



Whole Lotta

LOVE



TORI FIELDS

# WHOLE LATTE LOVE

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SUGAR & STEAM

**TORI FIELDS**



# LAST CHAPTER PRESS STEAMY ROMANCE

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# CONTENTS

## [Whole Latte Love Info](#)

1. [Marie](#)
  2. [Theo](#)
  3. [Marie](#)
  4. [Theo](#)
  5. [Theo](#)
  6. [Theo](#)
  7. [Theo](#)
  8. [Marie](#)
  9. [Marie](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

# WHOLE LATTE LOVE INFO

## **Marie**

I've already experienced true love and ever since I lost him, I've felt guilty about trying for love again.

Thankfully, I'm able to stay busy running the roastery and enjoy my small-town life in Kastle Harbor.

When I run into Theodore at my friend Violet's wedding, I can't help but share a dance with him.

Theo is unlike anything you'd expect from a mystery writer.

He's like a California surfer playing Professor, his tanned muscles wrapped in tweed, and he makes me feel like my old self before I became a widow.

But can I finally push past my guilt and fall in love again?

## **Theodore**

I'm a mystery writer who has no idea what's happening in my next book.

The only thing I know is my deadline is approaching much too quickly.

Luckily, I'm attending my old college friend's wedding and can relax and work through my writer's block while staying in

Kastle Harbor for a bit.

Enter Marie, a stunning woman with dance moves unlike any other.

When we share a kiss at the wedding, and I find myself enthralled.

Marie is a strong businesswoman with curves that would make any man swoon.

But I tend to fall fast and hard for the wrong women.

Can I push past my fears of old relationships and truly give Marie my heart?

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**No Cliffhangers. No Cheating. Only a beautiful happily ever after.**

ONE  
MARIE

THE WEDDING BETWEEN VIOLET PLATT AND JAKE BARLOW has been the talk of the town for months. I can't believe we're finally witnessing these two love birds tie the knot after a whirlwind romance. The ceremony was originally supposed to be in the church near town hall, but with their ever-growing list of guests, the couple opted for a beach wedding.

*And I'm so glad they did.*

The beach is the perfect place for the duo to get married. Jake and Violet are both full of life and passion. Having the wedding indoors would feel as though they weren't being true to themselves.

Curious about who all is in attendance, I look around those already seated. There's a lot of locals who are a part of Violet's life, and the bakery of course. And a small number of unfamiliar faces.

It's hard not to smile when thinking about how the couple met.

*Like one of those cliché romcom movies that I love.*

I tuck my shoulder length hair behind my ears. I recently felt like I needed a change, so cut off six inches of my midnight black hair. Instantly, I felt lighter. Better than opting for bangs. I wish I styled it up some way though. The gentle oceanside breeze is blowing it like a tornado is around my head. Plus, the wind is chilly against my bare arms.

Luckily, I brought a pashmina to wrap around my shoulders and ward off that ocean chill. I chose a navy-blue



silk slip dress with spaghetti straps and a low back for today's event.

I can't help but love rich, dark fall colors and how they work well with my summer tan. Paired with some silver sandals, I'm both comfortable and slightly cold. I'm following the cocktail requested dress code though, so at least my fashion choices won't go wasted.

Kastle Harbor, Maine, can give you the perfect summer weather one day and without warning, dole out a coastal storm the next. We've had some unusually brisk evenings this June. In addition to being prepared for any weather, the dress and pashmina combo let me be ready to go from the beach wedding to the indoor reception without changing in my car.

I opted for minimal jewelry and makeup. It's not my day to shine, so I will simply glimmer just like the others in the crowd of family and friends. I don't expect to be in a lot of photos, but you never know, so I wanted to look my best.

The beach fills up with guests. I spot my twin, Victor, looking for an open seat and wave him over. Both of my close friends are in the wedding party. Victor's girlfriend, Sally, is Jake's best-woman for the wedding and Bethany is Violet's maid of honor.

*Fiancée. Sally is Victor's fiancée.*

I'm still not used to saying that. Who knew my brother would ever get over his commitment issues and fall for a hardworking woman like Sally? I'm glad he did though. Everyone deserves to fall in love and find their soulmate.

*Even if we only get one chance and I've already had mine, I still believe in love for everyone.*

Victor joins me and we chat while waiting for the wedding to start. When the music starts to play, everyone stands, and we watch the small wedding party walk down the aisle. Jake's grandmother sits in the front row, looking like the woman behind the curtain happily orchestrating things and now witnessing these nuptials. When the music changes, we all know Violet is next.

In a sea of pale blue chairs and rows of smiling faces, Violet is stunning. Her gown is simple in design and silhouette. The dress is a creamy strapless white mermaid style. It has a lace overlay with a smidge of beading details. I was there when she picked it out in the store. No other dress made her beam with happiness like the one she selected. It was an instant yes.

*If only relationships were just as easy.*

After a short and sweet ceremony, the crowd cheers as the couple kisses and walks back down the aisle together. The wedding party will stay for photos on the beach while the rest of us make our way to Mrs. Barlow's, Jake's grandmother, home for the reception.

Victor tells me he'll meet me at the reception. There's a softness to his face as he watches Sally interact with the newlyweds. It appears everyone around me has fallen in love recently. Just the past few years Bethany and Violet, my two best friends in town, found their soulmates. Then Sally moved to town and our girls' group happily expanded only for her and my brother to fall in love.

I tell myself there's nothing wrong with that. I'm happy for them all.

It just gets a little lonely sometimes. Sometimes I think about dating, looking for someone to share the rest of my life with, but I just can't bring myself to take the risk.

*My partner is my grief, and I don't know when or if that will ever change.*

Often at these big life events I miss Seth, my husband. He was so full of life and love. My heart aches just thinking about his death and the emptiness I've felt ever since his passing. I've built up some walls since then, but the romantic in me still desperately clings to the idea that maybe one day I'll be happy with someone again. That perhaps if it felt right, I'd be open to dating. That my guilt would fade away and I could be open to love.

For now, I refuse to commit to anything other than a casual, no future attached, relationship.

I pull my pashmina more snugly around me, push my bubbling loneliness deep down, and head to the reception. I'm ready for some champagne and dancing.

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## THEODORE

I've never been to a beach wedding before, but I'm glad I made the trip. Jake's bachelor days are well behind him. And as the two exchange vows I can see the happiness in his eyes. I know they're meant to be. Especially after the way he became teary-eyed when Violet came into view. All the classic telltale signs of true love.

It's been a while since I've felt in love.

*One too many heartbreaks can make a person build some sturdy walls.*

That's a decent line, I need to make a note. I pat down my jacket pockets, find my small notepad, and jot it down. Working through writer's block means writing every single little idea or phrase down.

Maybe I'll add a dash of romance to my next mystery novel. Give my lead detective a love life. He can have a better one than me. My history is scattered with a few good relationships with women who ended up only liking me for my money. Everything seems to crash and burn. I'm hesitant now, but I still yearn for a serious and love filled relationship.

*I try my best to protect my heart.*

I let out a quiet sigh as I close the notepad and put it back. My notepad is mostly a bunch of short sentences about catching the bad guy or short plot points that I thought sounded good at some point. My deadline is approaching, and I still don't have the big story figured out. My brain needs time to sort through the tangled mess of ideas and possibilities for the book.

I spoke to Jake a few weeks back about places to stay near Kastle Harbor and he recommended getting one of the Airbnb rooms near downtown.

*Everything is within walking distance, including the beach.*

That's the tagline that sold me on extending my original weekend trip for the wedding to a few weeks. Besides, shuffling between New York City and Toronto was getting to be too much traveling. There hasn't been much time to breathe. I need a break.

I booked my stay, packed up some clothes and my laptop, and headed to Maine.

It may have been a little too easy to drop everything and hit pause on my social life.

I stand on the edge of the beach, in the grassy area, and watch as the crowd around me disperses. Some people are lingering, watching the wedding party take photos by the water, while others are simply chatting with each other. Most people must be here for Violet. I only see a couple of familiar faces from my law school and college days.

I find my way back to my rental car. Jake said the town was a quintessential coastal tourist spot, and that everything is easily walkable, but I feel better having a car at my disposal. Plus, it lets me leave the reception whenever I want. There's always the chance I don't know anyone and just want to get out of there.

*Or if I get a really good book idea and need to sneak off to write.*

Since I'm staying in town, I may explore up and down the coast while here. I booked a few weeks at the Airbnb, but I can always extend my trip or get a different place to stay.

The drive to the reception at Mrs. Barlow's home is easy to navigate. The house sits on a decent amount of land. One of those classic homes built for hosting parties. I walk in and there are people are milling about, glasses of wine in hand.

There are tables inside set up with appetizers and small snacks. I find the seating chart and locate my table out back.

There are a bunch of tables organized around the dance floor. With a live band and open bar, I expect the party to last well into the evening.

I drape my suit jacket over the back of my chair and set off to find the bar. I'm stopped along the way by a woman with the most enchanting eyes. They're reminiscent of a forest, with all the different shades of green.

I prepare myself to be bombarded by questions. It may be a small town, but people out here still read like any other city. Ever since my publisher and the movie studio announced that my mystery book series was slated to be turned into a multi-movie series, my face and name have been everywhere. Some big names are rumored to be attached to the project, too. Every rumor or press release adds sparks to the fire.

But everyone wants something from you when money and fame are involved. I've learned that the hard way, more than once.

"Excuse me, but have you seen the seating chart?" her voice is crisp. She's cute and smells like freshly roasted coffee with a touch of something floral.

"Yes, I am," I stop myself realizing she didn't ask me if I really was *that guy*. I clear my throat before replying, "I have, it's near the front hall, by the staircase."

"Of course!" she exclaims, "I parked and just came in from the back. Thanks for the help!" She lightly squeezes my arm as she flashes a wide smile. Her touch is electric. I'm tongue tied for once.

It's hard to not be mesmerized by her lips as she speaks. They're plump without looking overdone and a deep shade of red like Michigan sweet cherries.

She leaves just as quickly as she arrived, off in search of the seating chart. I didn't even get to ask for her name. Dang it, there must be close to a hundred people here.

*Will I even see her later?*

I'll just have to try to subtly ask Jake about the raven-haired beauty later.

I reach the bar and ask the bartender for a scotch on the rocks. I sip it as I make my way back to the table. I'm stopped twice by two different women wanting to chat. Neither are as stunning as the one who approached me earlier.

Both women inquire who I'm here for— the bride or the groom. After explaining how I know Jake and after putting two and two together, they know that I'm Theodore Birch, mystery writer turned screenwriter. Author of the well-known detective series with a book deal that raked in a few million dollars before the movies were even a done deal.

After some polite conversation, I make an excuse and finally arrive back at my table. I just want to enjoy my scotch and eventual dinner. I'm not in the mood for dancing right now, but I wouldn't mind finding some of my college buddies.

Maybe the night will turn around.

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## MARIE

The Barlow's home is decorated with various white flowers and little bits of the same blue tulle from the beach ceremony. The wedding décor really breathes life into the dark wooden interior. Jake's grandmother must be loving every single moment of this day. Her home is overflowing with guests. Every nook and cranny of the home and yard is full of people, decorations, or food.

*Speaking of which, the food smells amazing.*

I came in from the back and haven't found my way to my table yet. It's been a while since I've attended a wedding, but I assume it will follow the same little rules and schedule like others. Ceremony, photos and appetizers, dinner, and finally dancing the night away.

I went to Bethany's wedding, but hers and Liam's was a very small ceremony with dinner at the Waterfront Bistro in town. Cozy and intimate, unlike the feeling I get from larger weddings like this one. My brother Victor missed it because he was in Brazil on the coffee farm.

But I was here in Kastle Harbor.

*I'm always here.*

I shake those gloomy thoughts off, today is not a day for a pity party. It's a day for a wedding party. To celebrate love, not mourn a loss. Besides, maybe I can just drink enough to be tipsy and dance the night away. Maybe go home with a handsome stranger.

Or eat a lot of sweets. Head home in a sugar coma.

*That outcome is way more likely.*

I haven't dated in years, going home with a stranger wouldn't even be a possibility.

I continue to walk around the different rooms inside. I find the bar, but still no seating chart. With one last look, I decide to just ask the person closest to me. I tap the guy on the shoulder and when he turns to face me, I'm momentarily speechless.

He's wearing grey slacks, a light blue button-down shirt, and a green and blue patterned tie. Typical wedding attire, but everything fits him perfectly.

He seems like the same height as my brother, so he's probably six foot two. His dark blonde hair looks like it's peppered with natural highlights giving him an almost angelic halo. I'd wonder if his hair was dyed but his tanned skin makes me think he just spends a lot of time outdoors. Maybe he's like a California surfer or something.

After he tells me where the seating chart is I thank him and lightly squeeze his arm. It's a gesture that's automatic but I find myself conflicted. I want to linger, to touch him again, but at the same time I feel panic. My heart flutters. I haven't had feelings for another guy in years. It must be just because he's attractive.

*You can't fight natural attraction.*

I can admire him from afar. Maybe I'll run into him later, just to catch his name. Or I'll never see him again. Either way, I'll leave it up to fate.

Right now, I'm ready to celebrate my friends and enjoy the reception.



## TWO

# THEO

I SIP MY SCOTCH AND CONTEMPLATE MAKING A LAP AROUND the inside of the house again when a cheery voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“Hey stranger,” the intriguing woman from earlier greets me as she places her purse and pashmina down on the table. She takes the seat next to me. I lean to the side and try to see the name card, but it’s blocked now by the items.

“Hello.” I set my scotch down and wipe my damp right hand on my thigh. “I don’t think we exchanged names earlier. I’m Theodore Birch. I’m a friend of Jake’s from our college days.”

“Nice to meet you.” She shakes my hand before sitting down. “Marie Brunes. I’m a friend of both Jake and Violet. Although I’ve only more recently know Jake. Violet and I go way back since we’ve both lived here forever.”

“Ah, you’re a Kastle Harbor native then?” I try to not stare at the way her dress hugs her curves.

