. It was only me and her family. Also damning? Not one friend, besides me and my parents, came to the wedding. It was all just family on her side.

Despite all that, the rehearsal the night before proceeded without any issues. Matt seemed kind of dull, and not what I was expecting from the drama that had begun his and Chloe's relationship. Let's just say he didn't seem like a man worth fighting over, and I'll leave it at that.

Except for a couple of temper tantrums from the bride the next morning, Chloe wasn't all that bad. She was also live streaming the entire thing, so maybe that helped since she had to keep up her perfect-life persona for social media.

The wedding was being held in front of the pool her parents had put in the year before. I'll never understand why anyone would want an outdoor pool in Colorado. Unless you pay to heat it, you'll get two to three good months of use. The rest of the time, it will sit with a cover on in your backyard.

This pool was pretty fantastic, to be honest, with water features and a spacious wooden deck framing it. For the wedding, which was in mid-August, chairs had been arranged on the lawn leading up to the wooden deck, and an arch adorned with flowers was positioned by the pool, with bouquets of flowers floating on pieces of Styrofoam in the water. As far as backyard weddings go, this one was lovely.

That was, until the ceremony. We all walked down the aisle—live streamed, of course—and no one tripped or fell. Everything went perfectly up until this point, in fact. Chloe, I'll admit, looked beautiful, and although Matt didn't portray the part of the usual lovestruck groom who's excited to see his bride, he did sort of smile at one point while Chloe was walking down the aisle, so there's that.

The officiant, an older gentleman who was the preacher at their church, started the ceremony, and I stood next to Lilly (the same sister who'd drunkenly spilled all the details at the bachelorette party). It was kind of running long—the preacher was a bit long winded—and I kept having to adjust my stance because just standing in the four-inch heels I was wearing was proving to be quite uncomfortable.

When it came time for the rings, the ring bearer—one of Chloe's cousins

who was around twelve at the time—had been sitting by his parents in the first row and came up to the front to give them the rings he'd been holding and ... I tripped him. Not on purpose, of course, but I had set my foot out in front of me a bit, to give it a rest while I put most of my weight on my back leg. The pointy-toe part of my shoe was out there just enough that it caught his foot just right. Or just wrong, really.

The rings fell out of his hand as he went down, and the preacher moved to save the rings from rolling into the water at the same time Chloe did, and that's how they got entangled and ended up falling backward, right into the pool behind them.

Chloe screamed when she came up for air, and some people got in to help her and the preacher out. She looked like a drowned rat when she finally emerged.

I felt horrible. I'd ruined her wedding. I tried to downplay it, hoping maybe no one would find out it was my toe that tripped the ring bearer, but when the finger-pointing started (as soon as Chloe and the preacher had gotten out of the pool safely), the ring bearer ratted me out almost immediately.

I apologized because it was my pointy toe that started it, but honestly, who gets married on the side of a pool? And really, if anyone is to blame, it was the preacher for dragging on and on to the point where my feet needed a break.

I took the high road and didn't try to turn the blame on anyone else. I just apologized. Which was not really accepted, and if looks could kill, Chloe's diced me up and served me on a platter. She told me I ruined her wedding and then stomped off, the train of her dress leaving a trail of pool water in her wake.

My mom was horrified, and my dad kept sucking his lips into his mouth to keep from laughing. It turns out that they never liked Chloe, even when we were friends in high school, and now I wonder if maybe she was always nasty like this, and I just didn't see it.

In the end, we took a thirty-minute break while Chloe got fixed up, and she walked down the aisle again wearing a plain white cocktail dress that she'd planned to wear later, when leaving the reception. I sat with my parents and the rest of the guests during the ceremony, instead of up there with the bridal party, and she barely spoke to me the rest of the evening.

I had expected her to delete me from her followers on Instagram, but she

never did. I'm guessing she didn't want to ruin her follower numbers, but they skyrocketed after her wedding when someone made a clip of her falling into the pool and it went viral. She's an influencer now. Or at least she thinks she is.

Call it karma, or whatever you will, but I still feel horrible about it. It was after Chloe's wedding that I began to recognize a pattern. But there were still two more weddings for me to ruin before I really believed it.

Thirteen

Mila

THE NEXT MORNING, IT TAKES me a minute to figure out where I am, but when I do, the reality of the night hits me hard.

I'm in Hawaii with no luggage and sharing a bed with the star of 94 percent of my romantic dreams, the person I have a crush on when I most certainly should not. My freaking boss.

Fake Dave couldn't even get me out of this one. Poor Fake Dave. He deserves better.

Honestly, though, of all the people who should *not* be sharing a bed with their boss, it's me. I already have issues there. It wasn't like I had much of a choice, though. I couldn't have let him sleep on the hard floor. That would have been cruel.

Besides, nothing happened. We both stayed on our sides, the pillow barrier still between us. Not that I didn't think about accidentally-on-purpose rolling over to his side of the bed and snuggling up to him. I'm going to add that to my list of daydreams. Just after the fantasy of us really and truly kissing on Saturday night, instead of what actually happened. Grayson is an excellent kisser in my head.

No, brain, don't go there. It's already going to be awkward when he wakes up, because of our current situation. I don't need to add how I've been feeling about the kiss that didn't happen. I was able to let it go yesterday on the flight to Honolulu when I decided I needed to get over myself. It ended up being much easier to do after our arrival and the train wreck that followed.

Yes, I know it could have been worse. Much worse. I'm alive. I have a roof over my head. No harm or injury has befallen me or Grayson. But a girl needs her toiletry bag. It's just the facts. Not to mention that the dress I'm wearing for Nadia's wedding is in my lost suitcase. I can't believe my bad luck has started already. It usually has the decency to wait until the actual

wedding day.

Or maybe someone's looking out for me? Maybe I'm looking at this all wrong. If I don't get the dress in time, I can't be in the bridal party, and Nadia's wedding will be saved. Except I know Nadia, and she'd find me a dress to wear. She doesn't give up that easily.

I can hear Grayson breathing slowly and steadily next to me, and I roll my head to look at him. He's on his side, his face toward me, and he looks like a freaking angel. Why can't he look like an ogre when he sleeps? The man doesn't even drool. At the very least, he could be one of those ugly sleepers, with hair going every which way.

He's so kind, too. He hasn't judged me for being upset about my missing suitcase like Monty most likely would have done. And when he offered to sleep on the floor last night? Come on. What kind of man does that? Grayson, that's who. The man who also looks like a supermodel in his sleep. Why, cruel world? Why? I need to text Nadia and tell her all about this.

I can't, though. She'll have too many questions that will lead to answers that I don't want to give her right now. She'll get every last detail out of me, I have no doubt. But for now, I'll just keep it to myself. I'm not ready to tell her about my lost luggage, the single reservation with only one bed, how Grayson's T-shirt feels soft against my skin. How I pretended to sleep until he fell asleep—which took way too long—so I could sneakily take off my bra.

"Are you watching me sleep?" Grayson says, his eyes still closed, his face toward me.

"No," I say, quickly turning my face away from him.

"I never pegged you for a stalker," he says, his voice groggy.

"I'm not ... I ... shut up," I say. "You were snoring. I was trying to talk myself out of smothering you with a pillow."

"Lies," he says, chuckling low and throaty, and it's quite possibly the hottest sound I've ever heard.

"It's the truth," I tell him. It's not the truth and we both know it. The truth is I really was watching him sleep. I should start a list of all the embarrassing things I've done on this trip. The first one would be getting chocolate on my shirt during the flight here, the second would be falling asleep on a stranger, the third would be having to share a bed with my boss, and now ... acting like a creeper.

"What time is it?" Grayson asks. Rolling to his back, he swipes a hand

down his face.

“I think it’s almost eight,” I say. I’d checked the clock on the bedside table when I first woke up and it was seven forty-five. Which felt way too early to be awake after going to bed so late. But then I realized with the time change, I actually was in bed before midnight here.

Grayson sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed. “I better hop in the shower,” he says. “Then I’ll call Vik to let him know about the hotel mix-up with the app.”

“What will you tell him if he asks how we managed it?” I asked, a slight bit of panic racing through my body. It’s one thing that I shared a bed with my boss in a totally platonic way; it’s another to have the entire company I work for knowing about it. Not that Vik is a gossip. But if Jason finds out, everyone will know within the hour.

“I won’t give him details. He can just assume we found another room.” He stands up from the bed and walks over to his suitcase and riffles around in it. Must be nice to have clean clothes to wear today.

“Oh, right. Good plan,” I tell him.

“We’ve got a snorkel tour that I booked through the app in a couple of hours. Then a luau tonight,” he says, standing just outside the entrance to the bathroom, fresh clothes in hand.

“Yes, I saw that on the itinerary,” I say. One of the beauties of the app is you can share itineraries with other people, and they can even be interactive for a group trip. The itinerary Grayson made for us is called *Mila and Grayson Hawaii Test*. I will not admit how much time I spent thinking about how good our names sound together after seeing it.

“I’m going to call and see where my luggage is,” I say, still tucked under the covers.

“Sounds good.” He goes into the bathroom and shuts the door.

Okay, so things aren’t so awkward this morning. Only slightly awkward. We’ll see how the day goes.



“CAN I HELP YOU?” A woman in a gray pantsuit with a plum-colored undershirt approaches me at the high-end-looking store they have down in the lobby of the hotel.

I know what she's thinking: that I've gotten lost and ended up in the wrong place, looking like the hot mess I am in Grayson's oversized T-shirt and my dirty joggers, my hair falling out of its bun.

I panicked when, after being on hold with the airline for twenty minutes, I was told my suitcase looked to be en route, but they couldn't guarantee anything and that it likely wouldn't arrive today. So, after eating the breakfast we ordered from room service, I shoved a credit card and an ID in the pocket of yesterday's joggers and came downstairs in search of a few things. Like a bathing suit, for one. And maybe a dress for tonight. Luckily, I brought a bit of makeup in the tote I carried on the plane. So at least I don't have to go searching for that.

"I'm looking for a bathing suit," I tell the woman.

To her credit, she smiles politely and then leads grubby me over to the corner of the shop where there's a rack of bikinis and one-piece suits. I don't search too hard—I just grab a simple black one-piece in my size.

"And a sundress maybe?" I ask.

"Of course," she says, guiding me over to the other side of the store where there are various kinds of women's attire. Shorts, shirts, and dresses. I find a fuchsia one with straps that tie on the shoulders that could also double as a bathing suit cover-up, which feels like a two-for-one kind of deal.

I take it all to the counter, not bothering to try it on, along with a little travel-size bottle of perfume that smells like plumeria, and the woman rings me up. I tamp down the yelp that almost comes out of my mouth when I see the price. Over \$200 for those three items. The plain black bathing suit being the most expensive thing. It better make me look like a goddess for that price.

Turns out, it's a bit of a miracle worker. The suit gives me a clear waist and makes my boobs look perky and ten years younger. But what I wasn't expecting was the back. It's basically a thong that goes right up my butt, leaving little to the imagination back there. Fantastic. Another thing to add to my list of embarrassments. At this rate, I'll have an entire book when I get back, especially since we haven't even done the whole wedding thing.

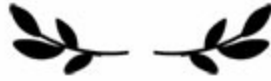
Oh gosh, sometimes I forget that's why we're even here. It seems far off even though it's only two days away. Or maybe that's how I want it to feel. Far, far away.

"You ready?" Grayson asks, after tapping on the bathroom door a couple of times.

"Yes," I say, throwing the pink dress over my butt-displaying bathing

suit. There's no time to take it back now. I've taken off the tags and we need to leave for the snorkeling tour.

I'll just have to make it work.



“THIS ISLAND IS SO BEAUTIFUL,” I say to Grayson as we sip on sodas while sailing on a catamaran named *Silver Streak* that's taking us down the southeast side of Oahu toward Turtle Canyon, a spot just off Waikiki Beach. We're all sunscreened up and ready to snorkel.

The sun is out, with just a sprinkling of clouds in the distance against the clear blue sky. The water is a beautiful cerulean blue, and the island of Oahu serves as the backdrop as we make our way toward the most touristy part of the island.

Both of us have been snorkeling before, but for Grayson, it was years ago on a trip with some friends while he was in college, and for me, the last time was with jerkwad Lorenzo. I'm happy to be replacing that memory with this one.

“It is,” Grayson agrees. We're sitting on a bench on the port-side deck, taking in the view, the wind keeping us cooler in the humid air.

“It seems so surreal,” I say. I've been to some beautiful places, and Hawaii so far has been impressive.

“I'd love to come back here someday, maybe on a real vacation.” He turns his head toward me and gives me a warm smile, making my stomach do a little flipping thing.

“When was the last vacation you took?” I ask.

He looks to the side as if he has to think about it. “Besides ski weekends, I honestly can't remember. It's been too long.”

I knew Grayson worked a lot, but to not be able to take a vacation seems like too much. And I'm no doctor, but I'd think that's probably unhealthy.

“We need to remedy that,” I say. *We?* Really, Mila? Why don't you just throw yourself at the guy?

“Maybe after *GlobeTrotter* is out, we can do something to celebrate,” he says.

Okay, he used *we* too. But I'm assuming he means *we*, as in the whole team.

“How about a leadership team trip to Hawaii?” I reply.

He chuckles with that low, rumbling voice of his. “That might be a little out of our budget.”

“Okay, Vegas,” I say.

He rocks his head from side to side. “Maybe.”

Grayson is looking extra handsome today, and more relaxed than I’ve seen him in a while, wearing a white T-shirt and navy-blue swim trunks. Maybe it’s because Vik and the team are working on the hotel issue on the app, so there’s not much else we can do until we find another problem, which hopefully won’t happen. The hotel one is frustrating because it worked for Grayson, but it didn’t for me, which means it’s not an easy bug to figure out.

“I don’t know,” Grayson says. “This is feeling like a vacation right now.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t really feel like work, does it?” I echo.

What does sort of feel like a job right now is trying to work through my discomfort with this swimsuit that’s currently embedded in my butt. There’s a reason I pick full-coverage underwear. It’s because I could never get used to the feeling of thongs. And I’ve tried many times. It just never worked for me.

I came up with a plan to keep my rear covered by leaving on my dress/cover-up while we snorkel, but then I realized I need to wear it tonight to the luau, so plan B is to always keep my front toward Grayson and never let him see me from the back. I should totally be able to do that, right?

It should be noted that I’m aware many women confidently wear suits like this, and they rock them. However, those women likely aren’t on a business trip with their boss, and I don’t quite feel at ease showcasing my assets (pun intended) to Grayson. I intentionally packed tankinis and one-pieces with more coverage for this trip. Unfortunately, since they haven’t made it here, this is my only option.

It takes about fifteen minutes for the boat to arrive near Turtle Canyon, and once we get there, the anchor is deployed. We were given our snorkel gear not long after leaving harbor, and I plan on waiting until the very last minute to put mine on, because putting it on means having to take my cover-up off and unleash my backside.

Once the boat is settled into the spot it will stay in while we snorkel, Grayson puts his gear on. He takes off his T-shirt, and I can now confirm to Nadia that the BILK has a six-pack. And, wow ... it’s a nice one. Not that the absence of one would deter me from my ever-growing crush on this man. I

don't even know if it's the boss thing anymore. Since we've been here, I've seen him as less of a boss and more of a friend. And even with that distinction, I still feel things for him.

I tell Grayson I'll meet him at the back of the boat, where people are either jumping off the platform or using ladders to enter the water. I hastily remove my dress and set it with Grayson's clothes and the towels we brought, don my life jacket, and put my mask and snorkel on, keeping it up on my forehead. I hold my flippers in my hands since we were repeatedly advised against walking around the boat in them due to the risk of tripping. Yet, there are plenty of people walking around this boat with their flippers on. And yes ... I've already seen two people trip.

I work my way down to the back of the boat where Grayson is waiting for me.

"You ready?" he asks when he sees me.

"Yep," I say, a smile on my face, standing squarely in front of him. I couldn't care less about the people behind me and the view they're getting, and that's because I don't work with any of them and will never see them again.

"You can go first," he says, gesturing with his hand toward the back of the boat, always the gentleman.

"That's okay," I say a little too quickly. "You go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

Grayson furrows his brow at me but heads over to the platform and puts on his flippers before jumping in. I'm going to have to do the same, since turning around to go down the ladder and thereby showing everyone my backside is not in my best interest right now.

I walk over to the platform and put on my flippers, and then it's into the water I go. It's slightly chilly at first, but it takes hardly any time for my body to adjust.

Grayson is there waiting for me, his mask over his eyes and his snorkel hanging by his mouth.

"I saw a turtle already," he says to me, a big smile on his face.

"Really?" I say, putting on my mask.

"I'll show you."

He puts the mouthpiece of the snorkel in his mouth, and I follow suit. We dip our heads under the water and swim side by side.

