



ABANDON

a jilted bride romance

ships

KARIGAN HALE

ABANDON

a jilted bride romance

Sheep

KARIGAN HALE

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Also by Karigan Hale](#)

[Stay Connected!](#)

[About Karigan Hale](#)

Abandon Ship

Copyright © 2022 by Karigan Hale

All rights reserved.

All rights reserved worldwide.

No part of this book may be reproduced, copied, or transmitted in any medium, whether electronic, internet or otherwise, without the expressed permission of the author. This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, locations, and names occurring in this book are the product of the author's imagination or are the property of their respective owners and are used fictitiously. Any resemblances to actual events, locations, or persons (living or dead), are entirely coincidental and not intended by the author. All trademarks and trade names are used in a fictitious manner and are in no way endorsed by or an endorsement of their respective owners.

May contain sexual situations, violence, sensitive and offensive language, and mature topics.

Recommended for age 18 years and up.

Cover Design © [KiWi Cover Design Co.](#)

Formatting: [Indie Pen PR](#)


Editing: [My Notes in the Margin](#)

Proofreading: Yvette Deon

Beta Reader: Kate Elspeth

Series Managed by: [Indie Pen PR](#)

PRINT ISBN Number:

 Created with Vellum

ABANDON SHIP BLURB

A jilted bride with trust issues. A disgraced photographer with something to prove. A Love at Sea cruise determined to distract them both.

Abby:

Instead of walking down the aisle, my fiancé walked out the door. So I'm taking our honeymoon cruise without him. I'll enjoy seven perfect days of endless margaritas, pristine beaches, and island excursions even more with my best friend instead. What I need is a complete break from ANYTHING akin to romance. Complete break. That includes the tempting Grayson Hamilton, I remind myself. No matter how much of a crush I had on him back in high school. No matter how lickable his abs turned out to be. I AM ON A BREAK!

Grayson:

Scoring my dream job with the industry's leading travel magazine was a lucky break. Unfortunately, I'm just about out of luck. This all-expenses-paid cruise my employer sent me on is my last chance to save my reputation. I have to stay focused despite all the beautiful, single women on this Love at Sea cruise. Yep. Focused. Focused on my job. NOT on my best friend's little sister, all grown up and smoking hot, looking like she needs someone to help her get over her freshly broken heart. On second thought, maybe a little distraction couldn't hurt. Maybe an offer of a no-strings-attached rebound will help get her out of my system. Then I can concentrate on saving my career before we both Abandon Ship.

Abandon Ship is a jilted bride romance, part of the Love at Sea multi-author series. Get ready to set sail through the Caribbean on Festival Cruises' most alluring voyage with eight of your favorite authors - happily ever after guaranteed!

Experience everything the Love at Sea series has to offer. From speed dating to masquerades, guests are sure to enjoy the hot days and steamy nights. Explore hidden waterfalls, swim with dolphins, and watch as eight couples find their forever on the open ocean.

*To everyone who wishes Hallmark would get a little racy
sometimes...*

What? Only me?

ABANDON SHIP ON PINTEREST

Check out the *Abandon Ship* visual board on Pinterest [HERE](https://www.pinterest.com/kariganspencil/abandon-ship/):
<https://www.pinterest.com/kariganspencil/abandon-ship/>

CHAPTER ONE

ABBY



SOMETHING'S WRONG. I can sense it.

The centerpieces are perfectly placed. The groomsmen all made it to rehearsal despite being hungover. My bridesmaids are dotting and attentive. The flowers are gorgeous. The food is delicious. A perfect rehearsal for our perfect day tomorrow.

But under the shiny facade, something's wrong.

A tension in the air punctuated by too tight smiles, one-arm hugs, sliding eye contact. A shift signaled by a tug of his collar, one too many glasses of wine, a hesitation before touching me.

Oh yes, something is definitely wrong. I've known my fiancé—Carlton Dubois III, affectionately known as Trey—for over two years. I know his moods and his expressions. I know when he's holding back. I know.

But I pretend everything is fine because our rehearsal dinner should be another blisteringly happy moment to add to my Abigail Gets Married memory playlist.

He's just nervous. Or stressed. He wants everything to be perfect for me—for us—tomorrow. He doesn't want to worry me. He's tired. He's worked long hours lately so he can enjoy a few days off after the wedding.

So many plausible reasons for his aloofness dangle in front of me waiting to be plucked and then tucked away to laugh at later. We'll be celebrating our thirtieth anniversary and say, "Remember how nervous we were before the wedding? Remember how I thought something catastrophic was

coming?” Then we’ll laugh and kiss and look fondly at our kids and grandkids.

The promise of those plausible reasons does not quell the roiling dread in my stomach. My gut is telling me there’s something else. Something bigger. Something akin to when Juliet found out Romeo was a Montague. Or when Elizabeth Bennett discovered Darcy sabotaged her sister’s relationship.

Something life altering and insurmountable.

Of course, this could also be my sleep-deprived, wedding-planning-stressed brain having a Lady Macbeth level meltdown for no reason.

When the night is over, we ride in the car in silence. The sickly-sweet smell of the leftover rose centerpieces we shoved in the back doesn’t help my growing nausea. I look out the side window, down at the take-home food container in my lap, then out the windshield—anywhere but at him. I’m afraid of what I’ll see on his face.

As we near our townhouse, his hand on my leg lifts my spirits but only for a moment. He’s not touching me from affection but to stop it from jiggling. I’m practically shaking the whole car. As soon as I stop, Trey puts his hand back on the steering wheel. He doesn’t look at me.

I am about to burst. I’m like that girl in *Willy Wonka* who blows up like a blueberry, floating away on all the words I haven’t said. My grandfather always said, “Never ask a question you don’t really want the answer to.” And my gut is telling me I’m not going to like whatever Trey has to say.

On the other hand, my grandfather also claimed that allergies weren’t real; I just had to get used to poison ivy and coconut. So, there’s that.

I manage to stay tethered to the ground until we reach the house. Once we’re inside, out of earshot of our neighbors, I can’t take it any longer. I corner him in the kitchen, blocking the doorway so he can’t escape. But I can if I need to.

“Are we even going to talk about it?” I ask, my voice surlier than I intend. I twine my hands together in front of me

so he doesn't see them shaking.

“Talk about what?” He’s pretend-busy, moving things around on the counters. He puts the mugs we used for our morning coffee in the dishwasher, something he’s never done in his life. Oh yes, something is definitely rotten in the state of Abby and Trey.

I say, “About why you’re acting so weird.”

He continues to avoid looking at me and shrugs. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes. You do. You’ve been avoiding me all evening. We’re supposed to be a couple in love. A couple on the verge of wedded bliss. Instead, we look like we’re at the eighth-grade dance—awkwardly standing on opposite sides of the room. Every time I tried to touch you tonight, you flinched.”

He flicks his eyes to me then immediately away. But in that second, I see it all. Regret. Resolution. Rejection. He doesn’t want to do this. He doesn’t want to marry me.

I suck in a breath and drop into my chair at the kitchen table. “Oh god.”

He knows I know. He sits too, but on the opposite side of the table from me, knees angled away so there’s no possibility our legs will touch.

His sigh is bone deep and resigned when he ruins my life with four little words. “I can’t marry you.”

“Why?” I feel like Nick Carraway from *The Great Gatsby*: I am both within and without. I am floating above us, watching this tragic tableau. *Oh, look at the poor thing. She’s getting dumped the night before her wedding. What will everyone say? What will she do?*

I’m hoping the separation of body and mind increases.

He scrubs a hand over his face. “I’m just not ready. Marriage is for life. It means I’ll be doing the same thing with the same person every day for the rest of my life. And I feel like I have a lot more I want to do first.”

“What?” I can’t concentrate. Can’t make sense of his words. “You didn’t think of that when you asked me to marry you?”

“I guess it just seems more real now that we’re here. I mean, when I asked you, it was the next logical progression, right?” He checks the items off on his fingers. “We’d been together for over a year. We are compatible in bed and in conversation. We are nearing our thirties. All the other guys in my office are married. Our families like each other.”

I notice he doesn’t mention that he can’t imagine his life without me. That he wants to marry me because he loves me so much and wants to wake up next to me every day. Nope. I’ve simply met some criteria on a checklist. I feel my initial numbness and shock morphing into anger.

“And those are the only reasons you wanted to marry me?” I ask, not really wanting to hear the answer and fearing I already knew what he’ll say.

He shrugs. He fucking shrugs. Lifts one of his stupid broad shoulders and then drops it again. A simple everyday gesture that makes me second guess everything.

If that wasn’t bad enough, he says, “You can’t say you haven’t been having second thoughts, Abs. You barely helped with the wedding planning. I’ve had to do most of it. That tells me you weren’t really into it either. I’m doing us both a favor.”

Oh no, he didn’t. Forget hurt and humiliation, I am now Big Mad. “You wouldn’t let me help, you controlling, self-absorbed asshole. You took charge of everything! I wanted something small and intimate with close friends and family. You were the one who insisted on making it the event of the year and inviting everyone you’ve ever met. You were the one who wanted the lavish flowers and gold-rimmed place settings and fucking doves.”

“I had to make those decisions because you weren’t.”

“Don’t you dare gaslight me.” I stand and point an angry, shaking finger at him. I’m ready to flip the table. “I told you I’d prefer daisies and lilies. Simple and elegant. You vetoed

that and said it was too pedestrian, that we needed roses and ranunculus and orchids. I wanted to use our favorite books as centerpieces, but you don't have favorite books. You said books were more of an 'Abby thing' and our wedding should be about us. Well, what part of this wedding is about us? About me? Tell me that? 'Cause all I see is impersonal Instagram-worthy tableaux." My voice has risen a few decibels and a few octaves.

Ever aware of appearances, Trey gets up and closes the kitchen window. "Calm down, Abby. I'm not saying I never want to marry you. I just think we're rushing into things. We should take a little break to make sure this is really what we both want."

In the opposite of calming down, I slam my fist on the table so hard the saltshaker tips over. "Don't tell me to calm down. And don't tell me what I 'really' want. I wouldn't have said yes if this wasn't what I wanted. I certainly wouldn't have let it get this far." I slump down into the chair and drop my head in my hands. "How—how long have you felt this way?" I wish I could duct tape my mouth shut, then I would stop asking questions.

