

A Second
Chance Age Gap
Romance

A Billionaire's

BET

OLIVIA CRUISE

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ROMANCE

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Also By

Chapter One

Brad

The joy of being the hottest video game designer in the tech world was incredible. I made loads of money, set myself up in a nice big mansion. I even got the pick of the litter when it came to women. Most of those women only cared to spend time with me because of my good looks, but even more so when they learned I was a billionaire. The youngest and richest in the small town of Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

I moved to Mass after I made my first million dollars. My family used to visit the Cape all the time when I was younger, that's why I loved it so much—my sister and I jumping into the freezing ocean and eating fresh crab legs right from the sea. Some of the best times of my life were spent in the Cape. Now, I was a grown man with money to throw away on the stupidest of things, like company parties every month for my entire staff and friend group.

“Can you ever show up anywhere without a date on your arm?”

Justin, a buddy of mine from college, always gave me a hard time about the women he saw me with. I was the kind of guy who liked to keep his options open – or should I say, stay away from love. So when it came to women, I rarely kept the same one around for long.

“A date?” I playfully looked around the room to see where my date was. “Where do you see a date? Kash and I are just friends.”

“Yeah.” Justin laughed. “Whatever you say, playboy. Anyway, nice party. These things are always nice. You plan on keeping this party tradition for the entirety of your career? ‘Cause I mean, you’re living the dream life. Couple of the guys and I are getting really jealous watching you live our dream lives.”

My friends wanted for nothing. As long as I was a rich man and they were in my life, I would take care of them and whatever they needed taking care of. That was just the kind of friend I was. I never meant to flaunt my success in their faces or make the guys feel like I was showing off with my women, but sometimes I felt like Justin took it that way.

“You really gonna lecture me again?” I chuckled. “Right now? In the middle of the party?”

“I’m just saying, bro.” Justin’s hand clamped down on my shoulder. “We’re not getting any younger.”

Justin's goal in life was to find a woman he could marry, settle down, have a houseful of kids, and work until he was ready to retire. He'd been my friend for years, but we had two completely different mindsets. I wanted to keep my youth alive for as long as I could. I was too busy spending money and enjoying my travel. Besides, how would I get inspiration for my games if all I did was sit behind a desk and yell at kids all day?

"Maybe one day I'll find a nice woman who makes me feel like settling down," I said. "Until then, let's just table my love life conversation and enjoy the party, huh?"

"Alright bro, whatever you say." He laughed.

Mingling with women was a specialty of mine. I had the looks, the class, and the money. Money was a big deal for a lot of women I ran into. Most of them only wanted to be seen in a billionaire's spotlight to either jumpstart their own careers or ride my coattails until I got tired of carrying them. That was the way it was for the majority of my dating life. I had met one woman whom I was head over heels for. Kayla. It was a long time ago, during my first year of college.

We had been pretty much inseparable for our first six months of dating and then she had just ghosted me. A year down the line I found out she had been in between relationships while we were together. She had an ex-boyfriend back home whom she loved more than me, so that's where she went back to. I'd fought for our relationship for months when she left. Calling, texting, and flying to her hometown. I even

threw a few punches with her boyfriend once. But even that hadn't changed her mind about coming back to me. She was in love with her high school sweetheart, and there was nothing I could do to change that.

After that, I vowed I would never take another woman seriously again until she showed me she couldn't live without me first. That attitude came from protecting my heart. I had stopped dating for a long time after college and just played the field mostly. I was afraid to fall in love again; I didn't want to get hurt. I never told anyone the way I felt inside—about dating—because I didn't care about it anymore. I figured, when the time was right for me to date again, I would feel differently. Until then, my friends would have to accept me for who I was—a ladies' man.

Miranda, another of my closest friends, reminded me a lot of Kayla. When we first met, I thought it was the universe playing a cruel trick on me. But she was nothing like Kayla. Complete opposites actually. Naturally, in my hurt phase, I was drawn to her in a romantic way, but she put that on ice immediately. We were more compatible as friends anyway. On top of that, Miranda was interested in women, not men. In fact, in college, her girlfriend had been the hottest girl on campus. They were together for a few years after college but split when Miranda made her move to the Cape. Ever since then, she'd been a lot like me.

“What are you doing hiding out over here all alone?” I asked, sneaking up on her while she was checking her phone.

“I could ask you the same.” She turned and smiled. “I saw your date wandering around the party looking for you. Are you ghosting her too?”

I sighed and let out a light chuckle. My dating life had nothing to do with my friends. It didn't affect them and their homes. They just wanted me to be settled down and tied to the retirement club they'd made up in their heads.

They really have no faith in me sticking with one woman. I can do that...if I wanted. But why bother? They hear about me partying, and I have to endure their relationship talks. That is close enough for me.

“What is it with you guys?” I laughed. “Why are you so worried about when I'm going to settle down? Don't you have your own lives?”

“Well yeah,” Miranda said, “we do. We just worry about you sometimes. That's all. I know getting crazy attention from women, being in the spotlight, and being so successful kind of makes you a target. We just want you happy and not being taken advantage of, or vice versa.”

“You think I would take advantage of a woman?”

She paused for a second and so did I. *Wait a minute...I get where she's going but...okay, so I do kinda take advantage...not like I mean to...that just kinda happens...*

“I know it's not your intention to take advantage of women, I'm just saying. Sometimes, it does come off that way. I mean, just look at her.”

She pointed out the date I'd brought with me that night. She was standing at the rear of the party looking highly disappointed. Sad even. A few guys approached her—to talk, I supposed—but she shooed each of them away.

Ah shit, that's not good. She has to know we've got zip in common. I kind of felt bad for leaving her standing there alone. That was a bad habit of mine; going after women like I had all the interest in the world but ghosting them the minute I found out we had nothing in common.

“You see what I mean?” Miranda asked. “Being ghosted doesn't make people feel good. And you know that from experience. She's probably over there wondering what she did wrong or why she isn't enough.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I guess I'm an asshole.”

“The biggest one I know,” she teased. “No, but seriously, you should probably do something to make it up to her. Even if you don't plan on dating her again, at least apologize or something.”

That night, my friends proposed a bet. At the end of the party, when everyone was gone and I'd given my date what she wanted—cash—for ghosting her the entire evening, Justin brought the idea to the group chat's attention. He was so hyped up about it like it was such a good thing, I thought he'd hit the lottery or something.

“I have an idea,” he said. “Let's all pitch in and bet Brad he can't stick with one woman for a whole month. It'll be an easy way for us to make some cash off him.”

He was joking about the cash, but what about the bet? Turned out, he was serious about that. I won't lie; I got a little offended. Miranda and Josh chimed in to agree with him, offending me even more. I didn't respond to the group chat that night. I got home late and had a big business meeting the next morning, so I went to bed.

The next morning, I got up and got ready for my meeting. Sarah Bland was one of the most prolific women in the world of gaming, and she was hot, too. Very sexy—tall, slender, fiery red hair, and amazing lips. Her breasts were one of my favorite things about her, and I think she knew it, too.

“Mr. Brad Harris.” She smiled as she walked into my office, her large breasts bouncing with each step. “Finally”—she approached me and kissed me on both cheeks—“we're able to meet and actually talk business. How are you?”

I was too zoned in on the two jugs that peeked at me over her bra to reply right away. It wasn't until I realized I was nearly drooling that I caught myself and responded.

“I'm good. Great. How are you?”

“Better, now that we're in the proper setting to make deals and contracts.”

The entire time Sarah and I talked, I thought about what life would be like to be with a woman like her. She was attractive, stylish, and had a great mind for business. And she could keep up a great conversation. I loved that.

By the conclusion of our meeting, Sarah had given me a great pitch that really had me interested. I wasn't sure if it was actually her business idea or her boobs that had my wheels spinning, but I was intrigued by both aspects.

“Well, Brad”—she smiled and leaned across my desk to shake my hand—“it was a pleasure to meet with you this morning. I hope my ideas are something you can see yourself becoming a part of, and we end up doing great business together.”

I saw myself taking her into the back room of my office and giving her some pleasure alright. My eyes trailed her long legs and thighs like they were hands, feeling for the jackpot. And she let them.

“Thank you for stopping by this morning,” I replied. “It’s always a pleasure to see the great Sarah Bland. There’s really not a single bland thing about you.”

Later that night, when all was still and I was satisfied by another one of my rendezvous, I went back to the group chat to reread the messages from the night before. Miranda had texted a few times that day, wondering when I would respond. And after some careful observations about myself and my dating life, I did.

“You guys are some real assholes, you know that?” I sent. “I don’t know why my dating life is such a turn-on for you, but you know what? I will accept your bet. And it’ll be a for sure way for ME to make some quick cash.”

They all responded with laughing emojis, even though I was serious. My friends never doubted anything about me in life, except for my dating. They knew what I had gone through after my breakup with Kayla, and how much that had affected me. So they knew firsthand why I was the way I was.

“It’s a bet then,” Justin replied. “One whole month, the same girl. And actually give it a real shot. If she’s cool, you’re on your way back into the dating pool. Even if she isn’t, and you end up not liking her, at least you can say you stuck something out for an entire month. No harm, no foul.”

“Exactly,” Miranda chimed in. “Dating is all about the experience. Learning what you like and what you don’t. How to treat people in an intimate setting, not just because you want sex from them. Being vulnerable and mature enough to ride the roller coaster of emotions and growing from there.”

I knew what dating was, so I didn’t need the lecture that came with the bet. Miranda meant nothing by it, but it still annoyed me to think they thought I didn’t know how to date without hurting a woman or chasing after my own selfish desires.

“Got it,” I sent. “An entire month of dating the same woman. Every day. I can do that. I’ve done it before. But, just to please you, I will accept your bet and take your money.”

I put my phone down on my nightstand after the chat and lay in bed staring at the ceiling for a while. I didn’t even know who I would date. I had thought about testing the waters with Sarah, because she was the easiest to get along with, but then

I'd found out she was already married, a revelation that only furthered my hatred for dating.

It seemed like every woman I thought of romantically always did something or reminded me of something that made me not trust women in general. I figured it had a lot to do with my first heartbreak, and I should probably seek therapy, but there was always something going on that seemed more important.

When I thought about marriage, I didn't know what to think of it. I told myself I would get married one day. At least, I wanted to. But in the back of my mind, I had a lot of questions and concerns. The biggest being my money. I didn't know who to trust when it came to that. The women I ended up with always seemed more interested in what I had in my bank account than what I had in my head.

My thoughts on prenuptial agreements were that they were used like bookmarks for a future divorce. *Guess what, sweetie, sign the dotted line to rake in a bit of cash along with a piece of my soul but you gotta tolerate me for this many months... Why bother?*



Chapter Two

Zoey

I sipped my freshly brewed coffee while waiting for Julisa, my best friend and roommate, to finish getting ready. Coffee soothed my stomach and mood which was what I loved most about it. Recently, at a wellness exam with my primary care provider, she reviewed my history and noted that I'd suffered from heartburn even as a child. I had explained that, at one point, I thought I had cancer because, when I didn't eat on time, my stomach became very upset. At that time, they had run a full panel of tests. Of course, they found no signs of cancer.

My primary care provider had still pushed for an answer about how many cups of coffee I drank a day. When I claimed only one cup, she'd advised me of the hazards of coffee—namely heartburn—and told me to limit my consumption to one cup daily.

Complete sincerity and a lack of judgment were what made her my favorite doctor. But even though I agreed to limit my

coffee intake, I just couldn't do it. I have cut back to two cups per day, thanks to Julisa's help. Since we became friends, she has never failed to look out for me.

"Julisa, I got your coffee ready," I called out, now that we were running short on time. "What's taking you so long?"

"Zoey, you know how many people get invited to this event?" she yelled back but didn't give me a chance to answer. "Very few," she answered for me, adding, "Stop being so impatient."

"I just don't want to be late. I hate sitting in the back."

"Alright," Julisa groaned.

I watched her glance in the mirror once more. She was really beautiful, but I'd always thought she downplayed it. Not tonight, though. Tonight, I suspected she did it for the confidence boost. I couldn't blame her. Lately, she was all about networking which was much better than cursing the ground her ex-boyfriend walked on. The idiot had cheated on her and, as a result, she'd sworn off men and embraced a sour mood for what seemed like forever.

It's not like she didn't have experience with men, some older than her, so I was surprised she hadn't picked up on the signs of him cheating. Then again, every girl we knew had some guy in their past who had cheated on them, including me. It was just a damn shame that she now turned her back on guys who showed any interest in her.

Maybe I thought that way because I was raised to be agreeable, to think of others before thinking of myself. Now, though, my upbringing seemed backward. After all, if I didn't take care of myself, how could I take care of others?

With these thoughts running around in my mind, I grabbed my bag, glanced once more at my reflection, and we set off.

Our arrival at the parking lot was a mere ten minutes before the event. Then, we couldn't find a place to park. Only one or two events like this happened each year, and word was out that gamers were flocking to this one—Julisa was only one of them. We drove until we spotted an opening at the top of the parking garage. Looking around at how packed the garage was, I was rethinking how crowded the gaming industry must be.

I'd played *Super Mario* and got obliterated enough times to feel the bite of failure. That was enough for me. Addicting? Well, yeah...but failure was not what I wanted to continually feel when my goal was just to lose myself in some fun. Instead, I lost time and got my confidence all screwed up.

I thought I'd developed a respect for gamers because of my drastic Mario failure and being best friends with Julisa, but the packed garage gave me a whole different perspective. These guys were dedicated!

Rounding a corner, we approached a group of stunning ushers as we entered the conference hall. *Did they hire models to work here or what?*

Directly after that thought, I remembered Julisa telling me about one of the presenters, a hot young billionaire who designed the latest virtual reality game. Apparently, players would find soothing settings for relaxation and meditation. She'd gone on about how smart this guy was, and I got a little jealous.

I wanted to find my talent. Sure, I could sing, but that was about it. Why couldn't I invent something profound that would help people? I mean, everyone wants money, but my search was for that ultimate satisfaction of seeing people happy. I was all about the results. This young billionaire should be glowing with happiness over his VR accomplishment.

My only experience with VR games was when my younger brother Geek, finally purchased one. Sometimes, I'd spend all day watching him play. He had no idea that I had snuck into his room to watch on many occasions. I'd thought he had looked a little crazy talking to himself while wearing the supersized headset. One day, he'd corrected me—he'd been talking to his gaming friends.

Before that familiar I'm-such-an-idiot feeling could grab me, Julisa tugged on my hand. "Seats. Right there. Let's go."

We rushed toward them and plopped down, both of us panting. I scanned the conference hall which reeked of high technology. Everyone talked in low tones, and the bits and pieces I heard went straight over my head.

My highest technology was my iPhone watch. I used it mostly to count how many calories I burned and to monitor

my heart rate when I exercised. I was completely out of my league here. I didn't even use social media that much. I might spend a couple of hours total looking at pictures of my friends who seemed so happy and content with their lives. Those only gave a partial reflection of their lives, though. Any sad, ugly problems were missing.

It was a little depressing, to be honest. At least a couple of my friends, images beaming out on various sites, were being threatened with losing funding for college by their parents for one reason or another. Yet, their happy faces told a different story.

The lights suddenly dimmed, and a chorus of yells and whistles ripped through the air. Several people even stood up and pumped their fists into the air.

A man stepped up and motioned for silence before saying, "My dear ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to introduce our guest speaker, Brad Harris, one of the youngest self-made billionaires I know. He is here to amaze us with his new virtual reality game and how it can both entertain and help millions of people around the world. Without further ado, here's Brad."

The next few minutes were full of screeching women, but my eyes were glued to the stunning man who'd stepped onto the stage. *Wow...he's just... Just...WOW.* No wonder these women were going nuts over him.

Then he smiled, and I stopped breathing. Julisa's finger under my jaw broke my trance. I jerked, leaning away from

her hand, and heard her laugh. I still couldn't tear my eyes off this man, even to shoot her a stunned look.

How can she look away from him? I'd never seen someone so freaking hot.

My gushing mind finally locked onto his voice, now that every other woman had shut that plump hole in their faces and sat their well-toned, shrieking asses back in their seats.

Oh. My. God. I'm jealous! The man just stepped into my life five seconds ago...pshhh, I've gone crazy...

My face flooded with warmth, and I giggled at myself.

"...gone! Another one fell over the cliff for him," Julisa said from beside me.

"Shut. Up," blasted out of me just as silence settled over the vast space.

From the stage spreading through the conference arena, heads turned to look at me. I froze, staring at Brad who was shielding his eyes from the arena lighting and appeared to be staring straight at me. His hand suddenly pointed at me.

"That wasn't me. She did it." He grinned as everyone erupted in laughter.

I could have crawled under the row of seats in front of me. My face burned, but I nodded and laughed, all the while pretending that our gazes were locked. Because it sure felt that way.

There is no way this man can be single. Heart, don't you dare jump over that cliff. The natural order of everything has to have stepped in already... Damn!

His motion for quiet held, and he started talking about how his VR program benefits lonely people, those suffering from depression and mental disorders, sleep loss, and the list went on. He commanded the audience, and I have no doubt that I wasn't the only woman who wanted to run onto the stage and tackle him.

How many women will be looking him up and staring at their phones all night while...yeah...uh-huh... I will definitely not be alone in that crowd.

I missed his last few minutes on stage, my mind was sprawled out in a rather naughty gutter. But I heard Julisa loud and clear.

“Come on, girl, clean your drool before the lights turn on.”

“I'm not—” *Oh God, I am!* I swiped my mouth with my hand and frowned. That was a first.

“I need a vaccination or...”

Julisa cackled beside me and got an elbow in the ribs. She giggled, “Guy's a billionaire, girl. You need a dose of reality.”

“Geez, would you just let a girl have some wicked fantasies? It's not like he's single anyway.” *But what if he is?*
“Is he?”

Julisa gave me the epitome of eye-rolls, then threw down a challenge. “Ask him. If he shows up at the exhibit. If you can't

win his heart, you can always get his autograph.”

After what she'd been through, I was surprised she was joking about anyone's heart. Even though I was the joke, I could tell she was dealing much better with her pain. If I could keep her laughing, all was not lost.

We stood around and waited until I was sure he wasn't going to appear. We were discussing giving up when a handsome usher approached us and asked that we follow him. We were a couple of steps through a doorway when Brad's voice sent my pulse into a danger zone again.

“Greetings ladies,” he said, appearing relaxed in an armchair. From where we'd been sitting, I hadn't gotten the full extent of his looks. Up close, I could only gawk.

His eyebrows tweaked upward over deep blue eyes as he grinned, waiting along with me for my sanity to return. Even when he was sitting, I could tell he was tall and muscular. I had to tell myself *don't you dare drool again*.

His semi-curly hair looked flawless. I could only wonder what it looked like after sex. An amused gleam trickled into his eyes. “Thank you for taking the time to hear about my new VR design. What did you think?”

Right after his question, Julisa nudged me in the ribs and hissed, “Answer.”

“Oh, y-yeah,” I blurted, face heating under his stare. I could barely believe I was sharing the same air with this man. Another sharp jab from Julisa's elbow helped. “I mean,

helping people in so many ways... that must be a dream come true.”

Okay...stop gushing...

His gaze was so captivating as he nodded and asked, “Can you tell me what you like best about it?”

“Oh gosh, that might take a while. There’s not just one thing. You’ve done something great here.”

Brad chuckled, and an odd expression flitted over his face. “Great, huh? Well, I’d like to hear more. Would you ladies like to join us later? My friends and I are going to celebrate at the Paradise Hotel nightclub.”

Paradise was a five-star hotel downtown. Only wealthy people stayed there. The nightclub was only accessible to its VIP members.

“Sure, we’ll join you,” Julisa replied and beamed at me as if she’d just done me a favor.

“Yes, at the Paradise,” I replied.

“And what are your names?” Brad inquired.

“Oh...I’m Zoey, and this is Julisa, a friend of mine.”

“I’m Brad, and I’m sure you know that,” he said, his eyes never leaving my face. “I look forward to seeing you later.”



Chapter Three

Brad

After the presentation, I felt ecstatic. I had been practicing it for over a month. As always, the presentation had to be perfect. But this time, I knew I would encounter some resistance, especially since my VR design had mild medical implications. But fortunately, no press comment was made on that point. Even though I have done so many of them, looking at that many people still gave me a flutter. In fact, I even looked forward to the next one.

The most memorable moment for me, though, was the beauty—Zoey. Standing close to her, I couldn't look away from her eyes, a light hazel color, and those full lips... The words weren't in my vocabulary. She'd stained them with a sexy shade of red lipstick. Her dark brown hair framed her face perfectly. I couldn't help but notice her breasts too; they were just right for her petite frame.

The way her eyes lowered when I stared at her intently made my stomach flutter. I doubt she even realized that she

was so gorgeous. Zoey...something about her piqued my interest. Very strongly. I want to discover what it was. I could tell she was into me, too. Her cheeks blushed when she looked at me. My effect on women had always been strong, but to have an effect on her, for some reason mattered to me more than it should.

She seemed so young, though...sixteen-years-old young. She couldn't be that young because only people over the age of eighteen were allowed at the presentation. The look of youth was on her side.

"Congratulations, Mr. Billionaire," Justin exclaimed. "You've done it again, man. I wish I had your smarts."

"Thanks, Justin. You know I couldn't do this without you guys, without all your support every step of the way."

"Congratulations, Brad." Miranda smiled from ear to ear.

A security guard motioned for us to go to the nightclub before I could respond to Miranda.

Tonight, I was more eager to go to the nightclub. I had instructed a security staff member to wait for Julisa and Zoey by the entrance so that he could guide them to our booth.

Inside the club, everything was as usual. Although I enjoyed the music, whether dancing or simply listening, it had been getting a bit stale. I hadn't felt that way until I turned thirty. As much as I hate to admit it to my friends, I had considered settling down on some occasions and whether it would be a good idea to do so soon.

But with whom? I hadn't felt anything special since Kayla.

Nowadays, women fell in with my money or my fame. How could I really be sure someone cared about me? After all, I thought Kayla cared about me, but then she cheated on me. The idea of trusting a woman, and dating her, was a foreign concept to me right now.



Zoey

“Is there a reservation for you two ladies?” A muscular security guard questioned us.

“Yes, Brad Harris invited us,” Julisa replied.

The security guard laughed loudly. “Nice try, ladies. Are you two even eighteen?”

Julisa snatched her ID from her pocket and held it close to the security guard's face.

He gave it a cursory glance. “You're not the first to say you were invited by Brad, okay? If you are not able to show me your reservation, I would appreciate it if you would move out of the way.”

A few minutes later, a tall, attractive man in a nice suit approached the security guard and asked for two ladies. The security guard pointed at us.

“Are you Zoey and Julisa?” the man asked.

“That’s us,” Julisa answered.

As we were leaving, Julisa gave the security guard an I-told-you-so look, but he just dismissed her.

We approached Brad and his friends’ booth, walking behind the tall man. I was so nervous; it was a good thing I couldn’t see him. I’d have probably fainted.

The tall man stepped aside, and Brad approached us. I composed myself to reflect maturity and confidence. At twenty-three years old, I’ve had my share of relationships, and most of them did not end well. I was hoping I’d found my one true love tonight albeit completely far-fetched.

“There they are. I’m glad you agreed to join us tonight,” Brad said as he extended his arm to us. He guided us to the booth on the opposite side. I sat down in front of him, and Julisa sat next to me.

Brad introduced us to everyone, and all his friends were nice. They looked to be the same age; I’d guess in their early thirties. Even though I was somewhere around ten years younger than them, I didn’t mind hanging out with them. The same seemed true for Julisa. She enjoyed hearing Brad speak about how he developed VR therapeutics. She smiled the entire time. I was smiling too, but for a different reason.

“What would you like to drink, Zoey?” Brad inquired.

“Hmm, I’d like a strawberry daiquiri.”

“Same here,” Julisa replied when Brad asked her what she wanted.

His eyes constantly darted to me, and although I was ecstatic, I was also nervous.

Justin interrupted my thoughts when he asked, “Tell us about yourselves.”

“Well, I’m a student, and I also work part-time at a skilled nursing facility as a nursing assistant.”

“I’m a student, and I manage my family’s gaming store,” Julisa replied.

“Oh, that’s really interesting,” Justin commented.

“So, Zoey, what are you going to school for?” Brad inquired.

“A Doctor of Pharmacy program. I’m currently in my fourth year.”

“Wow,” Brad exclaimed, “You have to be smart to learn about medications.”

“It’s a lot of studying, but learning about medications fascinates me... How they work in the body, and how they can help other people.”

“How about you, Julisa?” Miranda asked.

“I am pursuing a degree in computer engineering.”

“Both of you must be so smart,” Miranda said.

I could tell that Julisa wanted to talk more about gaming, but she held back.

“Don’t know about you guys, but the dance floor is calling me,” Miranda exclaimed.

Miranda, Justin, and Josh hit the dance floor. Brad remained seated, but he motioned towards the dance floor. “Do you want to dance, Zoey?”