We immediately see a bunch of tropical fish. A whole school of gray ones

are basically swimming around us. There are also some smaller colorful ones—an orange fish with white stripes, and a yellow-and-black striped one.

Grayson points toward something and then grabs my hand and we swim a few feet farther until right below us is a big, beautiful turtle. We watch as it sits on the bottom and little cleaner fish do their job eating up parasites, dead skin, and debris from its shell.

He points over to something else, possibly another turtle, and grabs my hand as we swim over to it. I'm not sure we need to keep holding on to each other as we swim, but I'm not going to put a stop to it.

The hour in the water goes by so fast. We spend it finding more turtles and seeing other kinds of sea life. All in all, it's probably the best experience I've had snorkeling. And it's not just because of all the sea creatures, but also the company. Getting to spend time with Grayson like this, to just have fun with him, might be my favorite part of it all.

When the tour company we're with calls us back to the boat, Grayson and I are the last ones to make it to the ladders. I grab onto it first and start to lift myself up before remembering my booty situation, and quickly fall back into the water.

"What's wrong?" Grayson asks, his mask still on his face.

"You go first," I tell him.

"What? Why?"

"I just like to go up last," I say.

He raises his mask up to his forehead. "Mila, what's going on?"

I let out a breath. "Don't make me tell you, Grayson," I practically whine.

"I just want to understand." His face is so full of concern. I don't want to tell him, but I can't think of any other excuses.

"Oh, fine," I grumble. "It's the bathing suit I bought at the hotel."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Oh gosh." I look up at the sky, wishing for a UFO to beam me up right here so I don't have to tell him. "Okay, fine. It's got a thong back."

His brow moves downward, bringing the goggles with it. I wait for him to figure out what I'm saying.

"Oh," he finally says. "Got it."

"And you're my boss and I'd rather you not see my butt." I might as well lay out all the cards right here since it looks like no aliens are going to save me from this.

"Right," he says, and then rolls his lips between his teeth.

“Don’t you dare laugh,” I say, but I’m fighting it off as well, twisting my mouth around, trying to keep my lips from pulling upward.

Grayson covers his mouth, his shoulders now moving up and down as he floats in the water. He’s fully laughing now.

“You can’t laugh at me,” I say, pouting even though I’m giggling at the same time.

“It explains why you were fidgeting around so much on the way here,” he says.

“It’s uncomfortable!” I exclaim.

This sends Grayson into more laughter.

“Hey,” one of the crew members calls down from the platform. “Do you two need help?”

“No,” I say, nudging the shoulder of Grayson who’s still laughing. “Come on—they can’t leave without us.”

Grayson, whose laughs have morphed into something like a chuckle, grabs onto the ladder and climbs up to the boat, and I follow right behind him.

When we get to the top, we take off our gear and hand it to one of the crew for them to collect and clean for later.

“After you,” I say to Grayson, both of us dripping-wet, and I follow him back toward our towels and clothes, my practically naked butt hanging out for everyone else to see.

Fourteen

Grayson

I SMILE TO MYSELF AS I walk down the sidewalk, not far from our resort to the place where I scheduled the luau, feeling happier than I have in a long time. There's not a cloud in the perfectly blue sky as I stroll, and the evening has cooled off enough that the tan shorts and navy-blue T-shirt I'm wearing feel comfortable in the slightly humid air. It took us longer to get back to the hotel after snorkeling than anticipated, so we had very little time to shower and get ready. Mila wasn't quite done yet, so she sent me ahead to make sure we kept our reservation and told me she'd be right behind me.

Today has been a good day so far, and I'm feeling excited to keep it going. Yes, there's been a voice in the back of my head that's been pestering me about all the work I need to do. Except for the call I made to Vik this morning about the hotel issue, I've done nothing. Which feels strange... but also good. I didn't realize how badly I needed this. How much work has been sucking the life out of me. And yes, I know what I'm doing now—going to a luau I scheduled through the app—is technically work, as was the snorkeling earlier today, but it doesn't feel like work, especially with the company.

Just thinking about Mila is why I've got what's probably a foolish-looking grin on my face as I walk down the path dotted with palm trees and bushes full of big yellow flowers. I've felt freer today than I have in a long time. I feel younger, like the kind of person I was before I started AppInnovate. The old me. I'd almost forgotten about him. It's all because of Mila. There's just something about her that makes me want to leave all my worries behind, at least for a little while.

I was wrong to think this trip would cure me of her. If anything, I'm even more attracted to her now. And feeling more frustrated by the minute that she belongs to someone else. She hardly talks about Dave, though. I also haven't seen her call him or text him since we've been together. Which seems ...

odd. Maybe Dave doesn't know what he's got. And if that's true, I kind of want to punch him.

I need to keep reminding myself about him, though, because holding Mila's hand while we swam around in a crystal blue ocean, looking at all the sea life, was probably one of the best afternoons I've had in a while. Mila has this way of making me laugh like no other person has before. She makes me forget about everything on my plate right now. Which, in turn, makes it easy for me to forget Dave exists.

If only that were the case.

I walk under a sign that says Coconut Cove and down a foliage-lined pathway, which leads to a picturesque paradise at its end. Tables are set up near a stage, with incredible views of the sun setting behind the ocean as a backdrop. I can smell the smokiness of a fire, probably from the roasting pig that's supposed to be the highlight of tonight's dinner. I get in line at the host stand, keeping an eye out for Mila.

"Name on the reservation?" the woman behind the host stand asks me when it's my turn. She's in a white-and-purple muumuu and has a white flower behind her right ear.

"It's Manning," I tell her.

She looks at the computer for a minute. "Can you spell that for me?"

"Sure," I say and spell it out for her.

Her brows pinch in the center as she looks at the screen. "I'm sorry, sir, but we don't have a reservation under that name," she says, giving me a sad frown.

"What do you mean?" I ask. It's an instinctual question because I know exactly what she means, and I also know what this could mean for GlobeTrotter.

I have her check under Mila's name just in case, and there's no reservation under her name either. I pull my phone out of my pocket and open the app to show her the reservation, but it's not associated with their system.

"We do have a cancellation for two people this evening," the hostess says. "Would you like to take that?"

The truth is, I'm only here to make sure the reservation works, and now that I know it doesn't, there's really no reason for me or Mila to stay. What I should do is go back to the hotel and try to figure out what's happened. It's too late to get on a call with Vik, but I could start working on it myself.

I turn to tell the hostess no thank you, but then I see Mila walking toward me. I know I've already seen her in that pink dress, but with her hair down around her shoulders and a soft smile on her face, I realize I don't want this day with her to end.

"We'll take it," I hear myself tell the woman.

"Everything okay?" Mila asks when she approaches me.

"Yeah, great," I say. I know she's asking about the app, and not wanting to ruin the night, I give her what I hope is a reassuring smile. I'm pretty good at keeping my feelings to myself, so it's not that hard.

We're each given a lei of purple and white flowers before we're guided to our seats at a small two-person table facing the left side of the stage, which has lit tiki torches lining the back and a trio playing Hawaiian music off to the right.

"I'm excited for this," Mila says after we take our seats.

"Me too," I agree, although the thing I'm most excited about is being here with her.

Dave. Must remember Dave. I shake my head, and she gives me a questioning look.

I'm saved by the server who comes by and takes our drink order. Mila orders a Mai Tai and I order something called a Blue Hawaii that the server recommends.

"What kind of vacations did you go on as a kid?" she asks once the server has left.

I think about that for a second. "Mostly to the mountains. My dad likes to fish," I say.

"Do either you or your brother like to fish?" she asks. We've talked about families in our leadership meetings before, but it's impressive she remembers mine.

"No, neither of us picked up the hobby, much to my dad's disappointment."

"Are you close to your family?" She sits back in her seat, folding her arms in front of her. It's closed-off body language for most, but not for Mila. It means she's getting down to business.

I look toward the stage, not wanting to make eye contact right now with that heavy question. "Yeah," I say. "We used to be." I turn to see Mila studying my face.

"Used to be?"

I lift my shoulder and then let it drop. “It’s complicated.”

“Got it,” she says, giving me a single nod, understanding that I don’t want to talk about it.

The thing is, I kind of do with her. I sort of want to talk to her about things I never talk to anyone else about.

I decide to give it a try. “I haven’t seen my parents in ... uh”—I stop to do the math—“over two years.”

“Do they live far away?”

I shake my head. “They live in Arvada.”

She lowers her brow as she studies my face. “That’s not far away at all. Is it because you’ve been so busy with GlobeTrotter?”

“That, and things are ... tenuous.” This is all I’m up for offering her right now. To divulge everything would mean to tell her my company—the one she works for—is hanging by a very thin string.

“Okay. What about your brother?”

We pause the conversation as the server drops off our drinks. Mine is unsurprisingly blue with a small wedge of pineapple sitting on the rim as a garnish, and Mila’s is an orange frozen thing with a real flower on it.

She pulls out the pink-and-white flower, and, wiping the toothpick it’s hooked on with her cocktail napkin, she slides it behind her ear.

“Hawaii looks good on you,” I tell her. In that pink dress, with her dark hair and her sun-kissed skin, she looks better than good.

“It looks good on you too,” she says. She picks up her drink and takes a sip out of the straw. “Oh, wow, that’s good.” She licks her lips, and it takes everything in me to look away.

Dave. Dave. Dave.

I take a drink of mine as a distraction. “Not bad,” I say.

She sets her drink down. “Don’t think I forgot about my question,” she says.

“About my brother?”

“Yes.”

“He hasn’t talked to me in three years.”

“Really?” she asks, surprised. “Why is he not speaking to you?”

I take another drink to give myself time to figure out how to answer that one. “He’s mad at me.”

“That’s too bad,” she says. It’s clear she wants to dig deeper, but I appreciate her letting me say as much, or as little, as I want to.

“What about your family?” I ask, ready to move on from me and my familial issues. The ones that are basically my fault.

“We’re close,” she says. “I’m annoyed my parents moved to Florida, and I’ve been trying to give them the silent treatment. You know, as punishment.”

“How’s that going?” I ask, but I think I already know the answer.

“I talked to them yesterday before our flight.”

I chuckle. “I could give you some tips,” I say, and then cringe. “Sorry, that was a bad joke.”

The MC for the night saves me from myself when he announces the buffet is now open, and Mila and I make our way toward the back and get in line.

The conversation is light after we get our food—which is excellent. The buffet was full of traditional food, kalua pork, and a variety of fish. Mila and I both try poi, which wasn’t as bad as I was expecting.

Then the show begins with someone blowing into a conch shell and the beating of drums. We watch different dances from many of the Polynesian islands, each telling different stories of their history. The music varies from island to island, some with beautiful melodies and others more like chants. The show ends with some amazing fire dancers who both eat and breathe fire, which is impressive.

I keep my attention focused on the show and try not to look at Mila. But every once in a while, I take a quick peek at her, so many feelings moving through my body as I see the soft, contented smile on her lips and the way the fire from the tiki torches reflects in her blue eyes.

I want to hold her hand again, like we did when we were snorkeling. Or lean into her, anything to touch her. As it stands, she’s only a few inches away, but it feels more like a yard to me. I remind myself she has a boyfriend, keep my hands to myself, and focus on the show.

“That was so amazing,” Mila says, after the luau is over and we are walking along the lit pathway that runs along the back side of the string of hotels on this side of the island. Each hotel has its own man-made marina, and when I stood out on the deck of the hotel room earlier this morning, the water looked crystal clear.

It’s a beautiful night with the sound of waves crashing, and an incredible woman walking next to me makes for a great ending to a pretty perfect day. I can’t say I’ve had one of those in a long time.

“Yeah, it was great,” I say.

“What was your favorite part?”

“Probably the fire dancers,” I say. “What about you?”

“I loved watching the Tahitian dancers move their hips. Like, how do they do that?”

“It can’t be that hard,” I say.

“What?” she laughs. “Okay, let’s see you do it.”

“Nah. I wouldn’t want you to be disappointed with the Tahitians after seeing me.”

“Now you have to,” she says, stopping in her tracks and putting her hands on her hips. “Show me what you’ve got, Manning.”

“Okay,” I say, feeling sillier than I have in years. Maybe it was the second blue drink. “You better stand back.”

I do my best to move my hips back and forth, but I know I’m not even close to any of the dancing we saw tonight.

“That was terrible,” she says, giggling.

“Let’s see you try.”

“I already know I can’t do it,” she says. “But I’ll give it a shot.”

She’s able to do it faster than me, that’s for sure, but neither of us can hold a candle to what we saw on the stage tonight. Still, I think I enjoyed Mila’s attempt, with that big smile on her face, more than the professional show.

“You nailed it,” I tell her.

“Liar.” She grins, grabbing me by the arm. “Come on. I’m exhausted and I need my rest before you make me go hiking tomorrow.”

“It’s an easy one,” I tell her. I did some research this morning and found an easy-to-moderate hike to a waterfall with a freshwater pool you can swim in. It’s only a couple of miles in.

“So you say.”

We make our way back to the hotel and walk around the pool area and in through the back entrance.

Mila guides me over to the check-in desk, where the man that checked us in last night is working again.

“Hello,” she says. “I was wondering if my suitcase showed up yet?”

She’d asked when we got back from the snorkeling trip and was disappointed. I can see she’s trying not to get her hopes up now.

“Oh yes,” the man says. “Your bag arrived tonight.”

“Oh my gosh, thank you,” she says, her voice echoing through the lobby.

“I’ve had someone take it up to your room. Here are your keys,” he says, handing her a small white envelope.

Her smile is big as she waves her keys at me. “I can’t wait to wear my own clothes.”

“And you get your own room tonight, so I won’t keep you up with my snoring.”

“Exactly,” she says.

Her relief is palpable. I just hope my disappointment isn’t. My room will seem boring without Mila Banks in it.

THE WEDDING C

Samuel James Marsh

&

Abigail Jane Nelson

THREE YEARS AGO

ABBY WAS THE FIRST FRIEND I'd met when I started working at LogicSphere in Seattle. I was a project manager, and she was in customer support. The software company was one of the largest in Seattle, and it was very intimidating to be all by myself in a new town and starting a new job where no one knew me. Abby took me under her metaphorical wing and showed me around town, introduced me to people, and brought me into her friend group.

A friend group that included one Montgomery Allen Prescott III, a.k.a. Monty, a.k.a. my manager.

Starting a job with someone who was basically my boss and then meeting up with him later for drinks with Abby and the gang was weird at first. But I learned to compartmentalize it. At work, he was Monty, a direct and no-nonsense type. There was no sugarcoating with him, and definitely no small talk. Then, out at night with the gang, he was Monty, the man who made me laugh so much and seemed genuinely caring and interested in me. It was strange but also fascinating to be able to see both sides of him.

My attraction to him didn't happen immediately, like it did with Grayson. He was handsome in a boy-next-door kind of way. Tall and thin, with sandy-

blond hair and brown eyes. There was something about his facial structure that reminded me of Andrew Garfield.

Anyway, I was initially interested in him because he's my boss and that's what I do, but it was those after-work meetups that took my attraction to the next level.

But back to Abby. She was already engaged to Sam when I joined her group of friends, and their wedding was set for the following summer. By the time it came around, I was already fully entrenched in the friend group, and Monty and I had been dating for almost nine months. So, when one of her bridesmaids had to drop out, she asked me if I'd take the spot. It felt like an honor that she'd think of me, so I said yes. Even though, at this point, I'd started to notice that every wedding I'd ever been part of involved some sort of disaster, and I was the common denominator.

The big event was set up at Snoqualmie Falls in an old lodge that had been refurbished and turned into a beautiful wedding venue. Most of the bridal party came up two nights before so we could spend the next day getting pampered at the spa, and then do the rehearsal dinner, and then the wedding the following day.

I'd been hit with some twenty-four-hour bug a few days before and was just starting to feel like myself the day we headed up to the lodge. I was so happy it was a quick virus and I was still able to be in the wedding.

I'm sure you can see where this is going. Cue facepalm.

Anyway, the lodge was gorgeous. Rustic and quaint. The grounds were stunning with the falls in the backdrop. It was June, and we'd just come out of one of the wettest springs I'd experienced in my lifetime (so much rain), so the foliage was lush and a beautiful bright green.

The biggest suite in the lodge was saved for Abby and the bridesmaids, which was me, Abby's younger sister, Valerie, who was the maid of honor, and the other two women in our friend group—Ava and Sarah.

Even though Monty and Sam were friends, they weren't that close, not close enough for Monty to be in the wedding, so he was coming up the day of. I didn't want to give him whatever I had, so I hadn't seen him in person since I got sick, and I missed him. He'd had soup delivered to my apartment while I was dealing with the virus, which was super sweet, but I had been too sick to eat it. What I really wanted was soda crackers and my mom. But that seemed like a big ask.

Abby had made a girls' trip of it. We'd spent the first day together, going

shopping and getting pedicures and manicures before heading up to the lodge. In the suite, Abby had set out matching robes for us, and her parents had sent up champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries. We spent the evening laughing and having the best time.