He shrugs again, and I'm about to really lose my shit. "A while. Listen, Abby, you're a great girl"—I huff in disbelief and wait for the but—"but I'm just not ready to get married. It's not you; it's me. I need more time to be free." He sits at the table and tries to take my hands, but I evade.

"Be free? Be free!" I'm standing again, leaning over the table into his smug, lying, annoyingly handsome face. "So, marrying me would be like prison? Marrying me would be like the end of your life. The worst possible thing. That's what you're saying right now? The night before our wedding?"

He stands too, tries to put his hands on my shoulders, but I shrink away again. "Don't be dramatic, Abby—"

"How dare you say that to me! I think if there is ever an excuse to be dramatic, it's this scenario. What the actual fuck, Trey? What am I supposed to tell my family? Our friends? My students? What am I supposed to do with two hundred small

jars of honey that say, ‘Abigail and Carlton are Meant to Bee?’” I ask.

I pace now, walking back and forth across the small space, literally wringing my hands. The more I think about what happens when I walk out of this room, the more I want a fissure to open in the ground and swallow me whole. Or better yet, swallow Trey whole. Better a missing groom than a rejected bride. Right?

Trey goes back to organizing our already organized counters. “It’s our life, Abby. We can tell them whatever we want. It’s no one’s business but ours.”

“Then why did you invite two hundred people to our wedding? You are the one who made it everyone’s business. And now you’re just calling it off because... because... because your dick wants more action?” I sputter.

He tries to hide his reddening face, but I notice. The blush creeps fast and deep up his neck, around his ears, and across his cheeks. Once again, I know. And once again, I wish I’d just kept my stupid mouth shut.

“You’re cheating on me,” I whisper when what I really want to do is scream. I point at him as he starts to turn. “If you fucking shrug your shoulder, I will absolutely lose it. Like a drugged-up celebrity in a Vegas hotel room kind of lose it. And don’t lie either. I deserve the truth.”

He doesn’t deny it, but he doesn’t outright admit it either. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs like he’s dealing with a toddler’s irrational emotions. “I needed to be sure we were right for each other. It wouldn’t be fair to you if I married you without being sure. It just sort of happened one night.”

“So, you cheated on me for my benefit.” I cannot even believe the bullshit coming out of his mouth right now. A mouth that spilled lies of love and devotion. A mouth that has tasted me all over. A mouth that has apparently been on other women.

A mouth I want to rearrange into a Picasso at the moment. I shove my hands in my skirt pocket to keep them from doing

just that.

“You’re twisting my words, Abby. Look. Here’s the bottom line.” He’s shifted into business mode now. Like he’s dealing with an unruly client and needs to set firm conclusions. “I can’t marry you tomorrow. I think we should take a break and see where we are a few months from now. Maybe we’ll both realize that this is exactly what we want. But I don’t want to resent you the rest of our lives because I didn’t give bachelorhood another shot.”

“Wow.” I sink back into my chair. “I am an idiot. I am such an idiot.” I can’t believe I actually didn’t see this coming. I’m starting to think everything we ever shared, every whispered “I love you,” was a lie. I rub my forehead, trying not to cry in front of him. “Well, I hope she’s worth all this. She better have a magic vagina for all the humiliation and hassle you’re putting us through.”

“At least I’m doing this today and not tomorrow or even worse, after the wedding.”

A derisive laugh explodes out of me on a wave of sarcasm. “Oh, thank you so much for your consideration. It’s really nice of you to not wait until the last possible minute. You know after we’ve ordered all the flowers and cake and decorations and photographer and centerpieces and favors and DJ and venue. Not to mention my dress.” A little whimper escapes my lips for the first time. I love my dress. Big L, cried tears as I put it on, goosebumps covering flesh, Love my dress. And now I’ll never wear it. The realization hits me like a tsunami.

I will never wear my dress. It has bad juju attached to it now. Hot, angry, frustrated tears stream down my face. I taste them, the salt tangy on my tongue, contrasting poetically with the sweetness of the rehearsal cake I ate less than an hour ago.

“Okay, Abby. I think you need some time to process this. I’ll tell my family if you tell yours. Maybe Jazz and Parker can call the guests,” he suggests.

At the mention of my maid of honor and Trey’s best man, my skin prickles. This is getting too real. I have to tell people.

I have to call my parents, my brother, and my friends. And telling other people will mean it's actually true.

I am not getting married tomorrow. I am not putting on my dress or walking down the aisle. I am not starting my life with someone I love and who I thought loved me back.

Trey's talking again. His traitorous mouth is moving, reminding me of more things he's snatching away from me. "I'll, uh, stay with Parker tonight. Give you some space. We can figure out living logistics tomorrow."

I blink at him. Right. We live together. Which at the time we moved in seemed convenient and rational but now just leveled-up this situation to apocalyptic. Fuck. My. Life.

No. Fuck Trey.

"I can't believe you're doing this," I say quietly.

He crosses to me, and to his small, infinitesimal credit, he does look pained and regretful. He reaches out a hand but pulls it back at the last second. Probably afraid I'll bite it off.

He's not wrong. I can't stand the thought of him touching me right now.

"I'm really so sorry, Abby. I let it get too far. But I don't regret one minute of us." His voice, soft and placating, is like fire ants on my skin.

He gives me one last regretful look, and then he's gone. He grabs a bag—a pre-packed bag—from beside the front door and walks out without another look behind him. He drops an atom bomb in my life and waltzes away like it's no big deal.

As soon as I hear the soft click of the front door, I scream all the obscenities I know. I call him every dirty name ever invented and a few new ones I think up on the spot.

When I've screamed myself out, I do the next rational thing—I track his cell phone. We shared our location with each other a long time ago. I've never thought to check it before, never had a reason to not trust him before.

"Working late my ass, you dick-brained coward," I say, stabbing at my phone like it's a Trey effigy, and I can cause

bruises remotely. When the app finally loads, I see that he's driving in the opposite direction from Parker's house. There are gas stations on that end of town, so I'll give him the benefit of the doubt for now.

I put my phone on the counter and cathartically crush the roses from the centerpieces into dust before dumping them in the trash. I've never been a fan of roses.

I then take his favorite coffee mug from where he's incorrectly put it in the dishwasher and, like an MLB pitcher, hurl it against the wall. It doesn't burst into a million pieces as I was hoping but breaks enough that he won't be able to use it again, so I'm satisfied. I leave the chunks scattered on the linoleum.

I check my phone. His car is stopped in a neighborhood. Not Parker's neighborhood. The street name sounds familiar, and although I can't quite place it, I know I've been there before.

As I walk upstairs to our bedroom, I wrack my brain, cycling through our mutual friends like a camera roll in my mind. I grab a handful of T-shirts from his drawer and walk over to the window, still unsure of when I was in that neighborhood.

It comes to me as I watch his shirts float satisfactorily onto the front lawn. Crystal Gibbons. His administrative assistant. How grossly cliché.

I rip several dress shirts from their hangers, buttons raining down like tears and chuck them out the window. Next comes his shoes and socks. I save the underwear for last so it's on top for everyone to see. I hope it storms tonight. I hope the skies open and dump rain and hail and snow and frogs—an absolute plague. I hope there is so much wind, his precious clothes fly all across the neighborhood, and he has to explain to everyone why his tights-whities are in their bushes.

Am I being dramatic? Am I my own version of cliché? Perhaps. But I don't go full Betty Broderick and burn his shit, so I'm sitting on the right side of sane. For now. Of course, if I

knew how to start the high-tech lawnmower Trey just had to have, his belongings would be in shreds right now.

Instead, I think about driving to Crystal's house and throwing bricks through her windows. I think about calling the police with an anonymous tip that she's running a meth lab in her basement. I think about calling Trey's mom and explaining to her in detail what a cheating, lying asshole her "perfect" son is. I think about cutting all his beloved ties in half.

I only do the last one. See how rational and calm I am?

When I feel like I can form words without my voice sounding like a hiccupping duck, I call my best friend.

"Hi, Jazz," I say when she picks up. "Are you busy? I need you."

She knows at once from my voice that something is wrong. "I'll be there in five minutes. With ice cream and chocolate."

"Thank you," I whisper and start to cry.

CHAPTER TWO



SIX MONTHS LATER - OCTOBER

THE HEART OF THE DEEP. She's unapologetically big. She's flashy and fun. She stays afloat no matter what life throws at her. Just like me. New me. Post life-explosion me.

Well, except that she's a ship. My ship for the next week. And I feel like we're going to be great friends.

"You hear that, Heart? You promise not to sink, and I promise not to throw up in the hallway. Tit for tat."

"Talking to the ship already?" my best friend, Jazz, says, coming up behind me. "You need this vacation more than I thought."

"Just setting some ground rules." I give Jazz a quick hug. She lets go of the rolling suitcase she's dragging beside her to throw her arms around me. I point at it. "You know you're supposed to leave your baggage at the drop-off. They bring it right to our room."

"I did." She looks to where I'm pointing. "Oh, this. I can't leave this. It has my laptop, make-up bag, third-date sexy-time undies, and my bathing suit. All the essentials."

I laugh and shake my head. "This isn't the airport. Our bags aren't going to end up in some other city. They are going from those bins straight to our rooms."

"Better safe than sorry." She pushes her sunglasses on top of her head to give me a once over. "You look good, Abby. How are you feeling about being here? Tell me the truth. I'll know if you don't."

Considering, I play with the strap of my purse before answering. She lets me process without interruption. I look from her expectant face, brown eyes full of concern, to the large red and white cruise ship, to the sign at the embarkation ramp "Love at Sea: Where Lovers Meet." The crowd around us hums with excitement and conversation. Couples hold hands and arms and waists. Groups of single girls discreetly

eye groups of guys, calling dibs, no doubt, on their potential conquests.

I wait for the pang of regret and longing, the jolt of pain and betrayal and anger, the sensation of ants crawling in, over, and under my skin. All the shit I'd been cycling through the last few months since Trey essentially left me at the altar. It's all still here, god dammit, but blissfully muted. The memories and emotions play through my body in dull monochrome instead of the technicolor I'd grown used to.