Julisa shooed me off. “I’m fine. Go have fun, Zo.”

My pounding heart fluttered as Brad took my hand. The moment we touched a wave of pleasure spread through me. Our gazes locked, and he blasted me with a hot, intense gaze that went beyond sensual. It promised wickedness in my near future.



Brad

I’d been checking her out all this time, hoping she wouldn’t get offended. When I asked her to dance, her obvious excitement got me excited too. My first impression was that she was shy, but now I saw her as vibrant and full of life.

Has she ever dated an older man, though?

I had to chuckle over placing myself in the older-man category. But I was about to turn thirty-five. One thing was for damn sure; our touch threw the tension between us into overdrive. Our eyes locked and her cheeks flushed.

She felt it, too. If she only knew how much I wanted to possess, fuck, and taste her. Pulling her into my arms to dance, her hypnotizing scent washed over me.

“Do you like this song?” she asked, interrupting my fantasies of what she’d look like naked. Under me. Writhing.

“Yeah,” I said, then had to clear the lust out of my throat and try again. “Yeah, I do.”

“What do you usually listen to?” she asked me. Her breathy tone beckoned my cock.

“R and B, jazz, alternative, and country music. I enjoy just about every genre of music.”

“That’s cool,” she breathed.

“How about you?” I asked, stroking her lower back with my thumb and feeling her muscles twitch.

“Uh... I like songs with a good beat or tune,” she purred, arching into me slightly.

My fingers stilled, otherwise we’d be hitting the dancefloor and our clothes would be flying off. For the moment, we silently danced. My thoughts remained on how she would taste.

Throughout the night, I wanted to kiss her, but I held back. We had unforgettable chemistry and I had to settle for that knowledge. Too soon, they announced that they had to go, coursework, and all that.

As we parted ways, I asked for her phone number, and she eagerly gave it to me. I offered them a ride home, but they declined. Julisa insisted they had a car and were fine.

Once they left, my friends bombarded me with an old idea for a bet that I thought was buried a few nights ago and forgotten.

“Brad, you are obviously fond of Zoey. She’s gorgeous and...uh, *young*. Too young, maybe?” I glared at Justin, letting my look say it all. “Okay, not another word on ages. So, let’s talk about that 30-day dating—”

“Come on, Justin. You expect me to wager on a lady like her?” He had to be kidding me.

“Why not? You two have chemistry. Who would be better to date for thirty days than her?”

They were all staring at me and waiting for my answer. Getting Zoey involved didn’t feel right. I took a little too long to answer. Justin smirked and shook his head. “You just can’t date or even imagine sticking with a woman for thirty days, no matter who it is. Can you?”

That irritated me more than I’d ever admit to them. “Fine. You want proof? Let’s do it, but first I want to know what I get when I prove it.”

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll fall in love,” Miranda pointed out. “Would that be so bad?”

“Well, Mr. Billionaire, you don’t need money.” We could always rely on Justin to state the obvious. “Let’s say you throw a party—we still get to drink and eat—but we’ll be the servers, bartender, whatever you need. Good?”

I laughed and shook my head. “Aren’t you already doing that?” Since Justin could be overly sensitive, I quickly added, “I’m joking. You guys know that.”

“So, party it is,” Justin announced, although I hadn’t really agreed to anything. Besides, they had fallen into all those roles Justin mentioned. So much so that the caterers were eyeing them and getting grumpy. But based on my experience, I knew it was as good as a done deal.

Sighing, I shook my head and raised my drink along with them. Everyone tapped glasses.

“The bet is on, but Brad,” Miranda pointed her finger at me. “Go easy on her. She seems like a very nice girl.”

We parted ways shortly after. A guy from my security team escorted me home, as usual. That damn bet sat heavily on my mind. Having Zoey’s number excited me, though. I was more interested in her than any other lady I’d met in a long while.

That scared me, and at the same time, my pulse thundered in my ears at the thought of thirty days with no one but her. It occurred to me that I should tell her about this idiotic bet, but I wasn’t sure how she’d react.

That, in itself, should tell me to forget about it and just focus on her. I couldn't get her off my mind anyway, so that turned out to be relatively easy. The bet wasn't of my making anyway. Justin was behind it.

Will she see it that way?



Zoey

It was around 2 a.m. by the time we got home. Julisa went straight to bed right after she took a shower. Meanwhile, I grabbed my laptop and looked up Brad. I still couldn't believe I had such a wonderful night with him. I'd wanted to kiss him but, even though we have chemistry, something held me back.

Our chemistry was so strong and, deep down, I was scared that any public displays of affection might turn into a viral embarrassment. He didn't make the first move, either. I wonder if he felt the same way. Don't get me wrong, though. I still enjoyed our time together.

Looking at my laptop screen – a gorgeous blonde's arm hooked through his—I could easily see how tall he was. And he looked uncomfortable in that photo. I pulled up image after

image, all with a different stunner on his arm. And then there were the headlines...

“Sensational Brad, Still Single and the Most Sought-After Bachelor on the Planet,” one claimed.

“Forever Single? What Will it Take to Get This Young Billionaire to Fall in Love?” another asked.

I switched to reading the blogs and learned he grew up in Cape Cod with his sister. The only picture I found was when they were younger. There wasn't a lot of resemblance between the two of them. Brad was described as a defiant kid growing up. He did not heed his parents' advice to be a doctor. Both his parents are doctors. Oddly enough, I couldn't find much about his sister, Christine.

Another headline caught my eye.

“Young Billionaire Donated 15 Million to Support St. Jude Hospital.”

“Young billionaire Playboy Can't Seem to Settle Down.”

And on it went. Every image was with a different lady; sometimes he was surrounded by a crowd. I had to look away from one photo showing a girl snuggled up to him on each side. He sure got around. Until now, I hadn't known he existed.

Either there's something happening between us, or I'm just lust-crazy. But I know he feels it, too. Something must be going on.

Or is it just a matter of wanting him so badly, I've convinced myself there's something? If I was after his money, that would make me a psycho-stalker gold digger. Am I a gold digger? No! I don't care about his money. Or his fame.

And I hadn't even gone out with him yet, so I shook those thoughts out of my mind. At a little after three o'clock, I shut the laptop and snuggled into my bed. Within seconds, I was fast asleep.

The next morning, Julisa was eating cereal in our little kitchen when I entered. She was grinning and chewing as she watched me approach her.

“Hey, Zo, what's up? How do you think it went with Brad last night?”

I poured a cup of coffee, nodding while sending her a grin. “Really good. The tension between us was outrageous.”

“Well, I guess you're not out of his league after all. Seriously, Zoey, be careful, okay? He's brilliant when it comes to software design, and he might just be one of the smartest people on the planet, but he is a notorious playboy.”

“We just danced and traded phone numbers, Julisa. Stop being so judgmental.” She narrowed her eyes at me and opened her mouth, but I wasn't finished. “Besides, half of the stuff on the internet is fabricated. You never should believe anything about celebrities.”

“Right, but he has a pattern. No image I saw shows him with the same woman. He isn't relationship material. In an

interview, he even said he wants to stay single,” she pointed out. “And he’s too old for you.”

I’d heard enough. “Come on, Julisa.”

“I don’t want to see you hurt, Zoey,” she snapped, glaring at me.

“He’s only thirty-four years old,” I told her.

“And you’re only twenty-three,” she said.

“Almost twenty-four,” I corrected and, before she could say anything, I added, “There’s something about him. I can’t explain it, but I know he feels it too.”

“Every woman he meets probably feels like that,” she pointed out. “I think the words *billionaire* and *playboy* warp women’s minds into thinking they are exactly what he needs. Maybe some like the challenge...”

I’d stared at her, frowning after she’d said the words *billionaire* and *playboy*. “You know I—”

“Yes,” she interrupted, bringing her hand up to stop me. “I know you’re not like that. Just be careful, Zoey.”

I nodded, wanting to drop the subject, and wondered if Julisa was jealous. Whatever the case, I grabbed the cereal and sank into the seat next to her.

Tomorrow, I would turn twenty-four years old. I focused on what I wanted and didn’t want to do to keep from dwelling on Brad, the playboy. Julisa wanted to celebrate tomorrow with me, but at the moment, I didn’t feel like going out. Watching

some shows on Netflix and not worrying about anything else sounded great.

I'll probably have to ban Brad's name from our conversation.



Chapter Four

Zoey

Bridgewater State University was my school of choice. When I moved away from Florida, I'd wanted to go somewhere that still had nice beaches and summery breezes, so Cape Cod was my destination. I had gone a few times to visit with my parents, but not very often. So, it was still a little new for me. The guys were a lot different than back home, that was for sure. They were a bunch of jocks, and really pushy, mostly too arrogant for my liking. Out of the two years that I'd attended, I could honestly say I only dated two guys. And they turned out to be exactly the same. Assholes.

“Zoeyyy, what's up girl? How you doing?”

Triston, one of the jocks that ran the campus, saw me sitting in the school's library and came over to interrupt. He and I had history, but nothing major. We had gone on a few dates and had sex a few times—very good sex, I might add—but that was all it was for me.

Good times...

“Triston.” I playfully rolled my eyes. “I’m studying. What’s up?”

“I can see that.” He blushed. “Nothing’s up, just wanted to see if you had any plans later tonight. Maybe you can come over for a little after school...fun?”

Really, Triston? Ugh!

Sometimes I gave in—whenever I was in the mood. Other times, I just didn’t want to be intimate with him.

And tonight is all mine. I have other plans.

“I can’t. Not tonight,” I said. “It’s my birthday, and I kind of just wanna relax after studying all day.”

“Your birthday? You have a birthday?” His airhead attitude always kicked in at the wrong time. “I mean, of course, I know you have a birthday. I just didn’t know it was today.”

“Because you never cared to ask. Your thoughts are too full of sex.”

“That’s not true,” he lied. “Sometimes I just really wanna hang out with you.”

That may have been true, but he definitely didn’t know how to show a girl that. Triston was older than I was by three years. I had just turned twenty-four, and he was already twenty-six. We had a lot of things in common, but for the most part, he was just too much of a womanizer to take anything seriously with me. And I was no one’s play toy. I’d fallen in love with

the idea of love when I was a lot younger, and I did my best to hold on to that idea until I found someone who could make it a reality. Triston just wasn't that guy for me.

“That’s very sweet, Triston. I like hanging out with you too, but right now, I have to study. Maybe we can get together another time and go on a real date?”

“Okay.” He gave me a huge grin. “It’s a date.”

My thoughts about dating had been tainted before I left for Cape Cod. I still believed in love and finding the perfect guy, but I was single for that reason as well. None of the guys I hooked up with were perfect enough. They were all liars and pretenders. Guys who were sexy on the outside, but dirty and rotten within.

Mike, the guy I dated before I moved, was the worst. He was one of the main reasons I stopped living in my fantasy world and started to see guys for who they really were the first time around.

When he found out I applied for a different college than he had, all hell broke loose, and I found out he had been cheating on me the entire time we were together. And with a girl I'd considered a good friend of mine. It devastated me to my core. Made me never want to even look at another guy for as long as I lived. I loosened my grip on that thought after a while of being in the Cape though. Didn't meet any guys that made me change my mind, that came of my own accord. After meeting Brad, that perception changed.

Just before packing up my study bag, Julisa walked into the library. She knew exactly where to find me at all times and never failed to show up at her convenience.

“You know,” she said, plopping down in the seat next to me, “I think you spend more time in this library than you do our own apartment, and I don’t know how to feel about that.”

“I have to study.” I laughed. “And if you weren’t as loud as you are during sex in the mornings, I could do that with no issues.”

“You have a point.” Julisa changed the subject abruptly. “What are we doing tonight? And don’t say ‘nothing,’ because it’s your birthday so we are definitely doing something. It doesn’t have to be anything extravagant, but we are getting out of the house. No studying. No avoiding people. Just you, me, some drinks, and a good celebration.”

One of the main reasons I loved Julisa so much was that she was big on birthdays and holidays. Just like my mom. She always celebrated with me, even if it was just the two of us. It didn’t matter how big or how small the celebration was, Julisa just loved to celebrate for the people she cared about the most.

“I didn’t make any plans,” I said. “I was just gonna grab a bottle of wine or something and relax on the couch all night.”

“Well, we can do the wine, but the couch? No, ma’am. I’ll book us a booth at the hookah lounge, and we can bring the house down with some karaoke.”

“Karaoke?” I pondered. “I do love to sing. Okay, karaoke tonight it is. Oh—please, if you see Triston around campus, don’t tell him we’re doing anything. He’s been nagging me about hanging out, and I’m just not in the mood for that right now.”

“No Triston.” Julisa playfully scribbled on her notepad. “Got it. See you tonight. I have a class to pretend I’m enjoying.”

Since Julisa had insisted on going out that night, after class I headed off to the mall to buy something new to wear. Rule of thumb—according to my mom—a girl must buy a new outfit for every birthday. Never let anyone see you wear the same clothes that you did the year before. It wasn’t about being a material girl, it was merely a way to remind yourself that it was a new year and you had upgraded some aspects of your life. Even if it was just your wardrobe.

The mall in the Cape was nothing like the malls in Florida. It catered mostly to the older crowds, the jocks, and the conservative community. Granted, I was pretty reserved myself, but I still liked to throw on a nice dress and a sleazy pair of high heels. After finding the perfect outfit, I stopped at my favorite Chinese food spot for a tray of the best Lo Mein I’d ever tasted and washed it all down with an ice-cold lemonade.

Julisa was home getting ready by the time I got back. To neither one of our surprise, she had bought almost the same outfit that I did and even planned to do her makeup the same

way. Sometimes, I felt like we might have been long-lost sisters or something because we were just so much alike that it was crazy.

“You look gorgeous, foxy mama,” she complimented me on our way into the hookah lounge of my choosing. “Have a good time tonight, okay?”

“Will do.” I smiled at her before getting ready to take our selfie. “Let’s go knock ‘em dead.”

Lookers was a nice spot right off the water. It was a relaxed vibe every time we went, full of people just winding down after work—or a long day of classes, in our case—and they had good food and drinks too. The crowd that night was a little bit older—men who worked in corporate buildings and women who chased after those kinds of men. But it was still a nice kickback.

Luckily enough for us, Julisa was in great with the owners. Greg—a guy she slept with years ago—still had the hots for her and made sure that she and whoever she was with were very well taken care of every time she visited the lounge.

“Shots for the birthday girl?” he said, approaching the booth he had decorated for my birthday with a tray full of shot glasses.

“Oh my goodness, you shouldn’t have.”

I smiled and stood up to hug Greg, and that was when I spotted a man so gorgeous I nearly knocked over the tray of

shots, it was Brad. He was sitting at the bar with Miranda, Josh, and Justin. My heart started pounding again.

“Do you see that guy over there at the bar?” I asked Julisa.

“Which one?”

I pointed out Brad and her eyes followed. This time, he wore a nice, tailored suit with a pair of expensive loafers. The jewelry he wore around his neck and wrist said he was well-off and stylish. It was his entire aesthetic that took my breath away. He was cool and reserved, but I could see his wild side throughout his demeanor. It turned me on, to say the least.

“Oh!” Julisa gulped after downing her shot. “Why is Brad here?”

“I have no idea,” I said, feeling warm all over already.

I watched him interact with his friends from across the room. He looked important—signing autographs, taking photos.

“Zoey, be careful. You gave your phone number to him right?” I nodded, bracing myself for Julisa’s judgment. “If there was something between you, how come he’s here and hasn’t reached out to you yet?”

I knew she was going to say that... Ugh, Julisa, just stop...

She rolled her eyes when I didn’t say anything. “He’s nice to look at, but don’t fall for him.”

Her words of caution sounded like slander, even jealousy, to me. There were a lot of guys she dated that I could see through

from a million miles away, but I never told her anything until the proof was already out there.

“Wouldn’t hurt to have a little fun with him,” I said.

Julisa cut her eyes at Brad. She suddenly acted as though she disliked him, and I didn’t even know why. *I don’t understand why she feels this way toward him after enjoying her time at the event so much.* It was so soon; I don’t even think she knew why she was acting that way toward him. Whatever bad she thought she saw in him, I didn’t see it. I saw through the guy he pretended to be with his friends too. Brad was a sweet guy underneath whatever mask of hurt he wore. He wanted to be loved. He wanted someone he could trust; I saw that in the way he spoke during his presentation. Deep down inside, he was crying out for love, and no one seemed to notice.

I do, though.

“Let’s do a song,” I said, trying to turn the tension down between us.

I wanted to get Brad’s attention, though I didn’t mention that to Julisa. Lord knows if I had, she probably would have grabbed her jacket and walked out on me entirely. I had no idea what song I wanted to sing to him. I wanted it to be something he knew, but I didn’t know many songs from whatever era he grew up in, so I chose a song that I felt had meaningful lyrics for both of us.

“Ugh, of course, there’s a line,” Julisa grunted. “We have two people ahead of us. More shots?”

“I’m down.”

A lot of people saw me as some sweet, innocent girl. But I was a wild card underneath all those assumptions. It always surprised people that I could keep up with the fun and festivities that happened during the night, and I liked it that way. I loved being unpredictable, underestimated. Because when I finally showed face, everyone was always so stunned.

“I’m really feeling these shots,” I said. “And they are good. Hope I don’t do anything crazy tonight.”

“Anything crazy like what? Hook up with Mr. Harris?” Julisa teased. “Look, you’re a grown woman, you can do whatever you please. I just want you to be careful, okay? I’m just trying to look out for you. I’m not jealous I just don’t want you to end up hurt. Or worse.”

I felt like she had read my mind from earlier, or maybe I gave off a vibe that told on myself. Either way, I was happy the cards were put on the table and the tension was killed completely. Julisa was my sister. I loved her. I didn’t want us fighting over something so petty.

“I know.” I pulled her in for a hug. “I love you for that. You’re always looking out for me.”

“And I always will look out for you, no matter what. You’re my sister. Now, let’s go up there and sing some karaoke!”



Chapter Five

Brad

I noticed a girl staring at me from a booth across from the bar. As soon as I realized it was Zoey, my heart started pounding again. Both she nor I had not contacted each other after our wonderful night together. Promoting my VR had taken up all my time today. My intention was to reach out tomorrow to see if we could get together. But she was on stage now. Singing karaoke. She was a brainy beauty, and her voice was phenomenal.

“Let me cater to you, baby this is your day. Do anything for my man, baby you blow me away.”

She sang a song I wasn't too familiar with, but the lyrics took my breath away with ease. I longed for the day I would find a woman who loved me enough to want to cater to me and my every desire. Listening to Zoey sing every word of that song somehow put me in a trance. The longer I stared at her, the more drawn in I became. I was so caught up in the sound

of her voice I didn't even hear Miranda talking to me while ordering another round.

“Wow, I didn't know Zoey can sing.”

“Huh?” I shook my head to snap myself out of my trance.

“You've been staring at her for the longest time.”

“Oh.” I chuckled. “Was I? I'll reach out to her after she finishes singing.”

She chuckled and rested her back against the bar to watch Zoey sing too. We were both in awe at the way she controlled the crowd with her highs and lows. So much so that Miranda suggested bringing up the bet and voted for Zoey to be the muse.

“You see Zoey on stage?” she said to Justin and Josh. “Brad is really into her.”

I laughed her off. “Don't start your bull tonight, Miranda. I was only listening to her sing, and I spent some great time with her, remember?”

“Listening to her sing?” Justin laughed. “Do you even know that song?”

I expected that kind of reaction from him. Justin was the one who'd pushed for that damn bet, and he was way too eager for me to get on with it. With Zoey, the need for privacy remained in the back of my mind.

“She's old enough, right?” Josh asked. “I mean, she looks young, but she seems pretty mature. Didn't you ask her how

old she was?”

“She got into the bar. She’s over twenty-one.”

They all gaped at me. I sighed and said, “I’ll find out in time. Just give me some breathing room here.”

“Who knows? Maybe Brad here needs a youngling to help him stay on track. He’s still pretty young himself.”

They all glanced at me, and I fought the urge to look Zoey’s way again. But I couldn’t resist. Seeing Zoey again, her beauty stole my attention and damn near my heart right from underneath my shirt and jacket.

“Well, we already decided she was the candidate. Now, if Brad will just get on with dating her...” Justin trailed off, staring at me pointedly.

I pondered for a moment, not even sure I still wanted to go through with the bet. But the way she looked at me as she walked off stage gave me an excuse to get close to her without anyone thinking I was actually falling in love.

“I guess so.” I shrugged. “Just to get you hounds off my back,” I teased. “I imagine this is what Miranda feels like when all the guys try to hit on her all night.”

“YES!” Miranda raised her shot glass into the air. “That is exactly the way I feel when guys try to hit on me all night. Hounded. Harassed and annoyed.”

We all laughed as we downed the liquid gold in our glasses. Zoey and Julisa were back at their booth puffing on their hookahs, while I remained at the bar wondering when I would

have the courage to go over and talk to her. There were several times when her eyes invited me over to their section, but each time I froze in my tracks.

What the hell? Just get up from the seat and walk over...

“Are you going over there or not?” Miranda asked. “It’s not like you’ve never approached her. What’s up with you tonight anyway, Brad? The enormous playboy with loads of cash to throw around gets shy about talking to a girl?”

There she goes...more of a hound than the guys. Gee-zus, Miranda!

I guess that’s why we got along as well as we did. She knew how to have a good time and put pressure on just like one of the boys.

“I’m gonna go over there.” I downed another shot and then another.

I saw Zoey tense up in her seat when I finally started to make my way over. By then, I was feeling the alcohol and felt a lot more confident than I had in the beginning. On my way, I noticed the birthday balloons and cake sitting on the table in front of her. There was a lone balloon with the number twenty-four on it. Great! At least I didn’t have to ask her age.

“Zoey, it’s your birthday today? Happy birthday. I apologize for not reaching out to you sooner. I’ve just been busy with the VR program.” I motioned towards the stage. “You have an amazing voice.”

“Oh.” She blushed. “Thank you. It’s been a long time since I held a note.”

“Mind if I sit?” I asked. “Looks like you could use some more birthday company.”

Her smile was inviting, but her gaze repeatedly darted to Julisa. I was getting a hostile vibe from Julisa tonight, but I politely greeted her anyway. She gave me a cold greeting back like she was just tolerating my presence. I directed my attention back to Zoey.

“You look fabulous, by the way.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and blushed again. “And yes, you can have a seat, but there’s really no action over here. Julisa and I...we’re just having a few drinks to celebrate my birthday tonight. Right, Julisa?”

“Speaking of drinks,” Julisa chimed in, “if you’re going to sit here with us, you should probably pitch in.”

There was no smile or an ounce of playfulness on Julisa’s face. Usually, I would have forgotten about both girls and continued my night with someone else, but there was something about Zoey that made me tolerate Julisa’s smug attitude toward me.

“Of course,” I said, giving her the same look she gave me as I tossed my black card down on the table between them. “That’s not a problem at all. I’ll even cover whatever your tab is for the night.”

Her glare got even stronger for a split second before a slight smirk curved one corner of her lips. Zoey looked unimpressed by my offer to cover their entire bill for the night, and that piqued my interest in her even more.

“What’s with your friend?” I asked when Julisa took my card to the bar. “Is she being overprotective of you?”

“She is.” Zoey nodded. “She’s like a big sister to me. Always looking out and watching my back.”

“Bad dating experience or something?”

“Yes and no. A girl can never be too careful.”

The way she answered my questions aroused my curiosity. She was confident, smart, and witty but there was more to Zoey. The way her eyes sparkled under the lights of the lounge intensified every feeling so much that I wanted to pull her lips to mine and taste their sweetness.

After a couple of bottles of champagne and a refill on the hookah, the tension between Julisa and me lightened up. She was still skeptical of my intentions with Zoey, but she was a lot nicer after spending my money. I didn’t mind; I was used to it. A few bottles of champagne were nothing compared to the wine cellar I had hidden in my basement.

“Twenty-four, huh?” I asked. “Getting up there.”

“Oh, yeah.” Zoey laughed. “You look a lot older than twenty-four. I mean, not super old, but definitely older than I am. You’re thirty-four, right?”

“Yes.” I had to laugh at that as well. She was right. I was a lot older than she was. Ten years older. I wondered how she felt about our age gap. My face was already plastered all over the internet; it wouldn’t have been hard for her to find out how old I was.

“Some of the most popular couples in Hollywood have age gaps. I guess that’s how they make things work for the long haul.”

Zoey seemed comfortable with me. She wasn’t concerned about our age gap because, to my surprise, she had dated older guys. I wanted to ask when she’d started, but I felt that was probably too personal. So I accepted a good thing and kept the conversation flowing. By the end of the night. I offered her—and Julisa—a ride home, but they refused. They had their own car and could find their way home perfectly fine, per Julisa.

“Can we get together again sometime?” I asked as I walked Zoey to their car.

“Oh yeah?” she chuckled. “Sure, we can hang out again sometime. I would like that.”

“No Julisa next time?” I laughed. “Not that she isn’t cool, it’s just...”

