



HAYES BROTHERS SERIES
BOOK SIX

TOO long

I. A. DICE

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eBook Cover: Dez Purington at Pretty in Ink Creations

PROLOGUE

Colt

READY.

A girl wearing a skin-tight, white top and a skirt so short her ass is showing points her manicured finger directly at me.

Same old, same old. You'd think they'd change how they start the races. Mix it up a bit, but no. Always the same routine.

Tonight, Chantel, the main organizer's baby sister got the privilege. She's turning eighteen tomorrow, and according to Curly, starting a race is a plausible gift. She's smiling coquettish smiles, five feet from my hood, as she gets the crowd going.

The dry desert wind cuts through the night, breaching my car, every particle charged with palpable excitement. I can fucking taste the gasoline and the metallic tang of adrenaline in the evening air. Cars with neon underglows cast halos across the beaten airfield tarmac while people rush around, cash whirling from hand to hand with the speed of thought.

Thirty seconds left to place bets.

A cacophony of blaring horns, deep bassline, and chatter fills my ears. It'll linger like an echo long after I get home. It always does.

A beefed-up Ranger with flame decals guns its engine. The exhaust's roar mixes with the beat pumping out of its speakers—a background track for the girls dancing around it.

I fucking love it here.

Steady.

Chantel's finger moves left to point at my opponent, Otis, sat at the wheel of his Supra.

It's a sweet ride. Not as sweet as the custom V12 Camaro parked nearby, though, and not half as powerful. It has no chance against my Challenger, but that didn't stop Otis

running his mouth fifteen minutes ago, saying he'll swallow me whole and spit me back out.

Wishful thinking.

Since I started racing almost three years ago, I only lost twice. Tonight won't be the third. No, tonight, I'm taking Otis's five grand and leaving it in the homeless shelter's mailbox. I do that every weekend. Instead of hoarding the cash I don't need, I choose between soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and animal rescue centers. They'll make better use of the cash than I would.

I make enough in my day job.

Chantel lifts both hands, sending one last pointed stare at us before she drops her arms.

Go.

I floor the gas pedal immediately. The Challenger shoots forth, gaining speed faster than the onlookers can comprehend. Three seconds and I'm already a car length ahead of the cocky teen. He's new here. Lacks experience, reflexes, and—by the looks of things—quite a bit of horsepower.

He could use a lesson in humility... a lesson I'll gladly provide. Colt Hayes: self-proclaimed ethics teacher.

One, two, three: zero to sixty. Five, six, seven: one hundred miles an hour... Sixteen, seventeen: one-fifty on the clock. Half a mile in less than nineteen seconds.

Time to break.

I throw the car sideways, drifting around a metal barrel that marks the halfway point. Otis catches up with me on the drift exit point, but as soon as I press the gas, I fly forward.

Adrenaline courses through my veins, my heart pumps blood faster, and I feel *alive*.

More alive than I usually do.

I shouldn't be here today. I should be at my parents' house for the monthly get-together. My brother Cody made it

abundantly clear I can't be late because our older brother—he didn't mention which—has some important news to drop.

It hardly matters. Regardless whose news, it's definitely another wedding or pregnancy announcement. And that's why I'm here, not there. That's why I'm not impatiently awaiting the news like Cody is.

I dread the elated high that settles over the whole family whenever my brothers announce something big. The endless congratulations, cheers, and smiles...

Never aimed at me.

I love my family. I'm happy they're happy, but I'm also incredibly aware I'm alone.

No big news.

No small news.

No news at all.

It's tough being the last single Hayes. Even our three-years-younger sister Rose is in a two-year-long relationship. She'll be dropping engagement news soon, I bet.

Seeing how happy my siblings are, I'm jealous. That's all. I want what they have... I just can't fucking find it.

So here I am... racing. Chasing my own brand of high. Chasing the only thrill that makes me feel remotely happy.

Shaking off the depressing thoughts, I focus on the stretch of tarmac ahead. I'm twenty-four, for fuck's sake. There's still time to find my happy ever after.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself. Too bad it's harder to believe as the days pass. I didn't even think about a wife and kids until Conor fell in love with Vivienne. It got worse when, against all odds, Cody went with Blair.

Now that I'm the last man standing, I feel like an outcast in my own family.

In my chaotic, unpredictable life, racing is the constant that keeps me grounded and relatively patient.

The engine roars beneath me, marshaling my thoughts. Not even flying a hundred and thirty miles an hour down the straight keeps my head in the game these days.

Still, I try.

I started racing for fun, but as the years went by, fifteen seconds of adrenaline rush turned into my escape from reality. Something to keep me centered, focused, and sane.

I grip the steering wheel tighter. Every nerve in my body tenses like a drawn string. It's the good kind of nerves, exciting, freeing... until everything changes.

In the side mirror, I catch a flash of the Supra gaining unnatural speed. He's on my tail within a second, not a feat he could pull off without a nitrous boost.

Looks like he didn't get the memo. Curly doesn't allow this shit here. It's fucking dangerous.

This will be Otis's first and last race.

I'm in a losing position, waiting until the fucker leaps ahead, but before I can fully register it, there's a sudden jolt as the Supra's front end clips my rear bumper, sending my Challenger into a spin.

Not good. At this speed, spins are *never* good. My mind fucking soars as I try to regain control. The world blurs. Neon colors and sharp lights from the sidelines whip past. Tires scream against the beaten tarmac so loud I can't hear anything else. My heart jackhammers in my chest as I grip the steering wheel with all I've got, fighting against the violent swing of my car. But it's too fast, too sudden.

And then I notice where I'm heading. Directly at the neatly parked cars ahead. Time slows, each millisecond dragging like I'm underwater, every movement slow, exaggerated. The front of a Dodge RAM flashes before my eyes, and the realization hits like a punch to the gut.

This might be it.

The end.

Game over.

The distance between my Challenger and the RAM evaporates and no matter what I do... nothing works. The steering wheel has no effect. Slamming the brake doesn't change a thing.

The only way to stop is to crash.

Memories whip through my mind. The infamous *life-flashing*. My brothers, my parents, my friends. Countless laughs and fights. Endless family dinners filled with pregnancy, engagement, and wedding announcements. The happiness surrounding me daily but is never my own.

My life doesn't have the same sweet taste my brothers get to savor, and in this slow-motion descent into death, I realize I haven't truly lived.

Regret gushes through me. The thought of dying before I found my purpose terrifies me more than the impending crash. Amid the noise of screeching tires and distorted shouts, a haunting quiet fills my head.

I haven't found my meaning yet.

I can't fucking die.

It's too soon.

And just as this thought sinks, I hear the deafening sound of my Challenger colliding head-on with the RAM.

Metal twists.

Glass shatters.

The pungent smell of gasoline fills my nose. My head jerks back and the seat belt cuts into my chest as the exploding airbag almost gives me a heart attack.

For a moment, the ringing in my ears overpowers everything. Then, slowly, muffled gasps, shouts, and cries filter in. It's blurry around, like I'm looking through a dense fog. I think it's my eyes before I realize clouds of smoke are hissing from the hood. Or what's left of it.

Blood fills my mouth as I shake uncontrollably, crushed between the bent steering wheel and the seat.

Distant shouts, thumping of feet against the tarmac, panicked cries... it all comes and goes as if someone's tapping the mute button again and again and again.

My mind's swimming. Every breath is a chore as my lungs struggle against the weight pressing down on my chest.

A voice breaks through, muffled but familiar.

Cody?

No.

He's miles away. Or maybe he's right here, pulling me out of this twisted metal coffin.

No... it's not him. It can't be. My mind's playing tricks on me as it slowly switches off.

Darkness threatens to pull me under, the weight of regrets even heavier. It's fucking painful... maddening, excruciating. A mental anguish rivaling the pain that floods every inch of my body.

And so when the darkness comes, I don't fight.

ONE

Colt

THREE YEARS LATER

“IT’S TIME!” Conor booms, storming into my house without so much as a courtesy knock. He’d bite my head off if I did the same. “You ready?”

I cock an eyebrow over the screen of my laptop, surveying him with Cody in tow. Dressed to paint the town red, they’re an unfamiliar sight. I can’t recall the last time we went out together. It must’ve been before Conor’s twins were born.

“I’m missing some information,” I say, my eyes darting to the family birthday list on the fridge. The Hayes clan now totals twenty-seven. While my memory’s great, remembering that many birthdays is a struggle.

A quick scan confirms I haven’t forgotten any looming celebrations. There’s nothing till the twins’ fourth birthday next month—a party I’m already prepared for. My assistant bought the gifts and cleared three hours in my schedule.

“Nothing in my calendar includes you two today,” I add, my attention snapping back to the screen.

Undeterred, Cody rolls up the sleeves of his jersey, perching his butt against my kitchen island. “We offer our sincerest apologies for failing to arrange a beer-drinking session in advance. Would you be *oh so* kind and fit us in for an emergency meeting this fine Friday evening?”

Asshole.

He’s close enough for a well-aimed punch to his bicep that wipes the smartass smirk off his face.

“To the point, Cody. What’s up? Trouble in paradise? You need a shoulder to cry on?” My eyes flick to Conor. “Or is it your paradise that’s in trouble?”

“Actually, it’s yours,” Conor chirps, making himself at home as he rummages through my fridge, probably searching for beer. “We’re staging an intervention.”

Asshole number two.

Though I admit, they got my attention.

My veins pulse, an unspoken challenge hanging in the air. Pushing my laptop aside, I scrutinize them both, wondering if they figured out my well-kept secret.

If so, how much do they know?

A quick appraisal tells me they don’t know shit. They’re positively buzzing underneath their forced gazes of condemnation. If they knew, they wouldn’t be doing this alone. Our four older brothers, younger sister, their better halves, and our parents would be here, armed with moralizing speeches that wouldn’t differ much from those they dished out three years ago while I lay in a hospital bed, barely hanging onto life.

Oh, and I’d be sporting a black eye and a split lip by now.

“Again, some info missing. Either spit it out or say goodbye,” I clip, accepting a Corona from Conor.

“We’re going out,” he clarifies.

“No shit, Sherlock. I gathered that much.”

Cody plops down on the bar stool, elbows hitting the counter. “You work like a fucking robot, bro. You barely have time to breathe, let alone meet someone, so we’re going old school and making things happen.” He grins, misplaced pride flashing in his eyes.

I doubt whatever they have in store tonight was *his* idea. Every scrap of Conor’s attention is taken up by his sons these days. No room in his head for brilliant ideas.

“Logan was reminiscing the other day about the bets he used to make with Theo and Nico,” he continues. “One evening in particular gave us an excellent idea.”

Not rolling my eyes proves a struggle. I know what he's talking about. It's one of Logan's favorite stories. Not just because those bets helped him get together with Cass, but also because Nico had been helping him all along while Logan thought Nico wouldn't accept him and Cassidy being together.

"If you say—"

"Express Dates!" Conor finishes my sentence, wearing a Joker-style grin. "Didn't see that coming, did you?"

"Only from a mile away," I shoot back. "And the answer is, as you very well expect, a loud, resounding *no*."

"Give us one good reason why not. What harm will it do?"

"Other than annoying your wives?"

Cody tears the bottle from his lips mid-chug. "Fine, so we lied. It wasn't exactly our idea. The girls are in on this. They know where we're going and approved this mission."

Conor smirks under his nose. "We're your wingmen, bro. Not participating. We'll be at the bar in the next room. If you find someone, great. You'll take her home or whatever. If not, there's always beer."

"The answer's still *no*. You two are so busy with your lives that you hardly ever have time for a drink. So, like the good brother I am, I'll fit you into my schedule tonight, but I'm not wasting half the evening getting turned down by desperate women."

They share a loaded look, crossing their arms in perfect sync. Their stance, combined with the holes their eyes burn in my face, quickens my pulse.

I don't need to hear what they're thinking.

We were born with a nonverbal way of communicating—triplet skill, I call it—and right now, I read them like a book.

I'm off my game. I should've trusted my instinct the moment they said *intervention*. They do *know*, and they're ready to use that knowledge against me.

“Fuck,” I hiss, running a heavy hand down my face. “How did you find out?”

Cody chugs the rest of his beer, inspiring Conor to follow his lead. Once they’re done, he grabs two more from the fridge. Looks like wherever we end up tonight, I’m the designated driver.

Unless they ordered a taxi.

I fucking hope they did because numbing the humiliation with bucketloads of beer is my best bet right now.

“You really thought we wouldn’t figure it out sooner or later?” Cody scoffs, taking his bun apart only to redo it exactly the same. “Give us some credit.”

“You followed me again?”

“Not this time. If it makes you feel better, it took us a while to catch on.”

A *while*? It took almost a year and a half. That’s not a while.

“I’m guessing you started again when you bought that cocktail bar in Pomona, right?”

“A little earlier,” I admit. Playing dumb won’t save me. They wouldn’t be here, suggesting Express Dates, if they didn’t have leverage. Interestingly, they kept my secret safe instead of ratting me out to the whole family.

“Told you,” Conor pokes Cody’s ribs before setting the second beer bottle beside my half-empty one.

I guess a taxi it is.

“What gave me away?”

“Your mood.” Conor opens the fridge again, fetching a fruit bowl my maid prepared for my midnight snack. “You were throwing hissy fits every day after you left the hospital, and then suddenly, you were just... calm. Composed. At first, we thought you met someone. I mean, we thought you were smart, so we didn’t think you’d be racing again after you

almost fucking died. But weeks turned to months and with no girl in sight we scrapped that idea.”

With a defeated sigh, I finish beer number one, clutching the second cold bottle with both hands. The lack of someone significant in my life, that one special person, might be why I ended up clinically dead for over four minutes.

My brothers have been building their families for years. It took a toll on me, the odd one out. The only single brother out of seven, always alone at family gatherings, always alone at home, always missing *something*.

Cody’s right. I work like a robot. Always have. Racing is my time-out from that and the loneliness that increases with every Hayes who goes down on one knee.

Before the accident, I still believed my time would come. Even though it was taking longer than I hoped, I thought one day love would just happen for me on its fucking own.

Everything changed the night of the crash.

Once I was discharged from the hospital, I spent six months in physiotherapy, growing ever more desperate with each passing day.

Once back on my feet, I signed up for every available dating website and went on countless dates, sometimes juggling three or four in a single evening, but nothing ever stuck.

After a year of disappointment, I called it quits.

Maybe I’m destined to be a forever bachelor.

“I assume this is the part where you lay down your demands,” I probe, even though I know the answer. “My participation in exchange for your silence, correct?”

“Sounds like blackmail, doesn’t it?” Conor bounces his eyebrows. “Be glad we kept our mouths shut. You’d be one sorry motherfucker if the others found out you’re racing.”

“Don’t worry, though,” Cody coos, treating me with the same sweet, coy voice he uses on our two nieces. “We have

your back, as always.” He clears his throat, rising from the stool as he confirms, “Express Dates in exchange for silence.”

“One evening?” I ask, ensuring there aren’t any loopholes they can hang me with later.

Not that I have any say in the matter. They fucking own me and know damn well I’ll do whatever they say as long as they keep my extracurricular activities a secret.

“Yeah... that would be a *no*.” Conor huffs a laugh. “I mean, if you find the love of your life tonight, then sure, one evening. Otherwise we’ll keep requesting your precious time until the right girl materializes on your path.”

“You can’t manipulate feelings, Conor. Of all people, you should know best that shit like that doesn’t happen on schedule.”

Cody bobs his head with a solemn look. “You’re right. The Cupid acts in mysterious ways, but he sure as hell can’t work if you’re stuck in your office or at home all the livelong day. You won’t meet your future wife in your fucking kitchen.”

“What makes you think I even want a wife?” I ask, watching them share another loaded look. “Never mind.”

They helped me set up my dating profiles, then listened to me vent about the women I met and discarded along the way. They know I want a wife and my own baby-making factory. How could I not? With six brothers enjoying their happily ever after, it’s hard not to believe in the institution.

Conor quickly checks his phone, probably worried he missed a message from his Little Bee. I’m surprised he took time off fussing over his twins. He hardly ever leaves the house without them.

Cody’s yet to become a dad, but his presence is still surprising. He’s so fucking whipped it makes me nauseous.

And jealous.

We’re all twenty-seven, so I expected at least one little Hayes from him, since my family produce kids like we’re

living in a post-apocalyptic world and we're the only ones who can repopulate the planet.

For now, though, Cody says Blair's busy making a name for herself in the fashion industry, and they have time. I call bullshit. I think he's perfectly happy as favorite uncle to most of our nieces and nephews.

He'll probably need to split his charming uncle persona further at some point; I doubt all the baby-making factories in the family are closed.

Conor says his twin chaos generators are quite enough, and seeing the mayhem they cause, I agree. Theo's happy with two boys, as is Shawn, and Logan officially said *enough* when he got his daughter a little over two years ago.

That means four out of eight Hayes baby factories are closed, but I don't think Nico's satisfied with just one.

In my humble opinion, *one* is too many for him. I take back everything I ever said about how overprotective he was toward his wife, Mia. He's twenty times worse with his daughter.

Two gorgeous baby girls born a week apart. Logan never lets us forget that his daughter, Ava, is older than Melody by seven days, making him the first of us to father a daughter.

"Fine. Express Dates it is, but if you breathe a word—"

"We won't," Conor says, holding his pinky out. "Pinky promise. We won't even mention how dumb you are as long as you give this a fair shot."

Conor points toward the hallway. "The taxi will be here in fifteen minutes. Go pretty yourself up. We'll be waiting outside."

I pull off a convincing scowl, taking my beer with me as I rise to my feet. I'm not half as pissed off as I should be. Deep down, a small part of me, the part that yearns for more than casual fucks, stirs to life again.

Looks like I didn't bury it deep enough.

TWO

Colt

WE STRIDE INTO A HIGH-END COCKTAIL BAR in the heart of Newport Beach. I check my watch: ten minutes to spare before the show begins at nine o'clock sharp. According to Cody, this isn't the same place they held Express Dates when Logan and Nico went that one time.

Too bad, maybe that other bar had some kind of special powers.

My brothers walk a step behind, one on the left, the other on the right, like my faithful wingmen. Although... to the passive observer they might come across as low-grade goons.

I'm forward and center, which, I believe, makes me the boss.

So far, so good.

The interior design lifts my mood a little. This is my kind of scenery: luxurious yet modern. Edison-style lighting arrangements, hanging low above the polished wooden tables, cast a warm glow over emerald-green velvet furnishings.

We navigate through the busy crowd toward the bar at the back. There's no line, and save for three overdressed women in their prime, the stools stand empty.

If they're here for the Express Dates, I'm fucked.

They look at least twice my age.

"You think they're participating?" I ask Cody in a hushed voice, motioning toward the pearl-loving, silver-haired trio.

Cody's lips curl into a knowing smirk. "Possibly, but not in the group you're signed up for. From what the guy said over the phone, they divide the participants into age categories—twenties, thirties, and golden-oldies. If you're ever curious, they host something like this for swingers on Sundays."

"Sure. Why wouldn't I share my imaginary wife?" I clip, snatching the ice-cold beer Conor's got me.

My gaze sweeps the room, my attention stolen by a group of stunning girls near the entrance. They look about my age, which is promising. Especially since they all seem to radiate the kind of confidence I enjoy: chins high, calculating eyes... a bit of an attitude, I bet.

Too bad they pale under closer scrutiny.

The overdone makeup marring their faces isn't my thing. Ever since I met Mia, I started noticing girls who prefer a natural look, and found I prefer it too.

But hey, never say never.

They're here to impress men, and with a limited time to do so—five minutes per date—looks unavoidably become the first *hook*...

As much as I want to detest the idea of having to spend the next two hours with twenty different women, I can't deny the thrill coursing through my veins. It's been months since I've done any socializing, and this sparkling anticipation is a clear sign my isolation wasn't the best choice.

Swiveling to face my brothers, I arch an eyebrow at the mischief and cheap wisdom dancing in their eyes.

Cody leans in, grinning like a child on Christmas. "Alright, listen up. You're out of practice, so you need a few pointers."

"I'm out of practice?" I scoff, leaning against the counter, my gaze scanning the sea of unfamiliar faces. "Please. It's been five years since you've done any flirting and I'm still more equipped to handle this than you ever were."

"Dream on," he mumbles, theatrically rolling his eyes. "You only have five minutes."

"Ten. There are two rounds."

"Smartass. Alright, fine. Two lots of five minutes. That's still not much, so forget small talk. Ditch the standard date questions. If you ask their favorite color, they'll lose interest faster than you can say *awkward*. Don't be boring, but don't try too hard."

Conor, always helpful, nods in agreement. “Yeah, and don’t brag. Don’t be a cliché. Don’t be predictable. Find the sweet spot in between. We clear?”

Do they really think they’re helping?

“So... *unpredictable*,” I summarize, tapping my fingers against the beer bottle. “I can’t believe you guys got wives by having a ‘favorite color’ as your standard date question. Who even asks that?”

They both look ready to swing for me.

“Alright, I hear you,” I continue before they take their chance. “I’ll make sure to leave a lasting impression.”

They look between each other, both unappeased, and Cody lifts a warning finger at me. “If you purposely fuck this up—”

“I won’t. Chill out. You’re acting like I haven’t been on a date before. I know what I’m doing. Just don’t get your hopes up.”

Cody crosses his arms, the scowl giving way to a knowing smirk. “I don’t expect this to work first time around. Consider tonight a practice run. You’ve been out of commission for months, bro. You’re a bit rusty.”

“Don’t come on too strong,” Conor chips in. “Keep it light.”

“Not too strong, huh? I should be as chill as you were with Vivienne? You wore her down until she caved. Too strong worked for you, so maybe it’ll work for me?”

He shakes his head. “No way. You lack my charm, and Cody’s right; you’ve been out of the game too long. Just find your rhythm and don’t look so sour. It’ll be fun! You never know what hidden treasures you might find.”

“Hidden treasures?” I cock an eyebrow, chugging half my beer. When did he get so sappy? “That a bedtime story you’re reading the twins? If there are any treasures here, they’re hidden in a minefield of potential awkwardness.”

Cody throws an arm around my shoulder, grinning from ear to ear. “Hate all you want but give it a fair shot.” He yanks me closer, lowering his voice. “Look at the girls by the stairs. They’re all pretty.”

I follow his line of sight and my eyes are naturally drawn to a deep, rich purple dress.

Purple is my favorite color.

The girl wearing it is standing with friends, but I don’t notice anything about them. I focus on her thick, heavy, waist-long, chocolate-brown hair. It hides most of her face as she turns between two girls who hang on her arms much like Conor and Cody flank mine.

She turns again, tucking a handful of strands behind her ear as if she senses my gaze and is trying to offer a better look. I’m a fucking goner as I catch sight of her lips. Full and juicy, ready to be bitten. Barely a hint of raspberry color: a faint lip stain or natural shade, either way, it suits her.

I treat myself to a cursory once-over. Cody’s right. She’s pretty, but an exasperated look paints her face—upturned nose, eyes rolling. Paired with the in-your-face sexy dress, she gives off a pick-me-girl vibe. An attention-seeking flirt. It’s hardly a good first impression, but under closer scrutiny, her posture suggests she’s uncomfortable with it.

She tugs the hem lower, even though her dress doesn’t reveal much skin, grazing two inches above her knees. Long sleeves add an illusion of modesty most men wouldn’t notice, more prone to eyeing her soft tits peeking from the plunging neckline.

I’m more interested in the way she holds her glass of red wine. Knowing her drink preference will be useful later, but that’s not why I noticed. It’s because she doesn’t hold the glass like every other girl here. No, she’s pinching the stem between her thumb and forefinger, and that means she either comes from money or, at the very least, she’s well-versed in high-end table etiquette.

I should probably stop staring, but... I can't. She looks like a girl on a mission. Determined, resolute... not a shy bone in her body.

Despite the well-defined high cheekbones, immaculate jawline, and straight-as-an-arrow posture, there's a softness to her. An innocence and cuteness that scream youth. If I were to guess, I'd say she only just turned twenty.

Too young, but she's far too appealing to dismiss on a guess. It's not easy to figure out ages these days.

She's got that natural look I enjoy. Nothing besides a touch of mascara accentuating her long lashes and the raspberry tint of her lips—I can't decide if it's lipstick or all her.

I won't mind either way.

Among a throng of women made up like fashion models, she's the odd one out. A picture of restrained confidence, calculating eyes on her glass while her friends whisper in her ears, pointing out different men.

I think she may need saving as much as I do. Perhaps we can come up with a suitable arrangement.

With a plan forming inside my head, I nod at Cody, injecting as much fake conviction into that nod as I can muster. "Maybe it won't be that bad."

"That's the spirit!" he cheers, whacking me across the back with typical enthusiasm.

He's lucky I'm almost done with my beer, and only a mouthful sloshes inside the bottle, not enough to spill out. Though come to think of it, a wet, beer-smelling t-shirt would be a valid excuse to bow out early.

Damn it. Missed opportunity.

Conor orders another round just as a waiter grabs a microphone, urging the participants upstairs.

"That's you, bro." Cody pats my back again, lighter this time as if he read my mind and won't take the risk. "Remember. Confidence, intrigue, and be yourself."

How on earth he managed to find a wife is a mystery.

“Don’t linger upstairs during the break,” Conor adds. “We’ll be here somewhere. We’ll want an update.”

I leave my empty Corona on the counter while my brothers share more last-minute tips and insights on engaging conversation starters.

Their wisdom falls on deaf ears. I walk away toward the staircase, my step lighter than I thought it would be. With all the disappointments under my belt, I don’t expect miracles, but what’s the worst-case scenario?

I’ll go home alone like I do every fucking day.

THREE

Addie

“YOU LOOK THIRTY,” he says, taking a seat at my table. He places a glass of red wine beside the one I drained two dates ago.

I glance at the tag stuck to his pec—Colt.

Ugh, sounds like an asshole. Looks like an asshole, too. All brazen confidence.

If I’ve counted every boring man correctly, Colt’s number eleven, and not one thus far deserves my number.

Opting for silence, I take a second to look him over. He doesn’t come across as someone who needs Express Dates to coax a girl into bed. He’s at least six feet tall and well-sculpted. Couple that with his tattoos, chiseled jaw, deep voice, and that dark brown, sizzling stare, which has surely given a few girls heart palpitations, and you’ve got yourself a panty-melter.

His dark, curly hair is buzzed short on the sides, the rest longer, falling carelessly over his forehead, and his plain, light gray t-shirt uncovers his inked arms. Hot as the tattoos are, I’m more into the way the fabric hugs his muscular shoulders.

Pretty, pretty, pretty.

Too bad the expensive watch on his wrist and the decadent smell of his cologne are a dead giveaway he doesn’t belong here.

He also doesn’t fit my profile.

I need a guy who’ll follow orders for fifteen grand. Colt probably doesn’t leave his bed for less than twenty.

Besides, he’s emanating a pure bad-boy trouble vibe. Not the best fit.

Then again, were this a regular date, he’d score major points for the wine... even if I won’t touch it.

I like observant, attentive men. Colt sat at my table at the precise switch time, so he must've cut his previous date short to order me a drink.

“Either you lost a bet, took a bet, or your friend dragged you here, claiming it'll be fun.” I push the wine toward him. “Thank you, but I don't accept drinks from strangers unless I see them being poured.”

He raises an eyebrow, looking me over. I'm aware that I indirectly accused him of being a drink-spiking psycho, but whatever. Better safe than sorry.

To my surprise, instead of getting upset, he smiles small, his laid-back attitude shining like a beacon. “Smart,” he says, velvety voice reminding me of rich dark chocolate.

Without another word, he grabs the wine and walks away.

I raise a questioning eyebrow. He didn't look offended, so I don't think he's ditching me... I hope he isn't. That would be pretty awkward.

Thankfully, he doesn't go far and returns after forty seconds, armed with a fresh, empty glass and a sealed bottle of a 2004 Château de Beaucastel.

As if buying a two-hundred-dollar bottle for a girl he met a minute ago is a regular occurrence, he takes a seat, uncorking the bottle with long tattooed fingers.

“Watch my hands, Audrey,” he chides, pinning me with a pointed stare until I drop my gaze. “And as to your question, the latter is correct. No bets.” The cork pops out, and Colt checks I'm still watching.

Another point—he's not ogling my chest, even though the low-cut dress my best friend talked me into wearing acts like a black hole for men's eyes, dragging them down. I told Ruby *sexy* is the least of my concerns, but she didn't listen. Not even when I said I won't pay with my body.

“It won't fucking hurt if they find you attractive, will it? Bigger chance someone will agree.”

She knows men better than I do, so I took her word.

Colt here is either very well behaved or has seen enough breasts that mine don't leave much of an impression.

"Eyes on my hands," he reminds, sounding amused as he pours the red liquid into the glass. "You're not here voluntarily either," he continues, replacing the cork and sliding the wine toward me. "But you're enjoying this more than you expected, even if most guys are boring you half to death. You know exactly what you want and aren't wasting energy on men who don't meet your requirements."

I cross my arms over my chest, impressed how easily he reads me. He hasn't mentioned any specifics, but he's more observant than anyone else I've spoken to. Maybe because he's not distracted by my boobs.

Pinching the glass, I take a measured sip, savoring the taste exploding on my tongue.

"Better?" he asks, leaning back against his chair.

"Much better. Thank you." I take another sip—a tiny pause to gather my thoughts. "I'm sorry for not trusting what you said, but I still think you've bet a friend you'll leave with more numbers than him."

"Brother. Two of them, actually. They aren't participating, so there's no competition, but you can cling to the bet idea if it helps. It takes time to change your mind once it's set."

I shift in my seat, both pleased and scared how fast he's deciphered my personality. The competitor inside me takes the reins. No way I'll fall behind in this game.

"You spend your free time above or below women who are up for anything once you've bought them a drink, but it doesn't give you much pleasure." I flash him a triumphant smile. Judging by the surprise in his eyes, I hit the jackpot. "You work with your brain, not your hands."

That's a wild guess based on three things: the obvious aura of importance droning around him, the fact Newport is filled with bankers and investors, and because his hands look soft. No callouses or cuts, but...

“Given the F1 keyring peeking from your back pocket...” I ghost my finger along the rim of the glass while I think, “... and the remnants of... I want to say engine oil, under your fingernails, you’re into cars.”

Colt studies his fingers, finding a few dark spots. Dragging his eyes back up, they flit over the electronic countdown behind me. Its reflection in the mirrored ceiling tells me we only have ninety seconds before he moves to the next table.

“You graduated with honors,” he says, weighing every word. “You’re involved in charity work. You’d rather read a mediocre book than watch the best movie. You’re fully aware how beautiful you are and how it affects men, but you have more self-respect than any woman in this room.”

“A pretty face is more trouble than it’s worth, Colt.”

“A *beautiful* face is just the packaging. If there’s nothing interesting inside, it only works on teenagers.” He rests his elbows on the table, leaning over. “What are you looking for tonight?”

A man who’ll follow instructions and needs fifteen grand.

The watch on Colt’s wrist is worth at least half that, so... “Definitely not you.” I’m sure he can follow instructions just fine, but I doubt he needs the money. “What are *you* looking for?”

“You didn’t really answer my question,” he points out. “Don’t expect me to show my cards when you’re hiding your own. What are you looking for?”

A gong echoes softly around the room, announcing we have fifteen seconds. I bite my lip, looking at his mouth. Tempting. Distracting... bottom lip fuller than the top. Pretending to enjoy his kisses would be easy.

I doubt I’d have to fake it. I bet he knows how to use that mouth well. He’s handsome, clever, and interesting.

Fits the profile on that front.

I could tell him the truth, but he'd probably laugh in my face—a reminder of my idiocy I could certainly do without—so I evade him again, hoping the time runs out.

“You first.”

His eyes darken when I look up. There's something exciting about him. He makes a broody bad-boy first impression, but he's quick. Perceptive.

I'm sure he'll win the bet he claims doesn't exist. No guy in his right mind would admit he's playing a game, but I see no other explanation why he'd come here.

One thing's certain. He'll leave with enough numbers to last a few weeks. My number won't be among them, though. I'm on a mission.

No time for distractions or veering off course.

“I'm trying to survive the evening without committing double manslaughter on my brothers.” Colt swirls the whiskey in his glass, the ice almost melted. “What are *you* looking for, Audrey?” he emphasizes my name, sending goosebumps down my arms.

His tone brooks no argument. There's subtle control there, an order that turns me on so suddenly it feels like he flipped a switch in my head.

The timer counts down to zero and the men stand up and move clockwise.

Except Colt. He stays where he is, deep brown eyes coaxing an answer.

“Not you,” I repeat.

The same shadow of a smile graces his features, and this time, he's the one stealing a quick peek at my lips. Another hot flush hits my cheeks, neck, cleavage...

He's trouble, that man.

“Keep the wine safe.” With a lingering look, he vacates the chair for the next man in line.

“I’m Alex.” The guy offers a nod, patting his nametag. “And you’re... Audrey.” He wrinkles his nose. “What do I call you? Aud? Drey?”

“Most people call me Addie.”

The drunken glaze in his light-blue eyes and two popped buttons on his white shirt betray he’s had enough whiskey tonight. “Interesting way to spend Friday evening, don’t you think?”

I visualize the cringe twisting my mother’s face if she heard Alex’s poor attempts at disguising his Texan accent.

She would *not* approve. I couldn’t care less, but selling the story will be easier if the man I arrive with is at least somewhat my type.

“I expected something different,” I admit, keeping the conversation going to avoid the awkward silence. “I’m pleasantly surprised. Five minutes isn’t long, but a few men have proved it’s enough to start off strong.”

Not you, unfortunately.

“First impressions take less than thirty seconds. If you didn’t expect this...” He gestures around, “...what did you expect?”

“Mostly comic book fans, a few self-loving businessmen, unsatisfied students—”

“I expected widows and divorcees.” He casts an assessing glance down my chest. “I’m pleasantly disappointed. I wish we had more than five minutes, but we don’t, so let’s see if I can start off strong. Tell me three things about yourself.”

Losing my ladylike manners, I tip half the red wine down the back of my throat. Considering Alex’s blue eyes and blonde hair don’t fit the description I gave my mother, I don’t share any significant details. These two five-minute dates we’ll share are all Alex will get from me.

“Let’s see... I love reading, jogging, and I’m afraid of spiders.” All plausible, but only one is true. “Your turn,” I add, wrestling with the wine cork that won’t budge.

“Let me,” Alex offers, outstretching his hand.

“No, it’s okay, I’ve got it.”

“Twist, Addie,” Colt says right behind me.

I almost jump out of my skin when I look over my shoulder to see him at the next table, less than three feet between us. It doesn’t slip by me that he said *Addie*, apparently eavesdropping on our conversation from the start.

“Twist,” he repeats, using visual aids as he mimics the movement. “Don’t pull, you’ll spill it all over yourself.”

I’m twisting, but the cork doesn’t budge. Urgh, how strong is he to have shoved it in so deep?

“Never mind,” I huff, clunking the bottle down before focusing on Alex. “You were saying?”

“I’m a die-hard basketball—” He cuts himself off, glaring over my shoulder.

Colt snatches the wine, opens it with practiced ease, and fills my glass before pushing the cork back in.

“Thank you. Can you loosen it up a little so I can open it myself next time?”

“No. You need a refill; I refill.”

As soon as Colt turns to his date, Alex starts talking, every word like a fired bullet. I think he’s afraid he won’t get to say anything if he doesn’t speak fast.

“I’m a basketball fan, I work as a set designer at Pixar, and I like to sleep in.”

“Divorced?” I point at a pale line around his ring finger.

“No, absolutely not. I haven’t found one I could marry yet, let alone divorce. I wear a signet ring but forgot to put it on today. You’re very observant. What else did you notice?”

“Your watch runs two minutes late.”

He bursts out in soft, forced laughter cut short by the gong. “That’s our time almost over. This was fun. I look forward to the next date.”

“Me too.” *Not.*

“I’ll be back in an hour, Drey,” he tells my boobs.

I don’t bother correcting him that it’s either Audrey or Addie, never Drey. My brother called me Dr. Drey when we were little, and I hated it with a passion.

The next eight dates are as boring as the ones before Colt. A few guys fit my profile, but they’re so dull I couldn’t take an hour in their presence, let alone a week.

When the break kicks in, I stay seated, guarding my wine bottle. People filter past, heading downstairs to use the restroom or placing orders at the bar.

“How’s it going?” my best friend, Ruby, asks, taking the empty seat opposite, a glass of cosmopolitan clutched with both hands. “Any luck finding the prince that’ll charm your mother?”

“None whatsoever. I’d have more luck finding a suitable candidate outside the homeless shelter. At least I know those guys need money, and with their lifestyle, they wouldn’t be dull.”

“Seriously? Not one? There’s like a dozen dark-haired guys here.” She looks around, then leans over the table with a massive grin. “What about that guy who bought you this?” She gently taps the wine bottle.

“His watch is a Tag Hauer Monaco. If he can afford that, fifteen grand’s not enough.”

Felicity stops beside us, hands crossed over her chest. “What does it matter if he’s dull? You’re not getting married. As long as he follows instructions, you’ll be golden.”

“Lower the bar, Addie,” Ruby hums, covering my hand with hers to strangle my fingers. “You’ve been searching for two weeks and nothing. At this point you don’t have the privilege of picking and choosing.”

She’s not wrong.

I have less than thirty-six hours to find a fake boyfriend and prepare him for my mother’s inevitable inquisition. While

I'd love a week with someone interesting, someone I could have at least a sliver of fun with, there's no time to turn my nose up at anyone.

"Take the first guy who agrees or you'll go alone," she adds.

A soft shudder runs down my spine. Alone is not an option. My mother would fetch Grant over—a fate worse than the humiliation of arriving with someone dull.

"Fine. I'll ask guy number three."

"And if he says no?" Felicity narrows her eyes.

"I'll ask the next one that fits the description and the next one, and the next until someone says yes."

"Attagirl," she cheers, searching for the straw with open mouth. "I think David's your best bet. Maybe Greg, not Josh..."

I rack my brain, trying to recall the men Felicity's listing, but since Colt sat at my table, they've all become a blur.

I've never met anyone like him. Handsome, soft around the edges, commanding down to the bone. Observant but not cocky. Dark eyes and curly hair kissing his forehead in an artistic, effortless mess. Square jaw, tall... Hotter than hell.

That's enough to mess with my libido, but there's more. That husky voice would have any woman swoon and he's interesting. Really interesting.

Ruby waves her hand in my face. "Earth to Addie. You zoned out. What's going on?"

"Just wondering who's my best bet," I lie.

Colt isn't. He's here because of a bet, I'm absolutely sure. Why else would a man like him come to Express Dates? He could snap his fingers and have a dozen women fall at his feet. No need for an evening like this to get laid, and he hardly comes across as someone looking for more than sex.

"Alright, show time." Felicity smiles when the end-of-break gong sounds. "Good luck!"

A moment later the room fills back up and round two begins. The first two men at my table have light-hair, so I don't pop the question. Guy number three—Travis—lacks in the height department, but next to my five-two, he'll look decently taller.

His lip stud might make my mother scrunch up her button nose and ask *How do you kiss him with that thing in his mouth?* but other than that, he's plausible, and a lawyer, so that might keep Mom's digs at bay.

"You're staring, Addie," Travis smirks, rolling up the sleeves of his black shirt. "Do I have something on my face?"

Other than the self-indulgent smirk?

I sit up, both arms on the table as I lean closer so people around can't hear our conversation. "I'll be honest with you," I say, my shoulder and neck muscles tensing. "I'm not here looking to fall in love or—"

"Believe me, neither am I."

"Oh..." That's not what I expected. "Why are you here then?"

He shrugs, the corner of his lips twitching. "Call it prelude. Ten minutes to gauge intentions. I'm not looking to get saddled, but a man's gotta eat if you catch my drift." He mimics me, leaning over the table, our faces inches apart. "I'm glad we're on the same page, angel. I've booked a hotel room for tonight, and you sure were my first choice as soon I walked in."

As if pulled by invisible strings, I drag myself away, both arms snapping across my chest. "That's not why I'm here, either."

He retreats, too, confusion flooding his face. "So why did you come?"

"Never mind. You don't fit the profile."

I'm offering money in exchange for time. *Not* my body. I'd rather spend the week dodging Grant's casual marriage proposals at every turn.

Travis opens his mouth but the fifteen-second warning sounds, and no words come out.

The next guy on the list, number five, turns bright red as soon as I explain my agenda, then quietly mumbles *I'm married* and flees the scene to stand by the bar until he hears the gong. What the hell is he doing here if he's married?!

Ugh, some men are such swines.

Brushing that fiasco under the table, I wait for number eight, but when it gets to his turn I don't ask him to be my temporary boyfriend because he's so soused he wouldn't remember the deal in the morning.

Number ten thinks I'm joking, and when he realizes I'm not, he decides I'm crazy and spends the remaining two minutes engrossed in his phone.

Well... this is going *great*.

Colt approaches right on the fifteen-second-warning gong, his face unreadable but eyes hinting he's been waiting to come back to me all evening. I've been waiting for him too, it feels like for way longer than just this evening, considering my body warms itself from the inside out at the sight of him.

"You need a beer, man," he tells number ten, pointing at his empty glass.

"Grab one with me. It's been a while. This..." He motions his chin at me, "...is a waste of time."

"Up and away, Finn," Colt clips, severity settling over his features. "Don't make me say it twice."

"Seriously, man, she's—" He cuts himself off, either noticing how Colt's big hands ball into fists or maybe deciding Colt should find out from me why this is a waste of time.

He won't.

However well Colt fits the description I gave my mother, I won't ask him to spend a week with my family. He's clearly rich, so fifteen grand won't pique his interest. And... a small part of me hopes that when I come back from cruising the Caribbean, we'll grab dinner like normal people.

“What happened here?” he asks, taking a seat. “You hurt his ego? I’ve never seen Finn ignore a woman the way he just ignored you.”

“I guess I’m not his type.”

“He doesn’t have a type.” Colt smiles over the rim of his crystal glass. “Four glasses of wine seem to be your limit.”

“My limit? I’m not drunk.”

“No, but your—very convincing when you’re sober—Californian accent slips the more you drink.” He grabs the bottle to refill my glass. “One more, and I’m sure I’ll figure out which part of England you’re from.”

“I don’t mind telling. Outer West London,” I mutter, failing to roll my *rs* and make my *ts* sound like *ds*.

“So? Ready to tell me what you’re looking for?”

A boyfriend.

“I spoke to Grant today,” my mother chirps, staring at me from my phone’s small screen. “He’s thinking about taking the summer off...” She inserts a meaningful pause to let me make peace with what she’s only implied thus far. “You shouldn’t show up alone, Audrey, and Grant’s happy to—”

“I won’t be alone,” I blurt out before she shoves Grant Whitaker down my throat again. “I... I met someone.”

My mother’s eyes narrow, her lips in a line, holding off a scowl. It’s not working, but at least she’s trying. “Well, that’s news I didn’t expect. Tell me about him.”

My palms start sweating, and my heart threatens to break my ribs as the realization dawns. I just dug my own grave.

“Oh, um... well, you know my type. Tall, dark haired, handsome.”

And now I dug it even deeper. I don’t know any men who fit that description. My university friends are seventy percent women, ten percent gay, and twenty percent scrawny guys.

Save for the dark hair, I basically described Grant.

Mom raises a questioning brow. "I truly hope I raised you better than to care solely about looks, young lady."

Better to care solely about looks than the size of a man's wallet like my mother does.

"He's not just looks, Mom."

"Well...? Tell me more. What does he do? Please don't say he's a fellow student. You need stability, Audrey. Lawyer? Banker?"

"He's not a student," I mumble, taking a long sip of coffee. The more details I give, the harder it will be to find a guy who fits the description.

Urgh, who am I kidding? At this point, my only two options are faking a rare, highly contagious, life-threatening disease or arriving alone, hopefully too late for my mother to summon Grant.

Though I doubt he'd pass the opportunity to brownnose my father. He'd probably buy a helicopter and land on the yacht's helipad, making an entrance worthy of his big head.

If he doesn't already own one.

With no other options for a quick way out, I stare at the opposite wall and mouth something incomprehensible, giving my mother the impression that someone needs me right away.

"I'm so sorry, Mom. I hate to do this, but I have to go."

"Not so fast. Does he at least have a name?" she keeps prying, her tone dubious enough that I know she doesn't believe a word I say.

"Everyone has a name."

So clever, Audrey.

Mom sighs a sigh of utter disappointment, seeing through my bullshit as if she has a first-row seat into my mind. "Oh, Audrey..."

"Mom, you'll meet him soon, okay? I really need to go. Love you!"

And cut. Not my finest performance, I admit.

“Like I said, I’m not looking for you,” I tell Colt, though I think we’d have fun together.

The problem is that his definition of fun more than likely involves sex, and I’m not trading the goodies for help.

“How’s avoiding manslaughter on your brothers going?”

“They’re safe tonight.” He sweeps his thumb across his bottom lip, staring into my eyes. “They dragged me here against my will. They’re worried I work too much and don’t have a life outside my job, so I think you can guess what my attitude was like toward tonight based on that.”

“Shitty at best,” I say.

He nods, eyes not veering from mine.

It’s unnerving how he maintains this casual, carefree aura while watching me so intently.

“Imagine my surprise when I realized this thing isn’t a complete waste of time.”

Now he looks away. Or rather *down*. Not to my boobs, though... my lips. It’s quick, barely a fleeting glance, but enough to give me a fever.

“It’s not?” I ask, my voice unnaturally high and quivering.

“No, it’s not. I want your number, Addie.”

I’ve spoken to twenty different men tonight, yet Colt’s smile was the only one to send tiny sparks rippling across my skin like a shock from a live wire.

“You’ve got about as much chance of getting my number as I have of finding a genie to grant my wish. Take it as you may.”

“Just one wish? Genies usually grant three.” He drops his hand, toying with his whiskey. “How impossible is it on a scale of one to ten? Anything under eight, and I’ll make it come true if I can have your number.”

A certain determination in his stare pushes me to bite the bullet. I don't weigh the consequences. Instead, I silence the voice of reason, and lean over the table.

"Fine. You wish for my number. I wish for a man who will act—" I sit up, my eyes growing wider as a light-bulb moment hits.

Act.

Yes! That's what I need. An *actor*.

How did I not think of it sooner? It's so simple. We're only an hour from Los Angeles. The city's bursting with broke wannabe movie stars.

I could hold an audition. Fifteen grand for a week of playing pretend ought to convince a few men to try their luck.

"That's brilliant," I mouth, searching the room for my friends, ready to drag them out of here, but before I locate either, my eyes fall on guy number fourteen.

He mentioned acting, but I didn't pay any attention because his hair's too light. Maybe he'd be willing to dye it.

"Addie," Colt prompts, reaching across the table to touch my hand. "You okay?"

"Better than I've been all week," I admit, glancing at his warm fingers tracing my knuckles. The sensation makes me shudder. "Don't worry about the wish. I think it's a ten."

"That would deem it impossible."

"Okay, nine and a half."

He leans back, taking his hand with him; the sudden loss is not pleasant. "Your number?"

"It's yours, but you can't call me for a week."

"Why?"

"Call it a test window."

He's having a hard time biting back a smile. "You're a smart little thing. Alright, a week it is."

FOUR

Colt

IT'S AN ODD FEELING—my heartrate increasing when I spot Addie's number among the others I got at the end of the dates. The guy handing over the cards looked me over as if wondering what the fuck it was about me that got me seventeen numbers.

My surname was probably the biggest factor. Most girls know who I am. Since taking over the management side of Nico's empire, I added a dozen spots to our now-joint portfolio and made a name for myself. People no longer refer to me as Nico's younger brother or right-hand man.

It's my biggest win to date.

The money that comes with owning and managing close to thirty spots around Orange County is a bonus I don't care much about. Sure, a big house, a penthouse in LA, five cars, and being able to buy all the luxuries my heart desires is nice, but there are things I want that money can't buy.

At some point, material things lose their appeal.

"How did it go?" Cody asks when I join them downstairs. He snatches the cards from my hand, rising to his feet, ready to go somewhere else. "Which one are you calling first?"

"Not decided yet."

"Did that girl you mentioned during break give you her number? Audrey, wasn't it?"

Cody's eyebrows bank together as he flicks through the cards. "Doesn't look like it. Unless..." His eyes snap to mine. "Empty your pockets."

He's good, but not as good as me.

"You think I'm hiding it?" I flip my pockets inside out. Her number is already saved in my contacts under *Wish*, card safely discarded. "She said I'm not the guy she's looking for."

If I tell them we're going out next week—and we are because I will call her—they'll poke, prod, try to help, and fuck things up for me.