This trip is my honeymoon—was my honeymoon—should have been my honeymoon. I thought about just canceling it completely and eating the deposit. But my family and I had already lost a cruise ship full of money on the venue, my dress, the caterer, the flowers, the DJ, the cake, the wedding planner, and my post-jilting therapy.

So, fuck it. I changed Trey's name to Jasmine's, and we are off on a girl's trip. The groups of hungry-eyed singles give me renewed hope that coming on this trip was the right choice. Yes, the theme of the cruise is Love at Sea. But it is for couples *and* singles. And single I most certainly am.

Plus, if *Hallmark* is to be believed, I should meet a muscled but emotionally-stunted island tour guide in need of a quirky mainlander (me) to remind him that true love does exist. Then I can fulfill my lifelong dream of opening a used bookstore on the beach and calling my perfectly tanned future children back from the waves with a conch shell.

I breathe in deeply, inhaling the salty sea air. And immediately cough. Sea air isn't the only thing filling my lungs. It's mingled with exhaust from the ship, the underlying stench of dead fish, and body odor poorly masked by heavy cologne from all the people milling about in the New Orleans' afternoon heat.

Jasmine pats my back and shoves a bottle of water into it. "Abby? Talk to me girl."

I take a swig of the cool liquid and wave a hand. "I'm fine." I choke out another cough. "In all ways, I'm okay. This

is gonna be fun. It's been forever since we've gone anywhere just the two of us."

"Right?! We are long overdue for a girl's trip and some random, no-strings-attached, vacation ugly bumpin'." The girl next to us hoots and gives Jazz a high-five. She makes friends wherever she goes.

"Maybe for you. I'm still on a no more dicks ban," I remind her.

"That sounds like more of a punishment for you. How about no more dickheads ban? Actual dicks should still be on the table. Or under the table. Or in a cabana on the top deck." She bounces her eyebrows twice and looks around.

An overly friendly man dressed head to toe in Festival Cruise gear meanders through the crowd, welcoming people aboard in a heavy Mexican accent. He shakes hands, pats backs, exchanges fake smiles. I half expect him to start kissing babies.

Okay, no babies. This is an adult-only cruise. The point is to practice making babies not bring them on board.

He approaches us with a toothy grin I can't help but return. He takes my hand and Jazz's in each of his and kisses them in turn.

"Oh," Jazz says, fluttering her eyelashes. She's a sucker for romance.

"Hello, beautiful ladies. My name is Eduardo Montoya!" He stands and takes a step back. "Welcome to my cruise, prepare to dance!" He makes a fencing "on-guard" gesture that morphs into a paso doble stance.

"Oh," Jazz says again. This time out of surprise and confusion.

"It's a *Princess Bride* reference," I tell her.

"Right. I get it. I just don't get it," she mumbles to me.

Eduardo either doesn't hear or just ignores her comments. "I hope you *chicas bonitas* find everything your heart's desire on this journey. And please, let me know if I can help in any

way.” He winks and moves off to the next group of passengers.

I watch for a moment, transfixed, as he does his shtick with the next passengers until Jazz grabs my arm and points to a group of men huddled near the on-ramp. They are clearly eye fucking all the female passengers as they board.

She says, “They look ripe for the picking.”

“They look like assholes,” I muse, crinkling my nose.

“Exactly!” Jazz’s voice is bright and excited. “An asshole is just what you need. It gives you permission to be an asshole too. No strings attached. No pointless conversation. No getting to know you. Just hot, lusty cowgirl action.”

I laugh. “You’re crazy.”

She links her arm through mine, the one that isn’t wheeling her bag behind us, and steers us toward the ramp. “Swing your hips. Do not make eye contact. When we pass, toss your hair over your shoulder and smile at me.”

“You’re too good at this.”

“And you are out of practice. Do what I say,” she hisses through clenched teeth and a bright smile.

And why not? I am reinventing myself. I’m a ME not a WE. Since I’m no longer Asshole’s fiancée, I can be anything I want to be. I could be a recovering circus performer who left the big top for big adventure. I could be a famous yet reclusive novelist willing to show my face for the first time. I could be a rich German heiress just waiting on wire transfers from my father—oh wait, that’s already been done.

I could definitely be carefree and happy and not have people look at me like I’m going to crack with the slightest provocation. I can find myself again or become someone new or entwine the two together.

As we pass the group of oglers, I smile brightly and toss my hair, as Jazz instructed. Instead of looking cool and collected, I am momentarily blinded by the sun and miss the small step to the ramp, pitching me forward into the crowd.

“Oh!” I exclaim, tuning out the chuckles from the guys beside us.

“Shit, Abby. You okay?” Jazz asks, trying to grab my elbow to help steady me. She misses.

Luckily, my fall is broken by the person in front of us.

Unluckily, my nose ends up embedded in his ass crack. I grab his thighs to keep myself from sliding down his backside. He clenches his muscles in surprise, but that only makes my face smooch harder into his ass. I’m sucking in his khaki shorts instead of air, but if I let go, I will face-plant onto the gangway. So, I hold on until I can get my feet under me and pray I don’t pass out from lack of oxygen. I can imagine the headline: “Jilted Woman Suffocates in Man’s Ass on Love Cruise.”

Jazz grabs my arms and helps me to stand. I suck in air, trying not to gag on the exhaust.

“At least buy the man dinner first,” she quips.

The man I bumped into glances over his shoulder with a frown. I give him a sheepish smile and a finger wave. “Crowds, am I right?”

He nods, lips twitching, and turns back around, putting his earbud back in his ear. The gesture and the way his dark hair falls over his forehead slams me with déjà vu, but I can’t think of why. I shake off the feeling. I’m just too mired in memories today.

I can’t help but glance at his backside now that I’m at a distance to examine it. It looks damn good in the shorts he’s wearing. If I had to face plant into a butt today, I’m glad it was a nice one.

“Well, that’s one way to make an impression,” Jazz says, suppressing a laugh as we follow the slowly moving crowd up the ramp to board the ship. “I didn’t peg you for being into ass play. I guess what they say about school teachers is true.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Go on. Get it all out of your system so we never have to mention this again. Like ever.” I groan. “I’m so not good at this flirting thing. I’ll be your wingman

and live vicariously through your overly friendly vagina. Just put a sock on the door if you don't want me walking in."

Her eyes widen. "That's not a bad idea. I mean, the sock on the door is a little too obvious, but we should have a signal for when we need some alone time." She taps a manicured nail against her lips, thinking.

I wave my cell phone in front of her face. "We could just text each other. Something like, 'If you don't want to see my amazing tits bouncing on a stick, stay out of the room for an hour.'"

She laughs. "That's not quite as fun, but it works."

As we inch our way along the gangway to check-in, I can't help flicking my eyes back to the stranger in front of us. The sense of "I know him from somewhere" is very strong. A parent to one of my students? Another teacher or coach at the high school where I teach? Someone I've seen around town?

Jasmine's shrill squeal brings me out of my trip down memory lane—it was too foggy to see anything clearly anyway.

"Oooo, get a picture of me in front of the check-in booth. And I'll get one of you too." She shoves her phone into my hand and pretends to blow a kiss at the screen. I'm distracted by her over-the-top poses and trying to find the camera amongst her bazillion phone apps, so I miss the man's name as he checks in.

"Next please?" the woman at the check-in booth says with a forced smile. Her cheeks must hurt by the end of the day.

"Sorry," I say, handing over my passport to her and the phone to Jazz. Jazz does the same.

"Welcome aboard, Abigail Winters and Jasmine Bucolo. You will be in Sea Terrace 13090A."

Jazz squeals. "That's my favorite number!"

The cruise member doesn't lose her bright, customer service smile. She's like the guards at Buckingham Palace—

nothing shakes her. “Great.” She draws out the word. She goes through a rote welcome speech.

After she puts the electronic bracelet around my wrist—an atrocious looking, slide-adjusted, cloth band connected to a bulky silver box that will open our cabin door, act as a passport onto and off of the ship, and be used to access ship amenities—I shuffle through the turnstile and wait for Jazz to get hers.

I’m looking at the cheeky inscription on the bracelet—Feeling’ Nauti—when a deep male voice startles me. “Excuse me.”

I jump a little and turn to face the man I bumped into earlier. My face heats to match the red carpet of the entrance way.

“I’m so sorry for earlier. I don’t normally grope strangers. I tripped and—”

“It was an accident. That isn’t why I stopped you. I—uh—this is weird, but did I hear your name is Abby Winters?”

I tilt my head at him, the fog of embarrassment lifting. And holy shit. “Grayson Hamilton?”

A broad smile lights up his face, smoothing out the strong angles, and my memories start clicking into place. Grayson and my brother dominating the soccer field in high school. Grayson and the rest of my brother’s annoying friends teasing me to no end. Grayson’s adorable, crooked smile. Grayson dominating my fevered teenaged dreams.

“Little Breezy Winters. Of all the cruise ships in all the world, you had to board this one.” He holds out his hand.

I laugh a little too loudly and take his hand. “God, no one’s called me Breezy in years. In fact, I think you and the rest of Alex’s soccer friends were the only ones who ever did. How are you?”

Besides really freaking hot. His handsome features—that I used to discretely study more than my homework...but in a not-at-all creepy way—have filled out into strong manly

angles. Small lines form around his mouth and deep brown eyes when he smiles. In short, he has aged very, very yummmily.

“I’m good. Great. I’m here for work, actually.” He waves away his comment with his hand. “That’s boring. You look amazing. All grown up.”

My eyes flick to his hands involuntarily. No ring. So maybe he’s here for a little work and a little pleasure. I am about to comment on his appearance as well—with a stern reminder to myself not to mention my intimate knowledge of his finely muscled *derrière*—when Jasmine bumps me from behind, propelling me once again into Gray.

He catches my arms, and I place my hands on his biceps to steady myself.

“Damn, kid. And I thought your ass was well-toned.”

He chuckles and sets me back on my feet. “I have a lot of pent-up energy that writing doesn’t quite expel.”

“Still trying to cop a feel on this poor unsuspecting gentleman?” Jazz asks.

I stammer my way through an introduction, heat rising on my neck. “Jasmine, this is my brother’s friend, Grayson. He used to throw me in the pool in high school.”

I roll my eyes at myself.