“I’m originally from Quebec, Canada, but grew up here in town with my grandparents. I run the Moon Brew Coffee Roastery with my brother Victor.” Her eyes scan the room as if she’s looking for him. “His fiancée was the best-woman so I’m sure you’ll run into him later. He’s like a taller, gruffer version of me.” She laughs as she imitates a bodybuilder type muscle man pose with her arms. Showing off nonexistent muscles, but unintentionally providing me with quite a view of her cleavage.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, but I don’t live near here. I split my time between Toronto and New York City. I’m a writer,” I reply, hoping she hasn’t quite realized my low status fame.

“Toronto is a beautiful city,” she replies glossing over my career tidbit. Marie looks around us, twisting in her seat.

Her dress hugs her curves. The silk looks like it was draped and sewn specifically for her body. I resist the urge to reach out and touch. To see if her sun kissed skin is as warm to the touch as I imagine.

There’s a whirlpool of emotions inside of me. I’ve been trying to avoid the whole falling fast for the wrong woman, but at the same time I find myself needing to know if Marie is single. I don’t see a ring, so I assume she isn’t married. I take a sip of my scotch, trying to distract myself from the dirty thoughts that are creeping in.

“Looking for your date?” I ask her, my curiosity getting the best of me.

She faces me, her green eyes holding mine.

“No, I’m not currently in a relationship. Just looking to see if my brother’s fiancée is here yet. They should be at our table. She’s a big reader so I thought maybe she’d like to meet you.” I’m listening to her words, but I’m distracted by her lips once again.

*Are they as sweet as they look?*

I can’t help but lick my lips.

“You don’t know what I write though,” I reply, realizing I didn’t tell her anything besides being a writer. “Or do you know who I am?” My heart drops. Maybe she’s a fan... and my protective wall starts to go up.

“No, I’ve never heard of you. I mainly read Harlequin-type romances and your name is too catchy for me to not remember it. But Sally reads anything and everything when she has time.” Marie tilts her head to the side slightly, as if she’s trying to figure me out.

“Do you want a hint?” I sip my scotch and wait for her response. Her brows draw together as the corners of her mouth pull downward. She looks conflicted, deep in thought. It’s endearing and I can’t help but grin wickedly back at her.

“I want to say something in the thriller genre?” She smirks as if she knows me. “I’m going to say some type of detective story though.”

“Final answer?” I set my drink down. Marie tucks her hair behind her ears and nods in response. “I do write detective novels. But I’m curious. How did you come to that conclusion?”

“I don’t want this to come across as mean,” she murmurs as she fidgets with the hem of her dress.

The music from the wedding band is getting louder. The crowd around us is filling up. Everyone must be back from the beach now. I take Marie’s hand in mine and squeeze it gently. Her skin is soft and her hand warm, either she naturally runs warm or is flushed from embarrassment at the thought of coming across mean to a stranger. All I want to do is feel her lips against mine. To have just a taste of her.

*See if she’s warm everywhere.*

I let her hand go. “You don’t strike me as a mean person.”

“Okay, if you insist. You dress like a professor and your name is kind of on the verge of being very pretentious.” Her entire face is now flushed, her cheeks rosy from embarrassment.

I can’t help but laugh loudly. For the first time in ages someone has made fun of my name. It takes me back to my college days, before my books took off.

“I can’t do much about the clothing quip, but you can call me Theo if it helps make me sound less pompous. All my friends call me Theo anyway.”

“So, we’re friends now?”

Without thinking I reply, “I’d like to be more than friends.”

I don't care about the consequences for my heart right now. We just met and already I feel as though the two of us could easily talk for hours. I want to see what happens between us. Even if it's just a fun night of dancing and conversation.

---

**MARIE**

I don't think my face has ever blushed as much as right now while talking to Theodore.

*No, we're friends now. I can call him Theo.*

I can't remember the last time I felt this warmth spread through my body while just having a conversation with a guy. Heck, it's been almost ten years since I became a widow. I lost my high school sweetheart, my soulmate, at twenty-five. Now at thirty-four, I had sort of given up on ever finding that spark with another person. I've resigned myself to short flings, one-night stands, and anything noncommittal.

But talking to Theo has brought out the flirt in me. It's fun, even if I just indulge in this side of myself for the night.

He admitted he wants to me more than friends, but who knows if that's the truth or just him flirting and wanting someone to pass his weekend with in Kastle Harbor. I'm a little rusty on the actual dating scene.

"Theo it is," I finally reply. I playfully nudge his leg. "I think the happy couple is going to be making their entrance soon and then dinner will be served. I'm going to grab a glass of wine from the bar. Do you want a refill?"

"Sure." He hands me his empty glass. I sniff his cup and wrinkle my nose. It smells way too strong for my likes. He chuckles. "Scotch isn't for everyone, but I'd take another one. On the rocks please."

I head to the bar with his empty glass. I spot Victor and Sally making their way to our table. I'm sure they'll enjoy Theo's company. Maybe Sally knows him already, she did work for Jake for a few years in the city.

I'll have to ask her about Theo later when we're alone. I wonder if he's dating someone or if he's more of a flirt. Maybe one of those playboy types who dates a lot of women. I should've asked him earlier about his relationship status after he asked me about mine.

But why do I care? It's not like I want to date him. I don't date.

*But I'd go on a date with him.*

These conflicting thoughts are giving me a headache. I need to ignore them and have a good time tonight. Besides, it's not like he's going to be in town forever. He said he goes back and forth between New York City and Toronto. No where did he mention staying in Kastle Harbor.

But for the first time in a long time my heart seems to yearn for something more than just night of pleasure. The conversation between us is fun and more importantly, it's easy. Not stiff and uncomfortable like the first few times I tried seriously dating again. It's a lot to think about.

I grab my glass of wine and the scotch on the rocks for Theo. I take a sip of my dry red before walking back to the table.

No need for all these thoughts on dating. Tonight, I want to dance and feel his arms around me. I can't help but smile as I reach the table. Sally is on the other side of Theo and Victor is seated next to her. Bethany and Liam are walking over to our table. It'll be a fun night that's for sure. Compared to Theo, Liam and Victor strike me as more outdoorsy and blue-collar guys. Briefly I worry about what our table will talk about but there's always some common ground at weddings. And if not, dinner and dancing don't necessarily require talking.

The table is already deep in discussion about the best way to cook a turkey. How this came about I have no idea, but I can't help getting instantly absorbed when I sit down next to Theo. He takes a sip of his scotch and mouths a quiet 'thank you' as he squeezes my hand under the table.

These small gestures make my heart flutter.

I need a distraction. I need some air. Some distance between us.

The tables around us start to cheer and stand. The happy couple must be about to make their entrance. Perfect timing. The band announces the new “Mr. and Mrs. Barlow” and the guests clap and whistle. As the duo get seated at their small table, they lift their glasses of champagne and toast a thank you to everyone in attendance.

The tears start to prickle at the corners of my eyes. I grab my napkin to subtly dab them before they start to trickle. Weddings bring up a lot of happy memories for me. I’m happy for Violet finding her own soulmate, but I miss mine.

As I set the napkin back down, I catch Theo watching me, concern on his face. My cheeks warm at the thought of him consoling me by wrapping me in his arms. My voice barely manages a quiet, “I’m fine,” before the couple announces dinner is served and everyone at the table sits down again.

I sip some of my wine before steering the table back into conversation. “I never knew there could be such strong opinions on turkey preparation,” I say, waiting for the private moment between me and Theo to just disappear.

Dinner passes as our table makes its way through the entire thanksgiving feast, including what sides are the best, which vegetables are better because they’re in season, how you should cook the turkey, and even which pies to avoid.

I sneak glances at Theo during the meal to see if he’s enjoying himself or begrudgingly getting through the night at our table. I was right though. Sally and Theo have met before when he visited Jake in the city. She’s also read all his books. They didn’t talk about that more than her saying something about the latest one and how she’s looking forward to the movie.

It’s interesting to hear just how different other peoples’ lives can be from yours.

When dinner is cleared, the speeches are made, and cake is cut. The couple has their first dance together and finally, it’s

time for the dance floor to be in full swing.

The band is playing a variety of classic wedding songs, romantic slow jams, and current pop hits. I find myself swaying to the music as I finish my slice of cake. I look around at the happy couples on the dance floor yearning for what I used to have.

“Care to dance with me?” Theo disrupts my thoughts. He extends his hand, waiting for me to take it. Now that I know he’s a big shot author, I’m curious if he’s ever been denied by a woman.

“I’d love to dance.” I put my hand in his, letting him gently pull me up. I leave my pashmina on my chair and follow him.

He navigates us through the small crowd for a more centered part of the dance floor. As evening set the little fairy type lights were turned on. Under the warm lighting, I admire his square jaw and the way his blue eyes seem to sparkle as if they have flecks of gold glitter in them.

We start to dance to the face paced music the band is playing. Enjoying ourselves in this moment. I’m determined to have a good time. It’s been ages since I’ve gone dancing though. I move my hips to the music, but I find myself unsure of what to with my hands. I can’t help but find a moment of silliness.

“What’s your favorite lame dance move?” I ask Theo as I display the sprinkler dance move. “This is mine.”

I grin as he laughs. I love his laugh, it’s like a full belly laugh that’s loud and genuine.

“That’s a tough question.” He takes my hand and gives me a twirl, lingering, holding my hand for just a moment longer than necessary. He lets go before showing me the shopping cart. “Let’s go with a tie between shopping cart and lawnmower. Both are classic dad moves.”

The music starts to change as we can continue to show off various embarrassing dance moves. As a slow song starts to creep in, Theo places a hand on my lower back. The warmth

radiates through my silk dress and the move sends a shiver down my spine.

It's a classic love story type song. Theo pulls me in closer as the singer croons. My heart pounds faster in my chest and I can only hope that he can't feel it despite my breasts being pushed right up against his chest. I lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder.

A slow dance is just a few minutes of normalcy that comes with being in a partnership. It's something I haven't experienced in quite a while. This glimpse of happiness is bittersweet, but I'm going to savor every minute, nonetheless.

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## **THEODORE**

Marie nestles into my chest, her head on my shoulder as we sway slightly to the music. And at this moment, I never want this night to end. For now, I hold her close and enjoy the way she feels in my arms.

We continue to dance for a while longer. Goofing off with others around us when the fast pop songs make their way back to the band's set list. We laugh. We talk. We enjoy each other's company. As the evening winds down, Marie excuses herself to head back to the table to grab her stuff before she heads home. I walk her to her car, eager for any extra minute together.

"I had a wonderful time tonight, Theodore." Her cheeks are flushed and hair a little wild from the dancing. Yet her eyes are downcast, as if she's unsure of what to say next or embarrassed for having a good time.

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear before I gently tilt her chin upwards. "Call me Theo. We're friends."

Before she slips away from my grasp, I lean down and kiss her gently. As my lips touch hers, she sighs into my mouth. I press my lips firmly, kissing her deeper and with more passion than the simple peck I set out to give her. I don't want to push her, but I'm hungry for more. Once again, I find the small of



her back and pull her against me. She moans softly as I move my tongue in and around hers.

It's a dance of our lips and tongues. Knowing we're in public is all that's holding me back. Her hands hold me tightly, the heat between us seemingly combusting in this one quiet moment of goodbye. She pulls away first, out of breath her chest rising and falling under the twinkling lights. I want to forever remember this kiss.

It means something. Everything.

"I need to go, but maybe we'll run into each other before you leave town," her voice wavers. She pulls her pashmina around her shoulders and snags her bag from the table.

"Or, we don't have to leave it up to chance." I take her free hand in mine. I stare into her forest green eyes once more. "Have dinner with me this week. Just name a place and time." The silence stretches between us. For a second, I feel as if I'm repeating my past mistakes. Falling too fast.

"Okay. Waterfront Bistro, Friday night at six. I'll meet you there and we'll pay separately." Marie pulls her hand from mine and opens her purse. She hands me her phone. "Go ahead and add your contact info and I'll just text you so you have mine."

I can't help but grin. "You drive a hard bargain, but I want to go out to dinner with you. Maybe after this first date you'll see how much of a catch I am and agree to a second one... on *me*." I type my name and number into her phone.

"We'll see." She tucks her phone in her bag before giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. "I had a lovely time today. See you Friday."

"See you Friday," I reply as I watch her get into her car.

I head back inside and scan the crowd. There's still a lot of guests on the dance floor. I look at my watch, it's only nine. I want more time with Marie, but she did agree to a date.

I find Liam and Victor at the bar. I order another scotch and chat with them before finding some friends. It feels good reminiscing and catching up with the guys from college.

*Though not nearly as good as Marie felt in my arms.*

I'll be thinking about our upcoming date all week.

Guess I'll have to write to distract myself. Maybe my publicist will be happy with me taking a break if I manage to write my book while I'm here.

## THREE

# MARIE

THE FIRST COUPLE OF DAYS AFTER THE WEDDING PASSED IN A blur of work, meals, and endless cups of coffee. Wednesday nights are reserved for wine nights with the girls. We rotate between houses and who supplies the wine and snacks.

Tonight, it's at my house and I'm relieved that the three of my closest friends will be coming. Violet and Jake don't leave for another couple weeks for their honeymoon. She's adamant to finish out the tourist season at the bakery and training a new hire before they head off to Europe for a few weeks.

I pace around my kitchen, glass of red in one hand and a piece of chocolate in the other. The kiss between Theo and me weighs heavy on my mind. It's been a few days and I still feel as if it just happened. One moment I'm full of happiness and there's the flutter of butterflies in my stomach. Then just as suddenly, the guilt comes crashing down on my joy and the uneasiness of something new starts twisting my insides. It's like a badly mixed cocktail slushing inside of me.

*Do I treat the date as the start of something new and let the relationship blossom?*

*Or do I succumb to guilt and go on the date with the expectation that it's the last time I'll see Theo?*

Just as I finish my chocolate the doorbell rings. Sally and Bethany arrive with their arms full of baked goods.