“I totally understand!” Zoey laughed. “We’re not always together, so us hanging out alone won’t be a problem. Besides, I am an adult. I can come and go as I please.”

I smiled and opened her door for her when I saw Julisa approaching. I motioned to open her door for her too, but she

quickly opened it before me, just to prove who was the boss in her world.

When I returned to the bar to say goodnight to the gang, they were all standing there smiling at me like I'd done something right. I already knew what they were going to say because I'd said the same thing to myself the minute I laid eyes on Zoey. I liked her. I knew it. They knew it. She probably even knew it. But I wasn't going to admit it. It was too soon for me.

"What?" I laughed as I hopped onto the curb. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"She looks like she could be special," Miranda teased. "Looks like things sparked up pretty quickly between you two."

"I think it was that song she sang," Justin chimed in. "Destiny's Child—let me cater to you. I've heard it a few times. It's a good song." He nodded. "I think that's what won him over."

"Won me over?" I laughed again, trying to hide the blush on my cheeks. "She hasn't won anything. We were just talking. Getting to know the bar a little bit. You know, prepping for the bet you guys forced me into?"

It was a joke; they hadn't forced me into anything. I was the one who'd wanted to prove a point to them. A point that I felt like I had already lost sight of. Ironically though, I didn't feel defeated. I felt accomplished like I was the one who had won something. I didn't know how long I would be able to hold up

the front, but I tried not to think of that too much. I wanted all of my thoughts to be of Zoey.

“So,” Josh said, “is this it? The bet’s started?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I guess so. A whole month.”

“Alright!” Justin clapped his hands together. “Let’s see how long you last.”

Miranda laughed at how ridiculous our bet was. I could tell she felt the same way I did; that it wasn’t a good idea to play games with Zoey’s time—and heart, if she led that way—but at the same time, Miranda was in on the bet as well. She wanted me to test my limits with dating, to take it seriously. I think she was the only one who really saw through my disguise and knew that there was something more there.

I walked her to her car after we all said our goodbyes. She was more than capable of making it to her car alone, but I was always the one to double-check. Things were silent between us on the walk over, but when she looked at me, she asked me something very personal.

“Are you sure you wanna go through with this? You know we won’t hold it against you if you’re not ready, or you have a change of heart. It’s never too late to back away.”

For a second, I almost caved and told her I wanted to take Zoey seriously. But I didn’t. For some reason, my pride wouldn’t let me speak on it. So I continued to play it off.



Chapter Six

Zoey

My mom came over to take me to brunch the next morning. I'd been so busy texting with Brad all night the night before, and now I was running late. My mom and I had a pretty strained relationship. Even though we'd tried to work through our issues, things between us were still very odd and strange. I felt like she paid my older brother more attention than she did me, and she felt as if I never gave her a chance. I could never see why she felt that way, but I grew tired of arguing about it.

“Sorry, Mom.” I sighed as I got into the passenger seat. “I had a busy night last night.”

My mom was very traditional and stuck in her ways most days. It was very rare that she allowed herself to break away from her own Islamic upbringing and enjoy a life that she chose for herself. She hated that I did. I loved my family and

the memories we made, but the strictness of it all just wasn't for me.

“Busy night, huh?” she asked, her accent a lot heavier than mine. “Busy drinking and hanging out with Julisa? You know I don't like you hanging out with her. That girl is gonna get you into a lot of trouble if you don't be careful.”

“Mom.” I rolled my eyes. “Don't start. Can we just enjoy a nice brunch and focus on us? It's my birthday, not a therapy session.”

I folded my arms across my chest as she backed out of the parking spot and headed to our destination. I disliked hanging out with my mom sometimes.

Please don't start judging me and everything that crosses your path... Oh, who am I kidding? Of course, her critical eye will be everywhere. Why do I even visit anymore? It's obvious I'm not good enough to be in her presence.

We went to her favorite brunch diner, of course. I didn't have a choice in things with her. She barely even wanted to let me run my own life. Luckily enough for me though, I enjoyed going to Lucky's. Julisa took me on one of our first few nights living together. She'd thought it would be a nice touch since the place was run by a man from the Muslim community.

“How's school?”

“School is great.” My eyebrows raised. “Studying, tests, speeches. I'll be glad when I'm finally finished.”

“You got a lot of years left, huh?”

“Depends.”

Brad texted me in the middle of my conversation with my mom. I was so happy to hear from him—because I was already tired of my mom’s condescending tone—that I tuned her out and focused on something more interesting. He said he had just woken up for the day and wanted to know if I wanted to spend the day with him. I wanted to jump on the opportunity right away, but there was my mom. Staring at me with questions embedded in the wrinkles of her eyes.

“Do you ever give that thing a break? Sheesh, you’ve been checking it from the minute you got in the car. Who’s so important?”

Somehow, she always knew when I was texting a guy. I guess my attitude—or focus—shifted and made it obvious, but either way, it was none of her business.

“A friend from school,” I lied. “We might have to end this early; we have a project that needs to be done.”

Lying to her was wrong but passing up the chance to spend the day with the sexiest man alive was unthinkable. My mom didn’t look surprised, but she sure looked disappointed. And she made sure I knew she was too.

“I don’t know where I went wrong with you, Zoey.” She shook her head. “You and your brother are two completely different people. It’s like he wants to be a part of this family and you do not. You never have. What did your father and I ever do to you to make you rebel this way?”

“Rebel?” I scrunched up my face. “Mom, I’m telling you something about school. Just because I don’t want to live the way you and Dad and Zeek do, doesn’t mean I’m a rebel. I just have my own views of the world and my own goals. I don’t wanna live my life bending over backward for a husband who couldn’t care less if I ate dinner at night or not.”

The words fell from my lips before I had the chance to stop them. I was so caught up in texting Brad where to meet me, I completely forgot about my mother’s feelings and told her exactly how I felt. I meant what I said, just not the way it came out.

“Mom”—I sighed as I pulled out my card to pay for our meals—“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to take that tone. I’m just so over you and Dad always acting as if you’re better than me because I don’t live the same way you do. I have my own life, and I’m capable of making my own decisions. I’m not you. I’m not Zeek. And I’m certainly not Dad.”

Her eyes looked sad as she searched my face for the answers to her own questions. There were a lot of places where my mother went wrong with me, she just couldn’t see past her ego and authority to see it.

“Is that really what you think of us?” she asked. “We’re bad parents to you? I visit you. I pay your tuition. I make sure you have what you need to survive in this world. Zoey, I left everything behind in my own country to come here so you and your brother could have a better life than I did. All I ask is for your respect in return. Nothing more.”

“You ask me to give away my freedom. And I don’t want that.” I shook my head at the reality my mom would never consider. “Mom, I love you, but I have to go. You won’t see where I’m coming from until it’s too late.”

Without another word, I left the diner and headed to the light where I’d told Brad I would be. I saw him waiting as I made my exit, my mom nearly on my heels. When she watched me get into the car with him and drive away from the diner, her mouth dropped with distaste.

After a while of us driving in silence, Brad finally asked me who the woman was who had watched us drive away. I didn’t really want to talk about her, or why I left the way I did, but when I looked into his eyes I felt an unfamiliar comfort that made me want to spill my entire life’s story.

“My mom,” I said. “Our brunch did not go as well as I thought it would. It never does.”

“Trouble in paradise, huh?” he asked. “I remember those days of fighting with my mom. She was always mad at me for not wanting to follow in her and my dad’s footsteps. They’re both doctors and that life just wasn’t for me.”

“Seems like you’re doing pretty good for yourself without being a doctor,” I said. “Are they not proud of that?”

“When I first started out, no.” He chuckled. “But when the money started rolling in and they saw how smart you had to be in order to be a developer, they changed their minds. Maybe your mom just needs a good success story to brag about.”

Brad made a relationship with her sound a lot easier than it was. I appreciated his trying to cheer me up or give me hope, but the more arguments my mother and I had, the more I wanted to distance myself.

“Where are we going?”

We had been driving for a while with no talks about where to. I thought I should have been at least a little nervous, but I wasn't. I enjoyed coasting through the windy roads of our beach town with nowhere to go.

“Well, when you said something about skipping out on brunch, I figured it was because you weren't having it on a yacht. So, that's where we're headed. I own a nice little secluded island off the coast.”

I was impressed. Not by the money or the fact that he owned a whole island, but by the idea of how romantic it all seemed. As a hopeless romantic and someone who'd fallen in love with love, I thought a surprise yacht date was one of the most romantic things a man could ever do for me.

“This is beautiful.”

I admired the large house on water as he led me up the ramp. In all my days, I had never seen a boat so big and decorated so homely before. The thought of a boat being bigger than the house I'd grown up in with my parents was out of this world.

Brad gave me a tour of the place before we took our seats in the fancy dining area of the yacht. He showed me the master

suite. The kitchen, where our food was being prepared. The bathrooms and guest rooms. There was even a large deck that allowed for jumping into the ocean if we wanted to.

“So,” he said as he sat down, “what do you think? Not too bad, right?”

“This place is amazing. I’ve been in houses that were a lot blander than this.”

He looked proud of his boat. I had thought all billionaires were snobby, stuck up, arrogant pricks who got off on flashing money in the faces of the less fortunate. But Brad was very humble about his assets.

Over brunch, we talked about the things we had in common, our goals, and what I felt like I wanted to accomplish out of school. It was refreshing to have a real conversation with a man who knew how to keep things interesting without being sexual. However, Brad was so good-looking, I wasn’t opposed at all to moves being made. The chemistry felt so right between us, I actually wanted him to make one. And quickly.

We sat on the deck near the water as the breeze crept by us. Looking out over the water, Brad’s hand resting on my inner thigh as we sipped mimosas and fancy cocktails, felt like heaven. I felt on top of the world like I was the queen for a day. Anything I requested or spoke about having an interest in, Brad had someone fetch it for me. That wasn’t my intention with him, but while it lasted I enjoyed myself.

“Can I kiss you?”

His question caught me by surprise. I would have much rather had him just go in for the kill but asking did something even better than I thought a sudden move would. It made me feel moist between my legs.

“Yes,” I replied, my lips thirsting for his.

He gently leaned into me and placed a soft kiss on my lips. My eyes closed, wanting him to go deeper and introduce his tongue, and he did. The warmth I felt from his kiss set my soul on fire. My heart was skipping a beat while the folds between my legs swelled, ached, and moistened. My hands darted up to caress the back of his head, while his rose from my thigh to my breasts. The grip from his strong hands made me arch my back as I silently pleaded for him to go all the way, but he stopped me.

“Let’s go to the bedroom,” he said, standing to his feet.

I wanted to jolt to mine, but I kept my composure as best as I knew how and slowly rose on my own to follow him. Instead, he let me walk ahead of him. He gently guided me by my hips while his lips kissed and suckled on my neck and his hands undressed me simultaneously. I could barely keep my eyes open as I wobbled my way to the bedroom. By the time we made it to his suite, we were both stripped naked and craving the taste of each other’s most divine parts.

The comfort I felt with Brad was amazing. It was like we had known each other for years. My body felt comfortable, my mind was relaxed. I was craving him inside me so badly. As he stretched my legs open, glistening moisture dripped down my

throbbing folds onto the sheet. He bent down and glided his tongue up and down every corner of my pulsating folds, tasting every bit of my arousal. Finally, he nibbled softly on my swollen bud, and I let out an agonizing moan before I nearly exploded. He changed position so he could quickly push his manhood steadily inside of me while looking at me with those lustful eyes.

It felt just the way I'd imagined. Large. Hard. Long-lasting. I smiled and dug my nails into his back as he thrust into me. The soft moans that escaped my lips made his body shiver in my arms as he continued thrusting in and pulling out of me.

My legs widened once he was all the way in. My head lulled back, and my nipples grew harder than they'd ever been. Rubbing against his bare chest, each spike of sensational bliss built into a fantastic orgasm.

"Easy girl," he whispered into my ear, sending my body into another spiral.

"Oh!" I gasped, feeling another one coming on.

Brad sped up his strokes while gripping a handful of my butt from underneath. His hand was so big and strong that it lifted me slightly off the bed so he could better reach my g-spot, hitting it just right and sending me to explode in another orgasm. Out of breath and panting, I looked up at Brad's tender eyes.

He kissed me one more time and *oh*, I thought, *I am in love*. He helped me up and we showered together. Bewildered at this

joyful moment, I let my imagination flow...thinking Brad could be my soulmate.

When we returned to the deck of the yacht, the water looked a lot clearer to me. The breeze coming in felt amazing on my skin too. I felt refreshed—brand new, even. There was a smile on my face and a wave of ruffles throughout my hair that hadn't been there before Brad.

“You okay?” he asked, pouring me another glass of champagne.

“I am.” I smiled and rested my head on his shoulder while we looked out over the water. “I don't usually do things like that, but I don't know. You were different. I felt more comfortable.”

“Yeah.” He slowly nodded. “Same here.”

His voice sounded a little distant then, but I didn't pay it too much attention. I figured since we were both out of our element, maybe he was just taking everything in. I knew I was. Trying to wrap my mind around how I'd gone from meeting him at the gaming event into his bed was beyond me. Especially when Brad wasn't the kind of guy I was usually approached by.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“How do you know I'm thinking about something?” he replied.

“I don't know. You're so quiet now.”

He let out a long sigh before he said anything else. I thought he would tell me it was time for me to go or something, but when his hand crept onto my thigh and held me in place I knew it was something deeper than that.

“This thing about relationships and dating—love,” he said, “it scares me. I don’t talk about it too much, but it really creeps me out. Makes me feel like I have to stand guard with my heart or something, I don’t know.”

He chuckled to mask the embarrassment he felt as he unloaded his feelings about love. I didn’t feel like he had anything to be embarrassed by, but guys were different from women. They felt like they always had to have this macho man attitude and hide their feelings. So I understood why he shied away.

“Love is scary,” I agreed. “It doesn’t have to be, and it shouldn’t be, but it is. I think so many people have the wrong idea about love in their heads, it ruins a lot of good things. Most people are just not ready to make that serious commitment, and it sucks because good people end up with their hearts broken in the end. My heart’s been broken before, but I don’t let that taint my hopes of finding the right guy. Sometimes, it just takes a little longer than expected, and we learn and grow from the experience of heartbreak along the way.”

I could tell he was hanging on to every single word I spewed. I loved how intently he listened to me, but I worried

that he had no idea of what love was and that just like Julisa had predicted, I would end up being the one hurt in the end.

I can't handle another relationship like that...

To my surprise, Brad invited me to spend the night on his yacht. The two of us fell asleep together much faster than we expected.



Chapter Seven

Zoey

When I opened my eyes, I forgot where I was. Then I looked up at the ceiling and I realized I was on Brad's yacht. Luxury surrounded the suite. The design was very modern. As I buried my face in the pillow next to mine, I could smell Brad's scent. So manly. I wondered how a guy like him could still be single.

My nose filled with the scents of fresh coffee and ocean breeze as I walked up to the deck. This guy had already captured my heart. I watched Brad fry bacon and eggs. Two slices of bread were ready to be popped out of the toaster. His smile spread across his face as he saw me.

"How was your sleep, gorgeous?" he asked.

"It was great, Brad," I replied.

Then he asked, "how many pieces of bacon do you want? I made two eggs, one for you and one for me. I hope you enjoy

them sunny-side up.”

I nodded. My eyes scanned the coast—what a beautiful day it was. We were a few miles from the coast. Five other yachts were spread out apart from one another. The sky was so blue with hardly any clouds. It was so nice to feel the heat of the sun on my face. This was such a beautiful day.

In a daze, I felt Brad’s lips touch my forehead. “Are you ready to eat, Zoey?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied with a smile.

“This is so beautiful, Brad. You know, I could get used to this.”

Brad’s expression was warm but something else was bothering him, as I could tell from the abrupt end of his smile. With those lavishing eyes, he gazed at me. I’d have loved to lie in bed with him all day, missing the lovely breeze and the endless waves on the horizon.

“Awwww, I don’t have a swimsuit,” I said.

Brad grabbed me by the waist and pulled me close to him so he could wrap his arms around me. My face was against his chest. Taking my chin in his hands, he kissed me.

Parting my lips, I welcomed his kiss. I allowed his tongue to touch and massage mine. I loved how he tasted like bacon. As his tongue warred against mine rhythmically, I could feel the ache deep between my legs growing.

He ended the kiss by saying, “Oh, don’t worry about it, baby. I’ve got you covered. I bought you a bikini.”

“Oh, wow, thank you so much! You sure were prepared for this, huh? Have you impressed a lot of girls with your yacht?”

With a smirk on his face, Brad asked, “Are you the jealous type?”

No! That thought gave me an unfriendly feeling in my stomach. *I just don't want this to end.*

Right then, I felt so content and happy with Brad. I suddenly became worried for no apparent reason. As a hopeless romantic, I always hoped to find my one true love. My wish was that Brad would be the one.

“Stay here.” Brad motioned for me to stay. He returned with a huge smile, showing off his perfectly aligned teeth.

He handed me a black bikini. “You’ll look amazing in this. Try it on.”

The bikini had such a soft fabric and felt so luxurious. I went down to the bathroom quickly and put on the bikini. Now I regretted eating so much toast. In the mirror, I admired my reflection. It fit perfectly around my hips. I turned around to check my butt and thought, *WOW!* I looked sexy and good. I liked how the black looked on me. As I combed my hair, I caught a glimpse of Brad’s reflection, and I could see him clearly adoring the view behind me.

“I thought you wanted me to model it for you on the deck so you could see it b-better”, I whispered trying to catch my breath as I felt an intense wave of pleasure suddenly coursing throughout every nerve of my body.

“Well, I couldn’t wait any longer”, he whispered back with his voice tainted with lust.

I could feel the moisture building up in my core, eagerly anticipating for him to savor it.

As he scanned my breasts and my ass, his eyes darkened even more. I could hear him panting. There was a predatory look in his eyes as if he was ready to attack his prey. All over my body, goosebumps spread. He squeezed my ass firmly, and hissed, “it looks perfect, baby. I can’t wait to sink my teeth into you.”

A moan escaped my lips as I shut my eyes. I moaned as he kissed me across and on the sides of my neck. I sucked on his fingertip as he sucked on my neck like a vampire. I turned around so I could face him. He lowered his face, and his tongue devoured my mouth. I could not breathe from the intense pleasure I felt when his tongue moved rhythmically against mine. I touched his groin to feel the growing length of his arousal. He gasped. Then he lowered his mouth to suck on my nipple and the ache between my legs grew stronger. I moaned as every ounce of energy fled my body.

As Brad continued to lick my nipple, he put me on the bed. My back arched as he moved on to the next breast to suck on the jealous nipple.

I breathed in deeply and held Brad’s head gently, feeling how his teeth gently touched my throbbing nipple. I felt so weak like I was drunk.

Brad growled, “You drive me crazy, Zoey. Where have you been hiding all this time?”

As Brad parted my legs to check on my throbbing flesh, all I could do was murmur a few words in response. He removed my bikini to watch the moisture build up. Then he teased me with his index finger. I called out his name lustfully. He lowered his face and licked my glistening folds with such force that my heart pounded like it would explode. I pushed my hips upward while I placed my hands on either side of his head. I closed my eyes to enjoy the feeling of his tongue on my soaked skin. With my eyes half shut, I watched him devour my folds so deeply and for so long that I thought I would never stop shivering.

“You taste so good,” he said as he wiped his face. “Now, let’s fuck,” he growled.

My eyes barely opened as I basked in the lusty sensation of his forceful entry into me. So perfectly hard and throbbing that his cock fit perfectly inside of me. With every pound, I felt wetter and wetter. When he pulled out his cock and turned me around to enter me from behind, I could hear him panting. To push deeper inside me, he positioned himself so that he could give me another orgasm. The man could fuck.

I was face down on the sheet, butt up, Brad thrusting his cock into me so hard while his hands gripped my thighs. My orgasm continued when he hit a spot I’d never known existed.

After pulling out his cock, he lay down on the bed. I took over and sucked his cock. On him, I could taste myself. I

looked up at him as I sucked his cock into my mouth. It grew bigger and bigger. His eyes rolled as he exploded in my mouth.

He opened his eyes and grabbed me so I could lie on his chest. Using the towel on the nightstand, he wiped my face. After that, he kissed my lips and softly said, “Wow, you’re phenomenal, baby.” He gave me a tight hug and I returned it.

He smiled at me as I gazed at him. My heart was singing in that moment, and I didn’t want the moment to end. When I got up to head to the shower, Brad stopped me to hug me again.

“Brad, I have to clean up.”

Teasingly, he continued, “but I’m not finished with you yet.”



Brad

There had never been a time when I was so excited about a woman in bed. With the exception of Kayla, of course. I’d never been in bed with a woman ten years younger than me before. To me, Zoey’s youth, her body, and the way she carried herself were all too new. It was refreshing to be around her.

But I had non-stop erections. She was wrong if she thought I was done. My hand reached out for hers as I got up.

“What are you doing?” Zoey asked. She chuckled when I picked her up and walked to the shower. There was so much joy in her eyes.

Together, we took a shower. Her skin was so soft that she didn't even need to shave. It was only fair to show off her perfect complexion. My tongue invaded her mouth as I pushed her against the shower wall. As I wiped away the dripping water from my eyes, I slid my throbbing cock into her, demanding she take it. I pounded it inside her like there was no tomorrow. The sound of Zoey moaning intensified my lust for her even more. As her hands were around my neck, I picked her up and fucked her while standing. As I squeezed her butt cheeks, I pushed harder. Her tight folds rhythmically pulsated, squeezing my cock so hard that I filled her to the brim with every drop.

After we got out of the shower, the bed looked so inviting. I grabbed Zoey and we laid on the bed, relaxed. I closed my eyes for a moment.

Zoey grabbed her phone to text someone. Julisa, I guessed. A guilt-ridden feeling came over me when I thought about Julisa. She didn't trust me, and she was right not to. That stupid bet was a mistake I wished I hadn't made. There was so much beauty in Zoey, not just physically but in her heart and soul, too. She was smart, and not afraid to express herself sexually.

When I opened my eyes, I discovered we had slept for two hours. Still holding her phone, Zoey was asleep. I grabbed a sheet and covered her beautiful body. I went up to the deck and enjoyed the beautiful view of the city quietly. I thanked God for everything. I had worked so hard to get to where I was. I had everything I needed except a woman I could spend the rest of my life with. I felt uneasy at that thought. Could my friends be right about me settling down?

Then I thought of Zoey. When she was around, everything was meaningful and less stressful. Was she the one? Was she ready to settle down at such a young age?

I did, however, enjoy my freedom. Did I want to be with only one woman? I was used to being with a different woman every week, but no one touched my heart the way Zoey had. We made love like we were pros. It was as if our bodies were meant to speak to each other.

Kayla's memory resurfaced. Back then, I had been so in love with her. There had been so much chemistry between us that I'd thought we would get married. The sting of her memory overshadowed any desire to entertain the notion that Zoey could be the one, shutting my heart at once out of fear of being hurt again.

We'll see what happens after thirty days...

Although, those thoughts hurt. I'd bought her a diamond necklace, but why? The other day I'd seen the necklace at Tiffany's and just thought Zoey would look great in it. But

maybe I only felt compelled to buy her a gift as a result of the stupid bet.

The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Zoey. She was a kind person. I needed to be honest with her, but how?



Zoey

I opened my eyes to see Brad looking at me while holding a rectangular box. My eyes grew wide when I saw a sparkly diamond necklace—white gold in 18k, with a diamond pendant shaped like a heart. It looked so expensive. This thing was huge, even though I didn't know anything about diamonds.

“Belated happy birthday, baby! Let's put it on you.” Brad placed it on me. I was speechless. In that moment, I felt more in love with him than I ever had before, not because the necklace was beautiful, but because it was a beautiful moment. Though I had only known him for a few weeks, I had already developed a deep affection for him.

Does Brad feel the same way? He seems like he does... Why else would he purchase this expensive diamond necklace for

me?

When I finally spoke, I said, “Brad, you didn’t have to do this, but it is so beautiful.” To express my gratitude, I kissed him passionately.

“Keep doing that and we’ll be naked again,” Brad growled.

“Maybe later, baby,” I chuckled.

Holding hands, we climbed up to the deck. It was nice to sit down and watch the horizon, imagining how rich people lived. I hadn’t grown up in poverty—we were doing okay. But the thought of sleeping with a billionaire had never crossed my mind. Life was so different for them. They were at the top. They did whatever they wanted without worrying about money. There was no limit to what they could buy or where they could go. It had never crossed my mind to be so wealthy, even though I wanted to live comfortably. Being in Brad’s billionaire arms was a wonderful feeling, though.

“I hope you’re hungry, Zo,” Brad broke the silence as he opened a large box of food. It hadn’t occurred to me that he had ordered sushi and sashimi. He motioned for me to sit beside him. I was starving.

“Wow, Brad, this is great!” I said as I took my first bite. There was nothing like fresh and delicious sushi. I was sure these had been freshly made. I wished I could live the life of a billionaire for the rest of my life.