It was around midnight that the first bridesmaid, Ava, came down with something.

“I don’t feel so great,” she’d said, rubbing her stomach and looking a little green.

When she barely made it to the bathroom before emptying the entirety of her stomach, none of us thought much of it, just that she’d probably overdone it on the champagne.

But then a few hours later, when Ava wasn’t getting any better and things were coming out both ends (graphic, I know), Abby’s sister, Valerie, started feeling sick too and then started coming down with something similar.

I was pretty thick that night because when it hit the third woman, Sarah, I still hadn’t figured out what was happening here. And what was happening was that I’d given everyone my twenty-four-hour bug.

At first, I’d tried to rationalize and tell myself I couldn’t possibly still be contagious. But one quick panicked Google search shut that right down. My only saving grace was that Abby, the bride, seemed to not be affected.

Until the next morning.

“This can’t be happening,” she’d said before running to the bathroom.

Because we didn’t want anyone else to get it, we stayed in the room, and since I had “miraculously” not caught it yet, I took care of everyone. I made sure they were hydrated, ordered more toilet paper from room service, and had one of the groomsmen go out and buy us soda crackers and Sprite. It was the least I could do. The *very* least.

Luckily, even though Abby had known I was sick earlier in the week, she hadn’t put it together this was the same virus, and I wasn’t going to be the one to tell her.

We missed the spa day and the rehearsal dinner, mostly because everyone still felt awful, even though Ava and Valerie were through the worst of it.

The day of the wedding, Abby was still a little worse for the wear, even though she was over the hump. The makeup artist did her best to make her pallid skin look less pallid-y. But you could still tell in the pictures she got back from the photographer afterward that she was suffering.

She made it down the aisle, she and Sam were married, and she and the

other bridesmaids feasted on a diet of soda crackers and Sprite at the reception while the rest of us enjoyed the steak.

Unfortunately, the virus was the gift that kept on giving, because the next day, on the flight to their honeymoon (a Mediterranean cruise), Sam, the groom, got hit with it. We all decided he had it the worst, having to deal with that on a plane bound for Barcelona.

I never admitted to it, and I never will. Not that I speak to any of them anymore because the next wedding was the end of everything.

Fifteen

Mila

A HIKE IS NOT HOW I like to spend a Thursday. Or any day, really. But the one Grayson planned this morning is incredibly beautiful.

Grayson did some research and found some waterfalls we could hike up to that had recently reopened after being closed the past two years. It's taken forty-five minutes so far and we're only halfway through the two-mile hike, according to the map on GlobeTrotter. The terrain has made it difficult to go fast. So have all the times I've stopped to take pictures. Which I honestly want to take, but also use as an excuse to catch my breath. I haven't done this in a while.

It's a partly cloudy sky and even though I'm tired from the hike, I feel great in my own clothes. It feels amazing to wear my own bathing suit that doesn't go up my butt, a pair of running shorts, and a tank top. I'm also wearing hiking sandals. They were one of the five pairs of shoes I packed. No regrets.

What doesn't feel great is my burnt rear. Since I've never had to put sunscreen on my butt, because it's never seen the light of day, I didn't even think to put any on before snorkeling. What's the one thing that sticks out of the water the most when you're snorkeling, besides your head? Your heinie. And mine is now a toasty red color. Curse you, Scandinavian skin. Nadia got a good laugh at that when she called me early this morning. I was getting ready to go hiking with Grayson, and she had a full day at the spa ahead of her.

"So, the BILK's got a six-pack," she'd said after I'd caught her up on my burnt butt and my lost luggage and the one room with the one bed situation. I thought she'd want to know more about that, but it's the six-pack she seems to hold on to.

"I can confirm it," I said ... again.

“And where are you going today?” she asked.

“We’re going on a hike, using the interactive map on GlobeTrotter.”

“What a hard job you have,” she snarked.

“It hasn’t been all sunshine and plumeria.”

“I don’t know, yesterday sounded nice.”

Yesterday *was* nice. I didn’t tell her all of it, like the conversations Grayson and I had. Last night, walking on the beach with him felt like a dream. I was honestly a little sad that there was a room for me when we got back, which was ridiculous. I got over it when I got up to my room and saw my suitcase there, waiting for me. All forty-nine pounds of it. I will never take clean underwear for granted again.

More importantly, my bridesmaid dress was inside, perfectly purple and totally wrinkled.

“You’ll be back in time for the rehearsal dinner, right?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Now, as I follow Grayson up the narrow path, a backpack—with snacks and water and other hiking necessities, plus a couple of towels we took from the hotel—hanging from his shoulders, I’m kind of sad to have to go to the dinner tonight. First of all, there will be more possibilities for my jinx-ness to make an appearance. Who knows what I’ve got up my sleeve this time. A bunch of poisonous frogs I somehow unleash into the building? A single bolt of lightning from the clear blue sky that only lands on their venue? The possibilities are endless. The other reason, though, is this thing—this time with Grayson—will be over. When will I ever get another chance like this again?

And yes, I know. It’s for the best. He’s my boss. I have a boss ... thing. But ... I don’t know. Since we’ve been here and I’ve seen this other fun side of him, I know it’s more than just that. I haven’t been fighting it as hard as I usually do. I’ve let my protective guard down, and I don’t know if I want to put it back up.

If the whole Monty thing hadn’t happened, I might be willing to really take a risk. But it did, and that holds me back. It’s also not like Grayson is making any moves. He’s been nothing but gentlemanly, and the whole almost-kiss thing that happened not even a week ago hasn’t been brought up at all—or repeated. Which is such a bummer.

“How are you doing?” he asks when we have to stop to let people pass us on the path, headed in the direction from which we just came. He’s wearing

sunglasses and it only adds to his coolness. One of the women passing by us pauses briefly to admire the view. Her eyes purposefully moving up and down his person.

“Great,” I say once they’ve passed. I’m not just saying that. It’s incredible out here. We’re in a tropical rainforest with all kinds of lush green landscape surrounding us. I have multiple pictures on my phone to prove it. The earthy smell fills my senses. I really don’t want this bubble I’m in right now to pop. To have to go back and sit at my desk with that cold brick wall in my office.

We walk mostly in silence, ducking under large branches covering us overhead, walking down makeshift stairs, and wading through a stream, where Grayson grabs my hand to help me across, before we finally come upon the waterfall, which is beautiful as it tumbles into the pool below. People are swimming and sitting on the rocks along the water.

“Wow,” I say as we stand in front of the falls, taking in the unbelievable view in front of us.

“Want to get in?” he asks, pointing to the pool.

“Sure,” I say. I’ve got mud on my hands and feet and feel hot and sticky from the mostly uphill hike right now, and immersing fully into the glorious-looking water sounds like the perfect thing to do.

We find a spot away from the pool to set our stuff down, and then, taking off our outer clothes, which is just a shirt for Grayson, we wade into the water. It’s shallow at first before it drops off into a deep pool, and we dive in, going fully under, then resurfacing at the top to gulp some air.

“It’s cold,” I exclaim when I see a smiling, wet Grayson.

We swim around for a bit, and then I follow him to the side where there are some rocks from which I’d seen some brave people jumping as we swam on the other side. We get out of the water, climbing up the rocky surface, taking in the view of the falls and the pool below and the lush foliage surrounding us.

“This is incredible,” he says, standing near me. The smile on his face falls as he looks around.

“What?” I ask, unsure why his facial expression changed so quickly.

“I keep thinking about all the life I’m missing, sitting in front of a computer,” he says.

I nod. “I think a lot of people feel that way.”

“Do you?” he asks.

“Well, I take my vacation time.” I nudge him with my elbow. “Unlike

some people. Even though I've got a real stickler for a boss."

"Really?" he says. "I've heard only great things about him."

"Was it Jason who told you that?" I give him a cheeky grin. "Because he's a real butt kisser."

He breaks into a laugh. A hearty one. "What's with the thumbs-up you and Nadia give him?"

I look away from him toward the water, feeling my cheeks heat up. Of course he noticed that gesture. "It's our intraoffice middle finger," I finally say.

"I knew it," he chuckles.

"Don't tell HR on me."

"I would never." He holds his hands up, palms out toward me. "Jason's never picked up on it?"

"No," I say. "He's much too self-important for that."

I look over to see Grayson's response, to see if I've crossed some kind of employee/boss line. But he's only laughing, his hand wiping his eyes as his upper body shakes.

"Nadia will kill me when she finds out I've spent three days with our boss and told him our inside jokes."

"Your secrets are safe with me," he says, and I believe him.

"There's a lot more."

"Oh, really?"

I snort and then tell him about Dane and how we call him Wiener Schnitzel after he told me in our one-on-one about forgetting his underwear when he biked to work. I left out the part about his open fly and what I saw because that's just not something you share with the boss.

"No way," Grayson says through a guffaw.

"We call Jason *Sir Jason*, since he thinks he's king of everything."

"Makes sense," he says with a nod. "Any others? Do you ... have one for me?"

My eyes go wide, telling him without words that we do, in fact, have a name for him. "No," I say, shaking my head emphatically. "No, we don't."

"Come on," he says, not believing me at all.

"I promise we don't."

"You definitely do."

"We don't."

"I'll get it out of you."

“You will not,” I say.

“Aha! You do have a nickname for me.”

“I’ll never tell you,” I say.

I yelp as he lunges forward, his strong hands firmly gripping my waist. Before I can react, he’s effortlessly lifted me off my feet and takes a couple of steps toward the edge of the rocks, the pool of water just below us. He dangles me over the edge.

“Wanna tell me now?”

I twist around, trying to get out of his grasp, but I can’t because the man is clearly strong; and also, I’m laughing too hard.

“You don’t scare me,” I tell him through gasps.

He takes one step and then, like I’m a sack of flour, throws me in the water. I make a sort of laugh-scream as I fall, just before the water envelops me.

When I resurface, my legs kicking to keep me up, I don’t see Grayson until he comes up out of the water next to me.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” I tell him before retaliating. I kick my legs and then, placing both hands on his shoulders, I jump up and use my weight to push him down under the water.

But he’s too fast. He grabs me around the waist and drags me with him, and under the water we both go. We resurface for only a second before I try the same maneuver again, and we both go under once more.

“Okay, okay,” I say when we reemerge a third time. My stomach hurts from all the laughing. And my lungs burn from trying to catch my breath as I kick my legs to keep afloat.

“You okay?” he asks, his eyes searching me, concern in his voice.

“I’m fine,” I say. “I just need to catch my breath.”

“Here,” he says, turning around in the water. “Get on my back. Put your arms around my neck.”

I do as he says, feeling his hard body underneath me.

Oh, Nadia is going to love this story. Me with my arms around the BILK as he swims us over to the shore like some sort of superhero. I’ll be adding this to my list of fantasies. Bonus, I’ll get to base it on real life experience.

“I’ve got you,” he says as he swims us over to shallow waters where I can touch the bottom.

“Thank you,” I say, as he grabs hold of my hand and helps me navigate out of the pool and back to our clothes.

Once we get there, Grayson opens his backpack and hands me a towel and I wrap it around me as I take a seat on the rocks, feeling the sun that's peeked through the trees on my back. He takes a seat next to me, and hands me a bottle of water which I open and take a few sips.

I can't believe I have to leave this actual paradise we are in, with a man that's becoming more attractive by the minute, for one of the things I hate most in this world ... a wedding.

Grayson nudges me with his shoulder, before running a hand through his wet hair. "We've got a little more time before we have to head back. Do you want to explore some more?"

It's like the man can read my mind. More time with him and less time heading toward jinxville sounds like the perfect idea.

"Let's explore," I tell him.

Sixteen

Grayson

THE PATH TO THE FALLS was too easy to follow. This was my reasoning for wanting to go farther, to see how the app worked when we went off the beaten path.

This is what I told myself. But the real reasoning is that I want to be with Mila, for this time not to end. I don't know what's happened to me. I've transformed into this lovesick idiot overnight who does things spur of the moment. Or maybe that's who I've always been, but it just lay dormant under the surface until Mila brought it out in me. Either way, I hardly recognize myself.

All I know is that tonight we have to move to the rooms Shane's reserved for us at the Four Seasons and attend the rehearsal dinner, and tomorrow is the wedding. Then all the time I've had with Mila, as short as it's been, will be over. And yes, I know we're technically working. But it's never felt like work. Not once. I also know she's got Dave, something I have to keep reminding myself about, which makes all of this pointless.

It's not pointless, though. Any moment I get with Mila feels like a good use of my time, platonic as it's been.

This is what I mean by not recognizing myself. This pathetic, cheesy person I sound like right now. *Any moment I get with Mila feels like a good use of my time.* Who even am I?

The more time I spend with her, the more I just want to forget she's got stupid Dave back home, throw caution to the wind, and kiss her. Lay all my cards out and see what comes of it. I have almost kissed her. I've had to stop myself a handful of times now.

I pull the phone out of my pocket to look at the map on the app again. It feels like we've been wandering in circles for the last hour, trying to find this other area I saw on the map last night. There's a tree to my left I swear I've

seen before, but it's all starting to look the same. Maybe we're going the wrong way. We haven't crossed paths with anyone in a while—not since we waded through that stream about forty-five minutes ago and ended up on a path that looked mostly overgrown.

The first thing I notice when I pull out my phone is I've got no service. Not a big worry since the maps can be used offline. The second thing I notice is that the map I've been using is gone.

Then the app glitches and shuts down on me.

I curse under my breath.

"What's wrong?" Mila asks.

"The app crashed."

"Oh," she says, not sounding all that worried. I'm not either, really. Apps crash all the time, after all, and it's usually an easy fix. "I've got the map pulled up on mine."

I feel instant relief as she pulls the phone out of her pocket, but the reassurance dissipates when I see her visibly flinch. "My battery's dead."

"Mine's running low as well," I say when I look at the little icon in the corner that says I'm down to about 15 percent.

"That's weird. Do you think the map feature on the app drains the battery?"

I shake my head, still not able to pull it up on my phone. Every time I do, it crashes.

"Did you bring a portable charger?" I ask.

"No," she says. "I didn't even think of it."

"Neither did I."

I let out a heavy breath when the app shuts down once again.

"It keeps crashing," I tell Mila, feeling frustration run through me.

"So, what does this mean?" she asks, turning around in her spot, a full 360. We're surrounded by foliage on every side. "Are we ... lost?"

I swallow. "No." I shake my head. "We'll just stop here and go back the way we came in."

"Okay," she says, sounding relieved. "Let's get out of here, then."



GOING BACK THE WAY WE came proves to be more difficult than I

thought. I headed toward where I was certain we'd find the stream and then figured we could just follow that down because surely it would lead to something. But it's been over an hour, and we've had no luck.

We've both been pointing at trees or other landmarks and saying, "I think I recognize that." But then, we're in a rainforest around a bunch of the same things and now I'm starting to question if I'm really recognizing anything.

The crazy part is we haven't seen anyone, not in a long time. With as busy as the path was up to the first falls, I figured more people would venture on to find more trails like we did. And we did see a few hikers as we went farther into the rainforest, but they became few and far between—and now, no one.

I think we might be lost. I haven't wanted to say it out loud so as not to panic Mila, but as we keep walking and walking with no sign of anyone or anything that truly looks familiar, I can't help but feel worried. I think, even without me saying anything, Mila is worried too, because we've hardly spoken on this trek.

"Grayson," Mila finally says as we enter a clearing, after we've crossed over some fallen tree branches I'm pretty sure I've never seen before. I turn to see she's stopped in her tracks, her hands on her waist. She threw her hair up in a messy bun some time ago, and she looks tired and sweaty and worn out. "I don't think we know where we are."

I shake my head. "I think we just need to keep going."

"Going where, though?"

I let out a breath. "I feel like if we just keep walking, we'll find the stream or maybe someone who will know how to get out of here."

She swats away a bug or something in her face. "Isn't the first rule of thumb when you're lost to stay where you are? So people can find you?"

I pull out my phone; I still don't have service and my battery is now down to 7 percent.

"Maybe," I say and watch the color drain from her face. I think she'd been holding out hope that *I* thought we were okay.

"Oh my gosh," she says, doing an upper body slouch. "This can't be happening."

I swipe my hand down my face. "I think we need to keep moving. We're bound to come across something."

"Probably the bones of someone else that was lost up here," she says.

"I'm sure we'll make it out. I just ..." I stop talking as I look around.

“Maybe I could climb a tree and get above all this. I can find the direction we need to go.”

“Okay,” she says. “That one looks pretty tall.” She points to a tree with large, sprawling branches that’s across the small clearing we’re in.

I nod and then take off the backpack I’ve been carrying around and hand it to her, as we both walk over to the tree.

We stand at the bottom and look up. From here, it looks pretty intimidating. Still, I’m up for the challenge. Especially if it means getting out of here.

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Mila says, her head tilted back as she takes in the tree.