"We're bringing all the goodies deemed unacceptable for Sprinkles Bakery & Café." Bethany laughs. Her vibrant red curls bouncing with her head movements. True to her colorful

self, she's dressed in a pink and red polka dot blouse and solid red skirt.

"I assume Violet is running late?" I ask, ushering them to the kitchen. "This is way too many sweets for just the four of us." I set everything out. They brought cookies, cupcakes, and a few slightly smushed looking Danishes.

"Well, you never know, just take them to the roastery tomorrow. Give to whoever stops by for coffee pickups. Violet's been training Anne for when she leaves on her honeymoon, so they've been making a bunch of sweets. She doesn't want us to sell the misfits in the store," Bethany shrugs and grabs a cookie before heading to the living room.

My living room is probably my favorite room in the house. Cozy with two grey velvet couches, a navy rug, and dark oak coffee and end tables. I have a fireplace that I love to use in the evenings, and my mantle has pictures and candles. Everything is well loved, being a family home. I've updated all the appliances and some minor things like paint and wallpaper.

Sally skims over the sweets, selecting two cookies, and heads to my living room. I grab three empty glasses and follow them.

"Wine?" I gesture to the selection I already have on the coffee table.

"Yes please, white," Sally mumbles, mouth full of cookie, crumbs falling as she speaks.

The three of us burst into laughter. This is exactly what I needed. Laughing feels good right now. I start pouring wine and the doorbell rings again. Bethany goes to get it and Violet joins us. She's empty handed and plops on the couch, sinking into the cushions.

After a lot of gushing about her wedding, Violet asks me what I thought about Theodore.

"We weren't quite sure where to sit him since all of Jake's other friends are married." She sips her wine.

I set my glass down, anxiously folding and unfolding my hands, “He was quite the gentleman.” I can feel my cheeks warm, a flush coming over me as I think about our goodnight kiss once again.

*It was one heck of a kiss that I desperately want to repeat.*

“Somehow I suspect there’s a little bit more to that,” Bethany quips. All three sets of eyes are on me and while I feel nervous, I also need help.

“We kissed, and now we’re going on a date Friday night and everything just feels like a mess already,” my words spill out.

“Are you worried about the date itself? Or something else?” Bethany pours some more wine. “First date jitters are normal for anyone. Whether you just want to have fun or you’re looking for something exclusive.”

“I suppose it’s a little bit of nervousness around going a date,” I stumble trying to find the right words. “After Seth died, I went on a few dates with the potential for a serious relationship on my mind, but everything just felt messy and wrong. I just feel a little guilty still.”

“It’s been almost ten years, right?” Sally inquires, knowing my history from past talks. “I understand the grief, but you shouldn’t feel guilty.”

“She’s right Marie,” Violet adds. “Seth loved you so much. You guys were the high school sweethearts we all wished would make it the end of time. It was clear to anyone who saw you two. You know he’d want you to be happy. And if dating Theo makes you happy then you should see what happens.”

She’s right. I deserve a chance of happiness. Seth wouldn’t want me to be alone forever.

“He’s only here for a bit though,” I murmur, mulling over their words. The relationship having an expiration date should make me feel easier about it, but there’s something holding me back.

“That’s what they all say,” Bethany giggles through the words and the rest of join her as we think about how they’ve

all landed their partners the last few years. One half of each of my friends' relationships are outsiders who fell in love and decided to move to town.

“Besides, one date doesn't lock you into anything. Instead, it could help you decide how you feel about dating in general. If you enjoy Theodore's company, then go on a few dates and have a good time. If it feels weird and uncomfortable, you know he's leaving town in a week or so and you won't have to worry about accidentally running into him at the bakery.”

Violet makes a really good point.

I'm nervous and psyching myself out before I even really gave the date a chance. It's a good plan – go into the date expecting nothing but a resolve of feelings about dating in general. Theo doesn't have to be the one. He could just be an entertaining night.

*Maybe one that ends in another magnificent make out session.*

I've gone on a few dates. They were weird and awkward. Then a few flings and one-night stands, but everything felt messy. My few hours with Theo at the reception were lovely and I do want to see him again. While I still hold onto a little sliver of guilt, the pressure I've been putting myself under about Friday night seems to start to melt away.

“Now, about the kiss...” Sally leans in, asking for the full details. “Tell us about the moment that makes you blush redder than Bethany's hair.”

I can help but choke on my wine. My living room is full of laughter, and it feels right. While most wine nights are just like this, I've never had one where I'm on the spot talking about anything remotely swoon worthy.

“It started with him tucking my hair behind my ear.” I demonstrated, all eyes on me. My friends all too eager for the entire play by play. And I happily deliver.

Before the evening ends, I have an outfit picked out for Friday, half the pastries are gone, and my heart feels full.

Romantic love is important, but strong friendships are what has gotten me through the past ten years.

For the first time in a long time, I'm excited about the prospect of going on a date. I find myself going to bed looking forward to date night, the uneasiness never bubbles to the surface.

Now to just get through the next couple of days without overthinking anything.

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## THEODORE

The first deadline to get a huge chunk of my manuscript to my editor is quickly approaching. Basically, half my book is due in a month, plus the overall direction of the book. The movie studio wants to know the direction the series is going as they work on their final casting and scripts.

I'm frustrated though and I still can't quite figure out the direction to take my detective. I have the story started and I don't need much to finish and send off to my editor, but I just can't figure out the details and stick to it. I've changed my mind several times now, rewriting scenes and potential plot points.

My desk is a mess of folders, notebooks, and miscellaneous writing supplies. I much prefer to handwrite bits and pieces, but the major chunks get typed on my laptop.

*Sometimes I am as pretentious as my name sounds.*

I sort through some of my folders and notes I have scattered about. Everything is disorganized. My mind has been preoccupied since the wedding. I thought maybe I'd dive right back into my story, but alas, I've just been thinking about Marie ever since I got home from the reception.

*I've been daydreaming about her like a love-struck teenager.*

Our date is Friday and I keep thinking about her lips.

And the way her dress hugged her hips.

And the way she felt in my arms.

I need to start thinking about baseball or I'm going to be taking another very cold shower that ends in frustration. I can't believe she's single.

*Maybe she's divorced or recently got out of a relationship.*

I didn't come to Kastle Harbor for romance. I came for my friend's wedding and to get over my writer's block. I need to switch gears and get back to writing. I clean up my desk and try some meditation techniques to help get back on track, but my mind won't stop wandering. I'm determined to get something written today though. I need to make progress before my date.

I flip through my pocket-sized notepad and start copying some of the notes and phrases onto a blank word document.

I have my main plotline figured out but with the thought of the series becoming movies, I feel like there's something missing. One of the notes I type is about building walls around a person after heartache. As soon I see the words on the screen I think back to my own instances of broken hearts over the years.

Flashbacks of my college years and my first couple of long-term relationships come up. I think about the good parts and how I could incorporate some romance into my story for my lead detective. I think I've had him go one too many books of solving mysteries and going home for a whiskey alone. Perhaps it's time for him to be in love.

I write out some potential ways to work in a partner. My detective could run into her on a case, she could be a new cop in the station, or a psychologist he goes to for advice on his case. The possibilities are endless. My list is getting longer and longer. I decide to just bite the bullet, pick one way to incorporate the woman in the detective's life, and just start typing.

I don't pay attention to the time. I'm in the zone, my full focus is on my laptop screen. The word count is rising. A few hours later I break to make some tea. As I settle back at my



desk my phone rings. Glancing at the screen I see that it's my publicist, Jackson. With a loud exasperated sigh, I decide to just answer it.

"Mr. Birch, how's your vacation?" The soft clacks of his keyboard are like white noise to me now. Jackson is always working on something in the background.

"Jackson, call me Theo. We've talked about this." I take my phone call to the living room. The windows are huge and the natural sunlight coming in today makes me yearn for getting outside.

"Yes sir." He clears his throat. "Theo, how's your break from the city?"

"It's been an excellent reset for my system," I reply, staring out the front windows, letting the sun seep into my skin. Being in the zone means the second I hang up I'll be right back at my desk hunched over my laptop. I won't reemerge from the den until the moon is out.

"Good to hear. We've been speaking with the marketing team and your editor, and we have the drafted schedule for your book tour. We're thinking towards the end of fall for a release. Maybe mid-October for the launch party in Toronto before heading to Los Angeles and New York City."

"Jackson, they don't even have the book yet. Don't you think it's a little ambitious to start a book tour this fall? What if my editor hates the manuscript?" I start to pace around the room. My deadline is approaching and I'm sure I'll work out the kinks to my story, but there's no way I'll be done with edits and revisions and ready to publish before fall.

"With all the commotion we're getting with the movie deal we want to take full advantage and ride the wave of success. This is the best route to do that. We'd prefer to start the tour mid-August, but we don't have everything back yet from the different cities. You're back in Toronto next week, right? We have documents for you to sign and the marketing team wants you in on a few meetings for your launch party."

“No, not next week,” I pause and consider my return plans. I just started to get somewhere with my book. “I think I’ll be here through the end of the summer. Maybe back early August.”

Jackson is silent on the other end. The typing ended and I momentarily think the call got dropped.

“August?” he croaks.

“Sorry but I’m doing this. It’s what I need for the book.” My tea is cold and my mouth dry. I wonder how many dates I can go on with Marie before I leave. Or if she’d do long distance. Maybe we’d alternate who’d fly back and forth.

*I’m getting way ahead of myself.*

One evening with the woman and I’m already contemplating using miles to fly her out to Toronto. Falling too fast, I need to reign it in. We haven’t even had our first date yet.

I sigh and rub my forehead, waiting for Jackson to reply and argue over my plan.

“If you can finish the book and send it to your editor by the end of August, we will expedite everything else. Because of the movie deal everything is already on the fast track anyways.” He’s running through everything more quickly now. I wonder if he has a meeting that I’m keeping him from. “We’ll email the documents, do virtual meetings, and move forward with things at a quicker pace. The book tour dates are basically finalized but we’ll still need your final approval.”

“I can handle all of that.”

“Okay then,” his typing sounds return, “I must run, I have a meeting. Please keep a constant eye on your email and keep your phone with you. Enjoy the beach. Bye, Mr. Birch.”

“Bye, Jackson.” I don’t even correct him on my preferred nickname. There’s no point. He’s a suit and tie, briefcase, last names kind of guy. Jackson is a professional through and through.

As I tuck my phone into my back pocket, I think about extending my stay here. But just as I sit down to start figuring out my Airbnb situation, I see my story up on my screen and get an idea for the scene. I have found my groove again.

I'm sure I'll be at my desk until my date on Friday.

I'm in Kastle Harbor for writing, not romance. It's my new mantra.

*I just hope it works.*

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## MARIE

Thank goodness it's finally Friday. Work has been crazy busy. Bethany was right about the extra pastries. People loved having them while they waited for me to collect their pre-orders or fill their in-store requests. We didn't have any for the tasting classes on Thursday night.

*I'll have to ask Victor his input on further expanding our business relationship with Sprinkles Bakery & Café.*

Right now, we're their main supplier for coffee beans. They don't make any coffee drink without our product. The success of the pastries has me thinking that we should consider stocking some of their pastries as little goodie bags. Small bundles of cookies or biscotti available for people to add on to their purchases in the retail space. Or just buying pastries and baked goods on a day-to-day basis for having in the roastery. I jot my idea down on my fridge's dry erase board. I wonder if Theo likes biscotti with his morning coffee.

I groan out loud, exasperated at my current situation. My stomach is still funky, I look for some indigestion medicine in my bathroom.

If only I hadn't woken up this morning to a text from Theo.

**Theo: Good morning, Marie, looking forward to tonight.**

I typed and deleted my message a couple of times before just responding with something similar.

**Marie: Can't wait! See you at the restaurant.**

Even though it's just a simple text exchange, my stomach has reverted to being a bundle of knots. My bliss of approaching the date with no cares about the outcome just disappeared the moment I saw his text.

I'm meeting Theo at the restaurant in an hour and while I showered and blow dried my hair, I still haven't gotten dressed. In my robe I made some peppermint tea and continued to just sit with my thoughts. I sigh and stretch my arms and legs.

It's just a date with a guy that leaves in a week or two.

It's no big deal.

*But why won't my stomach untwist itself?*

The outfit that the ladies of wine night put together consists of a sleeveless emerald green silk blouse and a black leather pencil skirt. It's modest, perfect for the chilly summer evening weather we've been having, and still hot as all hell. The blouse's silk shines and plays up my eye color while the skirt fits me as if it sculpted just for my hips. Sally recommended basic pumps but I'm torn between my black peep toe heels and my silver sandals. The heels are sexy, but the sandals are comfortable. I go with the heels, a single gold bracelet, and gold stud earrings.

I don't like a lot of fuss. My hair is down and after some simple makeup choices, I am ready to go. I snag my purse, double check the contents, and head off to the restaurant.

I park and see that I have five minutes until meeting Theo. I check my phone, no texts from him, just a couple in my wine night group chat wishing me good luck.

**Sally: Hope you went with the heels. Remember, it's not serious, just a fun night.**

**Bethany: Don't overthink anything. Remember to take a deep breath.**

**Violet: We expect all the details tomorrow at the bakery.**

**Bethany: Yes! Coffee and pastries in exchange for the details!**

**Sally: I'll tell Victor to open the roastery tomorrow, so no excuses. Have fun!**

I can't help but smile at my phone. Their various forms of encouragement are exactly what I needed. I double check my makeup in the car mirror and then head into the restaurant.

As Bethany reminded me, I take a deep breath as I open the door. The sounds of people eating and chatting wash over me. As always, the Waterfront Bistro smells amazing and despite the uneasiness of it earlier, my stomach is now grumbling, hungry for whatever special they have on the menu.

I check in and notice that Theo isn't here yet. I go ahead and let the hostess seat me. As soon as I take a sip of my water, I see him approaching. I must stop myself from audibly gasping like a teenage girl.