Cody stares a moment longer before handing the numbers over. “You got sixteen, Colt. I expect you to ask out at least three.”

Three might be a stretch. I was so focused on Addie I didn't pay attention to anyone else, constantly gawking over my shoulder to check on the pretty little Brit, then schooling myself not to jump ahead of the game.

There came a time during the online dating phase when my desperation to find someone reached an unhealthy level. It took months to learn connections like those my brothers share with their girls can't be faked or forced. I jumped the gun too many times before I figured that out.

“Fine, but not tonight. I need a proper beer. All they serve upstairs is whiskey, vodka, and Bud Light.”

“*Tortugo?*” Conor suggests, then frowns, looking over my shoulder. “Well, you're better than *him*. What the hell's wrong with that girl?”

I spin around, my heart thumping faster as I spot Addie leaving the building on Wesley's arm.

Fucking *Wesley*, the epitome of dullness in any room. Wesley, who can't hold a conversation that doesn't orbit around politics. *That* guy gets to take her out?

He's got aspirations for the Senate, though he can't even run his father's mayoral campaign, and yet, here he is, basking in Addie's attention while I'm left in the dust.

How? Why? What the fuck does he have that I don't?

The doubt creeps in. Have I done it again? Jumped the gun and imagined a connection that wasn't there in the first place because I want it so much?

This is bad...

I thought the week's stand-down she gave me was to make sure I'm genuinely interested, but now I wonder if I'm

giving off a desperate-creep vibe. Maybe it's her way of letting me down easily.

I'm working myself up, thoughts swirling, scenarios battling for attention. The sting of rejection pricks at my pride, but realizing I misread everything about her is what truly drives me nuts.

"If he's her type, I stand no chance," I seethe, and immediately regret it when both my brothers grin. "What?"

"You like her."

Damn it... I do. How fucked up is that considering: "I spent ten minutes with her."

"Took me less than that to realize Vee's the one," Conor says, finishing his beer.

"Yeah, but you're weird." My voice is almost back to normal, but controlling the emotions running rampant inside me takes immense effort. "Come on, you can catch me up on your perfect, blissful lives while I get black-out drunk."

Tortugo is only a five-minute walk down the road, and as soon as we step inside, I want to leave. Addie's at the bar, patiently waiting her turn. Every muscle in my body tells me to storm out, but before I do, I notice Wesley's absence.

"Find a table. I'll grab the drinks," I tell my brothers, ignoring their quiet *oohing*.

Addie rests her hands on the countertop, gaze fixed on the cocktail list above the bar. I had time to examine her pretty face during the dates, but most of her body was hidden behind the table. Now that I'm behind her, my presence unknown, I can't stop mapping every curve and every dent. She's not skinny, but not plus size, either, her waistline defined, hips wide, ass round and perky like JLo's.

I've spent two short dates with her and consider myself hooked. She's interesting. Effortlessly held my attention, but now she fucking left with Wesley, I'm wary to say the least. Wary and second-guessing my every thought but not ready to wave the white flag.

My attention idles from Addie to the young guys bickering beside her. Their raucous voices grate my nerves. I was their age not long ago, but I don't recall acting so obnoxious.

Despite Addie's blatant lack of eye contact, one approaches, wearing a cocky, drunken smirk.

"Hey there, what are you having? No, wait..." He holds up a finger, scanning her perfect body up and down. "Don't tell me. Let me guess... Sex on the Beach?"

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. I was *definitely* never this obnoxious.

A quick glance around tells me that Wesley, who, by the by, should be the one ordering drinks or at the very least keeping his date company, is nowhere to be seen. Has he ditched her?

What a fucking asshole.

"Thank you, but I'm not interested," Addie says, not even a slight head movement toward the kid.

Undeterred, he snorts out a condescending laugh. "Aah, playing hard to get, are you? I'm patient. Pretty girls like you shouldn't be alone."

Not my place but *fuck it*.

I close the distance between us, gripping the counter either side of her waist. "What makes you think she's alone?" I ask, taken aback by the protective edge of my voice and Addie's shoulders slumping instead of tensing.

She must've known it was me by the ink marking my arms. Not that it explains why she's relaxing while I've got her caged. I mean... she left with Wesley after telling me to wait a week before calling.

Confusing little thing.

Or maybe I'm reading too much into her body language.

Wouldn't be the first time this evening. Maybe I'm seeing what I want to see.

The cocky teen steps back, eyeing me with a frown before retreating to his friends. I guess he knows me, too. Or decided Addie's not worth the hassle.

I should give her breathing room now the teen isn't hitting on her, but my fingers gouge harder into the hardwood, the space between my chest and her back less than an inch.

"Where's your date?" I ask, dipping my head to speak in her ear. "He should be ordering drinks. And he should also know it's unwise to leave you unattended. You good?"

A faint shudder shakes her, injecting a shot of intoxicating desire into my veins.

She tilts her head to the side, giving me a glimpse of her profile and pink-kissed cheek. "I'm better now."

What did I say? Confusing as hell.

"Hey, Colt," the bartender says, stopping before us. "The whole pack here?"

"Just the trio. Give us the usual and a glass of your finest red. Actually, no. Make it a bottle and get me a corkscrew."

If he's taken aback by the request, he doesn't let it show. "Sure, give me a minute."

I dip my head again, watching Addie's neck break out in goosebumps at my warm breath on her skin. She smells like orange peel and spring evening on the beach. It's distracting.

She is distracting.

And the way my dick swells in my jeans is definitely the most distracting part. It's been a while since I had sex. Before the accident, racing and meaningless fucks were how I unwound. Not a week went by without at least one of those happening. Now, it's just the races. It's been months since I took a girl home. Six, maybe eight. I stopped counting.

Meaningless quickies lost their appeal when my life was flashing before my eyes.

"So, you were looking for a boring politician?" I ask, shaking off the depressing thoughts. "Where did he go?"

Addie spins around, still held hostage in my arms, looking flushed as she glances at my arms holding her hostage. “Restroom. Didn’t I ask you to give me a week before making contact?”

“Yeah, you did. You also said it’s a test window. Why didn’t Wes get the same treatment?”

A small smile crosses her lips, disappearing when the bartender pushes a corkscrew and a bottle of wine my way.

“Eyes on my hands, Addie,” I urge because she’s staring at my face instead of checking I’m not spiking her drink.

“You’re odd.”

A scoff flies past my lips. “That’s rich coming from you. You’re pretty, but that doesn’t give you the right to treat people like they’re fucking stupid. You could’ve told me you’re not interested instead of letting me think we’ll have dinner next week.” I pop the cork, pour half the glass, then shove the cork back in and hand over the bottle.

I’m ready to walk away, but she grips my wrist, yanking me back with surprising force. Liquid heat fills my chest when her face is suddenly an inch from mine, our breaths mingling.

“I was interested, but I’m away for the next week. I leave on Sunday.” She drops my hand, defiance painting her pretty face. “Wesley’s just a transaction.”

That should be my focus point. I know it should. I mean, a *transaction*? What does that mean?

But that’s not what I get hung up on. “Was,” I say, hands balled into tight fists. “Past tense.”

“Past tense,” she agrees. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, my date’s back.” She storms past me, her hips swaying.

The scent of her perfume lingers in the air, taunting me.

Fuck. I thought I knew what rejection tastes like, but the flavor she’s dishing out is the worst kind.

I should've left *Tortugo* promptly after Addie's blatant—if metaphorical—kick to my balls.

Did I?

No. Of course not.

I took it like a sadomasochistic champ and had a few beers with my brothers. The one thing I did was turn my back on Addie and Wesley.

No way I'll willingly watch their date progress.

It's been an hour. Two beers haven't calmed the mind-numbing whirlwind of thoughts stripping away my brain cells. I'm restless like a bee in a matchbox.

Addie relaxed when I approached, trembled at my touch, then promptly shot me down.

A walking mixed signal.

A red fucking flag, for sure.

“Oh-oh,” Conor nudges his chin over my shoulder.

“What?” I clip.

“He's ditching her.” His eyes widen as he watches the scene unfolding behind me. “Holy shit, he looks pissed.”

There must be something fundamentally wrong with this girl. She's a looker. Smart, coy with a hint of attitude. Perfect at first glance, but she's somehow alienated five men tonight. Each one had the same expression—halfway between deep shock and cringe.

“Maybe she's married,” Cody chips in. “What else would scare away so many guys?”

“Pregnant?” Conor drops his gaze at the beer he's sliding between his hands. “Whatever it is, if neither Finn nor Wesley wants her, you should steer clear, bro.”

“That's the plan,” I mutter.

“Yeah... good luck,” Cody muses in a hushed tone, his back suddenly arrow straight. “She's coming over.”

Sure enough, that's when Addie saunters closer. She grabs a stool from a table nearby, dragging it toward ours, her steps a little wobbly, eyes glossy, swimming with the bottle and a half of wine in her system. The half she hasn't downed yet is protectively tucked under her arm as she sits between my brothers.

"Hi." She sets her empty glass on the table, holding the bottle out to me in hopes I'll uncork it. "I'm drunk."

"You don't say," I clip, annoyed she's here and drunk *alone*. "Don't you think you've had enough?"

"Probably," she waves me off, the resigned expression clouding her face not something I enjoy in the slightest. "Keep it flowing. I've got nothing left to lose."

Cody kicks me under the table. Either to get my attention or let me know I should watch my attitude. "What did you do to Wes?" he asks.

Addie's drunken gaze eventually finds Cody's.

How the hell will she get home safely in this state?

There's a pause, then a deep crease creases her forehead. She turns to me, back to Cody, then me again, head whipping left and right like she's watching a tennis match.

"Twins," she mumbles.

"Triplets," Conor corrects, and Addie's world tilts on its axis when she finally zooms in on him.

"Wow... so pretty, pretty, pretty times three. That's nine times pretty." She sits up, her hopeful eyes wider than saucers. "That's three chances!"

"I hate to interrupt your train of thought, but you're making literally no sense," Conor says, hailing the passing waitress to order more beer. "Three Coronas and a glass of ice water."

"Unless you tip it over her head, it won't help," Cody chuckles.

The amused sound fades, his face contorted by a horrified look when Addie leans in like she's considering falling asleep on his shoulder. He scoots his stool as far away as he can, his arm touching mine.

I pass Addie the wine, watching her down half the glass in one chug, her ladylike manners long forgotten.

"What happened with Wes?" I repeat Cody's question.

"He got offended. Turns out fifteen grand isn't enough."

It's fun talking to drunk people. Kind of like solving a puzzle with half the pieces missing.

"Fifteen grand?"

"I can't afford more right now without making it look suspicious," she whines, running a hand down her face and smudging her lipstick. "I said I'll pay thirty, but he'll have to wait a few weeks for the second half."

"What were you trying to buy?"

"Him." She rolls her eyes like *I'm* saying dumb shit. "Duh."

I shoot Cody and Conor a look, checking whether they follow this, but as expected, they look as clueless as I feel.

"Elaborate," Conor prompts. "What do you mean *him*?"

Addie presses the wine glass to her full lips, her unfocused eyes fixed on the almost empty bottle. "I need a boyfriend."

"You tried to buy a boyfriend?"

"Only for a week!" She slaps her palms against the table. "God, keep up, will you? I need a boyfriend for my brother's engagement..." She trails off, scrunching her nose like she's deep in thought. "His engagement... thingy. My mother wants to invite Grant. I wasn't thinking, okay?! I told her I met someone tall and handsome with dark hair, but I haven't, and no one wants to cruise the Caribbean with me for fifteen grand unless there's sex, so now I have to go alone, and Grant will propose a million times and my mother will be *so* happy and

what if he wears me down and I marry the idiot just to get him off my back and end up with a herd of mini-Grants on a farm in Huddersfield?!”

She drops her head on the table, letting out a pathetic groan, probably a little tired after the world’s longest sentence.

I’m still processing when she lifts her head enough to awkwardly pour the last of her wine down her throat.

“More,” she demands, pushing the glass my way. “I don’t want to get married. I don’t want kids!”

Ah, so that’s what the *acting* reference was about during our second five-minute date.

Conor and Colt trade those infuriating loaded looks, their grins so bright I swear you can see them from space.

I know what they’re thinking.

They want *me* to be the boyfriend. Swoop in and save the damsel in distress. The thing is, Addie’s had the entire evening to ask if I’d be game. If she did, I’d have a hard time coming up with a reason against the idea.

But she didn’t ask, deeming me less of a catch than Wesley the boring fucking weasel.

“Don’t even start,” I snap at them.

Ignoring my glare, Cody gently taps Addie’s shoulder. “Did you ask Colt?”

It doesn’t happen often, but there are times I wish I was an only child. The question earns him an under-the-table kick in the shin. Childish, but he started it.

Addie straightens her back, big brown eyes idling between us. “No. I can’t—”

“She made it quite clear I’m not fit for purpose,” I say, aiming for jocular, and failing. It comes out pathetic. Bitter.

Great.

“That’s not it,” Addie sighs. “I just can’t afford you. Your watch is very expensive.” With another light-bulb moment,

she turns to Conor, grabs his wrist, and checks his watch. “Yours is cheaper, and you’re pretty, pretty, pretty, too, and tall.”

“And married,” he says, gently yanking his hand from hers. God forbid any woman who’s not part of the family puts one finger on him. “Before you grab Cody, he’s married, too. Colt’s your only option.”

“Colt’s not available,” I clip.

Addie bobs her head in understanding.

I pretend the sad, resigned expression marring her beautiful, drunken face doesn’t affect me in the slightest.

It’s her fault she’s been left high and dry. Not my problem.

“It’s okay. I knew there was no point asking.” She puts her wine glass to her lips, forgetting it’s already empty, and rises on unsteady legs. “Besides, you’re cute. I hope you’ll ask me out next week.”

Didn’t she say she *was* interested in me less than two hours ago? Past tense no longer past.

She changes tune faster than a DJ.

As if she’s not drunk off her ass, she mumbles *goodnight*, flings a bag over her shoulder, and saunters toward the exit.

She shouldn’t be alone.

It’s not safe.

My leg bounces against the floor harder with every step she takes away from me.

“I agreed to the dates, but there’s no way you can blackmail me into playing pretend,” I tell my brothers, feeling their eyes burning holes in my face. “Don’t ask. That’s crossing lines.”

Not that they care. Crossing lines is always on our agenda. We’ve been pushing one another out of our comfort zones since I can remember.

Might be why we turned out better than our older brothers.

“We would *never*,” Cody gasps, faking offense that’s clearly laced with amusement. “I mean, come *on*. A week sailing the Caribbean with a girl you find attractive... sleeping in the same bed... kissing, cuddling, laughing... Do you really think we’d subject you to such torture? That’s outrageous, bro.”

I liked him better before he married Blair and got all happy.

“Forget it,” I say, emphasizing both words, my body in high-alert mode when I hear the door open behind me. She’s *drunk*. It’s not fucking safe for her to be alone. “I have work. No time for vacation.”

“I get it,” Conor says, toying with his Corona. “Work’s important. It’s not like Cody and I could keep an eye on things for a week.” He jerks his head side to side, making fun of me in the process. “And we’re certainly not implying we’ll keep your secret forever safe if you help Addie.”

“Good.” I glare at my white knuckles, clenched around the Corona in my hand. “Glad we cleared that up.” The door shuts behind Addie, and the sound jolts me to my feet. “I’m just... it doesn’t fucking mean anything, alright? I’m just gonna get her home safe.”

They both nod, pulling serious faces while barely keeping their laughter in check. Assholes.

“Call us!”

“Fuck you,” I mutter, already halfway out the building.

I’m only making sure no one takes advantage of her while she’s wasted. I’m doing a good deed. That’s all it is. Just half an hour of my time to get a drunk girl home.

It’s *nothing*.

It would certainly be nothing if the half-hour didn’t stretch into two hours. When I finally fall face-first onto my bed, it’s close to three in the morning.

My head hurts. There's long, pink scratches covering my arms, and I bet I'll wake up with a bunch of bruises.

Jesus, that woman's wild.

FIVE

Addie

A POUNDING HEADACHE rouses me from a dreamless sleep. My temples throb like a construction crew's set up shop inside my skull. With a groan, I bury my face further into the pillow, inhaling deeply.

And that's red flag number one.

The pillow doesn't smell or feel familiar. It's crisp under my head, the scent like lilies of the valley in full sun. Eyes closed, I feel for the edge of the mattress.

Red flag number two.

I cannot reach either edge. I frown into the heavenly smelling pillow, listening for the sound of my pets.

Red flag number three.

Perfect silence. Not even the flutter of wings.

My heart hammers away when I tear myself into a seated position, the unfamiliar room spinning wildly in tune with my stomach roiling. I fist the bed sheets, afraid I'll tumble to the floor if I don't hold on. The bed is massive, swallowing me whole with its plush pillows and crisp white sheets.

Blinking my bleary eyes, I look around, wondering where on earth I landed and... *how*? The room is huge, bathed in sunlight, the walls a light shade of blue that should be comforting but isn't, considering I have no idea where I am.

My walls are white, so these walls aren't mine.

I don't have an ocean view from my bedroom window either. Sheer curtains dance in the salty breeze that sends chills down my back.

Squinting against the sunlight, I scan the expensive-looking, modern dresser against one wall, top bare, no picture frames in sight. A cozy wingchair is tucked into the corner next to a low coffee table where a stack of gray clothes awaits.

Finally, my eyes land on the bedside table, and the note propped against a water bottle. I pick it up with trembling fingers, reading the words written in unfamiliar handwriting.

Addie,

Don't panic, you're safe.

I'm sure you've found the water and painkillers by now. There's a change of clothes on the coffee table. Don't expect them to fit. Your bag's hanging on the door, and your phone's charging on the other night table. The bathroom's on your right.

Come downstairs when you're ready.

Colt.

Colt... the hot-as-sin, tall, broody guy from last night. Relief floods my system, somehow amplifying the headache.

Relief shouldn't be my go-to feeling, seeing as I'm missing a substantial chunk of last night and woke up in a stranger's bedroom, but I'm fine. Safe. Still in the dress I wore last night. Ugh... how drunk was I that I didn't bother taking it off?

Colt wouldn't leave me a note, painkillers, and water if he was a kidnapper, would he?

I swallow two pills, though I'm tempted to tip back at least five. Washing them down with water, I reread the note, my cheeks heating with embarrassment.

How did I end up here?

Bits of last night filter into my memory, but they're like shattered glass, impossible to piece together.

I remember the Express Dates, Wesley calling me crazy, and then Colt and his identical brothers... everything after has fallen irrecoverably into the abyss of my pounding headache and alcohol-induced haze.

I stumble out of bed, my legs barely holding my weight. I enter the luxurious marble bathroom and find a spacious walk-in shower with an array of expensive-looking soaps lining its

narrow shelf. White tiles gleam under the soft lighting as I strip, stepping under a stream of cool water to wash off the remnants of last night.

Ten minutes later, I shimmy into a pair of men's gray sweatpants, tightening the strings, then tug a loose white t-shirt that dwarfs me over my head.

It's not exactly a fashion statement, but it'll do for now. I leave the pristine bedroom behind, bare feet padding against stone stairs as the familiar melody of "Sweater Weather" by the Neighborhood fills the air, growing louder with each step.

The staircase arches left, ending directly opposite a larger-than-life kitchen. Colt's there, his back to me as he fiddles with a professional-looking coffee maker. The space is bright, filled with sleek appliances, breakfast bar in the center. The bitter aroma of coffee drifts through the air, mingling with the scent of sizzling bacon.

Colt turns around, a flicker of surprise in his eyes as they meet mine. "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

I smile sheepishly, dragging my fingers along the cool marble tops. "I could be worse. Thank you for the clothes and taking care of me."

He takes me in, starting with my bare feet, then up, assessing the fit of his oversized clothes, before he smirks at my wet hair and offers me a cup of coffee. "You're rude when you're drunk, you know that? And aggressive." He points out a big bruise on his arm and... is that...?

"Oh God... I *bit* you?" I gasp, my cheeks reaching boiling point as I look away. "I'm so sorry. I don't remember much after Wesley left. How did I end up here?"

"You barely held yourself upright. Surprisingly, it didn't stop you kicking or throwing your fists. I took you home, but you couldn't find your keys, and your phone was dead." He leans against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest, and I notice a few more, smaller, scratches and bruises. "I figured I could either bring you here or leave you on the doormat."

“I’m really sorry. I’m not usually like that, I swear. I bet you regret bringing me here.”

“Not really. You stopped throwing punches when I put you in the cab, but you did run your mouth almost the whole journey back. You’re very creative once you get going... plonker, nutter, wazzock, tosser, pillock, and my personal favorite: daft git. The cab driver couldn’t stop laughing when you told him I were taking the piss.”

I hide a smile behind the cup, the glint in Colt’s eyes contagious and helping to quell my embarrassment. “All I can do is apologize.”

“I don’t need apologies. It was quite the experience.” He turns to flip the bacon. “Sit down. Breakfast won’t be long.”

“Can I help?”

“No, I’ve got it. If you want to do something, lose the fake accent. I like the British one better.”

“I don’t like hiding it but it’s exhausting when every person I meet goes ‘oh, I love your accent’ then proceeds to mimic it with some kind of ‘Gor blimey, guvnor’ fake cockney nonsense.”

Colt chuckles. “I promise not to try.” He pulls two plates from the cabinet above his head and, a moment later, sets one filled with eggs, bacon, sausages, tomatoes, and toast before me. “As requested, a traditional English breakfast.”

I grab my fork, ready to dig in. “I *requested* breakfast?” I start with the eggs and bacon, both cooked to perfection.

“*Demanded* paints a clearer picture.” He sits opposite me, starting with a bite of sausage that he promptly spits back out. “Yeah... don’t eat that.”

“Why?” I lean over the plate, inhaling. “It smells fine. What’s wrong with it?”

“Tastes like cardboard: the only British sausages I could find in the store this morning.”

I chuckle, taking a bite. “They’re not that bad, a bit overcooked, but edible. You’re just not used to British

cuisine.”

“Clearly.” He loads the egg onto his toast, pushing the plate aside. “Now you’re sober, I have some questions.”

“Um, okay, fire away.”

“What exactly do you expect from your fake boyfriend?”

The fork slides out of my grasp, clanking against the plate and sending a splatter of tomato juice into my face and over the pristine, white t-shirt I’m wearing.

I’m hit by a flashback from last night of my wailing into the table about Grant, my mother, and living on a farm with many mini-Grants.

“God... I forgot I told you, and—” I look up, meeting his amused gaze. “Your brothers were there...”

“They were. So? Care to share more details?”

“You can’t be serious. You... you want to do it? Why?”

He shrugs, jaw set tight. “I have my reasons. And I didn’t say I would. Not until I know what I’m signing up for.”

“Is it the money? How much did I promise? I only have fifteen grand right now and—” I gesture around. “You don’t look short on cash.”

He smirks, grabbing our plates and setting them beside the sink. “I don’t want your money, Addie.”

“Then *what* do you want?” I snap, jumping to my feet. “Did I... did I... did I promise you *sex*?” I pale further when another thought strikes, and suddenly I’m hyperventilating. “Did we... oh, God, we had sex last night, didn’t we? I promised you more?”

His entire demeanor changes in a flash. From casual and relaxed to so unsettled his hands are shaking.

“You were drunk off your fucking mind!” he seethes, his voice powerful enough to make me shudder as he beats his fist against the counter, anger radiating off him like a storm in full glory. A category five hurricane. “I wouldn’t have touched you if you begged. I took you home so *no one* would fucking touch

you.” His chest heaves as he squeezes his neck, staring me down, his composure snapping back into place. “We didn’t have sex. Is that clear?”

I’m stunned into silence, no longer hyperventilating. No longer breathing at all, my eyes so wide it feels like they’ll pop out of place any second.

“I’m sorry,” I stutter, finding my voice. “I didn’t mean to imply... I’m sorry, it came out wrong.”

He pins me with a stare that spells out *you’re damn right it came out wrong*. “You haven’t promised me anything. You haven’t even asked if I’ll do it, but you obviously need someone. I might be available *if* you tell me why you need a fake boyfriend and what exactly you expect.”

He snatches my empty cup, starting the coffee maker. His shoulder muscles look carved in stone they’re so taut. I didn’t expect him to lose his temper so fast...

He looked in physical pain when I suggested we’d had sex. Like he wasn’t far off breaking out in hives at the thought of touching me while I was drunk.

That’s the cutest thing.

My belly fills with butterflies that quickly turn to pissed-off wasps when I remember what we’re talking about.

“My mother,” I sigh, settling back down, both elbows on the counter, my face hidden in my hands. “She’s utterly disappointed that her only daughter chose a career instead of becoming the perfect housewife. She firmly believes I should be married with at least two kids by now, and she chose the perfect husband for me years ago: Grant.”

Colt’s intense gaze softens, his expression less severe with every word I speak. “You come from one of those traditional, high-profile families, don’t you? Expectations from the moment you’re born.”

“Yeah, you could say that. My mother says a woman’s worth lies in her ability to marry well.” The coffee maker hisses and sputters as it fills a cup, the aroma hanging thickly in the air. I let out a weary groan, running a hand through my

hair. “Arranged marriages have been the norm in my family for centuries, but my father doesn’t support that. He wants his kids to choose their own path, but he can’t do much about my mother’s nagging and meddling. She’s been insisting I marry Grant since I turned eighteen.”

He’s proposed at least half a dozen times over the past four years. Every time, saying *no* gets harder because I know what comes after—weeks of my mother’s shitty attitude.

“I can’t imagine how suffocating that feels,” Colt says, his voice calmer now, no trace of the earlier anger.

“Yeah, it is. Suffocating and infuriating. Grant wants a part of my father’s fortune, so goes along with whatever my mother says.” I sip the hot coffee, locking my hands around the cup. “She’d ask him to join us for the cruise if I hadn’t lied and told her I met someone... I can’t handle another *will you marry me* in front of the whole family.”

“He proposed?”

“Any chance he gets. My mother’s livid every time I decline. She doesn’t understand I have bigger ambitions than being a wife. She thinks a career is a waste of time, that I’m not worth anything unless I conform to her expectations.” I set the cup down, gently twirling it around to keep my hands busy. “I just want a drama-free week to celebrate my brother’s engagement.”

Colt falls silent, deep in thought as he tidies up. He loads the dishwasher, cleans the milk-frothing nozzle on the coffee machine.

“Come on, I need a smoke,” he says once there’s nothing left to do.

I follow him through the large living room. The panoramic windows look out into a massive garden equipped with a swimming pool and a tennis court. We settle on a double swing under a tree, and he lights up a Marlboro, surrounding himself with a cloud of thick, gray smoke.

“When’s the trip?” he asks.

“The flight leaves tomorrow morning. A week of cruising and back to Miami on Sunday.”

He runs a hand down his face, then pinches ash onto the artificial grass. “Tomorrow... fuck, that’s tight. Anything I should know before facing your family?”

“Like what?”

He shrugs, inhaling another drag. “I don’t know. Topics to avoid? Questions I shouldn’t ask? Do I need a fabricated life story? A certain profession? Dress code?”

It strikes me again that we know absolutely nothing about each other. He might be a criminal and I wouldn’t know.

“What is it you do?” I ask. “Nothing illegal, I hope.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “No, nothing exciting, I’m afraid. Business management. I own a few spots in Orange County and manage my brother’s businesses.”

“That’s impressive. How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven. You?”

“Twenty-two next month. Dress code is...” I pinch my lips remembering the Formula One keyring I saw peeking from his back pocket last night. “The rich and famous at the Monaco Grand Prix, but I don’t care what you wear. I don’t really care if they like you and you shouldn’t either.”

“So, you basically want to show your mother you can make your own choices and they’re none of her business?”

“Precisely.” I get up, nervously pacing the pool’s length. Colt’s sweatpants hang low on my hips, prompting me to tug them up every few steps so I don’t end up flashing him my bare ass. “I can’t believe you’re considering it.”

“I’m not considering,” he says, resting both elbows on his knees as he looks up at me from under those dark lashes.

Men shouldn’t have lashes this fucking thick. It’s not fair.

I’m not sure if he’s aware how appetizing he looks when he stares at me like this, his broad shoulders stretching the

fabric of his t-shirt beyond capacity. I need an inconspicuous breath to cool myself down.

“What time are we leaving, Audrey?”

SIX

Colt

AGREEING TO THE FAKE BOYFRIEND IDEA wasn't my intention when Addie entered my kitchen. Even wearing my clothes, hair wet, face pale, she looked fucking gorgeous.

I kept smirking under my nose the whole ride to the grocery store before she woke up. I've met a lot of women in my life, plenty stayed the night, but not one had the guts to order me around and make silly demands.

A refreshing change of pace.

I told myself I'd send her home the moment we finished eating, but... curiosity got the better of me. It always does, and a hundred messages from Conor and Cody demanding to know what happened the previous evening and telling me to *live a fucking little* only fueled the fire. My brothers call me Detective Colt because I can't let anything go until I know everything about it.

The longer I stared at her, the faster I was running out of reasons to not spend a week with her. I'm into her. There's no denying that. She's fun, wild, free... absolutely gorgeous. Taming her would prove a lot of fun and a lot of hard work, I bet.

She smacked the last nail to my coffin straight on the head when she mentioned an arranged marriage.

It was a done deal after that.

I want a wife and kids like nothing else in this world, but I want her willing. I'd never settle for an arranged marriage.

No one should be forced to spend their life with someone they don't love.

Addie's clearly *not* in love with that Grant character. I've witnessed real love first-hand six times now. That feeling can't be fabricated, planned, or learned.

It just happens.

Sometimes it drops like a lightning bolt out of nowhere. Conor's a prime example. He swears on his life he knew Vivienne was the one the moment he kissed her.

And they kissed within two minutes of meeting.

Other times, love takes longer to bloom, like with Logan and Cass or Cody and Blair. Things between them grew at a steady pace until they reached boiling point.

There's no set timeline when it comes to feelings. No rules. My grandparents got married after ten days, and they've been together over sixty years.

I agreed to play Addie's boyfriend for two more reasons. Two *selfish* reasons. One: to get Cody and Conor off my back. I don't need their nagging, and I don't need the other four knowing how stupid and reckless I'm being every other Saturday.

The other reason... well, I'm curious what spending a week with Addie will be like. I'm game for whatever might happen. She's funny, sweet, rude in an endearing, clueless way when she's drunk. It's cute. Mainly because she curses in British, and I don't understand half the words.

And, obviously, she's absolutely beautiful.

I wouldn't mind exploring her naked body, but that's off the table, so this trip might prove an interesting experiment.

Half a day to set our story straight isn't much. Especially since, around ten in the evening, I'm leaving for my fortnightly meet-up and a night of racing.

Addie and I know nothing about each other. We're strangers, so playing a couple might be problematic.

To top it off, I have no idea what I'm walking into, so we decided to spend the rest of the day playing twenty questions. Though I imagine it'll be two hundred and twenty.

She went home to pack a bag and change out of my clothes but promised to drop by later so we could go through the basics. Meanwhile, I created yet another group chat for me Cody, and Conor, naming it *The Holy Trinity*.

Me: If you breathe a word about my racing to anyone, you'll regret being born.

Clutching the phone tightly in my palm, I grab a pen, jotting down a list of things Addie and I should probably know about each other. There isn't much time, so it's a blessing my go-to dress style is casually elegant and I'm not forced into a frenzied shopping spree.

Cody: You're going? Fuck yes! Good for you!

Me: We'll see. I know nothing about her. She's coming over soon so we can get some facts straight. I fucking hate you two.

Cody: Yeah, how awful that we give a damn.

Me: If you gave a flying fuck, you wouldn't be blackmailing me.

Conor: Technicalities. Admit it, bro. You want to go. You're into her.

I don't reply.

They're right, but they don't need to know it. The less ammo they have, the better.

Last night, dodging Addie's punches, bantering, and getting verbally schooled while keeping her safe was the most fun I've had in years, and waking up, knowing she was right behind the wall, that the house wasn't fucking empty... even better.

Shit. I should get a grip and focus on the main goal: earning Cody and Conor's silence.

I'm leaping ahead after only a few hours with her. That's unhealthy, considering I'm going to act as her *fake* boyfriend for a week. Fake is the keyword I can't ignore.

We're diving headfirst into a higher level of intimacy. No sex, so I can't deem this as purely physical. We'll be intimate without seeing each other naked, and that's... strange.

Scary.

Exciting.

Every arrangement I've ever had with women started with sex. Now, I'll be faking a *relationship* while sex is a no-go. This thing might blow up in my face if I can't keep a level head.

The doorbell rings a few minutes past four. Addie's there, boxes upon boxes of takeout food stacked so high I can only see the top of her head.

"Are you feeding an army?" I ask, taking the stack. "What is all this?"

"Fuel. We'll be here a while, won't we? I haven't eaten since breakfast." Instead of stepping inside, she turns toward a brand-new orange BMW M8 parked on the driveway.

With the click of a button, she opens the trunk, tucks two bottles of wine under her arms, then huffs and heaves at a huge case of Corona.

I drop the food on the side table, jogging after her before she wrestles herself into a hernia. "Are you always this self-sufficient? You could've asked me to grab this."

"You had your hands full." She marches into my house like a regular guest who doesn't require an invitation. Well, as my *girlfriend*, she technically doesn't. "Can we eat in the garden? I'll grab some plates."

Oh yeah, sure, help yourself.

Whatever.

I drop the beer in the cooler, checking my wristwatch. Six hours before the meet-up. Enough time to burn the little alcohol contained in one small bottle of Corona. With that in hand, I fetch a glass for Addie and head outside.

"I went with the safest bet and got Italian," she chirps, emerging outside with plates and cutlery. "I grabbed everything that looked delicious on the menu."

There are seven main meals, two soups, and a dozen other boxes of sides and starters. We could stay here for a week and not run out of food.

“I did a little digging.” Addie tips half the carbonara and half the Bolognese onto her plate.

If you ask me, those two don’t go together well.

“I had to check you’re not a psycho,” she adds.

“You bit me, hit me, called me names I can’t understand, and you’re worried I’m the psycho?”

A soft, sweet burst of laughter flies past her lips, along with a mouthful of wine. Some trickles down her chin onto her white shorts. That’s not coming out.

She mumbles *sorry*, but I wave her off, heading inside for paper towels.

“It was surprisingly easy to find out who you are,” she continues, patting herself and the table dry. “I moved here last month, so I’m not up to speed with local celebrities, but my neighbor knows all about you. I asked if she knows a Colt who has two identical brothers, and that’s all it took.”

“Who’s your neighbor?”

“Kaya Addams.”

My head whips toward Addie so fast I hear a crack. “Kaya? Tall, slim, unstable brunette?”

“Definitely tall. Not skinny. She’s a bit bigger than me. I’m not sure about unstable... she seemed fine. She said she dated your older brother Nico years ago.”

My eyes narrow, a vein ticking on my temple.

One of the darkest times in Hayes brothers history resurfaces, threatening to piss over my good mood. I shove the memories aside, or I won’t be able to stomach a single bite of food.

“Did she mention she was bat-shit crazy, an alcoholic and a cheater?”

“Not so blatantly,” Addie mumbles around a bite of garlic bread. “She said she ended up in rehab when Nico’s daughter was born, then relapsed when he married Mia, but she’s doing okay now. Sober, dating a banker.”

Huh, I didn't see that coming. I can't say I'm surprised her marriage to Jared fell apart. It was never going to last with her promiscuous attitude and undying love for my brother.

Kaya disappeared from the scene shortly after Nico's wedding last year. She crashed the reception, drunk out of her fucking mind, made a scene, got escorted out by security, and that was the last we heard of my brother's ex.

"So what did Kaya tell you?"

Addie whips a piece of paper filled with neat writing from her back pocket. "My cheat sheet," she proudly announces, handing it over. "I'll go find the bathroom while you check it's right and decide what else I should know."

"Corridor by the main entrance, first door on your right," I say, skimming the bullet-point list.

The information about my brothers is limited to names, ages, spouses, and kids. Some kids' names are missing, so I grab a pen from the side table in the living room and go back out, adding the relevant details, my scruffy writing contrasting Addie's elegant script.

I doubt anyone will quiz her on this, but knowing it won't do any harm. I also jot down a quick note about Rose, then add my siblings' professions.

"I have this committed to memory if you want to check," Addie says, plopping down beside me. She's closer than before, peeking at the sheet, her face so close I can smell her cherry lipstick.

"Maybe later. We have more important things to talk about than my brothers."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"How long have we been dating, Addie?"

The faintest trace of a blush heats her cheeks, and the sight stirs things within me I don't want to name. I need to cool my jets. I met her *yesterday*.

She scoots away, taking her plate, and curls her feet under her butt on the outdoor sofa. "That's a story we can fabricate

as we please. Other than telling my mother my boyfriend's tall, handsome, and dark haired, I left out everything else." She stuffs her mouth with a forkful of pasta, chewing slowly. "We could tie it with me moving to Newport, so... five weeks?"

"Based on what you told me, I don't think your mother will take us seriously if we've only been together a few weeks. Where did you live before?"

"On campus in Pomona. I couldn't keep pets there, and I love the beach, so Dad bought me a house in Newport."

If I didn't know she was twenty-two, *campus* would be a red flag. I left college girls behind when I finished college myself. Most are too young for real commitment, so no point taking them out. Thankfully, we cleared the ages earlier, and now *campus* makes me curious. Post-grad, I guess.

"There's a lot here I want to unpack, but before we change the topic... three months sounds better than five weeks. Your mother will think you moved to Newport for me."

"Three months it is. We're kind of serious, aren't we?"

"Seems so. And yet I don't know your surname."

Her eyes widen as a soft half-laugh half-groan fills my ears. "That'd be helpful, wouldn't it? Weston. Audrey Weston. I only have one brother, Benjamin, so you'll have it easier. He's twenty and has worked with my father since he turned sixteen."

"And what is it your father does?"

"Inheritance, property, and investment. My family's fortune was amassed over many years. My father will gladly tell you all about it."

"Back to *how I met your daughter, Mrs. and Mr. Weston*. You were still living in Pomona when we met, and I own the best cocktail bar there—*Mixer*—so I say we met there."

"Plausible. I go out with my friends every Friday, though I've never been to the *Mixer*."

“Now you have.” We keep the story going until we have a solid timeline of events.

Once that’s done, it’s getting chilly, so we clear the table and move into the living room. Addie immediately snatches a blanket from the back of the couch, making herself at home and... fuck. It feels good that she’s this comfortable around me.

As if we’ve really been dating for months.

As if she’s mine.

I squeeze the back of my neck, gouging my fingers hard into the flesh as I marshal my idiotic thoughts.

For the next hour, we breeze through first-date bullshit things Cody considers essential like favorite color, song, movie, and book before we get to the more interesting stuff. I wish I could say I won’t remember that Addie loves jazz, that “Colors” by Black Pumas is her favorite song or that white’s her favorite color, but I will.

I drink every fucking word falling from her lips.

“You said you lived on campus in Pomona,” I say, emptying the last of the wine bottle into her glass. “What are you studying? and why Pomona of all places?”

She’s in the corner of the huge couch, legs covered with the blanket, knees to her chest, feet an inch from my thigh.

“Veterinary medicine, and Pomona because it’s not that easy getting into a vet school. I wanted to be a long way from my mother, but with easy access to the beach and not anywhere cold. My parents have a permanent home in Miami and hardly ever venture to California. My mother says it’s too crowded with celebrities, so naturally, that was my first choice.”

“But why a vet?”

Addie shrugs nonchalantly. “Mostly because I love animals and a little bit to spite my mother. When I told her I wanted a degree, she assumed I’d study something that aligns

with my father's work. You know, something that'd make me useful until, and I quote, I'd 'see reason and get married'."

I chuckle, imagining the reaction her mother must've had. "Your mom sounds lovely. I can't wait to meet her."

"You should've seen her face when I told her I was going to be a veterinarian, and when she saw Emmanuel on FaceTime after I moved to Newport... priceless."

I raise an eyebrow. "And Emmanuel is...?"

"My pet pig," she says matter-of-factly.

I nearly spit out my beer, coughing and sputtering as I regain my composure. Addie doesn't miss a beat, whacking my back, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

"Pet pig? You have a pet *pig*?"

"Not anymore, unfortunately. I volunteer at a veterinary clinic, and sometimes, people abandon injured animals there in the middle of the night to get out of paying the bill. Emmanuel was left on the doorstep my first day there. He was only a week old with a broken leg. The clinic couldn't care for a pig long-term, so I took him in."

Curiosity piqued, I scoot closer when she pats the space beside her, flicking through pictures on her phone until she finds what she wants to show me. Sure enough, there's Addie, reading a book on a couch, while a tiny baby pig snoozes in the crook of her neck.

"He won't grow to standard pig size because he's a miniature, but he won't stay this small for long. With the engagement cruise coming up, I had to find suitable forever homes for most of my pets. Emmanuel's living on a farm in Oregon."

"How many pets have you had?"

"Thirteen." She grins, still flicking through pictures. There isn't one without an animal of some sort in her hands or at her feet. "Down to five now. Two parrots, a tarantula, and two hamsters. My best friend, Ruby, will take care of them while I'm gone."

“And I thought Cody’s python was unusual.”

“Lots of people keep snakes,” she says, angling her phone. “I miss this guy most.” She plays a clip of a peculiar-looking bird jumping around her kitchen. It’s big but still looks like a baby. “That’s Jasper. He’s an Emu.”

“Of course he is.”

She playfully elbows my shoulder. “He was cute.”

You’re cute.

I swallow the sentence before it escapes, and good job I do because the next second, Addie and I nearly jump out of our skin at Cody’s voice.

“Aren’t you an adorable fake couple?” He’s a foot behind us with Conor in tow, stealthy as fucking ninjas.

“You’re supposed to knock,” I say, getting up to fetch them a beer.

“Next time,” Cody promises, plopping down a safe distance from Addie in case she tries falling asleep on his shoulder again. “How’s the meet-cute going?”

Conor helps me with the beer and passes over a second bottle of wine. As always, he goes straight for the fridge, rummaging for leftovers. That guy eats more than Cody and I combined, I swear.

For the first time since I moved here, he hits the jackpot.

“Anyone want any food?” he yells, pulling out boxes.

“I could eat,” Cody yells back, and Addie follows suit.

“Fine, heat it all up. I’m on a tight schedule here, so you’re alone, Chef.” I leave his Corona by the coffee maker, heading back into the living room, but pause midway. “Conor?”

“Yeah?” he looks over his shoulder, hands busy opening takeout containers. “What?”

“You and Vee good?”

He pinches his eyebrows together. “Of course. Why?”

“You don’t usually spend any time away from her, and you’ve been here without her two days in a row now so... just checking.”

He drops the box on the counter, turning toward me, clearly uncomfortable with what he’s about to say. “I’m sorry. I... I should’ve been here for you more. It didn’t occur to me until the last get-together at Mom’s that you’re lone—”

“I’m fine,” I snap, cutting him off. It’s not real if he doesn’t say it aloud. “Don’t make a mess here.”

He parts his mouth but decides against talking, just bobs his head, sending me back to the living room.

“What have you talked about so far?” Cody asks, taking the bottle I hold out to him.

“Family, the story of how we met, work, and my pets,” Addie lists, bending a finger for each topic.

“What pets does she have, Colt?”

“Playing the gamemaster, are you? Let’s see... at the moment... two parrots, a tarantula, and two hamsters.”

“Remind me not to visit you!” Conor yells from the kitchen.

“He’s not keen on spiders,” I explain when Addie cocks an eyebrow. “Until recently, she also had a pet pig Emmanuel and Jasper, who happens to be an emu.”

“An emu...” Cody muses. “The big-ass murderous bird?”

“Hey!” Addie cries out, arms akimbo. “Jasper was *not* murderous! He was a baby.”

Cody pulls a *seriously?* face at me out of Addie’s view.

“A tap-dancing baby,” I add, prompting my fake girlfriend to whip out her phone and show my brothers the clip while Conor sets the table for round two of Italian takeout.

We eat while Cody continues testing our knowledge.

“No one will suspect you’re pretending,” Conor says around a mouthful of bruschetta. “Only *you* know the truth,

and you might end up overcompensating, making a show, so no one doubts you. Don't do that."

Addie nods along, soaking up the information, laughing at my brothers' stories about me, and throwing in questions. They didn't need to tell her I cried when I ran over a bird on my bike when I was five or how I passed out drunk at a frat party and woke up in the middle of the forest... naked.

But whatever. I don't mind.

It's oddly peaceful watching her banter with us as if she's been a part of our life for years, not hours.

"I think we should get going," Cody says, close to nine. "I can take you home, Addie, but you're riding in the back."

An adorable frown crosses her face. "I'm not going home. I'm staying here."

"Are you now?" I ask.

"Well, yeah. We need to be at the airport at seven in the morning and my house is in the opposite direction."

My asshole brothers hide their stupid grins behind their Coronas. "Makes sense," they say, nodding in unison.

Yeah, perfect fucking sense if not for the fact I'm racing soon.

SEVEN

Colt

“YOU’RE MORE THAN WELCOME TO STAY THE NIGHT,” I tell Addie as soon as Cody and Conor have closed the door behind them.

They didn’t pass up the chance to theatrically bounce their eyebrows at me as I saw them off.

Assholes.

“It’ll be easier in the morning,” I continue, “but I’m going out in half an hour and won’t be back until two or three in the morning, so c’mon. I’ll show you around before I take off.”

“Wait, you’re leaving?” Her wide, questioning eyes latch onto mine. “Where are you going?”

“Out. Come on, I don’t have much time. You know where the bedroom is, and I—” I stop mid-stride, glancing over my shoulder when I realize she’s not following. “Something wrong?” I ask, my voice softening at the deep lines etched into her usually bright face.

As if roused from a trance, she swallows hard, wiping the sadness from her expression. “No, nothing, I’m fine.” She straightens her back, heading toward the exit. “I’ll get going. Don’t worry about tomorrow. Will it be okay if I pick up my car next week? I shouldn’t drive after all that wine.”

Two wrinkles crawl onto my forehead. She seems shaken up, annoyed even. I catch her wrist as she tries to pass, halting her in place. “What’s wrong? We agreed I’m coming with you.”

“No.” She wiggles free, her voice tight. “It’s fine. I’m sorry, I... I...” She releases an exasperated huff, replacing the hurt-kitten look with a stern face. “It didn’t occur to me you were seeing someone. It seemed improbable given the Express Dates.”

“What?” I spit out. As stunned as I am by her assumption, I can’t deny the sadness painting her face is a fucking kicker. She’s disappointed I might have a girlfriend. A real one. “You think I’m leaving you here to go see another girl?”

“Where else could you go this late on Saturday?”

A smile breaks out across my face. I look her up and down, making a split-second decision. No way I’ll let her think I’m hooking up with someone else.

“How easily do you scare?” I ask.

“Um... not that easily, I don’t think.”

“Alright, you can tag along if you want, but there are rules, Audrey. One, you do everything I say without fail. Two, you stick with me at all times, and three, if you ever meet my older brothers, you don’t breathe a word of this to them. We clear?”

She folds her arms over her chest. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. My girl trusts me,” I say, putting a special emphasis on *my girl*. “Something tells me you’ll enjoy it.”

She takes a deep breath, nervously twisting her fingers. “Okay. I follow orders, I stick with you, and when I meet your brothers, I know nothing about this.”

“Good. Grab that wine, and let’s get moving.”

Addie fills the car with endless chatter as we drive, not once asking about our destination. There’s a thrum of anticipation underneath her light banter though, a quiver in her voice that betrays nervous excitement.

She’s a peculiar little thing: refused a drink when we first met but climbs into my car tonight no questions asked.

I could take her anywhere. Literally anywhere. It’s not like she’s strong enough to fight me off.

Looks like she trusts me, odd as that is. What’s more... *I* trust *her*. God knows why, but I do. Enough that I’m revealing a secret I’ve cloistered away from my family for over a year.

“We’re almost there,” I say, cutting through her chatter.

She falls silent, gazing out the window, big brown eyes wide and eager.

The desert stretches to the horizon, lifeless under the California sky. The rumble of my engine and Addie’s breathing are the only sounds piercing the silence.

We haven’t passed a single car in at least twenty minutes, navigating the forgotten roads until the emptiness around gives way to something very different.

Something alive.

In the distance, an orange glow flickers against the night sky. The deep beat of music resonates across the sand, hitting us in waves. Vibrations pulsate through the floor of my car, all the way into my bones.