Following a peaceful sunset, Brad brought his yacht back to shore and docked it. As we kissed and hugged each other, we

took a few selfies. I could tell, however, that something was bothering him. What? I didn't know.

“Are you okay, Brad?”

His eyes were fixed on me as he responded, “Of course, baby.”

At dinner, we went to a fancy restaurant by the shore. My stomach was still full from the sushi earlier so I only finished half of my plate. I did, however, enjoy my glass of wine. It was the best wine I'd ever tasted, sweet and delicious. On our way back, we walked across the shore and looked at some shops. It was obvious from the clientele that this was an exclusive place for affluent people. There was a moment when I felt like I didn't belong. One look at Brad and that feeling vanished.

We returned to the yacht and enjoyed the night sky. There were only a few stars visible to us. Kisses were exchanged between us as he grabbed my hands.

“I had a wonderful day today, baby,” Brad said softly. Then he added, “What would you like to do? Would you like to watch a movie?”

My body tingled with excitement thinking about spending another night with Brad. I wanted to possess him and cage him like an obsessed ex-girlfriend in a suspense movie. I felt so content being around him. Our financial status differed considerably, but Brad never made me feel that gap. He made every moment with me so special.

“Maybe we can watch a movie, or...” I licked my lips.

Then Brad interrupted, “Easy, baby. We’ve got plenty of time.”

So we sat and watched the movie *Safe Haven*. I loved this movie so much. I was so engrossed in the movie that at first, I didn’t realize Brad had fallen asleep. My heart sank. Making love again had been on my mind. I dismissed the thought and stopped the growing ache between my legs.

I had texted Julisa, but she hadn’t responded. *I don’t want to lose her as a friend, but I’ll have to show her how wrong she is about Brad. He cares a lot about me. Now I just have to show her how happy we are together.*

When I finished watching the movie, it was about eleven p.m. To avoid waking Brad up, I went to bed myself. Soon after, I fell asleep.

Suddenly feeling something on my chest, I opened my eyes. My entire being tingled with excitement when I saw Brad naked on top of me.

“Are you going to sleep without me? Do you think I’ll let this night end without fucking you again?” he asked with dark, lust-filled eyes.

As soon as he said it, I literally got so wet. After he suckled on my nipples and teased my neck ruthlessly, I was dripping wet. I gasped as Brad stroked my moistened flesh with his index and middle fingers.

“As much as I want to taste you again, baby, I want to fuck you right now,” Brad growled.

“Mmm yes, baby. I’d love that,” I responded, gazing up at him salaciously.

I spread my legs wide so he could thrust his cock inside of me. It was so blissful I was drowning in it; I wished I could stay in this moment forever. He pounded his cock forcefully into me, and in response, I spread my legs even wider to give him access to my g-spot. I moaned. I parted my mouth as I gazed up at him and he bent down to kiss me passionately. I held his face as I let his tongue devour mine. I drowned in ecstasy as pure pleasure coursed throughout my body. We were both panting and gasping for air. The union of our bodies, the mixture of our sweat, and the sound of my moisture against his cock made me explode in bliss. My body shivered. Brad came and emptied all his seed inside me shortly afterward. As he lay down next to me, he was panting. Our lips touched one last time before we drifted off to sleep.



Chapter Eight

Brad

Zoey exceeded my expectations. I thought she would get alone with me and change her entire demeanor, and she did, but not the way I thought she would. I thought her age would start to show and she would shy away from me completely, but it had been the complete opposite. She was hungry for me. Sex with her was some of the best I had ever had too. She showed me things I would have never thought she knew, and vice versa.

Things between us heated up fairly quickly after the two nights we spent together on the yacht. Every day that followed we spent sneaking off somewhere at her school for a quickie, or meeting at my office to get a fix before she headed off to class. My addiction to her scared me a little. It had happened so fast, I barely caught on to it.

The gang and I planned a weekend trip to one of the cabins I owned in the woods of the Cape. It was a nice spot with a great view of Long Pond and an even more extraordinary view

of the trees. I left my office immediately after the day's events to pick Zoey up from school and head out for the weekend. When I got there, Julisa was waiting with her at the curb, wearing one of the most unsatisfied mugs I had ever seen.

“Julisa.” I chuckled slightly as I got out of the car to take Zoey's bags. “Nice to see you again.”

Instead of replying, she scoffed and turned toward Zoey with a lecture, as expected.

“Are you seriously going out of town with a guy you just met? For an entire weekend? Do you know how dangerous that is?”

I pretended not to hear their conversation while I waited in the car, but it was hard not to hear. Julisa disliked me so much she didn't care to try and mask her voice.

“I've been hanging out with him for a few weeks now, it's cool,” Zoey replied with conviction, but Julisa didn't want to hear it. “Don't be like my mom. Besides, how many guys have you run off with and you'd only just met them?”

“That's different, Zoey, and you know it,” Julisa shot back. “You and I are two very different girls.”

“Are you saying I can't take care of myself?” Zoey asked.

“Yes!” Julisa stated. “I mean, no. Not exactly, I just worry that you'll let some guy who's ten years older than you take advantage of you. He's taking you out of town with a group of his friends and didn't invite a single one of yours. That just sounds fishy to me.”

To me, Julisa sounded jealous. I was used to fooling around with women who had jealous best friends or jealous exes, so Julisa's apparent temper tantrum came as no shock to me. I just wished she would hurry up so we could get on the road before she caused our drive to be longer than it should have been.

"Is everything okay?" I got out of the car and asked.

Julisa shot me that evil look of hers again, while Zoey looked at me like I was her knight in shining armor. Her admiration made me feel like I was, even though I would never have admitted that to anyone. Not even to her.

"Yeah," Julisa spat. "I was just telling my friend she should be careful around guys like you. Especially guys she just met."

"Guys like me?" I frowned a little, trying to understand what she meant. "What do you mean, guys like me? What kind of guy am I?"

"The kind of guy who shows up out of nowhere flashing money around trying to buy a girl's attention. Or the kind of guy who makes bets with their drunk buddies at a bar to get a girl to fall for them knowing they have no real intention of creating a relationship."

The way her eyes flared when she spoke let me know right away she was on to me. I had no idea how she knew about the bet—or if I was just being paranoid—but Julisa was right on the money.

“Okay, Julisa.” Zoey finally stepped in. “That’s enough. I’m going away for the weekend and there is nothing you, or my mother, can do about it. Gosh! I don’t know why you two always act like it’s the end of the world whenever I hang out with someone other than you. You’re driving me crazy with this! Can I ever enjoy something in my life without one of you ruining it for me?”

Julisa looked hurt to hear Zoey speak to her that way, but she had it coming. She may have been right about the bet she overheard Justin and Miranda talking about at the bar the night of Zoey’s twenty-fourth birthday, but I had Zoey right where I wanted her. And that was on my side.

“You know what?” Julisa raised both hands and washed them in an invisible sink. “Go ahead. But don’t come crying back to me whenever he breaks your heart, and you realize I was right about him.”

I felt like an asshole when she stormed off, leaving Zoey to cry after her. I consoled her as best I could, but I knew how it felt to lose a best friend. It was one of the worst feelings in the world and there was really nothing that could be done about it. Except to give it time.

“Let’s go.” I placed a gentle kiss on the top of Zoey’s head and helped her into the car. “We’ll go and enjoy our weekend and when we get back—and she sees that you’re perfectly fine—you two can work on your relationship. If I have to help with that, I will. She’ll be fine. It’s only a couple of days. Maybe you two need the time apart.”

Zoey was fast asleep when we made it to the cabin. Miranda, Justin, and Josh were already there waiting for me to arrive. They had no idea I was bringing Zoey. I hadn't wanted to invite her at first, because I didn't want any of them to notice that I actually liked her and kind of wanted to see where things would head for us, but I couldn't resist. I'd gotten so accustomed to spending time with her, I wanted her with me wherever I went.

"Brad," Justin greeted me as we walked in. "I didn't know you were bringing a plus one."

"Yeah." I chuckled nervously. "It was sort of a last-minute decision."

Zoey looked a little confused. I could see why she might have felt that way, me not telling them she would be coming. But I intended for her to have a good time anyway.

"Zoey, remember, my buddy Justin. And those two over there"—I pointed to Miranda and Josh—"are the two most painful pains in my ass, Miranda and Josh."

The mood around the room lightened up after the reintroduction. Everyone seemed to like Zoey and her bubbly persona right away, and she liked them too. I imagined she felt like a teenager hanging out with a group of old-heads who were all ten years older than she was, but it didn't show.

After our meet and greet, and a few shots of tequila, Zoey and I snuck off to the master suite. Whenever the gang and I camped out in my cabin they knew who the suite belonged to. Before we arrived, I hired a last-minute event planner to sneak

over and set the room up for us when we got there, and by my standards, the team had done an amazing job.

“Oh my god! Brad!”

Her hands rose to cover her mouth as she looked around the room. There were roses of all shades in large vases throughout the entire suite. The bed was covered with rose petals and there were gift bags laid out at nearly every square inch of the room. There was even sexy lingerie sprawled out on the bed for her to choose from.

“Are these for me?” she asked, placing one of the sets against her frame to tease me.

“Actually,” I said, stepping in closer to her for a better view, “they’re for me. Of course, you’ll be the one wearing them, but mostly for my pleasure.”

“Well then,” she said, biting her bottom lip, “why don’t I go and get changed so you can rip them off of me?”

I fell back onto the bed as she made her way into the bathroom. There were even gift bags for her in there as well. Champagne too—I knew how much she loved champagne. The things I picked up about her in the short time we’d been dating—if I really wanted to consider it that—were strange to me. Not the things per se, but the fact that I found myself caring about them enough to show her I did. The gifts. The trips and sneaking away to fall deeper into lust for each other. Those were all things I had said I would never do again.

When she finally left the bathroom, I was stripped down to my boxer briefs, aching for her return. I took in the lingerie before I even noticed the makeup she had applied. She was such a vision, chills spread throughout my body.

“Wow.” I stood up from the bed. “You look amazing.”

The way she strolled over to me sent pulsations from my brain down to my brewing erection. My hands started to sweat because they were so ready to trail along her skin, but Zoey had other plans. That night, she wanted to take the reins and show me she was in control. And I loved every minute of it.

She straddled me as I sucked all over her nipples and gently gripped her hair with one hand. The moans that escaped from her lips turned me on even more than I’d thought they could. I was completely wrapped up in the chemistry we shared between us, and I wondered about the way things would be if I decided to forget about the bet.

The longer she rode me, the wetter she became, the more I thought about a life with her. Honestly, it scared me. I even thought about it during my climax. It was a bittersweet moment. One that I didn’t share with Zoey because she was too focused on her own bliss, but the feeling was very heavy.

Usually, with sex, I was spontaneous. Exciting, sometimes traditional. With Zoey, it felt so natural. Our chemistry pushed us into spaces outside the norm that I usually wouldn’t care to try with other women. With ease. I stood up, with her still on top of me, then placed her facedown on the bed. She didn’t

contest either. Instead, she arched her back and made her ass go further into the air.

Entering her from the edge of the bed felt like heaven. The grip she had on my erection was more snug and wet. The way she guided herself back while looking me directly in the eyes almost made me cum faster than I ever had.

I let Zoey fill herself up for a minute before I took control. When I felt her having another orgasm, I gripped her hips with both hands and started to pound her from behind. She liked that. I could tell by the way she screamed my name and begged me for more. I kept my momentum until I was ready to release my liquid gold, all of it, deep into her pulsating womanhood.

“I could do this with you all night,” I said, as we lay naked under the sheets.

“Same here.” She giggled. “I haven’t felt this way about sex in a long time.”

I grew quiet after her truth. I wondered if that was because she hadn’t been having any sex, or because mine was just that good to her. I didn’t want to be arrogant about it, but I felt like I already knew the answer.

When she fell asleep that night, I snuck out of bed and went downstairs to check on the gang. Justin was the only one still up, drinking and watching old baseball highlights. I knew the minute he saw me that he would have something to say about me rushing off to the room to be with Zoey. And I was right.

“Looks like that bet is coming along great for your sake.”
He chuckled.

“SHH!” I quickly silenced him while I checked to make sure Zoey wasn’t around. “Her friend already overheard you loudmouths at the bar. If she finds out this is all staged, she’ll probably go postal on all of us.”

“You sure that’s the real reason you want me to keep quiet?”
He laughed again. “Looks like the man might be falling a little fast for her. It’s okay if you are, you can be honest about it.”

For the rest of the trip, I tried to stay as distant as I could from Zoey. I mean, not showing as much emotion as I’d shown with her earlier. I could tell she was thrown off by my sudden change of heart, but I had to back away. I didn’t even know why. Ego? Pride? Shame? Whatever it was, I didn’t want Justin and Josh picking up on it.



Chapter Nine

Zoey

By the end of the trip, Brad was a completely different person. There was no sex, no kissing, no hand-holding. He barely even talked to me in front of his friends. I felt so out of place and like I wanted to call Julisa to come and pick me up, but I didn't want to hear "I told you so."

So I stuck it out for the rest of the trip and waited to be dropped off at home. At one point, I wanted to reach out and kiss his face, but he seemed to no longer want me.

What the heck? Have I done something wrong? We had so much fun, I could totally love him, and maybe I even do.

Even the car ride back was a silent, long one. He was so cold and distant toward me that it made me want to cry. I tried sparking up conversation a few times on the drive, but his words were so short I might as well have been talking to myself. When I got quiet and just stared out the window the

entire time, I could feel him looking at me. It felt like he wanted to say something but didn't know how, but I didn't even bother to drag it out of him anymore. He was a grown man who could speak for himself, and if he didn't know how, it wasn't my job to coach him.

When he pulled up to the front of my apartment, I got out of the car before saying anything. I was anxious to get my bags out of the trunk and rush off inside to get away from him and the tension I felt. I didn't even want to say anything. He got out behind me to grab my bags when all he had to do was pop the trunk for me to get them on my own, and I couldn't even look at him.

“Thanks for the weekend,” he said. “We should—”

Before he could finish his sentence, I snatched my bags from his hands and stormed off. I didn't reach for any of the gift bags he'd given me the first night we were there. In one of the gift bags, I had placed the expensive necklace. I was glad I only wore it around Brad. I did not want Julisa to make a big deal out of it.

I don't care about any of that. I just want to be treated with respect and not some fuck toy. I am so sick of men who don't know what they want.

Granted, I probably should have been more in control of the way I felt, but Brad knew better. I guess being older didn't always mean being the most mature.

Julisa wasn't home when I got inside that afternoon. I was thankful for that because I didn't want her to see me cry and

start asking a million and one questions about my weekend with Brad. I didn't even want to talk about Brad for a while. I knew it would be hard to forget about him, because of the way I'd given him my body, but I forced myself to throw away my thoughts and continue with life the way it had been before he came around.

My classes the following week were a drag, and so was work, although I cut back on my hours to only eight hours per week. I mostly kept to myself and stayed locked in my room, despite Julisa practically trying to pry my door from its hinges. She wanted to know what had happened between Brad and me that had made me seclude myself. I told her nothing had happened, that I just needed some time to be alone, but she didn't take that for an answer.

"Whenever you're ready to talk about it, I'll be here," she spoke through the door before she left for work one afternoon. "Hopefully that's by the time I get back home from work."

When she was gone for the day, I finally came out of my room to grab something to eat, a cup of coffee, and then I went right back to bed. I wasn't in the mood for anything. I hadn't even heard from Brad, even though I'd texted him a few times to check on him and where we stood. I got no response from him, but he was all over social media cracking jokes with other girls. That was the one thing that infuriated me the most. So, I wrote him an email about the way I felt.

Hey Brad, it's been nearly a week and we haven't spoken. I'm not sure where the disconnect came from, but it bugs me to

see. To feel. To know. After a great weekend...it feels like I'm missing something. Did I do something wrong? Or not do enough? Is it your friends? My age? I know you don't necessarily owe me any explanations, but it would be nice to hear something from you. I guess I'll wait and see if you respond. If not, then I know where we stand, and I won't bother you anymore. Hope all is well.

Zo.

I waited a few hours before I checked for his reply. When I saw that there wasn't one, I started to cry again. I didn't know what it was that had me so shaken up about Brad and me not speaking, but it was very unusual for me. Usually, I could get over a guy like it was nothing. Mostly because I never let my feelings get too involved, but I didn't feel like I had been that vulnerable with Brad. Unless I counted the sex. Our sex had been...something I had never experienced before. It was very mature and new. He had explored every inch of my body and made it feel amazing while doing so. Maybe that was why he had such a hold over me.

When I finally grew tired of waiting for Brad to reply, I got the courage to delete him from my social media accounts. I held off on blocking him, just in case he decided to respond—once he noticed I deleted him—but even that didn't feel like justice enough. I wanted answers. But I told myself that maybe I was meant to move on without them.



Brad

I got Zoey's email while I was at a game signing at the mall that evening. I knew she must have felt like my responding to her should be easy, but it wasn't. It was one of the hardest fights I'd ever had to fight—what my heart felt and what my brain was telling me to do. There was nothing I wanted to do more than reach out to her, hold her, kiss her, but something held me back from that. No matter how badly I wanted to reach out.

I couldn't even keep my focus on signing autographs and taking pictures; I didn't want to be there. I couldn't even force a smile the correct way, because it looked more like I was snarling. All I thought about was Zoey. The entire time I ignored her, it made me physically sick. It came to a point where I had to switch over to my business phone, just so I wouldn't be tempted to call back.

The crowds of people around me were all there in support of me and my brand, but I had no interest in them. Any other day I would have been different, but without Zoey, it felt meaningless.

“Brad.”

I heard a familiar voice pierce through the crowd. My team and I were having a brief intermission, but somehow Julisa had slipped through a locked door. The door led to the office of a popular video game store inside the mall. When I saw Julisa’s manager keys, I was shocked.

“Julisa, you work here?”

“My parents own it.” Her tone was very sharp and straightforward, so I knew she was there to talk about Zoey. “What happened with Zoey?” Even her eyes were cut at me with no nonsense in them.

“Wh-what do you mean, what happened with Zoey? Nothing happened.”

I stepped away from my team, and the door—so no tabloids would overhear—to talk. Julisa had her hand resting on her hip and her foot tapped as she waited for a real answer from me. But I didn’t have one. I couldn’t tell the best friend of the girl I was seemingly falling in love with that the entire month had been a bet. Even though I believed Julisa already knew.

“She’s different now. So, what happened? She’s in her room all the time. Doesn’t wanna talk or go to class. That’s not like Zoey at all. And being that you were the last person she was with, something you did or said changed her. I don’t know what kind of sick joke you and your old-ass friends have going on but leave Zoey out of it. I’m only gonna tell you that once.”

The quick snap of her fingers told me she was dead serious and nothing to be played with. I knew she had some kind of power to impact me and my career. Her family owning the game store that had given me my big break was proof enough.

“Look.” I sighed. “I like Zoey, she’s a great girl. But right now, I have a lot going on.” I nonchalantly nodded toward the crowd of people on the other side of the office door. “We had a great weekend. Maybe she’s just tired from everything.”

I tried to act as if everything was cool. I said nothing about the bet because I didn’t want that to affect my chances with Zoey.

“Don’t play me like I’m stupid,” she shot back. “I know all about the bet you and your friends made that night at the bar. Your friend, Justin, right? He’s a lot louder than he thinks. You should tell him to keep it down when talking about personal affairs.”

She stepped closer to me so that I could get a good look at the seriousness in her eyes. They looked almost demon-like, or like the eyes of a mother who was dead set on straightening out her delinquent son.

“Now, unless you want me to go to the blogs and the tabloids about your paid fling with a twenty-four-year-old college student, that was only set in place to test your bent ego, stay away from Zoey.”

I wanted to argue, wanted to push back, and tell her how much I cared for Zoey, but it was time for me to go back out into the crowd and pretend like I was happy to be there. My

team came to pull me away before I could even speak my peace. All the while, Julisa stood there with this disgusted smirk on her face.

“Brad.” Miranda snapped me back to the reality ahead of us. “What’s up? Who was that girl? You’re all out of whack here.”

“That was Julisa,” I whispered to her underneath the crowd of voices. Zoey’s best friend. She knows about the bet.”

Miranda and I stared at each other for a moment. Two things came to realization that day. One—Miranda realized I was bummed out over Zoey. And two—I realized Julisa had ammo on me that could set me back millions of dollars and label me as a predator. I had to do something to make things right. But what?

“Did she threaten to say something?” she asked. “To anyone other than Zoey?”

The look I gave her was more than enough of an answer.

“Shit, Brad,” she cursed us both under her breath. “I knew this was a bad idea. I knew it. I knew it that night in that parking lot, we should have just forgotten all about the stupid bet.”

I agreed with her. But not for the same reasons. I wished I could have taken it all back and met Zoey on my own timing. I wanted to make things work between us, but I just didn’t know how to let my guard down and tell the truth.



Zoey

Julisa called on her way home from work and forced me to get dressed for drinks. She said she had something very important to tell me about Brad, and I was all ears. I'd figured she would be able to put two and two together about us at some point and by then, I was more open to talking about it. It had been over a week, and I was tired of holding everything in. Besides, I missed hanging out with Julisa.

"I don't think you should talk to Brad anymore." She was subtle but very straight to the point. "I ran into him tonight at one of his autograph signings or whatever and I confronted him."

"Julisa!" I gasped, wanting to be angry. "You didn't!"

"I did." She nodded. "I don't know what happened between you two over that weekend, but whatever it was I wasn't letting him get away with it. When I told you about that bet, the one he made with his friends, I was serious. You didn't wanna listen because you were all googly-eyed over him, but that wasn't a lie, Zoey. He bet his friends that he could stick

out a relationship with someone for at least a month. You were that someone. All of this was just a game to him.”

I shook my head while she talked, refusing to believe a word she said. The tears in my eyes gave away how devastated I was and she knew it. I was crushed. My heart was broken, even if it had only been a few weeks of being with Brad. I didn't want to believe I was just some stupid bet to him, but Julisa sounded so convincing.

“I'm sorry you had to hear it this way, but I don't think it's healthy for you to chase after him. He's out living his life, signing autographs and taking pictures with thousands of fans, while you're here sitting in your room not even wanting to carry on. I can't stand that. I knew he was a dog the first night I saw him. I could smell it on him.”

“You're wrong.” I stopped her from down-talking him. “Brad might have his issues, but he means well.”

The look in her eyes when I rushed to his rescue was terrifying. I felt like I'd broken her heart, and she would never talk to me again, but I had to fight for what I believed was love.

“Julisa, I love you and you're my best friend, but...” The tears that blurred my vision made it hard for me to speak. “But I can't let you talk about him that way. Whatever it is that Brad and I have going on, we should be the only ones to have a say in it. I have to hear his side before making a decision.”

“So you believe him over me?” she asked, tears flooding her eyes as well. “After everything. All my truths. You believe a

guy who sees you as nothing more than a game, over me?”

She stared at me for a moment before she stood up from her seat. Even then she glared at me with a scowl. I knew Julisa was on her way out the door, but I hadn't thought it would hurt as much as it did.

“Fine,” she said. “But don't come crawling back to me when he breaks your heart for good.”



Chapter Ten

Brad

The last week of my month trial with Zoey felt like it came quicker than it should have. I'd thought that by then, whatever love bug I'd contracted would have been out of my system, but it was still there. No amount of drinking or self-medicating could cure it. I drove by her complex a few times during that week but never pulled in.

Julisa already told her about the bet. What's the use of stopping by her apartment? If she wants to work things out between us, she'll come see me.

In my state of depression, my family came to visit for a company charity event. I knew things with my mom and dad around would be ten times worse, but they had to be there anyway. They were the ones in charge of all of my charity donations and were the face for commercials and whatever other campaign runs needed to happen. My sister tagged along this time around though, which was a surprise.

“Hey, little bro.” She greeted me with open arms for the first time in years. “Long time no see.”

“Christine?” I smiled, confused as I hugged her. “What are you doing here?”

My sister and I had a rocky relationship. We had been closer than ever growing up, but once I’d branched off into high school and she’d gone off to college, things changed. She met a guy that I became really close with in her senior year of college. She fell hard for the guy, and so did I. He was like the brother I never had growing up. Everything was great with our little family until one night I caught him cheating. I never said anything to anyone. I probably should have—at least, sooner than I did.

One night when my sister finally confronted him about her suspicions, he denied it and denied it and it triggered some old feelings I had about finding out I was being cheated on. So, I told her. She had been so in love with him though, so instead of being mad at him, she got mad at me. After that, our relationship changed for the worse. We stopped talking. She stopped coming to family dinners. She even quit the company and moved away.

“I’ve done some soul-searching. I figure it’s about time we bury the hatchet, huh? We’re not getting any younger.”