His muscular frame is more on display than at the wedding. His clothing is fit without looking too tight. But you can tell that he works out. He's wearing grey slacks, a white button-down shirt, and a dusty blue sweater. The crispness of the white collar really shows off his tanned skin. The sweater looks soft, like something I'd want to nuzzle my face in. As he approaches all I can think about is him holding me in his arms, me running my fingers through his hair, and of course where his hands would be touching me.

I feel my cheeks warming.

*Of course, I'm blushing, I'm imagining Theo undressing me.*

*Letting his hands wander over my naked body.*

I take a sip of water as he reaches the table. It's going to be a long night followed by either a cold shower or a romance book. Or both and some time with a battery-operated good time.

## FOUR

# THEO

I'M RIGHT ON TIME WHEN I WALK INTO THE RESTAURANT. THE hostess greets me enthusiastically and when I mention I'm meeting someone, she gives me a swift nod and beckons me to follow her into the dining area. Instantly, like a moth attracted to a flame, I see Marie.

She takes my breath away. It's as if everything else around her falls away. The people chatting just a light buzz in my ear. She's sitting alone drinking water when we make eye contact. Her piercing eyes stare right into mine, holding my gaze as I approach the table and sit. Marie's green top brings out her eyes and shows off her tanned skin. Her outfit looks simple from where I'm sitting, but she's stunning.

*She'd be gorgeous dressed in a baggy t-shirt and sweatpants.*

I'd still want to run my hands all over her body, feeling every inch of her until memorized. Nonetheless, this is a first date.

*Get a grip Theo.*

"I hope you weren't waiting on me too long." I place my napkin on my lap and open the menu.

"I actually got seated right before you walked in." She sips her water some more. "Have you eaten here before?" She scrunches her face up as if she's trying to figure something out. "I guess I don't know when you got to town."

"I got here the day before the wedding and settled in my Airbnb. It's quite close to here, I walked tonight," I scan the

menu momentarily, “but to answer your question, no I haven’t eaten here yet. I did have pizza from that family style place. It was good.”

Marie’s face lights up as I talk. As if the positive opinion I have of Kastle Harbor makes her feel like a proud mom.

“Kal’s Pizza? They’re amazing. They have one with honey that is delicious,” she drawls out the syllables at the end and makes a little chef’s kiss gesture that leads to the two of us chuckling like school kids.

The waitress comes and takes our drink orders. I haven’t picked an entree yet, so we get calamari to share as an appetizer.

“It’ll be hard not to get pizza every week I’m here.” I sip my scotch as I try to figure out if I want a steak or not. “Do you have any other restaurant recommendations?”

“How long are you staying?” She tilts her head. “I assumed you’d be leaving in a week or two like all the other people that flew in for the wedding.”

“That was my plan originally, but I managed to get quite a bit of progress done for my book. My publicist doesn’t need me back in Toronto until the beginning of August. I figure I’ll stay here until then.”

Marie’s eyes widen as I speak. “So, about two months in Kastle Harbor?” She drinks her wine before continuing, “That’s a lot of restaurant meals. I’d say you should add the Railway Tavern to your list.”

Our appetizer arrives as she talks. We place the rest of our order.

“I’ll cook a lot at the rental but it’s nice to get out and about while I’m writing. Sometimes I lose track of time and cooking isn’t practical.”

“I’d suggest getting breakfast or lunch at Violet’s bakery.” She munches on the calamari between us. “They serve the best coffee.” She winks at me.

“I take it you have something to do with that?”

Marie has a bit of sauce on her mouth. I'm tempted to reach out and wipe it off with my thumb.

*I wonder if she would find the action too forward? But we've already kissed.*

I hesitate too long, as I set my fork down, finally deciding to give in to my desire to touch her, she uses her napkin to get it. I take a drink to hide the disappointment from flashing across my face.

"I think I mentioned that I run Moon Brew Coffee Roastery with my brother, Victor. You met him at the wedding. He oversees the growing and distribution. I mainly handle the physical store and all the events."

"When did you guys start the roastery?"

"Actually," she pauses for a moment, as if she's unsure of how much personal information she wants to share. I get it, it's just a first date.

I've been on a lot of dates and normally the women are very forthcoming, no pauses or moments of silence.

Marie is different.

Not in a bad way, but in a refreshing way. Our food arrives and we start to eat. We both murmur good things about the taste.

She sets her fork down, her gaze intense but voice feathery, "I started the roastery with my brother and my husband, Seth, essentially right out of college. My brother and I were interested in starting a business here in town. Seth was into the agricultural aspect of coffee." Marie's eyes get misty, her gaze softens as she talks. "Seth died a few years after we started the company and my brother sort of filled the gap that I needed to keep it running."

I extend my hand and place it on top of hers. I give it a small squeeze as I offer my condolences.

"It's tough to lose a loved one." I take my hand back, giving her some space. I've never lost a partner, but I've also never been married, so I'm unsure of how she must be feeling.



“I’m sorry, I know it’s not really first date material,” she dabs her eyes, “but it’s something I thought should be mentioned sooner rather than later. I’m not quite ready for anything serious. In fact, I haven’t done a serious relationship since Seth. I didn’t want to start off on the wrong foot, I want to be open and honest.”

“I promise to be honest in return.” Seeing her dealing with this sadness, I never want to be the cause for her tears, only her happiness.

I write mystery novels; my detective is always searching for the truth. In all the scenes I’ve written, it’s always easier to tell the truth.

I wonder how long it took her to even consider the possibility of dating. It’s an impossible situation to imagine. I try to think about what would’ve happened if I had gone through with my engagement in my early twenties. That if I was blissfully unaware of her alternative motives and madly in love, how would I react if she died? Would I mourn the loss of my better half? My young love-struck heart would say I would never even look for another partner out of respect for my lost love. And if that happened now?

*That’s tricky. My heart is too damaged from the past.*

For now, I choose to enjoy this time with the beautiful woman in front of me.

We continue to enjoy our meal together and the conversation returns to more surface level topics. We talk about her favorite places near Kastle Harbor, including which towns nearby she thinks I should explore in my free time. She asks me questions about my books but only regarding how I started writing and found myself switching career plans in college.

As we finish dessert, I try to think of something to keep the night going. I want to invite her for a walk along the beach or something. We split the check, as previously agreed upon, and I walk her to her car. For the first time this evening I’m seeing her ensemble in its entirety, and I appreciate the view of her ass as she walks ahead of me.

The way her hips sway as she walks in the snug leather skirt are making it difficult to look anywhere else.

“Thank you for a lovely evening, Marie.” I lean down and lightly kiss her cheek. Unsure of how forward is too forward despite the previous kiss we’ve shared. “Drive safely.”

She shifts her weight side to side, playing with the keys in her hand. “Would you like to come back with me for a coffee? I know it’s a short walk, but I’m happy to drive you home afterwards.”

My heart pounding like it’s running a sprint inside my chest. I’m over the moon but don’t want to appear too eager.

“I would love to.” I grin as I walk around the car and hop in the passenger seat.

I try to subtly take a deep breath as she gets situated in the driver’s seat and takes off. I am just glad to know that she is also interested in keeping this night going. Marie said she isn’t ready for a serious relationship, but I am hopeful that she’ll change her mind.

I’ve fallen fast and hard for women in the past, but this feels different. Marie doesn’t strike me as the type of woman who cares about money and fame. I want to see where this goes, even if it ends in heartache.

*I can always write about it. Maybe my detective gets his heart broken.*

*Or everyone gets a happily ever after.*

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## **MARIE**

My heart is pounding so strongly in my chest, I fear it’ll jump out of my body at any moment. I turn the music on for the short drive to my home. I’m having such a wonderful time with Theo. I don’t want the evening to end.

He’ll be in Kastle Harbor for a couple of months, but I don’t know if I have enough courage to do a second date and put myself through the pre-date anxiety again.

Instead, I am opting for the live in the moment approach. I'll see where the evening goes. Maybe we'll have coffee, talk, and I'll drive him home.

*Or maybe we'll end up tangled up in my sheets.*

I enjoy Theo's company and I want to enjoy his body. My hang up is on the serious relationship bit, not on the lustful siren that seems to be floating the surface.

Once in my home I happily take my heels off and show Theo into the living room first.

"I was expecting much more of a rustic interior based on the log cabin exterior," he tells me as I give him the very short tour. My house is a simple two bedroom and bathroom, but it was my grandparents', and it holds a special place in my heart.

"It's the perfect combination for me." I pull out decaf coffee beans as he stands at my kitchen island. I feel his eyes on me even as my back is turned to him, yet I'm not nervous. I'm in my home, I feel much more relaxed than I did at the restaurant. I start the coffee maker and grab some mugs.

"Your kitchen is lovely. Do you cook a lot?"

"Most dinners." I pour the coffee and hand him a mug.

We settle on the couch. There's an empty couch cushion in between us. I sit with my legs tucked under me. I'm mentally cursing the leather pencil skirt I chose to wear. Not the best lounge wear, but it is first date appropriate.

*Did it give me confidence? Yes.*

So, it's worth being momentarily uncomfortable.

I noticed his eyes on my ass when we walked outside the restaurant. It was indeed worth it. If even just for the boost of confidence about myself. However, right now, as I blow softly on my coffee, I wish I was in my pajamas.

"I dated this girl a few years ago who had a top of the art kitchen." He sips his coffee. "New appliances, expensive pots and pans, the whole shebang. But she never cooked. It was all for show when she hosted parties."

His words make me tense. This is the first time he's really disclosing his dating history. We're both in our thirties, he must have some sort of past just like me.

I wince, he's also a well-known author so it must be a very rich relationship history. I want to ask more, to have a number or something. At the same time, I don't want to know. My stomach is in knots, the uneasiness like getting off a rollercoaster that had a bunch of loops.

It'll never be serious between us. It's not what I want.

*Ergo, his answer doesn't matter. I need to chill.*

I'm curious so I bite the bullet and just ask, "Have you ever been married?"

"Almost. I was engaged once. Things just didn't work out," he trails off. "I've dated here and there but with my work and traveling a lot it's hard to be in a serious, committed relationship. Usually, the other person gets annoyed that I can only call at certain times. Or that they can't fly with me for trips. Those sorts of issues."

"I don't know when I'll be ready to attempt a serious relationship again." I set my mug on the table. I wouldn't mind a summer romance. I'd be the Cinderella of romance. We could go on a few dates, have some flirty fun, and when Theo leaves for Toronto, I'll return to my regular life.

He sets his cup down and closes the distance between us. "Would you consider a relationship where there's no expectations on what the future looks like? Basically, a fling of sorts."

Words escape me. It's like he read my mind. Is a fling or even just a one-night stand worth the potential turbulence of feelings afterwards? I doubt I'd catch feelings, but my brain is playing ping pong with all the what-ifs.

*Do I go for it?*

Let my heart heal at its own pace but enjoy this time with Theo.

*Or I do take things slow?*

Tonight, I decide to give in, to let go.

There's obviously something between us. The heat of our first kiss more passionate than I would've ever expected. With a hunger I didn't quite realize until I touch his lips with mine again. I kiss him deeply.

He puts his hands on either side of my face, pulling me gently towards him, caressing my face as we kiss. His hands are warm against my skin, I want him to feel more of my body.

*His fingers could be doing something much more pleasure inducing than this.*

I moan softly into Theo's mouth, shifting my weight, easing my knees in between his thighs. I untuck my blouse as we kiss, our tongues intertwined.

I'm eager for more, to move faster. But Theo pulls back from the kiss. We're both breathing heavy. He reaches for my waist, pulling me closer to him. I can feel his hard dick against my leg. Theo smells like the ocean breeze and vanilla, maybe a hint of caramel.

*Delicious*, I lick my lips.

"How far do you want to go?" he purrs into my ear. "I will respect your wishes, but I need to know now Marie."

His breath is hot, and I feel the fire in my lower abdomen igniting. My body is a cocktail of emotions but only one is taking charge tonight—lust.

I need him. I crave him.

Even if it's just for a night, I want this experience with Theo.

I lean back just far enough to start unbuttoning my blouse. "As far as you'll go."

I toss my blouse over my shoulder. Theo's hands grip my thighs the moment my top hits the floor. He pulls me on top of his lap. With hungry eyes he claims my mouth once more.

FIVE  
THEO

MARIE'S WORDS ARE KEROSINE POURING OUT ONTO THE FIRE between us. Her hands are canvassing my chest, pushing my sweater further and further until I pull away and take it off.

*Too much clothing between the two of us.*

I stand and start to unbutton my shirt as Marie scootches to the edge of the couch, her skirt bunching up but she remains clothed.

*For now.*

I want to feel the leather move across her thighs. To cause her goosebumps as the warmth and texture changes.

Marie bites her lower lip as I start to remove my pants. I slide them down, stepping out of one leg and then the other. I remove my socks while I'm at it.

I'm sure we'll be doing scandalous activities all night long, until both of our bodies are glistening in sweat and we can barely catch our breath.

*I want her to scream my name.*

She beckons me closer, crooking a finger. Her eyebrows arching mischievously as I saunter over, not stopping until her face is level with my hardened cock. Her warm hands ease my briefs down. My muscles tense,

Her movements are light, like a feather skimming across my muscles. It's ticklish yet turning me on with each second. My eyes are closed as she takes my cock in her hands and slowly starts to move them up and down. One hand is working

my shaft in a vertical fashion, gradually increasing in speed, while the other hand is tenderly squeezing one ball. Then the other. It's gentle but pleasing.

I can't help but moan "Marie" as she takes my arousal in her mouth.

The change of temperature, the movement of her tongue. From top to bottom, one hand still softly massaging my balls. My legs are starting to shake as she continues.

*I want to see Marie's face.*

I can't finish yet. The night has only begun.

I look down, her emerald eyes sparkling like jewels. I run my fingers through her hair. I try to cup the base of her head as gently as possible to move her head away from my groin. She pulls back, her cheeks rosy and lips plump like strawberries. Swollen from kissing earlier. They're bruised, sweet, and begging for me to taste.