Jasmine, who is not blind nor in a relationship herself, puts on her best flirt, pops a hip, and runs a hand down Gray’s arm. “Abby wasn’t kidding. You’re packing some guns under here. Are you part of the couple or single side of the trip?”

“Cut right to the chase, don’t you?” I mutter under my breath. She shoots me a quick side-eyed glance, then turns her mega-watt smile back on Gray.

“Excuse me. Can y’all make your way down the hallway. We have a bit of a back-up forming,” the check-in clerk says, her signature smile a little tight. We make our way down the hallway toward the main part of the ship as a trio.

Gray answers Jazz’s question as we walk. “I’m here to do a write-up on the cruise. I’m a travel photographer and write

the blog for my magazine.” He leans in toward us. “But if I were forced to choose a label, it would be single.”

Is it just me, or do his eyes linger on mine a second longer? A slight lift of his eyebrow to accompany his smirk almost makes me think he’s flirting, but I’m so out of practice, I can’t be certain. Besides, it’s Gray. Annoying friend of my older brother who, along with their entire crew, used to make my life miserable in high school.

“Well, we are definitely single, and we’re in cabin 13090A,” Jasmine says. I smack her arm, but she continues. “We’ll have to all hang out sometime. You can tell me embarrassing childhood stories about Abby.”

Gray’s easy smile turns mischievous. “We can trade stories. I can’t wait to hear about Breezy since high school. Tell me you two went to college together.”

“Oh yes. And college Abby was wild.”

“Um, I’m standing right here,” I say, waving a hand between them. “I can hear you.”

“In that case.” Gray grabs my phone from my hand and holds it up to my face to unlock it. Before I can sputter a response, he’s flipping through the settings. Then, he makes a call.

“What are you doing!?” I try to snatch the phone back, but my average height is no match for his six foot plus.

“I programmed my number, and now I’m calling myself so I have yours.” He declines the call on his phone and hands me back mine. He points to it. “It’s under Fifty Shades.”

I chuckle. “Really?”

Gray shrugs. “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em, right?” He slides his phone into his back pocket. “Use it. I want to catch up, but I need to get some shots of the ship for work before it fills up with people.”

He pulls me into a friendly hug. I breathe in his smell—oak and leather and musk—a big improvement over the smells

outside. Same cologne that I remember from high school, but it smells different on his now more mature body.

“I can’t believe you’re on this cruise, Breezy. I was actually just thinking about you the other day. Seriously, text me later. We can meet for drinks.” He releases me and holds out his hand to Jasmine. “Nice to meet you, Jasmine. Make sure she calls me.”

“Absolutely. And please call me Jazz. I can tell we’re going to be fast friends.”

I watch him walk away, enjoying the view from the back just as much as the front. He glances back once, a broad smile still on his face, before disappearing around a corner.

“Damn. He’s cute. Tell me you guys dated in high school. And then tell me all about it. And then tell me he has a twin brother,” Jazz says. She’s essentially wiping the drool from her chin.

“Why a twin? One isn’t enough for you?” I ask.

“The twin is for me, stupid. Gray is clearly into you. That leaves me without a plus one.” She gives me the once over as we walk to the elevators for the cabin floors. “For someone who claims not to be good at flirting, you’ve met a Mr. McPanty-melter before we even crossed the threshold of the ship. Good work!”

I roll my eyes at her. “Don’t be ridiculous. He’s not flirting. He was just surprised to see me here. And you heard him. He’s here for work not to meet someone.”

“Ten bucks says his tongue is down your throat before we make it to Jamaica.”

I crinkle my nose automatically at the same time my naughty bits do a tap dance at the possibility. “Highly unlikely. I’ll never be anything to him other than Alex’s little sister.”

“Maybe I should bury my nose in a stranger’s ass too,” she muses. “I mean it works for dogs. And you, apparently.”

“Ha. Ha,” I deadpan. “Once we reach our cabin, no mention of that ever again. I mean it. It’s bad enough Gray

will tell Alex, and I'll hear it from him until I die.”

She laughs and takes my hand to lead me to the elevators.
“No promises. God, this trip is gonna be so much fun. I can just feel it!”

CHAPTER THREE

ABBY



WHEN WE GET to our room, Jazz immediately jumps onto the bed on her knees, checking the stability no doubt. I run to the floor to ceiling window and fling open the curtains, revealing a private balcony complete with a small table, lounge chair, and a freaking hammock.

Jazz gasps when she opens the closet to see two fluffy white robes and plenty of room for our clothing despite us both totally over packing. We proceed to touch, open, and explore every aspect of the space.

“According to the website, the beds can be pushed together to make one King sized, kept separate for two twins, or swiveled around to create a bed and a couch,” I explain.

“What’ll it be? Private spaces or do you want to cuddle with me?” she teases. Before I can answer, she adds, “Who am I kidding? You’ll definitely want to cuddle once you have a few drinks in you.”

I throw a pillow at her. “You don’t know me.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Okay,” I concede. “You’re probably right. We’ll leave it a King.”

“That’ll be more convenient when we have company of the male variety anyway.” She says it so matter-of-factly, like it’s a done deal. I like her spirit. If you think it hard enough, it’ll come true.

I close my eyes and think—let me find some rebound dick, let me find some rebound dick.

“You okay? You look like you’re casting a spell, weirdo.”

I blink my eyes open. “Kind of. Let’s check out the daily agendas. Everything I read says we have to book things in advance on the app because the good stuff sells out quickly.”

“Of course you researched the trip beforehand,” she teases fondly.

“I’ve been planning this trip since like April. I’ve had plenty of time to look stuff up.” I scroll through the app. “Okay. Most important thing first—food. There is anytime dining in The Galley, which is full of buffets and food carts. We can make reservations at a few more upscale, sit-down kinda places. There is also an ice cream bar and a coffee shop.”

Jazz is looking through her app now too. “Do we want to do the formal dinner tonight at the steak place?”

I wince. “Please no. Trey and I were supposed to do that as part of our honeymoon package.”

“No formal dinner.” She scrolls a little further then bursts out laughing. “The ice cream shop is called Lick Me Till Ice Cream. I can’t with this ship. We have to go there.”

“Absolutely. Want to just wander around and check everything out tonight? There are seventeen decks we can explore.”

“Sounds perfect. We can start at the top and work our way down. Maybe by the time we get from seventeen down to thirteen, our luggage will be here. I want to change before we go to the social center floors.” In her typical over the top exuberant fashion, Jazz grabs my hands and hauls me out the door.



Our luggage does miraculously appear in our cabin by the time we make it from the upper decks down to our floor. I'm quick to change into a light-weight short sleeved Lily Pulitzer top—a splurge after getting my master's degree—and white slacks. I twist my travel-weary hair into a banana clip, refresh my make-up, and scroll through the agenda app while I wait for Jazz to wrestle her fake eyelashes into submission.

“So, we have two days at sea before we land in Jamaica, and there is a shit ton of fun stuff to do. Drag Queen brunch, adult scavenger hunts, bingo, and karaoke to name a few. There's even a full gym with morning step aerobics classes. Should I sign us up?” I call through the bathroom door.

Jazz peeks her head out, one eyelash hanging from her finger. “I'd rather eat this eyelash than step foot in a gym during vacation.”

“And that is why we are best friends,” I say, scrolling past the fitness offerings on the app. “How would you feel about a speed dating event?”

“Speed dating?”

“Yeah. It's tomorrow night. Could be a good way to check out a lot of guys in a small amount of time.”

“You know what? Why not. Sign us up. I'm great in small doses.”

I go through the process of booking our participation on both of our phones.

When another five minutes pass with only an intermittent curse from the bathroom, I say, “Are you almost ready? I'm really hungry. My stomach is about to go on strike and start gnawing on a rib.” I stand and grab my cardigan from the desk chair. The air conditioning is cranking on this ship.

Jazz comes out of the bathroom a few minutes later looking flawless as always. Her floral high waisted pants and matching crop top hug her womanly curves perfectly.

“What are you wearing?” she asks like she just smelled something her cat killed and left on her doorstep.

I look down. “My Lily top and some—”

“No, girl. I’m talking about that sad excuse for a sweater draped over your shoulders. It looks like your ancestors knitted it from the hair of the family goat. And then the goat tried to eat it.”

“My cardigan? It’s practical. I get cold in A/C, and this is comfy.”

“You look like a school teacher.”

“I am a school teacher,” I point out.

“Lose the sweater, grandma, or no ice cream for you.”

I roll my eyes but comply because I’ve learned over the years that arguing with Jazz about fashion will possibly cause me to lose a limb.

She reaches forward and yanks the neckline of my shirt off my shoulders. Then she reaches in my bra and fluffs my breasts so they are tucked up nice and tight.

“I think we need to set some boundaries in our relationship,” I say as she removes her hands from my shirt.

“Now you look like you’re on vacation. Damn, your shoulders are sexy.” She slaps my ass. “Now let’s go scream for ice cream.”

We skip the rest of the cabin levels in our exploration—seen one, seen them all—and follow our stomachs to the food and drinks. And by drinks, I mean alcohol. Which we obviously order first.

I see Grayson across The Galley as we check out the buffets and the men milling about. He’s talking with one of the crew members and taking pictures from multiple angles of the food cart in front of him. A familiar pang of “damn, he’s hot” settles in my belly. I’ve thought about him, wondered about him, dreamt about him often over the years. Not enough to be a stalker, although I did follow his photography IG page a while ago, but only because he takes really amazing pictures.

That’s my truth.

I wait for Gray to look up so I can wave, but he disappears through an Employees Only door before noticing me. I guess he really is here for work.

Jazz rapid-fire hits my arm. “Check out that hottie checking us out.”

“Where?” The cafeteria is pretty crowded.

“Over there by the bento bar.”

I stand on my tiptoes to look, but she pulls me back down.

“Don’t make it obvious.”

“How am I supposed to look if I’m not supposed to look?”

She stares at me like she’s dealing with an insufferable toddler. “Abby. This is going to be a long week if you can’t remember how to seduce.”

“I can do it. I’m just a bit rusty.”

“You would have worn a cardigan if I wasn’t here.” She finishes her drink, sets our empty glasses on the counter, and takes my shoulders.

“Let’s practice. I need a wing woman who isn’t going to scare all potential penises back into their foreskin, circumcised or not.”