I fucking love this moment when I emerge from complete stillness into the vivacity of our meeting spot on the long-abandoned airfield. I love the reckless, adrenaline-starved part of me rousing from sleep, and I love the excitement streaming through the air to bubble in my chest. It’s addictive. Exhilarating.

I turn onto the final stretch of the road, watching the scene ahead unfold further. An asylum of light and sound. A wild mix of engines roaring, music blaring, and bodies dancing. Car headlights, neons, and strobing, colorful lights cut the darkness, illuminating a sea of cars as diverse as the crowd around them.

From all-out American muscle to Japanese imports. From high-end exotics to souped-up pickup trucks.

Every petrolhead’s heaven on earth.

People are everywhere. Leaning against cars, beers in hand, their laughter ringing over the music. Some are dancing, bodies moving in rhythm with the bass, others talk, joke, and drink beer. A couple is making out against the hood of a shiny yellow Corvette, oblivious to the surrounding chaos.

I pull my car into a spot between a pair of heavily modified Nissan GT-Rs. The drivers—both regulars and both in leather jackets—nod at me in silent acknowledgment. Someone else sizes up my car with visible appreciation.

It's nothing exotic. Nothing much at all if you take it at face value—Dodge Challenger—but I poured my blood and sweat into this car, making it one of a kind.

There isn't a faster Dodge in California.

Turning off the engine, I glance at Addie. She stares at the spectacle outside, her breath coming in short bursts, cheeks pink, hands trembling softly. As if she can feel my stare, she meets my eyes, hers full of hesitant awe.

“Welcome to my world,” I say, a smirk playing on my lips. “Remember the rules?”

I wait for her to nod before I step out onto the tarmac. The desert heat hits me, dry, thick, warm like a second skin. It's at its worst now with August just around the corner. I'll never get used to the sticky, stifling, smothering feeling.

I help Addie out, my hand landing on her lower back as we navigate the crowd. The bass from hundreds of car speakers is so potent it shakes the ground beneath our feet. Whistles, shouts, and greetings come from all directions, as they do every weekend. I nod at a few familiar faces and shake hands before Curly's booming voice steals my attention.

“Colt!” he yells, barreling toward us.

His long, curly hair bounces with each step. Cody's was the same years ago while he grew his hair out. Maybe that's why I took to Curly so fast.

He slaps me on the back, an ear-splitting grin on his face. “Ready for a race? Some punk wants a shot at your title.”

Of course he does.

Every weekend, I race a minimum of three newbies. They come from all over California, cocky and confident when they arrive, then utterly disappointed and a few grand poorer when they leave.

I don't go against new guys for less than five thousand dollars. The regulars... well, that's a different story. We race for fun. We race because we fucking love it. No cash involved between friends.

Addie tenses beside me like a drawn bowstring. A polar opposite reaction to the surge of adrenaline traveling across my nerve endings. I bet she thought we came here only to watch.

"How much?" I ask Curly.

"Ten grand. This kid's got big dreams."

"Big dreams and a small brain."

An easygoing smile curls his lips as he acknowledges Addie. "And who's this pretty lady?" he asks, extending his hand to her. "Not seen you here before."

"That's Audrey," I introduce her. "She's with me." My voice involuntarily hardens at the last bit, and my hand tightens around her waist.

It's a subtle shift, but Curly catches the possessive gesture without an issue. His eyes skim over her again, protective and brotherly now. We've been friends since my first race. No way in hell he'll get in my way.

"Gotcha." He grins. "No worries, I'll watch her while you're out there." He turns to the crowd. "Axel! Get me a cold one!"

Axel leaps up, offering Addie a beer. His smile is a little too wide, eyes wandering her body in a way that has me itching for a fight.

For the next week, she's my girlfriend. *Fake* girlfriend and not necessarily in this setting, but... technicalities.

"Get her a fresh one," I tell the guy, spotting the open bottle in his hand. "Sealed."

His smile fades, but with a nod, he quickly retreats, fetching another bottle.

“You good?” I use my index finger to tip Addie’s face toward me. Curly marches away to fetch the kid who wants to race. “You haven’t said a word since we arrived. That’s five minutes without a word. It’s concerning.”

She’s a little pale, but her eyes sparkle with a thrill that wasn’t there before. She feels it—the adrenaline, the excitement, the energy emanating from every person around.

“I’m processing.” She leans into me like she feels safer when I’m close.

“You’ll get used to the noise.”

Curly returns with a kid who can’t be older than twenty. He’s sporting a cocky smirk, far too confident for someone about to lose ten grand.

Addie’s almost glued to my side as Curly launches into the rules, his voice clear and firm over the thumping bass. The kid—Jace—grins away as Curly lays down the basics.

We race a mile. Half a mile one way, U-turn, then back. No veering, no braking, no bullshit. This is the same stretch of road where Otis bumped into the back of my car three years ago.

Five weeks in a hospital bed. Two major surgeries: one on my liver, the other on my heart. Seven fractured ribs, two broken bones in my left leg, and one in my right arm. Concussion, cuts, bruises, a collapsed lung...

I should’ve died that night.

My doctor said it’s a miracle I didn’t...

And I still came back to race again. I’m not the smartest bulb in the box, I admit.

Then again, shit happens. I could cross the street and get hit by a car or fall down the stairs and break my neck.

When it’s time to go, it’s time to go.

At least that’s how I see life and death since the accident. I won’t let that one night affect the rest of my days.

“Tip that back,” I tell Addie, tapping her beer. “I need to borrow your pretty head.” Before she has time to respond, I turn to the crowd and shout, “Helmet!”

A black and white one is passed from hand to hand until it lands in mine.

“What’s this for?” Addie asks, her voice small.

“You’re riding shotgun with me.”

Her eyes pop immediately. She opens her mouth to protest, but I cut her off, slipping the helmet on and adjusting the strap under her chin. I check it once, twice, three times.

Excessive, but I have a strong sense of responsibility toward her.

“Look at me,” I say, opening the tinted visor. “You good?”

She swallows, then nods. “Yes.”

“Good. You’re safe with me, I promise.”

I guide her back to the Challenger, helping her into the passenger seat. The buckle clunks into place, and I tug hard, checking it’s secure. No chances. No sloppiness.

“Ready?”

Releasing all the air from her lungs in one long puff, she gives me a small nod. “I think so.”

“Good. Try not to scream.”

My heart thunders as I back out of the space then pull up to the start line. An electric hum vibrates through me, a burst of pure adrenaline that the promise of a race brings. To my right, the kid revs his engine, the car purring beneath him. I don’t look his way. My attention’s focused on Addie.

She grips the edge of her seat, gouging her nails into the leather so hard her knuckles blanch. I reach over, covering her hand with mine, easing her tension a little.

“It’ll be over before you know it, and you’ll want to go again as soon as possible.”

She rolls her lips, staring straight ahead. “If you kill me, I’ll haunt you until you bloody die.”

“None of that, Addie. Lose the fear. You’re safe.”

“Easy for you to say, you cheeky bugger,” she mutters. “I’ve never done this before.”

“First time’s the best.”

She shoots me a dubious look. “If you’re a guy.”

I catch the double meaning just as a girl in a short skirt and sky-high stilettos strides into the middle of the tarmac. The crowd around us quiets, turning down the volume in their cars, the music now an indistinct thrum.

Addie swallows a large gulp of air as if she’s set on holding her breath the whole ride.

Five seconds. I give her five seconds before she screams. We’re sitting on over a thousand brake horsepower. Less than three seconds from zero to sixty. The G force during acceleration is bound to give her a head rush.

The girl in the middle of the road points to me, then Jace, and raises both hands. There’s something about this moment that always gets me. The world outside falls away, and I’m left with the race ahead, my car, and the endorphins rushing in my veins.

My life is filled with stress, work, lonely nights, and this... the few seconds when I’m behind the wheel, car flying as fast as it’s capable, are the only moments I’m truly calm. My mind clear.

The girl drops her arms. “Go!”

I pound the gas, and the Challenger jumps forward, the G force threatening to push me through the seat. The engine’s thunder and the screech of burning rubber fill my ears. The car beside us is nothing but a blur as we pull ahead. Four, five, six, and already a hundred miles per hour on the clock. Addie squeals, feet jammed against phantom brake pedals on the floor.

It takes thirty-six seconds to cover a mile at a hundred miles an hour, but within seconds, the Challenger's at one-fifty and the half-mile marker is right there.

Timing it perfectly, I throw the car sideways. We're skidding. Tires scream against tarmac. I whip the wheel around, forcing the car into a perfect U-turn.

Another movement of the steering wheel, and the car jerks, straightening out. I hit the gas again, gaining speed, the kid leveling with me a second later.

Whatever he has under the hood must be one hell of an engine. It's a tight race. Not something I'm used to.

I grit my teeth, slamming the gas all the way down. The Challenger roars, giving me everything it has. We inch ahead, crossing the line first, but Jace is less than a foot behind.

"How's that for your first race?" I ask Addie as I slow down, turning around to park.

She doesn't respond, absentmindedly staring forward.

"Addie?"

No reaction.

Worry stops the adrenaline whooshing in my veins and drowns out the background noise. Throwing the car to a stop that spews up a curtain of dust around us, I kill the engine and push the door open, sprinting around the front of the car, my heart pounding in sync with my steps.

Addie hasn't moved a muscle, her head dipped forward, the helmet obscuring her face.

"Hey, you're okay," I say, yanking her door open. "It's over. You're fine." I drop to my knees, fumbling with the clasp of her helmet. "Audrey? Talk to me."

She sucks in a harsh breath, her trembling hands cuffing my wrists, fingers squeezing me gently. "Again," she breathes.

"Jesus. Don't fucking scare me like that," I say, my hands dropping to her thighs. In a mechanical reflex, my thumb strokes her skin. "I thought you were in shock."

“No, I... I wasn’t scared.” She lifts the helmet off, her hair tumbling out in wild waves. “I was just... holy shit! We were going so fast!” Her lips twist into a smile that makes my breath falter.

What the hell is she doing to me?

The crowd, the music, and the heat of the night crash back over me, but they’re distant, blurry around the edges because all I see, all I *feel*, is her.

The fire in her eyes, the joy in her voice... fuck.

This was a bad idea.

I’m only her *fake* boyfriend.

EIGHT

Colt

WE GET INTO THREE MORE RACES before heading home for a few hours' sleep. After a quick shower, I toss and turn in bed, directing my newly learned British insults toward myself. Not only because I'm on a suicide mission but also because Addie's three doors down, either wet and naked in my shower, or already burrowed under my sheets.

The house carries a different vibe tonight. There's a fulness I enjoy way too much.

A soft knock on the door quickens my pulse. Fuck. What the hell is she doing? Inhaling a deep breath, I fling my legs over the edge of the bed and pat over to the door, pulling it open to find Addie in the hallway.

Jesus fucking wept.

She stands there, wrapped in a towel, her long hair wet, the apples of her cheeks pink from the hot shower.

"Hey," she whispers. "Sorry, I didn't think to grab a suitcase from the car. Can I borrow a t-shirt to sleep in?"

I should've pretended to be asleep because this... this is fucking torture. This is God laughing in my face.

She's *naked* under that flimsy towel, and I'm hyperaware that all it'd take is hooking my finger in the knot on her chest, and I'd see all of her.

"Yeah, sure," I say, doing everything in my power not to grab her waist, push her against the wall, and take her lips. "Come in."

Come in? What the hell am I thinking? She shouldn't be in my bedroom in the middle of the night.

She sends me a cheeky smile, hips swaying as she enters. Looking around, her fingers skim the surface of the dresser.

"I didn't expect your bedroom to be so... cozy." She smiles, scanning every inch of the place until she stops on my

bed. “Looks comfortable,” she muses, taking one step forward.

“Don’t go anywhere near my bed, Addie,” I warn. “I won’t get that image out of my head. Ever.”

The pink of her cheeks turns brighter, but her smile doesn’t slip. What’s more, her tongue peeks out to moisten her full lips, and I have the urge to bite my fucking fist.

She’s doing this on purpose, like she can read my mind and knows how much every move she makes affects me. It’s a good job I’m wearing pajama bottoms on top of my boxers, or she’d get an eyeful of my hard dick tenting the fabric. Thankfully, the baggy pj’s keep it contained.

Grinding my teeth, already visualizing my hand gripping the base of my shaft and pumping hard and fast under the shower as soon as she leaves, I open the closet.

My hand shoots to grab a black t-shirt, but I pause. I could pick a white one, then her long, dripping hair would turn it into in a wet t-shirt contest... I’d get a peek at her perky boobs.

Nope. No perving on Addie.

I grab a black tee and a pair of joggers in case she wakes up first and I find her in the kitchen, wearing *nothing* but my t-shirt. “Do not come downstairs unless you’re wearing both.”

“Am I distracting you?” she asks, draping the joggers over the dresser and tugging the t-shirt on over her head.

“I can’t think straight when you’re only wearing a towel.”

Slowly, like she’s provoking me to make a move, she tugs the tee down, simultaneously pulling the towel lower. My brain turns to literal mush when I catch a glimpse, just a tiny peek, of her bare stomach and deep navel.

“Better?” she asks, her tone a little breathless. “Can you think straight now?”

“What are you doing, Addie?” I rasp when the towel hits the floor, and the hem of my t-shirt stops not-enough inches under her butt. One deep breath isn’t enough to calm my racing heart. There she is... two steps away, looking like she

wants me to grab her waist, pin her against the wall and sink my fingers inside her. “Go to bed. You’re tipsy. Whatever’s going through your head, you’ll think differently tomorrow.”

“What if I don’t?”

“You will,” I insist.

Sex is not a part of this deal, and as much as I want to take what she’s offering, I won’t touch her when her courage comes from wine, beer and the adrenaline rush of the race.

She grabs the joggers, flinging them over her shoulder, then bends slowly down for the towel, almost showing me what I so desperately want to see, but not quite, and sends me a coy smile as she exits my bedroom. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Addie.”

The clock keeps ticking. It’s three in the morning and despite jerking myself off as soon as Addie left, I still can’t fucking sleep. The questions don’t stop, multiplying at an alarming rate while I wonder what the hell she was playing at.

Once that topic runs dry, and I decide the safest bet is to blame the alcohol, I wonder whether we prepared well enough. Whether this whole endeavor will backfire in my face the first day there. Whether I can fake intimacy in front of her family without crossing lines when we’re alone.

Lines she wanted to cross tonight.

Lines she probably won’t try crossing when she’s sober.

Fuck. We haven’t established ground rules for public displays of affection. Am I supposed to hold her hand? Offer a comforting pat? A peck on the forehead? A kiss?

No. A firm *no* to kissing.

With a frustrated grunt, I swing my legs over the side of the bed, ready to head over to the guest room for answers, but my feet barely touch the floor before I change my mind.

I can’t handle seeing her in my t-shirt again so soon.

Falling back on the pillows, I pull my phone out and open the triplet-only chat, not expecting a reply until the morning.

Me: You set me up, so you'll figure this shit out. Dos and don'ts regarding PDAs. Go.

Both of them start typing right away. Conor's probably up with the twins. They're in the *sleep all day, party all night* phase, and Cody... I'd rather not imagine what I might've interrupted.

Cody: No full-on make-out sessions in front of her parents. Fair game in front of her brother, I'd say.

Conor: No ass-grabbing, either. Basically, don't do what you wouldn't feel comfortable doing with our parents in the room.

Me: This must be the first time you've been helpful.

Conor: Screw you.

I toss the phone aside, mulling over their tips. Halfway through analyzing how appropriate or inappropriate it would be to sit Addie on my lap, it strikes me that I'm overreacting.

She said I should be myself, so that's what I'll be. If I cross a line, she'll have to deal with it.

Her fault for not laying down the ground rules.

Armed with that happy thought, I close my eyes and finally drift off to sleep.

Five minutes later, I'm awake.

At least it feels like five minutes, but my alarm kindly blares out that it's five in the morning and time to get going. The first thing I do is head downstairs to fetch Addie's luggage from the trunk of her car. I leave both suitcases outside her door and head back to my bedroom for a quick, cold shower.

I pack a large suitcase, adhering to the Monaco Grand Prix dress code Addie mentioned, then head to her room, checking she got up. The suitcases aren't in the hallway anymore, but I still give the door a soft pat.

Any doubts I had about this weird-ass adventure dissipate the moment she flings the door open, dressed in a delicate, flowy summer dress and platform sandals, her hair in a careless knot at the back of her neck.

Effortlessly classy but sexy enough to rouse the morning hard-on I barely fucking tamed under the cold shower. Jesus, I'll be jerking off ten times a day with this girl around.

"Morning," she says, leaving the door ajar as she straightens the bed. "Sorry about barging into your bedroom last night. You look dashing."

I guess the quick apology followed by a swift change of topic means she'd rather not go into detail.

I glance down at my light gray cotton pants and a linen button-down shirt, a few buttons undone, sleeves rolled up. "I'm glad you think so. Come on, I'm making pancakes and you're on sous-chef duty."

"Give me two minutes."

So I do, ignoring the fluffy feeling in my chest that I'm not home alone in the morning for once.

To ensure Addie doesn't stain her outfit with her usual messiness, I bundle her into a cooking apron, and only let her take it off when we leave the house.

"I'd grab my luggage, but I know you won't be happy if I do, so... it's upstairs."

"You're learning. That's a good sign," I say, dropping my suitcase into the trunk. "I do the heavy lifting around here. Hop in. I'll be right back."

Once everything's loaded and I double-check that Addie's safely strapped in, I slip into the driver's seat, handing her my phone with Spotify open on the screen. "You're the DJ."

She skims my playlists, settling for the one titled *Driving* and scrolls through it.

"No way! I love this song!" She sneaks a glance at me as the car fills with the iconic opening of "Californication" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

I put the volume up, tapping out the rhythm on the steering wheel. Addie sings the chorus, playfully nudging my shoulder, a genuine smile gracing her full lips.

“I’m glad you took me with you last night. It was... an experience. I sign up for future events.”

The idea takes hold immediately, my head full of *us*. I push the enticing images aside, aware I’m jumping the fucking gun yet again.

Jesus, I think I’d benefit from therapy.

The one-hour drive to LA only feels like ten minutes while we take turns picking songs. Arriving at the airport an hour ahead of our planned departure, we breeze through security in record time and enter the first-class lounge.

I sink into one of the comfy couches holding a bottle of water. Addie’s beside me, her hands subtly trembling. “Nervous about the flight or introducing me to your family?”

“The flight. Well, just take-off and landing. I’ll be fine once we’re in the air.” She’s downplaying it, but there’s a pre-freak-out tremor to her voice.

“My sister-in-law hates flying too. She always pops a Xanax for long-haul flights. Got any on you?”

Her leg bounces against the floor, cheeks pale, eyes wide. “I promise I’m not that bad.”

Yeah, she’s peachy.

“Hold this.” I thrust my water bottle into her hands before heading to the nearest shop.

Returning to Addie two minutes later, I find her in the same position, eyes closed, nails dug into her thighs.

“Sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine,” she murmurs, lost in her own thoughts.

I unwrap an apple candy from the bag and the crinkling sound catches her attention. “Open,” I coax. “Open your mouth, Addie.” Her eyes flutter open, a frown creasing her

forehead. She can't see what I'm holding but obediently parts her lips. "Mia says candy helps her relax."

"It's the sucking that helps," Addie mutters, her tongue twirling around the candy.

I smirk. If we run out of candy, I can certainly offer something else to keep her calm and help us unwind...

"Mia is Nico's wife, correct?" Addie asks, changing the subject, probably to keep her mind off the flight.

"She is. And their daughter is...?"

"Melody, two years old."

"Correct. The very first blonde born into the Hayes family. You have no idea what a shock to the system it was when her hair stayed that light."

Everyone was certain she'd be dark haired by the time she turned one, but she's as blonde as her mommy. Big eyes, too, not green like Mia's, but almost black like Nico's.

"Why *Melody*?" Addie asks.

"They're crazy about music. Both play the piano, and Mia's a vocalist, lyricist, and a multi-instrumentalist."

Speaking of music, the song seeping from the overhead speakers is interrupted by a female voice informing first-class passengers of the Los Angeles to Miami flight that it's boarding time.

Addie's hands start trembling again, the coffee in her takeout cup sloshing left and right. I set it aside before an accident stains her pretty dress.

The Hayes family trivia continues—now a proven way to distract Addie—as we make our way across the airport.

"I spend a lot of time with my family. They're my best friends. All of them, including the girls. If we'd been dating for the past three months, you'd know them inside out by now. You sure you've got the basics?"

No one will ask her a single question about my family, but she's close to hyperventilating, and other than hauling her

into my arms and distracting her with a kiss, I'm out of ideas.

"You can test me all you want. I know your family."

"Fine. Name all my siblings."

She takes a deep breath, falling into a sheepish walk beside me. "Shawn, Logan, Theo, Nico, Cody, Conor, Rose."

"Good. I thought you'd forget Rose."

"Not a chance." She forces a chuckle, but her pace slows as we approach our gate, it's teeming with first-class passengers. "She sounds like the most fun."

"Who's Cassidy?"

"Logan's wife."

"Yeah, good." We join the back of the line. "What about Vivienne?"

"Conor's wife. Blair is Cody's."

The flight attendant inspects our documents then steps aside. I motion for Addie to walk ahead, keeping my eyes on her because not only do I half-expect her to bolt the moment I look away, but also because I have a clear view of her wide hips and perfect waistline.

This girl is made of wet dreams.

"Can I have the aisle seat?" she asks as we board. "I can't handle looking out the window."

"Sure."

The moment she settles into her seat, her grip tightens on the armrests and she braces her feet against the floor, ignoring my every question.

"Three point one four one," she whispers. "Five nine two six five three five eight nine—"

"Sir, I need you to fasten your seatbelt," the flight attendant interrupts, stopping beside us.

"Seven nine three two three eight four six," Addie continues, reciting *pi*.

“Please sit down for take-off,” the flight attendant tells a woman two rows down, throwing Addie off again.

“Eight four six,” I remind her, clipping the seatbelt in place.

“Two six four three three eight three two.”

I lace our fingers. I doubt she feels it while she mutters under her breath, focused on the numbers.

The plane gains speed, intensifying the rattling noises and the shaking beneath our feet. I have a feeling Addie’s not far off puking.

“Five nine two three zero seven eight one.”

Her breathing hitches when the wheels lift off the ground. She gouges her nails into my hand so hard I can feel half-moons digging in, her grip like a vice. Where does she hide that strength?

She’s crushing my bones.

“Seven eight one,” I say, caressing the length of her index finger with my thumb. “Keep going, Addie.”

“Um...” Her voice quivers, barely above a whisper. She furrows her brows, but the upward motion while the plane climbs isn’t helping her focus. “Six... six...” A small whimper leaves her lips, and her nails break my skin. “Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California...” she mutters, switching to reciting the states.

The flight attendant’s voice breaches the cabin when Addie’s up to Virginia.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned off the seatbelt sign.”

My fingers are numb by the time she loosens her grip, opens her big eyes, and focuses on the seat in front, every breath slow and even.

“Better?” I ask, flexing my fingers to restore circulation. “You want a drink?”

She shakes her head, inhaling again, then pinches her nose to pop her ears. She must've swallowed the candy.

"Oh, shit..." she murmurs, taking my hand in hers, gently brushing her thumb over the red, angry marks.

Surprisingly, there's no blood.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, her voice frail. "You shouldn't have held my hand."

"I didn't expect a bone-crushing grip. You sure you don't want wine? Maybe champagne?"

"You have a week with me on a yacht where the drinking starts at breakfast. There'll be plenty of occasions to make a fool of myself and insult you with words you don't understand."

A chuckle falls from my lips. "I think I can take it."

"We have five hours to make sure we haven't forgotten any details. Better stick to water." She pulls a complimentary bottle from the holder beside her seat and attempts to unscrew the cap, but her fingers are too stiff.

"Any drinks?"

The flight attendant stops beside us while I open the bottle for Addie.

"Black coffee for me," I say. "You want anything, baby?"

Addie's eyes double in size, her cheeks reddening faster than I can arch an amused brow.

"No. Um, I mean... yes. Walnut latte if you have it, please," she stutters, then swivels my way as soon as the flight attendant moves away. "*Baby?*"

"We're dating, remember?"

She opens and closes her mouth several times, struggling to find the right words. "I just... okay. You're right. I wasn't expecting it, that's all."

"You can't act so shocked in front of your family, *baby.*"

“Right,” she nods. “We’re dating. We have pet names for each other.”

“No.” I firmly shake my head. “I have pet names for you, but that’s the extent of it. You won’t like what follows if you try a pet name on me.”

“Not even *teddy bear*?” she teases with a cheeky grin.

“Especially not teddy bear.”

After Addie triple-checks we have our meet-cute story down to a T, I keep her talking about animals. The childhood stories of her saving injured birds and crying whenever her father went fishing keep her distracted until halfway to Miami when the in-flight meal is served.

Spending time with Addie is surprisingly effortless. She’s open, genuine, and her family fortune—the extent of which I’m yet to discover—hasn’t rubbed off on her in a bad way. She’s as down to earth as Vee or Thalia. It’s nice.

My hand gets another torture session when we land, but it’s not as bad as during take-off.

Maybe because Addie knows we’re getting closer to the ground, or maybe because she’s too busy listening to me talk about my nephews and nieces to truly give in to the panic.

NINE

Addie

I STOP COLT as he rises to his feet, outstretching my arm to block his way when we're about to disembark.

My anxiety hits sky high now that we're minutes from starting the pretend play.

"The moment we step out of the arrivals hall, we'll be constantly watched."

"Got it."

"No, you don't," I hiss, the words coming out sharper than intended. "I mean it, Colt. There are security cameras all over the yacht. The only place we'll have privacy is our suite, though I expect my family to knock at all hours." My hand freezes around his wrist as a daunting thought settles in. "God, what if my mother's installed hidden cameras in our suite?"

"You think she'd risk seeing her daughter in the act? I very much doubt that, Addie."

"I'm *not* paying you for this week with sex, you muppet!"

He cocks an amused brow, silently reminding me how I teased him last night. My cheeks grow so hot I'm moments from catching on fire. I should've slept naked or made a dash to the car for some pj's. There was no reason to knock on his door, but I was courageous, tipsy and horny, and I wanted to see his reaction so... sue me for flirting.

I knew nothing would happen. He made it very clear how he feels about touching drunk women. It's one of the things I find so damn attractive about him.

He's every bit my type. Broad shoulders, tattoos, and deep brown eyes. He's commanding but attentive and makes me feel safe, and there's that confident, broody bad-boy aura around him, too...

"We established I'm not taking any form of payment for this week," Colt says. "Your mother doesn't know we're not

really dating, Addie, and couples have sex. You think she'd want to see you doing *that*? My performance would traumatize her for life, I assure you."

I shake the stiffness off my limbs, pretending I didn't hear the last sentence. It's raising too many questions.

"You're right. She'd have a heart attack if a sex tape got leaked. She wouldn't dare take the risk."

"Exactly. Now get up, I need a drink."

"Make it two."

On wobbly legs—thanks to the landing and what lies ahead—I ascend the steps and Colt immediately takes my hand, lacing our fingers together, his thumb stroking my palm.

Miraculously, it helps. Holding hands with this man I only met two days ago doesn't feel odd. If anything, it's unexpectedly pleasant. We stop by the conveyor belt, watching everybody's luggage but ours parading around.

"I paint," I say, dropping in some last-minute trivia. "Mostly landscapes, and I play the cello. Oh, and—"

"Relax, Addie." He pulls me into his side, then dips his head, his warm breath flirting with my ear. "I don't need your entire biography. We'll be more believable if I get to say 'you never mentioned that, baby' and you reply with 'now you know'."

He heaves my suitcases onto a trolley, stacks his on top, and we're off. I stop him again before we step through the door leading from the arrivals hall to the main airport.

"Thank you for doing this. I owe you a massive favor."

"I'm getting you drunk ASAP. You're more fun when you're mellow and calling me a bellend." He navigates the trolley with one hand, firmly holding mine in the other. "What does that even mean?"

"In slang, it's... well, it's the head of a penis," I whisper in his ear. "It's an insult."

"Okay, rule number one. Don't whisper *penis* in my ear."

I stop abruptly, earning a playful eyeroll from Colt.

“What now?”

“We haven’t set any rules,” I mouth. “We need rules.”

“Too late now.” He nods at a man in black, holding a sign with *Miss Audrey Weston* written in flowing gold cursive.

“And guest,” I mutter, the blatant omission prickling my annoyance. “We’ll sort out the rules later.”

“What if there are hidden microphones?” he teases.

I elbow him under the ribs and hold my tongue. We’re too close to Felix—the limo driver—to risk a verbal comeback.

“Miss Weston, welcome home. I wasn’t expecting you to have company.” Felix tucks the sign under his arm. “If you will, sir, I’ll handle the luggage,” he adds, taking control of the trolley. “Please follow me.”

Colt cocks an amused eyebrow once Felix has turned his back, sauntering through the airport toward the exit where a sleek, black limousine waits just outside. It shouldn’t be there, but the nearby traffic warden seems not to notice the thirty-foot-long vehicle obstructing the pedestrian crossing.

I squeeze Colt’s hand tighter, a silent warning as he reaches out to open the car door. That’s Felix’s job. The man would have a stroke if he were robbed of his door-opening privileges.

We’re inside a moment later, and I immediately snatch a bottle of bubbly from the limo’s fridge, my hands still shaking. Colt has more than enough evidence to label me an alcoholic, but at this point, I couldn’t care less. I need liquid courage.

“Give me that.” He takes over, opening the champagne with a twist like a pro. With a glass each we settle into the leather back seat.

He has this gig all figured out. Not an ounce of tension in him as he casually throws an arm over my shoulders, pulling me closer, and we sit... so close that our bodies are pressed together, as if cuddling in the back of a limo is such a regular occurrence for us.

“To my first vacation in five years,” he says into my hair.

“What? Why?”

“No desire, time, or company. Make this one memorable for me, Addie.”

I clink my glass to his, feeling bolder with every tiny sip. “I’ll do my best, *teddy bear*.”

His response is a low chuckle. “That’s grounds for a spanking. Watch your mouth unless you want to be punished.”

My heart thuds faster and pleasant tingles slide down my arms, making the hairs stand on end. I don’t think the word *punishment* should have me slick between my thighs, but his husky, suggestive tone tells me I’d love whatever he has in store.

There’s no denying Colt’s a dominant type.

Everything about him screams control and power. From the way he moves to how he stares. It wasn’t so staggeringly intense before, but his warning multiplies his dominance tenfold and it presses into me from all sides.

What’s confusing is how much I enjoy that pressure, that suffocating feeling of being under his command.

I press the rim of the champagne flute to my lips, tipping back half the contents. I should remember how to act like a lady. Gulping champagne like a parched baboon won’t go down well with my elegant mother.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” My voice wobbles, betraying the whirlwind of emotions and thoughts I’m clumsily navigating.

Colt’s lips curl into a smile against my temple, the heat of his breath seeping into my skin. He leaves a gentle kiss there, falling effortlessly into the role of my boyfriend. “Good girl.”

Oh my...

Those two words send shockwaves of desire through my body that settle in a pulsating knot between my legs. Two words shouldn’t have so much power. *Colt* shouldn’t have so

much power, but the praise, his scent, warmth, and intimacy make me crave him all the more.

Felix helps me out—God bless his soul—as I search for a response to Colt’s teasing. The partition slides down and he spins around in the driver’s seat.

“The itinerary has changed, Miss Weston. You’re set to sail at six o’clock rather than eight. I’m to ensure your safe arrival at the docks as soon as possible. Are there any stops you need to make along the way?”

“No, thank you, Felix.”

His hat tips in acknowledgment before the partition glides shut and he pulls into the bustling traffic.

The jittery anxiety I expected doesn’t grip me as hard while Colt’s thumb traces patterns on my arm, until twenty minutes later when we stop and Felix opens the back door.

“One Island Park,” he announces. “Please make your way to the yacht. I expect your family is already on board. I’ll take care of the luggage.” He nods at the gate to the marina, nestled between towering hedges.

“Which one is yours?” Colt scans four superyachts docked nearby, curiosity and a tiny bit of awe seeping into his tone.

“The biggest one.” I point at *Serenity*. “My dad’s motto is *go big or go home*.”

Colt nods, eyeing *Serenity*. She’s a sight to behold, that’s for sure. My father commissioned her four years ago after spending a year with the designer, working on the smallest detail. At over seven hundred feet, she’s one of the largest yachts in the world—a fact my father never fails to mention.

It’s a modern floating palace stretching across the water. The white hull and shiny chrome accents scream sophistication, more of which drips from every custom-made piece of furniture and chandelier. Our family isn’t big, but *Serenity* houses twenty-two individual suites, each complete with walk-in closets, spacious bedroom slash living areas and bathrooms.

Plenty of places to hide tiny cameras. The thought makes me shudder as we step onto the main deck. I shudder again when we come face to face with my parents. They're a fair distance away, given that the main deck stretches over sixty yards. They're inside, standing by the bar.

"I never asked how big this engagement celebration is going to be," Colt muses. "How many people."

"Mom said it'll be a small gathering and that usually means about twenty or so." I slow my steps, buying me an extra moment before facing my mother, Victoria Weston, in all her intimidating, elegant, snobbish glory.

"I'd advise you not to leave me unattended. I might get lost on this boat."

I let out a soft chuckle, dispelling a little stiffness from my shoulders. "Don't call this a *boat* in front of my dad."

Our banter is cut short as we step inside, drawing my parents' attention. They turn in sync at the sound of our steps in the open space.

The look crossing my mother's face is nothing short of priceless. With her perfectly coiffed hair and aristocratic vibe, she comes across as part of the monarchy, at the very least.

Her initial deep shock fades as she adjusts her expression so as not to appear impolite in front of my guest. Too bad she can't hide the skepticism in her eyes.

"Audrey, darling," she coos, laying it on thick as she extends both arms, pulling me into a tight embrace topped off with a bunch of air kisses. "I'm so glad you made it."

Like I'd miss my brother's engagement... thingy. What the hell is this called? Not a party. Parties don't last a week. Colt said celebration, but that still feels like a stretch.

Mom's eyes assess Colt. "I didn't realize you were bringing someone."

"I told you I wouldn't be alone. This is my-my—"

"Boyfriend," Colt interjects. "Colt Hayes." He stamps an obligatory kiss on my mother's hand. "It's a pleasure."

“My, my.” She beams, face lighting up with interest. “Aren’t you a surprise?”

“I told you I met someone,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Of course, dear, I remember. I just didn’t expect him to be... you know, *real*.” The airy, artificial laugh that follows does nothing to soften the stinging comment. “You have to excuse me, Colt. Audrey has a tendency to indulge her imagination.”

Before I stomp my foot, grab Colt, and flee this nightmare-in-the-making, Dad steps in, a pair of whiskey glasses clinking in his hand. He passes one to Colt, then firmly shakes his hand.

“Henry Weston,” he introduces himself.

Unlike Mom’s practiced politeness, Dad’s cheerfulness is genuine. It’s evident in the crinkling around his eyes and the way he looks Colt up and down without a trace of a frown.

That’s good. I was a little afraid Colt’s many tattoos could prove problematic, but it looks like my dad’s fascinated by them. *You and me both, Dad.*

“Colt Hayes,” he replies. “This is a magnificent yacht you have.”

“Ha!” Dad grabs Colt’s shoulder, with a small shake. “Good choice of an opener. I already like you, Colt. I’ll give you a tour in a minute. Quite a few things onboard will blow your socks off.” He turns to me, his broad grin growing wider. “Is this how you greet your old man? Come here!” He pulls me into a bear hug, whispering so only I can hear, “Did you see the look on her face?!”

He doesn’t have to whisper. Mom’s made herself scarce in her usual manner, sauntering back to the bar where she left her drink, no doubt a boulevardier—she’s all about bourbon.

Dad pulls away, leaving one arm firmly around my shoulders. “Everyone’s getting ready for dinner at seven-thirty. Suite seventeen is yours, as always. I’m borrowing your boyfriend for a while, but I’ll escort him back soon.”

We didn't plan for this. I look at Colt, gauging his reaction, but his face is impassive as always.

I left my mind-reading kit at home, so... "Dad, we just got here."

"I'm only talking twenty minutes, princess. Thirty max."

"But—"

"It's okay, Addie." Colt snakes an arm around my waist, gently breaking Dad's hold.

His possessiveness, though subtle, makes my body sing. He leans in, his lips brushing my hair in a tender kiss. It's such a simple gesture, but the promise it holds, the softness of his lips on my temple... it feels good.

Too good to be fake. My chest fills with warmth, the heady scent of his cologne soothing my anxiety.

"I won't be gone long, baby," he murmurs.

A surge of erotic pleasure pools in my lower belly. I love it when he calls me that. He makes it sound like I'm so precious to him.

I'm floating a few inches above the deck before the tranquil feeling vanishes.

Is he...? Oh, the nerve of him!

He's making me look *needy*.

Here I am, saving his ass, and he's having the time of his life at my expense.

"Fine." I cross my arms over my chest, then realize I'm coming off like a pouting kid and let them fall to my sides. "I'll go grab a shower."

"But I've ordered you a glass of wine!" my mother wails from the bar. "I want to hear everything I've missed."

"You'll hear it over dinner," Dad says, turning his back to Mom as he pins me with a pointed stare roughly translating to *run for your life*.

I do, leaving Colt behind. The *Girlfriend of the Year* award won't be gracing my mantelpiece anytime soon.

Rounding the corner, I peek over my shoulder, finding my fake boyfriend engrossed in a conversation, almost certainly about *Serenity*, with my dad.

TEN

Colt

I FOLLOW HENRY WHILE HE BOASTS about his boat. We pass a large outdoor swimming pool on deck three, then a smaller indoor one, and an array of Jacuzzis. There's a spa, sauna, and a wine cellar that houses five thousand bottles. One lifetime wouldn't be enough to drink that.

Unless you have Addie in your corner.

Deck two is what Henry calls a beach club, complete with water slides, a kiddies' pool, water sports equipment, and a diving instructor.

"We'll be diving in the Bahamas. I hope you'll convince Addie to try. She always refuses, afraid she'll drown." Henry chuckles, a fond twinkle in his eyes. "She's a girl of many fears."

I make a mental note of that comment. Addie comes across as tough, composed, and self-sufficient, which isn't my usual type.

I like feeling needed. I like girls who *can* hold their own but would rather let their man take care of them. I think those years of looking after Mia at college did something to me.

But then Addie's let me look out for her since the moment we met. The wine, buckling her up in the car, carrying the luggage... small things that mean a lot.

"What's the itinerary for this trip?" I ask as we leave the aft, heading upstairs.

"Grand Cayman, Jamaica, Haiti, Bahamas, and back to Miami on Sunday," he recites the exotic locations as though it's a casual weekend getaway.

Instead of turning left at the top of the stairs toward the restaurant where we began, Henry guides me up another flight, then down a corridor, halting outside suite seventeen.

“I’ll leave you here but join us in the restaurant as soon as you’re ready.”

“We will,” I assure him, reaching for the door handle.

“No, no, no.” He laughs, shaking his head, and gestures toward a tablet on the wall. “You need the pin. Four digits. This one’s set to Addie’s birthday.”

A perfect ploy to blow our fake dating shit wide open, but, thankfully, Addie’s prepared me for this. I tap in zero nine one one and... nothing happens.

Shit, did I forget her birthday already?

No. No way. It’s November ninth, I’m sure it is.

Henry looks down his nose at me with that special kind of curious annoyance only rich British men can pull off.

British.

Fuck, of course.

“Forgot you guys get your dates all ass about face,” I say with a grin, hoping to get him onside with the old-school reference as I type in one one zero nine instead and the lock disengages with a click.

“Good memory,” Henry praises. “I’ve been married twenty-five years but still get my wife’s birthday wrong.” He pats my shoulder, turns in place like a soldier, and strides down the corridor, his footfalls fading into the distance.

“Addie?” I call out, closing the door behind me.

The suite is larger than any hotel suite I’ve ever been to, and we stayed in the Caesars Palace villa for Cody’s bachelor party. The place screams luxury and elegance, from the plush furniture to the modern artwork adorning the walls.

To my left, there’s a huge living area with leather sofas and a state-of-the-art entertainment system. The bedroom section is on the right, separated by a room divider, the bed so big it looks like two kings squished together.

Soft, ambient lighting creates an intimate atmosphere, but it’s nothing compared to the real showstopper: a glass wall

offering an unobstructed view of the open ocean.

The *Serenity's* on the move, cutting through the water. The sun dips toward the horizon, painting the soft waves in bright oranges and reds.

“Addie?” I call out again, stepping further in to discover a kitchenette with an Italian coffee maker, fridge, and gourmet snacks set out on a narrow island. There’s an open bottle of champagne there... one flute conspicuously missing.

“In here!” Addie’s voice calls from the right. “Come in!”

I cross the living room, entering the bedroom area where another door leads to the bathroom.

Thick steam fills the air, but Addie’s not naked, wet, and soapy; my horny imagination is disappointed. She’s perched on the edge of the claw tub, wearing a white, fluffy bathrobe, her damp, long hair draped over one shoulder.

Her milky skin glistens with lotion, the smell and sight driving me feral. She’s soft, warm... tempting. Too fucking distracting. I imagine my lips on her collarbones, kissing their way lower to between her breasts, then lower again to nuzzle her belly until I’d make camp between her thighs.

I’ve not stopped imagining that since she walked into my bedroom last night in nothing but that towel.

“Why are you sitting here?”

She looks up from her phone, sets the empty champagne flute aside, and presses a finger to her lips. “You should grab a shower,” she all but shouts, pulling weird faces at me as she walks backward. “We don’t have much time before dinner.”

“Yeah... alright.” My eyebrows knot in the middle. She’s so fucking bizarre sometimes. “You’re done in here?”

The water starts, and Addie sprints back to me, rising on her toes. Her warm, minty breath fans my cheek, and my hands ball into fists, to stop me grabbing her waist and molding her into me.

“I think there’s a camera in the room,” she breathes. “I don’t know if it’s got a microphone.”

“Addie, we’ve been over this. The earth is round, there are no aliens, we landed on the moon, and your mom wouldn’t —”

“You don’t know that!” she cuts me off, her whisper escalating to a fierce hiss. “There’s a wireless phone charging outlet on a shelf in the living room, very conveniently placed with a vantage point of the whole room, and there’s this tiny diode in the base!”

I laugh. What else can I do?

“That diode glows green when your phone’s charged.”

“What if it *is* a camera?” she insists.

“Your mother didn’t even know I was coming. Why would she plant cameras in your room if she thought you’d be alone?”

Her expression flickers as my argument lands, and she falls back onto her feet. “Right...” she mutters. “You’re right. I’m panicking for nothing.” She takes a deep, centering breath, lifting her gaze to mine. Suddenly realizing how close we are, she tightens her robe, stumbling away. “I’ll change the access code to your birthday just in case.”

“August—”

“I remember!” She waves me off, storming out of the bathroom with a spring in her step. “Your clothes are unpacked. The crew took some things to be pressed. Leave the laundry in the hamper, and they’ll take care of it daily.”

And I thought I had it good with my maid...

Twenty minutes later, I exit the bathroom, showered, and dressed in another Monaco GP outfit, my hair already styled.

I stop two steps into the bedroom, spotting Addie across the room, threading large hoops through her ears. She’s in a wide-leg white body suit that hugs the slim curve of her waist and accentuates her boobs. Her dark hair fans down her back in beach waves, contrasting the light outfit. Barely any makeup, lips stained in deep pink, eyes popping thanks to mascara.

“Have I told you you’re beautiful?” I ask.

“I don’t think you have.” She beams, but her cheeks pink up a touch, adding a million hotness points to her look.

“You’re beautiful, Addie.”

She offers me a sheepish smile, mouthing “thank you” as she finishes with her earrings, tosses her hair over one shoulder, and comes closer, plucking my phone from the bed.

“It’s been pinging constantly for ten minutes.”

“Probably my brothers.”

I unlock the phone, and sure enough, there are forty-seven unread messages among three chats. I open *The Holy Trinity* first.

Cody: Onboard yet? How’s the yacht? Send us some pics.

Conor: Nico’s asking why we’re looking after the business. Someone called him to report that I showed up at The Olive Tree this morning. What story are we selling?

Both messages were sent less than ten minutes ago. I switch to the *Sausage Fest* chat, typing out a quick text before they launch a full-scale investigation into my sudden disappearance.

Nico already asked if anyone knows where the fuck I am. I meant to tell them about the trip when I woke up, but it quickly slipped my mind as soon as I saw Addie.

Me: Safe and sound aboard a superyacht (you should fucking see this place, Nico), cruising the Caribbean for the next week with my fake girlfriend: Audrey, whom I’m saving from marrying a slimy-sounding fucker named Grant.

A soft chuckle behind me alerts me to Addie’s presence and her nosy peeking over my shoulder.

“Spying on me?”

“Sorry... it was an accident.”

“Of course it was.” I settle down on the bed, grab her elbow, and tug her down beside me. “Now watch. Logan

won't believe me. Shawn will kick into detective mode, Nico will take it at face value, and Theo probably won't reply until tomorrow."

Shawn: What's her surname? How long have you known her?

Nico: If the other two-thirds of The Holy Trinity fuck something up while you're gone, it's on your head.

Conor: Hey!

Cody: That's not fair!

Logan: Does this Audrey come inflated, or...?

"I like Logan best so far," Addie says, grabbing my phone. She flicks to the camera, quickly taking a selfie of us. Her smile beams bright and cheeky as she stares into the lens. With another tap, the picture appears in the chat.

My brothers all start typing at once.

Logan: Considering it's her hand holding the phone: hey, Audrey. Do me a favor and smack the back of Colt's head. He'll know what it's for.

And *whack* goes Addie, her chuckle adding insult to injury as the messages come thick and fast. "What was it for?"

"Not letting them know about the trip, and letting you see the chat. It's sacred ground. I'm revoking your privileges."

Me: She did, thanks for that, bro.

"Just let me see their replies, and that's it. I promise," Addie says, leaning into me harder every time I try to move away.

Fine. A few more messages won't hurt. She audibly gasps as soon as I show her the screen.

"That's illegal!"

Shawn: Face recognition comes up with Audrey Weston. Ran a check, she's pristine. Have fun, don't drown.

Theo: Let the betting commence.

“That’s quite enough.” I lock the screen. “We should join your family for dinner. I’m starving.”

“Betting? What are they betting on?”

“They bet on anything and everything.”

“This is obviously about me.” She lunges forward to snatch my phone. “I want to know.”

“And I want food.”

“Show me!”

“No. Drop it.” I grab her by the elbow, then swing her over my shoulder and march out, phone tucked in the back pocket of my pants. “Food, Addie.” I poke her butt once we’re out in the corridor. “Left, is it?”

“Left and put me down!” she squeals, every word punctuated with laughter. “Please, I’m not wearing shoes!”

“You’ll survive. No dinging the deck with your heels.”

She stretches for my back pocket, but before her hands reach my phone, I slide her down my front, setting her on her feet at the bottom of the stairs.

“Nosy creature.”

“It’s only natural!” She grabs her waist with both hands, pulling an almost convincing stern school teacher expression. “What are they betting on?”

Us, baby.

More precisely: how long it takes before our fake relationship turns very fucking real.

Too bad they don’t have all the info—I’m here by accident and still not convinced I’m her type. Sure, she came on to me when she was tipsy, but that doesn’t count. Besides, we just fucking met. I’m not rushing into anything. Especially since this week is supposed to be nothing but a business transaction; we’ll both get what we want from the situation. She gets a Grant-free trip, and by the end, I’ll be free from my brothers’ blackmailing.

Win-win.

Anything else I get out of this will be a welcome bonus.

“Oh, there you are!” a female voice booms behind us.

We turn to find a young woman trotting down the stairs on ludicrous heels, her navy fitted dress so long the back is still at the top while she’s halfway down.

“I’ve missed you so much, sis!”

Addie stiffens beside me briefly, then releases a breath, forcing her muscles to relax as the girl engulfs her in a tight hug.

“Amara, this is Colt, my boyfriend,” Addie says when Amara pulls away, looking me up and down.

“Victoria mentioned Addie brought a guest,” she trills, extending her hand to suggest it should be kissed. “It’s a pleasure. I’m Amara, the bride-to-be.”

“Congratulations on your engagement.”

A dazzling smile takes the width of her face as she proudly presents her finger, adorned with a big-ass rock. It’s bigger and uglier than the ring Conor bought Vivienne before he consulted us. I guess Amara’s got around-the-clock security, so she doesn’t have to worry about being mugged...