“I can do this,” I tell her.

“Okay,” she says. “But be careful.”

I pull myself up onto the lowest branch and then start moving slowly up the tree. It takes me a bit, climbing from higher limb to higher limb. With Mila asking how I’m doing every three branches or so.

Once I’m high enough that I can see out above me, I look around for anything—any sign of life.

“Can you see anything?” Mila calls up to me.

“I’m still looking,” I say. But the truth is, I can’t see anything. From my vantage point, it looks like a sea of trees and foliage with no end in sight. I can’t even see the ocean from here.

“Don’t go too far out, Grayson,” she calls as I try to edge out a little farther, just in case.

“I’m just making sure,” I finally say.

“Do you see anything?” she asks.

“No,” I call down to her.

She says something but I can’t hear her from up here, and by the way she’s hanging her head, I’m guessing whatever she said, she didn’t want me to hear.

I make one last-ditch effort, and that’s grabbing the phone from my pocket to see if I can get any service up here.

Nothing. No bars at all.

Slowly, I make my way back down the tree and walk over toward Mila. She’s got her face turned away, and when I get close, I can hear her sniffing and see her wiping tears away.

“Hey,” I say, my voice soft. “Mila, we’re gonna be okay.”

This only makes her cry more.

I can't help what I do next. I reach out and pull her into my arms, wrapping them around her tightly. She smells like a mixture of sunscreen and sweat, and I love the feel of her against me. She wraps her arms around me and tucks her head under my chin.

"We'll get out of here; I promise," I tell her. I know I'll do everything I can to make it true.

"It's my fault," she says.

"What?" I ask, confused. "If anyone is to blame, it's me. I'm the one who had the idea to keep going."

I can feel her shaking her head underneath my chin. "No, it's me. I'm a jinx," she says, her voice coming out froggy from the tears.

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because I am," she says.

"You're not a jinx, Mila. We'll figure a way out of here."

"I read about this woman who was stranded in the Maui rainforest for two weeks before they found her." She sniffles. "I won't survive that long."

I can't help but chuckle. "We'll get out of here way before then. I promise."

"How do you know?" she says, pulling her head back so she can see me. Her face is blotchy and tear-stained, and her eyes look bluer than usual.

"Someone will come looking for us. The car is still in the lot," I tell her. "That will probably alert them to something. And our friends will realize something's wrong if we don't show up for the rehearsal dinner."

She tucks her head back under my chin, and I lean into her. "But how long?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I feel like we should keep trying, at least while there's light."

"Okay," she says, but she doesn't let go of me. She stays in my arms, and I let her. This feels so good right now. I know we need to keep moving, to keep trying while we have light, but I don't want to leave her embrace.

She sniffles a few times before pulling away.

"Are you okay?" I ask, searching her face, trying to shake off how bad it feels to not be holding her still.

She nods and then takes a big inhale. "Let's go."

Seventeen

Mila

WHEN THE SKY STARTS CHANGING to hues of oranges and pinks, I know we're screwed.

I'm exhausted and my feet hurt. I'm not sure what I have more of: blisters on my feet or bug bites on my legs. I had to pee earlier, and I think something got me on the rear. Hopefully it wasn't a carpenter ant. Also, the burned skin on my butt hurts. I'm pretty sure I look like I've been swallowed by a whale, regurgitated, and then swallowed again. At least in that scenario, the whale might know how to get us out of here.

Oh my gosh, I'm hallucinating.

I think it should be noted that I hate nature. All of it. Trees, and ferns, and wild-growing flowers. I never want to see any of it again. Oh, and bugs. I hate bugs. And wildlife. Although I haven't heard or seen anything beyond birds as we've been traipsing through this forest.

"Grayson," I say, thinking it's time to find a place to wait this out. But just after I say his name, I trip over something and fall, my hands catching me in the dirt, but not before I hear an audible popping sound.

Oh crap.

An intense pain immediately wraps around my ankle. Oh, Mila Banks, what have you done?

"Mila," Grayson says, hurrying over to me and trying to help me up.

"I think I hurt my ankle," I tell him.

"What?" he says, pulling me to standing. I wrap my hands around his forearms and keep my weight distributed between Grayson and the foot that isn't in pain.

Ever so lightly, I set my foot down and try to put some weight on it. I immediately let out a yelp as instant nausea courses through me.

"Is it broken?" Grayson asks.

I shake my head, my eyes closed as I try to push through the pain. “I don’t know,” I tell him.

“Let me have a look.”

I balance my hands on his shoulders, keeping my weight on my good foot, while he squats down to check out my ankle.

“It doesn’t look swollen,” he says. He lightly touches it, and I whimper when it shoots little daggers through it. “Can you walk at all?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.” I want to cry or scream or ... something. Why did this have to happen right now? It was supposed to happen before I left Denver so I could get out of Nadia’s wedding—not in the middle of the freaking rainforest. “I think I just need to sit for a minute.”

Grayson stands, and I hold on to him as he looks up at the sky. “Yeah, we might want to find a place to rest for the night. It’s starting to get dark. Especially if you can’t walk.”

“Oh gosh, really?” I say, tears stinging my eyes as I wonder if this is how I die, out here in the Hawaiian rainforest with a stupid twisted ankle. I guess if my last view as a living person is of Grayson Manning’s face, it won’t be so bad. I mean, as far as deaths go, it’s not a terrible one.

“Come on,” Grayson says, taking off his backpack and putting it on his front. Then turning around, he bends down again. “Get on my back. Let’s go find a spot.”

I’m too tired to argue, plus I have no right to given I can’t really walk. So, I climb on his back using my good foot and my hands, wrapping my arms around his chest, and he puts his hands under my knees as he stands. I do my best to not be dead weight and try to lift myself up as much as I can. The pain in my ankle throbs.

If I have to be lost with someone, I’m grateful it’s Grayson. At least he’s built enough to be able to carry me and my stupid ankle.

He carries me on his back for about fifteen minutes like this before we find a clearing—a pretty good-sized one with a large boulder for me to sit up against. Grayson gets me situated, taking one of the towels from the backpack, rolling it up and gently placing it under my ankle to keep it slightly elevated. Around us, crickets make a symphony of sounds.

He then sits down next to me and grabs one of the water bottles out of the bag, along with one of the protein bars. We each take a big swig of water, but that’s it since we need to conserve it, and we share the protein bar for the same reason. At least we have some food and water, or this would be even

more dire.

“How’s your ankle?” he asks.

“Stupid,” I say, and he chuckles. I look around the clearing. “So, this is our home for the night.”

“Unless someone walks through here.”

I look up at the sky, which has now turned more purple. “I think everyone is done hiking tonight.”

“Well, hopefully someone will be out tomorrow and will find us. Or our friends will send out a search party.”

“It’s probably almost time for the rehearsal dinner,” I say. “I wonder how long it will take Nadia to panic.”

“It’ll take Shane a while,” Grayson says. “He’s too laid back. He’ll probably think we ditched them for something better.”

“Nadia might be convinced of that since she knows I didn’t want to be here in the first place.” She might also think I’m hooking up with the BILK, which would be an acceptable reason to her.

“Why was that?” he asks. We’re sitting so close, I can feel his arm up against mine.

“Why didn’t I want to be here?”

“Yeah. You seemed to want to find any excuse to get out of it.”

I hold my hands up toward our surroundings. “This is why,” I say.

He eyes me, his brows pulled downward. “Because you could predict we’d get lost in a rainforest?”

I shake my head. “No, because I’m a jinx.”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t understand.”

“It’s a long story.”

He snickers. “I’m pretty sure we’ve got time.”

I slouch back against the rock, feeling resigned. I’ll probably die here with my stupid throbbing ankle. I guess I can admit my deep, dark secrets to Grayson.

“Okay,” I start. “I’m a wedding jinx.”

“A wedding jinx?”

I let out a breath, not sure I want to go down this road, but Grayson’s right: What else are we going to do with our time?

“I’ve been in seven weddings, and I’ve done something to ruin each of those weddings.”

“I’m going to need more information.”

“Fine,” I say. I start ticking them off with my fingers. “Wedding number one, I inadvertently dumped a glass of wine on the bride’s dress.”

“Your brother’s wedding?”

“Yes,” I say, remembering I told him about that one already. “The second one, the bride was bitten by a bunch of red ants.”

“How was that your fault?”

“I’d told her where to stand. It was a grand idea for some pictures,” I tell him.

“Okay?”

“She’s my cousin and we’re both allergic to carpenter ants.”

“Ah,” Grayson says.

“Then there was wedding number three, where I gave the groom a concussion.”

“This I’m going to need to hear more about,” he says.

“The groom wanted to give something to the bride before the wedding, and I came up with the bright idea for him to climb up the trellis by the window where she was getting ready.”

“And, wait, let me guess: he fell off.”

“Close,” I say. “We decided it was a bad idea halfway up, and on his way down, the entire trellis came off the wall.”

“Ouch,” Grayson says.

“Indeed,” I respond. “Then there was wedding number four, when I toppled the wedding cake.”

“How did you do that?”

“I basically ran into it, trying to get away from someone,” I say. “It was a man, and he was a cheating douchebag.”

“Got it,” Grayson says, bobbing his head up and down. “I’d like to know more, but we can circle back. And the fifth?”

“Oh yes, wedding number five. That one was a doozy,” I say, looking out across the clearing as I remember how things went down at Chloe’s wedding. “At that wedding, I tripped the ring bearer—”

“You tripped him?”

“Accidentally,” I clarify. “I accidentally tripped the ring bearer, who toppled over, and the officiant and the bride tried to grab the rings he dropped and ended up falling into the pool behind them.”

“A pool? Who gets married by a pool?”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling seen. “That’s what I thought.”

“And the sixth?” Grayson asks.

“You seem very interested in this,” I say.

“I am. I’m totally invested in this now.”

I let out one single laugh. “I’ve never told anyone the whole of it,” I say.

He holds a hand to his chest. “I’m honored.”

“To be hanging out with a jinx? You see where we are, right? Lost. In a rainforest. You should be horrified.”

“I’m still not convinced.”

“Still?”

“What happened with wedding number six?”

This man. How can I be lost in Hawaii with a twisted ankle and no way of knowing when we’ll get out of here, and yet somehow, I’m still just happy to be here with him? What’s wrong with me?

I exhale loudly. “For that one, I managed to get the bride and all the bridesmaids sick.”

“How did you do that?”

“I’d had a twenty-four-hour bug I’d thought I’d gotten over, but I was apparently still contagious.”

“Wow,” he says. “How did that go?”

“It was pretty ugly, but they did get married. The bride was just a little pale in her wedding pictures. Oh, and she gave it to the groom, who had the virus while flying to Barcelona for their honeymoon.”

“Yikes,” Grayson says. “And you were in every one of these weddings as a bridesmaid?”

“Every single one.”

He leans his head back on the rock, his eyes focusing on the space in front of us. “That’s pretty crazy.”

“Do you believe me now?”

He shrugs his shoulder and then looks at me. “I think you just might have had some bad luck.”

“Which also could be called a jinx,” I say. “And now I’ll ruin Nadia’s wedding. I think I’ve already started.” I look around at the rainforest surrounding us.

“We’ll get out of here,” he says.

“I believe you. Dead or alive, we’ll get out of here at some point.”

“We won’t die,” he says. “I promise.”

“Have any survival skills under your belt?”

“I know a few things,” he says.

A *Blue Lagoon*-type fantasy passes through my mind. Me and Grayson stranded here, learning to survive off the land, discovering each other's bodies during the night. Okay, maybe I don't want to be found right away. Of course, in this scenario, we'd also probably have to deal with attacks from deadly animals that I'm sure live in the rain forest. We'd also, most likely, end up fighting all the time because we're hot and tired and haven't eaten a real meal. Not to mention how bad I smell when I go days without deodorant. This fantasy sucks.

“Promise me if we're stuck here for longer than a day, you'll just roll me off a cliff.”

“Never,” he says. “I'll carry you out of here if I have to.”

“Oh yes, so I can ruin your future wedding. Grayson can't walk down the aisle because of a stubborn back injury from carrying an injured woman out of the rainforest.”

“Worth it,” he says.

“You say that now.”

He chuckles lightly. “Wait, you said seven weddings.”

I let out a breath. “I did.”

I was hoping he wasn't going to bring that one up. In fact, I'd try to skirt right over that. Why didn't I say six? Six is enough proof. It wasn't enough for Nadia, though. Maybe I should have told her about number seven.

“What happened with that one?”

THE WEDDING (

Montgomery Allen Presc

&

Mila Andrea Bank

TWO YEARS AGO

THAT'S RIGHT. WEDDING NUMBER SEVEN, the cake topper of them all, was my own wedding.

Monty asked me to marry him the night of Abby's wedding. We'd taken a walk out by the Snoqualmie Falls during the dancing part of the reception, which I got out of by saying I wanted to spend time alone with him since I hadn't seen him for a few days.

It was a chilly night, and I had his suit jacket on over my dusty-rose bridesmaid dress as we walked along the wooden pathway leading to the falls.

"I've missed you these past few days," he said as we strolled hand in hand.

"I've missed you too," I told him.

"I felt kind of dumb."

"For missing me?"

"Yeah, it's just that I'm so in love with you. I hate being away from you."

It wasn't the first time he'd said those words, but it was still wonderful to hear, nonetheless.

"I love you," I told him.

“Anyway, it got me to thinking.”

“Yeah?”

We were near the falls, and he’d stopped then to take me by the hands and look me in the eyes.

“I don’t want to be away from you anymore.”

I thought at this point he’d ask me to move in with him, instead he got down on one knee. “Marry me?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a navy-blue ring box.

I was in shock. We’d only been dating for nine months. I knew Monty was more traditional—with a name like Montgomery Allen Prescott III, could he be anything else? But marry him? Then I thought, doesn’t the saying go, *When you know, you know*? And I knew Monty was the one for me. Well, I thought I knew. More on that later.

So, I told him yes. And he kissed me and then showed me the ring, a very classic round-cut diamond on a platinum band.

We’d planned the wedding for the next summer, and because his parents—Montgomery Allen Prescott II and Jillian Prescott—were affluent and knew a lot of affluent people, and Monty was their only child, they asked if they could pay for the wedding.

My dad, who’s never been one to turn down a discount, had no problem with this. My mother, however, insisted that they help. The Prescotts said my parents could pay for the flowers. Which just happened to be around the amount of money my parents had set aside for my future wedding. That’s right. The flowers alone cost as much as my parents were planning to pay for my entire wedding.

Jillian Prescott was an interesting person. She was a little out of touch with the world, having been born into money, and then married into more money, and so when she asked if she could just plan the wedding, I thought, *Why not?* I had a busy job, and it sounded kind of nice to just show up at my wedding. I helped pick colors and flowers, and I chose my own dress (with her approval), and my own bridesmaids—which were Abby, Ava, and Sarah. I’d wanted to ask my cousin Amelia, but she was in the midst of divorcing douchebag Ethan, so that felt in poor taste. And that was pretty much all I did for my own wedding.

Jillian picked the venue—the Four Seasons in Seattle. She picked out and sent the invites (they were a boring white thing I didn’t care for) and decided the table arrangements, the menu, and the band that would play. She chose

the officiant (an older man from the church Monty attended while growing up), found the photographer ... she basically did everything.

I liked Jillian; I really did. She was definitely weird, as uber rich people tend to be, but she had her heart in the right place for the most part. She loved her son and wanted him to be happy, and she welcomed me into their lives with maybe not open arms, but more like stiff ones, similar to a robot. I was happy—or at least I thought I was.

It was at my bridal shower—planned by Jillian, of course—which was a month before the wedding, that I felt like something was off. First of all, one of my bridesmaids, Ava, was in tears the entire time and kept having to leave the room (which was Jillian’s living room since she had the shower at her overdecorated super-sized house). Abby had told me that she thought something was going on with Ava’s parents, but she wasn’t sure.

When I saw Monty that night at dinner, he seemed preoccupied with his phone, which kept pinging with texts. He’d set his phone down for only a moment when I saw her name on the screen—Ava. It was a text notification on his lock screen, which was a picture of this B and B Monty said he’d always wanted to take me to. It wasn’t weird for Monty to get texts from Ava, or anyone else in the friend group that I’d been welcomed into when I first moved to Seattle. But this time something didn’t sit well with me.

So, I asked him about it, and he shrugged me off, saying she was having some issues at work. The story didn’t align with Abby’s, but that could also be written off since Abby wasn’t sure what Ava had been upset about at the bridal shower.

I let it go, thinking it was just me being a nervous bride. And I was nervous. The closer this wedding came, the more I wondered if I was the right fit for Monty and his family. I didn’t want their lives; I wanted what my parents had. Comfortable, happy. Not extravagant and over the top, like the Prescotts are. So, I just tucked those thoughts into one of my brain compartments that was labeled *Stuff Mila needs to stop worrying about*.