I was sick of hearing that: *We’re not getting any younger*. It was apparent we weren’t. But she was right, it was time to bury the hatchet. It had been too long. My sister had been my first best friend. The person I talked to about everything. I

couldn't talk to my dad about a lot of things growing up, because he was just too stuck in his ways. He had never wanted to see the times change and his way of doing things just didn't work for me. Especially when it came to showing emotions. My mom had always been too busy being ruled over by my father for her to give me any real advice about love. That was where Christine came in.

After our charity event for the day, I pulled Chris to the side for a brief catch-up. She let me in a little on her new life, her spiritual endeavors, and love affairs. It all sounded so dreamy when she spoke. A lot dreamier than I remembered her to be. It was as if she was healed and purified, reborn. It made me want to get on the same level and revamp my own love life.

“Wanna do dinner tonight? Just you and me?”

“You and me?” She nodded. “Yeah, that would be nice. I need a break from Mom and Dad already.”

“Tell me about it.” I laughed.

Christine and I had never sat down and had a conversation about why I hadn't told her sooner about her boyfriend cheating. She had just left without warning. I hadn't said anything because I saw how happy she was, and I didn't want her to feel the same pain I had felt after my breakup. I loved my sister; I didn't want her crying over some dude who had pulled the wool over both of our eyes. I was supposed to protect her, not crush her.

We went to the beach bar we used to go to every summer. The best part about that place was being able to order drinks

from the bar. When we were kids, we'd always said that when we got old enough to buy our first drinks, that was where we would go. And we did.

“Baby bro.” She playfully punched my shoulder after our drinks came in. “You’re doing amazing with the company. I’m proud of you.”

“Oh.” I blushed. “I couldn’t have done it without the help of the family. You guys helped me get here. So, thank you.”

“No, this was your dream and your ideas. You’re the one who put in the work and supplied the jobs. Don’t give up too much of your credit.”

The positivity in her voice was different. It was prouder and humbler. More nurturing, even. Christine had always been the one who nurtured everyone, but it was different when she came back around. I felt like I could be as transparent as I wanted to be with her. Deeper than I was before.

“I never did get to apologize to you,” I said. “I don’t want that to become the topic of discussion, but I do want you to know that I am sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. And I hope you can forgive me.”

Christine had tears in her eyes. She wasn’t the type of person who cried a lot, but when she felt something, she really felt it. I could tell right away she forgave me. She even knew the reason behind me not telling her. At the time, she had been so angry she just couldn’t see it. But after she calmed down and had time to process her own emotions, she told me everything was alright.

“So, what’s up with you?” she changed the subject. “Tell me about life. Not the business, but your actual life. What you do for fun. Where do you like to go, who are you dating now? Any plans for kids? Already have kids?” She laughed. “What’s up?”

That sounded like more than enough to have something to talk about, but all I could think about was Zoey. I felt like the minute I opened my mouth, that was all that would come out—Zoey. Christine was the only person I felt completely comfortable being fully open with, so I opened up.

“I met someone,” I said, a slight smile on my face. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to open up to her about the secrets that led me to her, but I hope I can. Because I found myself really liking her. And it’s been a long time since I’ve liked anyone. Not since Kayla.”

“Kayla?” Christine frowned. “How long has it been?”

“I know, right?” I laughed at myself. “I just, I don’t know what it is, why I can’t let my guard down. It’s just hard for me to express anything after that. But then I met Zoey and she... she changed my entire way of thinking. Everything I felt.” I shook my head to gain clarity. “I don’t know, she just makes me feel like I can love someone again.”

Christine nodded her head like she knew exactly what I meant. I thought she would give me some long-winded lecture about how to finally get over Kayla, but she didn’t. She empathized with me and wanted to know how I felt about Zoey instead.

“Why can’t you express that to her? If she means as much to you as it sounds like she does, some things you just have to bite the bullet and bear. Fear is what keeps us bound to nothingness. I had to learn that when I went away. Fear steals the love and joy out of life. If you love her, you have to let her know. And I don’t just mean by telling her or buying her something nice. But actually open your heart and let her see it.”

Her words sounded so beautiful, I just stared at her like she was the smartest woman on earth. To me, she was. The most compassionate too. Even when she hated me and wanted to never speak to me again.



Zoey

What Julisa had said about Brad making a bet to stick with one woman for a month kept playing over and over in my mind. Perhaps Julisa was right all along. A bet was all it was. To my calculations, we were at the thirty-day mark, and I hadn’t heard from him at all. Nothing. Not even to confess to the bet or give me some kind of apology or explanation.

Although I wanted to admit the truth, I still wanted to believe that there was more to it... that I meant something to Brad. It may have started as a bet, but then he actually fell for me. But why hasn't he responded to my message? He must be over me for it to be true. The realization struck me like a knife. As if there were no tomorrow, I started to cry. Throughout the day, I cried, wishing I could start over again and forget about Brad.

Julisa was still mad at me, so she hadn't been home at all that week. She was staying at her parents' house to keep from seeing me for a while. It hurt my feelings, but I understood.

My mom and dad had invited me out to dinner with them and my brother that evening. I wanted to stay curled up in bed all day long, but I decided to take the invitation and get out of the house for a while. There was no promise about how my mood would be, especially with my mom being there. But I wanted to get back into the groove of my normal routines. I wanted to be able to move on with my life and focus on my everyday tasks.

I couldn't stop thinking about Brad though. I wanted to know why he chose me for his bet—if that was what it was. I wanted to know if he was as evil and coldhearted as I thought he was after the way he'd treated me. When I saw through his mask the night of karaoke, I had thought I was seeing the real him.

My mother picked up that something was wrong right away. She didn't pry too much—I figured she could sense that I was in a fragile state, but she had questions. As always.

“Leave her alone, dear,” my dad chimed in to give me a break. “Sometimes kids just don’t want to talk about what’s troubling them. They need time to figure things out for themselves, become more independent.”

“Or sometimes, we just need privacy,” I said. “I don’t mind sharing my life, but there are things that I would like to keep to myself.”

Even my brother agreed with me. Most of the time he stayed out of the bickering between my mother and me. He was more worried about texting his girlfriends and playing his video games to care. Until she started to pry into his business. I wished I was more carefree like my brother. Life seemed a lot easier that way. Especially when it came to the matter of love.

My mom got a little quieter than normal over dinner. After my dad said what he said to her, it seemed like some kind of lightbulb went off in her head and made her look at the way she was with me. Too overbearing. Confrontational. Bitter. Cold at times. I hoped she would have a change of heart and really put a different foot forward, but that was something only time could tell.

Before ordering dessert, I excused myself for the lady’s room. I needed a break from the table and everyone else’s energy, and I wanted to check my phone without having to hear my mother’s mouth about it. There was still nothing from Brad—Julisa either—and that pretty much sealed the deal for me. I started to believe what Julisa had said more than ever.

“Brad?”

I saw him sitting at a table with some woman as I exited the bathroom. He looked like a deer in headlights looking up at me. Whomever the woman was turned to look at me and man, was she gorgeous. I felt even more crushed than I already did. There I was, sick and sad about not speaking to him and he was out living his best life. Just like Julisa had said. I felt stupid. And alone. I felt like I had betrayed my best friend for a man who cared nothing about me.

“Hello.”

The woman smiled and spoke to me in place of Brad. He was so caught up, he couldn't even form any words. I wondered what his lie or excuse would be. He didn't have one; I had caught him red-handed.

“Zoey,” he said, getting up from his chair. “Hi, how are you?”

I scoffed. *How am I? I haven't spoken to him since the cabin trip, and he has the nerve to ask me how I am.* I was furious. Hurt. Confused. The list went on and on. I couldn't believe my ears or the audacity he had to date another woman right in the same county.

So Brad and I could talk, I led him to an empty room adjacent to the restroom. I tried to be discreet as I could. “How am I?” I chuckled sarcastically. “Is that all you have to say for yourself? How am I? After being shut out with no warning? Used like some sort of sex toy? And let's not even

mention the bet you made with your friends. You got paid to date me for a month and now you wanna know how I am?"

"Zoey, I'm sorry. I just...I don't know what to say for myself. I never meant to hurt you. That wasn't my intention. I really am sorry."

The look on Brad's face was one I told myself I would never forget. It was pitiful. I didn't understand it at all, but after I unleashed on him I didn't want to. I wanted nothing more to do with him after that.

"That was the same guy I warned you about." My mom broke the silence on the car ride home.

I wanted to take all my anger and frustrations out on her, but I didn't have the energy. And it certainly wasn't worth what little I had left. In that moment, I looked at my mother the same way I looked at Brad. Like she would never change. Until it was too late.



Chapter Eleven

Zoey

Three days after dinner with my parents, I had put everything behind me and was on the right track to getting my life back in order. I gave myself a long pep talk, a lot of self-care, and I even got my old job back. It was a sitter at one of the local nursing homes, something to keep me busy and bring a little joy back into my life.

Brad had tried to contact me a few times within those three days, but I blocked him shortly after. I got tired of seeing his name pop up in my notifications with lame excuses about why he had ghosted me, so I finally shut him out.

My mom tried to call me too, but I wasn't in the mood for her either. I was so sick of everyone stepping all over my feelings and going on with their lives like I didn't matter. The only person who made me feel like I mattered was Julisa.

I tried calling her a few times, but she still wasn't ready to talk. I went by her job and dropped off a gift for her, and she

didn't reply to that either. I knew our fight wouldn't last for too long, but I did miss her. I regretted not handling the situation a different way every time I thought about it.

“Hey, Zoey, glad to have you back.” Sheryl, the Director of Nursing at the nursing home said when saw me for the first time in months. “I thought you were gone for good?”

“I thought so too.” I chuckled. “I took some time off to catch up on a few classes. Now that I have my freedom back, I guess I missed this place.”

“Well, it's always good to see you here. You know these old people love you. You're like the sunshine to their cloudy days— isn't that what Mr. Williams used to say?”

“He did.” I laughed. “I'll have to go pay him a visit before I leave for the day.”

“Oh, honey.” Sheryl looked saddened in the eyes. “I'm sorry, but Mr. Williams passed away a few months after you left.”

Another sad realization that made me miss Julisa even more. Mr. Williams had been one of my favorite patients at the nursing home. He reminded me a lot of Julisa—acted like her, was bossy like her, and even liked his spaghetti separate from the sauce like her. I was sad to hear about his passing and wished I'd been there before it happened, but that was life.

After work that evening, I went out to the beach and lit a candle for him. I knew that was one of his favorite places to go

—mine too. In a way, I felt like he was there that night. Looking down at me, letting me know he was okay.

After that, I rushed home to get ready for a date I had lined up that night. It wasn't with anyone I considered special—just Triston. He had wanted to hang out and I didn't have anything better to do—I'd also promised him I would find time for him—so I took him up on his offer. He had a nice romantic dinner set up for us that night. It was a rooftop, candlelit dinner. To be honest, I felt out of place because it was him, but also because he wasn't Brad.

For some reason, the second romance came into play, my feelings for Brad resurfaced. I felt like I was cheating or being untruthful or something. I figured it was my lack of feelings for Triston that made me feel guilty for being there. Whatever it was, I tried to push it aside and enjoy the date that he had put so much energy into making sure went right.

“How you been? It's been pretty quiet your way for a while.”

Triston was a sweet guy, he just needed to grow up. After being with Brad, I saw that even more. I wanted to be disgusted with him for being as immature as he was at twenty-six, but it wasn't his fault. He had other issues that needed to be dealt with before he stepped forth on his new journey. We all did.

“I've been okay. Just taking some time for myself. You know, self-care.”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

I could tell he was trying hard to impress me that night, but I just wasn't feeling it the way he wanted me to. Triston and I had our days, but I was seeing something completely different for my love life. I was tired of the games, the lies, the make-ups and breakups. I was tired of not taking dating seriously. And Triston wasn't on the same page yet.

"That's good," he said. "Everyone needs a few self-care days."

"Yeah, we do. What about you? How have you been? No new girlfriends? Or babies? What happened to the girl who was supposed to be pregnant by you anyway? I think her name was Tracy?"

"Tracy?" He chuckled, not knowing I knew about Tracy. "Who's Tracy?"

"Ugh, come on, Triston. I stay to myself, but I know a lot more than you think I do. Everyone on campus loves to talk, so you knew it would get back to me at some point. But seriously, what happened? I think she might be good for you to settle down with. Maybe having a child will make you see life a lot differently."

I wanted to say that maybe it would make him grow up, but I didn't want to be offensive. Besides, I genuinely felt like he could make it work with whoever Tracy was. Since he cared enough about her to get her knocked up.

"Maybe." He shrugged. "How are you so cool with talking about another girl on a romantic date like this?" He chuckled, but I was glad he asked.

“Because, Triston, I see us as friends. I appreciate you going out of your way to set all of this up, but I think we’re fine as friends. We’re on two different paths in life and that’s okay, but we shouldn’t ruin a good friendship trying to take a romantic turn.”



Brad

My entire workday was spent trying to get in contact with Zoey. She blocked all of my numbers, my emails, and my social media. I couldn’t even get through to Julisa. I wanted to go by their apartment, but I didn’t want to cause any more trouble than I already had. Besides, what kind of a creep did that?

“She picked up?”

Miranda walked into my office just as I hung up my last call to Zoey’s answering machine. Miranda was the only one—other than my sister—who knew the way I felt for Zoey and what I had been dealing with trying to get her back. Mostly because of my own ego, but more so because she was my PR.

“No.” I sighed. “Should I go by her house? I should go by.”

I stood up to grab my jacket and keys, but Miranda stopped me. I wasn't thinking clearly and if anything got out of hand with me just showing up at Zoey's place, it could make things even worse if the story broke the spotlight.

"Think rationally here," she said. "You don't wanna just show up. Her friend is already upset with you and threatening to go public. Now, I don't think she would do something like that without Zoey's permission, but you never know what anyone will do. So please, let's just think things all the way through."

She was right. I had more than just my feelings on the line with Julisa; I had my entire livelihood there. I wanted to keep trying to call Zoey, but there was no use. I knew she would just send me to the answering machine once again and make me look foolish. Truthfully, I was starting to get pretty annoyed with her after calling so many times because of how stupid I felt.

"If she's really done, she'll reach out and let you know. I see this all the time with girls. They like to play games, they like to be chased. Just wait it out, and try to relax. She'll come around."

Miranda's words sounded convincing. She did have a lot of experience with women and being a woman, so I took her word for it. Zoey would come around. The only thing I had to do was stay sane enough to wait for that to happen. Something I didn't know if I could do.

“Let’s go have a few drinks at the hookah lounge. Maybe we’ll run into her there,” Miranda said. “I mean, she probably won’t be happy to see you there, but at least it might give you two a chance to talk.”

I wasn’t really in the mood for a crowd that night, but when I thought about the possibility of running into Zoey I was all for it.



Zoey

I left the rooftop early and found myself at the hookah lounge. After a long talk about the different paths we were on, Triston was fine with me leaving the date. I could tell he wanted to go make up with Tracy more than be there with me afterward anyway.

“Hey, Zoey,” Julisa’s favorite bartender greeted me. “You here by yourself tonight? Where’s your girl?”

“I don’t know.” I smiled a painful smile. “It’s just me tonight, let me have my regular.”

“I got you.”

I went over to a lone seat near the back of the bar. I didn't want to be among the crowd, but still wanted to be included if that made any sense. I guess I just didn't want to be alone anymore.

After three rounds of drinks, I was feeling the alcohol and it made me miss Julisa even more. Brad too, but I refused to unblock him and have my feelings toyed with again. I was past that in my romantic life. I scrolled through social media and saw how many women there were who were happy with their husbands and children—I wanted the same thing for myself someday.

Keep letting people walk all over me and I'll never have that...

When I saw Miranda walk into the hookah lounge, my heart started to thud in my chest because I knew Brad was either already there or he wasn't too far behind. As soon as I finished the last of the drink in my cup, he walked in. And just like that, everything I felt came rushing over me like a tidal wave.

“What are you doing here?” I barked at him, catching him off guard.

“Zoey! What the hell, calm down!”

I admit; I'd had too much to drink that night. I was so caught up in my feelings about Brad, I disregarded my limits and let myself get lost in the sauce. I still wanted him but being hurt wasn't something I agreed to, and I needed answers as to why he had done what he did.

“Why are you here?” I shouted. “Are you coming here just to torment me?”

“No! I came here for a drink! Relax.”

Brad did all he could to keep from explaining the situation to me, but I kept pressuring him for answers. Miranda didn't say much to stop me, she kind of stood off to the side and let Brad get what she apparently knew he deserved. When I grew tired of trying to claw at him, I flopped down in a chair at a nearby table and sobbed. I was hurt all over again, I didn't know what to do with myself.

“Zoey, can we go somewhere and talk?” he asked. “I'll explain everything.”

“I tried talking,” I slurred. “I tried asking every question there was to ask and you ignored me. Why now?”

He was silent for a moment as he stared into my eyes. I felt sick like I would throw up everything I'd eaten that day. I even saw the lights growing dimmer and knew I was entirely too wasted to have a real conversation.

“Because,” he finally spoke again. “Because I love you.”



Brad

I had to catch Zoey from falling to the floor just as I told her I loved her. She was so drunk and emotionally unstable that she'd passed out right there at the table. I knew she was tired and drained by everything she was feeling, so I swept her off her feet and carried her out to my car. I alerted my driver so he could open the passenger's door.

"What are you gonna do with her?" Miranda asked.

"What is she, some girl I drugged and kidnapped from the bar?" I laughed. "I'll call Julisa again and see if she's home and we can drop her off there."

"I don't know," Miranda teased. "She is someone who has dirt on you. Just making sure you weren't planning on wiping her out or anything."

"Oh yeah right." I laughed again. "Uh, sorry this kind of changed the plans for our night. Can we take a rain check?"

"Yeah, of course. Get home safe."

Zoey was fast asleep in the passenger seat, snoring like she was the only one there. I chuckled as I instructed my driver in the direction to her apartment. She looked so peaceful, even though she had been raging not long before. I tried calling Julisa again, I even sent her a message on messenger, but neither of those went through. Because she had me blocked. Zoey's phone was locked when I lifted it to try and call Julisa on it, so I was kind of at a crossroads.

“What happened?” Miranda asked when she answered her phone. “Did she wake up and try clawing you again?”

“No.” I chuckled. “I can’t get in contact with anyone to drop her off. What should I do?”

Why do I always feel like such an idiot when I’m near her lately? Can we get back to how we were? And what am I supposed to do with her tonight? My place? How will that play out?

“I’d say just take her to your place. That way, when she sobers up, you’ll have the chance to talk to her. I’m sure she’ll appreciate that more than being left alone at the bar.”

Needless to say, I took Zoey back to my place and set her up in the largest guest room. If it were up to me, I would have put her in my bed and cuddled her all night, but she was out cold, and I didn’t want her to feel like I’d taken advantage of her.

I removed her shoes but left everything else intact. Once I felt she was comfortable enough in bed, I covered her up, shut off the light, and closed the door. While I showered, I thought about the moment I’d told her I loved her. I had seen her eyes light up, but I didn’t think she would remember when she woke up the next morning. So, I prepared myself to tell her again. And again if I had to until we both realized just how much I loved her.



Chapter Twelve

Zoey

When I woke up the next morning, I nearly had a panic attack because I had no idea where I was. Until I smelled the heavy scent of Brad's cologne lingering in the air. When I looked out of the nearest window and saw one of his many cars sitting in the driveway, I realized I was in his guest room.

"Whew." I let out a sigh of relief. "Too much to drink, Zo."

Brad was nowhere in sight. I figured he had dropped me off and then gone back to his own room to get some sleep himself—or wrap his mind around whatever the hell had happened the night before—until I saw a text from him saying he had gone to work.

"Great." I sighed and plopped back down on the bed. "Now I'm stuck here until he gets off. Or until Julisa picks me up. If she's even willing to do that since she still isn't talking to me."

I could have called an uber to take me home, but Brad's place was so far away, and I didn't have that kind of money to blow. So instead of racking my already-pounding brain about how I would get back home to my apartment, I told myself to relax.

What happened before I blacked out?

The details were a little sketchy, but I remembered giving Brad a piece of my mind. He had never said anything about the bet he'd made with his friends, I think that was what had sent me over the edge with my emotions. I remembered feeling so hurt and confused by everything. But most of all, I remembered Brad telling me he loved me.

"Couldn't you have woken me up before you left?" I texted him. "What am I supposed to do here while you're at work all day?"

"I'm sorry," he replied. "You were sleeping so peacefully—and after what happened last night, I didn't want to wake you. I'll have my driver take you home whenever you're ready to go. No worries."

That was a relief. The only thing that still bothered me about the entire situation with Brad was the bet. I still wanted answers because my feelings were still hurt. I didn't feel as if I deserved to be anyone's play toy. Not even his.

"I wanna know about this bet," I texted again.

He didn't respond for a while afterward. Until I told him to forget about it and have his driver take me home.

He's never going to open up and be honest with me about that... Wait, he's typing... Maybe I got through to him.

“Zoey... I didn't mean for any of this to cause you any pain. I swear to you. Dating is just so hard for me. After a heartbreak and a terrible breakup, I've never been good at committing to anyone. The only thing that is easy for me to commit to is work. And as a man my age, that's kind of a bad thing. I do want to date; I want to settle down someday and start a family of my own, I just don't know how to do that without that fear lingering over my head all the time. I know none of this probably matters to you, because you have your own feelings, but this is the first time that I've ever been open and honest about this.”

And I'm supposed to be sympathetic after you break my heart even though you know exactly how it feels?! Really?

“You're deflecting from the question I asked. Which again lets me know that you will never own up to anything you've done. You know what, Brad? I'm over it. Please have someone drive me home. I have school and other things to tend to right now. You are not allowed to break my heart anymore.”

He texted another long message about his fears about dating, but I didn't respond. I was over it. *So you want to be coddled now after admitting someone broke your heart, but you're doing the same thing to me—breaking my heart! No. No. No.* I wanted someone kind and gentle. Someone who wasn't afraid to show he loved me, not just say he loved me.

I was already waiting outside when his driver showed up. That was how eager I was to get away from everything that had anything to do with Brad. I could admit I cried a little on the way home. Thinking about how much fun we'd had together and how well things had started off for us in the beginning, I knew he would be hard to get over, even if it had only been a month.

When I got back to my apartment, I was there alone. Julisa still wasn't around, and it sucked. I wanted my best friend there so I could tell her about my night and the big-girl move I had made with Brad. I needed her there to tell me how she was proud of me for moving on. But she wasn't. It made putting things behind me even harder than they already were.

However, after a much-needed nap and some self-pampering, I told myself that I would be okay. Brad had only been in my life for a month, so I wouldn't let him, and his absence affect me too much.

Over the next few weeks, I put all of my focus into school and work. I kept to myself for the most part and only went out for drinks at bars I knew Brad wouldn't step foot in. Julisa and I had spoken a few times, but it wasn't the way things used to be. She was still standoffish and I had grown too focused on my own life to push the issue with her.

When the time is right, she'll come around.

I started to pick up more hours at the nursing home, just to keep myself busy and out of my head about Brad. For what it was worth, it worked. I didn't have time to think about what

we shared together, because I was spread so thin. And I liked it that way.

On the weekends after studying, I went out clubbing and socializing. Those were my most fun days. I needed those days the most because they reminded me that I was still young and free. At least, until I found someone who made me feel like I wanted to settle down and share my life with them. I didn't see that day coming for a long time though. I wanted to enjoy my youth—really get to know myself on a deeper level. That way, when someone did come around with a love proposal, I would be able to tell right away whether they were serious or not.

“Hey, Zoey.”

Keith, a guy I'd met over social media, spotted me at the school's library one afternoon. I had no idea we went to the same school, or that he would even recognize me outside of my pictures. He was a tall guy, very athletic looking, and very handsome. Kind of dull and corny, but he was cute, so I held up a conversation with him. Nothing serious, he was just someone I enjoyed talking to from time to time.

“Hey Keith, I didn't know you went here. Nice to finally see you in person.”

“Same.” He blushed. “I had no idea we shared a campus. Mind if I sit?”

“Sure.” I moved my books out of the way for him to sit down. “It's crazy I've been here a while and have never seen you.”

“I guess you should start coming to the games then.” He chuckled. “I didn’t want anything important. I just saw you sitting here, and it took me by surprise.”

He asked if he could take me to dinner that evening, and to my own surprise I agreed to meet up with him. He was funnier in person, and cuter. Taller too. I’d never stood next to a guy as tall as he was and *wow!*

Our dinner went great that night. A lot better than my dinner with Triston had gone. Keith was such a gentleman the entire night, and he wasn’t afraid of showing his true feelings. I think that drew me to him more than anything.

After dinner, we ended up going to a nightclub for a few drinks and dancing. He loved dancing and so did I. I barely knew how to dance, but it was always fun to throw my hips around and pretend I knew what I was doing. And I had a great time doing it with Keith.

“Let’s take a selfie,” I said.

“Let’s do it,” he agreed.