I kneel in front of her, her rug providing my knees with some much-needed padding for what I want to do next. Up close she smells of coffee and something floral, perhaps a sweet, fruity, and sensual jasmine.

*First step, remove her clothing.*

Her skin is velvety soft under my hands. I unzip her skirt and glide it over her thighs and carelessly toss it aside. Clad in a matching black lace set, I can't help but pause.

*A goddess indeed.*

I unclasp her bra, easing the delicate straps off her shoulders until it joins the other discarded garments somewhere on her floor. Marie lets out a sharp gasp as I take one nipple into my mouth. As lightly as I can, I flick my tongue over the bud. I start to knead my fingers over the other breast as she arches her back, pressing her breasts further in my face.

My member twitches as she moans my name, dragging out the end.

I switch breasts, focusing my tongue on the other. I start to move south. My fingers rubbing over her panties. She's soaked, rubbing her thighs together, squirming in anticipation. I pull myself away from her bust to maneuver her underwear off. I spread her thighs apart enough to bury my head at her core.

Marie leans back, on her elbows, her dazzling eyes watching me move. I tease her, lightly and slowly I drag my tongue up and down her folds. One of my hands is on her thigh holding her in place as I continue my motions. I dip my tongue in and out, plunging it at different speeds until her thighs are trembling.

"Theo, I need more," her voice raspy. It's intoxicating when she says my name.

I quicken my pace, moving a finger in and out of her tunnel as I lap at her center. She moves her hips moaning murmurs of pleasure as she presses herself firmly against my face. seeking more. Her body shakes as her hands clutch the cushions.

She shouts out and I happily lap up her sweet taste, gripping her thighs as she rides the wave of pleasure until her hips slowly stop rocking.

Her body relaxes, hands unclench and her legs droop. I lean back to admire the view. She's breathing heavy, her breasts moving up and down as she tries to catch her breath.

*The stunning woman is all mine.*

Momentarily I panic at the thought that pops in my head, but as Marie starts to sit up, I can't help but want to ravage this woman. There's been no need to ask what she likes or wants.

Everything feels natural and our bodies feel in sync.

This is love, feeling so in tune with another.

*Nope, not going there.*

I push my thoughts aside and focus on the exquisite woman here with me.



I scoop her up in my arms, holding her against my chest, her naked body wrapped up by mine. I know where the bedroom is from the tour earlier and start to carry her there.

The need to feel her orgasm around my cock now taking charge of my actions.

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## MARIE

Theo's voice is deep. I can feel it reverberate as my head rests against his chest.

"I need to have you, Marie."

It's good to feel wanted.

I invited Theo over for coffee because I didn't want the evening to end, but a mind-blowing orgasm isn't the worst outcome to happen. When I think about even more from him, I'm even more wet than before. My nipples harden at the thought of him plunging his large manhood inside of me.

"I want that too Theo," my voice raspy. He carries me to my bedroom and gently places me down. My room is dark, the soft glow of the hallway light illuminates his Adonis figure. Each muscle on display. My duvet is cold under my bare body.

His eyes are hungry, and I know I'm the meal.

"I need to get a condom." He turns to leave before I can tell him I have a box in my nightstand for the second round.

Theo returns and climbs into the bed with me. His wide shoulders and broad chest seem to envelope me entirely. I feel the weight of him as he settles on top of me. His fully erect dick is twitching against my thigh. He kisses me, cupping my head, his hand fisting my hair.

I can't get enough of this man.

*And he's all mine.*

I shouldn't think like that. It's just a night together.

His lips are devouring me, he smells like the salty beach air. It's intoxicating. I move my hands to try to guide him to

my entrance. I wiggle my hips, trying to get better situated without breaking our kiss.

Theo pulls away and nuzzles my shoulder, lightly nipping me. “Not yet.”

I can’t help but giggle. “I can’t believe you bit me.”

God, I love the way the tiny lines on the sides of eyes crinkle as he playfully smirks at me.

“I guess I’ll just need to slow things down, have another taste of you,” he growls, shifting his weight as he kisses my collarbone. Then grazing my nipple with his tongue, before continuing his trail of kisses downwards. I pinch my lips together, trying to hide the grin on my face. I can’t help but squirm beneath him.

My body aches with need. I move my hands down his chest as I wrap a hand around his manhood. I can feel his body tense as I touch him. I feel uninhibited, craving every inch of his body against mine.

“Theo, I need you,” I whimper.

He starts to caress my folds, rubbing them with his fingers. I can’t help but moan as he pinches one of my nipples. I grind my hips against his hand. He pulls away momentarily. The cold air shocking against my skin. But the crinkle of a wrapper lets me know that he’s getting a condom.

I arch my back eager for him to enter me, to fill me up. He joins me once more on the bed, pulls me close, lifting one leg over his shoulder.

“You’re beautiful Marie,” he murmurs and kisses my leg before he presses his shaft against my throbbing clit. He eases into me, slowly at first, until filling me entirely.

I want to feel all of him. I clutch his ass in my hands, digging my nails as he increases his pace. My body is on fire, and I’m gritting my teeth as the climax builds inside me. Everything is tightening, I can feel his muscles clenching beneath my hands. We’re close.

He releases my leg and turns me over. I'm on my forearms and he grips my hips as he drills his cock into me. From this angle everything feels so much deeper. He's able to touch one of my breasts, gently squeezing the nipple as I grip the duvet covers.

I want to feel him, to return the attention, but that thought drifts away as I moan.

Finally, it's like a rubber band snapping inside of me and the waves of pleasure crash into me. I shout his name as he pumps. His rocking slower, he empty's himself into the condom before pulling out.

He kisses me gingerly and goes to clean up. I lay there, my heart beating loudly in my chest, out of breath and feeling worshipped. I think my heart is starting to thaw.

*Is this how it feels to be loved?*

No, it's just been a while since I've connected with anyone like this. A few orgasms that make see stars does not mean I'm falling for Theo.

He returns from my bathroom, a goofy grin on his face, before bounding into bed with me. Still fully nude he pulls me close to him, spooning me. He kisses my head.

I can't help but think how perfectly we fit together in this moment. He makes me feel warm and safe.

And loved.

In the silence between us, as we catch our breath, I wonder if I'm starting to have actual feelings for Theo.

*Nonsense, it's just been a great dinner and an even better evening.*

It's nothing serious. It can't be.

Somehow, as if we spend every night together, we both drift to sleep, naked in each other's arms.

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**THEO**

I wake to the sound of a coffee grinder. I stretch and realize I'm in Marie's bed. Her bed smells like coffee and oranges. I notice the clock says seven and wince. Much too early for me. I scan the room for my pants before remembering we left our clothes in the living room.

*No reason to be shy now.*

I shrug and get out the bed. As soon as I stand, I see my clothes neatly folded and laying on the chair in the corner of her room. Her little book nook. I imagine her curled up, reading a book, all cozy in her room. I wonder if she blushes when she reads her romance books.

I put my clothes on, opting to leave the sweater off for now. I don't bother to button all the buttons on my shirt. I join Marie in her living area. She's dressed in a pair of maroon shorts and a grey shirt. She's breathtaking with her tousled hair and her rosy cheeks.

"Good morning." She pours coffee into two mugs and gestures to her dining table.

"Good morning." I kiss her cheek before taking the mug from her hand. "Thank you for the coffee."

"It's a hazelnut blend from the roastery. Hope you enjoy it."

"I don't think I'll enjoy anything as much as I enjoyed last night," I murmur, letting the coffee's sweet and nutty aroma fill my nostrils.

"Last night was spectacular." She sips her coffee and we sit in comfortable silence. As if we do this every morning.

I find it hard to think of something witty to say. I want to ask her out again. I want to see her more, to spend another night together. But I don't know what she expects. What she wants. All I know is how I feel.

I want to follow where my heart is going, but my ever-watchful gut stops me. I want to kiss her goodnight and talk about the future together. But it's too fast. Hesitancy grips me, as if shaking me violently, trying to get me to sort my feelings out for once in my life.

I want this woman, but my past isn't even the last hurdle.

I can't fall in love with a woman who lives in a beach town when I fly back and forth between Canada and New York. Not to mention my book tour. I'll be living in hotel rooms and drinking stale coffee for months. That's not a great way to start off a relationship.

Marie is unlike any other woman I've met. She's honest, hardworking, determined, and passionate about her career.

*It's sexy as hell.*

But she's not the type of person that would drop everything to join me on a book tour where we'd spend more time on plane rides than with each other. Between my book tour and the movie, there's no way I would give any of that up to stay here. It's a predicament I never thought I'd find myself in, I'm going to need help untangling all my thoughts and feelings.

Thank goodness I meet with Jake soon. Of all our friends, I didn't anticipate him settling down. Hopefully he can give me some direction. For now, I'll keep these feelings to myself. Hidden from Marie.

We finish our coffees, chatting about my plans for the week. I tell her I'm meeting with Jake to catch up. She tells me to stop by the roastery sometime this week for coffee if my Airbnb doesn't have any stocked. This moment feels so natural, as if we wake up and have coffee every morning.

She offers to drive me home, but I opt to walk. I have a lot on my mind right now. The fresh air will do me some good.

I want to make plans to see Marie again. But I hold back. I will just talk to Jake, get a second opinion. I don't want to rush her and I don't want to ruin my chance.

SIX  
THEO

I CAN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT MY TIME WITH MARIE. IT'S AS if I have a spring in my step and a new fervor for my book. I haven't been able to come up for air since I sat down at my laptop this morning. If I wasn't meeting Jake for dinner I probably wouldn't stop.

Lucky for me the newlyweds aren't leaving town for their honeymoon for a few weeks. Both are committed to their jobs as much as they are to each other. Which works out great for all the out of towners visiting for the wedding. I'm sure they haven't had a moment alone yet.

Punctual being a core part of Jake, he shows up right at six. It's a little odd to see him dressed so casually. I'm much more accustomed to him in business suits than jeans and a sweatshirt. I ordered some pizzas, the perfect leftover food, and have some beer in the fridge.

We settle at the coffee table with beers and slices, just like our college days.

"How's married life treating you?" I ask in between bites.

Instantly he has a wide, toothy grin that seems to knock years off his face.

"Fantastic. Nothing is different, but it feels different." He tries to elaborate but is at a loss for words.

"I get it." I nod in response. "It's like the two of you are in a world of your own right?"

“Something like that,” he tries to mumble, mouth full. “You never did get engaged after that one girl in college, did you?”

“Nope.” I drink some of my beer.

“Ever felt like you’d want to take that next step with someone?”

“You know me, ever the poet at heart.” My hand over my heart. “I fall, both quickly and deeply, in love any chance I can.”

“Never met the right one then?” He smirks.

“Let’s just say since the broken engagement where I caught her blabbing about how much money I’d make after my next book and all the glamorous things I’d be buying her... I’ve been a smidge more protective of my heart.”

“You don’t want to protect it forever.” He pats my shoulder before diving into more pizza. “It’s been a while since I’ve had Kal’s pizza. It’s the best around. How’d you get it right on your first time to town?” He narrows his eyes at me.

“Marie suggested it to me.” I clear my throat, a nervous habit of mine I need to find a way out of. “On our date the other night.”

“I knew Violet was up to something setting you two next to other. Why else would we have two singles at a table of couples?” He shakes his head. “Sorry for the apparent set up.”

“No worries, it was a fun reception. Everyone was great company. And Marie and I decided to see each other again for a date, so we went out on Friday night. It went well.”

“It went more than well.” He clicks his tongue. “I don’t think I need to remind you that I’m a lawyer. May be mainly financial but I still know when clients are holding back.”

“She doesn’t seem like the type of other women that make up my relationship graveyard.” I take a deep breath before continuing, “We spent the night together. I won’t kiss and tell, especially since you two are friends, but since we slept

together, I'm having some more serious feelings towards Marie."

"How serious? Like move to Kastle Harbor and get engaged within three months serious? Or more along the lines of dating exclusive and seeing what happens down the road?"

"Somewhere in between?" I shrug and sink into the couch. "Everything seems so jumbled. If we hadn't slept together maybe I wouldn't be feeling this way. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad we did, and I have no regrets. Just don't want to scare her away if I suddenly spit out my feelings, I want to be exclusive or date after I leave."

"Take things slow, maybe just go on a few more dates before you leave town. When are you going back to Toronto?"

I fill Jake in on my publicist's book tour plans and how I'm staying in Kastle Harbor for a few months. We chat about my book, his upcoming honeymoon, and make plans to get together before he leaves town. After Jake leaves, I have a lot to digest. I tidy up and try to get back to my book, but my mind keeps wandering.

I decide to walk down to the beach and clear my head. It's dark and chilly, but the sound of the waves is exactly what I need right now.

Would Marie agree to dating exclusively? Or would she still be hesitant to commit to anything serious?

*Perhaps I can just enjoy my time with her and that'll be enough for me.*

I can set aside my growing feelings and just enjoy being together. I could also jump right into love again, give in to my heart's desires. Maybe pizza and beer aren't the best meal to have when you're under stress.

Nerves, stress, love, everything is jumbled together and it's like a giant ball of dough is sitting in my stomach.

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**MARIE**



As promised, the day after my date with Theo I headed into the bakery. Thankfully he was awake and out of my house by eight. It gave me time to shower and get ready for work. I didn't tell him I had work, but Sally had promised she'd get Victor to cover my morning so I knew I wouldn't have to rush Theo.

What a night together. My legs still feel weak, all wobbly like Jell-O.

I walk to the bakery and enter, letting the delicious smells of freshly baked bread, brewed coffee, and sugary sweets wash over me. That smell never gets old. I head straight the counter, ready for coffee number two of my morning.

Anne greets me with a smile. We chat briefly as she pours me coffee and grabs me a cheese Danish from the display case. She'll grab Violet and Bethany from the back for me. I take my goodies and head to a table. As I sit down Sally walks in, waves, and gets her usual plain black coffee. Her blonde hair is pulled up in a high ponytail. She's off on weekends so she looks as if she's going for a run instead of her usual business attire. Anne and she are laughing about something.