“I think that’s a bit harsh,” I mumble.

“Pretend I’m a hot guy. Like Chris Hemsworth level hot. I’m making eyes at you across the bar. What do you say when I come over?”

“Come here often?” My voice squeaks.

She groans in frustration. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Well, you aren’t giving me much to work with!”

She steers me towards the wine and beer buffet for a refill. “Okay. I need you to channel college Abby. Pre-douche-Trey Abby.”

I close my eyes and shake my bare-naked shoulders, trying to remember what I was like before Trey.

Jazz helps with the visualization. “You are sexy. You are single. You are confident. You are horny.”

“Yes, I am definitely that last one.” It’s been over five months since my poor lady town has gotten any action beyond my overused vibrator.

“We are steaming up the dance floor at the club and a man comes up behind you.” She squares her hips with mine and begins to sway. She lowers her voice into a baritone and whispers, “Hey baby. Wanna dance?”

I giggle. She smacks my belly. “Stay in character,” she commands.

“Sorry. So sorry.” I clear my throat and lean into her. “I hope that’s a Chapstick in your pocket because it feels awfully small.”

Jazz snorts and smacks me again. “Try again.” She rubs her hands up my thighs and drops her voice again. “Yeah, baby. We move so well together.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” I swing my hips in a circle and tighten my abs in anticipation of her next admonishing smack.

Instead, she says, “Not bad. But we can do better.”

I give myself a mental high-five. Back in the game. A shadow passes over us. Two men in their early twenties eye-fuck us as we dance.

One of them says, “Damn, ladies. Can we cut in? Or do you want to move this party to our cabin?”

Jazz wags a finger. “No. No, no. This is not for you. Adults only.”

“I am more adult than you can handle, baby,” the other guy says, thrusting his hips toward us.

Jazz makes an exaggerated show of checking out his package then tsks sadly. “Oh darling. Your mama may have said you were special, but she lied.” She pushes him away. “Bless your heart. Now toddle off.”

When they vacate with some vapid comments about us being frigid—how original—Jazz and I dissolve into giggles.

“Maybe I don’t have to talk to flirt,” I say. “We can just dance with each other and the men flock like vultures to carrion.”

“Could you pick a nicer metaphor? I’d rather not be a dead thing, thank you very much.”

“It’s technically a simile. And I was referring to my hibernating libido.” I take a mom-of-three-on-a-Friday-night sized swig of my wine.

“Hibernating is not dead,” Jazz clarifies. “Now, let’s go awaken that sleeping goddess.”

CHAPTER FOUR

GRAYSON



SOME DAYS I freaking love my job. Today is one of those days. In fact, every day on this cruise may be one of those days. We are on the open ocean, flying fish breaking up the glittering waves in the afternoon light, a light spray of water kicking up from the wake of the speeding ship, and beautiful bikini-clad women of all shapes and sizes adorning every deck.

Oh, yes. It's a great day to be a professional photographer.

The camera gives me an opening to talk to women. Everyone wants the opportunity to be in a magazine. Everyone is flattered that I want to take their picture. I mean, I'm not looking for anything serious in terms of a relationship—that's always hard to accomplish with my travel schedule—but there's no harm in flirting. No harm at all.

By the time I make it up to the top level where the jogging track is located, I've already filled a memory card with pictures. That's in addition to the one I filled yesterday while everyone was boarding. I should probably slow down so I don't spend the majority of my trip culling through the crap.

I'm grumbling through changing the card in my camera when I stumble over someone laying on the track.

"Watch it," a voice croaks up at me. "If you spill my cocktail, I'll never speak to you again."

I look down to see an older woman sunbathing on a towel in the middle of the jogging track. Her large sunglasses and tiny yellow bikini do little to hide her leathery tanned skin.

She displays every wrinkle with unapologetic pride. She points at the largest drink I've yet to see on the ship—think a literal bucket. As far as I can tell, she's drinking it alone and I'd bet my mirrorless camera it weighs more than she does. Beside her is a cane in the shape of a...

Wait. I look closer. Is that a penis?

"I'm so sorry. I didn't expect anyone to be stationary on the track," I say, crouching down beside her to get a closer look at...well, everything. "I'm Grayson Hamilton, a photographer for *Come Away With Me*. It's a travel magazine."

"Never heard of it." She lifts her gray-haired head slightly and peeks at me over the rim of her sunglasses with pale but astute eyes. She unabashedly checks me out. "Well, aren't you just a tall glass of yes, please, I'll have another."

Surprised, I laugh. She has to be nearing ninety, but she has more spunk than half the women I've photographed today. She props herself on her knobby elbows.

"Are you gonna take my picture or what, handsome? I'm the most interesting person on this ship."

"Yes, ma'am." I finish formatting the new memory card and adjust to find the best angle for the shot. She obliges when I ask her to tip her head or raise one knee. I make sure to get a close-up of the cane. My editor is going to eat this shit up.

"May I have your name in case these go in the article?" I ask when I finish. I take the small notebook from my back pocket, recording the frame numbers and a brief description.

"Gertrude. But you can call me Trudy. In fact, you can call me whatever you want, cutie, just don't call me late for cocktails." She lowers her sunglasses again and gives me a wink. "Hope to see you around. Now get out of my light, you're gonna ruin my tan."

"Great to meet you, Ms. Trudy." I move to the side to make a few more notes in the notebook. She is definitely going in the article. I'll have to keep an eye out for Trudy throughout the cruise. Something tells me her sassy self will manage to get into trouble.

My phone rings, and I snatch it a little too eagerly from my pocket to check the screen. To my annoyingly inappropriate disappointment, it's not Abby. She hasn't called or texted yet. And by some freak of bad timing, I didn't run into her on the decks today either.

I answer on the third ring. "Hey, boss."

"Hamilton. How's it going? Tell me good things." My editor, Frank, is no nonsense. He cuts to the chase just like he cuts adjectives and fluff from our articles. I appreciate that about him. It's about the only thing I appreciate about him.

"It's going well, I think. I was given exclusive access to some of the behind-the-scenes areas last night and got some great shots of the passengers enjoying all the amenities today. Wait until you see the woman I just talked to."

"Yeah? Is she hot?"

I laugh. "Well, she was sunbathing in a yellow bikini. I'll send you the link to my cloud account later today. You can look through the raw files."

"Great. Good. I can't stress enough how important this article is. If we can seal the deal as Festival Cruise' go-to magazine when they have new destinations and ships, that would help propel the magazine into the pool with the big guys."

"I know," I say. He's told me this at least a dozen times.

"I'm taking a risk with you Hamilton, given what happened in Morocco. You could gain back some of the reputation you lost if you clinch this."

I scrub a hand over my face. He loves reminding me of that. Even though it was months ago, and I've come a long way in terms of restoring my reputation since then, it's a manipulation tactic to put me in my place. Unfortunately, it still works. The sting of embarrassment is long and unforgiving. Especially since nothing ever really dies on the internet.

"I know, Frank." My voice is tight with frustration.

“You need an angle. This can’t be just another overview of a cruise ship. I mean, seen one, seen them all, right? Half the people on board are doing live YouTube streams of the decks already. Get me something different.”

“Frank. I know. It’s been less than twenty-four hours. We haven’t even hit our first excursion point yet,” I remind him.

He’s not listening. Based on the muffled voices from his end, I know he’s covered the mouthpiece and is talking to someone in his office. A moment later he comes back on the line.

“I’m counting on you, Hamilton. You only get so many chances in this business. Don’t mess this one up.”

He disconnects before I can respond. The mighty Frank has spoken. Let the minions do his bidding. The sad part is I will. I have to. Maybe this time the asshole will actually keep his word and give me my own bi-line.



Despite constantly looking—which I neither want to admit to myself or anyone else—I don’t see Abby all day until the evening activities get under way. I’m hanging on Deck 6, where the lounges and clubs are apparently the happening place to be at night, when I catch a glimpse of her across the central atrium.

She looks stunning. She was always beautiful, but high school Breezy can’t hold a candle to adult Abby. She’s wearing her dark hair down, full and wavy around her shoulders. It’s darker than I remember, which brings out her ridiculously light blue eyes. The halter jumpsuit she’s wearing looks like it was painted on her body in the best way. It hugs all her curves without being slutty like some of the other women in the room who are trying too hard. The front has a small cut-out, revealing the taut skin of her stomach. When she turns, the back is open, showcasing the smattering of freckles I used to dream about. It dips low, low, low on her hips, and I find my jeans suddenly too tight as I sweep my

gaze over the perfect curve of her ass. It's only fair since she had her face up close and personal with mine yesterday.

I still can't believe she's on this cruise with me. I had the biggest crush on her in high school even though she was two years behind me. Alex made it very clear that we were, under no circumstances, to even think dirty thoughts about his little sister much less try to act on them. Perhaps part of her allure was her inaccessibility. But only part.

In any case, Alex isn't here now.

I weave my way through the crowd toward her. She and her friend are at one of the many bars ordering drinks. I sidle up next to them and summon the bartender.

"I'll have what she's having," I point to Abby's drink.

She smirks at me as she takes a sip. I'm mesmerized by the way her lips curve around the straw.

She says, "You don't strike me as a gin and tonic guy."

"I am a man of many tastes." I lean toward her. "Killer outfit. Got a hot date?"

She raises an eyebrow. "Not yet. But Jazz and I are on our way to the speed dating event, so..." She trails off with a shrug of her shoulder.

"I might head that way too," I say, making the decision on the spot. I'm no idiot.

Jazz, sipping on something pink and fruity, says, "I thought you were here on business? Thinking of mixing in a little pleasure too?"

I tap the camera on my hip. "I am working. A speed dating event will be fun to photograph. Lead the way."

We make our way to the event space, which is already filling with willing participants. I spot Trudy, all decked out in a full face of make-up—most of which is in its proper place—and a ridiculously low-cut dress. Her short gray hair is styled in a spiky punk rock look. I adjust my camera to the low light and snap a picture.

Right now, I'm more interested in catching up with the woman beside me. I turn to ask Abby to tell me all about her life post-high school, but she and Jazz have disappeared again. I scan the crowd and spot them at the sign-in table getting their supplies. Several men are already giving her not-so-subtle "let's go to my cabin" stares.