His height made the picture taking a little hard until he finally bent down and wrapped his arms around my waist and placed his head next to mine. Our positions made us look like a real couple—cute and very comfortable with one another. It was a powerful photo that reminded me of my worth. I looked very happy and content hugged up with Keith. This time I felt compelled to share our picture on Facebook, and it received a lot of likes and comments.



Brad

I had been texting Zoey all day and had gotten no response. She wouldn't even answer a phone call from me. It made me angry, to be honest. After I'd made my way into the world and had come into my billionaire status, I hadn't experienced a single rejection from a woman. I knew it was wrong to think that just because I had money I was entitled to any woman I wanted, but that was my truth. I had gotten too comfortable with having my pick of the litter and because Zoey refused to choose me back, it upset me.

I might have even sent her a few text messages that were unfriendly. Rude. Selfish. When I read a few of them back to myself, I couldn't believe I'd sent them, so I had to apologize to her. After hours of not hearing from her at all, I decided to snoop around on her social media, to see if she had been posting and was just ignoring me, and that was when I saw it. The picture of her and some guy standing all cozy at some nightclub. I tried to get a good look at anything familiar in the picture, to see if I knew the club, but I didn't see anything I knew. Except for Zoey.

I almost started banging my head on the wall. Literally. The picture made me angry with myself more than anything. *I have everything in the world at the tip of a finger, but all she wants is the truth and I can't even give it to her.*

Seeing her look so content with another guy made me feel the same way I imagined she had felt when she'd found out about the bet. Betrayed. In the midst of my anger, I sent her a screenshot of the picture she'd posted and told her I hoped he made her as happy as she looked. That's when she finally responded.

“The smile on my face is very real.”

I guess she was tired of me blowing her up and wanted me to back off for good. That was the way her reply felt anyway. I wanted to reply again and say something to get under her skin, but I realized that was just the little angry boy in me being stupid, thinking I had presumably lost the fight. So I sat my phone down on my nightstand and went over to my personal bar for a drink.

After a few shots, I thought about calling one of my flings over for a midnight special, but that wasn't what I really wanted to do. I wanted to be with Zoey. She was the only one I wanted to share my intimate space with, be around, kiss, and love on. I could not stop thinking about her.

She was the only one who made me feel like a real man. Every other woman I slept with—or even hung out with—made me feel like a manager, or someone who owned a lot of

pretty things. I didn't want to feel that way in my personal life. I wanted to feel worthy of love.

I texted Miranda when I couldn't fall asleep and asked if she wanted to go out for drinks. Knowing her, she was always down for a fun night on the town. So we met up at one of our regulars and sat down to talk.

“What's up? I can feel the energy already.”

I sighed, not really wanting to talk about what had me so weighed down. I had no idea how to confess to her that I was jealous of a college student. I really didn't know why I was jealous to begin with, since I was the one who had messed up my chances with Zoey.

“Look.” I handed her my phone with the picture of Zoey and her new friend already on the screen.

“Wow,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “She looks happy.”

“Yeah,” I scoffed. “Very happy.”

When she gave my phone back, I looked at the picture again, trying to analyze every single detail of it. I was trying to find one single flaw, even if it was the tiniest thing, that would make me feel like I had another chance with her. But I couldn't find anything.

“That's tough.” Miranda sighed. “I'm sorry.”

“Right.” I slowly nodded. “It sucks. I don't understand how I can be so clammed up that I can't even let my guard down enough to tell her how I feel. I mean, I don't blame her for moving on. I just wish things were different. You know?”

“Well, maybe this is just a lesson learned, you know? Maybe this is your push to get you out of that clamshell and really in touch with your feelings. We’ve all experienced some kind of heartbreak in our lives. Some more than others, but it’s up to us to pull ourselves out of whatever pit we’re in and remember how to love again. It looks like Zoey has done that for herself and as much as it might hurt, we can’t blame her. She deserves to be happy just like everyone else. And to be honest, that bet was very cruel. I get mad at myself every time I think about it.”



Chapter Thirteen

Brad

Having drinks with Miranda didn't help my anxiety about Zoey at all. I tried my best to keep my mind off her, but I couldn't even focus at work or get anything done in my meetings. I couldn't even concentrate on my computer screen long enough to work on my new developments. Nothing I saw made sense to me. The only thing that did make sense was the way I felt about Zoey.

I called Miranda into my office around lunch time to let her know I would be taking the rest of the day off that afternoon. I expected for her to hit me with a million and one questions, or try to stop me because of our deadlines, but she saw how discombobulated I was and thought that was a great idea.

"I'll man the office," she said. "You do whatever you need to do to get your head back in the game in the meantime."

"Okay," I agreed. "Thanks for always having my back, Miranda. I really appreciate it."

Instead of going home that afternoon, I went to the mall and headed straight for the video game store that Julisa's family owned. I didn't know whether or not she would be on the clock that day, but I had to go and see for myself. To my luck, she was on the floor explaining gaming features to a very interested—and nerdy—customer. I was actually surprised to hear her speak “gamer talk” so fluently. So much so that I lurked in the shadows to listen in on every word she said, before I approached her about Zoey.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, the minute she found out I was in the store.

“Can you just please hear me out? Give me two minutes to explain myself.”

“I'm not giving you two seconds,” she said, as she brushed past me. “I'm not the one you need to explain yourself to. Zoey is. And this is my workplace. I don't talk about personal affairs—especially ones that have nothing to do with me—while I'm on the clock. Have a good day, Brad.”

Julisa was a lot tougher than Zoey was. Probably even a lot tougher than me. She had no sympathy for me and my broken heart, because I was the one who had put myself in this situation. Furthermore, I had hurt her friend. She didn't owe me any pity at all, but I wanted her to at least hear me out. I felt like she was the only person who could help me get through to the person I so badly longed for. However, even getting her to listen to me and spill my heart out felt impossible. She was stern, passionate, and set in stone when it

came to men. I figured that was why she had no man of her own.

“Julisa, please.”

I followed her into the back of the store, where the sign read, “No customers allowed.” But I didn’t care about the stupid sign. I had something important to say and I wanted her to hear me out. Even if it meant I had to be escorted out by security, or even arrested by the police.

“Just hear me out, please. You don’t even have to say anything or agree with me. I’m not here for any of that. I just want the chance to explain myself and I want help with getting Zoey back. I know what I did was terrible and childish. I know that, but please. I can’t go on without her. I don’t want to. And if me coming here to beg and plead with you makes me look weak and helpless, then so be it. But I want her back.”

For a moment, Julisa looked at me like she might have a change of heart. Or maybe she wanted to laugh at the sight of a man who had everything he could ever dream of helplessly pleading for a chance with her friend. Whatever her look meant, I didn’t care. All I wanted was for her to help me save my love life.

“Why’d you do it?” she asked, roughly dropping a box of games onto the floor at my feet. “Since you’re here, you can help me sort through these old games.”

“Okay.” I nodded as I bent down to go through the box with her. “I honestly don’t know why I accepted the bet. To be honest, my friends and I are much too old to be making bets

like that anyway.” I sighed. “It was a stupid bet they brought up to me to get me to think about settling down. They’re all married or in relationships and then there’s me—the lone star who jumps from woman to woman.”

“Typical guy,” she scoffed. “Couldn’t you have chosen someone else? Someone who wasn’t so young and vulnerable. Maybe one of those Hollywood women who only care about you for your money? It didn’t have to be Zoey.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “But I was drawn to Zoey. The day I met her at the event, there was something about her. Something more than the bet, that I wanted. I was just too afraid to let my friends see that I actually had feelings. I didn’t want to look like I’d fallen in love at first sight. But the truth is, I did.”

I knew my words were hard for Julisa to believe, and I didn’t blame her. I probably would have had a hard time believing a guy who tricked my friend into falling for him was telling the truth too.

“What you did was completely out of line, Brad. As the best friend, I don’t even accept your apology, but I saw how broken up Zoey was about you. It sickened me. But it isn’t my heart on the line. It’s hers. So, who am I to get in the way of that?”

Julisa seemed to have a slight change of heart by the time I finished pleading my case. And after I helped her unload boxes and boxes of video games.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said, once we were down to the last box. “If I help you meet up with Zoey, you have to do

something for me.”

“Anything,” I quickly agreed. “Just tell me what it is.”

“I want in on the world of development. I have a lot of great ideas and I wanna be in the loop to get them heard. I see what you do at your company, maybe you can find a spot for me there.”

“You create games?” I asked. “I overheard you talking with the customer earlier and I was actually blown away by how much you knew about the game.”

“Not only am I a developer, but I’m also one hell of a gamer.” She smirked. “And I need five thousand dollars to buy some new software to help me with that.”

I thought about her proposal for a moment, just to see if there was a spot for her at my company. The money wasn’t an issue at all, but when it came to my company and developments I was skeptical about who I let through the door. However, being that I was in the process of trying to come up with something new, I was interested in seeing what Julisa had to offer.

“Alright, fine.” I held out my hand for her to shake and seal the deal. “Five thousand dollars and I’ll bring you into the office to see what you’re made of.”

A large smile rose on her face as she firmly grabbed my hand and shook it. I could tell gaming was something she took very seriously, and I was willing to help with that. As long as she put in a good word for me with Zoey. Even if Zoey didn’t

accept my apology, I was still interested in seeing what Julisa could do.

“What are you in school for anyway?” I inquired again, since my attention was entirely focused on Zoey during our first meeting.

“Engineering,” she said. “Both of my parents are developers, and I wanna follow suit.”

“Is it something you actually enjoy doing, or do you do it just because your parents are?”

“It’s my life. I’ve been playing in—and winning—game competitions since I was three years old. The older I got, the less challenging I felt like the games were. So, I started creating my own games. Once my parents found out that I knew my way around an operating system, they upped the score and got me into some pretty fancy academies to test my skills. Now, I wanna go into business for myself and create my own lane because I feel like no one has a mind like me when it comes to creating.”

That was exactly why I had gone into business for myself. So I admired Julisa and her drive to create. It made me even more eager to see exactly what her mind was capable of behind the computers.

By the end of her shift, she felt more inspired than ever to message Zoey. It had been weeks since they’d last spoken, or even saw each other, but after talking to me about her opportunity to work with my brand, she had to reach out. It wasn’t the only reason she reached out, of course. But it was

the main one. She wanted her own brand as well, and she knew I could put her in the position to get there.

She did feel bad for reaching out to Zoey only after speaking to me about her opportunity. In a way, it made her feel like she had made a bet of her own, but at the same time, Zoey had chosen me over her. Even when she laid her own dignity on the line right in front of me. So, Julisa felt like a meeting with me was something Zoey kind of owed her. Even if they didn't reconcile.

When she clocked out that night, she gave Zoey a call with me on three-way. It took a few rings before Zoey finally answered, but when she did she sounded happy to hear from her friend. Truth be told, Julisa was happy to hear from her too. At the end of the day, they were still best friends.

“How you been, Zo?” Julisa asked.

“Better now,” she said. “How have you been? It's been a while.”

“Yeah, I know.” Julisa sighed. “I hate that we haven't been talking, I just felt like we needed some space. I still love you and you are still my best friend.”

“I agree.”

It was awkward, being on the phone but not engaging in the conversation. I learned that usually, the few times they had gotten into fights before, they had always talked it out in person. Julisa just felt so pushed aside that the thought of

talking it through face-to-face hadn't crossed her mind at all. She did want to fix their relationship though.

“Are you busy tonight?” Julisa asked. “Maybe we can get together and talk about all of this? I know I acted out of character when we last left off, but I was just...I don't know, hurt about you choosing Brad over me?”

“I know.” Zoey sighed. “And I'm sorry about that. I've been wanting to tell you that you were right for a long time now. I hate that I was so blinded by whatever it was to see it. But no, I'm not busy tonight. We can meet up for drinks.”

“Great. Our usual spot?”

“Sounds good.”

After the call, Julisa and I both rushed home to shower and get dressed. We also had a conversation of our own, so she could let me know what the plan was. It wasn't actually a plan, she was just the middleman to get Zoey and I together in the same space. After that, she said I was on my own.

“I'll let you know when to come inside. I don't want her to think you're the only reason I asked her to come out tonight, so don't jump the gun,” she lectured, just before ending our call.

When she and Zoey finally met up, I watched from my car as they gave each other the longest hug. I was surprised to see how good Zoey looked—better than she'd looked while she was still hurt over me. She looked more spunky and her hair

was different. She had a new pep in her step, and I was there for it.

I did notice her on her phone a lot while she waited at the door though. And whoever she was texting sure did have her smiling a lot. I figured she was texting the guy I saw her in the picture with, and I wondered what they were talking about. Whatever it was had to have been a great topic, because Zoey was all smiles.

While I waited for Julisa to give me the green light to come inside the lounge, I scrolled through Zoey's social media to find the picture again. The guy's name was Keith. Some guy who went to her school and played sports, a real looker. Their picture got a lot of likes and comments, and I felt myself slowly slipping into a state of jealousy.

When I thought about Zoey being with another guy, and being happy with him, it made me even more angry with myself. My ego wanted to throw around the fact that I was a billionaire, and he was just some college student, but I knew money meant nothing to her. Zoey was the kind of girl who only wanted love and affection. Money was merely a plus.

I found myself on Keith's page, looking through his photos. He seemed like a decent guy. Smart, charming, funny. He even made a few posts about Zoey that were very pleasant. I got a glimpse of the kind of conversations they had through a few of his posts. Pretty cheesy, if I had to be the judge, but he was very nice to her.

Right away, I knew he wasn't the kind of guy she would go for in the long run. He wasn't exciting enough. She needed someone who could keep up with the wild nights she wandered into at times. Someone who challenged her mentally and made her laugh. And I mean really made her laugh—not just tell a cheesy joke that she laughed at out of sympathy.

“This guy.” I chuckled. “You seem like a great kid.”

In a way, looking at his page and figuring out what kind of guy he was boosted my confidence. I felt like maybe I did have another shot with her, since he wasn't as exciting as I was. The only thing left to do was get Zoey to see that.

When Julisa finally texted me to come inside, I grew anxious. I had no idea how Zoey would react to seeing me, but I knew how I would react to seeing her. I was eager too.

Zoey, I miss you so damn much...



Chapter Fourteen

Brad

When Zoey stormed out of the bar that night—without even saying anything to me—I felt stupid. And hopeless. I knew it wasn't Julisa's fault or anything, but I felt she could have done a little more than she had to get Zoey to stay. Either way, I still gave Julisa the money and I still agreed to show her around my office and see what she had in store. I figured it was time I forced myself to move past Zoey—focus on my work more and improving my emotional maturity.

I decided to take up counseling to see if that would help me. My sister and I had been spending a lot of time together, and she thought it might work. So, I gave it a shot. The things we talked about in my sessions were pretty eye-opening, but none of them made it any easier to get over Zoey.

“What do you feel is making you hold on to her?” my therapist asked.

“I’m not sure.” I sighed. “It’s just a feeling in my gut that makes it hard to let go. It was only a month, that’s why I’m confused as to why it’s so hard. I’ve gotten over women I’ve dealt with for years in less time.”

“That’s because you had no real emotional attachment to those women. Zoey is someone different. Whatever you saw in her spoke to your heart. Your soul even. What is it that you desired from the connection with her?”

I had to think long and hard about my answer. I wanted everything with her. To share a life. To learn and grow, do things I never did. Travel the world and show her different sides of myself and what I stood for. I wanted all the happiness, love, and affection she had to offer. I wanted to offer her the same as well. Most of all, I wanted to be a better man—a man who was able to open up and show rather than tell. Zoey made me feel like all of that was possible. And I wanted it.

“I want to be in love,” I said. “I am in love. And I wanna be able to show her that. Because she deserves it.”

“Well then, you have to open up your heart and let that be known. No one can do that for you. It may feel as if they can, but you’re the one who holds the key to your own destiny.”

After my therapy session that evening, I decided to take my sister up on an offer to go to dinner. And to my surprise, she had a special guest with her—Miranda. I thought they were there for some sort of intervention for me or something.

Nothing could have prepared me for the real reason they were there.

“What are you two doing here?” I asked as I took my seat.

They looked at each other with loving smiles on their faces. They were smiles that I had seen before, from people who were head over heels in love with one another. So I was even more confused as to why we were all meeting for dinner.

“Can we enjoy a few drinks and appetizers before we dive into the good stuff?” Miranda asked. “Have a seat, take a load off. Tell us about your session tonight. That’s what’s most important.”

What do they have up their sleeves? No, first...I need a drink...

I felt lighter about everything, honestly. And it was the first time in a long time. Although I was still stumped over Zoey not accepting me back, I felt like I was in a better space to try and move forward.

“So,” Miranda said, after we had finished our first round and appetizers, “we brought you here tonight to let you in on a little secret. I don’t know how you’ll respond to it, whether you’ll accept it or not. But we would like to be very transparent with you about things.”

In my heart of hearts, I felt like I knew what Miranda was about to lay on me. It was written all over their faces—the happiness and light energy. It was very noticeable, I was just

confused on the when's and the how's. So, I waited to hear them both out.

“Brad,” my sister chimed in, “Miranda and I are dating.”

My eyes fluttered at her confession. It had caught me by surprise, but I was happy for them. I just didn't know how they'd caught each other's eye, or when. I wanted all the details. Especially because it was my sister and my assistant.

“Are you serious right now?” I chuckled. “How? When? Why? I mean, not why—because this is great news!—but, how did this come about?”

“Well...”

Miranda told me everything from start to finish. She and my sister had actually met on a company trip that Miranda was in charge of, which had sparked up a reunion between them. They'd gone out for dinner to talk about business ventures and my sister grew an attraction to her. I was surprised to hear it but seeing them together as they were, I saw where both of their attractions lay.

“This is a shock.” I laughed. “But I'm happy for you two. You look great together. Happy.”

“So, that's it?” my sister questioned. “We have your blessing?”

“My blessing? Of course! Why not? I love you both. Just do right by each other and don't bring any drama to the business.”

I left dinner that night inspired to go to Zoey's place. I hadn't heard from her, or Julisa, since the night she'd walked

out on me, and I wanted some kind of closure. I felt that was the least we could set in place after everything that had happened between us. I was a little drunk when I got there, so my approach was probably too forceful for the both of them. But at the time, it was the only way I knew how to express my feelings.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Julisa said, as she blocked the door to keep me from going inside.

“Where’s Zoey? I need to talk to her.”

“She’s busy at the moment. I can’t just let you inside our apartment without her knowing you’re here this time. I helped you the first time, I can’t risk our friendship any more than I already have. She’s pissed at me even more than she is at you now.”

“Fine. Just tell her to come talk to me. Please. It’s important.”

While Julisa fought to hold me off, Zoey came around the corner to see who was at the door. She was dressed up, like she was going somewhere, and she looked more beautiful than I had ever seen her look. I wondered where she was going, but there was no time for that. I had to plead my case with what little time I had. And make it count.

“Zoey, please just come outside and talk to me for two seconds. I have to get this off my chest and if you still don’t see yourself giving me another chance, I promise I will leave you alone for good. Please. Come and talk to me.”

I saw the hesitation in her demeanor, but in the end she stepped outside to let me speak my peace. I told myself I had to be honest with her about everything. From start to finish. And I was.

“I know you probably hate me right now, but you have to believe me. I’m lost without you. I regret taking that stupid bet every day.”

“Oh, so there was a bet,” she scoffed, cutting me off.

“I hate to admit it, but yes. It was stupid. It really had nothing to do with you personally. The bet was all to get me to think about settling down. I never saw myself taking a relationship seriously until I saw you that night. You sparked something in me that made me want something more. I hate that I was too much of a coward to really show my real feelings. I was afraid, I hurt you, and I’m sorry. I will do anything to make it up to you. Just give me a chance. Please.”

Zoey looked as if I had struck a nerve within her. She looked like she wanted to break down her walls and actually give me another chance. But then she looked as if she remembered all the pain she felt due to my actions and shook her head.

“I can’t believe you would do that to me. I was so genuine with you and really saw through the façade you had up with your friends and even still, you lied to me. I asked you. I gave you a chance to come clean and you still lied to my face. You never even gave me the satisfaction of being honest, so how can I trust you with anything?”

There were tears in her eyes and tension in her shoulders while she spoke her peace. And she was right. I had lied. I lied thinking I was protecting her feelings, but all I did was make her distrust me even more than she already did. My lies did nothing more than dig a deeper hole for myself.

“I completely understand how you feel. I wish there was a better way for me to show you how deeply sorry I am, but I guess that comes with time? This love thing is still very new to me, but you make me want to learn it more. To step outside my comfort zone and really go off the deep end with proving it. I don’t know if you remember, but the night you passed out drunk, I told you I love you. I meant it with every part of my being.”

“Yeah, and I also remember waking up alone and texting you for answers and you accepting no accountability at all. Do you know how hurt and betrayed I felt? Even now. Julisa and I are in an even weirder place because of your actions, Brad. I can’t believe you’re a grown man and this is the way you behave yourself. How dare you?”

I knew Zoey was right. I should have expected more from myself as a grown man. I hated that it took me losing someone I was really truly interested in to realize that.

“I don’t want to have this conversation again, Brad. I learned a hard lesson dealing with you, and it was to never let my guard down too soon. I had a bad habit of doing that in the past. I’m not doing it again. Now please, you have to leave because I’m on my way out.”

At the same time she said she was on her way out, I saw a car pull into the front of her apartment. It was the same guy from the picture she'd posted, the guy she looked so happy and content with. I couldn't lie, it made me furious to watch her walk off and get into the car with him and drive away.

I can't do a damn thing to stop her.

"Sorry you had to see that," Julisa said once Zoey was gone, surprising me.

"Yeah. Me too."



Zoey

Keith came to take me to dinner at the same time Brad tried to plead his case. I couldn't lie, I felt sorry for him and would have loved to stick around and talk things out, but I was afraid to let my guard down with him anymore. Besides, Keith had been stepping up and showing me the exact things that Brad was afraid to. I knew he was upset about seeing me talking with another man though, because he was silent for most of the car ride over to the restaurant.

“Who was that guy I saw you with?” he finally asked, once we were seated.

I didn’t want to lie to him the same way Brad had lied to me. Being lied to wasn’t a good feeling at all. I knew how it felt from both a relationship perspective and also with family. And I hated it. So, I told him the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

“That was Brad. He was this guy I dated for a month. But, before you get the wrong impression, it was all a prank to him. I was serious about it, but he had ulterior motives. When I found out about it, I left him alone and now he just can’t seem to get over things.”

“So, that was the guy you were dating before me? I recognize him from TV and magazines. He owns this big gaming company, right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “He does. And I guess he’s in the right profession because he’s just as childish as ever.”

Keith didn’t look too impressed with me, or Brad. He looked hurt, like he was a rebound or something. That was the last thing I wanted him to feel like, because he truly wasn’t. I’d never have expected Brad to come around causing as much havoc as he did. In fact, I never expected him to come around at all.

“So, what’s all that about? Are you two rekindling something, or...?”

What am I supposed to say to that?

In my mind I didn't want to rekindle anything with Brad. But in my heart, there was a different song playing. I felt how sorry he was and how much he truly wanted to change and show me the real him. But I was still on the fence about it. I didn't want to be hurt again. However, I was one hundred percent honest with Keith.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm sick of dating guys who are less mature than me, and I'm sick of being hurt by men. In my heart, I feel like there might be a chance for us. But I don't know, I'm just not sure."

"Well," he said, wiping his mouth with his napkin, "I hope you two can figure out what you want from each other. But it isn't fair to me for us to be hanging out as much as we have been while you still have another guy lingering in the background. Men get all kinds of slack for things like that, but rarely ever do women get pushed for the same thing. I truly like you, Zoey. But I'm not into being anyone's rebound boyfriend."



Chapter Fifteen

Brad

Despite the many times Zoey had turned me down, I just couldn't let go. I couldn't let her walk out of my life without a fight. The fact that she'd even given me the chance to speak my peace before she left on her date said more than enough for me. I figured if she was willing to hear me out in the face of another man, there was still a chance for us somewhere.

I contemplated the entire day about what to do to get her back. I felt like spilling my emotions just hadn't been enough. I had to do something to make Zoey see how serious I was about us. I had to learn something new about her and apply that to my tactics for getting her back. But there was only one person who could help me with that. And that was the one person who knew her best—Julisa.

I didn't want to just pop up on Julisa again at work, but I had no other choice. She was the only person I felt comfortable enough to surprise with my ideas of how to get

Zoey back, and she was the only person who could actually help me. So I bit the bullet and showed my face.

“You’re lucky tonight is an early night for me,” she said. “Otherwise, I would report you to security for stalking.”

I followed her out to the parking lot to make plans for the rest of the night. I didn’t have anything significant in mind, I simply wanted to talk to her about Zoey. Maybe get to know her more as a person, that way I would know how to better connect with her when it came to us.

“Should we go for drinks or something?” I asked. “My treat?”

“Of course it’s gonna be your treat. You’re the one bothering me with this. If I’m going to be putting in all my hard work to get you your lover back, it’s always gonna be your treat. But yeah, follow me. I know a place.”