The week of the wedding arrived, and honestly, I was mostly looking forward to it being over. It felt like we’d been running a marathon that final month, with all we had to do, and I was exhausted.

One night, a few days before the wedding, Monty came over to my place in a panic.

“Has Ava called you?” he asked me. His hair was messy, liked he’d been running his fingers through it, something he did when he was stressed.

“No,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said. “If she does, don’t believe a word she tells you, okay?”

“Okay?” I said, not sure why he looked like he was going to lose it at any moment. But then I asked him something that had been sitting in the back of my mind for a while now. Call it a sixth sense or whatever, but I had to know. “Is there something going on between you and Ava?”

Monty had stopped dead in his tracks. He looked at me like I’d grown a third head, like I was out of my mind, but it was also one of those looks that was so forced that I knew. I knew I was on the right track. It felt like a punch in the gut.

“No,” he said, emphatically.

I just stared at him. It was a tactic my mom would use to get me and Everett to tell the truth. She’d look at us, her lips in a straight line, and she’d wait until one of us cracked. It was almost always Everett; he has always been the worst liar.

It worked on Monty, though. His face crumpled, and he immediately started to cry. He told me it was just one time, months ago, and that Ava was upset with him for not telling me and wanted him to confess to me or she would tell me herself, and he’d been miserable holding it in. He begged me to forgive him.

I was shocked, but I also wasn’t (sixth sense, remember?). I asked him to leave because I needed time to think.

The next morning, when I’d emailed my boss to say I was too sick to come into work (a good reminder of why it’s not the best idea to date your boss), there was a knock on my door, and I opened it to find Jillian.

She apologized for her son and asked me to really consider what I’d be giving up by breaking things off with him. She told me there were a lot of people coming to this wedding, important people to their family. She even told me Montgomery II had cheated on her (which felt like TMI, to be honest) and that they’d worked through it. She basically begged me to go through with this wedding.

In the end, after talking it through with Abby, I decided to marry Monty. I even let a very apologetic Ava still be in the wedding. Because forgiveness. Or idiocy. Take your pick.

Monty was so thankful, he sent me ten dozen roses, each with a card on it telling me all the reasons he loved me. He promised he’d never do anything like that again, and I wanted to believe him. But I also still had this feeling

that I wasn't getting the full story.

The day of the wedding came, and my jinx issue was in full swing. I mean, besides the whole finding out three days before the wedding that the groom had cheated on me thing.

The first thing that happened was the cake didn't show. Jillian was beside herself, and I still don't know how she did it, but she somehow found a last-minute wedding cake that was quite stunning. Then I couldn't find Monty's ring. We looked everywhere, turning up couches in the bridal suite and searching under dressers and nightstands. But it was nowhere to be found. So, I sent my dad out to buy me another one.

Then Abby started throwing up. We looked at each other after the first time she ran to the bathroom, remembering her wedding fiasco (which she never found out was my doing), and worried we were going to experience round two (which would honestly feel like well-deserved payback) but as it turned out, she wasn't sick; she was pregnant.

I don't know if it was all the jinx-y things happening at once, or that little voice in my head that kept nagging at me, saying I wasn't getting the full story from Monty, or if it was the picture Ava had as the wallpaper on her phone. I'd seen it while I was looking for Monty's ring—a picture of the same B and B Monty had on his phone. Whatever the reason, I knew I needed to talk to him before the wedding.

So, I snuck out of my room, in my robe with my hair and makeup done, and found him in the groom's suite, having some kind of video game tournament with the groomsmen.

"Hey," I said, peeking around the door. "Can I talk to you, Monty? Really quickly."

He came out of the room, shutting the door to the suite behind him.

"Is it about the ring?" he asked.

"No, but who told you about that?" He didn't say, but I knew the answer already. Ava, obviously.

"Monty," I started. "I can't shake this feeling that you haven't been fully honest with me about the Ava thing."

"What?" He said, his brows pulled downward. "Are you serious right now?"

I folded my arms in front of me. "I am."

"Mila, we're about to get married. My family and all our important friends are out there, and you're bringing this up now?" He shook his head

while looking around the hall—anywhere but at me.

“I need to know,” I told him.

He breathed heavily out his nose, something he did when he was frustrated—a trait I’d seen mostly at work—that I’d always found super irritating. “This really isn’t something we need to talk about right now,” he said.

That was his answer, and it was also mine.

I should have called it off then and there, but I think I was kind of out of my head, because I went back to my room, got in my gown, and acted like I was going to walk down the aisle anyway. I think it was shock.

But I snapped out of it when I heard “Here Comes the Bride.” I looked at my dad, shook my head, and told him he’d need to walk down the aisle and tell Monty I wouldn’t be saying, “I do,” and I turned around and left, hailing a cab outside the hotel. A true runaway bride moment.

I do regret that I didn’t get to see the pure mayhem that ensued, but my family did and they were happy to fill me in. Turns out my parents and Everett didn’t like Monty. They really need to start being honest with me regarding the people I keep in my life.

Anyway, the story goes that when my dad told Monty I wasn’t coming, he freaked out, and Ava ran to him. Jillian, who was upset about the ruined wedding she’d planned, publicly called out Ava and Monty, who’d apparently been getting together behind my back for months, and then grabbed Ava’s bouquet out of her hand and started whacking the two of them with it.

When my mom was cleaning up my stuff from the bridal suite to bring back to me, she found Monty’s ring tucked inside Ava’s makeup bag.

The following Monday, with my family packing up my place because I’d made the easy decision to move back to Colorado, I went in to work to quit. To my surprise, Monty was there, and so was his superior, and they called me into Monty’s office and let me go. It turns out Monty’s father owned the largest percentage of LogicSphere, and so it was never a fair fight. I was told my position was being eliminated. Joke’s on them because they didn’t know I’d planned to quit, and when they let me go, they gave me a pretty decent severance package to leave quietly. So that felt a little like a win.

Before I ended contact with Abby (because in the end, she’d picked her side, and that was with the people she’d known longer than me), she told me Ava and Monty dated for about a month after the wedding before it fizzled

out.

Eighteen

Grayson

“WEDDING NUMBER SEVEN WAS MY wedding,” Mila says, her voice quiet.

“Wait ... you ... you’re married?” I ask, confused.

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “We never got that far. I found out he’d been cheating on me with one of my bridesmaids, who I thought was a friend of mine. Turns out, she wasn’t.”

“Oh wow, Mila, I—”

She holds out a hand. “And that’s why I don’t like to tell people about it. Poor little Mila, the jilted bride.”

“Does Nadia know?”

She shakes her head. “She knows I dated him, but I wanted a clean start when I moved back, so I ordered my family to never speak of it, and I haven’t really told anyone ... until now.”

“So, this was back in Seattle?” I ask.

“Good memory,” she says, giving me a look of approval.

I won’t tell her I commit most of our conversations to memory, and I want to know every little detail about her. Because that’s creepy stalker territory.

“How did you meet, uh ...”

“Monty?” she fills in the blank.

“Monty?” I echo, pretty sure I’ve never heard that name come out of her mouth. I think I’d remember a name like that.

“Montgomery Allen Prescott III, to be precise.”

“Oh wow,” I say. “That’s quite the name.”

“It should have been my first red flag, honestly.”

“How did you meet this Monty guy?”

She smiles one of those ironic smiles before answering. “He was my

boss, actually.”

“Your ... boss,” I repeat.

“Technically, he was my manager,” she says. “But he had the ability to fire me, and he did.”

“Wait, he *fired* you?” The audacity of this guy. I want to punch him more than Dave.

“I was going into his office to quit, but he got to me first,” she says.

“What an ass.”

She snort-laugh. “He was. It was all for the best, though.”

“Because you’re in a much better position now,” I say. I look around at where we are, both of us dirty and tired, Mila’s foot propped up and starting to swell, a backpack barely full of food and water, and I vow to get her out of this no matter what I have to do.

“Than being married to a lying, cheating scumbag? I’d say yes,” she says.

“Well, now you’re stuck with me.”

“I don’t mind the company.” She nudges me with her arm.

“I feel responsible,” I say, feeling the weight of everything that’s transpired press down on my shoulders.

“For my botched wedding?” she asks, her voice teasing.

“For dragging you out here. For getting us lost.”

“You didn’t drag me out here. I was a willing participant, and I think we both got us lost,” she says.

I look away from her, leaning back against the rock. “The app failed, though,” I say.

“It’s just another glitch. We’ll get it fixed.”

I let out a long breath, my shoulders falling as I do. “It’s a big one, though. It will take a while to figure out what went wrong so it doesn’t happen again. And if it keeps happening, we might have to implement another map. We’ve had too many issues this trip. User testing is going to find even more. I just don’t see how we’ll be ready for New York in September.”

I see her head turn toward me in my peripheral vision. “Okay, maybe we won’t. But it’s just a setback.”

“Not one we can afford.”

“How’s that?”

“I pulled a lot of strings to get into the summit, used up some favors, and made some promises,” I tell her. “If we can’t get it done and ready by then ...

I don't know what will happen."

"Grayson, it can't be that dire."

"It is that dire," I say. "Not only that, but I have debt that needs to be paid back soon."

"What kind of debt are we talking about here?"

I turn my head toward her so we're looking at each other. "It's a long story."

She smiles softly. "I'm pretty sure we've got time."

I chuckle at my own words being thrown back at me.

The sky is nearly dark—not so much that I can't still see her, but soon the only light we'll have is from the moon and the stars. I've got a small LED light that's attached to the backpack we can use, but I've never changed the battery on it, and I have no idea if it even works, and if it does, how long it will last.

"I started AppInnovate with my cousin," I say.

"Aaron?" she asks.

"That's right," I confirm. His name still makes me flinch. I'm also impressed she remembers because I've made it a point to barely mention him. Most of the people currently working for me weren't there from the startup. And those that were there were part of the whole fiasco, so they don't like talking about it either.

"Aaron had the idea that we should borrow money from our family before we went to banks to get the company off the ground. Because we barely had a product at the time, banks weren't really an option."

"Oh," Mila says. "Isn't that one of those things people warn you about? Never borrow money from family?"

"I knew that," I say. "But I let him convince me to do it."

She looks away from me, over to the side and then back. "Is that why your brother doesn't talk to you?"

Mila is so perceptive. Maybe it wouldn't take a genius to put that together, but it would if someone weren't listening. Really listening. I don't know how long it's been since I've had someone in my life that fully listens to me. Someone who hears the things I say and can pick up on the nuances. I don't know if I've *ever* had someone in my life do that.

"That's pretty much why," I admit.

"Did you borrow from him?"

"No," I say. "He hardly had any money when Aaron and I started the

company. Josh is a few years younger than me.”

“Where is he now?”

“Married, living in Sacramento.”

“So, if he didn’t lend you money, why is he mad?”

“He’s mad that I borrowed from our parents,” I say.

“Oh, got it,” she says. “How does that affect him, though?”

“He doesn’t think it’s fair. He started his own business a couple of years after me, and he didn’t have the luxury of borrowing from our parents because they’d given anything extra they had to me, and Josh was upset about that.”

“What do your parents say?”

“They never took sides. They’ve never said anything about it, really. My mom will just let me know now and then that she’s disappointed Josh and I aren’t close anymore.”

“Were you? Before everything?”

“Oh yeah,” I say, wiping my hands down the front of my swim trunks, my palms feeling sweaty from the discussion topic. There’s a reason I don’t talk about this much. “We were super tight growing up. He was one of my best friends.”

Mila is silent for a bit. “So is the money thing why you don’t see your parents?” she finally asks.

Again, I’m impressed by how perceptive she is.

“I talk to them every once in a while. But there’s a lot of guilt there. I haven’t been able to pay them back yet,” I say, feeling a churning in my gut and a heaviness in my shoulders, my body’s exclusive reaction to this topic. The money I owe to family members plagues me like a constant chirping in the back of my mind.

I haven’t been able to bring myself to see my parents face-to-face, knowing I wouldn’t be able to pay them back anytime soon. It’s not like I just decided one day to stop seeing them. I became so singularly focused on paying them back, I stopped finding time to make visits happen. And they eventually stopped asking.

“I’m sorry, Grayson,” she says. “That must be hard.”

I don’t know why I do it. Maybe it’s the softness of her tone and the genuine way she’s listening to me—truly listening. It could be how she’s leaning into me, or maybe it’s because it’s fully dark outside now and I need the contact. Regardless, I find myself reaching for her hand, taking it in mine,

and intertwining our fingers.

It's a friendly gesture. That's what I'm telling myself. It's also for Dave, who isn't here to witness this but should probably know I'm not trying to steal his girlfriend. Except I very much want to.

Mila doesn't pull away. In fact, she places her other hand on top of our intertwined ones.

"It's been hard," I say. "I ... miss them."

"I bet they miss you too," she says, squeezing my hand. "So, what happened with Aaron?"

"Aaron," I say, not able to keep the disdain out of my voice. "When things weren't going as well with TourSpotter, when we weren't making the money we'd thought we would, he bailed."

"He just left you?"

"Well, not like that. At first, he tried to convince me we should file for bankruptcy and then we'd be free of our debt. He'd borrowed from his parents as well, and one of our other uncles invested."

"You didn't like that," she says. It wasn't in the form of a question because she understands me.

"No," I confirm. "There was no way I was going to just leave everyone hanging out to dry like that. So, Aaron signed the company over to me, and last I heard he's in Arizona, working in construction."

"I'm guessing you don't talk to him either?"

"Nope," I say. "I'm not interested in repairing that relationship, and I doubt he is either."

"I probably wouldn't be either," she says. "We hate Aaron."

This makes me laugh. I love that she included herself in that.

"So, what did you do after he bailed?" she asks.

"I knew I had to pay back the debt to our families, so I kept at it. I got TourSpotter to a point that it was profitable enough to stay afloat, and it gave me the room to work on GlobeTrotter, and also the ability to hire some people to help me get that going." I nudge her when I mention hiring people. I can still picture her sitting across from my desk that day. Her dark hair was around her shoulders, a soft pink color to her lips. I even remember what she was wearing—a black skirt and jacket, with a white shirt underneath. Thank goodness she didn't wear the red dress, or I'd probably have asked her to marry me on the spot.

"So, you need GlobeTrotter to kill it so you can pay everyone back?"

“TourSpotter is already showing signs of decline, as newer apps come on the market,” I say, and she nods her head, acknowledging the fact. “I need GlobeTrotter to do more than kill it. If it’s not ready for the summit ... Let’s just say, I’m running out of resources.”

“Grayson,” she says, her head toward me. I can barely make out her face in the moonlight, but I can feel her gaze on me. “Why haven’t you told us—the leadership team—about this?”

I shrug, my shoulder brushing hers. “Sebastian knows some of it,” I say, because of course the CFO would be privy to this information. But he doesn’t know all of it. He doesn’t know how much I still owe to my family. He doesn’t know the details of the crappy loan I took out.

“The rest of us should know,” she says.

“I don’t know why. It’s my problem,” I say.

“You’re the CEO, yes,” she says. “But we’re your team. I can’t speak for everyone, but knowing this, I want to do whatever I can to make this happen in September.”

I want to kiss her so badly right now. To lean in and just put my lips on hers. Stupid boyfriend be damned.

I manage to refrain. I turn my head away, my eyes forward on the shadows surrounding us. “Maybe,” I say.

She pulls on our hands. “Not maybe. You shouldn’t be doing this all alone, carrying this burden.”

“It feels like I should,” I say. I’m not sure if it’s because I’m tired or that I’m lost in a rainforest right now, but her words make my throat feel a little thick. I swallow it down.

She leans her head on my shoulder. “We’ll figure this out.”

Nineteen

Mila

“IF WE DIE UP HERE, I think you should know something,” I say to Grayson as I lean my head on his shoulder, holding his hand. I was surprised when he grabbed my hand, weaving his fingers through mine like he did. It sent a pleasurable shock down my spine. Amazing that just the touch of his hand has that power. If he thinks he’s getting his hand back anytime soon, he’s got another think coming.

I felt like we should lighten the discussion after the one we just had. Both of us admitting things we haven’t divulged to anyone else. I can’t fathom the weight he’s been carrying around all this time. I want to take it from him, to make it lighter. Whatever I can do. But there’s not much either of us can do, lost like we are.

Grayson laughs, that low, gravelly laugh that makes my insides twist. “What’s that?”

“Wait, aren’t you supposed to reassure me that we’re not going to die first?”

“We’re not going to die,” he says. “But I’m more curious about what you were going to tell me.”

Some kind of rustling sound to my right has me sitting up straight, keeping ahold of Grayson’s hand.

“What was that?” I ask, my heart immediately starting a pounding thing in my chest.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” he says.

The noise comes again. “What is that?” I’m whispering now, so as not to give away our location to whatever may be out there.

“Maybe a wild hog?” he whispers back, which is either him reflecting what I’m doing or maybe starting to worry himself. That possibility doesn’t help the anxiety rushing through my veins right now.