Not that I blame them. I'm giving her the same stare. But I instinctively want to throat punch the others.

I tell myself it's because protecting Alex's sister is still ingrained in me, but I'm lying. If she's looking for romance on this ship, I want her to choose me. I stalk over to where the girls are standing, ready to sign up for this stupid charade myself, when Frank's voice comes to me like a long-distance cock-block.

Don't fuck this up.

I sigh. As much as I want to concentrate on getting Abby into my cabin—or at least keeping her out of anyone else's—I really need to focus on work. And that means photographing the events, not participating in them. Speed dating is a unique offer on the Love at Sea cruise, and if Ms. Trudy is participating, then it'll be an awesome human interest piece.

When I reach Abby and Jazz, I say, "So how does this work anyway?"

Abby shrugs a slender shoulder. "Beats me. I've never been to one of these before."

"I'm sure you haven't needed to. Tell me, how is it you're still single?"

A flash of something—pain? regret? embarrassment?—crosses her lovely features before they settle into a tight smile. I've definitely asked the wrong question.

"I haven't had nearly enough G and Ts to tell you that story tonight." As if to emphasize that point, she takes a long sip of her drink. "Let's just say I was supposed to be a couple on this cruise. Since I no longer am, I'm taking full advantage of the singles events on ship."

It's then I vaguely remember Alex mentioning some drama about his sister's fiancé. I was in the middle of the Morocco fallout and apparently wasn't paying close enough attention.

Jazz shushes us. "Quiet. I think we're about to start."

A stunning woman with white-blond hair and an impeccably tailored dress approaches a microphone.

"Welcome everyone! I'm Jenna Montgomery, co-owner of Love Snack Speed Dating, and your host for the evening," she says. Her voice is confident and strong. Clearly she's done this many times before. I take a picture of her as she beams at the crowd.

"I hope by now you've had a chance to get some liquid encouragement because we'll begin in the next few minutes. If this is your first Love Snack event, allow me to go over the basic format of the evening. We'll start with the speed dating rounds. Men, you'll be on the inside circle based on the number given to you upon arrival. You'll remain at that table throughout this portion of the event."

I start to tune her out and scan the crowd. Many people around us are holding cards in their hands. Several others, like me, seem to be here just to observe. In the background, Jenna explains that the women will rotate around the men in five-minute intervals. How anyone can really get a sense for someone in five minutes is beyond me, but I guess that's why they call it speed dating.

When she explains how matches are made, I refocus on her. I want to know how Abby will be paired with my competition.

Jenna says, "If you enjoy your time together and want to make a match, put a check mark beside the number of the participant on your cards. If both parties check the box, we'll share your contact information tomorrow via email."

If Abby calls any of these fuckers before she calls me, I'm gonna be pissed. Mostly at myself.

"See anyone that looks promising?" I ask her.

She tilts her head to the man who steps up beside Jenna. He's definitely handsome if you like the tall, dark, exotic type. He looks like he stepped off a telenovela film set. Jenna introduces him as her business partner, Sebastian Montenegro. Even his name sounds exotic. I do an inner happy dance that he's not part of the event.

When he speaks in a heavy Spanish accent, I roll my eyes. "*Hola y bienvenido.*"

I swear the entire room sighs. At least the female half, including Jazz and Abby. The guy next to me elbows me and whispers, "That guy is more than her business partner. Look how close they're standing. He'd be inside her if he could."

I whisper back. "Oh, for sure. He's been all up in her business."

"That's probably good for the rest of us, huh. I don't swing that way, but he's a good-looking dude."

"Lucky us," I say and lift my camera to take a picture of the gorgeous couple.

Sebastian continues, "After our speed rounds, we will have a mix and mingle. You can choose to stay or go, your connections will be emailed either way, but I highly encourage you to stay. Talk to anyone with whom you had a connection. Get to know someone better you didn't click with right away. Make conversation. Make friends. Make lovers." He lays on the accent and winks. It's like Antonio Banderas is doing a bad Antonio Banderas impression. "Most importantly, have fun and be yourselves."

Jenna retakes the mic after a brief round of applause for the smooth talker. She doesn't acknowledge him. It seems like she purposefully avoids touching him. Interesting dynamic. I make a mental note to try to talk to them later.

She says, "Remember, our theme is Love at Sea. We're all on this cruise together. Explain what got you on the cruise in the first place—"

"Hell no," Abby whispers under her breath. I study her stoic face, but she doesn't look at me. I guess her break-up

affected her more than she lets on.

“Talk excursions,” Jenna continues. “But maybe stay away from tales of sea sickness.” She pauses while a few people chuckle. “So, grab a fresh drink and head to your starting tables for our first round of little love snacks. We’ll be starting precisely at eight o’clock.”

Abby and Jazz give each other an excited hug and then separate to find their tables. The participants are a mix of ages and, let’s be honest, attractiveness. A few women look like they simply strapped on some heels and mascara to go with their barely-there bikinis. Ten years ago, that look would have gotten my dick hard.

Okay, truth be told, it still gets my dick hard. I’m older not dead. But there is something to be said for the allure of mystery. I would find great pleasure in revealing Abby’s skin inch by glorious inch as I peel that sexy jumpsuit down her—

“Are you participating or just ogling? ‘Cause if you’re participating, we can cut to the chase and I’ll let you take me back to my cabin right now,” a vaguely familiar voice cuts through my thoughts. I look down to see Trudy smiling up at me.

“I’m just here to take pictures,” I say, holding up my camera.

She smacks my ass with her penis-shaped cane. “Then get out of the way. I’ve got hearts to break.”

With surprising speed for an octogenarian, she moves to the tables and slides into a seat, rubbing the cane with practiced movements. The young man sitting across from her raises his eyebrows, then barks out a laugh at something she says. I can only imagine. I raise my camera to capture the moment.

I try to concentrate on the crowd, framing shots, adjusting my settings, finding the moments, but my eyes keep landing on Abby. How is she reacting to the man across from her? Does her smile reach her eyes? Have her freckles multiplied

since I saw her last—briefly a few years ago at a party Alex hosted?

I have no right to feel proprietary, but I do. She didn't even recognize me yesterday. She barely remembers me. I'm just a blip in her memory. It's a hard pill to swallow. I've definitely thought of her often over the years.

There is a bark of loud laughter and a commotion at one of the tables. A woman, with what looks like a caterpillar hanging from her eye, sobs and stands abruptly. I zoom my camera to grab a shot. When I check the screen, I realize it's a fake eyelash that is now flopping around on her face.

The girl next to her stands too and escorts her from the room. The two men shrug and smile at each other. Assholes, but I snag a shot of their comradery anyway. Abby is a few tables away from these guys. They better get their shit together because if they make her cry, I will destroy them.

A recovered memory of high-school Abby kicking Mike Fortuna in the nutsack after he made a rather unenlightened pass at her pushes to the surface. Her fierce "choose your words more carefully the next time you open your mouth" brought a smile to my face then and now.

You know what? She can do her own throat punching. I'll be here for back-up.

There are only a few rounds left. I'm itching to talk to Abby and get the full story of her break-up. I want to know what level of idiot could possibly walk away from her.

Just before Abby's about to sit down at the next table, the man abruptly stands, takes the hand of the woman he was just chatting with, and drags her out of the room. That leaves Abby alone for the next five minutes.

Fuck that.

I weave through the crowd and sit across from her.

"Hi. I'm Grayson." I hold out my hand for her to shake.

She smirks and plays along. "I'm Abigail, but my friends call me Abby. And some annoying boys back in high school

called me Breezy.”

“Breezy. I like that. It suits you. Has anyone told you how beautiful you look tonight?” I play with her fingers across the table.

“Actually, yes. Quite a few eager young men have said something similar tonight.” She leans forward conspiratorially. “I wore this outfit for just that reason.”

“So you *are* looking to meet someone on the cruise.”

She shrugs. “Not especially. As I’ve hinted, I’ve recently gotten out of a bad relationship.”

“A rebound then?”

Her smirk deepens. “Jazz seems to think it will help.”

“Only Jazz?”

She sighs. “I don’t know. I’ve been fine with... alternative forms of pleasure.” The most adorable blush creeps up her neck.

“As in electronic?” When she raises an eyebrow, I add, “A rebound is very similar to those alternative forms. No feelings, no pressure.” I squeeze her hand. “No heartbreak. Just fun.”

She chuckles. “Now you do sound like Jazz.” After a slight pause, she says, “Maybe you guys are right. I’m sure about seventy-five percent of the singles on this ship are just looking for a hook-up. I could be one of them.”

My interest peaks. She isn’t looking for anything serious, either. I could work with this. Maybe if I had a taste of Abby, I could quench my distracting curiosity and finally focus on work. I ignore the slight nausea I feel at the thought of her with some other schmuck on this ship.

“You could use me,” I say a little too eagerly. I dial it back. “I can be your willing rebound. Your ‘get it out of your system’ vacation fling. I don’t mind. I’m going into it with eyes wide open.”

She laughs, clearly not taking me seriously. “I’ve never been a one-night stand kind of girl.”

“Good thing we have seven more nights then.”

“You are incorrigible.”

“I think you said ‘irresistible’ wrong.” I wink at her. She laughs again. A light, almost silent breathy sound that I immediately want to hear again. In fact, it is now my express goal to make her laugh as often as possible.

“Isn’t the point of a one-night stand to not really know the other person? Total anonymity so there aren’t feelings or weirdness when you see the person again?” she asks.

Hope soars. Is she seriously considering this proposal? Seventeen-year-old me does a happy dance. Breezy Winters has been a regular in my spank bank repertoire since high school.

“What happens on a love cruise, stays on a love cruise.”

She’s still looking at me like she can’t tell if I’m serious.

I shift gears. “Listen. Even if the rebound is no-strings, it doesn’t have to be anonymous. I find sex a lot more enjoyable if I already have a connection with the other person. The offer is on the table. If you’d rather dip back into things with a stranger, I get it. But I think we can be great together. I’ve always thought that.” I lean back in my chair and spread my arms. “The whale is in your ocean, as they say.”

She raises an eyebrow and takes a sip of her drink. “I don’t think anyone says that. And I’ll have to get back to you on your very generous offer.”

“Great. I’ll take that as not a no.” I nod at the match card on the table. “Check any boxes yet?”