We move to the restaurant where over twenty people are sitting around a long table. The introductions and surprised glances my way don’t end for ten minutes, but once I’ve shaken all hands and exchanged pleasantries, Henry drapes his arm over my shoulders, steering me away.

“Don’t mind the commotion,” he says, signaling the bartender. “No one believed Victoria when she announced Addie had brought a boyfriend. They’ll calm down by tomorrow.”

“That’s... reassuring.”

He smirks, resting an elbow on the counter. “So tell me, Colt, what do you do for a living?”

“Business management and acquisition. I own a few places in Orange County and manage my brother’s portfolio. He started focusing solely on market trading a few years ago.”

“A stockbroker, eh? A handy person to have in the family.”

“Sure is,” I agree, ordering a drink from the bartender. “Can I have a glass of Château Lafite Rothschild Pauillac?”

“A fine choice,” the bartender commends. “I’ll fetch a bottle from the cellar.”

As the bartender leaves, Henry’s posture stiffens and his eyes narrow slightly. “Hayes,” he mutters, with an air of realization. “Of course. I knew it rang a bell. Your brother, the stockbroker, is Nico Hayes, yes?”

“Yes.” Addie joins us, wearing a look of bothersome terror. One glance behind her explains the issue: her mother’s glaring at her with a deep eleven marking her forehead. “I don’t think there’s a soul in Newport who hasn’t heard about Nico,” she adds, her hand sneaking around my back.

We align seamlessly, *naturally*, and as if we’ve done it a thousand times before, I draw her closer.

“His reputation precedes him,” Henry agrees. “The real-estate agent who helped me find Addie’s house sang his praises. I believe it was thanks to your brother that Michael tripled his inheritance, raising enough to start his own agency.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me. The list of people my brother’s turned into millionaires grows exponentially.”

The bartender returns with the bottle, turning his back to us as he fetches a glass and a corkscrew.

“I’d appreciate it if you could open and pour right here,” I tap the counter twice.

“I see you’re aware of Audrey’s peculiarities,” he muses. “I assure you she trusts me to handle her drinks. I’ve been doing so for four years.”

“She’s smart, not peculiar,” I clip, taking offense on her behalf, “and while you may have earned her trust, you haven’t

earned mine.” I tap the bar once more. “Here, *please*.”

He dips his head in what I assume is a polite bow, then gets to work with his hands where I can see them.

“Right, shall we?” Henry asks, biting back a smirk as he starts toward the table, leaving us to follow.

“Brown-noser,” Addie muses in my ear.

“Excuse me?”

“At this rate, Dad will start calling you *son* before the end of the evening.” Her voice grows softer, her breath ghosting across my cheek. “I told you I don’t care if they like you. Be yourself.”

Eyes still on the bartender, I slide my hand down her back. “I *am* being myself.”

“Oh...” She inches away, searching for any signs of bluffing in my eyes.

“Why would I act like someone I’m not when I still want to take you out on a date once we’re home?”

“You do? Really?”

I don’t know why she’s so surprised.

With every hour, I discover more things I like about her, and this is just day one. By the time we return to Miami on Sunday, I’ll know her inside out, and unless she uncovers some truly horrific secrets, it’s safe to assume I’ll want to keep seeing her.

“Yes, really. You said I can call you next week.”

She takes a step back, snatching her wine off the counter. “You have my number,” she says, and with a cute wink, she walks away, following her father.

ELEVEN

Addie

DAD STOLE COLT again after dinner to finish the tour of the yacht. He promised to give him back in half an hour, but they must've stopped at another bar because it's been an hour, and they're still not back.

That's not ideal because I'm exhausted and pleasantly mellow, though still slowly working through my first bottle of wine. After the seven-course meal, I need two to get a proper buzz on, so I'm not worried about calling Colt a git when the elevator dings and he and my father exit arm-in-arm, accompanied by two other men—Samuel Frost and Millington Burns. They're not part of our family, but they're treated like they are.

"I think it's time for bed," Colt says, approaching the couch I'm lounging on under an inky black sky speckled with bright stars. "You've been up for nineteen hours already."

"So have you," I point out, but I don't protest when he helps me to my feet and tucks me against his firm side.

He smells like expensive cologne, cigar smoke, and bourbon. A surprisingly satisfying combination.

"Here, take this," I urge Amara, holding out my half-empty wine glass.

The plush throw protecting me from the ocean breeze sighs to the floor, and my skin breaks out in goosebumps. The cold wooden decking under my bare feet makes me step from one foot to the other, shuddering in place.

"Grab that for me," he tells my brother, motioning at the throw, then scoops me into his arms, bridal style, and curves me into his broad chest. "Cover her up."

"I can walk," I mutter as my brother drapes the throw over me. "I'll be fine once we're inside."

He tucks one corner of the throw under my butt, adjusting his hold, zero fucks given about my protest. After saying his

goodbyes, he carries me inside, up the stairs, and stops by suite seventeen.

“Key in the code, Addie,” he urges.

“You can put me down now, you know?” but *please don't*.

It's been a while since someone held me so close... even longer since someone's touch made me feel this good.

A little too good, actually.

Taking my sweet time, I tap in the four-digit code, and as soon as we're in, he gently drops me on the bed.

“How do you think that went?” he asks, entering the walk-in closet to snatch a pair of pajama bottoms off a hanger.

“I think it went really well. My dad sure likes you, and my mom's behaving herself, so I'm happy.”

“From what you told me, I expected your mom to be a walking nightmare. You're doing her a disservice. She's alright.”

She is not alright, but I have to admit, she surprised me tonight, if I don't count her implying I always make things up.

We take turns in the bathroom, and when I emerge wearing the most modest nightdress I own, Colt's in bed with his phone, the glow from the screen illuminating his chiseled features.

Another thing we haven't discussed: sleeping arrangements. Seeing as he's already in bed, I don't think he's given it a second thought. Maybe I shouldn't either.

We're adults. We can sleep in one bed without it meaning anything but... it's intimate. Judging by how little it takes for him to send desire surging through me it might not be the best idea to lay down beside him.

I glance at the large couch. It's so big it'd fit two of me, and looks as comfortable as the bed. A slight shudder shakes my shoulders, my fingers twitching. Sleeping with Colt isn't the smart choice, but it's so tempting.

“What’s wrong, Addie?”

“Nothing... I’m fine. I’m just thinking.”

A slow smirk lifts the corner of his mouth. “Are you considering the couch?”

“Maybe?” I clip defensively.

“There’s enough room in here for you.” Getting no reply, he bends one hand behind his head, getting comfortable. “Fine. Take the couch.”

A challenge hangs in the air, stirring a stubborn streak within me. Raising my head higher, I cross the room, sinking into the plush couch cushions, and bounce lightly, assessing its comfort in great, fake concentration.

I’m challenging Colt’s authority—something he doesn’t take lightly, judging by the heavy silence stretching between us. The tension winds tighter with every passing second.

“I know you’re trying to piss me off,” he finally clips. “It’s working. I’m nothing if not a fan of a little bratty attitude, but careful, Addie. Good girls know when to stop pushing the wrong buttons. Get your ass in bed before I do it for you.”

The loaded meaning behind his words has my heart skipping a beat. The insinuation, the alluring promise of discipline, draws out a side of him I find hard to resist.

He holds my gaze, his expression stern, but there’s a glint in his eyes, a silent dare that hitches my breath. *Disobey me, see what happens.*

We’ve not been here ten hours yet, but I’m already debating whether the *no sex* rule wasn’t a huge mistake. How can I keep my libido in check when his scalding gaze devours me inch by inch like he’s starving and I’m the best meal he’s ever laid eyes on?

We stare each other down, the air crackling with electric current. It’s a dangerous game. His innuendos toe a fine line, but he doesn’t seem to have any desire to cross it.

I think he gets off on my reaction.

With a final glance at the couch, I let out a defeated sigh, and join him. My cheeks warm as I lift the comforter. I don't think I've ever blushed as much as I have over the past two days.

"The couch is uncomfortable," I say, holding onto the illusion of having the upper hand in this game we're playing.

"If anyone's sleeping on the couch, it'll be me."

"No," I blurt out too eagerly. "I mean... you're right. We'll fit here together." I fluff the pillow, slipping onto my side, leaving enough space between us for another adult. "Are your brothers checking in?"

He nods, staring at the screen. "Yeah, making sure Shawn's report on you was solid and I am, in fact, alive and well."

"Are you?" I prop my head on my palm, ogling him from his face to his muscular chest. A long scar between his pecs has me scooting closer. "How did you get that?"

Every muscle in his body turns to stone before he catches my wrist to stop me touching the long line.

"Sorry," I mutter, retreating. "How did you get it? It looks like—"

"It's nothing. Go to sleep, Addie."

Nothing? That's not nothing, but he's obviously not keen on sharing. I'm surprised how much that stings.

Rolling onto my side, I turn my back on him. "Don't you think I should know in case someone asks? You're on a yacht. You plan on wearing a tee the whole time?"

"I'm not ashamed of it," he barks.

A long silence follows. Long enough that I start drifting off, abandoning all hope he'll explain, but then he shifts closer to the middle of the bed and states without emotion, "Car accident. Aortic valve replacement."

"Oh..."

"Goodnight, Addie."

A whirlwind of questions twists and turns in my mind. Did he crash during a race? How bad was it? Was it his fault? Why is he still racing? Despite the nagging curiosity, I bite my tongue, sensing now isn't the time to prod.

The only sound in the room is the occasional soft rustle of sheets. In the privacy of my thoughts, I picture high-speed crashes. The images drag me along on a rollercoaster ride until sleep finally comes. But even as I drift off, the unease doesn't fully dissipate, and I realize I'm *worried* about him...

TWELVE

Colt

EXPECTATIONS HAVE A FUNNY WAY of morphing into reality's most unsuspecting surprises. When boarding the yacht yesterday, I expected a relaxing week with a few island escapades.

A loud, eight-am knock on the door was definitely not part of the plan.

Neither was waking up with a mouthful of Addie's hair, our bodies jumbled in a less-than-comfortable pile. It's not cute. She's not cuddling into my side like I see Mia do with Nico all the time when she falls asleep on the couch while they watch a movie.

No, this is... the wrong way around. My head's under Addie's chin, her hair a curtain over my face. It's uncomfortable and painful thanks to her knee lodged in my junk and her elbow digging into the hollow of my neck.

She's sprawled all over the place, half on the sheets, half off, half on me, half not, her weight dead center on my now-numb right arm. Another knock reverberates through the suite and I spit out Addie's hair, rolling her off me.

In the process, I learn a few fun facts about my fake girlfriend. One, her wake-up routine is a symphony of grunts and mumbles. Two, the way she kicks herself free from the sheets would result in a knee to my balls had I not already moved her a safe distance away.

What is it that they say about animals? That they mirror their owners, right? It might be the other way around with Addie. Looks like she channeled her inner animal kingdom, charging at the door like a pissed-off emu, her feet stamping against the wooden floor.

"What?" I hear her snap at whoever's at the door.

Fun fact number three: she needs to braid her hair in the evening because that nest on her pretty head will forever give

me nightmares.

And four... she is *not* a morning person.

With more grunting and grumbling toward whoever dared to wake her, she slams the door shut, then stomps back to bed. She burrows headfirst under the sheets to end up completely covered, just a few stray locks peeking from underneath.

I wonder if she ever rescued a meerkat.

“Morning.” I lift her pillow, earning myself a kick in the shin. Seriously, what’s with all the kicking lately? “I said, *morning*, Addie. What gets you going? Coffee?”

“Sleep,” she huffs.

“Breakfast?”

“Sleep.”

“It’s eight in the morning, who was at the door?”

With an incoherent string of muttered complaints, a hand shoots out from under the covers, slapping a crumpled envelope onto my face.

“So aggressive...” I chuckle, tearing it open.

I bet I could lift her mood in three minutes if I got my head between her thighs. Not the best visual considering my morning hard-on is fucking *raging*.

Back to my initial train of thought... another thing I didn’t expect when I agreed to help Addie was a week of activities. Participation mandatory. I skim the invitation to the task-filled adventure, then read it aloud.

“They’re so lame,” Addie mutters, tugging the sheets until her face pops out. “Is there at least a prize?”

I check the back of the card. “For today’s task it’s a whatever-you-desire dinner on the top deck tonight.”

“Lame,” she repeats, scrunching her nose.

“There’s more. Whoever wins can keep the same partner for the next task. Everyone else gets shuffled into new teams.”

She sits up, looking marginally more awake. “Ugh, fine. We better get moving.”

“Afraid to lose me?”

“Would you like to be paired with my mother?”

“Fair point.” I get to my feet, ignoring Addie staring at the scar marking my chest.

At least she’s not eyeing the bulge in my pants.

Not that I’d mind.

“Grab a shower and tame that.” I motion to her hair. “You look like you got struck by lightning.”

She rolls her eyes but smothers her hair into something less horror-movie looking before stumbling into the bathroom.

Within forty minutes, we’re on the main deck where people are enjoying breakfast in the morning sun. The seating arrangement has changed from last night. We’ve been moved up from halfway down the table to sit next to Addie’s father.

Over the next half an hour, during which two cups of black coffee wake me up and sharpen my focus on the conversation, all twenty-two people at the table—including three children—polish the food off their plates, while listening to the minute details of Amara’s wedding plan, even though she was only asked if they’d set the date.

Detailed, and by the sound of it, ridiculously expensive: Seychelles, three hundred guests, a performance by her favorite singer, and so on and so forth.

“Full?” I ask Addie, pointing at her untouched slice of pie.

From the corner of my eye, I catch her mother’s head whip toward me, eyebrows theatrically raised.

“The pie is topped with cashews. Audrey’s allergic to most nuts,” she denotes loud enough to draw everyone’s attention. “How long have you been...” She wrinkles her nose, looking between us, “...*dating* that you don’t know such a basic thing?”

Looks like someone started their day on the wrong side of the bed. Don't ask why, but her hostility seems hilarious.

Truth be told, I was a little disappointed with her smiles last night. I hoped she'd give me shit at some point during this trip. People like Victoria—narcissists—despise when things don't go their way, so my strategy for tackling her rude ass is bound to drive her nuts. Pun, obviously, intended.

"I can't say I noticed Addie having any aversion to nuts," I say, my tone casual, but I add a small emphasis on *nuts for* good measure. Addie's kick under the table and Victoria's eyes bulging from their sockets let me know the innuendo hit the mark. Playing coy, I add, "She had a walnut latte on our flight yesterday."

"I'm only allergic to cashews and pistachios," Addie says, sounding more defensive than I did. "They're hardly a popular ingredient, Mom."

Victoria narrows her eyes, cheeks reddening as I'd hoped.

Mother dearest: 0.

Colt: 1.

"You purposely haven't answered my question. How long have you been seeing my daughter?"

"Three months," Addie answers, sliding her untouched plate toward me. "You can have that."

"Can Colt not speak, or is he as ignorant as all the other charity cases you bring home?" Victoria seethes.

"That's enough," Henry snaps, his tone level but sharp enough to cut glass. "You will *immediately* apologize, Victoria."

"There's no need." I hold her lethal gaze. "It's only natural for a mother to be protective over her daughter."

She nonchalantly turns her head, glaring at Henry. Amara quickly starts a new topic, drawing everyone's attention. Within moments Victoria excuses herself, heading straight for the bar.

It seems a little early to start downing drinks if you ask me.

Addie grabs my hand under the table, squeezing hard three times, her beautiful, big eyes full of apologies. The smile on my lips doesn't reassure her. She looks ready to flee.

Aware we're under scrutiny, I close the distance between us, kissing her head as I mutter, "I think she compared me to Emmanuel. I'll take it. You like that pig."

"You're impossible," she huffs, doing a lousy job of biting back a laugh. "She'll go out of her way to provoke you now."

"Let her try."

"Colt." Henry's suddenly behind me, stealthy as a mountain lion. I need to keep that in mind. He drops both hands on my shoulders, squeezing once. "Come on, let's have a smoke."

THIRTEEN

Addie

MY MOTHER HUMILIATED or embarrassed me in front of people on many, *many* occasions, but not once has her acid-dripping disdain made me feel as bad as when she spoke to Colt.

Comparing him to an abandoned animal, like I'm only with him out of pity...

I know her well enough to read between the lines. She wasn't just saying Colt's a phase, that he's a project I've taken on to kill time. No, she dug deeper, ridiculing his social status, and accentuating the financial gap.

He's well-off. Owns a beautiful house. The cars I saw in his garage, the watch, his clothes—all expensive. If I were to venture a guess, I'd say he's worth at least five million, but in my mothers' eyes millions are spare change.

Dad's fortune is worth over thirty-five *billion* dollars. Anyone who's not part of the ten-digit elite doesn't matter.

Grant is an unfortunate exception because his life's mission is to hit ten digits. He's twenty-four, already worth nine, so ten is just a matter of time. He's also a huge ass-kisser and has made a considerable effort to get into my mother's good graces over the years.

I look toward the bow of *Serenity* where Dad's engrossed in conversation with Colt and my brother, Ben.

The happiness I felt when Colt agreed to spend the week with me, so I could avoid Grant, now withers away. I'm anything but happy. I'm disappointed. Mostly in myself. Focused on making sure *I* would be fine, I didn't consider what would happen to Colt.

I've not known him long, but it's clear as day that he's a good person. Despite the brazen arrogance he radiates, despite the controlling, dominating aura, he's good inside. It was clear when he was talking about his family during the flight. The

fondness in his voice when he mentioned his nephews, placing a particular focus on *the twin chaos generators*, as he calls Conor's sons... yeah, he's a *good* person.

And he doesn't deserve any shit from my mother no matter how well he can take it.

I wish I'd never asked him to come. It's only day two and I'm already wondering how to send him home, away from this shitshow. My mother's behavior will scare him off, we'll never have that date he promised, and I like him too much to let Mom ruin this for me.

She stands at the bar, her shoulders squared, a phone to her ear, her other hand flying about as she gesticulates, showing off her exasperation in case anyone hasn't noticed. I bet she's ordering the concierge to restock her minibar. Or maybe she's venting to her best friend who broke her hip the other day and couldn't make the cruise.

What. A. *Pity*.

"Ignore her," my brother says, taking Colt's empty seat.

Other than Amara chatting to her maid of honor at the far end of the table, no one else is seated. Most of the guests are lounging on comfy couches or indulging in a morning swim on the third deck while they wait for the first task.

"She's about as easy to ignore as a buzzing fly at three in the morning," I mumble, finishing my coffee.

Maybe I should follow my mother's lead and order a glass of red... Drowning my foul mood in a bottle of Château Lafite Rothschild Pauillac sounds tempting but getting drunk at half past nine in the morning while my mother lingers nearby is a recipe for disaster.

Benjamin chuckles. "She may be infuriating, but she does have your best interests at heart, sis."

"I've never heard her speak that way to Amara."

"That's different. Amara's only job is looking pretty, acting classy, and cooking my babies in her oven. There's

much more expected of your husband than there ever will be of my wife.”

I scrunch up my nose. “Age of equality my ass.”

“Equality? Not in our section of society. Like I said, just ignore Mom’s digs. Colt seems immune. Where did you even find him? Last time I heard, you were single.”

“Couldn’t resist my charm,” Colt says, appearing beside us, with a fresh cup of coffee for me. He’s so... attentive. So perceptive. I could get used to being treated like a princess. “Will you be okay here for twenty minutes? Your dad wants me to put him in touch with Nico.”

“I’ll be fine, just make sure you’re back before ten. Amara won’t be happy if you’re late for the game.”

“It won’t take long.” He drops a kiss on my head, nods at my brother, then marches away, meeting my father at the elevator. They’re probably heading to the conference room on the lower level. There’s also a movie theater, casino, and nightclub equipped with three poles down there.

My brother’s engagement celebration—for lack of a better word—will not take place down there, so it’s all closed for the week, but the bachelor party is bound to get out of control. Benjamin’s already announced he wants to sail to Cuba for a wild night.

“I like him,” he says watching my father and Colt step into the all-glass elevator. “He’s smart.”

“He is. Not that you spent any time with him to notice.”

“Yeah, but Dad’s keeping him close. That’s enough of a hint.”

True. My dad has a knack for reading people. He doesn’t surround himself with those who don’t represent something he values, and he values intelligence above all. Might be the reason he’s never been keen on Grant.

You’d think making the kind of money Grant makes requires intelligence, but the truth is, Grant is simply a great

piggyback rider. He climbs the ladder on the coattails of others, mimicking their strategic decisions.

“Come on, sis,” Ben pleads, nodding at Amara like he’s inviting me to spend time with her. “I know she’s not your favorite person, but... make an effort, okay? For me. Get to know her. She’ll be part of this family soon enough. It’d be nice if you got along.”

“It’s not that I don’t like her, Ben. I just think you’re rushing into this marriage to please Mom. I worry that you’ll meet the right girl one day and regret this.”

He shrugs, dismissing my words with a wave. He’s heard it all multiple times before, sat through countless similar conversations, and never once complained about my older-sister routine so I guess I should shut up and go with the flow.

FOURTEEN

Colt

AT TEN O’CLOCK, the waitstaff clears the table while Amara takes five minutes to thank everyone for coming before getting to the point. With a stack of black envelopes in hand, she tells everyone to divide themselves into pairs.

“Each pair will receive an envelope with the first riddle. I’ve designed the treasure hunt differently for each pair to avoid everyone chasing the same clues. There are four riddles with two tasks along the way. The last riddle leads to the prize.”

There are eight pairs in total. Ben and Amara aren’t participating, neither are the single father and his three kids. Benjamin grabs the envelopes, offering his parents first choice.

By the time it’s Addie’s turn, there are only two envelopes left. She grabs one, ready to tear it open when Amara gives everyone the go-ahead.

“Relax,” I whisper in her ear. “You know this boat inside out; that gives us an edge.”

She nods, dropping down on her ass to quickly lose her cute platform sandals.

“Okay, let the fun begin!” Amara yells into the microphone.

Addie, quick as the lightning that must have struck her hair during the night, tears the envelope open, presenting me a card with the first riddle:

At first, I’m a treat in the sun.

Then, I bring joy and fun.

As the years pass, my worth ascends,

More precious than ever, as time extends.

What am I?

“Vacation?” Addie turns to me, a crease between her dark brows. “No, that doesn’t make sense. It fits, but there’s no vacation room—” She halts, eyes growing wide. “It’s a book!” she whisper-shouts. “To the library!”

“No, it’s—”

“A book!” she mouths, a *don’t start with me* look crossing her features. “It fits, Colt! At first, it’s a treat in the sun for the kids, then it’s for adults—”

“No, it doesn’t fit. Come on.” I take her hand, but she yanks it away, arms akimbo, cheeks flushed.

“It *fits!* The older, the wiser!”

Seeing as I’m not winning this argument with words, I hoist her over my shoulder. It’s starting to become a habit, and something I enjoy way too much when her hip juts against my head. She’s light but furious.

“Wait!” She pummels my back with her small fists. “You’re not listening, you daft twit! Where are we going?”

“You’re just making words up as you go, aren’t you? And it’s *you* who doesn’t listen. It’s not a book.”

“Yes, it is!” she wails. “You’ll make us lose!”

She has more spirit in her little finger than Conor has in his entire fucking body. Ignoring her thrashing, I don’t slow down until we’re in the elevator, riding to the lowest level.

As soon as her feet hit the ground, she charges at me, all beautiful wrath. If only she knew how much I get off on this... my brain short-circuits, showing me enticing images of Addie on her knees, making up for acting out—

“We’ll lose!” she yells, pounding my chest. “You’ll end up paired with my mother, you pig-headed nutter!”

“I love it when you talk dirty, baby, but zip it for one damn second. It’s *wine*, Addie. At first, when it’s a treat in the sun—”

“It’s a grape!” she exclaims, her eyes lighting up. “Yes! Once it’s turned into wine it’s fun, and more expensive the

older it gets. God, you're brilliant!" She jumps, wrapping her arms around my neck, and kisses my cheeks before quickly hopping off. "To the cellar!"

"What the fuck is a pig-headed nutter anyway?"

"A stubborn, bat-shit crazy jerk."

"How about *twit*?"

"An idiot. A fool."

"You're so classy," I say, chuckling quietly.

She'll be the death of me, I swear. How fucking bizarre is it that I find her extremely hot when she yells at me?

Entering the cellar, we find a table in the middle. No note, just puzzle pieces scattered all over. I get to work, separating the border from everything else.

"This will take a while."

"What are you doing?" Addie asks, barreling her way to the table. "It's a wine bottle, can't you see? We just need to figure out which one."

I scan the puzzle pieces, a riot of colors all blending together, assaulting my eyes. "How can you tell what it is?"

She points to disjointed writing on the scattered pieces. Partial words—*Lefla* on one, *Cru* on another, then *ive* and *ard-Mo*. She takes a few moments to locate all the relevant pieces, then proudly claps her hands, aligning them in order.

"Leflaive Bâtard-Montrachet Grand Cru. That was easy!"

She dashes to the white wines on the left, concentrating on the bottles as she scans the shelves. I'm a beat slower to follow, captivated by the way she rises on her toes with a look of genuine joy on her face, and how fucking gorgeous she is when she smiles.

"Aha!" She plucks a bottle from the rack, turning it every which way, looking for *something*.

"At the bottom," I point out, snatching the small envelope glued there. Inside, there's a piece of paper folded three times.

*I spin above, yet I'm not the breeze,
I move around or in the air I freeze,
Not a bird, yet I fly,
What am I, up in the sky?*

“To the helipad,” I say, pulling Addie back into the elevator.

“Right! A helicopter. You’re quick with those.”

“They’re not that hard. Besides, we know it can only refer to places on the yacht. Makes it easier.”

“Tell that to them,” she whispers as we emerge on the main deck, where there are three pairs stuck deciphering their first riddles. “We only started fifteen minutes ago.”

“You sound like you want to give them a fighting chance.”

“I would if the stakes weren’t so high.”

There’s another table in the middle of the helipad. A wooden box with a number lock sits in the center, a black envelope taped to the lid, and inside, another riddle.

While I tackle that, Addie brushes her fingers over the island engraved on the box.

“I think it’s Cococay,” she says, her eyebrows bunching as she examines the lock.

*I hold no weight, yet I can tell,
Where in the world you dwell.
I'm just two lines crossing paths,
I'm not math, but I'm all about maths.
What am I, that can't be seen,
But tells you where you've been?*

“How many digits?” I ask, whipping my phone out. “Ten?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

I hand her the riddle, opening Maps on my phone, and search for Cococay.

“Is it...” Addie pauses, her usual confidence replaced by a flicker of doubt as she adorably worries her bottom lip. “Is the answer *coordinates?*”

“It is. Now we need to find the specific location on the box.”

Addie studies the lines, finding a small X on the coastline. “X marks the spot. I think that’s where the marina is.”

Going off that, I locate the spot, dictating the numbers.

“...nine three seven,” I finish.

With the last digit dialed in, the lock clicks and the lid springs open. Another black envelope hides inside, but Addie stops me before I take it.

“I think this is it,” she says, slightly disappointed. “Amara said four riddles and two tasks, didn’t she?”

“Really? Half an hour?”

“Looks like we make a great team.” She hands the envelope over. “You’re better at riddles than I am.”

*I’m filled with stories, but I don’t speak,
A place for the curious and those who seek.
Not a treasure chest, but in me, you’ll find,
Countless gems for your mind.*

What am I?

“You’ll know this one,” I say, handing her the card.

Addie smiles, and this time, she’s the one leading. We go down two flights of stairs and open the tall, wooden library door to reveal the grand prize. A huge bouquet of pink flowers sits in a large vase, a glass trophy glimmering beside it.

“Looks like you’re mine for the next task.” Addie beams, hugging the flowers to her chest.

And fuck... not dipping my head to taste that smile is almost physically painful.

It takes two hours before all the pairs come back from the treasure hunt. Henry and Victoria came in third, and if that wasn't enough to fuck up her mood, learning we won did the trick.

Save for her occasional glaring and snarky tone, the rest of the day passes without drama. We spend most of our time roaming the yacht, indulging in gourmet food, and lounging by the pool once the sun's not so scorching.

My brothers check in on me in the late afternoon, their bets firmly in place, same stakes as usual: a hundred bucks.

Theo's the most optimistic, wagering that Addie and I will turn the *fake* into *real* by the end of the trip. The rest play the game more conservatively. Shawn, basing his decision on Addie's background check and her family's fortune, has decided we won't even make it to the end and I'll fly home early.

That got me curious.

In a solitary moment, while Addie's getting ready for the romantic date we've won, I google her father and almost fall off the damn chair when his net worth pops up on the screen.

Thirty-five billion dollars.

Flicking through a few articles about Henry Weston, I find a mention of Grant Whitaker. His net worth? Three billion.

No wonder Addie's mother hates me... compared to the son-in-law she wants, I'm a tiny fish among whales.

FIFTEEN

Addie

THE TOP DECK HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED into a picturesque al-fresco dining space. Hundreds of glittering string lights are hung around a table, set under a pergola on the far end where nothing obscures the view of the ocean. The scent of fresh flowers wafts through the air, mixing with the salty evening breeze.

A pop-up bar stands on the other side of the deck, manned by two crew members. One of them leads us to the table as soon as we arrive. It's all very elegant, but far from what I had in mind when Colt made the mistake of letting me choose the menu. As it's a whatever-you-desire dinner, we were asked earlier what we wanted to eat. Colt said he trusts my judgment.

Bad call.

He pulls my chair out before taking a seat, playing the boyfriend part with utmost engagement. My family's on the main deck, but there are cameras everywhere, and the crew is loyal to my mother, so there's no room for slip-ups.

"This is too formal," I tell the waiter, wrinkling my nose at the twelve pieces of cutlery neatly arranged around my plate. "Can we swap all this for blankets and pillows?"

Colt cocks an eyebrow. "Picnic style?"

"Why not? The food I ordered doesn't scream elegance."

The waiter silently awaits our decision, and once Colt nods, he ushers us to the bar while he swaps the setting.

I catch Colt's arm, pulling him back. We've been surrounded by my family all day, and I've not had the opportunity to apologize for my mother's behavior. And Colt deserves an apology. The mortification that prickled my skin this morning rushes back, painting my cheeks red.

"I didn't have the chance to do this earlier... I'm sorry I dragged you into this," I say, pinching the hem of my dress

between two fingers. “I didn’t think my mother would ridicule you every single step of the way.”

He hooks his index finger under my chin, tilting my head up. “You think her digs are getting to me? You said you don’t care if your parents like me, so what’s the problem?”

“I don’t care if they like you, but they should at least respect you, and when Mom implied you’re a charity case—”

He chuckles, and the husky, low sound makes my heart thud faster. “I couldn’t care less about your mother’s opinion, Addie. Don’t worry about me. I’m here to help *you*.”

“But why?” I peer into his deep brown eyes, looking for answers. He never told me why he agreed. “You’re not getting anything out of this.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. It’s cute that you worry about me, but don’t, okay? I’m fine.” He drops a kiss on my forehead, turns to the bar, and swiftly changes the topic. “So, what goes with this less-than-elegant dinner?” He scans the drinks on display behind the bartender. “Beer?”

“Beer works,” I sigh, turning my frown upside down. “Can we have two Coronas?”

“Of course.” The bartender pivots, taking two bottles out of the cooler, but halts, touching his earpiece and nodding at no one in particular. “My apologies, but we have to change location,” he tells us. “Please make your way to second deck. We’ll ensure everything is moved there.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” I ask.

The distant drone of a helicopter breaks the otherwise silent night. I no longer need an explanation. The helipad is on this deck... looks like we have an incoming guest.

A knot of dread tightens my stomach as I look toward the sky. There’s only one person it can be.

“She has got to be kidding me!” Stomping my foot, I grab Colt, dragging him down the stairs, deaf to his questions. My stomach isn’t far from ejecting its contents when he stops me at the bottom.

“What’s happening?” he asks, his arms shooting out to pin me against the wall and block my way out. “Deep breath, Addie. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“My mother,” I spit out, not bothering with the deep breath. It won’t help. “She... ugh! She must’ve called Grant. I’m almost certain that’s *his* helicopter about to land here.”

“The Huddersfield farm guy? The guy your mother wants you to marry? *That* Grant?”

“Yes.” I swallow the bitter bile coating my throat. “I can’t believe she asked him to come when you’re here.”

Colt steps back, utterly unaffected. “Can’t say I’m surprised. Does his arrival change anything between us?”

“No! Of course not, I just... I don’t want him here.”

“Is he likely to make a scene?”

Oh yes. Grant’s as melodramatic and entitled as my mother. He’s not a bad person, just greedy. Having me as his wife would mean a substantial injection of cash for him. A fast-track way to ten digits because my dad’s put aside a billion dollars each for me and my brother; we get it once we say *I do*. So, yeah... Grant will definitely try to upstage Colt at every turn.

I should’ve anticipated Mom inviting him.

Colt, however smart, handsome, and well mannered, doesn’t meet her lofty standards. She’s so determined to have Grant as her son-in-law she conveniently disregards a lot of foul history between us.

“He was just a child, Addie. He’s a man now. He cares about you. You should give him a chance to prove that.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, my hands so jittery, I’m reflexively playing with my hair—a tick I absolutely hate. “This is so bad,” I whine. “Dealing with my mother alone is bad enough, but the two of them together... they’ll be brutal, Colt and—”

He tilts my chin up like he did upstairs, drawing my eyes to his. It’s a small gesture, but powerful enough that my body sings. The intensity flashing in his eyes, the way he crowds my

space, how good he smells... it's near impossible to remember this is supposed to be an act.

"I've got thick skin, Addie. I don't care what they say, but I want you to rethink whether I should be myself. I'm a hothead. I throw my fists way too easily."

His knuckles trace the contour of my jawline and a hot ball of lust swells behind my ribs. God, the intensity in his eyes is enough to burn me up from the inside. My blood spikes a fever at the careful way he studies me, his voice heavy, loaded.

It's only been four days since we met, but he's got a hold on me already. I imagine him closing the distance between our lips so I can taste him. He's had countless opportunities to kiss me for show but he hasn't. Not once. He'll kiss my forehead or my temple, but never my lips. The anticipation is maddening.

"You're the jealous type?" I ask, moistening my lips, my heart fluttering like a caged bird.

"Territorial," he admits. The hum of the helicopter grows, and Colt dips his head, whispering in my ear. "I don't share, Addie. I don't let other men touch what's mine, so you need to think hard whether you want me to be myself because I guarantee it'll end in blood if Grant gets too close to you."

My vocal cords are tied, my panties soaked, and all I can do is nod because I'm afraid I'll moan if I open my mouth.

"I need words, baby," he urges.

"Be yourself," I whisper. "I'll make sure he doesn't get too close, okay?"

Before he can respond, my brother rounds the corner, overly excited. At least he has the decency to wipe the grin off his face and offer a sympathetic look as he notices me.

"He wasn't supposed to be here, sis. I would've given you a heads-up, but last time I checked he had a week full of business deals lined up in Europe."

“*You* invited him?” I shoot him a death glare, pushing Colt aside as I charge at Ben, poking his chest with my finger. “How could you? I knew I had no support from Mom, but *you*?!”

“Are you kidding me? He’s my best man, Audrey. Did you seriously think I wouldn’t invite him because he makes you uncomfortable? Get over it. It was five fucking years ago!” His voice rises to compete with the deafening roar of Grant’s helicopter preparing for landing above us. “*You* broke up with him, so *you* need to suck it up!”

“You beat him up!” I yell over the surrounding noise. “You were fifteen and you *beat him up*! You said he didn’t deserve me! You were on my side back then. What changed?!”

“I grew up!” his voice booms across the corridor. The helicopter lands, the roar subsiding to nothing more than a low hum as the blades slow to a halt. “He grew up, too. You’re the only one still holding a grudge, Addie. Get over it.”

I scoff, taking a step back. I have so many things I’d love to scream in his face, but the elevator dings and Amara steps out with my mother. A cunning, self-righteous smile plays on her lips when we lock eyes.

“I can’t believe he came!” Amara rushes closer, bouncing on the balls of her bare feet. “Can I go up there?”

“No need, pumpkin.”

Cold chills slither up my arms at Grant’s voice on the top of the staircase. Amara squeals. Literally fucking *squeals* then flings herself in Grant’s arms as soon as he’s within reach.

Colt hovers behind me. His warm breath tickles my neck as he circles an arm around my waist, pulling my back against his chest. “He’s your *ex*?” he utters so quietly even I have a hard time hearing it over Amara’s elation.

I don’t miss the annoyance in his tone, though. It rings loud and clear. I nod once, the tendrils of a badass migraine licking my temples.

Grant sets Amara—who jumped into his arms—down and turns to my mother. A pair of overly snug, cream pants

hug his ass, going perfectly with a white polo shirt straining to contain his muscles. He's tied a pink cardigan round his neck to fall around his shoulders, dark shades tucked into his sand blond hair.

And the pièce de resistance? The dazzling Hollywood smile, brighter than the overhead spotlights as he kisses my mother's hand. With the brown-nosing complete, he finally looks at me, Ben, and... is that a *frown* denting his big forehead as he checks out Colt's arm draped over my stomach?

Grant is usually a master at maintaining his convincing poker face, so this slip-up comes as a surprise.

"Good evening," he rumbles in that gravelly voice I adored as a teenager. "My apologies for the dramatic entrance. I wasn't sure until the very last minute if I'd make it here at all."

Amara beams, throwing herself at him again, her fingers tightly clasped around his neck. "I'm so glad you came!"

"So am I, pumpkin." He stamps a kiss on her head, gently maneuvering her into Ben's arms before shaking his hand and passing over a large gift bag. "Part one of your engagement gift. I'm sending you on a quest. You'll find the details inside."

"Thanks, man. It'll keep Amara occupied for a few hours." He motions toward me and Colt. "You remember my sister." He smirks, the attempted joke falling on deaf ears. "Now meet her boyfriend, Colt Hayes."

Grant spares us a glance, unleashing his well-practiced, fake cheerfulness. "Of course. Victoria mentioned Addie brought a guest."

He extends his hand to Colt, and my first thought is to bite Grant's pulse point and tear out his artery. "Pleasure to meet you, Colt. I wish I could say I've heard a lot about you, but Addie's kept your existence a big secret..."

If Grant hoped to strike a nerve, he's misjudged the audience.

“Well, I heard a lot about you,” Colt replies, firmly grasping Grant’s hand. “Addie said you’re a farmer in Huddersfield. How’s that going?”

I let out a half-snort, half-laugh at the horrified look crossing Grant’s face.

“You told him I’m a *farmer*? Aren’t you the one living with a pig, and Jason the ostrich, Audrey?”

“It’s *Jasper*, and he’s an emu,” Colt cuts in, the faint amusement in his tone a dead giveaway he’s having fun.

“I assure you, Colt, I am *not* a farmer,” Grant emphasizes, his British accent getting posher the angrier he grows. “I own farmland all over the UK.” He drops his condescending gaze, sizing Colt up in a way that makes something violent stir within me. “And what is it that you do?”

“Right now, he should be doing me, so if you’ll excuse us...” The words tumble out before I can stop them.

Not my finest performance considering my mother’s literally three steps away, her face suddenly paper-white. Whatever. If I spend another second with Grant he really will bleed, and it’ll be *me* making it happen.

With a grip that’s way too tight, I seize Colt’s hand and lead him away, leaving Grant to gape after us.

I didn’t spend an hour getting ready just to have my date ruined by his arrival. Colt’s relaxed demeanor vanishes once we’re round the corner, away from prying eyes. The atmosphere between us shifts to uncomfortable for the very first time. It’s normally as easy as breathing to be around him... right now I’m closer to suffocating than breathing.

Every muscle in his neck and back tenses, his jaw clamped tight as he grips the railing. I watch him inhale and exhale, like he’s cooling his jets, before he pulls out a cigarette, the flame of his lighter flickering in the purple ambient lighting.

“Did I... did I take it too far with that comment?” I ask, coming closer.

The picnic area at the far end of the deck is the last thing on my mind, no matter how beautiful it looks.

“No,” he clips, sending a cloud of smoke swirling between us. “You could’ve told me he’s your ex.”

I lean beside him, my back to the ocean, eyes on Colt. “I’m sorry. It’s not a past I enjoy revisiting.”

He rakes his long fingers through his hair, taking another drag. “How far back are we talking?”

“Five years.”

That calms him down a bit. Maybe he thought we broke up recently and there were still some unresolved issues or feelings.

Someone clears their throat, and we both glance at the waiter with a bucket full of Coronas on ice, standing at a respectful distance. “Shall I give you a moment?”

I cover Colt’s hand with mine before he snaps the steel rail. “If you’d rather go back to our room—”

“No.” He flips his hand and laces our fingers as he turns to the waiter. “Leave the bottle opener, please.”

SIXTEEN

Colt

“WILL YOU PLEASE TELL ME THE WHOLE STORY or am I supposed to let my imagination run?” I ask as we settle on the mass of blankets and pillows spread by the pool.

Addie lays on her side, knees curled in, one arm supporting her head. The purple glow of *Serenity*'s lighting illuminates her skin, her long eyelashes casting delicate shadows on her cheeks.

“There's not much to tell,” she admits. “Grant's your age. He was twenty-one when we started dating. I'm sure you remember what it's like to be twenty-one. There's one thing men that age are particularly interested in.”

I sit up. “You were sixteen...”

“Technically, I was still fifteen. Three months shy of my sixteenth birthday.” She takes a slow swig of her beer, eyes unfocused, like she's traveling back in time.

“Did he...? Fuck, did he force himself on you? He was an adult, Addie, that's—”

“Wrong?” she supplies. “Inappropriate?”

“Illegal.”

“Underage drinking is illegal, too, but everyone does it. Are you saying you waited until you were eighteen to have sex?”

“No, but it was consensual between two minors. I never touched an underage girl after I was legally an adult, however slight the age difference.”

She smiles, drumming her fingers on the neck of the bottle. “Not everyone's so principled. Grant sure wasn't. He had no issue with the age difference.”

My palms start sweating. Unspoken scenarios flood my mind, spreading like a drop of ink in water.

If he hurt her... if he forced himself on her... he's dead fucking meat, I swear.

It's hard to keep the questions on the tip of my tongue from spilling over. The only reason I haven't asked yet is the contemplative look on her pretty face. If anything did happen, talking about it won't be easy, especially with someone she only met a few days ago, so I let her get the words out at her own pace.

She rolls onto her stomach, pushing herself up on her elbows. "I was very immature for my age. Naïve. Most of my friends lost their V-cards before they turned fifteen."

"There's nothing immature or naïve about waiting until *you* are ready, Addie. It's more mature than giving in to peer pressure."

"I guess... To cut a long story short, Grant was twenty-one and I refused to have sex, so... you can probably guess the rest."

My pulse hammers away, my muscles seizing. Jesus... I'll break his fucking hands first. It doesn't matter how long ago this happened or how *okay* Addie seems. Grant's getting the kicking of his life. I set the bottle aside, pumping my fists, fury engulfing my mind.

Staring at her bottle, oblivious to the change in atmosphere, Addie resumes her story. "I saw the signs, but I was so fascinated that he actually *looked* at me I ignored them all. I was scrawny back then. No shape, no confidence... an ugly duckling." She sighs, taking another long sip of beer. "When I caught him red-handed, there was no pretending. Though he did try the *it's not what it looks like* line."

"Jesus..." I grunt, the knots in my muscles slackening a little. "Fuck, Addie, you should've led with that. I had way worse in my head just now, and very detailed ideas on how I'd disembowel the fucker."

She looks up with an adorable frown, then her eyes grow wider once she realizes what she'd unintentionally implied. "Oh God. I'm sorry. No, he didn't do *that*. He never hurt me.

He was pushy, but always understood *no*. He's just a cheating swine."

"Does your mom know about this?"

Addie nods, sadness coating her next words. "Yeah, she does. She claims he was a kid and he's changed."

He wasn't a kid. He was an adult perfectly capable of keeping his dick on a leash. Conor was twenty-one when he met Vee. Cody was twenty-two when he found Blair, both of them got married and are still going strong. Age isn't an excuse. It doesn't define a person. Their actions do. Cheating on a sixteen-year-old girl because she won't put out is fucking low.

Cheating is always fucking low.

To this day, I still haven't fully forgiven my father for cheating on Mom all those years ago. She did, but I don't think I ever will. I have six brothers and none of them have ever cheated. It's not that fucking difficult.

"What did he say when you caught him?"

She laughs softly, the sound so genuine my heart stutters with a weird pirouette. "Apart from *it's not what it looks like*, he said he only loved and wanted me, but he had needs. He swore he'd stop once I was ready for sex."

"How very nice of him."

"That's what I said!" She laughs harder. "He begged me for weeks before giving up. I don't know what deal he struck with my mother to make her so adamant I marry him, but she invited him to my eighteenth birthday party and he showed up with a ring."

"Please tell me you shot down his proposal."

"In front of almost two hundred unsuspecting guests." She beams, handing me her empty bottle. "Then again, and again, and again... I've lost track at this point, but we must be at half a dozen rejected proposals by now."

She goes on, listing every occasion when Grant popped the question, while we wait for the food. The appetizers arrive

first; she laughs some more at the cringe on my face and I catch myself thinking I found a new favorite sound. Who thinks shit like this after four days?

Addie ordered traditional English cuisine since, obviously, I'm such a fan...

We spend over an hour eating, talking, getting to know each other better, and trying to guess what tomorrow's task is. The conversation flows, no awkward silences, or uncomfortable topics. I lap up every word she speaks.

There's a lingering curiosity around her. Like there's a question right on the tip of her tongue but she keeps changing her mind about asking it.

I'm pretty sure I know what she wants to know. If she asks, I'll tell her, but I won't volunteer the story.

"What did you enjoy most so far?" Addie asks when the waiter clears our plates. "Don't tell me it was all bad."

I rearrange a few cushions so I can comfortably rest my head. "Not all of it. Just most of it. Cottage pie was alright, but that soup... be glad it's staying down."

"You only had a spoonful!"

"More than enough." I wash the memory of the pea and ham soup down with beer. "So what's for dessert?"

She pinches her lips, clearly amused. "Spotted dick."

While we were eating, she went through a few other dishes she'd been tempted to make me try before she settled on cottage pie and that godawful pea disaster. The runners-up included cock-a-leekie soup, bangers and mash, toad in the hole, and my personal favorite: knickerbocker glory.

"Who the hell came up with that name?" I ask, raking my hair back. "It sounds like a symptom... *Well, I didn't have any condoms, doc. She said she's clean, but I think she was lying because look at my spotted dick!*"

Addie laughs so hard she tears up. "It's delicious, I promise."

“I think my gay brother would disagree.”

She whacks my shoulder, still laughing. Fuck, I love that sound. I love when her cheeks pink up and she’s this carefree.

It takes an extraordinary amount of willpower not to lean over and taste her sweet lips. I’ve wanted to kiss her a million times, but it doesn’t feel right while we’re here, pretending. When I kiss her, I don’t want her thinking I did it for show.

How I’ll survive five more days is anyone’s guess.

She calms down, but once the waiter arrives, proudly announcing “Spotted dick, as requested” she loses it again as he places two plates before us.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Addie asks between big bites. “Try it. It’s good.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Oh come on! Don’t be such a melt. Just one piece.” She holds out a forkful, apparently trying to feed me. “Open up.”

Pressing the bottle to my lips, I shake my head.

Pointless. I should know by now that Addie doesn’t let things go without a fight. She rises to her knees, half crawling the short distance between us.

Jesus... she’s trying to kill me. Every move she makes is ridiculously titillating. Choreographed to arouse. I’m showering three times a day, shooting my load on the tiles like a sex-crazed teen because of this girl.

“Just one bite,” she pleads. “You can spit it out if you don’t like it.” Seeing my single brow raise, she slaps a hand over her mouth, eyes full of giggles. “You’re impossible!”

“Me? Who’s been talking about cock-a-leekie soups and ordering spotted dicks?”

“I promise I’ll stop if you try it.” She shoves the fork closer, using the other hand to wrestle the bottle out of my grasp. “Just one taste. Come on, please. It’s sweet, soft, and —”

“Soft is good? Since when?”

She whacks my chest when I laugh. Her patience gone, she pushes me onto my back. I may have let her... who in their right mind wouldn't? Having her straddle me isn't something I'll willingly pass up.

She moves my hands to my stomach and traps them under her body, most of the dessert now fallen from the fork.

"Try it."

I part my lips, letting her drop the spotted dick in my mouth. "Not bad," I admit.

"Not bad?! It's gorgeous!"

"You're gorgeous," I say before I can stop myself.