“Are they deadly?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“That’s not very reassuring.”

The rustling sound happens again, but it’s closer this time.

“We’re gonna die,” I say.

The noise comes again, this time followed by a soft sort of grunting. I want to say what happens next is me living out a fantasy I’ve had about Grayson, but I didn’t even consider that as I let go of his hand, anchoring myself with my good foot and basically move right into his lap.

“Mila.” He immediately wraps his arms around me. “We’re okay.”

“You can’t guarantee that,” I say.

“I promise you. I think the deadliest thing we’d find around here is swimming in the ocean.”

“I’m glad you didn’t say that yesterday when we were snorkeling.”

I can feel his chuckle more than I can hear it.

I flinch when I hear more rustling. “I don’t want to be eaten by a hog,” I say.

“We’re okay.”

“You say that, but you’ve got use of both your feet. You could run from whatever it is.”

“I would never abandon you.”

More rustling, more snorting.

“Oh my gosh,” I say, leaning into him, my head falling onto his shoulder as he pulls me closer. “This is how I ruin Nadia’s wedding—by dying. It’s the ultimate jinx move.”

“You’re not going to die.”

“I’ll never see my family again.”

“Shh,” he says.

“I’ll never get to go skydiving or see the pyramids. I’ll never get to grow old with someone.”

“Dave?” he says.

“Oh yeah,” I say. “I’ll never see Fake Dave’s face again.”

He stops rubbing my arm.

“What?” Grayson asks.

“What?” I echo, realizing what I’ve just said. Nadia warned me to stop calling him Fake Dave or I would slip up. I hate it when she’s right.

“Did you just call him *Fake Dave*?”

“No,” I say. “You just heard me wrong.”

“What did I hear, then?”

I rack my brain trying to think of something that sounds like fake. Bake? Baked Dave? Could I play it off as a nickname for him because he’s high all the time?

“Mila?” Grayson asks.

I sit up, pulling my head away from his shoulder, making a grumbling noise at the back of my throat because I’m such an idiot. “Dave is ... not real,” I finally say.

“What do you mean?”

“There is no Dave. I made him up.”

It’s dark, but there’s enough light from the moon that I can make out the furrow in his brow.

“There’s a picture on your desk.”

“Photoshopped.”

Grayson sputters. “Why would you make him up?”

I let out a breath. “To save me from myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a thing for ... men I’ve worked for. A ... boss thing.” I sound like such a psycho right now.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve repeatedly been attracted to my bosses. You just heard the whole story about Monty,” I say.

“But what does Dave have to do with that?”

“Dave happened because that night you brought Shane over to talk to Nadia, the time I ... fell off my chair,” I mumble the last part, not wanting to remember my clumsiness.

“Yeah?”

“I’d had some liquid courage that night and I was going to flirt with you, but then you said you were dating and so I made him up. And then I just kept him around to remind me that I should never flirt with my boss. It’s just an all-around bad idea. But you’re ... you, and even though I know it’s a bad idea, I feel this crazy attraction ...” I stop myself from going further by sucking my lips between my teeth. I’m just going to stop talking now, and possibly forever.

“So, Dave isn’t real?”

“Mm-hmm,” I say, still sucking in my lips. My vow of silence is

beginning as of right now.

“And you made him up because you’re attracted to me?”

I don’t say anything because of my vow, and also because I’ll embarrass myself further if I do. What I need to do is just slip out of Grayson’s lap, hobble over to whatever is in the bushes, and let it put me out of my misery. Coincidentally, I haven’t heard any noises in a while, so it might be gone.

But before I can figure out how to get out of his lap with my hurt ankle, Grayson leans in and places his hands gently on my face, one on each side. This close, I can feel his heart beating in his chest, or maybe it’s my rapid pulse I can feel as he moves in even closer and presses his lips to mine.

“Grayson,” I say breathlessly, when he pulls back ever so slightly, our noses almost touching, our breaths mingling. I wrap my hands around his forearms. Not to push him away, but to keep him there.

I lean in this time, closing the distance between us. I press my lips to his, softly, and then I linger there. Letting him know I want this. I want this so badly; I might explode with all the feelings running through me right now.

He takes my cue, and his lips begin to slowly move over mine, like the loveliest of caresses. It’s tender and sweet at first, like he wants to take his time. But that only lasts for so long before the intensity changes. He tilts my head to the side so he can deepen the kiss, his tongue brushing just along my bottom lip, and I feel like I’m on fire.

I open my mouth to give him more access. Our kisses feel hungrier now, more passionate. Grayson kisses me like he wants to keep me, like he never wants to let me go. He moves his hands so one is woven in my hair and the other is at the back of my neck, and mine are around him, feeling his strong back muscles as I pull myself into him, not wanting any space between us.

I’m fully making out with my boss in the middle of the Hawaiian rainforest in the dark of night, and I can’t bring myself to think about all the reasons I shouldn’t be—I just want to keep doing this for basically the rest of my life. I could die up here, from a wild hog attack, or who knows what, and I can say with full confidence that I couldn’t care less. I would have no regrets.

Sometime later we come up for air, my lips swollen and my body completely alive.

“You kissed me,” I say. I don’t know why. It’s the first thing that comes out of my mouth.

Our faces are close together. I’m still in his lap, my hands are on his

shoulders, and his arms are wrapped around me.

“You kissed me back,” Grayson says.

“Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I’ve wanted to since the first time I met you.”

“You did not,” I say with a laugh. I lean in and lay my head on his shoulder, and his hold on me tightens.

“I did,” he insists.

“So, this isn’t a trauma bonding thing,” I say.

“What?”

“Like, you know, we’re both lost in the rainforest. We have no idea if we’ll survive.”

“We’ll survive,” he says. “Is that what this is for you? A trauma thing?”

“No, I’ve wanted to kiss you for a long time too,” I tell him. “I wanted to kiss you at the club the other night. I thought it might happen, but then you just left.”

I feel his exhale. “I thought you had a boyfriend.”

“Oh, right,” I say, feeling relief rush through me. Why didn’t I think of that? “What a good guy you are, Grayson Manning.”

“I’m not really,” he says. “I may have been able to stop myself from kissing you when I thought you were dating someone, but that didn’t stop me from wanting to.”

I tilt my head up and kiss him at the base of his jaw, feeling the stubble there as I let my lips linger. For some reason, it seems as intimate as the make-out session we just had. I don’t know why. Maybe because it feels more like something you’d do with someone you’ve been with for a long time.

He lets out a breath. “So, this boss attraction thing—”

“Oh, no,” I cut him off, not wanting to talk about it. I hate that I even told him.

“Are you saying you wouldn’t be attracted to me if I weren’t your boss?”

“Grayson, I think every living creature on this earth would find you attractive,” I say.

He laughs. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I tell the truth.”

“I know this complicates things, and I know your last experience dating someone you work for didn’t end well. But I feel like I need to tell you that I’m not like him.”

“I know,” I say, pulling my head back again so I can look at him. Even though I can’t really see him very well in the dark. “You’d never be like him.”

“And you’re not just attracted to me as your boss?”

“I’m attracted to you because you’re probably one of the best men I’ve ever had the chance to know,” I say, and I’m telling the truth. Grayson is everything—all the things I’ve ever wanted without even knowing it.

I lean in and kiss him, and he kisses me back. It morphs quickly, this time into something intense. Like we can’t get enough of each other.

I don’t know how I’ll feel in the morning; I hope I’ll feel the same way I do now. I know I’ve been fighting this for so long, but it feels so freaking good to just lean into it. I shouldn’t compare, but as much as I thought I felt for Monty, it’s nothing like this. It’s so much different with Grayson. With Monty, I felt sort of like I was in a play or something, in a role I was never meant to be cast in. With Grayson, I feel like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.

“What were you going to tell me before we heard that noise earlier?” Grayson asks after we’ve finished kissing a third time. That’s right, I’ve had three fantastic make-out sessions in the Hawaiian rainforest, under a moonlit sky, with my boss. Although right now, he’s just Grayson to me.

We’ve changed position so we’re now lying on the ground. Grayson’s got a rolled-up towel under his head as a makeshift pillow, and I’m on my side up against him and tucked under his arm, my head on the soft part of his shoulder.

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

“Before we heard whatever that noise was, you said you should tell me something.”

“Oh, that,” I say.

“Tell me,” he says.

“I was just going to tell you that the one time Jason was red-faced mad because someone drank his kombucha ... that was me.”

“It was you?”

“In my defense I didn’t know it was his. I thought it was Nadia’s.”

Grayson laughs. “That was your deathbed confession?”

“I have so much guilt. I needed to repent,” I say, laughing with him.

“Never change, Mila,” he says, kissing me on the top of my head. “The world is a better place with you in it.”

Twenty

Grayson

A FLUTTERING NOISE IN THE distance wakes me up.

It doesn't take me any time to remember where I am. You don't tend to get that deep of a slumber on a dirt floor in a rainforest, the woman of your dreams snuggled up next to you. In fact, although I'd like to get out of here and take a hot shower and I'm achy in places I didn't know I had, I don't want this part to end. I don't want Mila to wake up and decide last night was a mistake. Or go back to the real world and have her realize this isn't what she wants. I don't think I could handle it if she did. Well, I'd handle it, but I wouldn't like it.

The fluttering noise gets closer, and I have no idea what time it is, but by the look of the light-blue and pink sky, it's not too long past dawn.

Mila shifts, making a little noise as she does. It's the second time I've spent the night with her, but this is the first one where she's been in my arms. I love it. I love *her*. I was kidding myself when I'd thought I was only half in love with this woman. I'm 1000 percent in love with this woman. I love her mind, the way she thinks, the way she keeps me on my toes. I love how she looks, of course; I'm definitely attracted to her beauty, but that's such a small part of it. I want her—the whole package. She'd probably freak out if I told her right now, so I'll keep all that to myself.

When the noise gets even closer, I realize what it is: a helicopter.

"Mila," I say, lightly jiggling the arm she's lying on to wake her up.

"Grayson," she says. "What's going on?"

"I can hear a helicopter," I tell her.

"What? Really?"

Just as I say this, the noise becomes much louder and a blue helicopter comes into view.

We both get up and start waving our hands at it and yelling, even though I

know they can't hear us over the engine and the thwapping sound of the rotor blade.

"Do you think they're here for us?" Mila yells over the noise. She looks to be favoring her bad leg, but she's standing up. So, either her ankle is better this morning or she's got adrenaline making up the difference.

"I don't know," I yell back.

We keep up the waving, both hands in the air, but then the helicopter starts to fly away.

Mila looks defeated, and I get it. I was hoping it was someone looking for us, even though we haven't been gone a full twenty-four hours.

"Wait," Mila says. "They're coming back!"

We wave and yell as the helicopter comes back toward us. This time, it stops and hovers over the clearing, not too far above, but it's obvious they've spotted us. After a few minutes, we see someone being lowered down toward the clearing on a cable.

"Oh, thank goodness," Mila says, wrapping her arms around me.



"THANKS FOR SAVING US," I tell Shane once we're off the helicopter and in a black SUV, the driver taking us over to the hotel.

"What's money for, if I can't use it to save my friends?" he says, like a spoiled socialite that he's most definitely not. Well, he's spoiled for sure.

It turns out Shane and Nadia didn't take long to start worrying about us. Once we didn't show up at the hotel before the rehearsal dinner, they both started to feel concerned. In the end, they cut the rehearsal dinner short, and through Vik, they were able to find the rental car company, which had GPS in the car and gave them our initial location. Then Vik was able to find our last known location on the app. And that's how they narrowed down the area.

Shane notified the police but chartered a helicopter to start the search himself at the first sign of light. Between the GPS tracker on the car and the last known signal from the app, they were able to track us down. The fact that we'd been in a clearing big enough for them to see us was just pure luck.

Mila sits next to me in the car, our bodies close together. We hold hands as we drive toward the hotel, and after a bit, she falls asleep, her head on my shoulder. Shane, who's sitting up front, turns in his seat to look back at us

and gives me a very knowing facial expression, eyebrows high on his head. I respond with a smile. I may have just been rescued by a helicopter after being lost in the rainforest and restlessly sleeping on a dirt floor, but I've never felt better. I suspect it's because of the woman sitting next to me.

The car waits for us as we grab our things from our first hotel, then we drive over to the Four Seasons, where we're given key cards, and then head up to our rooms.

Both Mila and I are on the fourteenth floor, and I walk her to her room even though mine is just a few doors down. She's only slightly limping now, able to put some weight on her ankle.

To everyone else, we probably look like two people who were lost in the rainforest overnight, covered in dirt and smelling like who knows what. But to me, Mila looks beautiful.

She parks her overpacked suitcase by her door before taking a step toward me and placing her hands on my chest, looking up at me. I let go of my bag and wrap my arms around her.

"I just wanted to say that of all the people in the world I could've gotten lost with, I'm glad it was you," she says.

"You sure about that?" I ask, searching her face. We haven't gotten a chance to talk about last night, about the kissing and all the things that were said. "I mean, I wasn't exactly a Boy Scout up there."

She lifts herself up on her tiptoes and kisses me softly on the lips. "Very sure," she says.

I give her a mock-serious look. "How are you going to tell Dave?"

"Tell him what?" she asks, eyebrows traveling up her forehead.

"That it's over between you two," I say. "That you've got someone else now."

"Do I?" she asks, the corners of her mouth pulling upward.

I wrap my arms tighter around her, like I don't want to let her go. I don't, actually. "You do," I say.

I know with everything that has to be done with the app, if we even have a chance of getting it done on time, this probably isn't the best move for me—getting involved with Mila. But I couldn't care less. I'll do what it takes to make it work. Now that I have her, I'm not letting her go.

"It's gonna be hard," she says, giving me a fake-sad look. "Dave's going to be pretty devastated. There might be some begging."

"Oh, I bet."

“And probably a little crying.”

“No doubt,” I say.

“He’ll be heartbroken. He may roam the world a lonely man, no one ever comparing to me.”

“I believe it.”

She smiles at me then, and I lean my head down and kiss her. It’s not like the soft one she just gave me. It quickly becomes more heated, more urgent. I’m not ready to let her go just yet, even if she’ll only be a few doors down from me.

“Okay, okay,” she says after a minute, smiling at me as she pulls herself away and out of my arms. “I need to take a shower before I have to join Nadia and the others. And you”—she pokes me in the chest lightly—“have got duties of your own.”

I reach for her one more time, but she bats my hand away. “I’m serious,” she says, even though she’s smiling. “I’ll see you at the wedding.”

Like a pathetic, lovesick fool, I’ll be counting down the minutes until then.

THE WEDDING (

Edward Shane Richara

&

Nadia Rose Singh

TODAY

“OH, MILA, YOU REALLY ARE a jinx,” Nadia says, wearing a silky robe and hugging me so tight, it feels like my ribs will crush under the pressure. For a petite thing, she packs a punch.

I had to wash my hair three times to get everything out of it, and I couldn't believe how much dirt I was covered in. I don't know if I've ever appreciated a shower so much. One thing is for sure: Grayson must really like me if he wasn't repulsed by all that. Not that he looked much better himself. But I still thought he was handsome, even covered in dirt.

“I tried to tell you,” I say as she lets go and I follow her into the ridiculous suite that is both her room and the bridal suite today. It has a wraparound deck with outdoor seating and a perfect view of the ocean, two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchenette, and a dining room. It's three times the size of my apartment back home.

The room is abuzz with Nadia's sisters, her mom, and her nani, who are all getting ready. There are a couple of hairstylists and a makeup artist as well.

“Mila, we're so happy you're safe,” Nadia's mom, Shanti, says.

“I was saying prayers for you,” says her nani.

“Thank you,” I tell them.

Nadia grabs me by the arms and turns me to face her. “When you didn’t show up last night, I originally thought you’d finally made things happen with Grayson,” she says, giving me a double eyebrow lift.

I really do know this woman so well.

“But then when neither of you showed up at all or had even checked into the hotel, I knew something was up.”

“Weeeellll ... ,” I say, dragging out the word an octave higher than I normally talk.

“Shut up,” Nadia says, her eyebrows moving up her forehead.

“I mean, we were lost, but something did happen,” I say.

“I need all the details, immediately.”

“About being lost?”

“No,” she says, batting my words away with a wave of her hand. “I mean, I do want to know about that. But first I want to know what happened between you and the BILK.”

“I’m not telling you because we have a wedding to get ready for.”

“I don’t even care about that right now,” she says.

“Nadia Singh.”

“Mila Banks.”

We glare at each other. I hope her family knows this is just what we do.

“I’ll give you the shortened version,” I finally say. Although I’m bursting at the seams right now to tell her every freaking detail.

“Give it to me,” she says, excitedly rubbing her palms together.

“He knows Fake Dave is fake.”

“No way,” she says. “How did that happen?”

“It slipped,” I say.