Now her smile is wide and amused. “Do I sense some jealousy, Mr. Hamilton?”

“Just making conversation.” Damn right I’m jealous. Now that I’ve laid my “I want you” cards on the table, I want her to pick me and not one of these other morons who probably couldn’t find a woman’s G-spot with a high-end GPS.

“Your blush says otherwise,” she teases.

Before I can respond—to tell her my blood is heated not just by jealousy but also by my sudden need for her—Jenna’s voice commands the room to rotate one last time. I almost take a move from the last guy’s playbook and drag Abby out of there, but the expectant look on the next woman’s face makes me hesitate. Since I’m not a total asshole, I stay put.

“Think about my offer, Breezy,” I tell Abby as she gets up to move. “And think about me peeling that jumpsuit off your sexy as sin body with my teeth.”

Now it’s her skin that turns a pretty shade of pink. I hold eye contact and bite my lower lip to drive home the image.

She swallows hard and whispers, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Oh, I sincerely hope she does.

CHAPTER FIVE

ABBY



USE ME. *Peel off your jumpsuit with my teeth.*

I can't get Grayson's heated words out of my mind. Is he just teasing me? Trying to get a reaction like he and my brother's asshole friends used to do all the time? I frown into my margarita. Gray was never one of the overtly asshole ones though.

"There is no frowning allowed on a cruise," Jazz says beside me. We're lounging in the cabana area on the upper decks. The breeze from the water takes the edge off the oppressive heat of the sun.

The bottomless margaritas take the edge off my dizzying thoughts about Gray.

I haven't seen him since his final provocative statement at the speed dating event last night. Jazz wasn't feeling well after the speed dating rounds, so we made our excuses and went back to the cabin. She claimed motion sickness. I told her she shouldn't have eaten so much cheese. It worked in our favor because we were awake earlier than most of the ship and able to snag a great breakfast.

"Did you get your speed dating matches, yet?" Jazz asks, scrolling through her phone. "Mine just came through." Her lips curve into a smile. "Oh hell yes. Table Seven wants my info. He was so delicious."

"Nice. Maybe you'll have someone's tongue down your throat before Jamaica too."

Although I'd checked a couple boxes on my match card, I wasn't really into any of them. It was hard to concentrate with Gray's steely stare on me all night. He must have really liked the outfit. Maybe I'll bump into him tonight at the clubs. If he liked last night's jumpsuit, he'd really like tonight's dress. Where last night I was lady in the front and naughty in the back, tonight is the opposite. The low-cut front of my blue sequined A-line dips to my belly button. I have to hold the dang thing on with dress tape to avoid a nip-slip. It shows just enough cleavage and inner side boob to be interesting without being overtly provocative. The skirt is short and flirty.

"Would you just text him already?" Jazz says.

"Who? Table Seven?" I ask, feigning ignorance.

She peers at me over her sunglasses. "Do it before I do."

"Won't that seem a little presumptuous?" I ask. "Isn't playing hard to get a thing women do?"

She sighs. "Presumptuous is offering to be a woman's rebound and then telling her he wants to nibble away her clothing. We are way past presumptuous."

"Fair point. That's hot, right? The dress nibbling bit?"

"So hot." She swings her legs over the edge of the lounge chair. "I'm going to get a refill. Want one?"

I look into my half-full glass. "I'm good."

She points her empty glass at me. "Invite him to join us tonight. You deserve a little fun, girl. And a super-hot guy wants to help you with that. A guy who isn't a crazy stalker type person since you know him. That is like the unicorn of hook-ups."

"It's like I owe it to women everywhere, right?" My hands, apparently controlled by my libido and not my brain, are already pulling up Gray's number in my contacts.

"Exactly." Jazz is scrolling through the onboard itinerary app on her phone. "You still want to go dancing tonight? There's an acrobatic show in the Red Room, salsa dancing lessons, an adult scavenger hunt, karaoke—"

“After the speed dating event, I think I want to take a break from planned group activities. And I’m dead set on wearing my blue dress.” I nudge her leg with my toe. “Besides, I can practice my dance flirting.”

“Oh, there’s still some openings at the spa!” Jazz sits up straighter. I swear she just ignores me half the time. “Limited offerings though. What do you think colon hydrotherapy is?”

I scrunch up my nose. “That’s an enema. They squirt an intrusive amount of water up your stink wrinkle at an alarming speed and then you shit over a drain.”

Jazz’s horrified face makes me laugh. “Why would anyone pay to do that? Moreover, why do you know that?”

I shrug. “I listen to a lot of podcasts.”

She shudders. “No spa today. Looks like The Manor doesn’t need a reservation. It’s like a huge club with a DJ.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Before I can chicken out, I text Gray, still Fifty Shades in my contacts, our plan for the evening. He responds almost immediately.

FIFTY SHADES: I wouldn’t miss it. Wear the same outfit. I can’t stop thinking about it.

ME: I have a better one.

FIFTY SHADES: Not possible.

ME: You’ll see tonight.

FIFTY SHADES: Where are you now?

ME: Enjoying girl time by the cabanas.

FIFTY SHADES: I wouldn’t want to interrupt. I’ll see you tonight then.

ME: Looking forward to it.

Later that night I spend a bullshit amount of time on my hair and makeup. Jazz gives me side-long smirks but doesn’t say anything. We take one final look in the mirror and declare ourselves ready for the public.

“Damn, we’re hot,” Jazz says. “Let’s go pick up some dicks before my hair falls.”

Her hair never falls, at least not that I can tell. She has the natural curls from her African American father and green-brown eyes from her Caucasian mother. Couple that with flawless sepia skin and a killer curvaceous body, and I look like a dirty dishrag beside her. I do like how my blue dress brings out the color of my eyes though. I hope they’re visible in the dim light of the bars. Not that anyone really looks at my eyes with half my boobs hanging out.

“Gray is gonna bust out of his pants when he sees you in that dress,” Jazz comments as we wait for the elevator. A few more people join us in the queue, also dressed for an evening “out.” One of them is an elderly lady wearing an outfit I’m sure she bought in the juniors section of Forever21. Her gray hair is spiked around her head, and I swear she used lipstick as eyeliner.

“Where are you girls headed?” she asks.

“Dancing at The Manor.”

Her pale eyes light up, her wrinkles rearranging themselves into a bright smile. “Shit. I used to tear up the dance floor and leave it begging in my day. Now my knees,” she taps them with her cane, “only let me have fun once a day before I have to rest them. And I’ve already been down on them today,” she winks, “if you know what I mean.”

She cackles at our stunned faces, wheezing through her tears. “Your faces. Lordy day. I was talking about Twister. Get your minds out of the gutter.”

I whoosh out a breath and try to scrub the image of what I was thinking out of my mind.

She exits the elevator on Deck 8. “But if you need pointers on the other thing, hit up ol’ Gertrude. I’ve been doing it a lot longer than you’ve been alive.” The elevator doors close on her waggling eyebrows.

Jazz and I look at each other, stunned to silence for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“Seriously, I want to be her when I grow up. Did you see her shorts? Cause I didn’t, they were so short,” Jazz says.

“How is she cooler than me?”

“She’s cooler than both of us combined.”

“She’s older than both of us combined.” I wipe the tears carefully from under my eyes, trying not to smudge my mascara.

“And apparently going downtown just as long.”

“Ew, Jazz. Just ew. My buzz from earlier is wearing off, and I need more cocktails before I can appreciate that.”

“To the cocktails!” Jazz links her arm with mine as we make our way to The Manor, the two-floor nightclub on the ship. Two floor? Two deck? Either way, the place is huge and covered in mirrors and the signature red of the Heart of the Deep. Even though it’s relatively early in terms of normal club scenes, the dance floor is banging and many of the tables are already full.

We walk past a group of girls all wearing matching tank tops. I think there are about a dozen, but it’s hard to tell in the constant strobe of their light up penis necklaces. They’re having a vibrator race across the table. Several girls wear headbands with bouncing penises on coils.

“God, it’s like Dicks ‘R Us threw up in here,” Jazz quips as we walk by. She slides a glance to me. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. At least Trey didn’t ruin my bachelorette party for me.” I paste on a smile. That was probably because he wanted to have his. My mood darkens slightly as I realize he probably did sleep with the stripper that night even though he said he smelled like sex because Parker did. Bastard.

Jazz, noticing my mood, takes my hands. “Remember the look on Trey’s mom’s face when that stripper gave her a lap dance? He put his junk all up in her face. I swear she darted out her tongue and took a little lick.”

I bark out a laugh. “No she did not.”

“Hand to God. Then she swiveled her head around like that chick from *The Exorcist* to make sure no one saw her do it. She’s a little nasty, that one.”

Have I mentioned Jazz is the best?

We order drinks—a G&T for me, Sex on the Beach for Jazz—and scope out the room for an empty table. I spot one an acceptable distance away from the bachelorette party who are now taking shots out of each other’s cleavage.

We are half-way there when an already drunk bridesmaid accosts us. She drops two penis straws into our drinks. “If you aren’t sucking dick, what’s the point? Am I right?” She holds up her hands for a high-five like we’re bros in a locker room.

“Hell yeah,” Jazz yells, obliging. “High-five for sucking dick!”

“I have talked about blow-jobs more tonight than I have in my entire life,” I say, but wrap my lips around that little plastic penis and suck away. No G&T left behind.

The DJ is playing a good mix of everything from the nineties to salsa to R&B. My hips sway in time of their own accord as we claim an empty high-top table. A few more sips and I’ll be ready to join the sweaty throng already dancing in the middle of the room.

I sense him before I see him. Is it his scent? His aura? His cocky self-assurance? Or is my body still attuned to his even after all these years. He was my favorite of Alex’s friends and I’d purposely goad him so he’d throw me in the pool. It meant he had his hands on me.

Before I can turn to greet him, Gray steps up close behind me and puts his mouth to my ear. “I missed you, Breezy.”

Is he talking about today? Or since high school? Obviously today, right?

“Did you have pleasant dreams last night?” I ask coyly. Jazz widens her eyes at me, amused. Maybe my flirt muscle isn’t completely broken after all.