The laughter in Addie's eyes dims, replaced by an intimate, quiet uncertainty. The atmosphere shifts, teeming with want. Her pupils grow darker. Juicy, bitable lips fall apart to let out a shaky breath. I swear that pouty mouth will be the death of me.

The urge to grip her neck and pull her into a kiss overwhelms me. I'm running out of reasons not to, and when she leans over me, inviting just that, I flip her onto her back, pinning her beneath me.

A soft little noise hits my ears when I grip her wrists, maneuvering her hands above her head. My resolve hangs by a thread. She's so... willing. Pliant, eager.

Arousal paints her flushed face, eyes big and round as she peers up at me, chest rising and falling faster each second. I bet if I slipped my fingers under the hem of her dress, I'd find warm, soaked lace.

She smells like peaches, sugar, and sex. A scent God designed to drive me out of my fucking mind.

If I kissed her, she wouldn't push me away, I'm certain, but... as much as I want to cross that line, kiss her and fuck her senseless. I put that line there for a reason.

The intimacy of our predicament and a couple of drinks are responsible for the horny gleam in her eyes. God, why is

she always under the influence when she's willing? I won't take advantage of that no matter how thick the sexual tension.

Right now, we both want the cards to fall where they may, but she'd regret it tomorrow, and regret is the last thing I want her to feel after a night with me.

"Deep breath, Addie," I say, marshaling the desire running rampant inside my every cell. A shadow of confusion flits across her face, but she draws a steady, deep breath. I follow suit, our chests rising together. "Good, one more."

Her eyes shift to where the swell of her beautiful, full breasts, hidden under her summer dress, brushes against my pecs. A blush of embarrassment and lingering arousal fills her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"There's nothing to be sorry about."

"I just thought..." She bites her cheek, then fills her lungs back up to the brim. "Never mind. I understand." Bracing both hands against my shoulders, she pushes me away.

Or tries, but I don't budge.

"What do you understand, Addie?"

She turns her head, refusing to answer, but her eyes snap back to mine at the *thud thud* of approaching footsteps.

"Grant," she mouths, her face falling further. "Shit..."

I don't like the swift change from blissfully happy to quiet and reserved. More than that, I don't like that cryptic *I understand*.

"Stop shaking me off," I whisper. "Stage face on."

With a tiny nod, she blinks twice, then gets in character while I grab some spotted dick to feed her.

"Ahem..." A voice—Grant's voice—draws our attention, his heavy footfalls halting nearby. "Sorry to interrupt."

Ignoring the feeling of holes being burned in the back of my head, I press a kiss to Addie's forehead before peeling

myself off her. “Next time don’t interrupt. Then you won’t have to apologize.”

“Right...” He scratches the back of his neck. “Ben thought you should join us upstairs. Amara’s drawing teams for tomorrow’s task. Too bad you’re not available, pumpkin.”

“Don’t call me that,” Addie clips, deliberately adjusting her dress. “We have phones. Ben could’ve called.”

“I was heading this way anyway. Need to grab my suitcase,” he explains, eyes roving her body. “Anyway, whenever you’re ready.”

Addie sighs, reluctantly rising to her feet. “I suppose we should join them, at least for a little while.”

No. What we should do is talk. What the hell did she mean by *I understand*? Unfortunately, the itinerary isn’t mine to decide.

Grant forgets the luggage he was fetching from the helicopter as we fall into step. He boasts about his work, and how he could barely claw a few days off because he’s so fucking busy managing his empire.

“Addie didn’t let you answer before,” he says, matching my strides. “What do you do? I mean, unless it’s a touchy subject then forget I asked.”

And to think *this* is what Nico could’ve become when he made bank. I’d have drowned him in his own fucking pool.

“Business management,” I say. “Bars, restaurants, clubs.”

His eyebrows pull together, cogs whirring in his brain. I guess he can’t belittle this, so he changes tactics. “I don’t mean to sound rude, man, but you should probably stash the beer out of sight if you want to fit in with the crowd. It’s considered tacky to chug from the bottle around here.”

“Thanks for the tip,” I say and make a show of chugging from the bottle. “I couldn’t care less about fitting in.”

“Clearly.”

Addie tenses like a bow. She's so fucking sexy when she slips into combat mode. I can tell she's not far off lashing out, so I send her a message by squeezing her hand.

Grant could waste a week coming up with new ways to annoy me, but he won't put a dent in the shell I've built around me since the accident.

Looking death in the eye puts life in perspective.

Besides... you can't win against a stupid person. They drag you down to their level and destroy you with experience.

As we approach the main deck, the bass grows louder. There's definitely a party in full swing. "Vicious" by Bohnes blasts from speakers we can't see but can definitely hear, and Addie bounces beside me to the rhythm. Other than her parents and a couple of their friends, everyone's dancing.

I'm about to lead Addie onto the makeshift dance floor when her father approaches, with a cheerful, "There you are!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Weston, I was just—" Grant starts.

Henry's not addressing him, though. And he makes it known by blatantly cutting him off mid-sentence. "I thought you'd stood me up. Ready for a quick game?"

"No way, Dad." Addie pulls me behind her. "You stole him for two hours last night."

"Just one game, we need a fourth."

"I don't mind standing in if Colt's not available," Grant cuts in, *accidentally* stumbling into the bucket of beer I'm holding to draw Henry's attention.

What does he think will happen? I'll get tossed overboard for drinking beer? Like I said: stupid.

Henry snags a bottle from my bucket, pops the cap and takes a long pull. "It's been a while since I had a cold one. Brings back memories. So, how about it? One game."

"One," Addie denotes, holding one finger up for emphasis. "If you're not back in half an hour I'll come looking."

Drawing her into my side, I let my eyes roam down her figure, pausing where her dress hugs her curves, then plant a tender kiss on her head. “Behave, baby. No dancing on tables in that outfit.”

“Pinky promise.”

Grant’s attention flits between Addie and me, a sneer curling his lip. The sight of him watching her with such entitlement lights a slow, burning anger in my chest. The fucking audacity.

The petty side of me pulls Addie even closer and whispers, “Don’t let Grant too close. He’ll lose his teeth if he lays a finger on you.”

Before she can say anything, I turn away to join her father, leaving her flustered and Grant fuming.

Colt: 1.

Grant: 0.

I’m on a roll.

SEVENTEEN

Addie

“MAYBE YOU’RE NOT HIS TYPE?” Ruby suggests, her voice indifferent through my AirPods.

“Gee, thanks, *friend*,” I mumble, staring at the millions of stars speckling the inky canvas above.

I locked myself in our bathroom once Colt disappeared with my dad, and sent Ruby and Felicity a voice message, ranting and raving about how I already came onto Colt twice and he shot me down on both occasions.

They called at the same time when I came back out on the main deck, so I connected the AirPods, and I’m mostly speaking in monosyllables in case anyone overhears.

I guess *not his type* is plausible. I’m plumper than your average prom queen. Maybe not plus size, but close. More than enough flesh to grab. Maybe that’s not Colt’s yum?

“Bullshit,” Felicity snaps. “He wouldn’t keep going on about this date once you’re back in Newport if he didn’t find you attractive. What did you have to eat? Maybe it was your breath.”

“When’s the last time you were out-of-your-mind horny, kissed a guy you were hot for, and stopped because his breath wasn’t minty enough?” Ruby asks. I can imagine how hard she’s rolling her eyes. “When you’re in the moment and really into someone, you don’t notice their breath.”

“*You* don’t.” Felicity chuckles. “I won’t kiss them unless they’re clean and smell nice *everywhere*.”

“Yes, we’ve seen your guest bathroom.”

It’s fully equipped with manly toiletries. She’s a germophobe and makes her hookups shower and brush their teeth before they’re allowed to fuck her. Good job she’s stunning or she’d never get laid.

“Are you drinking every day?” Felicity asks, not waiting for the answer. “Lay off the damn wine and try again. You said he turned into the Hulk when you asked whether you’d had sex together after Express Dates. Maybe he just won’t touch you while you drink.”

“Oh please,” Ruby snaps. “No man is *that* principled. I mean, she sounds fine, doesn’t she? She’s not slurring or swearing, so she’s not drunk. When have you ever seen a guy turn a girl down because she had a glass of wine?”

“Two beers,” I correct quietly, looking around to see if anyone’s paying me any attention. “Maybe he has someone.”

“And what? Left his girl at home to go cruise the Caribbean with you? Don’t be stupid. Instead of coming up with idiotic theories, just *ask* him what the problem is.”

And make a bigger fool of myself than I already have?

It won’t change much. The damage is done.

That’s true. My ego is damaged beyond repair. I kind of understood why he sent me back to the guest bedroom when I paraded into his room in nothing but a towel, but tonight... I don’t get it. Like Ruby said, I’m not drunk. And the way he looks at me sometimes isn’t how men look at women they’re not into.

He likes me, I’m almost certain he does. And I... God, I’m beyond *like* right now. Every moment we spend together pushes me deeper and deeper into feelings I can’t comprehend.

Not this fast.

But no matter how much I try to slow down, I’m way past just desire. There’s more there. So much more.

Everything about him turns me on. Everything about him is my type. From the way he walks, talks, and looks, down to how he smells, frowns, and acts. Attentive, caring—dominating. Fun. Smart. The list goes on, and it’s growing fast.

I love his hands on me. His lips pressing against my head. I love how he pulls me into his side, and how he holds me.

“I know!” Ruby cheers proudly. “You told him you wouldn’t pay him with sex. Maybe he’s respecting your wishes so you can start right when you get home?”

“You’re an incurable romantic,” I say on a sigh. “Whatever it is, it’s big enough to make him backtrack *twice*.”

“What if he’s just not comfortable fucking you on your dad’s yacht?” she suggests.

“Okay, that’s it,” Felicity huffs. “I revoke your right to an opinion, Ruby. And, Addie? Stop fucking guessing, grow a pair, and ask him why he won’t fuck you.”

We started this conversation with *Colt doesn’t want to kiss me* but it somehow turned to *doesn’t want to fuck me*. Whatever. One doesn’t rule out the other.

Ben plops down on the couch opposite mine, bursting the small privacy cocoon I locked myself in when I chose the seat furthest from everyone’s ears.

“I’ve got to go,” I tell the girls. “I’ll keep you posted.”

“You better! I’m invested now.”

We say our goodbyes and I pluck out my AirPods, eyeing my brother. “What’s going on?”

“We’re playing truth or dare,” he explains. “You’ve been on the phone for an hour, sis. Come play with us.”

I glance over my shoulder toward the bow, glad to see it’s just the younger generation playing. Amara, her maid of honor with her husband, two groomsmen with their dates, and... Grant.

“Fine, let’s play,” I say, rising to my feet.

“Look who decided to join.” Grant beams when we come closer, patting the seat beside him.

I purposely plop down in the only empty loveseat, pretending not to notice Grant’s invitation.

His smile slips, but he recovers fast, staring me down. “This can be your turn, and we’ll go clockwise.” He leans over to grab a card from the table. “Truth or dare, pumpkin?”

“Don’t call me that. And I’m not playing. I’ll watch.”

“Oh, come on,” Amara whines. “It’s just a game. You can always skip the dare and drink a penalty shot.”

“I’ve seen those cards before, I know what the dares are and since I’m not doing that with anyone other than Colt, I’ll get black-out drunk within a few rounds, so... I’ll pass.”

There are too many sex-based dares on those cards for me to take the risk with Grant at the table. It would end in blood if Colt saw him lay so much as a finger on me.

“Fine,” Amara huffs. “How about we switch it up and play *This or That* the dirty way instead?”

“I don’t think I ever played,” Ben says, sipping his whiskey. “Explain the rules.”

“We take turns asking a question like *would you rather pay or be paid for sex*, and everyone answers which they’d prefer,” Amara says. “We can keep the penalty shots for this, too, in case your sister’s too embarrassed to answer.”

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. “Just because I don’t boast about my sex life to anyone who’ll listen doesn’t mean I’m embarrassed.”

“Okay, I’ll start,” Grant says, his eyes repeatedly jumping back to me. “Let’s go with something easy first. Lights on or off during sex?”

Everyone, including me, says *on*. I never cared much, but I’ve imagined myself with Colt enough times now to know I’d want a clear view of his body, and his face too.

“Always *on*,” a low baritone sounds behind me, wrapping around me like a warm blanket. Colt takes the empty seat beside me. “Sorry it took so long. Your dad wanted one rematch after another.”

Ben’s head snaps to him, brows pulled together in confusion. “He lost? That almost never happens. Who won?”

“I did,” Colt admits, his hand sliding lazily up and down my arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps.

“Well, you’re officially uninvited to the poker table,” Grant chuckles, looking smug. “Henry’s a sore loser.”

“How would you know? You were never invited,” Dad booms, approaching with two crystal glasses sloshing with amber liquid. He passes one to Colt, before clinking his against it. “Same time tomorrow?”

“If Addie allows it,” Colt says, taking a sip.

“I won’t,” I say, playing my girlfriend role, despite how torn and confused I feel inside. “You don’t give him back on time, Dad.”

“Damn, sis, clingy much?” Ben laughs. “You can always barge in and drag him out of the casino.”

Dad drops a kiss on my head, and I feel his smile as he says, “We’ll talk tomorrow.” He straightens up, dropping his big hand on Colt’s shoulder to squeeze it once. “You kids have fun.”

A chorus of *goodnights* fills the air as Dad saunters away toward the elevator.

“Should we play?” I ask, accidentally brushing my freezing feet over Colt’s thigh as I pull them up and under my bum. “Sorry,” I mutter, glancing around in search of a blanket.

Colt unwinds my legs, and grabs my ankles in one hand, resting them on his lap. He makes it look so natural no one would guess it’s the very first time we’ve done this.

“You’re freezing, baby.” He lifts his shirt, pressing my icy feet against his warm, honed stomach and covering them with the thin fabric.

“Thank you,” I mutter, my heart doing weird twirls.

He’s so confusing. I get that he’s *acting* the part of my boyfriend, but there’s no need to go to such extremes to convince anyone we’re dating. I do my best not to blush because all eyes are on us, but Colt rests his warm hand over my ankles, his thumb drawing small circles on a sensitive spot.

“Whose turn is it?” Grant barks out, clearly unappeased. “Ben? You wanna go?”

“Sure. Spit or swallow?” he asks and the blush I tried holding back spills down my neck.

The guys unanimously agree they prefer their girls to swallow, and Amara beams, nodding along. The other girl, who I don’t care enough about to remember her name, says she’d *never in a million years* swallow, and then all eyes are on me.

I knew this game was a bad idea.

“Can I have a shot?” I ask, wriggling my feet, wanting Colt to let go, but he tightens his hold on my ankles, turning to me with a shadow of a smile. “What?” I clip. “I don’t feel comfortable sharing this.”

The truth is, I never managed to make a man come with my lips, so I have no idea which option I prefer.

Colt gestures for the bartender to come closer, asking for a shot glass. Once I down the penalty shot of Royal Dragon vodka and finish coughing, the game continues.

It’s not easy focusing on what everyone’s saying while Colt’s brushing his thumb under my ankle, holding my feet flush to the heat of his toned stomach, but I try my best.

“Your turn, Addie,” Grant instructs.

I have a question at the ready, one I think I already know Colt’s answer to but wouldn’t mind having it confirmed. “Would you rather dominate or be dominated?”

His fingers tighten their hold, and a small smile plays across his lips like he knows the question is for him. He doesn’t bother answering until I say I’d rather be dominated.

“I much prefer to dominate,” he admits. “But you already know that, don’t you?”

I try to wriggle my feet free again, heart racing, but Colt’s grip stays firm.

“Are you uncomfortable?” he asks.

I shake my head *no*, even though I’m so wet between my thighs I am uncomfortable.

“Then stop squirming, baby.”

The game goes on, the questions growing bolder and bolder to the point where I regret turning down truth or dare. Once Ben asks about pegging, I call it a night.

EIGHTEEN

Colt

TUG OF WAR. That was today's game. Addie was up and out of the suite before my alarm rang at eight. I found her sitting with a cup of coffee, staring out at the island on the bow of the yacht.

She's been on edge all day, her girlfriend role not on point in the slightest. Every time I touched her, she seemed taken aback, eyes wide, body language reserved like she couldn't comprehend *why* I would willingly invade her personal space.

I've not stopped mentally kicking myself all day for the way I handled things last night.

I don't regret not kissing her.

Well, that's a big fat lie, though still kind of true. I wanted to kiss her. I've barely thought about anything else since we met, but given how much I want it, kissing her while we're here, acting, with rules to obey, is a *bad* idea. I know me. I'd lose my cool and take more than she wants to give.

No sex. That's what she said.

If I want a chance with this girl back in Newport, I have to play my cards right.

So yeah, I regret it and don't at the same time. I should've told her *why* I won't do it, though. Maybe she'd still be all smiles and good mood if I had.

I can fix this with a simple conversation. I just have to tell her that I don't want to rush. Not with her. She's too important to me.

We met five days ago, but we've spent so much time together I feel like I've known her for months. This isn't a casual fling. No, this has a chance of being something big.

I won't fuck it up because I'm impatient.

Dates usually last about... what? Two to three hours? Tops. Multiply that by three dates a week, and you'd need a year to match the hundred hours plus I've had with Addie so far.

I doubt I'd learn half as much over a couple of dinners as I have in the past five days. I know how she takes her coffee in the morning. How she frowns when she's annoyed, and how to tell her fake smiles from the real thing. I know she's not a morning person. I know she's allergic to some nuts, but not all of them. I know all the first-date things, all the things I'd learn during months of dates, and so much more.

I know what she feels like pressed against me when she sleeps. What her hair smells like. How soft she is. How warm.

And I'm growing attached at an alarming rate.

I had a long-term friends-with-benefits deal with a girl from college—Anastasia: two months here, three months there. It went on for almost two years but you could hold me at fucking gunpoint, and I wouldn't be able to tell you what color her eyes were. I don't even know her surname.

Running my fingers through my wet hair, I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

You have issues, man.

Yeah, I do. I'm well aware. At twenty-seven, I shouldn't be this set on starting a family. I shouldn't feel like my life won't properly start until I have the same thing my brothers do.

Their happiness messed me up. Which is why I need to be careful. I'm stepping on thin ice, one false move and everything falls apart.

I was mostly okay before the accident, bitter about my *single* status, but fine compared to now.

Things changed the night Otis clipped the back of my Challenger. I bet things always change when you're on the brink of death. When you *die* because, technically, I was dead for over four minutes.

To this day, I sometimes wake up drenched in sweat. Not because of the trauma. Not because I barely made it out alive, but because I remember heading straight for the cars parked on the sidelines and feeling fucking empty. Empty and disappointed with what flashed before my eyes.

You haven't lived yet, but it's time to die.

When I woke up at the hospital, alive, with the valve in my heart replaced, multiple broken bones, and a total of one hundred and thirty-nine stitches, I re-evaluated my priorities. Wife, kids, memories: that's what I put on a pedestal.

But the longer I searched for my happily ever after, the worse I felt when nothing *clicked* the way my brothers described it. Now, I'm scared of that *click*.

I'm tired of the disappointments. Tired of getting my hopes up and then crashing with a sad, aimless reality like I crashed with the Dodge RAM.

A knock on the door snaps me back into the here and now. Back to getting ready for a movie night on the pool deck of a luxurious yacht. Back to fun-filled days with Addie. Tomorrow won't be as much fun. We lost the tug of war, which means I'll be paired with someone other than Addie.

And she'll probably end up with Grant.

I can smell a fistfight in the air already.

"Give me ten minutes," I shout at the closed door.

"Are you decent?"

"Kind of, why?"

She barges in like a woman on a mission. "Okay, I need to ask you something because I'm driving myself crazy, and if I don't ask, I'll keep wondering and—"

"You're rambling. Next time you want to ask me something, *ask*. Don't spend the day lying to my face that you're fine when you're clearly not. What is it?"

She stops pacing. Nervously smooths out her long hair, leans against the doorframe, and crosses her arms over her

chest.

“We’ve been here for three days acting like a couple, but you haven’t kissed me. Not once, and when I...” She halts, balls her hands into small fists, and shoots the next words out like a machine gun. “When I wanted to kiss you last night, you pushed me away. You basically told me to chill the fuck out, Colt. Why?”

I look up, catching a blush on her cheeks. The tightness in my chest enough to choke me. She stands in the doorway like every good dream I ever had, dressed in a flowy white dress, the epitome of elegance, class, and innocence.

Beautiful. So fucking beautiful. Smart, fun.

Her dark hair cascades down her back, frames her face, and flirts with her arms. She stands there, the pink of her lips my new favorite color, the scent of her skin like a soothing blanket, and she asks *why* I haven’t kissed her.

“I can’t,” I say truthfully, looking back at my reflection. I already feel like I’m in a dryer on its highest spin setting whenever she’s close.

Too bad she doesn’t let it drop. Of course she doesn’t. It’s not in her nature. She’s been working herself up since last night. There’s no turning back now.

In the mirror, I see her coming closer, the delicate fabric of her dress caressing her thigh as it peeks from the long slit. She stops close enough for me to smell her perfume, and she stares, beckoning me to look at her.

“You *can* ’t? What does that mean?”

“Drop it, Addie.”

She hops onto the cabinet by the sink, her bare knee escaping from the slit of her dress. I drop the towel over my head, drying my hair to stop myself staring.

“Is my breath smelly?” she asks.

“What?” I tug the towel off, glaring at her. “No.”

“You won’t kiss me with my parents around? Not if I’ve had a drink? Not while we’re pretending? Is it just a line you won’t cross?”

“None of the above.”

She folds her arms over her chest, a little hurt. “Am I ugly? Not skinny enough? Does the thought of kissing me repulse you?”

“No!” I ball the towel, tossing it in the sink. “Stop asking questions.”

“Why?!” she raises her voice to match mine. “Now you’ve got to know me better, I’m not your type? Is that it? Or maybe there’s someone else. You got a girl back home?”

“I’m not having this conversation.” I march away, but she adds something that, coupled with the pain in her voice, almost breaks me clean in two.

“What the hell is *wrong* with me that you won’t kiss me?”

I turn back and grab her by the throat, firm but gentle as I bring her face closer. “There’s nothing wrong with you. Don’t ever think that. There’s no one else back home or anywhere in the goddamn world. You’re perfect. You smell like roses in spring rain, peaches, and sugar.” I caress the column of her throat with my thumb, balling the other hand into a tight fist at my side to keep myself from grabbing her hip and yanking her into me. “You’re smart, beautiful, funny, and I can’t get enough of how absolutely fucking infuriating and nosey you are.”

“Then *why* won’t you kiss me?” She’s no longer shouting, she’s whispering, her sweet breath on my lips, the distance so small... so fucking small.

So tempting.

“Because if I do, if I get a taste of your lips, I won’t stop until I know what every inch of you tastes like. Until I know what makes you submit. What makes you tick, what makes you open that smart mouth and sigh my name.”

And when I know all that... I’ll want more.

She swallows, her throat pulsing under my fingers, eyes holding mine, her expression nothing short of a dare.

“You’d know that by now if you hadn’t pushed me away last night.” She raises both hands, then scrapes her nails slowly down my torso. “We both want a wild night together. We’re two consenting adults far away from our real lives, so... why not have fun while we’re here? What’s standing in your way?”

It’s hard to argue with her logic. I *could* argue it’s because I want more than *fun* from her, but there’ll be time for that later. Right now, I’m weak. I’d have to be a world-class idiot to turn down what she’s offering. Especially since I’ve imagined her naked and panting every fucking day since we met.

“You have no idea what you’re asking, Addie.” I squeeze her neck tighter. My mind’s made. The ball’s in her court and I’m about to find out how brave she really is. “Let me explain before we add benefits into the mix. You can have the worst attitude all day long but...” I dip my head, dragging my nose from her jaw to her ear, “...in bed, I don’t take that kind of behavior lightly. In bed, you’re my good girl. Submissive. You do as you’re told.”

I take one last step forward, standing between her legs, and grab her hip, yanking her closer to the edge of the cabinet. “You take what I give you,” I continue, my fingers pumping around her neck. “If I want to deny you, I will. If I want to punish you for acting out, I will. If I want to reward you with five orgasms, you’ll count.”

“Five?” she gasps, her cheeks deliciously pink as oxygen deprivation kicks in. “I’ll be impressed if you manage *one*.”

I cock an eyebrow. “That’s all you got to say?”

“I’d rather moan than speak.”

Fuck this girl is reckless.

Those few short words send me spiraling. I’m done. So fucking done holding back. This thing between us isn’t going

to follow any standard dating timeline, but who cares? I'll make this work whichever way I have to.

My lips come down on hers, sealing that bratty mouth and shutting up that attitude I can't wait to tame. She's eager. Quick to let me sink deeper, tasting her sweetness.

Boy, am I in trouble.

Everything inside me coils, tightens, knots so hard it's almost a pain. The *best* flavor of pain. The freeing, arousing, exhilarating kind with the anticipation and bliss I only ever feel when my car screeches up to the start line. Now, it floods my system because of Addie. My heart swells, ramming against my ribs as her hot tongue darts out, exploring mine.

She grips fistfuls of my t-shirt, pulling herself closer, clinging to me like she can't stand even the tiniest gap between us.

It's *everything*, this kiss. It feels like I've been waiting a fucking lifetime to taste her.

I ignore the *click* in my head.

I ignore the feelings exploding in my chest.

I ignore how all my malice ebbs away, leaving a sense of peaceful rightness. Kissing her feels like the best decision I've ever made.

But I ignore it all, channeling that fervor into the kiss. Into the five-orgasm challenge ahead. I grab her hips, haul her into my arms, and... she feels so precious.

A fierce protectiveness seizes my mind, my every step cautious, calculated, measured, so I don't trip. I can't afford to hurt a hair on her pretty head.

Fuck this is intense.

Unlike anything I've ever experienced. Just holding her sets endorphins roaring through my system. This all-consuming need to have her closer is almost too much to handle.

“Last chance to change your mind,” I say, carrying her toward the bed. I beg fate, karma, God, and the Devil not to let her back out. I’m pretty sure the disappointment would permanently damage my vital organs: heart, brain, and dick, too... “If you want to stop, now’s the time.”

Addie arches back, her delicate fingers knotted on the nape of my neck, nails scraping my scalp, sending tingles all over my skin. “Nervous you won’t make good on your promise? It’s okay. One orgasm will be enough. No pressure.”

I love that teasing edge to her. And I’ll love taming it.

“You’ll beg for mercy after the third one. You’ll give me a color when I ask for it.” I lay her on the bed. “Green when you love what I’m doing to you.” I climb over her, briefly closing those plump lips with mine while I help her out of her dress. “Yellow when you want me to slow down or ease up. And red if you want me to stop.”

The dress comes off, the sight before me tearing a low growl from my chest. Beige panties and a matching, plain bra. No lace. No bright colors, and somehow, the simple set that almost melts into her complexion is the most arousing thing ever.

“*Red* is your safe word,” I say, watching her squirm as she eyes the bulge in my pants. I grip her chin between my thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look at me. “Focus for one more minute, pretty girl. It’s important. I won’t stop unless you use the safe word. You can scream *stop* until you’re blue, but I won’t listen unless you say *red*. Say it, and I stop immediately, understood?”

She nods, wrestling with my t-shirt. “Stop talking, start working. We have forty minutes. That’s an orgasm every eight minutes or we’ll be late for dinner and movies.”

“Careful, Addie. You’re acting out. You’ll end up frustrated if you keep talking back.”

I get off the bed, grab her thighs, and yank her to the edge, kneeling on the fluffy carpet. Her surprised gasp morphs into a moan when I hoist her legs over my shoulders and latch

onto the soft skin of her inner thigh, spreading her open with one hand, the other splayed over her stomach.

“Colt, I—”

“Quiet, baby,” I rasp, staring at the wet patch of beige between her legs.

I head straight there, kissing my way down her leg. She smells divine. Peaches. Sugar. *Sex*. She tastes like it, too. I slowly drag my tongue over the soaked fabric, savoring the moment as her arousal fills my mouth.

My brakes snap.

The need to suck her into my mouth and get a proper taste drives me feral. In one swift tug, I rip off her panties, loving the mewling little sounds she makes as she anchors herself to the sheets with both hands.

“I want you to watch, Addie,” I say, hooking my arms around her thighs.

Her cheeks pink up, but she quickly rises on her elbows, watching me lick her again. Her legs buck over my shoulders as she squirms, arching back and pressing herself harder into my face the faster I flick her clit with the tip of my tongue.

A symphony of her breaths, soft moans, and gasps fills the room, spurring me on. I could spend hours buried between her thighs. Hours eating her out, listening to how much she loves my mouth on her sweet pussy.

“Oh shit, I’m—” She pauses, her thighs squeezed around my ears so tight I barely hear her say, “I’m so close...”

I’m dying to push two fingers inside so I can feel her walls clench, but not yet. I want her first orgasm on my lips.

She can’t stay still. She pivots her hips and grips my hair, grinding harder the closer she is. I’m in love with the look of her: so real, raw, and beautiful as she chases the orgasm.

And when it hits with the next flick of my tongue, she falls back, unable to hold herself up. Her spine bows away from the mattress, face flushing pink as she holds her breath,

and every muscle in her body seizes for two short seconds before she vibrates beneath me, moaning softly.

“There it is,” I whisper, licking her clean. “Count, Addie.”

She hums quietly, brushing long hair off her face before a barely audible “one” leaves her swollen lips.

I can’t wait for two, so I don’t. I dive back into work, slipping two fingers inside her warm pussy before she’s even come down from the first high.

NINETEEN

Addie

“TWO,” I MOAN as Colt prolongs the orgasm, pumping his long fingers in and out, dragging them over my G spot. “Oh shit!” I jerk away because I’m so deliriously oversensitive every lick of his tongue on my clit triggers an earthquake through my body.

He lets me go for a moment. My eyes are closed, and my bra is gone. I’m buck naked, covered in a mist of sweat, my pussy pulsing with the remnants of my second orgasm. Next thing I know, Colt grips my waist, scooting me further up the bed like a rag doll, positioning himself between my legs.

My eyes shoot open at the heat of his skin on mine.

He’s naked. Kneeling on the bed. His big, thick cock stands to attention, and the sight dries my mouth.

“You’ll split me in half with that,” I murmur, entranced by the red head glistening with precum.

A dark laugh falls from his lips as he falls forward, bracing on one elbow. He fists the other hand in my hair, tilting my head up to him. “I’ll make you scream with that,” he corrects.

He straightens his back, looking down at me, and I follow, sitting up to reach him. My fingers find his shoulders, my lips find his torso, the liquid heat inside me only intensifying.

I’m lost in him.

Consumed by him.

Obsessed with the way he watches me and the sharp intent in his dark irises. Obsessed with the raw, primitive awe painting his face. With the control he exudes.

I touch him everywhere all at once, my body on fire, demanding *more* even though I didn’t believe he could get me off even once, let alone twice.

Now I need a third as much as my next breath.

I want Colt to make up for the unskilled touch of the men before him. There weren't many. Three total, but none hold a candle to Colt.

He's a force of nature.

Every move he makes drives me half incoherent. Every touch of his big, skillful hands has me hungry for more.

I hold onto the nape of his neck, rising higher on my knees to taste him. No man should be this skilled at eating pussy and kissing. No man should smell, look, and taste so good.

He's all my favorite things combined. Seizing the moment, I push my tongue into his mouth, stealing a hot, erotic kiss. He indulges me for a little while. His fingers caress my face then weave into my hair, tying it all back in one fist.

I slide one hand down his stomach, grip the base of his shaft, and moan when my fingers barely meet.

He bites my lip, pulling back until it pops out of his mouth, those dark eyes looking down at me. "Eager little thing," he praises, dragging his thumb across my lips. "Let's see what you've got."

I am eager. Too eager as I lie on my belly, my face level with his cock. As soon as I take him in my mouth, his fingers flex in my hair.

"Fuck," he hisses, the muscles in his body pulling taut. "I want to take over, baby. Give me a color."

I look up, swallowing him as far down as I can. It's not far. I don't get half his cock in my mouth before there are tears wetting my lashes. Easing up, I release him long enough to say, "Green."

"Good girl. Tap out if you can't take it. Tongue out."

Holding his gaze, I do as I'm told. He slides in slowly, testing how far he can go. The tendons on his neck pulse, his jaw clamps, and blown pupils swallow his brown irises.

I love how he touches my face. How adoring he is as he checks every angle, looking for one that'll let him slide further down my throat. Once he finds it, he catches my chin, holding my head in place, and sinks his cock almost all the way in.

There's something in his primal dominance that surges a mindless desire through my nerve endings.

"You have no fucking idea how beautiful you look," he rasps, his hips working at a steady tempo. "Gorgeous."

Who knew I had a praise kink? Who knew a compliment could have me ready to beg for more? It's surreal. I never considered myself the submissive type... then again, I've never been with a man who had the faintest idea how to play my body like this. It's exciting when he orders me around. Addictive when he dictates my every move.

I sink my nails into his thighs, making a split-second decision. I want him to come in my mouth. I want a taste, and I want to swallow it down.

But he doesn't come.

"That's enough," he says, peeling me off him, then quickly grips my nape, guiding me back to my knees. Unfazed by the taste of his cock in my mouth, he kisses me deeply, both hands brushing my long hair behind my ears.

The mixture of hot and cold, dominant and soft, makes my head spin in the best way.

One second, he's tender, showering the column of my throat with sweet, small, biting kisses, and the next, he pushes me so I land on my back, his hands full of my hips as he tugs me closer.

I immediately grab his cock, eager to have him inside me. "I'm on birth control," I say, pumping his length.

Something dark crosses his face so quickly I can't tell what it is. I expect him to say something. To acknowledge the admission but he clamps his jaw harder as he pins my hands to the sheets, positioning me how he wants. One leg bent on the bed, the other hooked over his shoulder.

“Eyes, Addie,” he whispers, staring at me like I might disappear if he looks away.

And when I meet his heated gaze, he drives into me hard, sinking balls-deep with one smooth thrust. We both let out a moan as my head falls back. He follows, dropping on top of me. The weight of his muscular body would crush me into the mattress if he weren't holding himself up with one arm.

“Shit,” I hiss, almost ripping the sheets with my nails. “You're so big. I didn't think you'd fit.”

“I knew I would,” he whispers, staring down at me. “You wouldn't fall into my path if we didn't fit together, Addie.” He pulls back, before pushing back in, slowly this time like he's savoring the moment. “Perfect,” he whispers.

I love the feel of him stretching me inside as he holds still. I love the intense conquering look on his handsome face. It almost has me coming again.

“Fuck...” He hides his face in the crook of my neck, gently sinking his teeth in my flesh. “You feel good, baby. So fucking good,” he chants quietly, pressing his forehead to mine as his hips rock back and forth.

My eyes roll back into my head.

He's barely made five moves, but the orgasm is already building. Rushing to the surface. He's so big, there's no space. I feel every single inch of him slide all the way in. And when he parts his lips and drags them from the tip of my nose up to my forehead, leaving a kiss there, my skin erupts in tingles.

“Ready for the third one?” he asks, falling into a rhythm.

“God, yes.”

Snaking an arm over my thigh, he angles his hips. I see stars when his dick hits my G spot with the same precision his fingers did. The sensation is overwhelming.

I knew he'd be intense in bed, but I never expected *this*. The claiming, greedy feel to every move he makes. How the temperature around us climbs higher when he takes my lips in deep kisses, stroking my tongue with his and biting my lip.

Every touch feels like he wants to take as much as possible before I stop him.

I won't. No way in hell.

The orgasm builds faster, hurtling to the surface. Unstoppable. All consuming. Different from when it was just his lips and fingers. When I'm almost there, almost coming, Colt straightens back to watch.

"Don't fight it," he rasps, nothing short of awe flooding his irises as the orgasm ignites my mind. "That's it, that's it," he chants, prolonging the high with precise, intense thrusts. "I could watch you for hours."

My reply is an incomprehensible jumble of gasps, sharp breaths and a few *ohs*. I can't think straight. I can't see through the white spots blurring my vision. Three orgasms in less than fifteen minutes have my body rebelling against me.

The sensation is so deliciously powerful it's almost too much. I draw long lines down Colt's arms, gasping for air and making small whimpering sounds. I can barely take it.

"Color," Colt demands, slamming into me one last time. He stops, buried balls-deep, his hand clasped around my throat. "Give me a color, Addie."

I'm nowhere near red yet, but I've never come three times in a row. It's intense. I'm overstimulated. So sensitive a breath of air makes me spasm. I'm a little out of the green zone. Very pale yellow. I just need a second to catch my breath and come down from the high.

The orgasm slowly fades, easing the feeling of being ripped apart in the best way possible.

"Mild yellow," I admit. "Very, very mild."

He pulls his cock out and wraps an arm around my waist to flip me over. This shouldn't turn me on so much, but I almost squeal whenever he repositions me.

It's hard not to swoon at his every move or how his muscles shift beautifully under his ink.

“You forgot to count,” he says, straightening my leg and dragging the other knee almost to my chin. “Count.”

“Three,” I sigh, lifting myself on my elbows when he tugs my hair, forcing my back to arch.

He fills me again, forcing a long moan from my lips. I look over my shoulder, loving the sight of him bent over my back, hips working faster, hands on my waist pushing me down. God, that angle is amazing.

“Don’t you dare stop,” I order.

Just as the words roll off my tongue, I know my attitude won’t be appreciated. It’s clear in the calculated delight on Colt’s face that I’ve stepped out of line.

Adrenaline fills my blood. My heart picks up rhythm as I squirm beneath him, waiting, *excited*. The anticipation of his next move has me flooding his cock.

“You don’t make demands here.” A sharp slap lands on my butt. The clap ricochets off the walls and I almost come undone on the spot. He soothes the sting, rubbing me gently, never breaking the tempo of his thrusts. “Behave, Addie. We’re only up to three, and you look desperate for the next one. Wouldn’t want me to stop now, would you?”

“No,” I pant. “No, please don’t stop.”

I don’t know what I’d regret losing more, the orgasms or his undivided, determined attention. A swarm of butterflies flutters in my stomach when I meet his gaze.

I’m helpless, utterly defenseless.

His to please, punish, and use.

In this position, he hits my G spot without fail. I’ve never been this sensitive. Never orgasmed without the help of my fingers or a toy, but Colt needs neither. He knows exactly how to summon the high. How to make it hit with a force that knocks the breath out of my lungs.

It’s insane, but I think I could come just from looking at his slightly parted lips, eyes boring into mine.

When the next orgasm washes over me, my moans border on cries. My body's exhausted, sticky, sweaty. Every muscle hurts when the orgasm rams through me.

Good pain but draining nonetheless.

"I can't take any more," I whimper when he flips me over, moving to lay beside me. "Please, four is enough, I—"

"You'll give me another," he rasps, burying his face in the crook of my neck. In the same breath, he slips back inside me, resuming the hastened tempo. "You're doing so good, baby. So fucking good. One more. Just one more. You can do it."

Rising on one elbow, he pulls me flush against his chest, his hand clasped round my throat.

It seems the more he makes me come, the easier triggering the next orgasm is. Or maybe I'm so overstimulated that every deep stroke of Colt's cock feels like the one that'll tip me over.

I claw his arms, biting his shoulder. My eyes water and I'm ready to crawl out of my skin. "Oh God... no, no, no... I can't."

He squeezes my neck harder, covering my lips with his like he's trying to soothe my mind. Every heavy breath he exhales and every grunt at the back of his throat fuels the fire burning in my veins.

"Don't fight it," he says in my mouth. "Let it happen. I want that last one, and you'll give it to me." He angles my head, so I'm staring into his eyes. "Again, Addie. You're almost there."

He scans my face, searching for something. I don't know what, but when a long moan slips past my lips, I realize he's been switching angles on his strokes, studying me to judge which works best.

"That's it," he hisses, completely cutting off my air supply. "Good girl, that's it. That's it." He leans over me, the bulk of his body pressing me into the mattress. He slips his tongue in my mouth when another orgasm strips me of my sanity. "There it is," he breathes, his hips still working.

My eyes fall shut for... I don't know how long. I'm so exhausted I'm losing my sense of time, but when I force my eyelids up again, Colt's no longer controlling my breathing.

"Not enough," he clips, brushing my hair back. "Give me a color. How are you doing?"

I'm delirious. Every single exhausted gasp and moan brings me closer to tears. He's so good to me, looks so enamored that I really want to cry. I might pass out if we don't take a break, but the raw look of desperation crossing his features fills me with new energy.

"I'm not done with you yet," he chants, stroking my thigh. "I don't want to bring you down from this high. I can't stop looking at you when you come, Addie. Give me a color."

My first instinct is to say *green*. I want to please him, but I stop myself before the word fully forms in my mouth. He'll see right through the lie and won't trust me again. Safe words, boundaries, and informed, conscious, *sober* decisions are important to him. Bending the truth won't do me any favors.

"Bright yellow," I admit, the words sounding weak, like I'm half asleep. "Close to orange. I can't take much more."

"I know, baby," he coos, brushing my hair back. "I know." He's still inside me and slides out, to slowly push back in. "I'll let you rest after this one, I promise. Tell me if you can't take it. Say *red* and I stop, okay?"

"Okay, okay," I gasp, holding onto him for dear life.

He doesn't move my hands away when I touch him. He lets me explore his muscular back and chest, but I'm careful not to touch the scar. Not without permission.

We're both slick with sweat, hot like we're running a fever, and moving together like our lives depend on my sixth orgasm. He grips my neck, pulling my head off the pillow far enough that our foreheads touch.

His thrusts grow faster and harder, but his eyes are thick with adoration. The second he finds the angle that makes me shake, he locks himself there and slams into me over and over again.

“Look at me, Addie. I’ll come with you now. I’ll let you rest, but I want your eyes on me while you’re coming. Can you do that for me?”

A nod is all I can manage. It’s the most erotic feeling when we lock eyes, bringing us both to the edge. Every instinct in my body tells me to shut my eyes and throw my head back, but the look on Colt’s face, the determination radiating off him, his parted lips, labored breaths, and low growls the closer he gets are too stimulating to miss out on.

We’re in a frenzy. Lost, closed in a bubble as we move together as one. He holds my hips, keeping me in place while I tangle my fingers in his hair. And then we both still as our orgasms wash over us in sync.

Colt stops only briefly, then pulls back and slams in, every next stroke slower, longer, more intense. I shake beneath him, the muscles in my thighs cramping as he falls, covering my body with his. He takes my lips in a long, deep kiss, then stamps a cute little one on the tip of my nose.

“Ruined,” he murmurs, dragging his open mouth along my cheek to leave a kiss on my temple.

“I want to say you have a big ego, but you’re right. You just ruined me for any other man.”

He rises on his elbows, eyes cold, angry, but he wipes that look off as he brushes my hair over my ears.

“I meant *you* ruined *me*, Addie.” He exhales all the air from his lungs, slowly pulling out. With one last kiss to my forehead, he stands to his full height. “Stay here. I’ll grab a washcloth.”

“Mhmm,” I murmur. “So... does this mean our date next week is canceled?”

A quiet chuckle escapes him. “No, baby. I’m still taking you out as soon as we’re back in Newport.”

TWENTY

Colt

I'M NOT SURPRISED to find Addie asleep when I emerge from the bathroom. It took me ten minutes to clean up and school myself as I gripped the sink with both hands, staring into my reflection, mesmerized by the long angry marks on my arms and back.

You're such an idiot, Colt.

I shouldn't have let Addie get to me like that. I shouldn't have fucking touched her. It was hard enough keeping a level head before I knew how well we fit. How good she tastes. How beautiful she is when she submits.

I knew the moment I kissed her that I'm beyond fucked, but I rationalized; I'm not going to let her go, so what's the harm in starting early? We both want this. We're adults. We find each other attractive. What's the harm in enjoying ourselves? We can date like normal people when we're back. Sex won't ruin anything. No harm done. None at all.

Or so I thought.

Now?

Now I want more. And not just sex.

I want *everything* right fucking now. I want her to move in with me. I want her to marry me. I want her to have my kids.

And *that* is an issue.

We just fucking met. I'll scare her off if I'm not careful.

You're just desperate to find someone, and latching onto the first girl in your path.

Yeah, that's plausible. I do want my forever. My girl, my kids, my own little family. But it doesn't mean I should grab the first girl I like and cling on for dear life.

Or maybe that's exactly what I should do. Seize the moment. Grab Addie and never let go. Wear her down like Conor did with Vivienne. Secure my future.

I run a heavy hand down my face, marshaling the obsessive thoughts and locking them in a box at the back of my mind.

Too bad it pops open when I glance at Addie, asleep on the bed, her long hair a veil around her face, skin still pink, bare nipples peaked.

She nuzzles her cheek deeper into the pillow. Seeing her like this, so peaceful, so helpless... something shifts in my chest again. It kept fucking shifting the entire session as I watched her blown pupils and the trust within, while I listened to her erotic, soft moans.

With every orgasm, I was falling faster, caring more than I should. This isn't how sex goes for me. I'm not usually as keen to please women. Sure, I'll get them off once or twice, rarely more, unless I'm in an exceptionally good mood and she's been particularly well behaved, but things were different with Addie.

The need to see her fall apart was like a separate entity inside me, demanding more and more of her pleasure. Every time her body shuddered in ecstasy, the need kept growing. I couldn't stop watching, couldn't stop listening, and I sure as fuck couldn't bring myself to stop touching her.

Again, that's not normal for me. I don't do missionary. I don't hold them close. I hardly ever kiss them outside of foreplay. I have them on all fours or belly down, pinned to the wall or spread-eagled on a table. There's never much skin-on-skin or eye contact but peeling my eyes away from Addie was mission impossible.

I wanted her closer even when I had her under me. Even when both my hands were wrapped tightly around her and I kissed her lips, sinking balls-deep, we were still too fucking far apart.

That's... troubling.

All the more because now that I'm not touching her, I feel like I'm missing something vital.

I should wake her up. We're supposed to head to dinner in ten minutes, then watch movies by the pool, but looking at her peaceful face, I can't.

She must be exhausted. She wasn't far off tears when we got to the sixth orgasm. I could tell she loved every second, but she's not used to such a sensory overload. I would've stopped and let her rest if she'd said *red*.

I would've forfeited my own orgasm.

But she was lost in me and the moment as much as I was lost in her. The second she wrapped her sweet lips around my shaft was the second I thought I was doomed. Holding off after eight months of celibacy didn't come easy at first, but it got easier with every orgasm that shook Addie.

Feeling her come was better than coming myself and I would've kept going. I'd find every ounce of restraint buried in my bones to give her as many orgasms as she'd let me.

I never got that big of a kick from girls coming undone beneath me. Now, nothing will ever come close to the feeling inflating my chest when Addie's back arched off the bed.

Warm washcloth in hand, I quietly cross the room and gently wipe between her legs, staring at my cum trickling down her thighs.

A sick thought seized my mind when she mentioned birth control. I imagined flushing her pills down the toilet, replacing them with a placebo and knocking her up so she'd stay with me.

It was so fucking bizarre, so fucking wrong I almost leaped out of bed, scared and disgusted. You can't force anyone to be with you, but in that moment, I didn't give a fuck.

Addie doesn't wake. She stirs a little as I tuck her in and dip my head, kissing her temple.

For years now, I knew I'd be in trouble if the day ever came when a head kiss brought me this much joy.

My brothers always said head kisses mean your feelings are deeper than just physical. I've kissed Addie's head a few times since we got here, but those were staged, meaningless pecks. This... this is different. There's no one here. I'm not doing this for show. I do it because I can't *not* kiss her.

Grabbing fresh clothes from the walk-in closet, I lock myself in the bathroom for a quick shower. Since Addie's in no state to join her family for dinner. I'm forced to do the doubtful honors.

It'd be suspicious if I sat this one out too.

Taming my hair and slipping into another Monaco Grand Prix-worthy outfit, I quietly jot down a one-word note for Addie in case she wakes up.

Headache.

I'm pretty sure she'll know to fake one. After all, I can't tell everyone she's exhausted. We hardly did anything today other than lose the tug of war. With one last lingering look at the bed, I leave the suite, closing the door softly.

Henry grabs me as soon as I step onto the main deck. "Where's Addie?"

"Sleeping off a headache."

He narrows his eyes, looking me over like he expects to find proof of a lie. He would, had I not put on a long-sleeved jersey. He'd see right through my bullshit if he spotted the long red marks down my arms. Addie will have to clip her nails. She's out of control when she orgasms.

"Oh, that's too bad." Henry sighs. "I'm glad you decided to join us, though. Did she take any pills?"

"Yeah, she took Tylenol and went to sleep."