I laughed a little, because of how forceful and straight to the point she was, but I also followed suit. I instructed my driver to follow her. We ended up on the other side of town at a small diner she liked. She said no one knew about her secret stash of diners, and I liked that. Being secluded in a quiet setting so we wouldn’t be distracted by everything going on around us was a plus, too. The conversation was a lot more personal, and that gave us a better chance at getting some real results.

“So,” she said, “there’s no need for small talk. We’re obviously here for a reason. So, what is it?”

We both knew the reason; I just had no idea how to present it to her in a way that would work. I realized I wanted her to tell me what to do. It wasn't her duty or fault, but I really needed her help.

“Alright,” I said. “I need your help getting Zoey back. I know it sounds stupid, but I'm desperate here.”

Julisa stared at me over her drink for a moment. I thought she would get up and walk out before she helped me solve my problem, but when she smirked at me I knew my desperation had finally broken her down.

“You really care about Zoey, huh?” she asked.

“I do. In the beginning—even though it was based on a bet—I cared about her then too. I was just too immature to act on it in front of everyone. Wow.” I shook my head at myself. “That sounds really stupid and childish, huh?”

“Yeah.” Julisa slowly nodded her head. “I guess I can't fault you too much though. Men have a weird way of showing their emotions. And it never works out. It's like you all are just wired wrong or something. I don't know, that's why I'm single.”

Julisa's relationship status wasn't much of a mystery to me. It was pretty apparent that she hated men, or at least wanted to stay away from them for as long as she could. And judging from the way I had treated her best friend, I didn't blame her.

“So, how do I get her back?”

“Man”—she took a large gulp of her drink—“that’s gonna be tough. She even hates me now for trying to help you out. I mean, the way I did it was pretty messed up, but I didn’t think she would get as mad as she did about it. You must have really hurt her feelings.”

I lowered my head when I imagined how hurt Zoey must have been by my actions. The shame I felt made me track back to how I had treated every other woman in my life. I’d always put it off on them only wanting me for my money, but truth be told it was more than that. The power to deal or not deal had always been in my hands and had I not been the selfish, entitled rich man that I was, I would have made better decisions when it came to my love life.

“Do you think there’s even a chance for me?”

The silence between us made me feel like there wasn’t. Though Julisa’s eyes wandered around like she knew there wasn’t a chance in hell for me either, she smiled and gave me a little bit of hope.

“Well, she hasn’t cursed you out yet, so I guess that’s a good thing. I mean, Zoey isn’t really the type to curse anyone out the way I would, but she still gets mad. So, maybe.”

I chuckled thinking about Zoey getting as mad as Julisa did. I couldn’t picture it. Even though I knew everyone was capable of getting angry, I just didn’t picture Zoey being a girl who stepped out of her character that far.

“How come you’re not in a relationship?” I asked. “Have you ever been in a relationship before? I mean, probably, yeah.

But like, why haven't you stayed in one long term?"

"Who says I haven't stayed in one long term?" She laughed. "My longest relationship was four years. When I found out the guy was a lying, cheating scumbag, I said to hell with it and have been single ever since. I don't like wasting my time or my emotions. I'd rather stay single and committed to myself, until I find the right person."

"Person?"

I only asked because of the revelation Miranda and my sister had laid on me not long before. On top of that, Julisa did seem like she might like both men and women, so I didn't want to limit her to just men. I knew how some women took offense to that.

"Ahh." She slowly nodded. "I like how you caught that, my man. Yes, I said person. I date both men and women."

"Is that why you and Zoey are so close?" I asked. "Have you two ever...?"

"Heck no. Zoey's my girl. My best friend. I would never cross that line with her and potentially ruin our friendship. I love her too much."

She was much more aware than I was. I actually took a lot of notes from our conversation over drinks, Julisa was very cool and very smart. She gave me a lot of insight on dating too. I didn't know whether I took in everything she said because of her age or her experience, but I hung onto every word.

“I’ll talk to her for you,” she said. “Tell her you’re not as bad as I thought you were. Maybe if I say I kind of like you she’ll be more open to at least having a real conversation with you.”

“You like me?” I teased. “So, we’re cool now? Like, friends? Because I’m actually having a good time here tonight. The drinks, the music, the whole atmosphere. It’s cool.”

“Friends?” She laughed. “Don’t push it, buddy.”

I thought she was serious. Turned out, she was only teasing me to get a rise out of me. Julisa actually did think I was pretty cool once I opened up. I figured I should open up more, that way people would perceive me in my true nature and not for who I portrayed myself to be. Talking to her made it easier for me to be the real me.

At the end of our night, we said our goodbyes and even planned to meet up for drinks again. I gave her a date to stop by the office so that I could show her around and we could get down to business, and then we parted ways.



Zoey

Julisa said she thought Brad was actually pretty cool. She said he wasn't as smug and arrogant and full of himself as she thought he was. I'd known that from the get-go. He was just a guy who didn't know how to get himself in tune with his emotions. I ran into guys like him all the time at school. They usually buried themselves in either work or video games, but never the true nature of the self. Because they were afraid to show their real self to the world. Most of them didn't even know their real selves.

On my drive home from my date with Keith, I thought about the place Julisa and I were in. I'd gone to my parents' house to stay for a while after the way she and Brad had bombarded me at the lounge. And she couldn't blame me. Because when she needed her space from me, she had done the same exact thing. Needing space was something we both understood fairly well, but neither of us could go home that night without at least attempting to fix things between us. So she had stopped at my parents to talk to me.

My mom opened the door for her. I heard them talking in the hallway. My mom was skeptical about letting Julisa in to see me at first, but she knew I was expecting her and wanted her there. Mom was just jealous that I was willing to speak to everyone except her.

"She's in her room," she said. "I hope you can get through to her, because she doesn't listen to me."

"I'll do my best." Julisa chuckled. "But she's mad at me right now too."

She softly knocked on my door, prompting me to remove my headphones and tell her to come in. She looked foxy that night, like she had gone to a party or something. I figured she was living life to the fullest without me by her side, until she told me she and Brad had drinks that night.

“I was surprised I actually had a good time with him.”

She sat down on the bed next to me. Not really knowing where to start, she started with the truth. Everything Brad had told her that night, she spilled into my ears because she knew I needed to hear it.

“So, Brad invited me out for drinks tonight.”

She knew that would grab my full attention, so that was where she began. I was sure she saw the flicker in my eyes when she mentioned him. Brad was just so...I didn't know. As mad as I was at him, I still cared.

“He's a pretty cool guy, Zo. I know I said I hated him in the beginning, but after talking to him tonight, I see that he's just damaged goods. We've all been in his shoes before. Brad has a hard time moving truthfully in love because he's afraid of being hurt.”

“So that gives him the right to hurt other people?” I scoffed.
“How did you two get on a good foot anyway?”

“Well, the night he came to the hookah lounge, he came to my job. Twice. Begging and pleading for me to help him get you back. I told him I would only help if he gave me a job at his company and he agreed. When he came the second time,

he wouldn't leave without me having a real conversation with him. I think he was looking for me to tell him how to get you back, but I didn't know what to tell him." She chuckled. "He suggested we go out for drinks to come up with a plan for him. We started talking about our love lives and surprisingly, he opened up all the way. He really loves you, Zo. I felt it tonight. And he's truly sorry. I know that probably doesn't mean anything by now, but he wants you to know how he feels. He even told me about the bet."

I stared off into space for a moment. I figured Julisa knew I was taking everything in, or contemplating giving Brad another chance, so she let me take all the thinking time I needed to wrap my mind around things.

"I just don't know, Julisa," I said. "I knew he was afraid, but so was I. I guess I just figured if he really cared about me the way he says he does, he would have no problem showing up. Regardless if he got hurt or not. I put my own feelings and pride aside for him, he should be able to do the same."

"I agree. And I know it's no excuse, but men are just stupid."

I laughed at that. It was the first time anyone had seen or heard me laugh a real laugh since the night I'd stormed out on her and Brad. I missed her laugh. I missed us being okay and being the best of friends. Brad had really caused a lot of trouble for Julisa and me, but in the end, it brought us closer together.

“I’m sorry I stormed out on you that night,” I said. “I should have at least stayed and heard you two out.”

“No need to be sorry.” She shook her head. “That was my fault. I should have never caught you off guard like that. I was wrong. I just want my friend back. We’ve been away from each other for too long.” She laughed to keep her tears from falling.

“I know, right?” I sniffled and flung myself on top of her to give her a hug. “I’m tired of fighting with you. I hate when we fight. It makes me feel so out of place in the world. It’s even worse than how I felt after Brad ghosted me.”

“I gave him a piece of my mind about that, you know. Like, really made him beg for his life.” She laughed. “I wish I could have gotten it on camera for you to see how afraid he is of losing you for good.”

I smiled a wide smile when she told me how pitiful Brad looked begging for me back. It wasn’t his pain that amused me, but the thought of him actually loving me the way he said he did. When I finally let my guard down again and was ready to sit down with him, I nodded my head and let Julisa know I would call him.



Chapter Sixteen

Zoey

Even though I said I would, I didn't call Brad right away. There were still too many emotions there for me, too many unanswered questions. On top of that, Keith and I talked over everything and were still hanging out. He'd been upset with me on the night of our romantic date, but after he calmed down, he messaged me sweet little nothings and brought me flowers the next day. He really was a sweet guy. He just wasn't as exciting as Brad.

It had been a few days since Julisa and I had made up, and I had been so busy studying and working so I decided to get out that night. I wasn't really in the mood for the lounge or a bar or a club, so I went to the coffee shop instead. Remembering how groovy it was at night, while everyone else partied, made me feel a sense of comfort. When I got there, however, Brad was there.

I thought about turning around and going somewhere else, but he'd already seen me. I didn't want to make my

nervousness—or awkwardness—any worse, so I went ahead and went inside. Brad was talking to a group of college guys about gaming and creating and I thought, *Great. Maybe he'll just leave afterwards.* But when I took a seat somewhere near the plant section of the coffee shop, his eyes followed.

“What are we having tonight?” the waitress asked as I removed my jacket.

“Uhh, I’ll take an iced coffee and two glazed donuts.”

The minute she walked away to place my order, Brad came walking over toward my table. I could smell his cologne in the air already. He looked like he had lost a few pounds too, which wasn’t a bad thing. It made his already bulging muscles show even more.

“Hey Zoey,” he said. “Mind if I sit?”

Right away, Brad made his intentions clear. He wanted to talk about what was happening between us and that was it. I gave him credit for being intentional—in a good way—but I still had my guard up.

“Sure,” I finally replied.

When he sat down, I got an even bigger whiff of his cologne. The coolness matched his energy that night. He seemed more relaxed and open, ready to explore his emotions more. I enjoyed the connection more than I’d thought I would.

“First things first,” he said, “I would like to apologize to you. Sincerely. I was wrong in every aspect of the way I

treated you. I should have never done that to you, because you didn't deserve it. No one does."

He sounded sincere. Then again, he always did, up until he ghosted me. My feelings for him were still there—apparently—but I didn't know how to fully trust him anymore. No matter how badly I may have wanted to fall at his feet and let him back in, I couldn't. I was completely numb to the situation.

"Thank you," I said. "I really appreciate that."

I think my nonchalant reply caught him off guard. The way he sat back and gave me a confusing look was proof of my accusations. He wasn't used to me being so distant with him because from the moment we met I had always been so open and bubbly.

"I guess I don't really know what to say now." He chuckled. "I didn't expect you to be so cold."

"I bet." I slowly nodded. "Brad, I still care about you and adored every minute of the month we spent together, but I don't know how to be open with you anymore. That's hard for me, and you should be able to understand that."

"I understand."

Brad and I sat in silence for a moment. He didn't know what to say and I wasn't in the mood to put words in his mouth. I figured if he truly wanted to become emotionally intelligent, he had to figure out how to use his words on his own. I couldn't force him to speak the words that needed to be spoken.

“I really am sorry, you know,” he said. “I can’t even sleep most nights because of this. I feel so guilty, so out of place. So...lost. It’s hard for me to even think or focus on work. All I think about is that month we spent together. How much fun we had. How content and happy I felt. I’ve never felt so free in my life and I wanna feel that again, Zoey. With you.”

I wanted to burst into tears and fly into his arms, but I held myself back. Brad had really hurt me, and even though his words were the exact words my heart wanted to hear, I had to use my brain in that instant. I couldn’t fall back in line so blindly and end up getting hurt all over again. Brad had to prove to me that he was ready.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he said. “I know I hurt you to the point where you probably can’t even stand to look at me, but I’m sorry. And I’ll do anything to make it up to you. Anything.”

In the midst of Brad’s apology, Keith came to the coffee shop to take me home. It had already been in my plans before I knew Brad would be there, so I didn’t cancel on him. But I did appreciate Brad’s honesty.

“I hate to leave in the middle of your apology,” I said. “But my ride’s here. Maybe we can pick this up another time?”

“Oh.” He sat back in his chair looking disappointed. “I could have given you a ride home. Julisa didn’t have to come out.”

Brad had no idea who was there to pick me up. He only mentioned Julisa’s name to see if I would tell him she was

there. I was honest with him, though. Unlike he had been with me. Not only because it was the right thing to do, but because I didn't want him causing any problems between Keith and me.

“Julisa's not here to get me. My friend Keith is.”

Brad's face turned ghost white. I could see the jealousy large in his eyes and hear it in the heavy breaths he took while trying to keep his calm. A part of me felt good to see him so thrown off, but other parts of me were nervous. Even more nervous than I had been when I first saw him that night.

“Keith?” he asked. “Are you two seeing each other officially now?”

Keith and I didn't have a title and I liked it that way. We hung out, we had fun, expressed our emotions to one another. But we weren't necessarily dating. We simply enjoyed each other's company. I knew that Keith would eventually grow into wanting something serious, but for the time being we were only companions.

“I wouldn't call it dating really. We do hang out a lot though. He's a cool guy.”

“So, you like him?” Brad asked. “You actually like him and see yourself being with him?”

Each time he asked a question, his breathing got heavier. His jealousy increased by the second and I grew even more anxious to leave. Keith texted me to let me know he was waiting for me to come out and I texted him back to give me a

minute. When he asked why I was taking so long, my palms started to sweat.

“Why do you care so much who I talk to these days? You weren’t ready to make any commitments with me. Our relationship was all a game to you.”

His eyes shot over my words as if he wanted me to recant them. But they were the truth. I didn’t understand men. They didn’t want to commit to you but didn’t want you to commit to anyone else. It was an odd game Brad—and many other men—loved to play. A game that I wanted no part in.

“It wasn’t like that, Zoey. It was a bet. A bet that led me to you, and I loved you the minute I saw you.”

My heart pulsed a little faster at his confession. It came at an awful time, and I didn’t want to believe it, but the look in Brad’s eyes was too fierce to ignore. He was telling the truth, and I felt it. I just couldn’t get past the hurt he had caused me.

“That is not fair, Brad.” I packed up my things with tears in my eyes. “You can’t hurt me and then come back around telling me you love me just to get me back. Maybe when you really understand the way you hurt me and how to move forward, we can talk. Until then, I need some space.”



Brad

Watching Zoey walk away with tears in her eyes was hard for me. What was even harder was watching her get into another man's car to be consoled. She was my woman—she belonged to me. Not in a possessive way, but we were meant to be together. I knew it. She knew it. Even Julisa knew it. When I could no longer see the guy's car anymore, I lost my cool and knocked over the table where we'd been sitting. I was so angry at myself for even letting things get as far as they had, I cursed myself.

I tried to call Miranda that night, but she didn't answer. I was on my way to a bar to have a few drinks and wanted some company. I figured she was too busy being a lover-girl with my sister though. That made me even more angry. I wished I knew how to be in a relationship. I wished I knew how to express my feelings instead of hiding them away like some teen-aged boy.

I actually enjoyed being in relationships. Having someone to come home to after a long day. A designated hang-out buddy. Someone to share my dreams and nightmares with. It was the risk of being hurt again that terrified me. Even when

Zoey had showed me I had nothing to worry about, I still couldn't let myself be vulnerable.

When I got to the bar, I bought out an entire section and drowned myself in my sorrows. A few women tried to come over and flirt with me, but I wasn't into them. I wasn't into anyone except Zoey. The more I drank, the more I thought about her and the way I had hurt her. I wished I could go back in time and tell the whole world I loved her, but life didn't work that way. What was done was done, and there was nothing I could do about it.

My mind wouldn't let me forget the sight of her getting into the car with Keith. He looked so lucky to have her next to him, it made me remember how big my smile had been when she was with me. I had felt so content with Zoey. She had a way about her that just made me feel completely whole and sure of myself. No matter how much money I had, or how many places I had the luxury to travel to, all of it meant nothing without her.

When I grew tired of drinking, I called for my driver to come and take me home. But on the way, my anger got the best of me, and we ended up taking a detour to Justin's place. He was the one who had egged on the bet, so he was the one who had to feel my wrath.

“This is all your fault!”

I grabbed Justin by the collar and pushed him backward as soon as he opened his front door. My arm clenched against his throat as I backed him up against the wall. The terror in his

eyes told me my strength was one he couldn't match that night and I won't lie, I felt accomplished.

“W-what are you talking about, Brad?” he managed.
“What’s all my fault? I didn’t do anything!”

Luckily enough for me, Justin was the only one home that night. His wife and kids were gone to her parents, so it was just us. I never wanted his family to see me act out so violently toward him, but I felt like he had it coming.

“Zoey! That stupid bet! Everything. All of it. She won’t even give me a second chance because of you. I can’t even talk to her and now she’s seeing some other guy!”

Justin had no idea what I was talking about, because I hadn’t even expressed my feelings about the situation to him. Only Miranda. I didn’t know how to tell him I was in love with the girl he had dared me to date for a month. I was sure he would’ve told me to just go after her if he had known, it was me who held myself back. I just wasn’t ready to admit it.

“Brad, what’s going on, man? What did I do that was so terrible, huh? Talk to me, buddy.”

My strength slowly subsided and my arm fell from his throat. I still held on to his collar, just in case I had another burst of energy, but I was over the fight. I realized I didn’t really want to fight with one of my best friends. It was stupid and pointless.

“I’m sorry.”

My head fell against Justin's chest. I felt the tears getting ready to spill over from my eyes and I felt ashamed to let him see them. But then I heard Zoey's voice in my head telling me to express myself. That was my test.

"Zoey," I said, lifting my head so that Justin could see me in the flesh. "She found out about the bet."

He didn't realize why that was such a huge issue for me, until he finally realized I was in love with her.

"Brad," he said, placing both hands on my shoulders. "I'm sorry, man. I had no idea."

Justin and I sat down and talked for hours that night. I told him everything from start to finish. And like I thought, he told me to fix it. He even gave me a long lecture about not being afraid to commit to the things and people I loved because in the long run, love was all that mattered. Love made the world go around.



Chapter Seventeen

Zoey

After walking away from Brad that night in the coffee shop, I decided to put all of my love interests on hold and take some time to be single. And I mean, completely single. I hadn't gone on any dates, hangouts, or anything for a few weeks after that. I had to get my emotions in line about Brad before I tried again. It was only fair for whoever I shared my time with.

Keith wasn't happy about my decision to back away from him, but he understood. It didn't take long for him to find someone to replace me though. And I couldn't lie, I was a little jealous of her. When I saw their pictures and how great they looked together—and how sure she was of him—I rerouted my jealousy and put all of my energy into school and work.

That was all I had time for those following weeks. Julisa and I went out to the lounge and did karaoke a few times, but things just didn't feel the same. The feeling I got when Brad

was there to watch me on my birthday was what I compared everything to. I felt myself starting to go a little crazy after a while, but even still, I refused to reach out to him. At least, not until I was ready.

“Have you talked to Brad at all?” Julisa asked one night over dinner.

“A few weeks ago. We ran into each other in the coffee shop, and he apologized. But I wasn’t in the right space to accept it then.”

“And that’s perfectly fine. You don’t have to accept anything outside of your own timing. What Brad did was really messed up, it’s natural to feel afraid to try again with him. And don’t let him pressure you into anything either.”

“I know.” I chuckled. “I think I hurt his feelings the last time we spoke. Keith came to pick me up in the middle of his apology, and I kind of walked out on him.”

Julisa laughed. She felt bad for Brad, but she also felt like my sternness with him was his own karma for playing with my emotions. We both knew Brad was a good guy underneath all the fear layered on top of him, he just didn’t know how to remove the layers.

“Brad’s not such a bad guy,” she said. “It sucks that it’s taken him so long to learn how to navigate through his own emotions, but he’ll get there.”

“Do you think it’s worth the wait though?” I asked.

Julisa sat quietly for a moment. I knew she couldn't make that decision for me, but her insight was one I had always respected and trusted. She never steered me wrong. Even when my own mother couldn't find the words to guide me, Julisa always shed the best light.

“Honestly, I think he's teachable,” she said. “He learns pretty quickly, and I can see he really does care about you. So, yeah. I think it would be worth it.”

One week later, I got a text from Brad. An entire month had passed since I'd last heard from him and I was a little excited to see his name pop up on my phone. After so much time apart, I felt a little refreshed to him, like he was someone new or had turned over a new leaf. He said he'd been going to therapy and working through his past issues, and it showed. He even told me about the fight he had with his best friend the night after the coffee shop.

“That's terrible, Brad. You shouldn't be fighting with the people you love about our issues. No one put a gun to your head and made you accept the bet.”

“I know.” He laughed. “I was out of my mind that night and just looking for someone to blame other than myself. I've been learning how to take more accountability for my actions these days and just remember that it's okay to make mistakes. As long as I learn from them.”

I was highly impressed with Brad's new outlook on life. Especially love. He was more open and expressive. More attentive and carefree about outcomes. All in all, he felt free of

the burdens that had kept him bound to being toxic. I was proud of him.

“Well, you sound as if you’re doing very well these days. I’m happy for you and all the work you’ve put in. Doesn’t it feel great to be able to express yourself freely in love?”

“I haven’t gotten that far just yet,” he said. “I’m still single. Just taking things day by day.”

I was sure that Brad would have found some other woman to keep him company. He’d been in and out of the country over the past month for work events and award shows, so I figured he would have met someone new and put his work to the test. I was surprised to hear that he was still a free agent looking for love.

“Wow, that’s...surprising to hear,” I said. “I guess staying single until you’re completely healed is a good thing. I had to learn that too, over this past month. I think I’m pretty adept at it now. I’ve been taking time to myself to just work and focus on my happiness as an individual. I think I’ve found that again.”

“Me too,” he agreed. “I’m always going to want my happiness to be with you, though.”

I felt butterflies in my belly. The same ones I’d felt the first night we met. Brad didn’t let me get a word in afterward. He asked me out for dinner and said we could talk about it more then. I was hesitant to accept the invitation, because I didn’t want us to rush into anything, but he insisted we could start

over on a completely new slate. He wanted to show me the real him. No holds barred.

When I got to dinner that night, Brad had closed down the entire restaurant for the two of us. I would have preferred to have dinner in a crowded room, but the intimacy of it all was nice, so I didn't complain. On top of that, he had my favorite flowers all around and a chilled bottle of champagne for me to taste test.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "I know it may not be what you expected to walk into, I just wanted to make this night special. In case it's our last night."

Over dinner, Brad was a completely different man. He listened more intently, instead of suggesting things or being that older guy who felt the need to direct me because he was older. He was more open about his feelings and the things he wanted. He even let me do the honors of ordering our entrees that night.

"You know I don't have to be in charge of ordering your food, right?" I laughed a little. "I don't want to be in control of anything at all."

"I know," he replied. "I'm just trying to get into the groove of trying new things. You know, letting my guard down. Besides, I trust you."

The longer our night went on, the more open I became to Brad again. Once we got past the newness of things, I felt more content being in his presence. I felt like we were on a great path and could really make something out of ourselves

together. As long as his new way of thinking wasn't just a momentary arrangement to get back into my good graces.

“What finally did it for you?” I asked. “Like, what was the turning point—the thing that made you really wanna dig deep and gather all of this courage?”

“You,” he said, simple and plain. “I realized what I lost, and I couldn't live with that. Of course, I told myself, if I have to, I'll figure out how to move on. But I do wanna put my best foot forward. In everything. Regardless of who I end up with, I wanna be the best man I can be and not have to think twice about it. It's really opened some new doors for me in all other aspects of my life as well.”

Hearing that made the ambiance of the dinner so much more peaceful, yet intense. I saw the new fire in Brad's eyes; he really wanted to be a changed man. He even talked about getting married and starting a family someday. That was something he made very clear in the beginning, that he hadn't thought about before.

By the end of dinner, I felt a lot better about Brad and his intentions. He wasn't forceful or too apologetic about our starting point. Instead, he focused on moving forward and what we had the possibility of building. And I had no objections about it.

After dinner, instead of going home that night, I decided to accompany Brad for some drinks at his place. Going in, I knew there was a possibility for us to end up in bed together, and I was okay with that. It had been a long time since I had

felt a man's intimate touch, and I missed it. Especially with Brad.