“I told you not to call him Fake Dave.”

“Who is this Fake Dave person?” her nani asks.

“Nani, stop eavesdropping,” Nadia says. We both look over to see that everyone is watching us, including the three strangers hired to get us all ready.

“It’s hard not to—we’re all in the same room together,” her nani says, lifting her shoulders toward her ears and then dropping them.

With that, Nadia grabs my hand and drags me to the master bedroom.

“Keep going,” she says as soon as she shuts the door.

“So, he found out there was no Dave, and then I admitted I’m attracted to

him.”

“Shut your dirty mouth,” Nadia says.

“And then ... he kissed me.”

Her eyes go wide. “This is the best wedding present I could ever have.”

“I hope so, because I didn’t bring you anything else. My presence is my present.” I give her a little curtsy.

“How was the kiss?”

“Amazing. And then we made out like three times.”

She starts jumping up and down, clapping her hands. “I’m so happy right now. What happened after that?”

“After that, we fell asleep together on the ground, and Shane rescued us this morning.”

She gives me a more serious look. “Oh, Mila, I wanted to be there to help look for you. I was so worried. But there wasn’t enough room in the helicopter.”

“Don’t even give it a second thought. I’m just so grateful to you both,” I say. “And now I’m here, and alive, and ready to be in your wedding. Unless you’ve changed your mind?” I give her a hopeful smile.

“No,” she says, emphatically. “It’s still happening.”

“You’ve literally seen proof,” I say. “I’m a jinx.”

“And I literally don’t care,” she says.

“Okay, well,” I say, giving her my best bring-it-on face. “Let’s see what I’ve got in me for the rest of the day.”

Maybe the jinx gods think the whole lost-in-a-rain-forest-overnight thing was enough stress for this wedding, because after getting ready and making our way down to the ceremony, which was set up on fresh-cut grass overlooking the ocean, I walk down the aisle with my arm through Grayson’s, and we get through the *I dos* without any issues. I’m even able to wear my heels and my ankle feels okay.

The only thing feeling slightly jinx-y so far is the fact that my burnt rear is already starting to peel, and I had to run to the bathroom right after the ceremony to scratch it. But no one knows about that. I plan to keep it that way.

After taking pictures on the beach, and some with our feet in the water (and yes, the photographer had me bend my knees for some shots because I was sticking out like a sore thumb), we head to the reception, which is absolutely stunning. Two long tables set to perfection with gorgeous

bouquets of flowers down the centers, all under a wooden canopy draped in white organza. It looks like a fairy tale. We feast on fresh lobster and steak, and I don't spill my drink or accidentally poke someone in the eye with my fork during the festivities, and it feels like a win.

It's honestly the most beautiful day and the loveliest wedding I've ever attended. I'm so happy for my friend. I can't believe I wanted to miss this. Well, I could have skipped the being in the wedding part. But to miss the entire thing would have been a sad mistake on my part. I can now say I'm glad I'm here.

Since Grayson is the best man and I'm the maid of honor, we're seated together during dinner, and we can't keep our hands off each other. In a subtle way, of course. I'm pretty sure Nadia doesn't want to see people getting handsy at her wedding. Or maybe she does, since she was so excited to hear about the kissing. But we keep it tame—Grayson's hand on my knee under the table, and me purposefully leaning into him between courses.

I've never been so attracted to someone and had them return it. It's a pretty amazing feeling that I don't want to let go of. I have no idea what the future will bring, or even next week when we're back at the office, but I'm soaking it all in right now.

When it's time for the toasts, and the sun is setting into the ocean behind us, and the strings of globe lights have been turned on to give the scene an ethereal feeling, I stand up to give my speech that I barely scrambled to put together earlier in the bridal suite while we were getting ready. I hadn't done it before because I was still holding out hope I'd somehow get out of this.

I take a breath before starting, looking at my phone where I've put my notes before glancing at everyone else, including a very handsome Grayson, who's looking incredible in his linen suit pants and vest, staring up at me, his arm resting over the back of my now-empty chair.

"So, I'm Mila, and I'm the maid of honor. I've known Nadia since I started working at AppInnovate, where we bonded over clothing and our love of giving nicknames to everyone we work with. Don't worry, Simone, you don't have one," I say, turning toward our director of HR, who's sitting at the end of my table with her husband next to her. She laughs and smiles at me, while everyone else chuckles.

"What's mine?" Grayson asks, and everyone laughs.

"Mila will tell you later," Nadia says.

"No, I won't, because he also doesn't have one," I say, giving Nadia wide

eyes, which makes everyone erupt again.

“Anyway,” I say, drawing out the word, getting us back to the toast. “I was there when Shane and Nadia first met. It was at a bar, after work, and our boss, Grayson, introduced him to us, but it was very obvious from that moment Shane only had eyes for Nadia.”

“It’s true,” Shane says before giving Nadia a quick kiss on the mouth.

“As the story goes, it was love at first sight, and they’ve been together ever since. But what Shane might not know, but Nadia definitely does, is that I didn’t want to be here.”

“I made her come,” Nadia says, nodding her head and smiling, which makes everyone do a sort of awkward-sounding laugh. Like they’re not sure whether it’s funny.

“It had nothing to do with Nadia and Shane,” I continue. “And everything to do with my long history of being a sort of wedding ... jinx. I’ve got a long list of grievances where that’s concerned, and Nadia knows about most of it. And I didn’t want to bring my bad juju to this one. But, for those of you who know Nadia, you won’t be surprised that she wouldn’t take no for an answer.” I look over to see her nani nodding and smiling at Nadia’s parents, who are doing the same back.

“So, as most of you know, yesterday I got lost on a hike with this guy,” I say with a head bob toward Grayson. Everyone chuckles because they all know, and we’ve been asked repeatedly about it. “I had many thoughts up there, but the one that made me the saddest was that I’d done it again. I’d ruined another wedding. And not just any wedding, but for one of my most favorite people on the entire planet.”

I didn’t expect to get choked up at those words, but I do. And one look at Nadia, whose eyes are also glistening, doesn’t help.

“But, as you can see, we’re okay, and we made it back, thanks to Shane and Nadia. And I’m so grateful. Not just because we made it back, but because I can be here right now, celebrating with you.”

I pause to sniffle. “Shane, you’ve got yourself one of the most loyal, wonderful, funny, beautiful, and stubborn humans on the planet. And I hope you’re grateful every day for her.”

Shane doesn’t say anything; he just gives me an understanding nod.

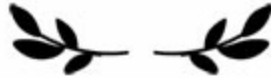
I raise my glass. “So, here’s to Nadia and Shane. May your life be filled with happiness and love always.”

Everyone lifts their glasses and says, “Hear! Hear!”

I lift my flute of champagne to take a sip, and instead, in a moment I'm blaming on nerves, dump the entire contents down my purple bridesmaid dress.

"Oh my gosh," I say, looking at Nadia. We both start laughing as, next to me, Grayson grabs a cloth napkin and hands it to me to try to soak up some of the liquid that's now running down my entire front.

"And the jinx lives on!" Nadia exclaims, and everybody cheers.



LATER THAT NIGHT, I'M SITTING on the beach next to Grayson, listening to the waves crash against the shore and the low tones of music in the distance where Nadia and Shane's reception is still going strong. Her nani really knows how to keep the dancing going. We had to sneak out to get away.

She even got me to dance, and I'm still not sure how I let her do that. But I'd already spilled booze down my dress—what were the odds I'd do it again?

High, actually.

I didn't ruin anyone else's clothing, thank goodness. I'm mostly dry now, and I only lasted a few dances before escaping. Two fast and one slow where I danced with Grayson. And yes, I did step on his foot, but only once.

Now as we sit on the beach, I can't help all the questions running through my mind. Like, *What happens when we go back? What does this all mean? How do you feel about me? How are we going to navigate this whole thing?*

I know what he said earlier today when we were standing by my hotel room. About breaking up with Fake Dave because I've got someone new now. But, seriously, what does that actually mean?

I think I'll wait to ask him when we get back to Denver. I'm not ready to pop the bubble we're in with all my craziness. But I'm having strong feelings for Grayson. I always have—I just tried to tamp them down. But now that I've released them, they feel stronger than they probably should at this point. We just started ... whatever we started. I need to not get ahead of myself.

I just really want to marry him and have his babies, okay? There, I said it.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks me.

"Oh, just ... life," I say, sounding like a moron. But that's better than,

“Can you define this relationship in detail please? Also, what would you like to name our first son?”

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, directing the question back, before I do say or ask something I’ll regret.

He squeezes my hand. “Just about all the things I have to do when we get home.”

“Oh,” I say, sort of disappointed he wasn’t thinking about me, and then I feel dumb for feeling that way. Because of course he’d be thinking about work. He has a lot on his plate. And also, the world doesn’t revolve around me, as much as I’d sometimes like it to. Like right now.

He lets out a breath. “And how I’d kind of rather not go back.”

“Should we run away together?” I ask, and then feel stupid for saying that.

He lifts our combined hands up to his mouth and kisses mine. “You have no idea how good that sounds.”

I shrug. Running away with Grayson sounds amazing to me, actually. “Let’s not think about all our responsibilities right now,” I say.

“I do have a question, though,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“What’s my nickname?”

“Oh no,” I say, shaking my head.

“Come on,” he says.

“I hate Nadia so much right now.”

“I would have remembered anyway,” he says. “So, tell me.”

I sigh. “Fine. It’s BILK.”

“BILK?” he asks, confusion on his face.

“It’s an acronym. Oh gosh, this is so embarrassing,” I say.

“What does it stand for?”

“Boss I’d like to kiss,” I say.

“No kidding?”

“What did you think it would be?”

“I thought it was something mean. Like Mean Boss or Jerkwad Boss.”

“You’re neither of those things.”

“BILK, huh? Who came up with that one?”

“I did,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat. *Way to go, Mila Banks.*

“So, am I still?”

“Still what?”

“A boss you’d like to kiss.”

“Oh, most definitely.”

“Good,” he says, before leaning toward me and kissing me soundly.

Twenty-One

Grayson

“SO, IN THE SPIRIT OF transparency, this is what we’re up against, team.”

The room is silent. Everyone is staring at me like I have two heads—everyone except for Mila, who’s giving me a reassuring nod. I’m just grateful it’s not one of her signature thumbs-up. She did give one to Jason after he explained to her all the things we should have done when we went hiking, like he’s the utmost authority on the subject. Honestly, he probably does know more.

Everyone knew all about it when we returned, probably because of the late-night call to Vik and his help with locating us, and the subsequent work that followed as they tried to fix the problem. As it stands, we’re going to have to reimplement the map’s API into the app, which is going to take a lot of time to do.

It’s Tuesday; we flew back from Hawaii on Saturday, and I’ve just told my leadership team during our weekly meeting what we’re up against with GlobeTrotter. Everyone is here, except for Nadia, who’s headed to Australia for her honeymoon.

I feel very itchy in my own skin right now, being more transparent about things. But I also feel a lot of relief, too. Mila was right—I had been carrying this burden around for too long. Not that I divulged everything to them, they don’t need to know about my family drama. Just how dire it is that we get this app done and ready for market by September.

“So, if we don’t have this done by the summit, then ... what?” Jason asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t know.” I tell him, honestly. Maybe it would work out even if we don’t. I know I could borrow money from Shane, even though taking on any more debt feels like a really bad idea. Honestly, if GlobeTrotter doesn’t take off, it might be the end of things around here. But I’m not going to tell them that. I’ve hired smart, hardworking people for this

team. I'm sure they get it.

"What do you think, Vik?" Mila asks. "Do you think we can have GlobeTrotter ready in time?"

"I think it's not out of the realm of possibility," Vik says. "I'm willing to put in the extra work to do it."

If anyone would be honest about the possibilities of this happening, it's Vik. His words are encouraging.

"I am too," Mila says. But I already knew she was on board.

She looks amazing today in a navy-blue dress with her hair pulled back in a ponytail. I told her just that when I saw her this morning. I haven't had any alone time with her because I had so much to catch up on Sunday, and then we had to jump right back into work Monday. I've basically been working nonstop since we got home, and so has she.

"My team is on it," Jason pipes in.

"I'll do whatever I can," Simone says. As the head of HR, that's not much, but I appreciate her enthusiasm.

The rest of the team follows suit.

"Okay," I say. "It's going to take every one of us to make this happen. Some more than others. We might have to do things outside of our normal scope. But if you are all on board, then I think we can do it. Or we at least have a good shot."



"HEY THERE," I SAY AFTER tapping on Mila's open office door.

She turns her face toward me and gives me a warm smile. It's dark out, and the soft lighting of her desk lamp gives her face an otherworldly glow.

I've missed her. After coming up with a plan at the meeting, we all went our separate ways and have been working tirelessly all day. If we're going to have the app ready in time, there are going to be more long nights ahead of us like this.

"How are you?" she asks.

"Tired," I say, and she smiles.

What I want to do is walk over to her desk and grab her and kiss her, but we—well actually, Mila—made the decision on the flight back that we'd keep things at work ... work. And so, kissing her and holding her and

everything else I want to do with her will have to be outside of work. Which makes sense, because we both have so much to do, and it's not a good look to find your boss making out with the project manager, as enticing as it sounds to me.

I get her reasoning, and I also agree with it. But that doesn't stop me from hating it.

The problem is, my time is all work right now, even when I'm not here, and it probably will be until September. I have basically zero nonwork time. Which feels like a hard thing with this burgeoning relationship. Like it's a big roadblock.

"The meeting went well today," she says.

"I think so," I respond. "It went better than I was expecting."

"What were you expecting?"

I shrug. "Some yelling. Vik quitting. Jason possibly smashing a chair."

She laughs. She also knows I'm joking. Vik is much too loyal. And for as irritating as Jason can be, that doesn't seem like something he'd do.

She nods. "Speaking of Jason—I bought him some kombucha today."

I chuckle. "What did he say?"

"I don't know. I put it on his desk when he was meeting with his team and ran."

I shake my head, but I've got a smile on my face. It's so strange to miss someone who's been right down the hall all day. "I want to kiss you," I say in an almost whisper.

Her eyes go wide as she tilts her head to look around me, outside her door. There are a lot of us still here, but no one around that can hear me. Her assistant, Britain, who sits closest to her office, has already left for the day.

She lowers her chin, but her eyes are on me. "I thought we agreed—"

"I know," I say, running a hand down my face. "It's just that I'm going to be working constantly until September."

"Me too, remember?"

"I know," I say. "We'll find a way to squeeze some nonworking time in, okay?" I feel like I'm saying this more to reassure myself. I know what we have to do, what's ahead of us to get everything ready by September, and I know I need Mila in my life, and not just at work. It seems almost impossible right now to have both. But I'm not willing to compromise any of it. I'm committed to figuring out a way to do it if she is.

She nods. "Okay. Now, you're distracting me, so I need you to go back to

your office.”

“I’m distracting you, am I?” I give her what I’m hoping is a flirtatious smile. I love that she thinks I’m the distraction. If anyone is the distraction around here, it’s Mila. A distraction I honestly don’t have time for. I know that, and I also don’t care. I just hope she’s willing to hang on—that I’m important enough to her, too.

We didn’t really discuss how things will go, aside from keeping work and whatever is going on between us separate. I think I’ve made it perfectly clear how I feel and I’m pretty sure I know where she stands, even if definitions haven’t exactly been spelled out.

“Yes,” she says. “You’re keeping me from my work.” She looks around me again and then lowers her voice. “Looking so handsome like you do right now.”

That’s it, I’m kissing her. I walk inside her office.

“No way, mister,” she says, holding out a hand. “I’ve got too much to do right now, and so do you.”

I let out a breath. “Okay, fine,” I tell her. “How about lunch tomorrow?”

“Can’t,” she says. “I need to take a working lunch because I’m meeting with TestPulse for the user testing at one.”

“Oh, right.” The stress that’s been keeping a low, steady pace running through my body amps up. We aren’t ready for user testing, and we need to be. It’s enough to snap me back to reality.

“But I’ll see you at our one-on-one tomorrow,” she says, giving me a coy smile.

“Are we throwing the work rule out the window?” I can’t stop the hope in my voice.

“No,” she says. “But you’ll get a whole thirty minutes with just me.”

“I’ll take it,” I tell her. I’ll have to think of a way before then to convince her to let me use fifteen of those minutes to kiss her senseless.

Twenty-Two

Mila

“MILA,” BRITAIN SAYS AFTER A couple of soft knocks on my open door.

“Yeah?” I reply. It’s Wednesday, and I’ve been tackling some budgeting work-throughs Sebastian sent me this morning to review before our meeting later. We’re going to have to borrow from one department to have enough for the other, but I think we can make it work.

“It’s time for your one-on-one with Grayson,” she says, peeking her blond head in my door.

I lick my dry lips and get up from my desk, straightening out my white pencil skirt and re-tucking my dusty-pink top with the ruched sleeves.