"That's good. We can bring her back some food. Now chop, chop. We're losing daylight."

Arm-in-arm, we descend the gangway from the yacht onto the marina, heading toward one of the many restaurants Jamaica has to offer.

We get there to find everyone already seated. When the waiter's taking orders, I'm there, but not really. I order my food, listening while Henry tells me he'll be visiting Addie in Newport soon, but my mind's in suite seventeen. In bed with the girl that makes me question my sanity.

I miss her. It's wrong, but true. I shouldn't miss her. I shouldn't feel this fucking possessive over her after just a few days, but there's shit all I can do about it.

The feelings spread through me like a disease. Uncontrollable, but I have to control them. I have to tame them and let this progress naturally, or I'll scare her away and fuck up the only chance I ever had at something real.

TWENTY-ONE

Addie

COLT'S ASLEEP WHEN I WAKE UP the next morning, my head pounding after twelve hours in bed. Flipping onto my side, I prop my head on one elbow, watching his peaceful face. In the same breath, I realize I'm naked.

My cheeks heat as last night comes rushing back and I'm turned on again remembering how he watched me... like he never wanted to stop.

No one ever looked at me that way. No one ever touched or kissed me like he did. No one was ever so attentive.

I could blame his behavior on our fake dating act, but I know he's not pretending. He's not acting in a certain way to please my parents. No, he *is* attentive. He *is* caring.

He's also dominant as hell.

Something I find entirely too attractive.

I'm not sure if he'll be up for round two while we're here, or if he'll want to wait, but what I am sure of is that I don't want this... *us* to end once the trip ends on Sunday. I want him to take me out on that date he promised.

I didn't plan on sex last night.

I just wanted him to kiss me because the anticipation and his rejection was driving me crazy. I should've known we wouldn't stop there. As soon as he gently gripped my neck, I knew we'd go the distance. The pull between us is undeniable.

I was intrigued by him the second he sat in front of me at the Express Dates, and that intrigue keeps growing every day, morphing into more.

"Morning," Colt says, making me jump.

Lost in my head, staring into the distance, I hadn't noticed him open his eyes.

"Morning. We missed dinner."

He smirks, stretching out. “*You* missed dinner. I had roast duck with figs and sage glaze, zero cock soups, and no dicks for dessert. Then, instead of watching the lame rom-com Amara picked, I played poker with your dad until midnight.”

A small smile tugs the corners of my lips. “Dick desserts are good. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“I’m more of a pink pussy sherbet type of man. If that’s ever on the menu, count me in.”

“You had your fill last night,” I remind him, the visual of his head between my legs invading my mind.

Colt tenses immediately, the playful jokes long forgotten. He flips onto his side and props his head on one arm, staring down at me. “How do you feel about that?” The muscles in his jaw work circles as he studies my face. “Any regrets?”

“Regrets? No. Why would you think that?”

“You said *no sex* when I agreed to come here.”

“I did.” I stretch and yawn before I flip onto my side as well. “Only because I’d never pay for favors with my body, but that wasn’t the case last night.”

I didn’t come on to him to compensate for his troubles. I know he’s enjoying the trip—his first vacation in five years—and *me*. I came on to him because I couldn’t stop myself no matter how hard I tried rationalizing.

And I really don’t want last night to be a one-off. Too bad he doesn’t look like he’s about to make a move. Which means I’m dictating the pace. *I* get to decide how much will happen and how often.

This is a bit out of character for me, but... screw it.

I want him, and I won’t cower again. Feeling a rush of confidence, I slip out from under the sheets, taking my sweet time as I drape my hair over my shoulder.

Slowly, I make my way to the bathroom and stop in the doorway, looking back at Colt.

He's staring, his hungry brown eyes devouring every inch of my naked skin. "You little tease," he groans, palming his cock under the sheets. "I want my dessert, Addie."

"You shouldn't eat dessert before breakfast," I say, tracing the curve of my hip with the tip of my finger. "But we're on vacation. Rules don't apply, so dessert will be served in the shower."

He shoots out of bed immediately, scoots me into his arms and doesn't let go until we're both in the walk-in shower, warm water pattering our backs.

And then, without warning or even a kiss, he drops to his knees, hooks my leg over his shoulder, and devours my pink pussy like he's starving.

My jelly-like legs barely hold my weight an hour later. Three orgasms mere minutes apart will do that to a girl.

Too bad my blissful mood bursts as soon as we sit down for breakfast and Grant slips into the seat beside me, way too close for comfort.

Colt's jaw clamps shut, his hands balling into tight fists on the table as the waitress pours his orange juice.

"Well, look at the lovebirds," Grant drawls, reaching over to pick a strawberry off my plate. He pops it into his mouth, eyes idling between Colt and me. "What took you two so long? Amara's almost incandescent she's so impatient to start the next task," he muses loudly, his tone implying he knows the reason we're late.

I glance at my parents three seats down, catching my mother's raised brow.

"We overslept," I mutter, avoiding her glare and poking at the breakfast on my plate.

Grant's a master at ruining my appetite.

"Overslept?" he drawls, bouncing his eyebrows. "You fell asleep before dinner last night. Colt said you had a headache."

I grind my teeth, knowing damn well what he's doing. "I did, but I'm fine now. Just had to sleep it off."

"Are you sure you're fine?" He makes a show of looking me over. "You look *flustered*, pumpkin."

My cheeks burn hotter, showing everyone that Grant's barking up the right tree.

The fucking nerve of him.

Amara giggles behind her coffee and my mother's bright red. I don't dare check what facial expression my father's sporting. There's nothing more mortifying than thinking about your daughter's sex life, I'm sure.

A few excuses dance on the tip of my tongue like *the shower was hot*, but instead of digging deeper, I say, "I'm fine."

The less I talk, the better.

Grant doesn't let the subject rest, pressing the back of his hand to my forehead. "You're not running a fever, so..."

"Either you take your hand off her, or I'll rip it out of your shoulder socket," Colt grinds out, holding the fork so hard his knuckles are white. "Don't test me, man. I don't play well with others."

Grant chuckles, withdrawing his hand and lifting both in surrender. "Chill out. She knows I'm joking. It's all good fun."

"You're being an ass," Benjamin says in a playful tone behind us, gripping Grant's shoulders. "C'mon, we gotta talk."

I offer my brother a small, grateful smile as they leave. He might be on Grant's side, but he does have my back sometimes.

"He's harmless," I tell Colt quietly.

"I'll decide that." He takes a large gulp of juice, dropping his eyes back to his plate. "He better not touch you again."

A warm feeling inside my chest should *not* be my body's reaction to his possessiveness, but it is. I'm learning a lot of new things about myself with Colt around, and I'm enjoying

every single one. It's like I've been locked in a shell my whole life, and he cracked it open last night.

I wonder what else I'll learn while we're here.

We inhale breakfast in record time thanks to Amara breathing down our necks and complaining we're delaying the next task: an egg-and-spoon race.

Not a standard one, though. No, my brother has turned the skill level up to infinity. Paired with—surprise, surprise—Grant, I stand by the railing, staring at a diving board jutting out from the yacht, suspended over the ocean.

It's narrow. *Very* narrow, and we're supposed to walk to the end, blindfolded, holding the spoon with our teeth as we balance the egg. The fastest duo to not drop their egg, wins.

I'm certain the draw was rigged so I ended up with Grant. The only consolation is that Colt's paired with my father not my mother. They stepped aside as soon as the task was announced and now look lost in conversation, probably preparing a battle plan.

The warm sea breeze tugs at the loose tendrils of my hair, the smell of salt and seaweed blending with the strong scent of Grant's cologne. I swear he bathes in it.

My head feels light just looking at the drop below the board. I'm not great at judging heights, but it's at least thirty feet, probably more. There's no way I'll complete the race. My legs feel like they're about to give in and I bet they will the moment I take one step away from the railing.

"I can't do this," I say, my voice trembling even though my feet are firmly on the deck. "You can't make me."

Grant sidles up closer, a smug grin plastered on his face. "It'll be fun, pumpkin. You'll be blindfolded so you won't see the drop." His fingers brush against mine, sending a shiver of revulsion up my arm.

"Stop calling me that. And *don't* touch me."

Across the deck, Colt's watching with concern, annoyance, and a protective spark in his eyes that kindles a

flame inside me. I send him a small smile, moving away from Grant to maintain a safe distance. Colt admitted he's a hothead and I believe his word. It's not difficult to imagine him throwing his fists. With six brothers, he's probably very good at it. Siblings always fight when they're kids. I sure did with Ben.

"I'll panic and fall, Grant. I'm not a good swimmer."

"There's a huge inflatable underneath. You'll be fine. C'mon, don't leave me hanging. I know you want to win and be back with Colt for the task tomorrow."

Bastard. He's not wrong, though. Winning means choosing a partner tomorrow, but...

I lean out, checking how far the drop is, and my head starts spinning. "I'll pass out," I mutter more to myself than him.

"You won't. Look," he nudges my shoulder, motioning at my mother who's going first. "Watch everyone and by the time it's our turn you'll be fine."

Piece of cake.

Not so much. Watching others doesn't help. Not in the slightest. Every cheer, every splash as someone loses their balance, tumbling onto the airbag below or missing it by a foot, every laugh echoing from the deck feels directed at me.

I pinch the hem of my dress, hoping to stop my hands shaking, but the weight pressing onto my chest grows heavier as the minutes tick by.

My father and Colt are second to last, completing the task with undeniable ease. I feel better while I watch Colt navigate the narrow plank. He makes it look so damn easy, every step confident, his posture straight, the egg firmly on the spoon.

Once he's back, my father repeats the process, almost losing the egg twice along the way.

Amara's not sharing times, so I have no idea who's winning. That's the only reason I'm still by the railing, watching, instead of hiding in the comfort of our suite.

I should at least *try*. Colt was lucky to land with my father today, but who knows who he'll get paired with tomorrow?

What if it's my mother?

What if it's Grant?

I know he doesn't give a shit about their digs, but *I* brought him here and *I* should be at least trying to make his stay pleasant.

"How are you doing?" Grant asks me when Amara hands him a spoon. "We good?"

Swallowing hard, I meet Colt's gaze over Grant's shoulder and relax my muscles by letting out a long puff of air. It's surreal how just the sight of him helps me find my balance.

"Okay. I'll try," I say, moving my eyes to Amara.

She gives me an appreciative, if a little surprised, nod. "I was certain you'd back out," she chirps, looking between us. "Grant goes first. Then he hands you the spoon. Same spoon, same egg."

Grant doesn't waste time. Shooting me one last smirk, he blindfolds himself and takes the spoon in his mouth. Unlike Colt, he's not graceful. Every few steps, there's a wobble, an almost disaster, but he reaches the end quickly and spins on one leg, starting back. My dread intensifies the closer he comes, inevitably bringing my turn with him.

The moment he hops down onto the deck, he thrusts the spoon toward me. "See? Easy peasy," he says, the challenge evident in his voice. "Make me proud, pumpkin."

"Call me *pumpkin* again and I'll shove this egg so far down your throat it'll tickle your intestines."

Amara lets out a half-gasp, half-chuckle and Grant grins, pretending to lock his mouth and throw away the key.

Colt's still with my father, Amara's instructions are clear: stay with your team until the end of the task. I'm not sure how this stops any foul play, since there's no way to cheat, but no one disobeys, eager to please the bride-to-be.

Taking a deep breath, I let Amara tie the blindfold. It's thick and doesn't let in much light. Maybe that's for the best. They say looking down is the worst thing you can do when you're afraid of heights.

At least now I can't see anything.

Slowly, I pop the spoon in my mouth, chanting *it'll be over in one minute* on repeat in my head. With a deep breath, I let Grant help me onto the board and, using the band-aid method, I quickly take a step forward.

The faster I walk, the sooner it'll be over and the better the chance we'll win. Too bad one shaky step is all I manage.

The blindfold doesn't help.

It makes things worse because my imagination compensates for it tenfold. My heart races like a frightened horse, vertigo hits, and my legs feel like lead. I'm shaking so hard that the spoon slips from my mouth to clatter away under my feet. Two seconds later there's a soft splash below. Probably the egg.

My stomach churns so hard I feel sick. I know one step back is all I need to take, but I'm frozen, paralyzed. Panic grips me, a tight band around my chest and I'm hyperventilating.

"Get me down," I squeal, the board beneath my feet shaking with me. "Please. I can't... I can't move."

"Trust you to overreact," Grant huffs behind me. His big hand cuffs my wrist and he helps me down, taking little care to make sure I keep up with his moves. Yanking the blindfold off me, his narrowed eyes bore into mine and his grip tightens. "You're fine. Chill out. It's not even that high."

"Hands off," Colt growls, his voice dripping with anger as he materializes behind Grant.

"We're just talking, man. She panicked, so—"

"Panicked?" Colt echoes, stepping around Grant to get to me, his eyes searching mine like he can read my mind if he tries hard enough. "What's wrong?"

“It’s too high,” I mutter, my tense body slowly relaxing. “I’m not good with heights.”

Grant scoffs beside us. “I thought you’d been dating a while... I’d have thought your many fears would be something Colt’s familiar with by now. Didn’t you *fly* to Miami?”

There’s an edge to his voice. A challenge of sorts, like he’s not buying our relationship. Like he suspects we’re leading everyone by the nose. Or it’s just me reading too much into it, freaking out that we’ll get discovered.

Conor’s words come back to me like an echo.

“Only you know the truth, and you might end up overcompensating, making a show, so no one doubts you. Don’t do that.”

I close my eyes briefly, taking a deep breath. I’m overthinking. That’s all. I’m doing something wrong, and I’m scared it’ll blow up in my face.

“He knows I don’t like flying,” I say, grasping Colt’s hand and squeezing his fingers. “But heights isn’t the same thing... I mean, it’s not like I hand out a list of my phobias to everyone I meet.”

“You should. You’re afraid of your own shadow, Addie,” my mother cuts in, standing nearby. “Grant’s right, though. It’s rather odd Colt doesn’t know such a basic thing about you. First your allergy, now this... seems you two don’t talk much.”

I grit my teeth, choosing not to argue. Instead, I look over to Amara and her notepad. “Who won?”

TWENTY-TWO

Colt

LEFT ALONE FOR THE FIRST TIME since we arrived, I set up a call with Cody and Conor while Addie and all the other woman on board are getting pampered in the yacht's spa.

We docked in Haiti this morning, and after the egg-balancing task, Amara called in the local beauticians. Henry immediately tried to hijack me for a fishing trip, but I got out of it by saying I needed a few hours to catch up on work.

I'm not proud that I lied to the guy. He's been nothing but nice since day one, but I'd rather throw in a little white lie than spend any more time than necessary with Grant. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep myself from breaking his nose.

With a tall cup of iced coffee, I sit out on the balcony of our suite, set the phone up for FaceTime, and light a cigarette. A minute later, when the agreed hour strikes, Cody's the first to join the call.

"You're getting your ass kicked when you come back," he starts, folding his arms over his chest. "I text you five times a day and all I get back are fucking emojis."

Judging by the flowery wallpaper behind him and the background hum, he's having lunch somewhere in town.

"I'm busy, Cody. This trip's nothing like I expected. Addie's future sister-in-law has made it one big bonding exercise. We're playing kiddie games every day."

He raises a brow, then looks past his camera, gesturing for someone to come over. Ten seconds later, Conor plops down beside him, nudging his chin up at me.

Before saying one word in my direction, he hails a waitress and only when they've both placed their order does he offer me any attention.

"How's paradise?"

“Not paradising,” Cody chips in. “He says he’s playing kiddie games every day instead of lounging by the pool, getting drunk, and making sweet mistakes with Addie.”

“Kiddie games? Like what? *Twister*? Because let me tell you, play that naked and it’s so not a kiddies’ game.”

I roll my eyes, blowing out a cloud of smoke. “Treasure hunt, tug of war, and today, egg-and-spoon race on a diving board forty feet over the ocean.”

“Sounds dreadful,” Cody chuckles. “You suck at games, so I bet you’re having fun.”

“I suck at games when I’m stuck with you two as teammates. I’m doing fine here, but I’d still much rather *not* play.”

“I doubt that takes all day, so... aside from weird bonding exercises, how are *things* going?” He emphasizes *things* harder than getting the point across requires.

“Good, I guess. I don’t really know what to say. Addie’s father’s cool, her mother’s a witch, and Grant’s here, pissing me off to no end. I’m ninety-nine percent sure I’ll dislocate his jaw by the end of the week. And Addie... we’re getting along.”

That’s an understatement, but I’m not going to word-vomit that we fit like two puzzle pieces or list any of the other thousands of things about her that draw me in and make me feel all fuzzy and warm inside.

“Getting along,” Conor muses, two wrinkles marking his forehead. “Wow, that’s juicy, bro. What’s with the secrecy? I can tell something’s chewing at that big head of yours. Spill.”

I take another long drag, earning a few precious thinking seconds. Maybe a bit of perspective won’t hurt. Maybe it’ll help me slow the pace and make sure I don’t fuck things up before they’ve really started.

“I’m getting attached,” I admit, pushing the words out fast. “I know I shouldn’t. Not so fast, but—”

The soft opening and closing of the suite door cuts me off. I look over my shoulder to find Addie, dressed in a white, fluffy robe, her face glowing.

“Back so soon?” I ask, though a quick glance at the clock tells me she’s been gone over two hours. Cody and Conor took their sweet time jumping on this call. “How was it?”

She comes closer with a dreamy smile. “I’m pampered, relaxed, I smell like something edible, and the massage...” She sighs softly. “His fingers are magical. I feel so... light.”

A pang of jealousy hits me, sharper than expected. My eyes rove her perfect body, wondering where exactly he touched her. The thought of another man’s hands on her stirs my inner rage.

“A male masseuse?” I ask, the words coming out harsher than intended.

My hand’s itching. I want to bend her over and slap her pretty butt for letting someone other than me touch her. It’s irrational. I know. It’s the guy’s fucking job but...

Yeah, but what, Colt?

But nothing... she’s not mine. I have no right to feel so possessive. That seems like bullshit, though, because ever since that picnic dinner, things between us have escalated at warp speed.

And I don’t just mean sex. There’s more. Like the fact she sleeps cuddled into my side and kisses my chin when she wakes up. Or that the girlfriend/boyfriend dynamic doesn’t feel fake anymore. We’re not pretending.

But I don’t name the feelings blossoming inside me. There’ll be time for that once we’re back in Newport, dating.

Addie chuckles lightly, stepping closer to me, her knee touching my thigh. She’s so close I can smell the sweet almond oil that fucker must’ve massaged her with. She’s right. She smells edible, and I’m suddenly starving.

It takes all the willpower I have not to cuff her wrist, pull her down to my lap and run my hands all over her, so the last

touch every inch of her skin felt would be mine.

“Yes, a male masseuse,” she admits, her eyes dancing with amusement as her fingers slowly ghost up my arm, sending shivers down my spine. “*Very* skilled hands.”

I swallow hard, my face heating up in proportion to the uncoiled anger running rampant inside me. God, if she really were mine, she’d get punished for riling me up this bad. Orgasm denial, clit torture, I’d make her beg for mercy.

“Oh really?” is the cleverest response I can bark out.

She leans in, her breath warm against my ear. “Oh really. Very skilled and *very* professional.” She pulls away, a triumphant smile twisting her lips. “Why? Feeling a little... jealous?”

That twinkle in her eye, her proximity, and the light brush of her fingertips further stoke that possessive feeling consuming me. Damn this girl. She’s driving me crazy.

Trying to regain my composure and save face, I opt for a casual shrug. “No, just... curious.”

Conor and Cody remind me of their presence, letting out amused scoffs I interpret as something like *yeah, right*.

I can’t blame them. I’m full of shit.

Jealousy doesn’t begin to cover it. I’ve never felt this territorial. It coils itself around me so hard all I can think about is pinning Addie to the mattress and showing her who she belongs to.

“Hey, boys,” Addie chirps, casting a playful glance at my brothers. “How are things?”

“Good,” Cody says, biting back a smile. “Do us a favor and make sure Colt gets five minutes every evening to send us an update, alright? Also, if you could delete all the emojis from his phone, that’d be great. Especially the *thumbs up* one.”

“I’ll remind him to text you, but I don’t think you can delete emojis.”

“Goddamnit,” he huffs, moving his attention back to me. “I won’t be held accountable for what I’ll do when you come back if you send me one more emoji. Got it?”

I show him a thumbs up and Conor chokes on his coffee. Having brothers is fun.

“Right, I’ll leave you boys to it. I should wash this oil off and get ready for the bonfire.” She bends slightly, pressing her full lips to my cheek.

My hand instinctively shoots out, gripping the back of her knee. “Any dessert left?” I slide my fingers along that soft spot.

“Plenty left. You know where it is.”

I sure do. And I’ll devour my share as soon as I shake my brothers off the call. Addie steps back, then spins on her heel, aiming for the bathroom. I’m left watching her every move. The sway of her hips, the bounce in her step, the swing of her hair... she’s intoxicating.

“Sooo...” Conor drawls, breaking my trance. “What’s for dessert, bro?”

I roll my eyes, the smile spreading over my lips hard to hide. “Fuck you.”

TWENTY-THREE

Colt

TRUST BILLIONAIRES to make a simple bonfire on the beach look like a Royal Gala.

Instead of fallen branches surrounding the fire and marshmallows on sticks, there's a triangular canopy stretched out over the sand. Fairy lights twinkle around the perimeter, illuminating the low tables and luxury loungers below. The bonfire burns in a perfect circle, a safe distance from the wooden, fully equipped pop-up bar and tall stools.

Almost everyone is here already, some chatting by the sea where lazy waves foam at the shore, some relaxing on the loungers, some standing by the bar, drinks in hands, not one paying attention to the bonfire.

Seems it's only here for decoration.

"Is this how your family always do bonfires?" I ask, glancing down at Addie who's walking side by side with me across the beach, her bare feet sinking into the sand.

We're holding hands. Not for the first time, but now we've added benefits to our make-believe relationship, holding her hand feels different. It's nothing exciting for most people, but it sure is for me.

Exciting. Intimate. Fucking amazing.

"More or less," Addie admits. "Not fun, right?"

"Not really. What's the point if no one's toasting marshmallows or drinking beer by the fire?"

The low coffee tables under the canopy bend under the weight of gourmet snacks, fruit, and... damn. There's even a chocolate fountain.

Addie steps out of our two-person line, dragging me toward the pop-up bar. "I made some arrangements." She grins, her pace quickening.

Her elbows touch the bar a moment later, and she beams at the waiter, leaning closer like she's divulging national secrets. "Do you have my order ready?"

"Of course, miss," the bartender says, fetching a bucket of Coronas on ice, a few long sticks and a pack of giant marshmallows. "Enjoy."

Addie pulls a few bills from her purse, since the bar's not part of the yacht, but the bartender shakes his head and points at a laminated card by the till.

Open bar, courtesy of Grant.

Of course. Mr. Show-off had to leave his mark. Whenever I open a tab for family or friends, I don't shout it from the rooftops so everyone knows who's paying. I don't do it to get a *thank you*. Grant, on the other hand, loves to boast.

"He can't help himself, can he?" I say, grabbing the beers.

Addie shrugs, hugging the marshmallows. "Nothing I haven't seen before. Be glad he didn't put his picture up there this time to make sure anybody who doesn't already know him has no doubt who's buying their drinks."

Talk about ostentatious.

Nodding polite *hellos* in everyone's direction, we walk past the seating area, heading straight for the bonfire.

"You want one?" Addie asks with a stick in hand, skewering a marshmallow as soon as we sit down.

My first instinct is to take the sharp stick out of her hand, but I have a feeling she wouldn't appreciate that, no matter how pure my intentions.

Thankfully, she's extremely focused on what she's doing as the flames dance around, mirroring in her pupils.

"Yeah, I'll have one, too," I say instead of *give me that, baby, I'll do it*.

It takes less than a minute before I hear footsteps from behind. "Ah, marshmallows and beer," Addie's father says,

plopping down on the sand beside us. “Brings back memories. Mind if I join you?”

Addie passes him a stick. “Do you even know how to toast a marshmallow?”

“Your father knows everything,” Grant says, joining us with more sticks. “I, on the other hand, might need some pointers. I’ve never done this before.” He rubs his chin, sitting carefully down beside Addie. “What do I do?”

Addie rolls her eyes so subtly only I notice. She grabs a marshmallow, handing it over to Grant.

“Watch and learn,” she says, pointing at her father. “It’s not rocket science.”

“He’ll poke his eye out with that,” Benjamin chuckles, coming over with Amara.

Well look at that. Simple marshmallow-toasting is gaining a following.

“I think I’ve got it,” Grant mutters. “So, how about we get to know each other a little better, Colt? I’ve not heard your story yet.” He looks between me and Addie. “Where did you two meet?”

“At a bar I own,” I say, thinking back to the meet-cute story we rehearsed and haven’t needed.

“And how long have you been together?”

“Almost three months.” Addie smiles, leaning closer to me, her head landing on my shoulder. “Feels like three years.”

“Three months?” Grant’s eyes narrow as if he’s piecing together a puzzle. “We were in Europe three months ago, and you never mentioned meeting anyone.”

“Why were you in Europe together?” I cut in, unable to prevent another sharp pang of jealousy.

“We weren’t there together, just in the same place at the same time. It was our mutual friend’s wedding, and...” She moves her eyes to Grant, “...I met Colt the day after I came

home.” She takes a small bite of her perfectly toasted marshmallow.

It takes less than ten minutes to empty the bucketful of Coronas. Almost everyone’s come to the bonfire, chugging from bottles and toasting marshmallows, so I get up, heading toward the bar for another round.

I have half a mind to order everyone a bottle of the most expensive drink they have, but no matter how much it costs, it won’t put a dent in Grant’s wallet.

With two buckets of beer, I go back to the happy gathering, stopping a few yards short when I spot Addie and Grant away from the crowd.

His fingers are wrapped around her upper arm, and his body language tells me he’s not happy about something.

“Stop pouting, pumpkin. I said I’m sorry a million times already!” Grant says, his voice growing louder. “He’s a nobody. I know you’re teaching me a lesson or some shit, but enough is enough. Send him home.”

I’m there in seconds, dropping both buckets on the sand. “I recall telling you to keep your hands off her,” I say, my hands balled into fists and itching to go. “You don’t know me very well, but I assure you I won’t have the slightest issue with knocking you out. Let. *Her*. Go.”

With visible annoyance, he loosens his hold on Addie and then drops his hand completely, spinning to face me. “You obviously don’t deal with many people of quality. Lay one finger on me and I’ll sue you for all you’re worth.”

The corner of my mouth twitches. He’s such a fucking cliché. “Of course you will. Since you can’t throw a decent punch to save your life, it’s your only line of defense.”

If he had some common sense, he’d realize what I’m doing. But he must’ve left his common sense back in England because his holier-than-thou attitude switches on the flip of a dime, the provocation working a treat. He winds his elbow back, then—like a coward—rams his fist into my stomach.

It wasn't easy letting him land that punch. My instincts wanted me to grab his fist, twist his arm back and make him bite the sand, but that'd defeat the purpose.

Addie gasps, covering her mouth as her father jumps in to pull her away from us. It's been years since I was in a fight. I used to walk around with black eyes or split lips every weekend back in high school, but fighting gets less and less entertaining as the years go by.

Not tonight, though. Tonight it's mighty entertaining.

Rolling my sleeves up, I smile at Grant, knowing damn well it'll work like a red rag to a bull.

"Now it's self-defense," I say, and the blow I send his way hits like a lightning bolt.

One.

I don't spend fifteen hours a week at the gym for nothing.

"Stop!" Addie yells, not at me, but at Grant who's spitting blood, gearing up to fight back.

Good fucking luck.

He's a big guy but he lacks experience. It's clear in the way he holds himself and throws his elbow back that he hasn't fought much. I wouldn't be surprised if he's popping his cherry right now.

He ignores Addie, and fully aware of twenty pairs of eyes watching, he sends his fist flying. No technique, so dodging the half-assed punch is child's play. I step aside, then hammer the side of his face.

Two.

That's when Addie breaks into a sprint toward the yacht. My first instinct is to follow, but Grant's getting ready to retaliate again. Stupid prick.

I'm done taking it easy on him. He's been grating my nerves since he arrived. He should've thought twice about laying one finger on Addie.

“Next time I hit you, either your bones will break or your teeth will fall out,” I warn him. “Do *not* throw another punch.”

He doesn't listen. The prospect of the humiliation he'll face from losing spurs him on. He spits blood onto the sand, righting his stance.

When he's about to jump into action, Henry steps in.

“That's enough for one day,” he says with his back to me. “Go get yourself sorted, Grant. You're making a mess.”

He's not appeased, but Henry's the only person Grant wants to keep happy.

“Of course. I'm sorry, sir, that was... uncalled for. Beer obviously doesn't serve me well.”

The only thing missing is him bowing so low his forehead brushes his bloodied shoes.

“And you,” Henry says, turning to me, voice stern but eyes amused. “That's some lethal weapons you've got there.” He smacks my bicep. “Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“I have six brothers, four older than me. We fought all the time when we were growing up.”

I don't mention we still sometimes throw the odd punch. It's been a while, but it happens. The last one was probably Logan clocking Nico when Melody was born.

To be perfectly honest, if he hadn't, I would've. Nico was out of control. He refused to let anyone other than Mia hold the kid, which didn't sit well with us. We got into a heated argument, but Nico was deaf to all arguments and Logan lost his cool.

It worked. Nico toned down afterward, though he's still way too overprotective. Melody's feet barely touched the ground during her first year of life.

“Right,” Henry muses, looking around the silent onlookers. “I think the show's over.” He motions at everyone to get going before he turns to me. “You should probably check on Addie.”

With a nod, I grab two beers, certain Addie could use one right about now. I expect she's shaken up, maybe scared, but when I enter our suite, ready to hug her and explain myself, she's throwing her clothes into a suitcase.

"What are you doing?" I ask, closing the door behind me.

"What does it look like?!" she snaps, tearing dresses off hangers. "We're leaving. Right *now*. I've had enough!"

My eyebrows knot in the middle. "You need to calm down. You're not thinking straight."

Her head whips to me fast and she stops pacing. "Calm down? CALM DOWN?! How the hell am I supposed to do that? You just got in a *fight*!" She throws her hands up, then slaps them hard against her thighs.

It shouldn't. I know it fucking *shouldn't*, given the circumstances, but the sound of her palms connecting with her bare flesh makes my cock twitch.

"This is not how this trip was supposed to go!" she continues, working herself up more with every word. "I wanted a drama-free week. Is that so much to ask for?!"

I flex my fingers and crack my neck, her attitude rubbing me the wrong way. "Take a deep breath, Audrey."

She doesn't. Of course she doesn't.

Not even her full name rolling off my tongue grabs her attention. It should. It's a sign she shouldn't ignore, but she looks like she didn't notice I called her *Audrey*.

Instead of recanting, she fucking *scoffs* at me, arms akimbo.

That'll cost her dearly.

"Deep breaths won't help. God! I'm so angry! I thought if I brought you here, Grant would stay away!"

I try to cut in, but before I get a word out, she's ranting again, working herself up even more. And over what?

Grant?

He doesn't deserve a single second of her attention.

"But nooooo," she wails, pacing again. "He's *here*, making our lives miserable! He's such a bloody knobhead! I... I—" She pauses, running out of steam as she closes her eyes. "I'm so sorry I dragged you into this."

I hate seeing her like this. Frantic, unstable, and close to tears. She needs a distraction. She needs to calm down and look at the situation with a clear mind.

And I only know one way to clear her mind.

"You trust me?" I ask, rising from the bed.

"Do I trust you?" She spits out the words like they're something bitter stuck to her tongue.

"Watch your mouth, Audrey. Answer the question."

She swallows hard, her lips opening and closing like she can't find the right words. Or maybe she just realized she's been acting out, and she's not sure of the consequences.

"Yes, I-I trust you."

"Good. Down on your knees for me."

Her eyes go round like silver dollars, a look of utter shock crossing her face. "*What?*"

Closing the distance between us in two steps, I grab her by the throat. "Did I fucking stutter? On. Your. *Knees*. Right now."

Squeezing the column of her throat harder, I limit her air supply and bring her face closer.

I'm not trying to scare or hurt her. That's the last thing I'd ever do. What I am doing is taking charge.

Her body language is an open book, and right now, the frantic pacing, suitcase-packing, her bitter tone... it all tells me she can't control her emotions. She doesn't know how to navigate this torrent of anger.

I do.

Swallowing hard, she obeys, dropping to her knees before me, eye-level with the inseam of my pants.

“Good girl.” I trace the line of her jaw with my knuckles. “Undo my belt.”

She’s silent, submitting without a second thought, but I notice how much she’s shaking as she lifts her hands.

“Eyes here, baby.” I grip her wrists before her fingers brush the buckle, and wait until she looks up “You’re doing okay? Give me a color.”

She swallows hard before lifting her chin higher. “Green.”

“Good. Now get to work. We don’t have all night.”

I don’t have to tell her twice. She unbuckles my belt, slides the zipper down, frees my cock and takes me in her hot, sweet mouth.

The gentle sucking motion sends a pleasant shudder through me. “Fuck,” I grunt, tying her long hair. “You’re so good at this.” So good I don’t have the urge to seize control and fuck her throat at my own pace.

She takes me deeper, her small hand wrapping around the hilt, jerking me off in rhythm with her tongue pirouetting around the head, tasting the precum beading at the tip.

It’s been a long time since a girl got me off using her mouth. Years, to be precise, but three minutes is enough for Addie to have me on edge. She’s eager, and I think she loves that, even though she’s on her knees, she holds the power.

Addie’s effortlessly submissive. She bends to my will, but there’s a spark in her. A *need* to take the reins sometimes.

Every hastened breath and growl I let out spurs her on. I’m loving every second. I’m dying to spill down her warm throat, but she might not want that.

“That’s enough...” I wrap her locks around my wrist, tugging gently so she’ll let me go before there’s no choice.

She shakes her head, clawing my thighs and sucks me in deeper, her hand working faster.

“Addie,” I coax, nudging her chin, my self-control going to shit. “You want a taste, baby?”

Her eagerness is my only answer, and it’s enough for me to stop fighting the incoming release. My orgasm erupts at the bottom of my spine, sending a rush of heat throughout my body as I fill her sweet mouth.

She doesn’t spit it out like I expect. Not many women enjoy the taste of semen, but Addie swallows, her throat contracting around my cock and milking every drop.

And fuck if that’s not the hottest sight I’ve ever seen.

My thigh muscles cramp, but I ignore the sting as I caress Addie’s cheek, watching her release me with a quiet pop.

“That was beautiful, baby.”

She smiles up at me, then squeals when I lift her off the floor and drop her on the bed, covering her body with mine.

“Feeling better?” I ask, scooting her up until her head lays on the pillows. “I’ll shut you up with my cock every time you yell at me.”

She bites back a smile, playing with the hair at the back of my scalp. “Can I sit on your face every time you yell at me?”

“I’ll never yell at you, but don’t let that stop you. Sit on my face whenever you want.”

My lips are level with her belly, so I leave a kiss there, caressing her ribs with both hands. “We’re not leaving. Not until we dock in Miami.”

“I know,” she sighs, pulling me up until I reach her lips. “I’m sorry I yelled. And I’m sorry Grant hit you.”

“I’m sorry your father interrupted before I knocked that fucker’s teeth out.”

She chuckles, gently whacking my shoulder. “You know... we’ve been here for days but hardly used any of the

amenities. Care for an evening swim?"

TWENTY-FOUR

Addie

COLT EMERGES FROM THE WATER at the pool's far end, the muscles in his arms and back rippling as he grips the railing and stares at the open ocean.

Everyone's still enjoying the bonfire on the beach, so we're alone on the third deck, undisturbed. A waiter stops by to check on our drinks every half an hour, and cameras are watching our every move, but other than that, it's just us.

My heart swells when that thought sinks. Just *us*.

"What are you thinking?" Colt asks, looking at me over his shoulder.

That I hope our bubble won't burst once we're back home.

We're enjoying being together now, but we're far away from our normal lives, far from work, friends, family, and commitments. We're living the dream here, cruising the Caribbean on a luxury yacht. It feels like no rules apply.

Maybe that's why I'm falling so hard and fast. Because there are no rules. No distractions. No inhibitions.

I'm scared of what things will look like when we go home. Will he still want me or will reality ruin the amazing thing we've got going on here?

"How hot you look," I lie smoothly, bringing the wine glass to my lips.

There'll be time for the heavy topics when we're back in Newport. For now, I'd rather enjoy what we have. I've never felt happier than I do when we're alone.

"Me?" he scoffs, turning my way, the black ink marking his chest almost glowing under the purple lights. "You should see you," he counters, then dives to swim the pool's distance underwater and emerge at the foot of my lounge.

I watch as he effortlessly pulls himself out, then grabs a towel, drying off before he drops onto the lounge beside me.

“It was your idea to come here,” he says, grabbing the fresh bottle of Corona the waiter left him. “Why aren’t you swimming?”

“I’m enjoying the view.” I purposely rove his body from head to toe, paying extra attention to where I can recognize the outline of his cock under the wet swim trunks.

I’m still in my dress, the over-the-knee, yellow swing number I wore to the bonfire.

Colt leans over, his lips on my neck, grazing the soft flesh with his teeth. “You made me spill before I made you come, Addie. That won’t fly. I want to feel you, baby.” He lowers his voice to a soft whisper, kissing below my ear. “Here. Now.”

“Here?” I repeat, my heart gaining pace as shock, fear, and excitement mix in my veins.

I glance around the deck, spotting two cameras pointing this way. There’s not a soul around. The waiter won’t come back for the next twenty minutes, but that doesn’t change the fact anyone could stumble out here.

Grant’s somewhere on board. The bonfire party might come back. There’s a few crew members about.

“That’s not a good idea,” I finally say, though denying him doesn’t come easy. “There are cameras,” I add, tilting my head to the side to give him better access.

But Colt’s warm lips are gone from my neck as he twists away. “Sit on my lap.”

“What?”

“Do as you’re told.”

I love how fast my burning need reacts to his orders. I also hate it sometimes. It’s like I no longer control my body.

Colt owns it now. He owns *me*.

My heart races in my chest, but I rise to my feet, taking extra care as I fling one leg over his lounge so I don’t

accidentally flash my panties at the cameras.

I don't know if anyone's manning the security room at this hour, but it's safe to assume someone's there, watching my every move. Holding onto the hem of my dress, I sit, shuddering when my warm skin touches Colt's cold, wet trunks.

A jolt of adrenaline spasms through me when I feel his cock pressing into my pussy.

"I want to feel you," he repeats, his hoarse voice barely above a whisper. "Put me inside you."

"You're crazy. We can't. Someone could—"

"Don't say *no* to me," he cuts in, gripping my neck and pulling me in for an intense, erotic kiss. He lifts his hips less than an inch, but it's enough to show how much he wants me. "*In*, baby." He skims his hot mouth from my collarbone up to my ear. "Reach under your dress, move your panties aside, pull my cock out and put me in."

"There are two cameras pointing right at us," I hiss, diligently ignoring how slick I am, how fucking needy whenever he touches me. "The bartender's somewhere around and—"

"I won't fuck you here," he tuts against my lips, biting the lower one. "I just want *in*. I want to feel how wet you are for me. I want to feel you come on my cock from nothing more than me kissing you."

I arch away, raising a brow. "You think you can make me come just by kissing me?"

His head hits the back of the lounge, a self-indulgent smirk curving his raspberry-pink lips. "You wanna bet I can't?" He digs his fingers into my hips, the gesture lighting me up from the inside out. "If I can—"

"No betting. I know I'll lose. You're a great kisser."

"Takes one to know one. Now put me inside you."

His fiery look challenges me to do as he said, and there's no way I'll back down now. All the reasons why we shouldn't

do this fall away. Colt's a master of making me submit. A master of centering my thoughts around him and him only.

Before we met, I never would've called myself courageous. Feisty, sure, but too many fears live rent-free inside my head to ever describe me as courageous.

But with Colt, I feel like I can conquer the world. Fear doesn't hold me back when he's around, bringing out parts of me I didn't know were there in the first place.

Letting out all the air from my lungs, I scoot back a little, reach under my dress, and inconspicuously lean over him, chest to chest, our lips mingling while I pull back the waistband of his trunks.

His long, thick erection springs out, the head touching my panties. My hand shakes as I pull the soaked fabric aside. The thrill of doing something we shouldn't spurs me on as I move forward to take him in.

Colt bites my lip, his hands gripping fistfuls of my dress, easing me down until his cock hits a sensitive spot deep inside, making me tremble.

"Good girl," he whispers.

I adjust my dress to make sure it sprawls around, hiding the indecency happening underneath. Without warning, he thrusts his hips up a fraction of an inch, tearing a soft, barely audible gasp from me.

"Shh, baby... fuck... you're so wet."

"You're cheating," I say, my hand caressing his jaw. "You said you'd make me come with nothing more than kisses. *Don't* move."

"We should've gone back to our suite." Pressing his hand to the small of my back, he urges me to rest my head on his shoulder. "You feel too fucking good..." His teeth scratch against my earlobe as he works me up with open-mouthed kisses. "You're mine, you know that? I'm not letting you ghost me when we go back home. I'm taking you out on Monday, then Tuesday, and Wednesday..."

“So, every day?”

His lips curve into a smile against my skin. “Every day.”

Moving one hand to the small of my back, he forces me closer, my boobs squishing against his pecs. He looks down with dark, hooded eyes, and his lips part in a shaky exhale. He weaves one hand in my hair, steering my head to the side and exposing my neck.

His lips latch on there, sucking, biting the soft flesh as he noses a line up, up, *up*, all the way to my ear.

The warmth of his breath leaves a trail of goosebumps across my skin and with every almost inaudible moan from my lips, his cock juts inside me.

“Close your eyes and focus,” he says, biting my earlobe. “I want one orgasm here, then five more in bed.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Addie

“TODAY’S TASK IS CAPTURE THE FLAG,” Amara announces as we gather on the beach in the Bahamas.

We docked after breakfast and spent the day exploring with a professional tour guide. It’s half past three in the afternoon, the sun high and scorching.

“Four teams,” Amara continues. “Last night’s winners get to pick three people to join them, and Ben will divide the rest.”

She explains that the team who have the most flags when the game ends—at seven, an hour after sundown—wins. She shows us a map, drawing boundaries and explaining that every team’s area has been taped off.

It’s amazing what kind of service you can buy when you have almost unlimited cash. The area we’re playing is pretty big—almost a square mile—which explains why it’ll take three hours.

I pull Colt to one side, my game face on. We won at *Pictionary* last night, so we’re back together and can choose who we want to play with. “Is there anyone you think will be useful on the team?”

“Your dad,” he says, turning to check who else might help. “Maybe your brother’s friend... Mark, is it?”

“Close. Marco. Fine, but I want his girlfriend, Tia.”

“Deal.”

As expected, Mom almost glows red when she’s not picked, but her mood quickly lifts when she ends up with Grant.

With a blue flag for our team, we’re wheeled off to our area on a local golf-cart-looking vehicle and left in the Amazon-like forest to play a children’s game.

“Dad, you hide and guard the flag,” I say. “Tia and I will grab the yellow team’s flag. Marco, you’re on red, and Colt’s

green. Don't get tagged. Back here as soon as we can."

Marco kisses Tia before marching toward the red team's territory.

"Have you always been this bossy?" Colt asks, stopping me when I try to take a step. "Turn around." He slides off his beaded bracelet.

"She's been like this since day one," Dad says, amusement lacing his tone. "Better get used to never winning an argument with this one."

With practiced ease, Colt ties my hair into a secure bun with his bracelet, then drops to his knees, unbothered by the dirt.

Grant would *never*.

Colt's fingers skim up my legs as he gathers up my maxi dress to tie it in a knot above my knees, presumably so my moves aren't limited in case I need to run. My heart picks up its rhythm with every brush of his skin against mine.

No more than eight hours ago, his lips were down there, rousing me from sleep. He headed north, latching onto my clit as soon as I uttered *morning*. I pray to all things holy that I'm not blushing in front of my dad.

Still unhappy with my jungle look, he shimmies out of the shirt he casually threw on over his t-shirt, twisting it here and there. Pleased with whatever he's made, he ties it around my waist. One sleeve, tied in half, hangs loose down my hip and only then do I realize Colt's made me a bottle holder.

"That's cute, but I could've just carried it."

"You don't know the terrain, Addie. It'll be better if you have both hands free in case you trip or need to climb." He undoes his belt, ties it around me, and drops my phone down my cleavage. "Now there's no chance you'll lose it." He stamps a kiss on my head and sends me on my way.

Half an hour later, Tia and I press forward, weaving through dense undergrowth in the yellow team's territory. We don't

talk, careful not to draw any attention in case anyone's lurking nearby.

Time stretches like bubble gum the deeper we venture into the island's wilderness. The air is thick with the earthy scent of the forest, and sunlight filters through the canopy, casting a soft glow on the ground.

I hate Amara a little more with every small scratch, cut, and prickle from a bush or low-hanging branch I fail to dodge. I'm sure Ben had no say in the games or the cruise itinerary. He dances to every tune Amara plays. Probably because she was the first girl he slept with.

My muscles ache, sweat trickles down my back and I've tripped at least ten times already. The terrain grows more rugged, steep inclines and fallen trees littering our way. The sun and the horizon are well on their way to meeting when our not-so-stealthy march is interrupted by a rustling sound ahead.

We freeze, exchanging panicked, loaded glances and, without a word, we instinctively split up. I veer to the left, my heart racing faster than my legs as I sprint away from whoever's approaching.

No way I'm getting tagged. Colt and I will have to split again tomorrow if we lose today. We're docking in Miami shortly after lunch, but Amara has one last game planned for the morning. I'm *not* losing Colt on the last day. No way. No freaking way I'm getting paired with Grant again after their brawl.

He's got a black eye to rival all black eyes, and his ego has been bruised so badly, said black eye has not looked at me for two days now.

Panting and wheezing, I stop when I reach the yellow tape marking the perimeter. There's not much water left sloshing in my bottle, but I down it all, dropping onto the ground behind a huge tree until I catch my breath.

It takes a few minutes before my legs stop feeling like jelly. I should work out more. I'm such a weakling.

Once I can move again, I look beyond the tape, assessing the peak of a hill in the distance. My mother and Grant are on the yellow team. Knowing their lack of imagination, I'm willing to bet they hid the flag as far up as possible.

If not for the gruesome possibility of being paired with Grant again, I'd say *fuck it* and turn around, but... obviously, I don't.

I start walking, careful not to make any noise.

No way will I sprint again if someone crosses my path. Good job Colt's not here because my legs ache and I'm still wheezing like I'm eighty, not twenty-two. It's embarrassing.

Maybe he'll take me to the gym with him on Monday.

The hum of the nearby river grows louder the higher I climb. I'm relieved because, according to the map Amara showed us during the game briefing session, the river marks the border between blue and yellow territory. After what feels an eternity, and tripping over at least another ten times, covered in dirt and a thin sheen of sweat, I stumble upon a clearing.

My thigh muscles are on fire.

Instead of the gym, I should ask Colt to let me go on top. I hear bouncing up and down on a cock makes for a great leg day.

Towering trees and boulders surround the area, creating a natural fortress—a perfect place to hide the flag.

A flash of movement catches my eye. Mother dearest perches on one of the rocks, no more than a hundred yards away. Her attention's on her nails, but I still retreat behind a tree.

Really? They chose *Mom* as the guard? She looks bored out of her mind, picking her cuticles or maybe chipping away the nail polish. If not for the bottle of bourbon beside her, I doubt she'd still be participating.

The flag moves in the wind, tied to a low-hanging branch just ten feet from her. Too close for a snatch-and-run strategy

without running the risk of being tagged. Besides, I really don't think I can move fast enough now.

My mind races as I plan my next move, casting a quick look around for the best escape route. The blue tape is somewhere on my left, so if I run that way, I'll stumble into our territory. The only downside is the open space. I'll have nowhere to hide if Grant or another yellow team member jump out of the bushes when I snatch the flag.

I think it'd be wiser to run straight ahead. From where I stand, it looks like we're at the top of the hill, so passing the line of trees on the other side of the clearing should lead down.

Taking a moment to consider my options, I settle for the most obvious distraction: I throw a rock as far to the right as I can. It lands with a sharp crack, startling some birds into wing-rustling flight.

My mother's ears perk up, her attention moving from her nails to scan the trees. She doesn't move at first, but then, as if deciding she should at least make the minimum effort, she saunters ahead. As soon as she's far enough from the flag, I muster what little strength I have left and bolt like a burst of energy across the clearing, certain my sophisticated mother does not have it in her to chase me.