Bethany and Violet exit the kitchen. In their typical work clothing of course. Violet is in jeans and chef's jacket, brown hair pulled back, and flour on her cheek. Today Bethany is wearing jeans which would be a surprise, except she has a neon purple sweater and leopard print heels.

Soon all my friends join me, eager for details.

I tell them about the dinner date and how I offered to make him coffee. They ask about the dinner, our conversation, and of course... what happened next?

"We slept together," I whisper, looking around the café area. "It was amazing and I want to do it again, but I don't know if he'd be open to just a fling."

"When does he leave town?" Sally asks, sipping her coffee.

"He's staying until the end of August. Which gives us time to go on another date or two."

“And another round of steamy sex,” Bethany points out.

“I didn’t say anything about the sex being steamy.” I narrow my eyes at her as she eats a muffin.

“You didn’t have to,” Violet chips in. “Your cheeks are as rosy as if you gave us a play by play.” She grins.

“It was spectacular. He was very focused on me, which was a nice change of pace. I’m just unsure of what’s next.” I sigh heavily, closing my eyes.

“I say just ask him on a date. Don’t worry about the what-ifs, especially if he’s leaving in by August,” Bethany says.

“He’s just a guy on vacation. I doubt he’s thinking about starting anything serious, so just relax and have fun like you intended. Only now you get a little longer to enjoy yourself.” Sally shrugs.

“You’re right.” I sit up straighter. I know my friends are right.

I don’t have to date Theo in a formal way. We don’t need to talk about exclusivity and what’s next for our relationship. I can just ask him out, no strings attached. We can have a good time. Then when he leaves, no one gets hurt. I’m sure he’s not even thinking about me in a starry-eyed, falling in love way anyways. He’s probably just looking for fun before he goes back to his everyday life.

We continue to chat about my date and what everyone has planned for the weekend. When my friends disperse, I decide to text Theo and invite him out tomorrow. The roastery is closed on Sundays so I have all day to relax and unwind. Normally I do chores, but I’d much rather do Theo.

I can’t help but grin as I text.

**Marie: Would you want to grab coffee and go to the beach tomorrow?**

He instantly texts me back. It makes me feel as if he’s been staring at his phone since he got home.

**Theo: I would love that. Where and when?**

**Marie: Sprinkles Bakery & Café, you can't miss it. Neon cupcake sign in the window. Does eleven in the morning work for you?**

**Theo: Yes. I will be there! Swimsuits?**

**Marie: Sure. Hope you're writing is going well.**

**Theo: Thanks, it is! See you tomorrow.**

I pocket my phone and head to work. It's hard to focus. All I can think of how Theo looks in swim trunks. His muscular frame under the sun.

For once I'm giddy about a date.

I'm not going to worry. I'm going to lean into having fun.

Like Sally said, he's a guy. He's probably not even thinking about when he leaves town.

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## **THEO**

I could barely focus on my book since Marie invited me to the beach yesterday. I wasn't sure how long I needed to wait before reaching out to her. I considered planning on going to the roastery Monday morning to try to run into her if I hadn't heard from her over the weekend.

I've managed to get some writing done and now I'm ready to have a break.

I walk to the café Marie told me about. It's very colorful and fun on the inside. Lots of quirky décor. But the smell is what really sells it. Amazing aromas of baked goods and coffee.

Marie waves to me from a table by the window. She's dressed in a white linen top, jean shorts, and sandals. Her hair is down, and I just want to run my fingers through it. Even more tempting are her lips. Before I sit, I lean down and give her a swift kiss.

"How's the coffee?" I chuckle as I sit down. She beams at me.

“I highly recommend it.” She winks and squeezes my hand. “Do you want to get something to go? We can walk to the beach.”

“Sure, do you want anything?”

“I’d take a refill.” She hands me her empty traveler’s mug. “And a cheese Danish.”

“Coming right up!” I take her mug and head to the counter.

As someone who was adamant about paying separately for dinner, it’s a pleasant surprise she accepted my offer. When the redhead behind the counter, who I remember as Bethany from the wedding, says “it’s on the house” as she hands me a bag and two coffees, I understand.

I politely thank her and then stuff a twenty in the tip jar before she can refuse.

Marie and I walk to the beach, hands full of goods. I find myself wishing we could hold hands. That I could touch her somehow.

We chat about my book’s progress and her roastery business as we find a good spot. She lays down two beach towels and we sit. She’s telling me about an idea she had to further the business connection between the roastery and the bakery, but all I can think about is kissing her plump lips. I nod along and offer some insight when she asks for my opinion.

I find myself enjoying these mundane moments with Marie.

*That’s what love is you goof.*

I can’t be in love after a night of dancing and a night of lovemaking.

*Nope, nope, nope.*

Even after speaking with Jake, I know Marie isn’t the type of woman who desires money and fame. She loves her small log cabin home and is a hardworking businesswoman. She’s full of passion and has plans for her future. None of them seem

to involve a guy who is independently wealthy with a film deal for his mystery books.

Still, I want her in my life. Even after hashing out my past with Jake, I think I want to bring up dating exclusively, even after I leave. Long-distance wouldn't be too bad. Besides, I have the money to make the trip, or even pay for her to visit me. We could fly to Toronto together.

As I daydream about the future Marie starts to strip down to her swimsuit. I can't help but gaze in awe at her tanned body. Her curves highlighted by her navy one piece. There's a bit of white ruffles, adding some playfulness to her suit, but also emphasizing her ample chest. It makes it difficult to focus on the task at hand. Do I bring up wanting to start a real relationship?

I decide to just go for it, past be damned.

"Marie," I reach out for her, she sits next to me once more, "have you thought about what happens next?"

"I assume we're going to enjoy a dip in the ocean and then enjoy our coffee. Why?" She raises her eyebrows. "Are you thinking about dinner? We could get pizza from Kal's, it's not too far of a walk." Marie points off past me, but I keep my eyes on her.

"No, I mean between us." I clear my throat. "What happens after I return to Toronto?"

"No, I haven't given it much thought." She folds her hands in her lap, looking at the ground. I can't tell if she's lying or not.

"I would like to officially date. As in, keep seeing you here in Kastle Harbor and then when I leave, continue dating if everything goes well between us."

She runs her fingers in the sand. "I told you that I'm not looking for anything serious right now."

"I just think there's something special here." I gesture between us, as she finally looks up.

“I don’t want to date exclusively. I’m fine with going on dates and eating meals together. Hell, I’m even down for more sex.” Her voice rises with each sentence. “But I’m not interested in anything serious. I told you that up front.” Marie exasperatedly sighs, clearly annoyed.

“Okay.” I take her hand and squeeze it gently. “Nothing serious, we have an expiration date. We’ll see other while I’m here and when I leave, I leave.”

“I’m sorry Theo.” Her voice cracks. “I just can’t.”

“It’s okay.” I rub her shoulders, trying to ease the stress that she appears to be under. “If you’ll have me as a casual date, then a casual date I’ll be.” I kiss her forehead lightly.

“Can we just pretend this conversation never happened and go back to having fun together?” she stands, reaching out her hand. She helps me stand up.

I’ll have to take Marie as she’ll have me.

*So much for not falling fast for a woman.*

A pain starts in my heart as she stares at me. There’s both sadness and hope within her dazzling green eyes. I follow her to the ocean’s edge.

Letting the waves crash over my feet, I watch as Marie makes her way further into the water. Until she’s just a chest and head bobbing. She waves me to join her.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

*It’s not heartache. I still have time with Marie. I won’t waste it.*

I follow her into the water. Ready to salvage the day and enjoy this time.

*Love is never convenient.*

SEVEN  
THEO

IT'S BEEN ALMOST A WEEK SINCE I PROPOSED DATING exclusively and seriously with Marie. The rest of our beach time was slightly awkward. Despite both of us pretending as if I hadn't basically professed my love for her after a night together, we did have a pleasant time. When we were done, I kissed her cheek, and she hugged me tightly. It was a comforting moment, but all too brief.

We parted ways with promises of texting later. She hasn't reached out and I haven't texted her since. I want to give her space. Maybe she'll realize she feels the same for me.

Or maybe she won't see me again.

Nonetheless, I've dived into my book. I've started to make serious progress. The romantic in me is giving my detective a happily ever after.

*Even if I don't get one.*

When I'm not writing I take walks on the beach. I've gotten coffee at the bakery, trying the different brews they have available. Marie and her brother really know their stuff. I have yet to have a bad cup of coffee.

Today it's some sort of Brazil peaberry bean. It has a smooth flavor and it's a little more sweetness than the other brews. The lady working told me it should have notes of unsweetened chocolate with a hint of vanilla. I'm not a coffee expert but I'm getting some vanilla nutty flavor. No run in with Marie, she probably makes coffee at her roastery anyways.

It's Friday night and I don't want to waste another day.

**Theo: Hope you're doing well. Had the peaberry at the bakery. Best one so far.**

I set my phone aside and decide to get pizza again tonight. There's something about that honey and pepperoni combo that Kal's serves that is just mouthwatering. I'm a few slices in when my phone goes off.

**Marie: It's one of my favorites too. I'm doing well, very busy with the roastery. How's your book? Making progress or napping on the beach?**

I can't help but smile as I type my reply.

**Theo: Progress. Really cruising along with my story.**

**Marie: That's awesome!**

**Theo: Would you be free tomorrow? Afternoon walk along the beach after lunch? I need some sun. We can meet at the café at two.**

The three little dots move and move on my screen but there's no words. Finally, after a few minutes my phone dings.

**Marie: That sounds nice. I'll get Victor to cover my afternoon. See you then.**

A walk along the beach is progress.

I have another slice of pizza, clean everything up, and get back to my laptop. I have a bunch of emails I need to sort through and see if any are important and need a reply before Monday. I've been getting included on a lot of the movie marketing information. There's a lot of back and forth between workers that I don't need to be involved in. I see an email from my publicist about book tour dates.

Jackson lists the dates and locations for the tour. He's begging me to end my trip early. Apparently, there's a few extra places we could add if I fly back after the fourth of July.

I feel like my insides are starting to twist together. Pulling and pushing things around. I feel restless, my thoughts racing at the different possibilities.



I could end my time in Kastle Harbor a few weeks early and get back to my life in Toronto. Leave everything behind, my time with Marie just a wonderful bundle of memories that I can carry anywhere I go. Or I could just eat the potential earnings from the book tour and stay my full time here in town.

I need some fresh air. I leave for a walk on the beach. The sun setting painting the sky a gorgeous array of reds and pinks. I try to run through all the different options.

I want to give Marie time. Maybe she'll change her mind after we spend more time together. I could explain my idea about flying her out and covering travel costs. I'm sure she could easily hire another person and get some time off at the roastery. The bakery seemed to be doing well with hiring and training staff.

Or maybe I'd suggest her visiting me during the off season and I'd visit her during her busy months. I'm sure it'd be easier for a new person to run things while she's gone. I know Victor is out of the country for a portion of the year, so they obviously have a slow part of the year.

The chilly evening air gives me goosebumps as I watch the sun set over the ocean. It's peaceful here, a lot more peaceful than anywhere I've ever lived. I'm always surrounded by people, and it's been so relaxing to just be here and have some privacy and solitude. The only thing better has been when I'm with Marie.

She's smart, determined, compassionate, and witty. Not to mention stunning. Everything about us just feels right. Nothing like how my stomach feels. I don't know if I could convince her to give us a shot. There's perhaps a very small chance she'd agree to be a couple together.

*Who am I kidding? She won't change her mind.*

Nothing like the cold ocean breeze to really clear my mind.

I trudge back to my rental and decide to email my publicist. I tell him my plans have changed and that because of the progress on my book I'd be happy to end my trip early. I

lock in my dates and leave the rest of the trip planning to the morning.

Right now, I just want to lay in bed and sort things out when I have a good night's sleep. I'll tell Marie about my plans when we meet tomorrow.

*If only wishing for a miracle could make it happen.*

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## **MARIE**

The roastery has kept me thoroughly busy during the day. However, at night and alone in my home, my thoughts are instantly brought back my love life.

Or lack thereof.

I've thought about texting Theo several times this past week. I've deep cleaned my home, went through my closet, even cleaned my oven. Anything to help keep my mind off the possibilities. But then Theo texted me and now I just want to see and spend time with him before he leaves. All these conflicting feelings are making me run through stomach medicine quicker than the busy holidays.

A Saturday stroll along the beach may help clear things up.

I walk to the café and run through what I want to say to Theo about the future of whatever this is between us. It does have an expiration date and he needs to be okay with it.

He's standing outside the café, holding two coffees. His blond hair shining under the sun's rays. His strong, muscular frame wrapped in a snug tee and swim trunks. I wouldn't suspect he's a writer who normally dresses like a tenured professor at a stuffy college. He looks like he just walked off a movie set where they're spending days running on the beach. I feel my pulse quicken as I approach him. It's like a tiny hummingbird has replaced my heart.

*I wonder if he'll ever stop affecting me this way.*

"I wasn't sure if you'd want one, but I got us both coffees." His smile spreads.

“Thanks, I appreciate the afternoon pick me up.” The strong hazelnut scent hits my nose and calms my nerves.

We start to walk towards the beach. A lot of locals are out and about. I smile and wave to those we pass. Tourist season will be finished by the end of August.

*Theo will be long gone by then.*

I glance at Theo, his eyes on the horizon. His brow furrowed, deep in thought. I thought this walk together would lean more awkward, but instead I feel comfortable and at ease. The tension in my shoulders gone. I savor my coffee as we continue to stroll in silence. I’ve always loved people watching.

It’s pleasant. People are walking their dogs, kids are building sandcastles, and there a handful of people just soaking up the summer weather. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.

I grab his arm to stop him. “Theo, I just want to say something.”

His eyebrows arch upwards as he opens his mouth to talk. I put my empty hand on his chest. He sighs under my palm. I look up into his face, admiring his strong features.