"Things look different in here," I said, taking a seat at the bar in his home.

"I did a little redecorating over the past couple of months. I needed something new to match the new me."

I liked the new setup he had going on. It was more vibrant and livelier. There was more peace and happiness surrounding all the things he had inside, and I felt good being there. After he made us a few drinks, we took our conversation out by the pool. He knew it was my favorite place to be in the whole world—the water—so that was where we sat.

"So, you said you aren't dating anyone right now, right?" he asked.

"That's right." I chuckled. "I'm not trying to rush into anything. I'm enjoying the freedom I have right now. If love comes knocking for me, I may answer. If not"—I shrugged—"I'll be happy either way."

The small ripples of water on my feet made me feel even more at peace while I spoke my mind. I felt completely content and settled. Even though Brad and I were still not an item, there was a sense of understanding there between us. Something that let us both know where we stood with each other. He knew I loved him, and I knew he loved me. But there was no rush.

“Do you still think about getting married?” he asked. “I hope I didn’t ruin dating for you too much.”

“You didn’t ruin dating for me.” I chuckled. “I’m just more cautious about who I open up to and how much. I take my time with things now and don’t let myself get caught up in the hype of love too soon. But yes, I do still want to get married and have a family of my own someday. I don’t think I will ever let anyone take wanting that away from me.”

He smiled and nodded his head as he looked out over the water. Brad looked as if he had something up his sleeve, and I was a little nervous about what it could be. He talked a lot about marriage and wanting kids that night. Especially when he talked about how happy he saw his friends to be in their own marriages. When he told me that Miranda was dating his sister though, I was very shocked.

“Really?” I gasped. “How did that happen?”

“I have no idea!” He laughed. “My sister and I were on bad terms for years and, one day, she just came around to mend things and the next thing I know, she and Miranda are dating. They look happy, so I’m happy for them.”

His conversations about dating seemed to make him full of life that night. When he thought about being in love again and sharing all the things he once shared with the woman he loved, he was just thrilled. After we finished our drinks and the clock struck twelve, Brad asked me if I was ready to be driven home. To be honest, I wasn’t. I was ready to be taken to his bedroom and be driven insane by his kisses and caress.

“Let’s go upstairs.” I spoke through lust-filled eyes. “I have something to show you.”

He let me lead the way and choose whichever room I had a taste for. I chose his upstairs office. It had a fireplace and a great view of the full moon that night. Once we were inside and the lights went dim, I started to undress in front of the window and commanded Brad to do the same.

His body glittered under the moonlight, making him look like some sort of statue of a Greek god. The ripples and bulges in his muscles turned me on even more than his new attitude that night, and I couldn’t get enough of it. The minute his hands caressed my skin, I shivered under his touch. It had been so long since I’d felt this, I thought I might have an orgasm before he even filled me up.

My mouth opened, letting his tongue invade. As Brad caressed my throbbing flesh, I gasped. He pulled my hair gently to expose my neck and nibbled on it. I let out a moan as a wave of excitement coursed through my body. I yelled Brad’s name lustfully.

Having felt so much moisture already, he quickly lowered his head to admire my glistening folds. He spread my legs and devoured my flesh with his tongue until I had an orgasm. I turned around so that he could bend me over his desk and enter me from behind. Squeezing my butt, he pushed his cock inside of me.

After a gentle start, he began pounding more intensely each time, fucking me mercilessly. Then he hissed, “I missed you so

much, baby.” The feeling of his hands on my breasts while he filled me up felt like heaven. When his hand gently gripped my neck and his lips tasted the back of my neck, I could feel all the love Brad had for me. It was even more intense than it had been the first time around. Hotter, stickier, more passionate. As I felt his cum run out of me and ooze down both of our legs, I wondered what this meant for us.

When we were finished, the air was silent between us. We stood at his desk, the fire from the fireplace flickering on our skin, and just held each other. It felt good to be naked with him again. I couldn't explain it, but there was something about being completely pure with him.

“Did you enjoy your night tonight, Zo?” he asked.

“I did,” I said. “We should do this again sometime.”

“We can do this every day if you want. I'll make all the time in the world for you. For us.”

His voice was low, subtle, and full of happiness. His hands too. Brad could barely keep them off me that night. When the time for me to go home came around, he made sure he let me know how much he loved me and how much he hoped I would give him another chance to prove it to me. And I agreed to let him.



Chapter Eighteen

Brad

Julisa started working at the company and *wow!* Her presence there really made a huge difference in a lot of areas. Not only did she quickly become one of my best content creators, but she also helped me organize a lot of my own schedules and plannings as well. It was hard to place her in any specific area—because she was great at everything—but we made it work. And everyone on the team loved her. Especially Miranda.

We had started working on a new game while Zoey and I were still on the outs and that turned into something amazing. Once we finished our demo and sent it over to a few eager reviewers, our nerves were shot waiting for the results. The only thing that kept me at bay during that time was going steady with Zoey.

“Finally got your girl back, huh?” Julisa asked one day while we were taking a lunch break.

“Yeah.” I laughed. “We aren’t really giving ourselves a title, just going steady I guess. It feels like we’re back where we once were though. Feels nice.”

“Good.” She nodded. “That’s how it should be. Just don’t do anything to mess it up, because I don’t think she can handle another round of heartbreak from you.”

I didn’t plan on doing anything to mess up what I had going on with Zoey. She meant too much to me. In fact, marriage had been on my mind a lot after we started to work on our relationship. I knew I wanted to make her my wife, but I was afraid to ask. The thought of her rejecting my proposal made me so sick with nervousness, so I put off buying a ring until I felt like I knew for sure she would say yes. It didn’t stop me from getting Julisa’s input on it though.

“What do you think about marriage?” I asked.

“Marriage?” She frowned. “What about it? Are you thinking of asking Zoey?”

For a moment, I didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure how Julisa would take it, but then I thought to hell with it. I wanted to marry her best friend, and I wanted to shout it from the rooftops of every building in the vicinity.

“Yeah.” I nodded and looked her directly in the eyes. “Yeah, I am. What do you think about that?”

The sternness in my voice made her smile because she could tell I was serious, and she was proud of me for being that stand-up guy. It was the first time in my life—well,

second, if you count my career—that I was more than sure about something. And I was sure. I wanted to marry Zoey.

“I say go for it!” She clapped. “Wow! Finally, the big man on campus is going after what he wants full-fledged. Wow, man, that’s great. I know she’ll be excited to hear your proposal. You have my blessing.”

The following week, I left the country to launch the new game Julisa and I had made. She came along with me to promote and stream with some of the world’s greatest gamers, and we really had a blast. While we waited for our deals to be finalized, I decided to go and shop around for a nice engagement ring for Zoey, something I needed Julisa’s help with.

“Zoey isn’t a flashy-flashy girl. She likes subtle and sweet. Something that makes her *feel* important, rather than show she’s important. You know?”

I knew exactly what she meant because my sister was the same way. She didn’t care how much money we had or how many nice things she was able to buy, what made her happy were the little things.

“So, something sweet and comfortable? Something that reminds her of something she really loves.”

It took me couple of days, but I finally came up with something. I had a custom ring made while we were in Italy. Something that symbolized family, friendship, love, and also music. I knew how much Zoey loved to sing, so I wanted the ring to represent all of that.

Julisa and I signed two major deals while we were in Italy. Julisa even made a few negotiations to create her own games and launch her own brand after a while, and I was happy for her. There were no contracts signed between her and I, so she was free to do whatever she pleased with her business. I was just there to help her, the same way she had helped me.

When we got back to the states, I surprised Zoey with another romantic dinner that night. I planned to propose to her, the same way Julisa and I had practiced on the flight back, but I was nervous. It didn't matter how much I practiced asking her to marry me, it just wasn't easy. I was eager, but I wanted it to be perfect—something she would never forget. Something that she couldn't refuse or back away from.

“Just relax and breathe. She's gonna love this.”

Julisa lectured me while we waited for Zoey to arrive. Zoey's family was there, and their closest friends. My family and friends were there as well, though no one knew what was going on. My family and friends were all under the impression that we had come together to celebrate another huge deal of mine. While Zoey's family and friends thought we were celebrating Zoey passing all of her classes.

“Am I making the right decision?” I asked. “Tell me I'm making the right choice.”

“You're making the right choice,” Julisa said, while fixing my tie. “Zoey's a great catch and this is something you've been wanting since the first day you two met. Besides, it's kind of too late to back out now. Everyone's already here and

you already have the ring. Don't second guess it too much. Just go for it. She's gonna say yes. I know she is."

Everyone took their seats in the restaurant just before Zoey arrived. Her parents looked confused as to what was going on, but they were happy to be there to celebrate with her. I had set up a surprise dress fitting for Zoey that evening, because I wanted her to be the best dressed and not have to worry about her hair or makeup either. Even Zoey was surprised when she got there and saw everyone sitting at their tables.

"What's all this?" she asked Julisa, as she met her at the front door. "Why is everyone here?"

Julisa only smiled and took Zoey by the hand to lead her over to me. I stood up at my chair and waited for her to get closer, the entire time feeling like I would keel over and start puking.

"Brad will tell you everything," Julisa said. "Just sit down, have a drink, and enjoy the evening."

Julisa took her seat at the table with Zoey's family, while Zoey and I took the king and queen table in the middle of the room. Everyone already had their drinks and appetizers brought over to them, the only thing left for me to do was to get Zoey relaxed.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"It was good. What's going on, Brad? Why is everyone here?"

She sounded ecstatic to see everyone in the same place, but she also sounded nervous. I guess a woman's intuition knew when something was up. She kept glancing around from table to table, taking in the fact that everyone was smiling and seemed to be in their own little worlds, all in celebration of us.

“Just relax, babe.” I chuckled and took a sip from my wine glass. “We're all here tonight to have a good time. Enjoy a nice meal—as a family—and just, you know...have a good time.”

“How did you even get my family to agree to come?” She laughed a little.

“Oh, that was all Julisa. I think she told them we were celebrating you passing all your classes. But I think by now they know something else is up.”

“What do you mean something else is up?”

In the midst of her question, I stood up to address everyone in the room. I was tired of the anticipation and keeping everyone else waiting for the big event, so I took it upon myself to start my surprise early. Besides, it was better to have an answer early on before everyone wasted their time finishing dinner.

“Ladies and gentleman...” I cleared my throat as I got everyone's attention. “I know you're all under the impression that we're here for reasons other than the real reason we're here. And I'm sorry for having to trick you.” I chuckled. “The real reason we're here tonight is that I wanna make my life whole. Zoey and I have been going steady for a while now and

I've never been happier. She makes me laugh, she makes me smile, she makes me think before I act. She changed my life. So, without taking up too much more of everyone's time..."

When I reached into my pocket and removed the ring box, I could hear everyone in the room take a deep breath. Even Zoey. She had tears in her eyes from the moment I started my speech, and I couldn't get to the ring fast enough.

"Zoey Prescott...will you do me the biggest honor and marry me?"

I could barely get my question out before she said yes, and it was the most relieving feeling I had ever felt. Her kiss sealed the deal for me. It felt ten times better than it had before, like we were officially a couple. A married couple.



Zoey

Brad's proposal was beautiful. He had everyone standing to their feet cheering and blushing for us. Everyone except my mom. Even my dad and brother were happy for me, so I didn't understand why she couldn't at least pretend to put on a smile.

“Should we uh, go over and say something to your parents?” Brad asked. “Your mom doesn’t look too happy about my folks getting all the attention.”

I knew he was joking about the attention part. He knew why she didn’t look amused, and I figured if we didn’t go over and smooth things out with her, soon everyone else at the dinner would know too.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “Get ready for her to bring the heat.”

My dad gave me a big, long hug when we approached their table. My brother too. It never mattered what went on in my life to those two guys, they loved me no matter what. It was my mom who had the most to say.

“Mom.” She would barely look at me, or Brad. “This is Brad. I know he hasn’t had the chance to properly meet you and Dad, but that’s something we can work on.”

She shot a cold eye at me, and then down to my engagement ring. When she saw how large and iced-out it was, I felt her energy change.

“Why do you want to marry this man?” she asked, her accent as heavy as the rock on my hand. “He makes you cry and fight with your best friend. You think because he throws money around the place, he owns you?”

“Mom, Brad isn’t like that. He’s a great guy. The way things started between us weren’t the best, but we’ve come to fix the issue and try for a real life together. He’s the man I love.”

I saw a bit of hesitation in her gaze between Brad and me. But, for the first time in a long time, I saw some compassion in her eyes too. I was afraid to believe I saw what I saw, but when she reached her hand out to shake Brad's, I felt secure enough to believe my eyes. And so did he.

“Nice to meet you. And I promise you, I will do right by your daughter. I love her.”

The weeks leading up to the wedding were so stressful. Luckily enough for me, I finished my courses early and had the extra free time, but getting everything together was such a pain. My mom helped me every step of the way. Julisa too. However, they bickered over decorations and colors schemes more than I did, as if they were the ones getting married.

Brad wanted this gorgeous, grand wedding, while I was fine with just a small reception. But when I saw 3D animations of what the wedding planner had put together, I was really taken aback. The setup was one of the most gorgeous things I had ever seen in my life. My dress was a close second. It was a custom made Oscar de la Renta with real diamonds sewn onto it. It was such a beautiful dress, I told myself I would wear it even after my wedding.

“Are you ready for your big day?” My mom was staying in the hotel room with me the day before the wedding. “There's no turning back from here. Once you accept that ring and take that leap, you're bonding and becoming one with this man. It's a big responsibility, Zoey. I don't want you taking on more than you can handle.”

“I know, Mom. I’m ready to marry Brad. I believe I was from the first day we met. We had our issues in the beginning, but he’s changed. I see it, I feel it—he shows me every day. Never once did he stop trying to prove it when we were broken up.”

My mom looked afraid for me. I understood it though. I was her daughter—her only daughter—and she didn’t want me going through the same things she’d gone through in her life.

“Okay.” She hugged me. “As long as you are happy and safe, I can accept and give my daughter to him. I don’t want to”—she chuckled—“because you’re my baby, but as long as you’re happy.”

I hugged my mom for a while that evening. It felt like years had passed since we’d last hugged each other the way we did. It was what we needed to bring us closer together. I sure felt a lot closer to her. Either that or my nerves were shot from racking my brain about the turnout of our wedding. But when the sun rose the next morning and I still felt close to my mom, I knew we had connected the missing pieces again.

“Today is the day!” She smiled, thrilled that I was getting married.

“It is,” I said, feeling a little queasy. “Today is the day.”

I didn’t know why I felt so nervous. I knew I loved Brad and wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, so why was my brain questioning it? I jumped from the bed and ran off to the bathroom feeling sick. I wasn’t ready.



Chapter Nineteen

Brad

“**F**inally settling down, huh?”

Justin, my best man, walked into my fitting room to congratulate me again. He looked great in his suit that morning, even though he was worried about his belly being too big for his jacket.

“How’s it feel?” he asked.

“Honestly, it feels great. I thought I would get cold feet and change my mind at the last minute, but I’m ready to do this. I knew I was ready the moment I met her.”

Zoey gave me a different feeling, a feeling of comfort and wholeness. Most men would have probably been a nervous wreck on their wedding day, but not me. I was eager to place my ring on her finger and make her my wife forever.

“You’re an insane man, Bradley Harris. The only man I know who’s actually excited to get married,” Josh teased. “I

guess that's why we've been friends for so long."

Justin and I never spoke about the fight we had over Zoey. He knew I meant no real harm, I'd just been upset and hurting because I thought I'd lost my good thing. It was his words that really pushed me over the edge to get her back and, for that, I made him my best man.

While I waited at the altar for Zoey to take the aisle, I looked out at everyone in attendance. They were all so beautiful, and happy for Zoey and I. Before I'd ever thought of getting married myself, I always thought a huge wedding was a waste. But looking out at everyone, I realized they made the day ten times as special. Having everyone who cared about us and our well-being there to celebrate as I tied the knot with the love of my life...felt amazing.

When I saw Zoey standing at the beginning of the aisle, I froze. Her dress made her look angelic and unreal. So much so, I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Everything moved in slow motion as she made her way down to take my hand in marriage. My eyes were stuck, focusing on her the whole way. When she finally made it up to me, that was when my tears fell, and everyone cheered because they couldn't believe it.

After accepting my hand for life, Zoey and I sealed our fate with the softest kiss. Being married was a very different feeling. I'd thought it would feel the same as just being in a relationship, but it didn't. It was more than that; I really felt

like we'd become one. It was as if there was this imaginary lace that was suddenly tied inside me.

“Was this everything you ever dreamed it would be?” I asked Zoey, once we finally had a moment to ourselves.

“It was. Though, I would've never thought my mom would be as open as she is to me getting married to anyone. I'm not sure what you did to her, but I guess she trusts you.”



Zoey

Brad took me to three countries for our honeymoon. It lasted an entire month and I got to do whatever I pleased. We went to Japan and Russia, then ended our last week in Paris. It was the most amazing adventure I had ever been on in my whole life, and he promised to take me on more.

“Now that we're married,” he said, “anything you ask for, anything you desire, you just tell me and it's yours.”

Over that entire honeymoon month, Brad made good on his promise too. Of course, I didn't ask for much. Ice cream, teddy bears, quality time. Little things made me the happiest. I think that's why Brad was always so willing to give me the world.

When we got back home, all of my things were moved into Brad's place. We were really starting our life together, and I couldn't have been happier. I knew adjusting to living with anyone other than Julisa would be a challenge, but I was up for it. Brad was my husband.

"I can't believe we're actually married," I said. "When I think about how far we've come, I'm always so amazed."

"So am I," he replied. "I actually thought you would turn me down when I asked. I figured I had done so much wrong, you'd tell me no."

"I don't think I could ever tell you no. I know I did a few times while we were broken up, but there were so many times that I wanted to just pick up the phone and call. I always held myself back though. You had to learn your lesson. And you did. And now, here we are."

Every Friday after the honeymoon, Brad and I made time to go out for a nice dinner. And every Friday—without fail—he bought me a gift to remind me how much I meant to him. That night, however, I felt sick again. There were days when I would randomly feel sick to my stomach after eating something. I had been so busy getting our house together after the honeymoon though, I didn't have time to go to the doctor.

"Sorry for ruining dinner tonight." I climbed into bed with Brad after taking a hot shower to relax myself. "I think I might be working myself too hard these days."

"I keep telling you that." He chuckled and pulled me close to him. "You know we can hire people to come in and

decorate. You don't have to do everything by yourself.”

“I know, that's why you should help me. This is our home. I don't want some stranger coming in here telling us how to live.”

At times, I felt like Brad was too privileged. He was always ready to pay someone else to do something that I felt was intimate and personal. That was one of my biggest pet peeves with him. Most times, I didn't really know how to address it so I went along with it. But having a stranger decorate our home was where I drew the line.



Brad

The following week, Julisa and I flew to Granada to promote and launch another game we shared. Zoey and I had been going back and forth about who would decorate the house, and I was over it. I knew there would be times where my wife and I wouldn't agree to everything, but I hadn't thought home décor would be one of those things.

“How's the married life treating you?” Julisa asked, while we sat at a nice restaurant for dinner our first night there.

“Man,” I scoffed. “I have never needed a drink as badly as I do now. I don’t know, it’s like her hormones completely changed after getting married. We’ve been arguing for a full week about decorating the house. She wants us to do it alone but come on, that’s a huge house. There’s no way we’ll be able to do something like that alone. I mean, we can, but do you know how long that would take? With us bickering and disagreeing on everything?”

“Wow.” Julisa raised her eyebrows and laughed. “I guess you do need a drink.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

Over dinner, I decompressed. It felt good to be able to get things off my chest with someone who knew Zoey, because I knew I would get the best feedback on how to handle my wife and her newfound temper tantrums.

“Maybe she’s pregnant.”

Julisa’s assumption took my breath away. So much so, I nearly choked on my drink. Zoey being pregnant had never even crossed my mind until Julisa cracked a joke about it. It made sense though. She had been getting sick, and her hormones were all over the place. Some days, she even ate tons of food like a pregnant woman. Just the thought of it made me happy.

“Maybe she is,” I said. “She has been very emotional lately. That has to be it.”

When we got home the following week, Zoey was still on a rampage about the house. I never addressed my concerns to her—about her being pregnant—instead, I did whatever I could to make things easier for her. Everything except decorate the house.

“Brad!”

One day, while working from my home office, Zoey shouted bloody murder from the bathroom. I thought maybe a bug or something had gotten in while she was taking a shower, but that wasn't it at all. That afternoon was when we found out Zoey was indeed pregnant. And had been for almost two months.

“That would explain the rage and hunger I've been feeling lately,” she said on the drive home from the doctor. “Wow, I'm sorry. I know I must have been terrible to you these past few weeks.”

She had been, but I didn't tell her that. I was too afraid to risk sending her on another rampage while I was behind the wheel. The weeks following, I made sure I stayed home as much as I could to help Zoey prepare for the baby. Her mother came over a lot too. She was so excited to become a grandmother that her whole entire demeanor changed for the better.

One day, while Zoey's mom and I were out doing some shopping, she expressed all of her concerns to me about the baby. She wanted to be sure that Zoey and I were actually

ready for a baby—together. Our age difference was still a challenge for her, but she did put forth her best foot.

“Did you two plan this, for a baby?” she asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “We didn’t know she was pregnant at all. I’m happy she is though.”

“So am I. I can admit, I was worried about this marriage in the beginning, but you two have really proved me wrong. I want to thank you for everything you do for my daughter and our family. You changed my mind about letting her be with you.”

I didn’t think she “let” Zoey be with me, but I understood what she meant. I had her blessing to be with her daughter. Zoey’s father’s blessing too. Zoey’s family and I had gotten extremely close over the pregnancy. They shared holidays with us and my family, and I loved when they did because her mother’s cooking was phenomenal.

The woman even planned and executed our whole baby shower herself. She did a great job too. Unlike our wedding, we wanted the baby shower to be something private for just our families. Of course, we invited our closest friends, but it didn’t go beyond that. Another thing we kept a secret—even from ourselves—was the gender of our baby. We wanted that to be a shock for the world to see.

“Are you sure you don’t want to know the gender?”

Our doctor playfully tried to pressure us over our last appointment, but we were adamant about keeping it a secret. I

wanted a boy, and so did Zoey. I hoped and prayed every night for a boy, even though if we had a girl we knew we would love her just the same as we would love a boy.

Zoey's water broke the following week. We were out doing some last-minute shopping for our baby room, and I guess all the walking we did took a toll on her body. I was so freaked out by all the water I saw shooting from her, I nearly fainted. Good thing her mother was there and knew exactly what to do for the both of us.

Thirty-six hours later, we introduced the world to our baby girl, Zara Bradley Harris. And I couldn't have been more in love. She looked exactly like Zoey when she was a baby, though she had my eyes and large smile. After she was born and ready to be brought home, our families came together again to celebrate her life and what was to come.

Things were amazing between Zoey and me. Once our baby was home and started to take up all of our time, Zoey finally agreed to hire home decorators to finish the decorating. It was one of the sweetest moments of our marriage, in my opinion.

We homeschooled Zara up until she was five years old and ready to go to primary school. I wanted her to continue being homeschooled, but she and Zoey insisted she needed the experience of being around other children, and slowly, I found myself agreeing. I thought about how important my friends were to me and wanted my daughter to create the same bonds with people she liked.

Elementary school was a breeze for her. She was placed in advanced classes and even got to start middle school two years earlier than she was supposed to. Zara took after both Zoey and me with her smarts. She loved to learn new things. She thought outside the box and was heavily into inventing, writing, and experimenting. I was one proud father.

Zoey and I kept our Friday night dinner dates throughout the years. Her mother and mine were our designated babysitters on those nights. Those two had grown exceptionally close over the years as well. They were always hanging out, shopping, playing bingo, and whatever else women their age enjoyed. Her mother even bought my mom a friendship ring for her birthday one year. She said my mom was like the sister she'd never had.

“Can you believe we’ve been married for twelve years already?” Zoey asked.

“And many more to come,” I replied. “Can you believe we have a child? That amazes me every day.”

“I can.” Zoey smiled at me. “I always knew you would be the best father. Even though you said you never knew if you wanted kids or not. Guys like you are usually the guys who make the best dads. And Zara loves the ground you walk on. Probably even more than she loves me.”

My daughter did love me an awful lot. She loved her mother too—that was a given—but she adored me. I was honestly shocked that a child could ever love me as much as my daughter loved me. Or maybe I was just paranoid and

overthinking the experience of being a father. I felt like I had to be perfect. I felt like I had to get everything right, but at the end of the day, Zara showed me the only thing I had to do was be present.

“She loves you too.” I chuckled. “And so do I. I thank you for sharing your life with me. For giving me such a beautiful daughter and never giving up on our love. I know at times we don’t always agree, but we never give up. So, to many more years to come.” I raised my glass.

“For many more years to come.” She smiled.



The End

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