She doesn't.

Her only line of defense is a theatrical *hey!* as I snatch the flag, stuffing it down my bra, and then I'm gone, running toward what I hope is a way down the hill.

"Why are you just standing there?!" Grant's voice bellows behind me. "Run, Victoria! Catch her!"

So he was somewhere nearby.

Good luck catching me, I think as my feet pound the ground, the thrill of the chase and the inevitable taste of victory coursing through my veins. The excitement fades when I emerge into another clearing. Much smaller... and ending with a cliff. Damn it. There's no way down this side of the hill, but...

There is a way across.

An ancient-looking rope bridge stretches over the river. There are planks missing, those that are left look rotten, and the ropes are all dried out and frizzy.

“There’s no way out of here,” Grant yells from behind me.

He’s not running, perfectly aware I’m trapped and afraid of heights. Either I face my fear (recent events don’t inspire much faith in my abilities) or I get tagged and spend tomorrow’s task with Grant. My mother will see that we’re “randomly” paired once again. I don’t know the task, but part of me is scared about what will happen to Colt and me once we’re back in Newport. I’m *not* losing the time I know I still have with him.

Win or lose.

I blame the decision on adrenaline and endorphins. Under normal circumstances, there would be no question of stepping onto the bridge, but today, determination outweighs fear. With a deep breath, I steel myself, checking one last time for an alternative route. Nothing. It’s either across or straight into Grant’s grubby hands.

He barely sent two punches Colt’s way the other night—far less powerful than the ones he got back—but the knuckles of his right hand are scraped. The black eye looks ugly and out of place on his pretty, aristocratic face.

I bet Colt would look mighty sexy with a few bruises...

Grant emerges no more than ten feet behind me, a glint in his eyes. “Well hello there, sweetheart. Game over.”

I look down at the river below. The churning water makes my head spin.

“It’s not that high,” I whisper. “The bridge isn’t that long. At full speed, I’ll be across in fifteen seconds.”

Grant starts closing in on me, a triumphant smile stretching his lips. “You’ve got nowhere to go, pumpkin.”

Swallowing my fear, I ball my fists. No way I’ll give up so easily. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

This bridge has probably been here for years. No matter how old it looks, it's survived storms, heatwaves and all kinds of weather. There's no reason it won't survive me.

"It'll be fine," I whisper, stepping onto the first plank.

Giving myself no time to panic, I quickly move onto the next one, working my way across as fast as my shaking legs allow.

"Addie! What the hell are you doing! Get back here!" Grant booms, his heavy steps growing louder.

"Don't follow!" I scream. The panic I'm trying hard to suppress is clear in my voice. "Stop!"

"Shit! Baby, this doesn't look safe! Get back here!"

"Don't look down, just don't look down," I chant, my heart pounding an anxious rhythm as the wooden planks groan beneath my feet. "It's not that far. Just a little further. Just a few more seconds."

The coarse ropes cut into my palms as I grip tighter, each creak and sway tightening the knot in my stomach. I focus on the opposite end, ignoring the dizzying drop beneath.

I'm halfway across. My pulse roars in my ears when a plank gives way, snapping with an echo that resonates across the canyon.

My foot goes through.

I drop to my knee with a scream, clutching the ropes so hard my palms sting.

"Addie!" Grant booms. "Hold on, I'm coming!"

"No!" I cry out, maneuvering my leg back through the hole. "It's not stable! Stay where you are!"

"Oh my God, Audrey!" my mother shrills in the distance. "What on earth are you doing?! Get back here!"

A look down sends my heart into my throat. The river looks much further down than I initially judged. I cling to the ropes, listening to its loud roar, my fingers white-knuckled.

I'm stuck. No way in hell I'll move now. What if the other planks give way as I try to cross? What if the rope snaps?

The sickening swinging makes things even worse. My heart feels like it might hammer through my ribcage, a tidal wave of panic surging through me, threatening to pull me under like the river below will when I fall.

With a shaking hand, I fumble for the front of my dress, retrieving my phone. It feels like a lead weight as I pull it out, the bridge swaying with my every move. My breathing comes in shallow gasps, the pounding rush in my ears drowning out everything else.

I blink against the tears threatening to spill over, the metallic taste of blood thick in my mouth. I bit my lip, or maybe my cheek. I find Colt's number, dial, and press the phone to my ear but, as the first ring echoes, the bridge swings under Grant's weight as he steps onto the first plank.

"No!" I scream, and the phone slips from my grasp. "Don't come closer!"

"Okay, okay, calm down. I'm here, pumpkin. I'll help," Grant says, soft and pleading, as he drops to his knees at the edge of the bridge. "Come here, you can do it..." He pulls his phone out, switching the flashlight on and making me realize the sun has officially set.

TWENTY-SIX

Colt

BY THE TIME HENRY AND I reach the cliff, it's dark outside. We're tearing through trees, guided by voices from the west.

"Come on, pumpkin, you can do it. It's not that far," Grant coaxes, his tone chilling me to the bone.

I can't see them, but he sounds so fucking scared my throat tightens.

"No!" Addie yelps, her voice echoing through the dense forest. "Don't get on the bridge! It'll snap!"

"It'll be fine, I promise. You need to calm down. I'll come and get you, just don't—"

"Shut up! Shut up!"

Henry and I break into a sprint as we cross the tree line. We emerge on top of the hill, the bridge looming in the distance. There are people on both sides, everyone using the flashlights on their phones to illuminate Addie.

She sits halfway across, clinging to the ropes, her cheeks wet with tears, body shaking so hard it swings the bridge. The motion only freaks her out more.

Grant's on the other side, down on his knees as he beckons Addie over. He inches closer, poised to get her, but Addie screams again, panic seizing her mind.

"Do *not* get on the bridge!" I can hear she's trying to hold onto control, but her voice cracks so much it's obvious she's failing.

She's too frightened to think clearly. Her cheeks are white like dough, eyes big. The bridge isn't long. Thirty, maybe forty feet across, the drop about fifty.

Olympic divers jump from thirty-three feet. It's doable, but I doubt Addie's in the right mind to think about body positioning in case anything goes wrong.

“Get the helicopter, you knobhead!” she wails, jerking her hand at Grant. The sudden movement swings the bridge harder. A bone-chilling shriek breaks from her chest, the sound ripping me wide fucking open. She clings to the ropes, eyes squeezed tight. “It’s your fault I’m here!”

“Oh please, darling, stop making such a scene,” her mother says.

Grant swings her way. I can’t see his face in the dark, but his tone proves that, in this moment, we’re on the same page.

“You’re not helping, Victoria. Can’t you see she’s scared?” A beam of light from someone’s phone catches him as he turns back to Addie, his mouth parted in shock, face paler than fucking pale. “Come on, pumpkin, it’s not that far. Just don’t look down. You can do it, I promise. You’ll be fine.”

He doesn’t sound like he believes what he’s saying. Coaxing and begging won’t get her moving. Grant’s tone doesn’t evoke any sense of safety or trust.

He sounds as panicked as she is. He’s confirming her fears, making it clear the bridge isn’t safe and she’s stuck.

No wonder Addie doesn’t trust him to keep her safe.

“Addie!” Henry booms, overtaking me. “Hold on! I’ll get you off there!”

“No!” she screams, shaking like a leaf in the wind. “Don’t get on the bridge!”

I catch up when he’s two steps away from barreling onto the flimsy planks and yank him back by the collar of his shirt, almost knocking him ass-first to the ground.

“I’m sorry, but...” I point at a plaque nailed to the wooden pole supporting the bridge. “It says one person at a time. The ropes might not hold both of you.”

I don’t mention that, by the look of things, this bridge hasn’t been used in years. The greenery surrounding the cliff is undisturbed, no trace of footprints or worn paths on either side.

Henry straightens his shirt, dread welling in his eyes. I pinch my lips, the distressed whimpers coming from Addie driving me half fucking insane.

Showing her I'm worried won't help.

She needs to know I'm in control. That I can get her across safely. But it'll be a façade. Inside, I'm so scared my heart's leaping out of my chest.

I can't fucking reach her...

"What are you waiting for?!" Addie yells at Grant again. "Get the helicopter, you daft git! Lift me out of here!" Then she turns to me, too abruptly, making the bridge lurch violently. "Where the hell have you been?! Don't just stand there like an idiot! *Do something!*"

"Watch your mouth," I snap, marshaling my rising fear. "Screaming and crying won't help. Are you hurt?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Grant yells. "Don't talk to her like that! How is that *helping*?!"

Henry places a firm hand on my shoulder. "I don't like him, but I like your tone even less."

I turn my back to Addie, lowering my voice. "She's scared, Henry. If I show her I'm scared, she'll panic more. She needs to believe I'm in control, that I can get her across. You need to trust me on this."

He narrows his eyes, his jaw working in small circles before he nods.

"I asked you a question," I tell Addie, taking a firm stance at the edge of the bridge so I can grab her as soon as she's close enough. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes! I'm scratched, bruised, tired, thirsty and—"

"You know that's not what I'm asking. Focus, Audrey. Yes or no. Are you hurt?"

She doesn't answer, rubbing her face against her shoulder in an effort to wipe her tears away. She looks down, and her

grip tightens on the ropes she can't let go of, prompting fresh tears to trickle down her cheeks.

"Eyes. On. *Me*." I emphasize each word. "Right *now*."

There's a pause in her whimpers as her head snaps my way, eyebrows raised, breath caught in her throat. "I-I'm... I'm not hurt. Not badly."

"Good girl." The praise pulls her attention more my way. Her focus sharpens as she angles her body toward me.

"She's not a dog!" Grant booms, jumping to his feet. "Don't talk to her like that!"

Grating my teeth, I ignore the ass-kisser. "You know the bridge might not hold two people, Addie," I continue, my eyes not leaving hers, "and there are too many trees to bring a helicopter in. You need to walk."

She bites her bottom lip, shutting her eyes. "I-I can't move. I can't, I—"

"Eyes, Audrey," I urge with the same impatient, crude voice I used to get her on her knees. "You can and you will. You trust me. You'll do exactly as I say. Start with three deep breaths."

From the corner of my eye, I spot Grant testing the first plank, leaning half his body's weight on it. He mutters something under his breath, taking the first step.

"Either you turn back, or you'll get another black eye to match as soon as I can reach your face, and this time, you'll lose your teeth," I warn, the protective instinct surging through me. "Don't fucking test me."

Victoria gasps but seeing that her daughter's finally stopped sobbing, I think she's willing to give my methods a try.

She doesn't like me. That much is known. She has way too much to say about Addie's life choices, too, but despite having a weird way of showing it, she does care about her daughter.

She grips Grant's arm, shaking her head to keep him from crossing the bridge and possibly tumbling himself and Addie into the river.

"You got halfway across," I continue, focusing back on Addie. "You've been sitting there for however long, and you're fine. The bridge is safe. Tell me you understand that."

Looking at the state of the construction, I doubt it's safe, but it's held her this far, so it can't be as bad as it looks.

Instead of words, Addie takes another long pause, feeding off whatever strength she finds in my eyes.

With a pinch of her lips, she nods once.

"Good. You have two options. Either you crawl to me, or you walk. But before you say you'd rather crawl, remember that bridge will swing more if you're on all fours."

"It'll swing if I get up," she points out, her voice as brittle as those ropes look.

"Only for a moment. If you're crawling, I won't be able to grab your hand as soon as I can reach, so you'll have to crawl all the way."

There's another reason I want her to stand. If the ropes give in, she has a much higher chance of surviving the drop if she's vertical.

Her assessing eyes search the space between us, calculating the distance, and then her trembling hand lets go of the rope before she reaches out as far as she can. I do the same, showing her the gap between the tips of our fingers is less than fifteen feet.

I think she knows that once she grabs my hand, she'll be safe because the next thing I know, she looks me right in my eyes, a sense of determination peeking through the fear.

"I'll... I'll walk." She swallows hard, flexes her fingers, and bracing for the worst, rises to her feet.

The bridge sways out to the side.

Addie's whimpers almost fucking gut me. Hiding how scared I am, how much I want to have her safe in my arms *right fucking now* might be the hardest thing I've ever tried to do.

"Okay, now what?" she wails, standing on wobbly legs, clutching the ropes either side. "What if I fall? What if it snaps?"

"You're panicking again."

And I'm panicking with her.

The ropes holding the bridge are old, frayed in places. Even if everyone around grabs hold, there's no way we can keep the bridge together if the ropes give in.

Adjusting my stance, I get in position. It might look like I'm getting a better footing, but in reality, I'm bracing to jump.

"It won't snap," I say firmly.

"What if it does?!"

Then I'm going down with you.

"We'll have a problem if you don't stop acting out. Eyes on me and *walk*."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, I..." She swallows a gulp of air, taking the first step. "I'm walking."

"It's all about balance. Imagine you're walking a tightrope with a book on your head."

Her back straightens on cue. "I did that before. My etiquette tutor called it posture practice," she says, distracting herself as she takes another step.

The distraction isn't magic, unfortunately. With every small step and corresponding lurch of the bridge, Addie pales further, her whimpers growing in strength when, four steps in, she hits an insecure plank.

The cracking sound it makes as it starts to take her weight has my stomach flipping.

“Not that one,” I say, still managing to hold onto my commanding voice. “Take a wider step. You’re doing so good. Keep going.”

Every squeak of the ropes and groan of the planks accelerates my heartbeat. No one around speaks, as they watch Addie taking tentative steps toward me. She’s trembling like a scared rabbit but presses forward, one foot after another.

“Almost here.” I lean out as far as I can. “Grab me.”

As soon as she clasps my hand, I tug with all I’ve got. The force sends her straight into my arms and I spin her around, away from the edge. Relief rattles through us simultaneously, and Addie’s crying again.

“You’re okay,” I whisper, weaving my fingers into her hair. “You’re okay. Fuck, baby, you scared the hell out of me.” I curve her into my chest, tucking her head under my chin. “Shh, you’re okay. I’ve got you.”

She nods, swallowing gulps of air. Fisting my t-shirt, she clings to me so hard I feel her galloping pulse as if it’s my own.

Maybe it is. My heart isn’t far off snapping my ribs.

It takes a minute before I tune into anything beyond Addie. More people arrived while I was focused solely on getting her across. Henry takes over, breaking my hold on his daughter and pulling her into his arms. I have half a mind to knock him the fuck out. I don’t want to let her go.

Once she’s calmed down enough to stop shaking, she shoves her hand down the front of her dress, retrieving the yellow flag, a small, exhausted smile on her lips.

“How many did we get?”

Henry pulls out the red and green flags Marco and I got, and Tia waves the blue one.

Addie’s smile widens as she gathers them all, holding her hand out for me to tie them around her wrist like bracelets. “I get to keep you for another day.”

Can you keep me for the rest of your life?

TWENTY-SEVEN

Colt

THE *SERENITY* TAKES TO THE OCEAN once everyone's back onboard. The final stretch of the trip. This time tomorrow, Addie and I will be on the plane back to LA.

I take her to our suite, having carried her almost a mile on my back from the top of the hill. Cuts and bruises mark her dirt-stained legs. She's got a small cut on her cheek where a branch must've struck her and she bit through her lip while crying on the bridge.

"I'll draw you a bath," I say, setting her on the plush couch, having to force myself to let go of her.

"It's okay, I can do it. I'm sorry I freaked out like that."

"Don't apologize." Crossing the room, I grab a bottle of bubbly from the cooler. "Just promise you won't ever do that again." I crouch by her legs, holding a flute out to her.

Her expression grows serious as she reaches her small hand to touch my face, ghosting the line of my jaw in great concentration. "You didn't sound worried when you were telling me what to do, but you were... weren't you?"

I lean into her touch, craving contact, forgetting everything I promised myself about taking things slow. "Never more. Those ropes... those planks..." I let all the air out of my lungs, finally understanding why my brothers are so shaky about anything concerning their girls or kids. When you care about someone, you never stop worrying, and today, I had every reason to worry. "I couldn't risk walking across to you, but if you fell... I'd have followed."

Her eyes widen a little, lips parting. "What? Why?"

"So I could hold you in the best way to not hurt yourself too much."

Her fingers weave in my hair, gently scraping my scalp. "That was a hundred-foot drop, no one could survive that."

“You were scared, Addie,” I say, brushing a lone lock of hair over her ear. “It seemed worse than it was. Fifty feet tops.” I bring her hand to my lips, dragging my mouth over her knuckles, the restless anxiety inside ebbing away now that she’s safe, but the feelings that have been blooming since day one long for a way out. “I’d catch you,” I whisper, convinced it’s true no matter how irrational. “I’ll always catch you, baby.”

A small smile touches her eyes as she wiggles her hand free to cup my face and plants a soft, lingering kiss on my lips.

It’s not enough. I need more. I need everything. All of her... mine. Always mine.

Fuck taking things slow.

Fuck downplaying what’s happening between us.

There’s no way in heaven or hell I’ll let this girl go. No way I can keep acting like I’m not falling in love with her so fast my head spins. I run my tongue along her bottom lip then sink deeper, tasting her sweet mouth while my heart swells till I think it’ll burst through my chest.

She gives in, her delicate fingers cupping my face as I lift her off the couch and into my arms. Her legs wrap around my waist, and her thumbs brush the soft skin under my eyes, our lips working in a slow, heated rhythm.

It’s too soon to say it. I’d scare her off if I vocalized how much she means to me already, how I can’t fucking imagine not being around her, but gestures... that’s a different story. I can show her. I can make her feel the three words dancing at the tip of my tongue.

Those eight letters I’ve waited too long to say.

I drop her on the bed, following her down, and she wraps her arms round me, squeezing until there’s no space between us.

This isn’t about control, so when she tugs my t-shirt off, I help, then lift her dress over her head and dive lower, kissing a vertical line from her navel up the valley of her breasts.

A soft moan fills the air, roping me into her more.

The room's too dark for my liking. I'd install stage reflectors all around to see every detail of her. Desperate for more skin-on-skin contact, I flip us over, propping my head on the pillows, Addie's face an inch from mine. With one arm curved around her back, I drape her leg over my middle, pulling her half onto me, enough that her clit rests directly over my hard cock, still hidden in my pants. I bend her leg at the knee, giving myself easy access.

She clings to me, nuzzles closer like she craves the contact more than I do. Taking her mouth in a deep kiss, I skim my hand down her back, mapping the sweet curve of her butt until I reach the mark, groaning at how soft and warm she is.

Wet, swollen... ready for me even though I've not done a thing to get her this aroused. No need for foreplay. She's dripping, her hunger matching mine, but I won't deny myself the pleasure of making her come when she clings to me like this. Like she never wants to be anywhere else.

"Mine," I coo against her lips, drawing lazy circles on her pussy, my fingers soaked within seconds. "Look at me, Addie."

She opens her eyes, lips parted, and a soft moan hits my ears when I dip one finger inside to slowly stroke her G spot.

"Kiss me, baby," I whisper, nudging her nose with mine.

She inches closer, taking control the one way she can as her lips devour mine. There's so much intensity in her. So much raw emotion as her tongue meets mine, stroking, teasing, proving how much she wants and needs me.

It's fucking addictive.

She is addictive. Tempting. Distracting.

The sounds she makes while I slip my finger in and out, taking my sweet time. How she grinds into me, her hips canting in small circles as she rubs her clit over my cock...

She's perfect. Mine. A sight to fucking see.

“Colt,” she mewls, breaking the kiss. She hides her face in my neck, her whole body quivering. “Oh, oh, I—”

The rest of the sentence is just a symphony of sweet, delirious moans and gasps as she soaks my hand, her hips working harder as she wrings out every ounce of orgasmic pleasure, taking what she needs.

“Good girl, don’t stop. Give me one more.”

She gently scrapes her teeth over my pulse point, then draws a sharp breath when I add a second finger, working her faster and deeper. I hold her tighter, both arms flush to her sides, limiting her movement.

It’s a trap.

She can’t roll off. She can’t move her arms. All she can do is work those hips and take whatever I give her.

And I’ll give her everything she ever asks for.

She loves being at my mercy. I can tell by how wet she is. How loud she moans despite biting the pillow by my head. How eagerly she rubs her clit over my cock, soaking my pants.

“Almost there,” I whisper, working her faster when her walls start to pulse. “Don’t hold it. Let go, Addie.”

And she does, coming undone again so hard her legs shake. I drink her moans, holding her close as we kiss.

“I need a second to catch my breath,” she murmurs, skimming her lips across my jawline while I pull my fingers out. “You’re too good at this.”

“No breaks.”

I strip, then flip her onto her stomach and push her legs together, crossing her ankles. Wrapping her long, brown locks around my wrist, I tug until she arches her back enough to dent her spine. Positioning myself at her entrance, I thrust myself inside, deep and demanding. Addie lets out a satisfied cry, gripping the sheets with both hands.

I lean over her, my lips roaming her back, shoulders, and neck as my pace quickens, my moves rhythmical but fast and

hard. She gasps, arching back more.

Her lips part, letting out short moans every time I drive into her. I love this position, the angle, and how tight and wet she is. She rises on her elbows, pushing her sweet ass a bit higher when I let go of her hair, knotting our fingers again.

Locking her in a purpose-built cage of my arms, my hips move back and forth, the angle letting me in so fucking deep I can barely keep my orgasm in check.

“Oh God,” she mewls.

“There it is.” Satisfied, I hit the same spot over and over again. “Now. Come for me.”

Our bodies gleam with a mist of sweat when she starts pulsating around me, and I speed up, knowing damn well it’ll prolong her orgasm. She’s still trembling when I help her into a sitting position. “Turn around and kneel.”

I love it when her legs wobble as she complies, kneeling with her hands firmly on the headrest for support.

“Good. I’ll show you something. Just follow my lead.” I move myself up and push slowly into her.

She gasps, squeezing her thighs together, making the tight space even tighter. This position lets me sink deeper than any other, but it’s not just how deep I can get; it’s the angle that matters. She’ll find out why in a moment.

“One day soon,” I whisper in her ear, buried to the hilt. “I’ll want your ass, too. I’ll buy you a pretty silver plug, and you’ll wear it all day so you’re ready for me in the evening.”

“Okay,” she moans as I slowly pull back. “Can you buy one with a cute tail?”

“Kinky,” I chuckle. “Hands behind your back.” I tie her wrists with my fingers when she obeys. “Lean back with me, like you’re about to sit.” I move my other hand to her front, holding her flush to me, and grasp her neck.

“Oh God... this feels so, so good. Too good, I won’t last long like this. I’m too sensitive. I’m already so close, and—”

“Shh,” I tut against her. “You’re doing great. I know this is intense, so I’ll go slow. Get you used to the angle. I only want one like this, okay? Just one, and then you can take a bath.”

She nods, trembling softly when I pull back to make my first thrust, then shuddering with every stroke hitting and dragging along her G spot. I keep a steady tempo, counting to ten, then up the speed a little.

“How’s that, baby? What color are you?”

She arches back, resting her head on my shoulder. “Green.”

“That’s good. Now I’ll show you how fast you can come like this. Hold onto me.”

I release her hands, letting her grip my forearm that’s wedged between the flesh of her breasts, and I let the hunger inside me take the reins. With every next move, I squeeze her neck a little harder, loving how her skin flushes pink.

My hips piston in and out. The faster I move, the louder she moans, her orgasm looming nearby, the need growing even though she already came three times.

I grab her hip, pull her into me harder, and hold her in place, my growls mixing with her gasps as they grow more desperate, like she can’t take it much longer.

Biting her earlobe, I hit as deep as possible, and Addie cries out, trying to wiggle her hands out of my grasp. There’s nothing more satisfying in this world than seeing and feeling the way her orgasm turns her to splinters. Her nails dig into my flesh and she throws her head back, resting it on my shoulder as she starts quaking, coming so hard I truly hope the suite is soundproof or the whole fucking yacht will hear her moan.

I hold off a bit longer, loving how her pussy spasms around my shaft, but it’s only a few seconds until I can’t stop the orgasm hitting and warm trickles of cum surge deep into her.

The most obscure thought seizes my mind, threatening to knock me off my damn feet.

Impregnated.

I wish, but she's on the pill, so there's no way in hell we just made a baby. One day. One day *soon* because she is *it* for me.

Mine.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Colt

CIGARETTE IN HAND, I sit on our balcony, staring at the open ocean. Tonight's not going according to plan.

Instead of taking a long bubble bath with Addie like she asked me to once her breathing stabilized, I got caught in a whirlwind of work. Conor called with an emergency just as Addie's foot broke through the bubbles, so instead of soaking with her, kissing her shoulder, and holding her close, I've spent the last two hours sorting out contractors to fix a gas failure at my Pomona cocktail bar.

Now, all I'm waiting for is one more phone call and I can join Addie out on the main deck where she's having dinner with the rest of the engagement party. The *last* dinner on the yacht.

To kill time, I check the messages in the Hayes group chat. Nico sent a picture of Melody playing in the garden with Conor's twins. Vivienne and Mia are in the pool with what looks like iced coffee.

I scroll further up, checking what I've missed over the past week of barely opening the chat, and find more pictures of my brothers with their families.

I toss the phone aside when a knock reverberates through the apartment. Addie knows the pin, so it could be her father, or maybe Grant, ready to spew a few shitty lines because I threatened to knock his teeth out.

Better if it's not him. My foul mood might cost him more than just his teeth. But as I fling the door open, neither man stands out in the corridor.

It's Addie's mother.

In an elegant evening dress with a crystal glass of bourbon, she looks me up and down.

"Yes?" I ask, my tone far from pleasant.

You get what you give, and Victoria's all judgmental, entitled vibes.

"I wondered why you didn't bother to show up for dinner. Have you something better to do?"

"Work," I reply drily because I'm sure Addie's already told everyone I'll be late, but it looks like Victoria still decided to check our stories match. "I'll be downstairs as soon as I can."

She tilts her chin, looking uncomfortable as she stands in the corridor. No way I'll invite her into the suite.

"I've been married to a workaholic for thirty years, Colt. I know better than to trust your word." Pinching her lips, she clears her throat. "Very well, I would've preferred to do this in front of everyone, but as you're so... *busy*, I have no choice but to thank you here."

"Thank me?"

"Obviously. While I don't care for your crude methods, rude tone, or choice of words, you did help Audrey cross the bridge safely. Contrary to what she thinks, and undoubtedly told you, I care about my daughter, so... thank you."

Well, well, well, so she does have a shred of decency.

Who knew? Not me.

"No need to thank me."

She nods, her features softening. "Then let me give you a piece of advice instead. You're certainly not my favorite person, but you've proved today that my daughter's important to you. Unfortunately, Audrey's been finding ways to defy me for years. Moving to California, her degree, those animals she adopts, and now... *you*. You're genuinely invested, maybe falling in love, but don't get your hopes up. You're nothing more than a means to an end."

Not waiting for my reply, she gives me a pitiful look, turns, and marches off, every move gracious and confident, her long navy dress swishing around her ankles.

Words crowd the tip of my tongue, begging to be let out, but starting an argument with Victoria Weston seems counterproductive. It's not like I could change her mind, so what's the point in trying?

Wasted effort.

Closing the door with a quiet click, I almost break my leg sprinting across the suite to my ringing phone. Ten minutes later, when the conversation ends and everything's sorted, I'm finally free to enjoy the last hours of my unplanned vacation.

I leave my phone on the balcony table before heading down the corridor toward the staircase up to the main deck. Hushed voices halt me in my tracks at the end, and I immediately recognize Addie's resigned tone.

"I don't want to marry him, Dad," she sighs, clearly embarrassed about something because her voice has that squeaky quality it always does when she's ashamed. "Mom ignores everything I say," she continues. "I thought if I showed up with a boyfriend, she'd stop insisting on Grant."

A cool sweat breaks out on my back. She's lasted a *week* playing pretend, and this is when she breaks?

I can't see her, but I can tell she's at the bottom of the stairs, voice hush-hush and soft like she doesn't want anyone to overhear. She should've hid in the library or the conference room downstairs.

"I figured it out the moment your mother told me you weren't coming alone," Henry says, sounding amused.

"What? How?"

"I know you, sweetheart. I know you hate Grant, I know your mother drives you insane, and I know you've told me about every boyfriend you've ever had... just not Colt. It all smelled fishy from the start."

"I'm sorry I lied... I didn't think it through," she chuckles, but there's nothing happy in that sound. It's like she quit, like she's so fucking over this whole situation.

I have the urge to fly downstairs and hide her in my arms. I also have the urge to bend her over my lap and spank her ass for not giving me a heads-up about spilling her guts. It'll be hard saving face in front of her father now.

“So?” Henry urges, his boots shifting on the polished floor. “Is it just Grant you don’t want to marry, or don’t you plan on getting married at all?” He waits for a reply, but she’s silent. “I’m glad Grant won’t end up my son-in-law, Audrey, but I don’t think you should put a cross through the institution altogether.”

Another long, tense pause that has my palms sweating.

“It’s not got much that speaks in its favor,” she finally says. “All the married women I know are miserable. I don’t want a husband, Dad. I want to finish school and open a veterinary clinic. A safe place for abandoned injured animals. I want to travel the world and make my own choices.”

Her words drop on me like a guillotine. My chest constricts. The date, my future plans, the hope I felt when I held her in my arms two hours ago, the feelings infecting my system... it all dies a sad death. My dreams brutally severed.

There won’t be any dates. No future. This week is all I’m getting. Seven days of happiness abruptly pulled from under my feet.

My mind’s reeling, my stomach in knots, and I feel physically fucking sick, ready to double over and throw up. An echo of what she said the night we met comes back like the recoil from a gunshot.

“I don’t want to get married. I don’t want kids.”

She volunteered that information. She never lied...

How the fuck did I blank it out? How did I let myself fall for her so fast while *knowing* this significant piece of information?

“And does Colt know where you stand?” Henry asks warily. “He’s very... realistic in playing his role, Audrey. Are you sure he’s just pretending?”

Another sad, resigned chuckle bursts from her chest. “We barely know each other, Dad. I met him on the Friday before we came here. We’re basically strangers. There’s been no reason to talk about marriage and kids. I mean... it’s all just a big ruse.”

It takes me a disgraceful amount of time to hear, process, and accept what she’s just admitted. It’s as far from the truth as possible for me. Sure, we’ve not known each other long, but we’ve spent every waking hour of the past week together.

I know more about her than any other woman in my life, my sister included. I feel like I’ve known Addie for years, not days. She’s told me about her past, her family, her goals, and dreams. I know every detail, the answers to all the first-date questions.

And the things she hasn’t told me?

I know them as well.

I know her fears, how she writes with her right hand but favors her left when holding a glass. I know which smiles are genuine, when she’s confused, sad, and annoyed, even if she’s hiding it.

But while I’m well-versed in the ways of Addie, I purposely ignored the main thing standing in our way. In *my* way.

Now I think about it, I can’t believe my own fucking stupidity. The only reason I’m here is because she doesn’t want to get married. She doesn’t want to be a wife or start a family.

The three things I crave.

No matter how much I like her, how deep I already fell, how much I feel for her... she’s *not* it. No matter how much I want her to be, she’s not my forever.

My pulse rings in my ears, stomach dropping to my fucking knees. She’s not mine. Never was, but it feels like I lost her. Like I lost someone I’ve waited for too long. Like the light at the end of the tunnel just flickered out.

Her words bounce around my head as I back out.

It's all just a big ruse.

We're basically strangers.

Strangers.

Strangers.

Strangers.

Fuck. Who knew words could cut so deep?

In a trance, I get back to our suite and close the door, squeezing the back of my neck, the huge space like a luxurious prison cell... suffocating.

Addie's perfume lingers in the air, her clothes hang in the open walk-in closet. Her things litter the space and it's like I'm surrounded. She's not here, but she's everywhere.

Soon enough, she'll come back to find out what's taking me so long. She'll smile, joke, change into pajamas, and sleep beside me all night. So close yet out of reach. She'll nuzzle her button nose into the crook of my neck, breathing me in like she has every night since we snapped and went the distance.

Her hair will tickle my skin. The peach and sugar smell of her will taunt me just as much as her warm, soft body. She'll sleep safely tucked against my side where I wish she could be every night, but she won't be mine.

She never was mine.

I can't do this. I can't go out and sit through another meal, pretending to be her boyfriend while my insides threaten mutiny. She'll figure out something's wrong. She'll ask questions I can't deal with. Not while I'm coming apart at the seams, losing my fucking purpose.

Not while this heavy disappointment threatens to crush my lungs, bones, and mind.

I wish I never fucking came here...

God, this is *insanity*. We just met! She wasn't wrong about that and while I could get on board with the premise and

force my heart to slow the fuck down, there's no denying we want completely different things.

We'll never work. Not how I want.

I need space. Time to clear my head. Time to take apart those feelings converging inside me before it's too late.

Maybe it already is, but it's worth a try. The yacht's huge. There's a library, a cinema room, arcades, swimming pools, even a gym. I change into swim shorts and a t-shirt, my mind set on hiding away on the third deck.

I open the door and almost tackle a waiter to the ground. He ducks at the last moment, saving the tray of food from tumbling to the floor.

"I'm sorry, I didn't expect anyone here," I say.

"No problem. Miss Audrey thought you might be hungry. Were you on your way to join the others? Should I take this back to the table for you?"

"No, it's fine." I grab the tray. "Thank you."

If he's wondering what I'm up to, he doesn't let it show, bowing slightly as he walks away. Food, no matter how appetizing, is the last thing on my mind. I doubt I'd stomach one bite, so I leave the tray on the breakfast bar and head out, changing my mind about the swim before I reach the elevator.

Since I'm seriously lacking endorphins, and working out always gets them flowing, I hit the gym.

I start with weights, and once my arms get too weak, I move to the treadmill. Addie's in my head no matter how hard I push her out, so after two hours, I lock myself in the steam sauna before taking a cold shower.

None of which distracts me. Physically, I'm beat, but my mind's going a million miles an hour, imagining everything I won't have with her.

It's my head that needs a distraction.

I hit the cinema room, choosing from a huge selection of movies as I settle onto the couch at the back. One of the crew

members materializes before the opening credits.

“Can I offer you a drink or any snacks, sir?” he asks, startling the living shit out of me. “My apologies. I should’ve made my presence known before speaking.”

“No, it’s... it’s fine,” I say, calming my racing heart. “I didn’t expect anyone to be here.”

“Oh, I wasn’t. I was watching the camera system, saw you enter, and thought I could be of assistance. Glass of whiskey? Popcorn?”

“A bottle of water, if you don’t mind.”

He bobs his head, disappearing behind the personnel-only door. Five minutes later, he wheels in a cart filled with beverages and snacks.

“In case you’re feeling peckish,” he explains, parking it beside me. “Enjoy the movie.”

Maybe if it was porn... though I’d probably imagine Addie and *nope*. Not going there.

Like all Marvel movies, this one is action-packed and pulls me out of the tumult in my head. Once the end credits roll in, I stay in my seat, pondering the idea of starting another, but one glance at my wristwatch tells me it’s past one in the morning. I should get some sleep ahead of whatever fun-filled task Amara’s planned for tomorrow.

Addie’s probably asleep by now. If I don’t make any noise, I can crash on the couch and avoid questions. Halfway up the stairs, I change my mind and end up on the third deck. Purple lighting illuminates the infinity pool and its adjacent seating areas. There’s a pop-up bar to the left, and the same man who found me in the cinema finds me here.

Looks like they have staff working around the clock.

He sets a bottle of water and a fresh towel on a nearby lounge. The same lounge where Addie came undone, panting my name while I kissed her neck.

I shove the thought aside, wishing I could file my memories of her far, far away and never see them again.

“A glass of whiskey could help with insomnia,” the staff member offers, his tone light.

“One won’t hurt,” I admit.

“Coming right up.”

I dive under, swimming the length of the pool until I perch my elbows against the glass edge. The ocean gleams before me, reflecting the thousands of stars speckling the night sky. Away from land and artificial light pollution, the sky here is darker, the stars brighter.

I run a hand through my wet hair, raking it back. It’s so fucking peaceful out here. My problems seem insignificant, the emotional turmoil a distant hum at the back of my mind.

Not for long.

The waiter comes over, crouching by the edge to pass me a crystal glass filled with way more than two fingers of whiskey. Five at least. I guess he can tell I need more than a regulation shot to numb my head.

As soon as his footsteps retreat, I hear different ones. Lighter, softer... unmistakable.

“Basically strangers.”

Bullshit.

I know her so well I don’t have to look over my shoulder to know who’s padding toward me barefoot.

“Hey,” Addie says. I hear her sit on the tiles and drop her legs in the water. “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

I keep my eyes on the calm waves, but even without looking at her, the smell of peaches and sugar clouds my head.

“I felt like swimming. How was dinner?”

“Lonely,” she sighs, with a twinge of sadness. “Are you mad at me?”

Now I turn, taking her in. Gorgeous. So fucking gorgeous, in a short, light-blue nightdress, her hair braided and thrown over one shoulder, eyes big and clear.

“Why would I be mad?”

“I don’t know. You didn’t come out and you’ve been hiding somewhere all evening... what’s wrong?”

A better question would be *what’s right?*

“I’m not mad. I had to work.”

“This long?”

“One phone call led to another, and another—”

“You’re lying,” she cuts in, her voice small. “I came to check if you enjoyed dinner a half-hour after I sent it. You were gone, but your phone... you left it on the balcony.” She inhales a harsh breath. “You weren’t working. You just didn’t want to spend time with me, and I was alone, listening to my mother’s stupid comments and Grant’s innuendos.”

What am I supposed to say? She’s not wrong but fleshing it out won’t help. I walk to the opposite edge, downing a big gulp of whiskey as I go, then haul myself out.

“Fine, I needed a few hours alone, okay?” I drape a towel over my shoulders, heading back inside. “I’ll behave tomorrow.”

“That’s it?” she scoffs. “You’ve got nothing else to say? Just *I’ll behave?*”

“I’m tired, Addie. I’m off to bed.”

Or *couch*. I haven’t decided yet.

I’m perfectly aware I’m acting like an asshole, but save for stealing Grant’s helicopter, I don’t have much choice. Alienating Addie is a better option than spewing the truth.

Her footsteps splash after me, but she doesn’t start talking until we’re in the privacy of our suite.

“What the hell is your problem, Colt? Why are you acting like this? You say you’re not mad, but I can tell something’s bothering you. Tell me what I did wrong!”

“Nothing,” I emphasize.

It's true. She did nothing wrong. Not one fucking thing. She didn't lie or lead me by the nose. She was crystal clear about my role on this fancy yacht. She was crystal clear about not wanting any of the things I've yearned for and what did I do?

I blanked it all out. No one to blame but myself for this mess. A mess I should've fucking foreseen but this girl put me under a spell at Express Dates and hasn't let go since.

There were clues. Blatant, obvious, glaring clues: when I fell asleep with a shit-eating grin, knowing she was just behind my bedroom wall; when we spent hours talking, preparing for this trip and I couldn't stop asking questions, hungry for every scrap of information; when I kissed her head for the first time and my world tilted on its axis.

I should've known I'd fall for her.

And I should've fucking nipped it in the bud because she wants a life without a family.

"I don't want to get married. I don't want kids."

She fucking *told* me and what did I do?

I.

Blanked.

It.

All.

Out.

"You did nothing wrong," I repeat, entering the bathroom.

"Then what happened? We were fine before I left for dinner, and now you're acting so... so *cold*."

I make a show of looking around, the veins in my neck ticking wildly. "No audience to impress."

Tears well in her eyes, but she wipes them away, adamantly keeping her composure. "Don't push me away. Talk

to me. Whatever I did that upset you, I'm sorry, okay? I thought we were friends. Friends talk."

My head snaps to her, anger gushing through me, uncontrollable. That's a step too goddamn far.

"Friends? *Friends*, Addie? Really? That's funny. I don't think you used that word when you told your dad we've been lying through our teeth the whole time. I believe the word you used was *strangers*." I swallow hard, briefly closing my eyes to get a hold of myself. "You can't act like I mean something to you when you wake up, call me a stranger a few hours later, and suddenly decide we're friends."

Her lips part, then close, then part again. No words. She has no answer. No comeback. Of course not. Looks like Victoria was right about something.

I'm nothing more than a means to an end.

"Get out, Addie. I need a shower."

Tears slide down her cheeks as she stares at me wide-eyed, worrying her bottom lip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I just—" She chokes, wiping her eyes, a sight I can barely stomach. "I didn't mean it, I swear."

Her voice breaks, and along with it, every cell in my body screams. I can't handle this. I'm fuming, disappointed, dying a slow death knowing she won't be mine, but my explosive cocktail of emotions ebbs, leaving behind just the need to hold her, and make her feel better.

My heart and mind go to war as fresh tears wet her cheeks. We have one day left. Less than twenty-four hours before we part ways. That's all. One more day of memories I'll relive for years to come.

As much as I want to storm out and start licking my wounds, my heart tells me I'll regret that sooner than I think. It's not her fault our goals don't align. I can't be angry she doesn't want the same future I do. We have a different outlook on life, but neither's wrong.

"You're not a stranger," she whispers, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "I don't know why I said that. I was

just playing this... *us* down in front of my dad because I can't wrap my head around it yet. We happened so fast, Colt. Dad wouldn't understand. Not now. In time, yes, but we've only known each other a week, and even I don't understand how that's enough to fall in—"

"Don't say it," I plead, pinching the bridge of my nose. There's nothing I want to hear more, but walking away from her will be that much harder if she says it.

I cross the room, sit on the bed, and hide my face in my hands. It takes me two solid minutes to align my thoughts. Her unspoken admission hangs between us, testing my resolve.

I try to imagine a life where she won't take my surname. A life without kids.

I try flushing my dreams down the drain just so I can hold onto her, but the idea of having a family sprouted roots a long time ago and those roots reach deep into my bones.

There are a hundred things I'd give up for Addie. Work, lifestyle, racing, my house, cars, my business. I'd move halfway across the world if she asked. I'd do so fucking much to give us a fighting chance, but everyone has their limit.

Putting a cross through starting a family is mine.

"Talk to me," Addie utters, sitting down beside me. "Tell me what's going on..." She moves her hand to the back of my head, gently scraping my scalp. "What are you thinking?"

I lift my head, meeting her teary eyes and hope comes from out of fucking nowhere to flood my system. "Did you mean the other thing you told your dad?"

Tonight wasn't the first time she's boldly stated that marriage and kids have no place in her life, but... a drowning man will grasp any straw. Asking the question and hearing the answer can't hurt me more than I'm already hurting.

And I'd rather regret checking than never asking.

"About marriage and kids," I add.

Ten seconds pass before she reacts. Recognition flashes in her eyes and they lose their glow, turning dull as she drops

her hand, inching away from me.

“I meant it.” Her voice wobbles as she nervously pinches the hem of her skirt. “I guess you’re on the other side of the fence.”

I nod as a noose wraps itself around my throat and *puff* goes hope. “I’ve watched my brothers start families. Cody was the last to join the club. He married Blair two years ago, but they’ve been together longer. With every engagement, wedding, or pregnancy announcement, I’ve wanted a family of my own that much more, but the years flash by and it’s never my turn.” It’s involuntary by now... kissing her head.

One, two, and a third for good measure.

God, she feels so fucking good in my arms. She was made for me. This is where she belongs...

Maybe in a different lifetime.

“Three years ago, I was fine. I was only twenty-four, so there was no pressure on the family front, but it was getting harder to sit through my parents’ get-togethers, listening to my brothers sharing their news. One night, Mom was hosting a BBQ, and Cody made it clear I shouldn’t miss it. I was in a particularly foul mood that night, and instead of getting there on time, I got Curly to fix up another race.”

Addie stirs, arching away to look at me, but doesn’t interrupt, silently waiting for more.

“The guy I raced lost control and bumped the back of my car at north of a hundred and twenty miles an hour.”

I move her to sit beside me and get up, standing in the open balcony door with a cigarette in my mouth. Inhaling a cloud of smoke, I stare at the horizon. I’ve never told anyone about that night. I don’t think I’ll get the words out if I look Addie dead in the eye. It’s personal.

“I remember heading toward the Dodge RAM parked on the sidelines, feeling so fucking disappointed. Not scared—*Disappointed* because I hadn’t lived yet. I hadn’t been happy, but I was about to die.” I scoff, taking another drag. “I did die. For four minutes and eleven seconds.”

Addie shifts on the bed, then slowly gets up and crosses the room to where I stand. As if she's afraid I'll push her away, she cautiously slides closer, then wraps her arms around me and cuddles her cheek to the spot where my heart thumps.

"Why are you racing again?"

I throw one arm around her and mold her further into me, memorizing how she feels when she's close.

Memorizing how *I* feel.

Calm.

Composed.

I'd risk happy, but I'm far from that right now.

"I spent six months in physiotherapy, and once I was up and running, I was on a mission to find someone I could spend my life with. Someone to come home to. I went on hundreds of first dates, but nothing came of it. A year after the accident, I was still where I started. Alone." I pinch the ash off my cigarette, taking one last drag before I butt it out in the ashtray. "I never found anything that let me catch a break like racing does, so I went back."

She's silent for a long time, but it's not uncomfortable. Nothing is with Addie. Being with her is as natural as breathing.

"I don't want this to end," she whispers, holding me tighter.

But hangs in the air, unspoken. There's no point stating the obvious. We know where we stand.

Fuck. This is it. We're done. Over. The end.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, close to tears again. "I—"

"Don't apologize." Catching her chin between two fingers, I tilt her head my way. "I hate that this is where we draw the line, but don't ever apologize for what you want. You only have one life, baby. Live it how you want. Make sure *you're* happy."

I wipe the lone tear escaping her eye, but it's a Sisyphean task. It's rapidly joined by more, marking her cheeks and the end of us before we ever properly began.

TWENTY-NINE

Addie

THE MORNING SUN peeks through the curtains, casting a golden hue across the room. It warms my face but does nothing to thaw the chill surrounding my heart.

Colt's sleeping beside me, though at a distance. No contact, no cuddling. I fell asleep with my back to him so he wouldn't see the tears sliding down my cheeks.

He looks so peaceful, so untroubled, and for a moment, I'm tempted to trace my fingers along the outline of his lips one last time to memorize the feel of him. But I don't.

No need to further twist the blade.

I shift, trying to slip out from under the covers without rousing him, but his eyes open and his head turns my way, glaring at the distance between us.

"Morning," I whisper, too scared to speak up in case my voice breaks, then quickly add, "Thank you, and I'm sorry."

His jaw tightens, eyes close briefly, and then he breathes out heavily as he reaches over, pulling me into him. A slight shudder shakes me when he puts my leg over his thighs, my hand over his ribs, and my head under his chin.

"Stop apologizing," he says, kissing my head as he holds me tight. "It was the best week of my life, Addie."

I close my eyes, breathing him in. For a moment, I can almost pretend everything's okay.

Almost.

I don't move for a long time, soaking up his closeness. I don't speak either, reveling in the feel of his fingers brushing up and down my arm.

He breaks the silence after one more kiss on my head. "We should get moving. Amara won't be pleased if we're late for the last task."

I nod, pushing my hair behind my ear as I haul myself up, everything inside me rebelling against walking away from him, but one step at a time, I do.

The next few hours pass in a blur. We barely speak, lost in our heads while we eat breakfast and play the last game. It's a sack race. Simple. Silly. But neither of us have heart or head in it and—predictably—we lose.

The Miami coastline looms in the distance as noon strikes. We head back to suite seventeen to pack our suitcases in silence, chasing our own thoughts.

I steal glances at Colt, my heart aching with every folded shirt and each pair of trousers he puts away. I'm so destabilized I hardly notice when we dock. I say my goodbyes to everyone through a dense fog. I'm not sure what I say or who I say things to as I'm passed from embrace to embrace.

My heart rams in my chest louder once Colt and I descend onto the marina, Felix, a few steps ahead, pushing a trolley with our suitcases stacked high.

I'm shaking all over once we stop by the limo and the time comes to say goodbye. "I'm staying with my parents for a few more days," I mumble, forcing the words out, eyes on the ground instead of Colt's face.

My vision's blurry, tears threatening to spill, my lungs at half their normal capacity.

"That's good," he says quietly. "Your dad's missed you, and you've not had much time together this week."

I can tell he's relieved we don't have another eight hours together in awkward silence. I think he needs space as much as I do.

A lump forms in my throat, making it hard to breathe. I'm so cold, despite the summer sunshine tanning my skin. So empty inside as I climb onto my toes to kiss his lips one last time.

Just a peck. Just to remember his taste and etch the shape of his mouth into my memory.