*In another lifetime maybe I wouldn’t be burdened with guilt.*

I take a deep breath. “I am not ready for a commitment. I don’t know when I will be ready, but it isn’t fair to keep seeing each other if you’re expecting this to turn into something else.”

I close my eyes and I can feel Theo wrap my hand in his. “That’s okay. I understand.” He squeezes my hand but doesn’t let go. “I have some news that I wanted to share with you.”

“With your book?”

We continue walking together, my hand wrapped in his.

“Yes,” he clears his throat. Theo tends to do this a lot. I wonder if he does that when he’s nervous or if he just isn’t used to the salt-tinged air here. “I got an email from my

publicist about some additional opportunities for my book tour. It'd be beneficial for both the book launch and the movie if we could get these dates booked."

"That's wonderful! Are they all in Toronto?" I take my hand back from him, toss my coffee, and attempt to put my hair up. The heat is starting to make me sweat.

"A little bit everywhere. I'll still start in Toronto but we're adding Montreal, Quebec before I fly to New York City. From there we're adding Los Angeles and San Diego to coincide with some of the movie press. I'll take some time to meet with the script editors and marketing team while I'm out there."

"Wow that's a lot of traveling." I shake my head. I have refused to fly ever since Seth died. That's one reason Victor handles the coffee farms in Brazil for the roastery.

Theo's book tour sounds like the longest car trip in the world. I don't envy him.

"Yes, it'll be a few months of flying, living out of hotels, and meeting a lot of people." He runs his hand through his hair. His hair looks like one of those effortless styles where he could play around with and style it different ways, but right now he has strands sticking out here and there. Very disheveled.

"Here, let me help." I reach out and try to smooth his locks. He catches my hand, brings it to his lips, and gently kisses it.

*The hummingbird has returned, beating its wings inside my chest.*

"Unfortunately, to get these additional locations, I need to leave shortly after the fourth of July. The timeline is tight and it's the only way to add them to my schedule."

It takes a moment for his words to truly sink in. He's leaving almost a whole month earlier than planned. That gives us just a couple of weeks together.

I don't want anything serious, but I was hoping for more time.

“That is definitely different,” my tone flat.

“I want to respect your boundaries.” He cups my face, his touch gentle. “And I know you don’t want anything serious. But will you continue to see me while I’m here?”

My thoughts shuffle through my head, one after another.

Nothing has changed except our expiration date.

“I would like that.” I lean into his hand, kissing his palm. “Now let’s have fun while you’re still here. Have you gone to the Railway Tavern yet?”

“No, but I’ve had Kal’s at least four times.” He laughs.

We get back to our walk along the beach. Everything seemingly falls into place once more. He’s respecting my commitment wishes and I’m more than happy to just spend time with him. Theo mentions talking to Victor and Sally again and we decide to try to make a double date. We agree to dinner on Tuesday night at the Railway Tavern.

After a bit longer we part ways so I can head to the roastery and he can work on his book.

I watch him walk away. I decide to grab a sugary treat before going to work. Besides, I’m just doing inventory and tastings prep for class next week. The retail side isn’t open past lunchtime on Saturdays. I text Victor my change in plans and head into the bakery.

*If only sugar could cure grief and heartache.*

## EIGHT

# MARIE

BETHANY CHEERFULLY GREETES ME WHEN I ENTER THE BAKERY. She's wearing an orange and pink plaid dress with a white apron. Her fiery red curls are pulled up in a bun with a few straggling curls bobbing as she waves me over to the counter.

"Give me one second and we can chat." She's putting a new tray of summer themed sugar cookies in the display case.

"Those look delicious." I point to one that's iced with a yellow and orange sun. There are little pink and orange seashells, blue and green fish, and even a few sandcastle ones. "How many different designs is Violet making these days?"

"Well, you know she's training Anne to be able to handle everything while she's on her honeymoon." Bethany gazes at the display case. There's a bunch of empty space, which it's after four so the bakery closes soon. I'd expect them to be wiped out of goods by now.

"Violet and Anne are making more than enough!" I grin at my friend. She wipes her hands on her apron before taking it off and hanging it on a hook.

"I swear I don't know how we're supposed to sell all these extra pastries and cookies, but I trust Violet." She hands me a couple of cookies on a plate.

I start to munch on one, it's delicious as expected. The sugar rush hitting the spot.

"I wanted to talk to you about a potential business plan for the roastery and bakery." We head to a table and sit down together.

Bethany tries to redo her bun, but her curls are just too much for her scrunchie. I try to hide my smile as I note she's using a neon orange silk scrunchie. I don't know if she's ever worn a dull outfit in her life.

But she lives her life fully and boldly, that's for certain.

"So then, you're not here to talk about a potential relationship with Theo?" She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

"No, just business." I fidget with the hem of my shirt, letting the silence stretch.

"Now that you're here," she leans in, her round eyes squint slightly, "do you want to talk about how you and Theo are doing anyways?"

I let out an exasperated sigh. "He agreed to my plan of basically being friends with potential benefits. He changed his plans and now he's leaving a few weeks early, and everything should feel right but it doesn't." My words just fall out. "It feels like I ate takeout leftovers that were sitting in the fridge just a smidge too long, Beth." My eyes become blurry, tears coming just as quickly as my words.

"Oh babe..." She moves to sit next to me and pulls me into a hug as my tears begin to fall. She strokes my back as she continues, "I thought you didn't want anything serious."

"I know," my voice croaks out. "I feel so guilty whenever I think I'm starting to feel romantic feelings towards anyone. But there's something about being with Theo. Lately when I've been thinking about my future and the roastery, Theo keeps popping up in it." I sniffle as she continues to rub my back.

We just sit together in silence for a few minutes. Bethany is my one friend who knows what it's like to lose loved ones. She still lives in her parents' home and took over the family business when they died and left it to her. She sees pieces of them every day.

*And yet she's not a mumbling mess of tears and snot.*

"It's like I just found the final missing puzzle piece that I've been searching for," I pause, "and yet it still feels like if I

try again, I'd be letting Seth down. As if it'd make him feel as though I didn't love him as much as I did while we were together."

"I see." Bethany pulls away and hands me a napkin. "Do you know how we get our biscotti to be so crisp and perfect?"

I tilt my head, quizzically looking at my best friend, trying to figure out how she got to this train of thought from me crying about my love life. I finally just shake my head no and let her continue her tangent.

"They get baked twice." She holds two fingers up. "The first time is like a normal baking, but then we pull it out, let it cool, and cut it into pieces. Then we bake the pieces again. This second round gives them the crispness and crunch when you eat them."

"Are you saying I'm a piece of biscotti?" I question her attempted analogy.

"More that your love life is the biscotti. You had a good first round with Seth. You loved each other and he'll always be a part of who you are, however," she scrunches her brows, "when he died you got cut into a bunch of little pieces. You're fine but you're not as good as you could be. You need to be open to love again, ergo the second baking."

"How did you do it?" My tears have finally stopped, my nose just a little sniffly.

"It took time, but it helped that when I met Liam everything just sort of felt right. It was hard to explain but I knew he had to stick around." She sighs, "I know that's not super helpful."

"No," I wipe my nose again, "that's quite helpful. The biscotti analogy kind of makes sense. I know I've dealt with my grief and that Seth will always be a part of my heart, but I also know if I want to be happy, I need to make room in my heart for the possibility that I find another person whom I'd like to spend the rest of my life with."

She nods along. "Yes. Do you think Theo could be the one who you let into your heart?"



“That’s the question of the day, isn’t it?” I grin at her, feeling a little more at ease now. We get up and hug. “Thank you for this. Can we talk about my business proposal later?”

“Of course, just stop by.” She squeezes me tightly once more before I leave.

Twice baked biscotti. Weird analogy but it has me thinking.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to try to give a relationship a serious attempt. Theo is here for a few more weeks, but he’s traveling afterwards. It’s not a bad train ride to New York, I could manage a train trip to the city. I won’t fly to Canada or California, but maybe he’d be open to visiting me in Kastle Harbor in between book tour locations.

*I can do it. I can be biscotti.*

I can’t help but laugh out loud as I walk home. Bethany was helpful, guiding me through my thoughts and feelings that have been muddled and weighed down with guilt.

I can choose to be happy. The first step is taking a risk.

If I don’t see him before then, I’ll talk to Theo after our double date on Tuesday.

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## **THEO**

Not acting on your feelings is rough. I return from my walk with Marie and get settled back at my desk. I’ve managed to outline my book in its entirety and even made a few notes for what could happen in the next book. My editor will be thrilled.

I send off my first half of my manuscript. I continue to chug along with the second half.

Once I started writing the other day, I couldn’t stop. It helped to have a distraction from this Marie thing. I’ve never really lost a loved one, so it’s hard to imagine exactly how she must feel. When I broke off my engagement, I swore I’d never let that happen to me again.

But I kept falling for the wrong women.

They'd be charming and sweet, and we'd laugh together, and I'd be absolutely smitten. Then something would click. Whether it was a response to a gift, or wanting to be overly public with our relationship, there was always some type of sign that I found before it got too serious. While I think I'm still falling too fast for Marie, it feels different than any time before.

We could really have something special.

But I'll spend time with her anyway she'll have me, for now that's casually dating. I don't want to wait until Tuesday to see her. Maybe I'll just text her and see if she wants to grab pizza. I'll have to add another run to my plans for tomorrow. All this pizza is going to ruin my abs.

**Theo: Want to come over for pizza tomorrow night? I'm thinking about ordering in.**

**Marie: If the order includes mushrooms, then count me in.**

**Theo: Done, one with mushrooms just for you. Come over at 6? I'll text the address.**

**Marie: See you then!**

Once I send the rental's address, I get back to work. I have a million emails now that we've added extra stores to the book tour. I have things to sign, hotels to approve, and other miscellaneous things.

I wish I had a personal assistant for this stuff.

Maybe they'd handle my love life too.

---

KAL'S PIZZA arrives right before Marie shows up. I place everything out on the kitchen island. We grab slices and settle onto the couch while the pizza is hot. We eat and talk about the best and worst pizza toppings. Surprisingly we both enjoy pineapple on our pizza.

"I guess we can still be friends."

We both chuckle. I really do love Marie's company.

"Speaking of which..." She sets her plat down and crosses her legs as she turns to face me on the couch. She clasps and unclasps her hands. "I've been thinking about this whole casual situation."

I reach out, taking them in mine. "I'm fine doing things the way you want. A slow pace, nothing serious on the horizon." I smile warmly and gently squeeze her hands before releasing them.

"Actually, I was thinking about it and I would like to rediscuss what you want Theo. When you imagine yourself after your book tour, what's that look like?"

"I will be sleeping for a few days. But honestly you keep popping up when I think about planning what's next."

"That was what kept happening to me too." she nods along. "I thought maybe we could do what you suggested at the beach and try dating with the potential for it to turn into something serious."

"What changed your mind?" I narrow my eyes, skeptical of her sincerity in suddenly wanting a real relationship.

"I tried to picture what my life would look like down the road, and I just couldn't imagine myself alone. I was mulling over the future of the roastery and expanding the business and you were just there, a shadow on my mind. I couldn't shake you. That's I want to give us a shot. I'm not saying I'm ready to talk marriage or anything, but I'm ready to move from casual fling to an actual relationship."

"We haven't known each other very long and I leave in a few weeks. Are you okay with long-distance? It's a lot of phone calls and texts."

"I can't guarantee what will happen after you leave, but I want to try. I'm happy to take a train and work around your book tour, but I don't think I can easily write whatever this feeling between us is." Her eyes soften and her corners of her mouth start to rise.

“Theo, will you date me exclusively and seriously?” She grins.

“Yes, but this does not count as our first date.” I look around the living room. I tidied a little bit, but the stacks of papers and recycling I still haven’t taken out is not the right ambience for a romantic meal together.

“Let’s treat Tuesday night as our first date. In the sense that we’re officially a couple,” she says through a chuckle.

“I think that sounds lovely.” I lean in to kiss her, I put one hand on her lower back and cup her face with the other. I pull her snug against my chest.

I deepen our kiss as we tumble backwards, horizontal. Somehow, we both fit on the couch. Marie pulls back, I think she’s going to stand but instead she straddles me. She claims my mouth once more. The kiss sending little waves of pleasure through my muscles.

She moans softly into my mouth before biting my lower lip. My dick hardens as she starts to grind her hips against mine. I grip her ass as she continues to rock her hips, the friction between us building up.

*Making out while fully clothed was not something I thought would happen tonight.*

Marie’s hands roam across my chest, her touch sending little shockwaves through my body. I try to maneuver a hand between us, to take care of her, but she moves it away. I want to return these little moments of bliss. Since she won’t let me explore her body with my hands, I start to massage her butt and upper thighs.

*She’s on her feet all day...*

“Theo,” she moans into my mouth before pulling away, just inches away from my face. her hair creating a wall around us. “I just want to kiss, nothing further.”

I don’t want to scare her off like before. I want to give her time.

She only just decided to attempt a real relationship.

*Marie is officially my girlfriend. She's all mine.*

“Of course, whatever you want, sweetheart,” I drawl out. Her eyes shoot up at my term of endearment. There’s a sense of satisfaction in her face, the worry lines eased.

We kiss until our breathing is ragged. Marie needs to head home. I offer to let her sleep over, promising to keep my hands to myself, but she declines.

“We haven’t even had a first date.” She kisses my cheek as she leaves.

For once I got the girl. My cheeks hurt. I can’t seem to stop smiling.

I text her to let me know when she’s home and she replies. We confirm our double date and she’s off to bed.

I can’t screw this up.

NINE  
MARIE

IT TOOK EVERY OUNCE OF MY WILLPOWER TO PEEL MYSELF OFF Theo and leave his place. But I didn't want to start our official monogamous relationship off by sleeping together.

Not like we didn't already do that, but better to at least try starting fresh. Having a new outlook on relationships means I shouldn't go in with sex on the brain. Although, we are extremely compatible sexually. Which is a bonus to starting this new relationship with my boyfriend.