“Love the shoes,” Britain says, with a head bob toward the nude heeled mules I’m wearing today.

Nadia may not be here, but I’m still dressing up. And yes, it’s absolutely for the man whose office is down the hall.

“Thanks,” I say as I grab my laptop and head out my door to meet with Grayson.

I tell myself I am going to stick with my work rule and will not make my daydream of throwing myself over the desk and into Grayson’s lap a reality. It becomes a sort of chant inside my head as I walk down the hall and knock on his door. *Stay in your seat. Stay in your seat. Stay in your seat.*

“Come in,” I hear his deep voice through the door after I knock a couple of times.

“Hey,” I say when I open the door and see him sitting there, wearing a blue shirt rather than his normal white one.

Do not throw yourself over that desk, Mila. Control yourself.

I tell myself this because he looks so freaking good in the blue, but also because he seems completely exhausted and stressed. There’s a deeper crease

between his brows than there was just yesterday. I want to hug him and make it all better. But that's not exactly something I have the capability of doing. I can hug him, sure, but I can't make this go away. Things won't get better until September, and even then, there's no guarantee.

It makes me wonder if maybe this burgeoning thing we've started should possibly take a back seat. I mean, it sort of already has, even without saying the words. It has to be this way. Getting GlobeTrotter ready has to be our first priority.

"Hey there," Grayson says, the corners of his mouth lifting upward. His eyes are warm and appreciative as he takes me in, even though the bags underneath are darker than I've ever seen them. And that includes the morning after barely sleeping on a dirt rain forest floor, so that's saying something.

I shut the door and head over to the white leather chair sitting opposite his desk and take a seat. "You're wearing blue," I say.

He looks down at his shirt and then back up at me, a little smirk on his face. "Thought I'd switch things up."

"I like it," I tell him.

"Good, because you're who I was thinking of when I put it on this morning."

My heart does a little jumping thing, and I can't help the smile that spreads across my face.

He echoes the sentiment, but then, in the next second, he runs a hand down his face, wiping the smile away, the tiredness and stress replacing it. My grin drops a bit.

"How much sleep did you get last night?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "I think maybe three hours?"

"Grayson," I say, my voice sounding more like a chastisement than the worry I'm actually feeling for him. He's not going to be able to keep this up.

"It's fine," he says, waving my worry away with his hand. "I can catch up in September."

"Promise me you'll sleep tonight," I say. "More than three hours."

"That depends," he replies, with a very mischievous look on his face. "Will you be with me?"

There's the Grayson I know and am pretty sure I love. I have fallen fast for this man. Or maybe I was falling all along, and I kept putting up barricades to block it.

I bite my lip, trying to stop the smile that wants to break out on my face. “No,” I say, shaking my head. “I only save that for missing room reservations and rain forest floors.”

This makes his impish grin turn into a full-blown smile, teeth and all. I remind myself once again to not jump over his desk and into his lap. Gosh, I want to, though. So badly.

“Should we skip this one-on-one?” Grayson asks, his eyebrows moving toward his hairline, suggestively. Clearly, my inward struggle to stay away from him is showing on my face.

“Um, no,” I say, trying to mask my emotions, and taking on a mock-offended tone. “We have things we need to talk about. Work things.”

“Okay, fine. Let’s have this meeting.”

“Thank you,” I say, giving him a single nod of my head.

“So, how are you?” he asks the question he always starts our one-on-one with.

“I’m good,” I say.

“Glad to hear it. Done anything fun lately?”

I twist my lips to the side. “Not really.”

“Ouch,” Grayson says, which makes me laugh.

“I did get lost in the rain forest with a very handsome man,” I say.

“Really? And how was that?”

I shake my head at him. “Grayson,” I say. “We need to work.” My gosh, this man is such a distraction.

His focus moves toward his desk. “It’s hard to think about all that when you’re around.”

I let out a breath. “I feel the same about you.”

The truth is, I might think about him more than I do work. It’s amazing I’ve gotten anything done with all the feelings I have running through me, thanks to the man sitting across this desk from me. He feels too far away and I kind of hate it.

Grayson sits up in his chair, setting his shoulders back. “We’re keeping work things at work, right?”

“That’s what we’re supposed to be doing,” I say.

“Okay, then let’s do that,” he says.

I nod. “Shall we go over my KPIs?”

“Sure,” he says.

We spend the next fifteen minutes going over my assigned tasks and

making sure we're on the same page.

"Everything looks great," Grayson says, once we go through my to-do list. "I appreciate all you're doing, Mila. I hope you know that."

"I do," I say.

"Well, okay, if you have nothing else for me, then I guess I'll see you later," he says, the words sounding robotic. At least he's trying.

I grab my laptop and stand up, walking toward the door. But just before opening it, I turn back toward him. "Promise me you'll sleep tonight," I say.

"I already told you my terms."

"Grayson," I chide.

"Mila," he says, his tone mimicking mine.

"You need to rest."

"Fine, I promise I'll sleep tonight," he says.

"Thank you," I say. This all feels so hard right now. I wish there was something I could do to lighten his load. I go to open the door but stop myself. There is something. Even if the thought makes my stomach do a turning thing.

"Do you think maybe we should put a pin in this?" I ask him.

He furrows his brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean ... us," I say.

He sits back in his chair, his eyes searching my face. "Is that what you want?"

"No," I tell him. "But maybe it's for the best? At least until after the summit. Then we'll have more time to see where this goes."

My stomach is twisted in knots. I don't want this, but also, it might be the best thing to do right now, for both of us—but especially for Grayson.

When he doesn't respond, I keep going. "We're both busy, and I think not having to try to navigate all this right now will make things less complicated."

He swipes a hand down his face again. The gesture seems more from frustration this time. I'm frustrated too. But I think it's what we need to do.

"I guess that makes sense," he finally says. There's irritation in his tone.

I nod, my hand on the door. "I think it's for the best."

"Okay," he says.

"I'll ... see you later then," I say, giving him a closed-mouth smile before opening the door and walking out.

This is the right thing to do. I feel good about it. Except no, actually, I

don't. I don't like this at all, and I'm pretty sure I'll spend the next two and a half months pining for Grayson, which will take over my brain and possibly affect my work worse than if I'd just let things stand as they were. I'll just have to compartmentalize. I'll stick this in a box labeled *Whyyyyyy?*, tuck it in the back of my brain, and pull it back out in September.

I walk into my office and set my computer down, then turn to find Grayson coming in after me, shutting the door behind him.

"No," he says, standing there with his hands on his hips, a fierce sort of look on his face.

"N-no?" I stammer, taking a step toward him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't agree with that," he says. "I'm not putting a pin in this."

"Grayson—"

"I know it's hard right now, and we have a lot to do, but I'm not going to be able to just set my feelings for you aside and direct my focus solely on my work. My brain doesn't work like that. I could barely manage it before when I thought you were with someone else."

"But—"

"Can you?"

"Can I what?"

"Just shut your feelings off like that?"

I could tell him yes, which would basically be lying. I can compartmentalize some things, but not this. I tried before when I was fighting my attraction to him, and even then, when I didn't know things were reciprocated, I couldn't really do it. But now, when I know he wants this? It seems impossible. Still, I would try if it meant making it easier on him.

I shake my head instead.

He grabs me then. Turns me and pushes me up against my office door. His hands are at my waist, his face is close to mine. I can smell cologne I don't recognize on his skin, and the mint on his breath.

"Do you not want this?" he asks, his voice low, just above a whisper. "Because if you've changed your mind, then that's one thing."

I shake my head. "I want this," I say. "I just thought with everything going on it might be easier."

He lets out a breath—I can feel it on my neck. "It wouldn't be easier for me. I promise. Both ways are hard. But if we're in this together, we'll make it work. I don't have a lot to offer right now; I might be the CEO of a sinking ship."

“Grayson, I don’t care about that,” I say. And it’s the truth. The boss thing has never been about money, and especially not with Grayson. It’s always been about him and who he is.

“So, are you?” he asks. “Are you in this with me?”

“I am,” I say.

“Good,” he says, sounding almost relieved. “I’m going to kiss you now, and I don’t care if we’re at work.”

“Okay,” I say, just before his lips land on mine. We go from zero to sixty in an instant, as I wrap my arms around him, and he explores my mouth with his. His hands are at my back now, and he pulls me into him, holding me close.

We are making out in my office, and honestly, this might be the hottest moment of my life.

Someone taps on my door, breaking the spell I was just under, kissing Grayson like my life depended on it in my office. “Give me a minute,” I say.

“Okay, but I wanted to remind you of your meeting with Sebastian,” Britain says through the door.

“Crap,” I say, my voice a whisper.

Grayson chuckles. “This is going to be hard,” he whispers back.

“We’ll make it work,” I say, leaning in and kissing him. “But you have to go. I need a second.” Mostly to calm my beating heart and wait for the swelling in my lips to go down.

He smiles. “I’ll go talk to him for a minute, give you some time.”

“Thank you,” I say. He leans in and kisses me lightly.

“Are you working late tonight?” he asks, his hand on the door handle.

“Of course,” I say. “I’ve got this boss, you see. He’s got us working practically around the clock.”

“What a tool,” he says, and we both smile. He makes to open the door but then turns back toward me. “Let’s order dinner and eat in my office later.”

I smile. I love that Grayson isn’t just a man of words. “Love to.”

He pulls me in for a kiss one more time before opening my door and walking out.

Twenty-Three

Mila

TWO AND A HALF MONTHS LATER

“I CAN’T THANK YOU ALL enough,” Grayson says as he stands at the end of the long table in an Italian restaurant in the West Village of Manhattan, most of the leadership team sitting around it. “It took a lot of work, but we did it. And I don’t know if it could have gone any better than it did.”

I look around the table. Everyone is here except for Simone and Sebastian, who stayed back to manage things at the office. Even Shane came along, sitting next to Nadia, his arm around the back of her chair. He’ll be our first investor in AppInnovate, now that GlobeTrotter has been declared this year’s “App to Download” at the summit. We were immediately inundated with investors, and Shane made it known he wanted to be first.

Grayson will be able to pay back his family, sooner than he’d thought, and I could see it in his eyes when he realized that burden was lifting. He’s already been repairing his relationship with his family, in little steps, because honestly there hasn’t been much time for that. But I’ve been with him every step of the way. We even went over to his parents’ house for dinner last week. His mom cried when she saw him. He cried, too. Then I cried. It was a big crying fest.

The last months have been stressful, to say the least. We’ve all been working round the clock trying to make this happen. User testing brought out more issues and flaws within the UI, but somehow, we made it work.

When Grayson was on the App Growth Summit stage, telling everyone about the app and all its capabilities, I looked around me at my coworkers, and we were all smiling from ear to ear, because we’d done it. We’d made it happen. The icing on the cake was being the featured app at the summit. It’s

huge, really. I think things are about to get very exciting for AppInnovate.

Also exciting, but definitely not expected, was Grayson walking off the stage, coming over to me, and kissing me on the mouth in front of all my coworkers, surprising everyone, including me. Well, everyone except Nadia, of course. She wasn't expecting the kiss, but she's known about our relationship from the start. We did our best to not tell the others, and somehow, we managed it. Not that we didn't want them to know—this was never going to be an indefinitely-secret thing—but we didn't want to add office gossip in what was already a complicated time, having to navigate this new relationship while trying to save GlobeTrotter. We didn't need everyone up in our business. I got plenty of that from Nadia, who wanted to know every little detail.

There weren't a ton of details, to be honest. Grayson and I found as much time as we could to be together, which wasn't ever enough. But we managed, knowing that soon we'd have more. Just having each other, knowing we were there for one another, made things easier. And of course, there were times at work when he'd just walk into my office, shut the door behind him, and kiss me until I couldn't think straight. I hope he keeps that up, even now that we'll have a lot more free time. There's still plenty to do, but it won't be half as much as the work we've been doing since the end of June.

After Grayson finishes his little speech and we all clink our glasses together, he sits down next to me and leans over toward my ear.

"In case I haven't said it today, I'm ridiculously in love with you," he whispers in my ear, and I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face.

"You have," I whisper back. "Feel free to keep telling me, though."

He says it again, and I say it back, then he leans in and kisses me on the cheek.

He told me he loved me about a month after we started things. We were sitting on his couch trying, unsuccessfully I might add, to work and keep our hands off each other. And then he just said it. "I'm in love with you, Mila."

He said he was pretty much already there before we even kissed, which I thought was a little crazy, but then again, I was pretty much there myself. I just wouldn't admit it. So, I said it back, of course. We've been saying it ever since. Finding creative ways to say it. My favorite is when I get an email from him at work with *IMPORTANT* in the subject line, and when I open it, it just says three little words. My favorite words from him. Right up there with, *I brought you a snack*. The man just gets me.

“You two,” Nadia says, pointing to me and then Grayson. “You two should get married already.”

I shake my head at her and give her a thumbs-up, even though I’m smiling. Wedded bliss looks good on her, and she wants everyone to join in her happiness.

I look at Grayson, and he looks at me, and he gives me a knowing smile. I know that’s where he believes this is headed because he’s already told me so. I think so too, but it feels too soon. Except I keep thinking of the line Nadia said that I’m still pretty sure she stole from a movie: “*When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want that life to start as soon as possible.*” I think I get it now.

Whenever it happens, I can tell you this: It definitely won’t be a big affair, and if I have my way, there’ll be no wedding at all. It will just be him and me and a courthouse.

That sounds like a fairy tale wedding to me.

THE WEDDING (

Grayson Michael Mann

&

Mila Andrea Bank

Grayson

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

I ASKED MILA TO MARRY me the spring after we released GlobeTrotter to the world.

Yes, it was soon, and no, I don't really care. Who decides what the right timing is for stuff like this, anyway? Plus, I'd been pining over her for pretty much the entirety of two years before we finally started dating. I've basically loved her for well over three years now, and it feels like a long enough time to me.

GlobeTrotter was doing so well, I took my leadership team to Vegas to do some planning, team building, and celebrating. I'd wanted to go to Oahu to celebrate, but we aren't far enough in the black for that kind of trip yet. Maybe next year.

As far as work trips go, this isn't quite as great as my trip to Hawaii with Mila last year. Nothing will compare to that. Even the getting lost part. I'm not saying I'd want to do it again, but my life changed for the better after that in so many ways. The best part was Mila, of course.

The trip so far had consisted of a dinner upon arrival and a tour the next morning of the Valley of Fire, where we saw amazing red sandstone formations and incredible canyons.

We had some free time after a planning meeting the next morning, so Mila and I went to the pool. It was a beautiful, hot day in May, and the water felt great. Having Mila next to me was even better.

We were lying side by side on a double chaise lounge just after we'd gotten out of the pool, and I looked over at her, and I don't know what it was—maybe how she was wearing a floppy hat and glasses even though we were sitting under a large palm tree for shade. Or maybe it was the drops of water that clung to her skin. There was no real justification, but for some reason, in that moment, I knew I didn't want to spend another day without her being mine. Legally mine.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked.

"I was just thinking," I said. I didn't even try to deny it. I was, in fact, staring.

She took off her glasses then and turned her beautiful face my way. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking we should get married while we're here," I said.

"What?" she asked with a sort of incredulous laugh.

"Right now," I said.

"Grayson," she said, sitting up. "You can't be serious."

"Why not? The ring I bought for you is upstairs in my computer bag."

She was smiling big then. "You brought a ring with you?"

"I wanted to give it to you while we were here, but then I just got to thinking, we're already in Vegas, and you don't want a big wedding."

"The only wedding I want is you and me and a justice of the peace," she said.

"We're in the best place to do exactly that," I said with a shrug. "What do you say?"

"I say ... yes," she said.

"Really?" I'd half expected her to say no at the time, but looking back, I don't know why I was surprised. This was Mila, after all.

"Let's do it."

And so, we did. At a little venue in Vegas that actually turned out to be quite nice. I wore jeans and a white button-down shirt, as requested by Mila, and she wore a red dress. Yes, *the* red dress. And she looked amazing. I will

never let her get rid of that dress.

So, all alone with someone from the venue as a witness, we made promises to love and care for each other for as long as we both shall live. And that's exactly what I plan to do.

We went to dinner that night with the team. No one but us knew what we'd done. It was sort of our secret wedding reception, even though Mila didn't want to call it that.

I'm happy to report that not one thing was jinxed.



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Becky Monson is a mother of three and a wife to one but would ditch them all for Henry Cavill. She used to write at night but now she's too dang tired, so she fits in writing between driving kids around to activities and running a household. With a talent for procrastination, Becky finds if she doesn't watch herself, she can waste an entire afternoon binge-watching Netflix. She's a USA Today bestseller and an award-winning* author, and when she does actually get off Netflix to write, she uses humor and true life experiences to bring her characters to life.

Becky wishes she had a British accent and a magic spell to do her laundry. She has been trying to give up Diet Coke for the past ten years but has failed miserably.

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