But it's not just a peck. Colt seizes the moment, his hands cradling my face as he kisses me back, sinking deeper. It's a kiss that says everything we can't put into words. A goodbye neither one of us wants or knows how to voice.

The world fades until he pulls away, stamping a warm, firm kiss on my forehead.

This is it.

The air between us crackles with tension, unsaid words, and a universe of regret. I'm tempted to beg him to stay, throw caution to the wind, and hold onto him with everything I have, but I know that's not fair to either of us.

The finality hits me like a punch to the gut. This isn't how it was supposed to end. I hoped it would never end, but life has a way of shattering expectations.

"Take care of yourself, baby," he says, running his knuckles down my cheek.

And then he's climbing into the limo and the driver closes the door behind him. I stand there, staring at the black, tinted windows as the car pulls away, everything inside me cracking and breaking, screaming and crying.

It's not until my dad grabs my shoulders, spins me around, and hides me in his arms that I realize I'm not just crying inside.

THIRTY

Colt

Cody: Where the hell are you?!

Countless similar messages like that have flooded the chat throughout the week while I've avoided contact with everyone, throwing myself into the whirlwind of work.

I sent a message to the group chat once I landed in LA on Sunday to get them off my back. Not that it worked particularly well, given the countless messages and missed calls.

Me: Back home. Don't want to see anyone. I'll call soon.

But I haven't all week.

I've let my phone ring out whenever any of my brothers try calling, and I've kept clear of my house until it's late enough that I know they won't come knocking. I need time alone. Time to organize my head and marshal the overpowering disappointment and hurt prickling my skin.

Every day, I rise bright and early, having slept an hour or so, uncomfortable without Addie by my side. I've slept alone for twenty-seven years, but a week of her cuddling into me has rewired my brain and now I can't fucking sleep without her.

I've bought two more clubs, gone daily to every spot Nico and I own, then just either sat on the beach or driven aimlessly around the OC so I don't have to sit home alone.

I wish I could say I'm climbing out of the ditch. That life's getting better, brighter again, but the cold, harsh truth is I'm as bad today, five torturous days later, as I was on Sunday when I kissed Addie goodbye.

Another text comes through, the loud *ping* echoing in the still living room.

Cody: What the fuck am I supposed to do with this pen?! It got delivered today. You want it?

Ah, the pen... I forgot all about it. While Conor was running around like a headless chicken on Saturday, dealing with the gas failure in Pomona, I texted back and forth with Cody.

Get someone to make an outdoor pen for a big bird. I want to surprise Addie and get Jasper back for her next week.

She loves that bird, she spoke about him all the time, telling me stories while she was falling asleep, and I knew getting him back would make her happy.

A loud *bang!* on my front door startles me out of my trance. The only reason I'm home at eight on a Friday evening is that Curly rang earlier to say the meet-up had moved from tomorrow to tonight. Instead of aimlessly driving around town, I've risked coming home to get my car ready.

Looks like that's not happening because another *bang!* resounds through the house, and then, "Open the fucking door, or we'll break it down! I know you're there! I heard your phone ping!"

Logan.

And that means they're all here.

Fuck my life. I don't need this. I don't need to relive what happened; I don't need to relay the story and feel my heart get shredded again. I don't need their back pats or wise words, but I know I'm not getting away with it.

Running a hand down my face, I get up from the couch, butt the cigarette out, and head across the room.

As predicted, all six of them stand at my door, alcohol in hands, matching scowls on their faces.

"Look who's alive, breathing, and capable of answering his phone," Logan clips, shouldering past me. "You've got a shit-ton of explaining to do, bro. You don't get to ghost us."

They barge inside, scowls turning to concern as they take me in. I don't think I look any different. I still eat, shower, and manage to stop myself downing a bottle of vodka every evening, but I hardly sleep... I guess it shows.

“I want her to have it,” I say, eyes on Cody, who’s picking out glasses from the drinks cabinet in the corner. “It’s not like either one of us has any use for a big bird cage.”

He turns, less hostility in his eyes than his texts. “And let me guess,” he huffs, flexing his fingers like he’s always done when he’s annoyed. “You won’t take it to her, so I have to. Fine, I’ll drop it off. I’ll even unload the parts, but that’s it. She can figure out how to assemble it herself.”

I nod, a silent *thanks*.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, *no*,” he chants, handing out the glasses. “First, you’ll spill your guts. We’re not leaving until you tell us what the fuck happened.”

They all nod while Nico pours himself, Theo, and Shawn whiskeys, the others cradling Coronas.

“Where are the kids?” I ask Logan, easing myself into the conversation. Getting any words out doesn’t come easy lately. “Isn’t Cassidy in Milan with Blair?”

“She is,” he confirms. “Mia’s taking care of the kids. All the girls and Jack are at Nico’s, and the kids are having a party, so we have plenty of time. Start talking.”

They came prepared... made sure they had the entire evening available. Not that they’ll still be here in an hour. Well, maybe they will, but I sure won’t.

Knowing damn well I’m not escaping this conversation, I start from the top. Over the years, we’ve had to get together and talk through one or other brother’s problem dozens of times. No matter how big or small the issue, the seven of us together can find the solution.

They won’t in this case, but after years of listening to them vent and seeing it help them center themselves, I hope voicing the riot in my head will at least calm me down a little.

So I rant.

I tell them everything, how we met, how right away I couldn’t stop thinking about her, how much I loved having her in my house, how fucking amazing it felt to wake up every

morning and see her face, how well we clicked, how fun she is...

They ask supporting questions, and I indulge them, painting a detailed picture of the whole week. I tell them how scared I was when she sat on the bridge. I tell them I would've jumped after her.

And only when I'm certain they understand how deep my feelings for this girl run do I explain *why* it all went to shit.

"She never wants to get married," I say, staring at the cherry of my cigarette. "Doesn't want kids."

"She's twenty-two," Shawn pipes in. "She's young. Marriage and kids aren't her priority. You don't know what'll happen a year or two down the line. You just met, Colt."

Theo nods. "He's right. I never considered a family until after I met Thalia. Maybe Addie will change her mind down the line? Maybe she just wants to finish school first? You're making a mistake letting her go so fast."

That's plausible, but... "What if she doesn't? I know every relationship requires compromise, and believe me, I'd fucking compromise on whatever, but *this*... I can't. It's too big. I want a family. She doesn't. She was very clear on that. I won't risk spending a few years with her hoping she'll change her mind, only to lose her when she doesn't."

Glancing at the clock, my leg bounces against the tiles. I should be on my way to the meeting point. Instead, I'm stuck at home with my brothers, listening to their poor advice.

They mean well. I'm grateful they give a fuck, but I'm in no state of mind for their visit tonight. I'm too impatient to press the gas pedal to the floor and feel my adrenaline spike dangerously high.

"Listen... I know you're stubborn, bro, but this isn't the time for that," Conor says. "From what you said, you've not really talked this through. She didn't even tell you *why* she doesn't want to get married."

"Why did you want to get married?" I ask, my tone clipped.

As much as I love my brother, he's talking out of his ass. I suppress my smirk at the last thought. The British company on the yacht has rubbed off on me. Henry used that phrase all the time during our poker nights, and it never failed to make me laugh.

"Why did any of you?" I continue, looking around the room. "Addie doesn't need a reason *not* to want a family, same way none of us need a reason we *do*. It's a choice. It doesn't require justification."

Nico nods solemnly, unnaturally quiet this evening. He usually commands the room, but tonight, he's hanging back, drilling those black eyes into me like he's trying to unpick my brain.

"There's not always a reason," he admits slowly. "There doesn't need to be, but sometimes there is one, and you're dumb for not asking."

My head hits the back of the couch. They're fucking exhausting. I know they want what's best for me. And I know they might be right. Maybe Addie does have a solid reason we could work around. Perhaps she'll change her mind at some point. She's young, ambitious...

But *maybe* is not enough. I can't imagine my life without a family. I want kids. I want a girl who'll carry my name. As much as I want that girl to be Addie, I can't risk losing any more time.

I've waited for my happy ending too long already.

Balling my hands into tight fists, I grind my teeth. This conversation will run in pointless circles now. Back and forth, back and forth.

"You should get going," I say, straightening in my seat. "I've got somewhere to be."

Theo's raised eyebrow has *you're an idiot* woven into it. "Don't do it, Colt. Don't go looking for a quick hook-up. It won't fix anything and you'll feel like shit tomorrow. If you wanna go somewhere, go talk to Audrey."

"I'm not looking for a hook-up."

“Then where are you going?” Nico pipes in, suspicion written all over his face. His commanding aura is back, like he knew all along something else was on my mind, something important, and he was just waiting for it to resurface.

It’s fucking scary how well he reads people.

A little over a week ago, my top priority was not letting my older brothers find out I’m racing again. They worry about me. We all worry about each other more than normal siblings, I guess. We’re so tight-knit it strikes everyone as bizarre because you rarely get this kind of connection with your family.

I remember their faces when they visited me at the hospital: the relief I was alive and all the *fucks* they spewed while schooling me to not ever race again.

So yeah... keeping my racing on the down-low was a priority.

But now?

Now I don’t give a fuck what they think. They have their own lives. Something that makes them happy. Something that makes them calm. I don’t.

Racing is my way of unwinding. The only thing that keeps me the right side of sane on a typical day and tonight I need that more than ever. I’ve been waiting to put the pedal to the floor since I overheard Addie and Henry.

“*Where* are you going, Colt?” Shawn emphasizes.

I snatch my car keys off the coffee table, rising to my feet. “None of your goddamn business,” I spit out, heading for the exit.

“You’re racing again?!” Theo jumps to his feet, running after me. He grabs my shoulder, forcefully spins me around, and slams me against the wall. My head bounces off the concrete. “Are you fucking kidding me? What the hell is wrong with you? You almost died last time!”

Nico’s quick to join, his chest heaving, mindless fury in his eyes. I’m pretty sure he’ll knock me the fuck out.

To be honest, I hope he will. A flurry of physical pain may alleviate the mental one tearing me apart.

“You’re not going,” he says, emphasizing every single word. He’s not shouting—that means he’s beyond furious. “Give me the keys.”

I shove him away, a little surprised when he actually stumbles back a step. It’s not that easy moving a fucking tank.

“Try and stop me,” I grind out.

There’s a commotion as the others scramble to their feet. I expect at least one of them to grab my arm and yank me back as I step toward the door, but they don’t. They’re all deathly silent until Nico speaks again.

“Do you have any idea what we all went through during your fourteen-hour heart surgery?”

That stops me in place. Not because he’s getting to me in a good way. Not because he’s playing on my emotions and I’m caving. No. Because he’s riling me up that much more.

“You have any idea what will happen to this family if you crash again and don’t make it this time?” he continues.

“What?” I boom, spinning around to face all six of them. “You’ll mourn? Cry? Yeah, I bet you will. But how long will that last? How long before you move on? A week? A month?” I scoff, trying and failing to control the emotions tearing me wide open. “You have families, Nico. People who always have time for you. People who depend on you and love you unconditionally. You don’t sit locked at home staring at the fucking wall for hours on end. You’re never alone. You’re never lonely.”

“Colt—” Logan steps forward, but I’ve had it up to *here*.

“Don’t tell me I can always count on you. I know that. You’ll be here if anything happens, but that’s not the point, Logan. It doesn’t change the fact you’ve all moved on, and I’m stuck in the same fucking place.” I take a deep breath, doing my best to calm down.

It's not their fault I'm alone but it absolutely guts me that I don't have what they do.

"Racing isn't the answer," Nico says, though he sounds less hostile. "Risking your life won't change anything."

"I know. Nothing will ever change for me, but when I sit behind that wheel, it's the only time I feel something other than disappointment."

THIRTY-ONE

Colt

THE ORANGE GLOW in the distance paints the desert in shades of twilight while the rhythmic bass throbs against my chest, matching the beat of my heart.

My anticipation grows the closer the show gets.

The frenzy of roaring engines, neon lights, music, and people hits me like a wave as I pull into the makeshift parking lot. Despite the crowd, there's a hollowness inside me, an inexplicable void I've never felt here before.

Addie only came with me once, but I feel her absence ten times stronger here than at home. It's hard to explain, but this part of my life is mine alone. She's the only person I've ever willingly shared this with, and it feels so fucking wrong that she's not here.

I shake off the memories of her wide eyes, the glint of excitement shining through her nerves as she looked around when we pulled up here two weeks ago.

Stepping out of my car, the desert heat smothers my skin just as a mess of curls and gleaming teeth strides closer. Curly's smirk is usually contagious, but I've not mustered a smile in a week, and I doubt I'll manage one tonight.

"Ready to show the kids how it's done?" He claps my shoulder, shaking me from side to side. "We've got a group from LA here tonight. First-timers."

"Good. I need a race." The words come out more desperate than intended.

Racing isn't just my hobby. Not just a momentary thrill. It's a way to drain the maelstrom swirling inside me and feel alive.

Hopefully, tonight, it'll also be a way to forget.

Curly eyes me for a moment, his smile fading. He's clever and has known me for years, so he can tell I'm in a foul

mood. I didn't realize it was so obvious *why*, but the way he glances around, searching for Addie, tells me he's figured it out.

"Got just the guy," he finally says with a touch of concern. "Kid from down south. Been bragging about his ride all night. How about a ten-grand race to get you started?"

"The sooner, the better." I flex my fingers, already imagining the leather of the steering wheel under my palms.

Curly disappears into the crowd without another word, off to set up the race. The chaos around me blurs as I lean against the hood, willing my pulse to slow.

I let my gaze wander, drinking in the sight of people laughing, the bright headlights piercing the desert night, the occasional cheer as a car revs its engine.

All these things brought me a sense of belonging not long ago, but tonight they only amplify the emptiness inside.

Curly returns with a kid who barely looks old enough to drive. "Colt, meet Brian. Brian, meet Colt," he introduces us, his voice easily carrying over the rumbling bass.

"Heard a lot about you, Colt," Brian drawls, sizing me up, a cocky smirk playing on his thin lips. "Let's see if the talk lives up to reality."

Addie would be rolling her eyes big time right now. He sounds like he watched *Need for Speed* one too many times.

"Ready when you are."

"Alright, then," Curly booms, summoning everyone's attention. "Let's give you all a damn good race!"

The crowd roars, the music surges, and I feel that familiar spark of anticipation. Adrenaline floods my system like a soothing balm for my frayed nerves.

This is exactly what I need. Thirty seconds on the track. A break from my own fucking head.

I slide into the driver's seat, the faint scent of peaches and sugar like a punch to the gut. There's still a trace of her here. It

gnawed on me the whole way from Newport, but the open windows dealt with the worst of it.

The leather seat creaks under my weight, every little detail triggering a memory. How she braced against the seat, the awe in her eyes, how my heart rocketed when I ran around the hood, worried she'd gone into shock.

God, I miss her.

I grip the steering wheel tightly, my knuckles whitening under pressure. There's a lump in my throat that won't go away. I turn the key, and the Challenger roars to life, vibrating beneath me, temporarily silencing my thoughts.

A crowd forms on either side of the track, a sea of indistinguishable faces bathed in the artificial glow of neon lights. Cheers and whistles fade into the background, drowned out by the cacophony in my mind. It breaks above the roar again and all I hear is Addie's voice screaming in this car with fear and elation, then her laughter when we raced again and again.

I want her. I want her like I've never wanted anything or anyone else before. But she's a bird longing to spread her wings and fly. She's destined for places I can't follow, and I... I'm tethered to the earth, stomping on hard ground, searching for the future I always imagined.

I shove those thoughts aside and push Addie out of my head. It won't last long. She'll be back within minutes, but at least for now, I can focus on the smell of gasoline, the feel of leather under my hands, the roaring crowd and loud engines.

The starting line looms ahead, a strip of white paint barely visible in the dim lights.

It feels more like a precipice.

I draw a deep breath, willing the tight knot in my chest to ease, desperate to focus on the race, the speed, the thrill, but my palms are sweaty on the wheel.

I've tamed the storm of excitement brewing under my skin at countless starting lines, but tonight?

Things are different.

The usual calm gives way to torrential unease. My stomach churns so hard it's fucking painful. It refuses to settle, however many deep breaths I take. My lungs barely expand thanks to the crushing sensation around my chest and the cold tendrils of fear coiling around my heart.

For the first time ever since I started racing, I'm afraid.

I've never known fear on the racetrack. Fear is for the weak. The unsure. The unprepared. Seems I'm weak and unprepared tonight because staring down the long stretch of tarmac before me, my heart's trying to dance its way out.

In all my years of racing, it's always been about the thrill, speed, and exhilaration of control on the edge of chaos, toeing the line of recklessness. I never had anything to lose, only the race to win.

Until Addie.

The taste of her lips, the warmth of her touch, and the sparkle in her eyes have become my vulnerability.

I know we don't dream the same dream. She has a different take on the world, but it doesn't mean shit because... fuck.

I'm in love with her.

And suddenly, the stakes are sky high. She's not mine. Might never be, but the thought of taking unnecessary risks and losing the sliver of a chance I have with her is chilling.

The kid in the car beside mine revs the engine, taunting. Normally, I'd rev right back. Show him he can't count on me tucking my tail between my legs... not tonight.

My mind's made in a split second. Beeping the horn, I shift my gaze to the other driver. His window rolls down as he cocks a questioning eyebrow.

I toss him a roll of cash: ten grand. The price for backing away from a race. "I'm out."

His face idles somewhere between shock and disbelief. I don't wait for his reaction. I slam the pedal to the floor, burning rubber out of there.

The crowd becomes a blur, their cheers fading into the night as I highball down the road. A crazy laugh escapes my lips, a mix of relief, excitement, and fear. I've made my choice. It's a long way back to Newport, but with each mile the knot in my chest loosens and the fear subsides.

Not every fairy tale ends with a big wedding and children's laughter. Pining after the dream, I forgot the most important thing: happiness doesn't always look like we've imagined.

Sometimes, less is more.

The neighborhood is shrouded in darkness. My headlights illuminate Addie's empty driveway. No sign of her bright orange BMW. It disappeared from outside my house yesterday, so I know she's back in Newport.

The garage by her house is closed, and despite there being no lights shining inside, I step out of the Challenger, a pit of dread forming in my gut. Cool air prickles my skin as I walk up to her front door. I already know she's not here, but I knock anyway, my knuckles rapping out a beat against the hard oak.

Just in case she's sleeping.

Just in case she's in the garden.

Once, twice, three times... each knock echoes through the night, fading into nothing.

She's not home.

And I have no idea where she might be. I don't know her friends or usual spots. She said she's not much of a party girl, only going out for drinks when her besties leave her no choice.

I pull a packet of cigarettes out of my jacket pocket and sit on the porch, lighting one with a Zippo. She'll have to come home at some point, and I'm not moving until we talk.

At least that's my three-minute resolution before I grow impatient. Sitting around doing fucking nothing drives me nuts, so I jump back behind the wheel, setting off toward town. The Challenger rumbles a low, comforting growl that seems out of place.

Ten minutes later, cruising down the main street at a crawl, my head swings left and right, searching, *hoping* to catch a flash of that bright orange BMW.

Newport's bustling. It's a summer vacation Friday night. High school and college kids are out, flooding the streets, loud and cheerful. Music spills out from open club doorways, and lights blink from all directions. I drive past the cocktail bars, the fancy lounges, all the best spots, peering through the windows, but there's no sign of her amongst the crowds.

An hour ticks away, as relentless as my heartbeat in my ears. Each passing moment amplifies the dull ache in my chest. The city lights seem harsh, the music from the clubs grating. Even my Challenger feels more isolating.

I circle back to Addie's house, but it's still dark, silent, and empty. My hands feel heavy on the wheel as I turn back home to grab my cell. I left it on the coffee table when I stormed out, and even though I'd much rather do this in person, I'm out of ideas where Addie might be, so a phone call it is.

That's if she even replaced her phone since it tumbled into that river in the Bahamas.

I won't fucking stop until I see her. I don't know what I'll say, I don't know how to put the turmoil inside my head into words, but they'll come.

Every mile and every red light seems to last an eternity before I reach my driveway. And there it is. The orange BMW I've been looking for.

I wouldn't have guessed she'd be here if I had a million chances, but she is. Sitting with her back to my front door, staring right at me as I throw the Challenger into a parking spot beside her car.

I'm out in a flash, relief surging when her beautiful brown eyes meet mine. A kaleidoscope of emotions paints her face as she scrambles to her feet, descending the few concrete steps.

She's not in a hurry, every step measured. "Cody came by," she says like she's mentioning the weather, not giving anything away. "He dropped off a pen for Jasper."

I bob my head, standing by the hood of my car, completely fucking paralyzed. She's so... casual. Not at all what I expected when I saw her sitting outside my door.

A short clip played in my head: an epic, movie-worthy reunion. Her jumping into my arms, our lips connecting. A kiss to rival all fucking kisses among whispered *I love yous*.

"He didn't leave any instructions," she continues, stopping right before me, the scent of her body hooking me like a potent drug. "I was rather rude about him ditching his wife on Friday evening to bring me the pen, but then he said Blair's in Milan with Cassidy."

My eyebrows bunch in the middle at the sudden change of topic. "Yeah, she's showing off her new clothing line, and Cass is her photographer."

"They're all living their dreams, aren't they?" she muses, taking another step closer, our breaths mingling. "Mia's writing songs, Thalia's head chef, Vivienne's climbing the career ladder..."

I have no idea what she's getting at, but I nod along, confused beyond reason.

She steps even closer, so close she has to angle her head to look me in the eye. "Do you have any idea what a shock to the system it was when I realized they're not trophies?"

And it hits me.

There *is* a reason Addie doesn't want a husband. Why she doesn't want a family. She doesn't want to end up like her mother. A trophy wife: pretty, well mannered, well behaved, and caged. Forced to nurture her husband's aspirations while squandering her own.

She pokes my chest with her long finger. “Do you have any idea how shocked I was when Cody said you were going to bring Jasper home for me? Why would you do that?”

I open my mouth, but she doesn’t let me speak, rising on her toes as she wraps her hands around my neck.

“I’ll tell you why. Because you want me to be happy and you’ll do everything you can to make that happen. Because for you, my dreams are important and you’ll make them come true even though they’re not *yours*. Am I wrong?”

I shake my head. “One hundred percent right.”

A small smile tugs her lips, growing wider and brighter until she’s beaming, eyes sparkling. She doesn’t say anything else. She’s on me before I can blink, hands on my face, body pressing into me, her warm, plump lips on mine.

I grab her waist, pulling her closer. I’m confused... so fucking *confused*, but never this calm. She gasps, a small sound I swallow as I take over. I delve deeper, lifting her into my arms, my hands full of her sweet ass. She grips the fabric of my tee and melts into me as if we’re two matching pieces of a puzzle.

Our lips move in sync. The kiss deepens, growing hungrier, greedier. The feel of her against me, her taste on my lips, her scent filling my lungs... I’m fucking drunk on her.

It’s intoxicating. Overwhelming.

My legs start moving, one after another, blindly, toward the house, but I stop dead when she inches back far enough to look me in the eyes.

“I love you, and I *will* marry you.”

I inhale a sharp breath and hold it, lost in her brown irises. “Say it again.”

“I’ll marry you.”

“Not that. I don’t need that. I don’t need you to say *yes* right now. I just had to know there’s a possibility. That one day
—”

“You don’t get it, do you?” she cuts in, wiggling in my arms, pressing herself closer, fingers weaving through my hair. “I love you and—”

I close her lips, sealing that confession so she can’t take it back. Sliding my tongue in, I kiss her, taking everything she has to offer and pouring in everything I have.

“I love you more,” I whisper, taking her mouth again. “So fucking much I don’t know where’s up and where’s down, baby. I’ll make you happy. You’ll see.”

She stops me, bracing her hands against my chest. “You already do. That’s why I’ll marry you tonight if you ask, but no kids... not until after I graduate.”

“Anything you want.”

A big smile breaks across her face. She parts her lips to say something, but desire steals her voice, and we’re kissing again, pausing just long enough to get the door open.

A moment later, I drop her on the bed. *My* bed.

“You’re the first woman in this room,” I say, arching back to tug my t-shirt off. “First and last.”

I’ve never brought a girl here. I had plenty in my bedroom while I lived at Nico’s, but once I bought a house, my bedroom became sacred. I promised myself I’d never bring a woman here unless she was mine. Unless she’d stay.

“I’m not letting you leave.” I climb over her, one hand twisting her hair into a ponytail, the other holding her waist. “You’re moving in tomorrow.”

“As soon as we’re back from Vegas,” she says, knotting her fingers on my nape to pull me down. “But sex first. I missed you.” She tugs my neck, trying to get my lips on hers.

“Why Vegas?”

“So we can get married,” she deadpans. “Tonight.”

I smile down at her. “We’re not getting married tonight.”

“Why not?” She pouts, moving her hands to my face. “You want to, don’t you? Let’s do it.”

She's crazy. My kind of crazy. A big part of me wants to say *fuck it* and drive to Vegas right now, but the part of me that's waited so long for this wants to do it right.

"Of course I want to, but not tonight. Not until you're wearing a big rock on your ring finger. And—"

"I guess it's too late in the day for that rock, isn't it?" she cuts in with a contemplative look on her pretty face. "No jewelry stores will be open at this hour."

I fall silent, studying her features, those beautiful dark eyes staring me down. "Why do you want to rush?"

"I just want you to know you've got me. You don't want to go to Vegas, so—"

"Definitely not in fucking Vegas, baby. My mother wouldn't survive another secret wedding; Theo had one years ago." I flip us over so she lays on top of me, and my hands roam her thighs and hips. "I want you in a beautiful white dress. Your dad deserves to walk you down the aisle."

She beams, dipping her head to kiss my nose. "I never wanted to think about it before, but... maybe I do want a big wedding."

"You'll get everything you ask for, baby. Every single thing. Always."

"Obviously not." She wiggles her ring finger at me, chuckling as she dips her head to stop my lips with hers, small hands traveling under my t-shirt. "Enough talking." She trails open-mouthed kisses down my neck. "I missed you."

"I missed you more."

THIRTY-TWO

Colt

WE LIE IN BED, my head in Addie's lap, the morning sun pouring into the room through huge windows. I can't fucking believe this is real. That I'm not dreaming. That my life could be flipped upside down in two short weeks.

And it's just the beginning.

It's Saturday. Normally, I'd be on the go by now, chasing work. And if I were still moping over Addie, I'd be making plans for the evening with friends or trying to drag one of my brothers away from their families for a few beers.

Now, all I want is to stay in bed with Addie.

I finally understand why my brothers rarely go out without their wives. Why they spend their weekends on the couch instead of partying like we used to. Why the group chat has changed so much and why the *Sausage Fest* is nowhere near as lively as it used to be.

They're happy. Truly, genuinely happy. They don't need the thrill of late-night drinking in a club. A family get-together and catching up with everyone is more important than downing ten Coronas.

And now I understand because, looking into Addie's eyes, I'm the happiest I've ever been.

She's enough.

She's everything.

"This can be just for us," I say, seeing the look crossing her face as she plays with my hair. "We don't have to tell anyone until you're ready."

"It's crazy," she says quietly, but there's awe in her voice. "It's so fast, so completely unreasonable. Unexplainable... like us. Two weeks, Colt," she chuckles, riffling my hair some more. "That's all it took. If you don't believe in fate, now's the time to start."

I sit up, grip her waist, and flip her over so I'm on top, devouring her sweet mouth. I've not stopped kissing her since she showed up last night.

"No regrets?" I ask, skimming my nose up her cheek. "You can tell me if something's bothering you."

"No regrets." She lifts her head off the pillow to stamp a kiss on my forehead. "It feels right, don't you think? I never imagined it would but... it does, and I love it. I love *you*."

"I love you more. I'll make you happy, Addie. I swear. You'll always be my priority. Until we have kids... then you'll have to share the pedestal."

She smacks my head gently. "Not so fast, Mister. You said you'll wait. I need to finish school first, and—"

"I know," I cut in before she works herself up. "We have time. Now you're mine, I can wait. Whenever you're ready."

I roll off her, a huge grin stretching my face. "I can't wait to see the look on your mother's face when she finds out we're back together." I sit up, an idea popping into my head. "We should hold our engagement party on the yacht. I'd like to invite Grant. I don't think your dad will mind."

Addie chuckles, smacking my face with a pillow. "You're a cruel, cruel man. My mom might need therapy when she finds out, but it's *your* family I'm worried about. Your brothers were rude yesterday. I don't think they'll be pleased."

"You don't know them well enough, but I promise they'll be thrilled. Remember Theo's message on the first day of the cruise?"

"The one about betting? Yes." She pulls me back down, toying with my hair. "Is this when you tell me what they were betting on?"

"Us," I say. "More specifically, how long it'll take before fake dating becomes real dating. You think you're ready to tell them which one's winning a hundred bucks?"

"Your phone, please." She beams at me, holding her hand out and I'm having an out-of-body experience, my chest

constricting, heart swelling.

How did I fall so hard so fucking fast?

“Picture?”

I shake my head. “I have a better idea.”

“Oh?” She traces the outline of my lips, then brushes her fingers across my jaw. “Do tell.”

“Give me your phone, baby.”

Reaching to the night table, she unplugs her phone from charge, taps in her access pin and passes it over. I prop my head on the pillows as she sits up, watching as I open the app store.

Might as well start with a bang.

Once the app we use for group chats is installed, I set up Addie’s profile, then take my phone and open the Hayes group chat. The one with everyone in it, including our parents, who we added a couple of years ago.

“Ready to meet the family?” I ask, resting my back against the headboard and curving her into my side so she’ll fit into the inevitable FaceTimes.

With a deep breath for courage, she nods, eyes on the screen as I hold the phone out. With one tap, I get the ball rolling, my heart doing a strange cartwheel when a message appears:

Colt Hayes added Addie Soon-to-be-Hayes to the group chat.

The radio silence that ensues is so fucking gratifying. For the first time ever, they’re speechless. I see bubbles spreading, letting me know who saw the notification. One, two, five—twelve, but no one’s reacting. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds go by, and I wonder what’s going through their heads.

Twelve hours ago, I was venting, acting like the world fucking imploded, and now? Now we’re engaged.

Addie kept mentioning that big rock while I wrung orgasm upon orgasm out of her, and at some point, I thought...

why the hell not?

She's everything I ever wanted. It's a crazy notion, getting engaged two weeks after meeting. Who the fuck does shit like this? People don't get engaged so fast. It's not how this is supposed to happen...

Then I remembered it doesn't matter what people think.

This is my life.

Our life, and no one but us sets the rules. I've searched high and wide for the right person. I've been desperate to find my girl and put a ring on her for years, but never rushed into anything with the countless women I dated.

I wanted the *click*. I wanted the real feeling.

And now I have it. I have *her*. Mine. Always mine.

"Who'll call first?" Addie asks, squeezing the life out of my fingers, her ring biting my flesh.

"Either Rose, Nico, or Vee."

Another ten seconds pass, and Nico it is.

His face pops up onscreen, quiet, a little out-of-tune piano music in the background even though Mia's sitting beside him. I guess it's Melody. She's been trying to play since she managed to climb the stool on her own.

Nico's first sentence highlights why he's the one I always looked up to growing up. Why he's the one who took care of me, Colt, and Conor, and why he's the one I can always count on without fail, even in the most mundane of things.

Family is the most important thing to Nico. It always has been, and he proves it when he opens his mouth.

"Welcome to the family, Addie. I take it you're engaged."

Addie wells up, her muscles relaxing, and I kiss her head, lifting her hand to show off what we agreed would be a temporary engagement ring. It's plastic. Pink with a daisy on top. A novelty ring you win at the arcades. I didn't win this one though. It's been in a drawer downstairs since Melody left it here. It was the only ring I could find after midnight.

It'll be one hell of a story to tell our kids as long as I leave out that I sauntered downstairs naked, and ate Addie's pussy straight after she said *yes*.

"Hey, Nico." She waves at him. "Hey, Mia. It's nice to finally see your faces."

"Explain," Theo demands as he and Thalia join the chat. "I don't get it."

"They're engaged," Thalia says, rolling her eyes. "Try and keep up, baby." She turns to us with a bright smile. "You don't waste time, do you?"

"Addie bullied me into proposing," I aim for a scolded look, but there's been a smile permanently glued to my face for hours that ruins the effect.

Cody joins the chat on his own, his wife still in Milan. "Well, aren't you two quick!" he booms with a grin. "Hey there, soon-to-be-sis. Glad I knocked some sense into you last night. Also, I said it before, and I'll say it again. I. Am. Fucking. *GOOD*."

"Taking credit, are you?" Conor joins the conversation, the heads popping up on the screen getting smaller and smaller. "At least share it, alright? We were both there when they met."

"You're such an attention seeker," Cody muses, shaking his head. "Go on, Addie, let's see the ring."

She holds it up just as Logan joins the chat. Cassidy appears a second later with Blair right beside her, FaceTiming from their Milan hotel room.

"I see you spared no expense," Cassidy chuckles. "Congratulations! I can't wait to meet you, Addie."

Addie mumbles *me too*, suddenly a little shy, the number of faces staring at her from the screen too overwhelming.

"So fucking classy, bro." Logan whistles. "Ava has the same ring."

"Quiet," Nico says, then looks to the left, his features softening on cue. "Not you, angel. You're doing great. Keep

playing.” He turns his attention to us, stern look firmly back in place. It’s incredible how fast he switches from world’s softest dad to world’s biggest grump. “I think celebrations are in order. I’ll book a table at *The Olive Tree* for tonight. We’re missing some information here, and the whole family need filling in, so don’t get too comfortable.”

Everyone nods, including Addie, who, like every other woman in this family save for Mia, seems to be taken aback by Nico’s commanding personality.

She’ll get used to him. Just like she’ll get used to Logan’s short temper, Theo and Conor’s weird jokes, Shawn’s protective cop instincts, Cody’s ostentatious demeanor, and Rose’s perfect blend of all things Hayes.

“And Colt?” Logan says, sitting Ava on his lap. Despite Cassidy’s blonde hair, Ava’s taken after her daddy, and thus far, Melody remains our only blonde. “For fuck’s sake, bro... you better get your fiancée a proper ring before dinner, or Grandma’s gonna wipe the floor with you.”

I wouldn’t dare let Addie show off that plastic thing in front of Grandma. Besides, Melody will want it back as soon as she sees it.

EPILOGUE

Addie

I WAKE TO GENTLE KISSES feathering down my spine. Sunlight trickles through the sheer curtains, casting a soft, golden hue across the room. The scent of freshly brewed coffee filters through the air, making me smile as I stretch out on the bed.

“Morning,” Colt whispers against my neck, the vibrations adding to the tingles spreading across my skin.

“Morning,” I murmur, flipping onto my belly. The crisp cotton sheets rustle with our movements. “Happy birthday.”

“Thank you.” He smiles, pushing his hands under the hem of my nightdress. “Since it’s my special day, I’d like to start with dessert.” He drags his finger between my folds, eyes darkening with the wetness he finds. “Pink pussy sherbet. My favorite.”

I fake a smile, my heart thudding faster. “Okay, but I need five minutes.”

His brow furrows, but he lets me slide out of bed, and I patter across the wooden floor to the bathroom. Had I known last week, it could have been a first engagement anniversary gift. It seems a more appropriate occasion than a birthday, but I didn’t.

Five agonizing minutes later, I climb knees-first onto the bed, both hands behind my back.

“I’ve got something for you. It’s not really a gift, not in the traditional sense, but...” I pause, taking a deep breath.

I’m not afraid of his reaction, but I’m emotional, nonetheless. We *just* moved into the new house and started building my dream clinic. Colt’s bought a huge stretch of land outside Newport where our house now stands, courtesy of Logan and Cody’s combined skills, the acreage perfect for a clinic and a safe haven for abandoned animals.

We flipped our lives upside down the day we met, and we've not stopped since. Now we've moved into our forever home, things were meant to slow down... we were supposed to plan the wedding so we can get married when I finish school, but things change.

"I love you," I say, looking down at him, my eyes watering.

His expression morphs into confusion with a hint of alarm. He repositions himself, resting on his side, head propped up on one hand. "You're close to tears, Addie. What's wrong."

Drawing a shaky breath, I hand him the pregnancy test, the first tears sliding down my cheeks. Happy tears because I know he'll be over the moon. And as much as I didn't plan this, and wanted to secure my own dreams first, I'm happy it's happened.

Time comes to a standstill while he processes the news, his gaze flicking between the test and my face.

"You're..." He stumbles over his words, eyes snapping to me. "Addie..." He stops again. Gazing at the two blue lines, and sounding almost incredulous, he asks, "Is this real?"

I chuckle softly. "Yes. Of course it's real."

He looks up again, then back to the test, up and down, up and down, completely shocked. "Jesus, baby... you're pregnant."

"I'm pregnant," I confirm, my voice barely above a whisper.

He quickly sets the test on the nightstand, grips my waist, and pulls me under him, his lips catching mine.

We've kissed before. So many times over the past year, but this is different. More intense. Filled with a raw emotion that leaves me shaking.

He pulls back just enough to whisper against my mouth. "I love you so much. So fucking much. We're having a baby, Addie... We're having a *baby*."

And just like that, all my fears dissipate. He rises on his elbows and all I can see is the absolute bliss in his eyes. We'll make this work. He won't let my dreams slip through my fingers. I know he won't. He'll work twice as hard to make sure I have everything I ever wanted.

"Hey, hey..." He gently wipes my cheeks with his thumbs. "Why the tears?"

"Happy tears," I assure him, holding his gaze.

"Promise? You can tell me if you're scared. I know you didn't want this for another few years."

"I'm not scared, but if you want honesty... I'm surprised how happy I am."

He pushes a relieved puff of air down his nose. "I wanted you to finish school, have fun, live your dreams, but this... this is *everything*. You... mine and pregnant. I'll be here every step of the way. You'll finish school and get your veterinary clinic, I promise." He drops a kiss on my forehead. "How far along are you? And... how? You were on the pill."

"I don't know how far along. I lost track of time. Six, maybe seven weeks? I got so busy with exams and work I might have forgotten to take the pill a few times."

"Your exams were almost three months ago, baby. Why didn't you tell me? You always tell me when you forget to take it."

"I... I don't know. I'm sorry I didn't run it by you. I just... I see your brothers with their kids, and it's hard thinking we have to wait two more years."

"Have you seen a doctor?" He moves down until he's level with my tummy. "How long have you known?" He presses his lips to my lower belly, caressing my waistline with his fingers, pure awe on his face.

"I've done about twenty tests the past three days. All positive. I've not seen a doctor yet. I didn't want to go alone."

"We need to see a doctor, Addie. As soon as possible." He hops off the bed, snatches his phone, and heads to the

bathroom. “Grab a shower and get dressed.”

Less than two hours later, after a long debate on whether I should wear a seatbelt while pregnant, we enter a private clinic. It took ten minutes of back and forth before Colt caved and strapped me in, triple-checking the seatbelt was as low as possible.

I’ve had no time to process the news, but Colt’s in his element, his overprotectiveness in its highest gear. I’ve had glimpses into that side of him over the past year, and while he’s nowhere near as overwhelming as Nico or Logan, he does have his moments.

Sometimes, I let him get it out of his system. It seems to help if I let him dote over me occasionally. Makes him less prone to going overboard. Other times, when I’m particularly annoyed, I scream that I’m not a child and can do shit myself... That’s when I end up on my knees with his cock in my mouth.

“I want the full workup,” Colt tells the doctor the moment we cross the threshold of his office.

He told me on the way that Dr. Jones has been responsible for every Hayes pregnancy since Cassidy got pregnant with Noah. That might be why Colt’s attitude doesn’t faze him. He’s had to deal with Nico, so I doubt any demand could come as a surprise after that.

I’m on the bed five minutes later, and the doctor spreads cool gel on my tummy while Colt sits in a comfortable-looking chair, holding my hand.

“We might need to do a vaginal ultrasound if you’re only six weeks, but we’ll try this first since Colt thinks it might be longer,” he says, grabbing a wand.

The room fills with the sound of a steady heartbeat. The rhythm oscillates through the speakers, and Colt’s grip tightens around my fingers, his other hand resting on my thigh.

The screen is nothing more than gray static, but the smile on the doctor’s face tells me he can see things I can’t. “You’re definitely not six weeks, Audrey,” he states, his fingers

working the ultrasound probe over my belly, poking here and there. “By these measurements, you’re nine weeks along.”

“Is the baby okay?” Colt asks anxiously, gaze fixed on the screen.

“Perfectly fine,” the doctor assures, adjusting the monitor. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“What about Addie?”

“They’re both doing well from what I can see, but I want to order Audrey some blood tests, and we need to sort out prenatal vitamins.” He keeps checking the screen, touching the wand to my tummy. “Any questions?”

“Yes,” Colt blurts, features pinched. “When will she start showing? Can she wear a seatbelt? What should she avoid? She’s not been sick even once. Is that normal?”

The doctor cocks an eyebrow, clearly amused. “Your sisters-in-law have had eight babies between them now, and you’re still not an expert?” He chuckles, pulling out a pregnancy pack. “Here’s all you need to know, though I believe an evening with your brothers will be more helpful. Just don’t pay too much attention to Nico. He’s the most out-of-control, overprotective man I ever met. Though I must say... you’re not far behind. And yes, she can and should wear a seatbelt.” He hands me a paper towel to wipe the gel off my belly, but Colt’s on it in an instant.

“You won’t be showing for a while, Audrey, but the bump’s here.” He points to my lower abdomen, tracing a barely visible curve. “This will be getting bigger pretty soon now.”

Once he’s done cleaning me up, Colt helps me sit, like I’m nine months along and incapable of moving without assistance.

“You’ll be insufferable until the baby’s here, won’t you?” I chuckle, weaving my fingers through his when he takes my hand.

The only answer I get is a kiss on the top of my head.

Colt

Addie's asleep on the couch with our two dogs when I get home from work. The parrots are in their cages, and Jasper's running around the backyard, chasing the cat. It's barely six in the evening, but Addie's been sleeping more and more as the weeks go by. Thankfully, tiredness is the only pregnancy-associated inconvenience she's had.

She's not been puking and hasn't had a single craving. She's just tired, falling asleep wherever and whenever.

We're halfway there. At twenty weeks, her bump's still small, but Dr. Jones says my son's growing as expected and it might just be Addie's physique.

The baby's the right size and developing as it should. You have nothing to worry about.

Nothing to worry about...

Seriously?

I'm lucky if I go an hour without checking how Addie's doing. I have no idea where she gets her patience from, but I swear she's a saint when it comes to dealing with me. She takes my overprotectiveness like the good girl she is, putting my mind at ease at least twenty times a day.

Her bump's now visible under her clothes, and she stopped fitting into her jeans last week... we lost a lot of hours going out and buying new clothes.

I cover her with a blanket, dropping a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Wrong choice.

She stirs, and her brown eyes pop open. "Hey."

"Hey, baby. Sleep. I didn't mean to wake you."

She stretches out, smiling. "He kicked when I was having lunch. It's the most bizarre feeling."

I kiss her temple, draping my free hand over her collarbones. "Bizarre how? Painful?"

“No, not painful, just... weird. Nice, but weird. I’ll tell you if he kicks again, but right now, you need to let me go, or I’ll pee all over you.”

That’s one thing my brothers are united over: pregnant women have the bladder capacity of the kids they’re growing.

“What do you want to eat?” I shout after her.

“Italian, please. Bruschetta and gnocchi.”

I nod, taking my phone out of my pocket to order food.

She’s back moments later and straddles me on the couch, lips on mine, hips circling my lap, eyes hooded and dark.

I know what she wants. What she hasn’t stopped wanting since week ten, and I’m game, but... “I need a shower first, baby. I’ve been all over the place with work today.”

She’s clearly unhappy she has to wait but lets me go, pouting a little, arms crossed over her chest. Her pregnancy sex drive is off the charts. Not once and not twice, she’s barged into my office during my lunch break and had me eat her out on my desk. She’s all over me every morning, and the moment I get back home, then again before we fall asleep. Then, most nights, she wakes me up.

Logan said Cassidy was the same, but I never thought I’d be lucky enough to live that dream.

I’ve been making her come in a lot of different places lately, including her parents’ house, where we were for a long weekend. It was the quickest sex we ever had. Addie was so worked up she was digging her nails into my thigh under the table for ten minutes before I could come up with a plausible excuse to get her away.

I closed the door to our designated bedroom, spun her around, pulled her dress up, and buried myself deep with one thrust and a low groan.

She’s amazing.

No matter how many times I slip inside her, I’m in fucking heaven. Three thrusts, and she came, nearly chewing

my hand off. Another five, and I did too. We were gone less than five minutes.

A lot has changed over the past year. Initially, Addie's mom refused to speak to us when we announced our engagement. Her father, on the other hand, wasn't at all surprised. He's been on my side since day one and still is.

After months of no contact, Victoria finally pulled her head out of her ass one fine Sunday morning. She reached out in her own special way—by booking us return flights to Miami. Not one phone call, not a single word of explanation, just plane tickets dropped straight into Addie's email inbox.

I expected many things to happen that weekend. Rude comments, demands we break it off, threats, even Grant waiting with a ring, but when we arrived at the mansion, Victoria acted as if nothing had happened. She didn't apologize for ghosting us or explain why, just effortlessly slipped into her role as attentive mother and mother-in-law.

I was pissed off on Addie's behalf, but after a lengthy late-night conversation, I had to admit it was better this way. Fleshing out the past wouldn't do us any good, and Addie was so happy to have her mom's approval I didn't dare ruin it.

For six months, I wasn't sure whether Victoria was acting or if she'd gotten over herself and genuinely started to like me. I got confirmation of the latter when we arrived with news of the baby a week after Addie told me.

Victoria does like me. Not only that, but she realized Addie's better off with me than she ever would be with Grant... even if the fucker is worth a thousand times more.

I had to abandon everything I knew when I married Addie's father. My role was always the trophy wife. No opinions, no dreams. Just pretty, polite, and helpful, but you... you love her the way she is. That's rare.

Not that rare when you look at my family, but I guess it's unusual in the Westons' world.

No wonder Addie didn't want to get married...

“What are you doing in there that takes so long?” she shouts from the bed. “I’m falling asleep here. Chop chop!”

Turning the water off, I towel dry, then walk into the bedroom butt naked, my cock twitching when I spot Addie on her back, ready and waiting.

“How long was your nap?” I ask, dropping to my knees at the foot of the bed and filling my hands with her sweet ass.

“Only ten minutes,” she mewls, beyond ready to come.

“That’s not enough. My son needs the rest, and so do you, baby.” I tug her closer to the edge of the bed, maneuvering her legs over my shoulders. “How about I tire you out? Help you get back to sleep. We can heat up the food later?”

Bunching her dress around her waist, I pull her soaked panties aside and dip my head, licking a slow path back to front. “So wet for me,” I whisper, closing my lips on her clit.

She’s oversensitive like she’s already come a few times. It’s been like this for about two months now. Always wet, swollen, and ready for me at a moment’s notice.

It takes less than three minutes of my gentle licks and two fingers pumping in and out until an orgasm runs through her, so potent her thighs shake around my head as she gasps and moans, riding the high while pressing herself against my mouth.

I’ll never get enough of this. Of her. The sweet taste, the breathless moans, the look on her face when she comes.

I grip her underarms, sliding her further up the bed, then crawl over her till we’re eye-level. “Sleep, Addie. You need to rest.”

“No,” she mumbles, eyes closed but hands clasped on my neck to pull me down for a kiss. “It’s your turn.”

“Later.” I kiss her forehead first, then her belly before I tuck her in, pulling the covers up to her chin. “Sleep. I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

THE END

Thank you so much for sticking with me throughout the whole Hayes Brothers Series. I hope you enjoyed reading all stories as much as I enjoyed writing them.

I thought about including a big epilogue with all characters making an appearance, but it just didn't feel right whenever I tried to write it. Forcing words out I don't mean never worked well, so I abandoned the idea. We get glimpses into everyone's HEAs throughout the series, and forcing out an epilogue just for the sake of it isn't something I felt comfortable with.

So, instead of the finality such an epilogue would provide, I thought I'd leave it as it is. I have a few ideas for how to move on from here, none of which are final yet. The Hayes Brothers are complete, but there are some characters that maybe, MAYBE, one day will get their story told.

If you'd like to stay in touch, please visit my website

www.iadice.com

and sign-up to my newsletter for all up-to-date information.

I'm pivoting to a little darker theme with my next release. If you enjoyed the darkness of Nico and Mia's story as well as Cody and Blair's, I'm sure *Breaking Hailey* will not disappoint you.

You can check the tropes and pre-order it [here](#).

Lots of love,

I. A. Dice

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