*Theo is officially my boyfriend.*

I say it out loud a few times. At first it feels surreal, like a foreign word I just can't grasp the pronunciation of yet. But after I say it a few times I can feel my cheeks raise and the smile forming. I text my friends about my new boyfriend. The grin stays plastered on my face as I watch their replies roll in.

**Bethany: That's wonderful babe! You double baked it!**

**Violet: Ignoring Beth's comment, congratulations on this new stage!**

**Sally: Congrats! Can't wait for tonight!**

On cloud nine, I glide through my normal routine. I'm excited for the double date tonight. I've already showered and shaved my legs, the whole-body shower routine. Covered in lotion, I try to style my hair but I just can't get it the way I want. I spritz some water all over it and start again but opt to just blow dry and brush it out. I'm not nervous about tonight, I'm looking forward to it.

For once Victor and I are experiencing joy in our lives. When I had Seth in my life, Victor was going through his healing process post-accident. And his fiancée left him. Then I lost Seth. We both grieved what we lost.

But after a few years, he found Sally and fell in love. Then it was just me, alone with my grief and guilt anytime I tried to branch out.

Now I feel a new sense of happiness blooming in my chest. Seth will always be a part of me. I don't need to ignore that. Dating means learning about each other, making sure you're meant to be together.

And I look forward to this experience with Theo.

The Railway Tavern isn't too fancy, so I just dress in a navy tank top that has a little beading on it, black jeans, and some sandals. I add some small gold hoops and some rose red lipstick. My hair is down and I'm feeling fun and flirty.

I'm the last one to arrive but the trio is waiting in the lobby. Theo greets me with a light kiss on the lips. He puts one hand around my waist and we chat with Sally and Victor.

We all get seated and start chatting. Victor and I catch up briefly on roastery stuff before Sally rolls her eyes and points out we see each other every day and to save the work talk for tomorrow. We both laugh and agree to drop it.

The waitress brings us our drinks, the guys opting for scotches while Sally and I both end up choosing red wine for the night.

"How's the book coming along?" Sally asks Theo.

"Really well. I already sent the first half to my editor. It's a little rough around the edges, but once I worked out the plot it all just sort of fell into place." He squeezes my hand under the table. I can't help but beam back at him.

"Nice! Marie mentioned that you have a lot of traveling coming up?" Victor chimes in.

"Yes, it'll be the longest book tour I've done so far. Pretty much some major cities in Canada, New York, and

California.”

“How fun!” Sally continues, “Sometimes I miss the big city life. All the hustle and bustle of New York City. But now I get amazing coffee any time I want so it’s a win in my books.” She kisses Victor on the cheek.

“You guys should make the trip to New York City when I’m there. I know we haven’t talked about it but, Marie.” Theo turns to me. “I’m happy to fly you out and pick you up at the airport. It’s a super short flight.”

I stammer, “That... that sounds nice, though I prefer the train trip. Very scenic.” I sip on my wine, my mouth suddenly very dry. The room starts to feel stuffy.

“Nonsense.” Theo squeezes my hand. “That’s such a long trip. I’d rather you not waste your time.”

I look to Victor to see if he’s going to say anything, but he’s just looking at his drink. Typical. Avoiding confrontation.

“I’d love a train trip,” Sally quickly interjects. “Maybe a girls’ trip is order? It’s been a while anyways.” Between this and her blonde hair, she’s an absolute angel in my life right now.

“Are you afraid of flying?” Theo questions me. “Don’t worry about, nothing bad ever happens. The worst thing that could happen is maybe they lose your luggage.”

He laughs and it’s like a dam that was holding all my emotions at bay just breaks.

My hands are tightly clenched, the pain from my nails digging into my skin nothing like the excruciating heartache I experienced. Memories of the phone call, the photos, everything from that night is coming back in flashes.

“Sometimes people lose more than luggage,” I say through clenched teeth.

I’m trying to remain calm but there’s an anger inside of me that I thought was long gone is simmering. I can’t push it down any longer. My face burns hot, and the room is closing



in on me. I need fresh air. I need space. All eyes are on me. I want to be alone.

“I need to leave. This was a mistake.” I get up and walk away.

I don't look back. I don't slow down. I just leave the table and my things behind me. as I exit the restaurant the blast of cool air hits me. I hear the waves and head to the beach.

I can't go home this angry and upset. Home is my safe place. I can't bring this there. It'll be infected.

Just like me.

I'm not meant to love again.

I fall to the sand, curling my legs up. I hold my knees tightly against my chest as I let the tears fall freely. The salty taste suits the setting.

---

## **THEO**

“Marie, wait!” I stand and start to leave but Victor stops me. “What's the problem?” I ask him, completely clueless as to why she left.

“You know about Seth, right?” Sally asks me, her eyes on the empty seat at the table.

“Marie told me her husband, Seth died.” I look around. the other patrons of the restaurant clearly trying to pretend nothing happened. No one is looking over at our table.

“I suppose since you two haven't known each other very long that she didn't tell you how he died, did she?” Victor questions me.

I hadn't noticed until now how similar he and Marie are with their features. They share the same piercing green eyes.

I shake my head, “No, I didn't think it was appropriate to ask.”

Sally sips on her wine and Victor looks deep in thought. No one speaks for a moment. The normal sounds of a

restaurant buzz around us. People chatting, eating, walking around. I can't take it. I need to know how to fix this. I only just got Marie in my life, I don't want her to leave.

My words just tumble out, "We haven't known each other very long. She didn't talk to me for a bit after I asked her to consider dating after I leave town. I didn't want to pry before she was ready to tell me. What am I missing?"

"At the beginning of the roastery we were still figuring things out. Seth, being more interested in the agricultural sides of the business, did what I do now. He would fly back and forth to Brazil. He made multiple short trips whereas I just go half the year. Because he was flying there all the time, he became good friends with some of the pilots he ran into all the time. Anyways one time there was a storm and his flight got cancelled but because he was flying out of a small airport one of his friends offered to let him ride with them. They were cleared for flying the small plane but there was an issue. The plane lost a wing, the engine died, and they went down. They crashed and there were no survivors."

"Marie hasn't flown since. She probably never will," Sally adds.

We all sit in silence. I see how my teasing brought up the worst experience of her life. Just shoving all her trauma to the surface.

*Shit, I really messed up.*

"You didn't know," Victor adds. "I'm sure she would've told you eventually. Outside of me flying back and forth, no one else really travels much so it's not like she goes around telling friends and acquaintances why she's stressed about their travels or why she hasn't been abroad in years."

"If you'll excuse me," I stand, "I need to go apologize. Thank you for the lovely night. I don't know if we'll be back."

"Understood, don't worry, we got the bill." Victor gives me a curt nod.

"Good luck!" Sally offers a warm, genuine smile before I leave.

I leave the restaurant, unsure of where Marie would go. I don't think she would simply go home. She left everything back at the table. I look around the parking lot for an empty bench or patio furniture. It's still warm out. The wind picks up as I keep walking around the restaurant. I close my eyes trying to think about where she would go.

The sounds of the waves hitting the shore reminds me of the beach time we've spent together. The ocean sounds are relaxing despite the urgency of my situation.

*I'd go on beach walks all the time if I lived here.*

I find a rocky pathway down towards the beach. I gaze around, there's a few people walking dogs but there's no one that fits her figure. Finally, I see her.

Marie is sitting in the sand, slumped over with her knees pulled tight against her. She's sniffing. As I sit down next to her, I hand her a handkerchief from my pocket.

"I'm sorry for what I said back there Marie." I leave some space between us.

"I just can't right now, Theo" she croaks, her eyes are puffy. "We never talked about flying, you don't anything about me."

I extend a hand and rub her back in small, light circles. She buries her head into her knees once more. She starts to quietly sob, I can feel the reverberations as I continue to rub her back. She doesn't pull away.

I stare at the tide, thinking about what exactly I want to say. I don't want her to feel like I'm ignoring her history. Seth is part of her past, but he's always going to be a part of her story. If this were a mystery story and she was my lead detective, I'd leave him single forever. Alone against the world.

But this isn't a story. And I don't Marie to be alone against the world any more than she already has been. I continue to rub her back, feeling her sobbing cease.

"I don't want to rush you. You don't need to tell me anything. I've hurt you and for that I am truly sorry." She

looks at me with her round, teary eyes. It makes my heart ache.

*I caused her pain.*

She wipes her eyes. “I told you that my husband died about ten years ago, but I didn’t tell you he died in a plane crash. You were just teasing, I’m sorry I ruined dinner.”

I reach out and gently stroke her cheek. “You didn’t ruin anything and you don’t need to apologize for your feelings. You lost a loved one, how ever much you want to share is up to you. I want to respect that and just let you know that I love you, as is.”

Her eyes widen as my words sink in.

“Theo,” she leans into me and I wrap an arm around her, “I think I’ve fallen for you too.” She whispers the last part, as if she’s not ready to shout it to the world.

The silence stretches between us once more but it’s not heavy or uncomfortable. It’s like a warm blanket wrapped around us.

*I love Marie. There’s no going back now.*

“I won’t ever ask you to erase him or your past, I only ask that you leave room for me in your future.”

The ocean waves soft whooshing sound are like whispers all around us.

Marie murmurs against my chest, “Thank you Theo. Thank you for finding me and for loving me.” Her voice is smooth and crisp, reverting to her normal tone.

“Can’t help it,” I reply as I kiss her head. “You’re quite a catch.”

“Can we still be together?” She looks up at me.

“Of course, we’ll take things at your pace. I’ll take as many train trips or car rides as you want.” Marie begins to smile now. “Will you be my girlfriend and face the unknown of the future together with me?”

“I’d like that.” She kisses my cheek and the future crashes into me like the waves on the beach.

Perfect.

# EPILOGUE

## MARIE

I just love Christmas time here. Everything looks like it came straight from a movie set. The freshly fallen snow is stark white and glitters under the sun. Everyone decorates with lights and wreaths. I made Victor hang up colorful Christmas lights and we even got a few plastic glowing snowmen for the front. Violet and Bethany have a whole window display set up with rotating cookies on display of course. They're always swamped around Christmas time with all the holiday parties.

I keep checking the clock. Theo is coming home any minute now.

After a lot of conversations and travel plans getting cancelled and rescheduled several times, he sold his apartment in Toronto and moved all his stuff into my cabin. The old Marie would have freaked out at every turn, but after the long beach cry and Theo confessing his feelings, things have just sort of settled into a new normal for me. For us.

All my anger, grief, and guilt have sort of dulled.

We've only lived together for a few long weekends that he was able to peel away from his book tour, but every moment was bliss.

His dark oak desk fits in perfectly with my furniture. Nothing of his looks out of place.

*Odd how easily we combined our lives.*

It was like the moment we agreed he'd move in with me, the rest fell into place.

I look out my kitchen window and see even more snow falling. It's going to be a long winter season this year. I hear a car pull up. Theo's latest rental looks practical this time. He has yet to get a car since he tends to just walk everywhere here. Last time he got a convertible and we drove up the coast. It was beautiful.

Theo walks in, snow covering his tousled hair.

"You're home!" I squeal. He pulls me into a hug. He's warm despite all the wet snow on him.

"It was a long trip, I'm glad to be home." He takes his coat and boots off then kisses me. He pulls me in snug against his chest, his hand on my lower back.

"I missed you," I murmur, holding him close.

"I missed you too." He kisses the top of my head. "But I have good news."

"Your book is sold out?"

He shakes his head.

"You're cooking dinner tonight?" I flash a toothy grin at him as his laughter fills the room.

*I really missed him.*

"The book sales are doing well. So well in fact it's been labeled a best-seller."

"That's fantastic!" I kiss him on the cheek. "Do you want some hot chocolate?" I head to the kitchen while he continues to shed some layers and follows me.

"There's other news too." He pulls at the hem of his sweater, fidgeting with his hands.

“Do you have to leave again?” I pour us some cocoa and hand him a mug.

“The team wants me out in California to go over the final scripts. They start shooting a few weeks after the new year.”

We sit on the couch together. The fireplace roaring and cozy.

“Are you going to miss Christmas?”

“No, I can leave after, but,” he takes my hand in his and squeezes it, “I want you to go with me.” He takes out a small box from his pocket.

“Theo...” I can’t stop my eyes from widening and a small gasp escapes me.

He opens the box to reveal a silver car key. I tilt my head, curious about where this is going.

“I bought the car I drove here today. It’s practical enough to take a long car trip across the country. Your car would never make it past the state line.”

I chuckle at his honesty.

He continues, “We can stop and sightsee along the way. But I can’t imagine spending even more time away from you, Marie.”

This is probably the silliest but sweetest thing that’s happened to me. Theo is willing to make his probably five-hour plane trip into a week-long car ride just so that I can come too.

*I really love this man.*

“I love you Theo.” I take the box with the car key. “I’ll go on a road trip with you.”

“Say it again.” His eyes sparkle as he speaks. His infectious smile making me grin too.

It’s the first time I’ve said those words out loud. I don’t regret them. Theo is my future and he’s worked hard to make sure I know that I’m a part of his too. He shares his location



with me so I'm not as anxious when he's flying. Plus, he calls me before and after every flight.

"The part about me going on a road trip with you?" I can't help but tease him. "Or that I love you?"

He puts a hand over his heart. "Can you say it again?"

"I love you, Theo!"

"I love you too Marie." He pulls me in for a kiss.

My heart feels full, like every puzzle piece fit perfectly, showing me the full picture. The future may be unknown, but I'm no longer alone.

I have Theo to go through it with me, together.

*And we've got a whole latte love.*

**If you haven't, be sure to get the free prequel to *Gingerbread Hearts* and find out how Violet's boss, Bethany and her love, Liam found each other in the short story, [Sprinkling of Love](#).**

**There are more stories to come from Tori Fields, but for now, be sure to check out this series of sexy, steamy instalove perfection!**

### **Valentines & Holidates**



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