He digs his fingers into my waist and growls. A shiver and a thrill pulse through me. Heat pools between my legs and I squeeze my thighs together so he can't hear my naughty bits singing "Let's Get It On." They've already decided that rebound Grayson is a great idea. The best idea. A "fuck politeness and take me right here" idea.

"I'll take that as a yes," I say a bit breathless. I wrap my lips around the penis straw with more emphasis than necessary.

Gray grabs my wrist. "Is that what I think it is?"

I nod slowly, letting the straw bob in and out of my mouth. Seriously, though, this night is all about blow jobs. Why don't they make vagina shaped straws?

"Do you need another drink?" he asks. "I need something to cool off."

"Absolutely. Jazz?"

She nods and, after another squeeze of his fingers, Gray releases me to head to the bar.

Jazz nods her head and smiles at me across the table. "Oh, you have it bad, girl."

"What? I do not," I lie, thankful for the dim lighting to hide my blush.

She pretends to look under the table. "I'm sorry. Aren't those the ashes of your panties on the ground? I think they spontaneously combusted when Gray touched you."

"Shut up."

She opens her mouth to say more, but I interrupt. "No seriously, he's coming back. Shut up."

Gray is carrying a tray full of colorful glasses and shots. He laughs when he sees our expressions. After he sets it on the table, Jazz throws an arm around him.

"I knew I liked you," she says. "What have we got here?"

"I figured this was easier than going back and forth to the bar." He names the shots and the drinks. "What shall we do

first?”

“Tequila. Obviously,” Jazz says, winking at me.

I groan. Tequila and I have an interesting relationship. One that I usually like to reserve for nights alone at home. You know that country song “Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off?” Yeah, that was written about me.

But when in the middle of the ocean surrounded by buckets of free condoms, why not? Right?

Gray passes around the shots and limes. Looking directly into his eyes, I lick the side of my hand by my thumb—wetting it to hold the salt. With parted lips, he watches my mouth move. I raise an eyebrow and smirk. Maybe flirting is like riding a bike. It’s all coming back to me now. And man is it fun.

He isn’t moving, so I take his hand and bring it to my lips. In a move that surprises even me, I run my tongue along his hand in the same place and scrape my teeth lightly on his skin. He blows out a long breath. I blink slowly. He forgets to inhale.

I release him and sprinkle the salt where I’d tasted. Before I can lick the salt from my own hand, he brings it to his lips and offers his own hand to me. I raise an eyebrow; he gives me his crooked smile.

As his mouth covers the salt on my skin, lazy waves of heat cascade over my body. He never breaks eye contact. Watching his lips on my skin is so sensual. When he finally releases my hand, I almost use it to tug him to me. To sear my lips to his. To taste his bottom lip. Just a nibble.

Oh, who am I kidding. I want to detach my jaw and swallow him whole. Not a good look in the middle of a crowded bar, however. Lifting the shots, we all clink glasses and toss back the liquid. I wince slightly as the heat slides down my throat.

He hands me a lime wedge, taking me out of my mini-fantasy.

“Damn, you two. You’re making me wet,” Jazz says.

I roll my eyes at her as I suck on the wedge. We do another shot, not tequila, and Jazz and Grayson start sharing Abby stories, which is totally fun for me, by the way.

“Why do you call her Breezy?” Jazz asks.

Grayson smiles broadly. “We used to tease her by calling her Gail instead of Abby.”

“By ‘we’ he means the entire Varsity soccer team,” I interject. “Cue the *Wizard of Oz* jokes. I hated it.”

“Oh, we knew. One day, we were really laying into her, and even though she pretended to ignore us, I could see she was pissed. I guess it triggered the memory of when my brother and I got upset when we were younger, and my mom used to play a word association game to get us to forget about our worries. So, Gale became Wind became Breeze and then Breezy. It fit her so well, it stuck.” He looks at me. “You didn’t seem to mind it as much.” He smiles and takes a swig of his beer.

I cock my head at him. “You never told me that. About your mom.”

He shrugs. “Never came up.”

We share a knowing glance. His mother passed away suddenly when he was a sophomore in high school. He spent a good bit of time at our house with Alex around that time. I was still in middle school and not even a blip on his radar, but I had an immediate crush on the sad, broken boy trying to stay brave in front of his friends.

I put a hand over his on the table and squeeze. He squeezes mine back.

Jazz says, “Dammit! I was hoping it was because she was a slut. Like Abby was Easy Breezy.”

I swat her shoulder. “I was not a slut.”

“There’s still time.” She winks and then laughs at my horrified expression. “I gotta pee. Don’t dance without me.”

She gives me a look when I start to offer to go with her. I stay put for fear of my life.

“Have you had enough alcohol to tell me more about what brought you here?” Gray asks as she leaves.

I sigh. “Fine. But it’s a boring story.” After another fortifying shot, I give him the short version of my relationship with Trey. The very, very short version.

“I was with this guy, Trey, for about two years. We got engaged, started planning our wedding. Then, about five months ago, we broke up after I found out he cheated on me.” I shrug it off, like it wasn’t the worst day of my life. “Tale as old as time.”

“You were engaged to the guy? Have you seen him since?” Gray asks. I search his face for pity but see none. The short version was the right way to go. I’m not Poor Abigail Winters, Jilted Bride around him. I’m just Breezy, Sexy Vixen in a Hot Dress Sipping from a Penis Straw. And I love that.

“Once. At a restaurant,” I answer him.

“How’d that go?”

A vivid memory of the large security guard’s arms around my waist hauling me out of the restaurant as I yelled, “You are the fuckiest fuck face in fuck land” at the top of my lungs plays in technicolor in my mind. And all because I threw a few wine glasses at Trey.

And a couple plates.

And the floral center piece.

And the fish off of his date’s plate.

“I was the epitome of grace and poise,” I say, looking away so he doesn’t see the blush heating my skin.

“Right,” he says slowly.

Jazz returns then, saving me from his scrutiny.

One more shot, and I’m ready for the dance floor. I grab Jazz’s hand and pull her with me.

“Come on, Jazzy Hands. It’s time to dance.”

We make our way hand-in-hand into the mix. When I turn to see if Gray is following, he stops in his tracks and gives me a long, hungry stare. He's finally getting the full effect of the dress. The plunging neckline into the flirty little skirt make a striking dichotomy. And when I turn, it flares just so around my thighs.

He puts a hand on his chest and mouths, "Breezy." Point one to this dress.

I hook a finger at him, beckoning him to me. He obliges, threading our legs as I drape an arm over his shoulder and begin to slow grind, moving my hips in time to the music, but keeping a bit of space between our bodies so he gets a good angle of my boobs in this dress. He puts a hand on my hip, digging in his fingers like earlier.

"You were right. I like this dress better," he says, caressing me with his gaze.

"Told you." I move a fraction closer to him.

"He's a world-class idiot for cheating on you, Breezy. You know that, right?"

"I don't want to talk about my ex. I just want to dance."

I look around for Jasmine. She's already dancing with a really cute guy nearby. When they turn, she mouths, "Table Seven." I give her a thumbs up and refocus on Gray.

As the alcohol mixes with the heat from his touch, I'm emboldened. I squeeze his thigh between mine. He yanks me forward, pressing his hips against me. I tangle my fingers in his hair and close my eyes. The music and lights swirl around us as we move together in perfect rhythm. His hand moves from my hip to my lower back, fingers spreading over my ass. I have no idea how many songs we dance to, and I don't care. He's strong and smells amazing and is a great dancer and that's all that matters in this moment.

When I open my eyes to check on Jasmine, she has her tongue down Table Seven's throat. I look back at Gray and the room takes a moment to catch up. And then keeps on spinning around me.

Shit. I'm really drunk.

CHAPTER SIX

GRAYSON



WHAT TOOK me so fucking long to get this woman in my arms? She fits perfectly. And if she doesn't stop squeezing my thigh between hers, I'm seriously going to bust through my shorts. They're incredibly uncomfortable as it is. She rolls her head back, eyes closed, and her hair tickles my hand as it cascades down her back. I have never wanted to kiss someone as badly as I want to kiss her. If she were anyone else, I would already have my lips on her.

But I don't want to push her into something she isn't ready for.

I also don't want to miss an opportunity if she is ready.

Lowering my lips to her ear, I say, "Have you considered my offer?"

"What offer?"

I'm momentarily offended until I see her small smirk. She's teasing me. Game on, baby.

I drop my voice, making sure my lips are against her ear. "I want to taste you, Abby. All over. I want to trace the neckline of this dress with my tongue."

When she once again squeezes my thigh tighter, rubbing a little against it, I groan and press my lips to her neck.

She sighs and shivers. I lift my head to kiss her since she hasn't pushed me away yet. When I look into her eyes, they are glassy and unfocused.

"Abby, you okay?" I ask, halting half-way to her lips.

She attempts a little spin and almost falls over.

“Whoa, there,” I say, holding her tighter, although now out of necessity.

She traces a finger over my face and slurs, “You are so pretty. Has anyone told you how pretty you are?”

Shit. She’s drunk. Really drunk.

“Stay here. I’m going to get you some water,” I say into her ear and pass her off to Jazz. “Watch her, she’s drunk.”

Jazz nods and tugs Abby closer to her side. I keep half an eye on Abby, still moving a little off-beat and waving her body like the blow-up guy in front of a car repair shop, while I fight my way to the bar.

“Well, aren’t you just juicier than a T-bone,” a woman says, blocking my path. There is a blow-up penis strapped to her waist and a tiara on her head.

“Congratulations. Your partner is one lucky son of a bitch.” I smirk, pointing at her penis.

She wiggles it. “I’m not the bride, so this could be all yours baby,” she lies. Her white tank top says, “Bridin’ Dirty.”

“Oh no. I’m an exit only kind of guy.”

She leans in and drops her voice to sex phone operator. “But I’m not.” Then she licks my ear.

I jump back.

“Where’s your fiancé?” I ask pointedly. She shrugs and wiggles her hips until the balloon dick is swinging in a circle.

I’m saved when her friends, all wearing matching tank tops that read “We’re Ship Faced,” squeal in between us. Another one is also donning a plastic dong. She whips it around so it slaps against the bride’s.

“Come on, bitch. I’m gonna dick slap you into tomorrow,” she screams, chasing the bride to the other side of the room.

I shake my head and give Abby a “did you see that?” look. But she isn’t where I left her. Abandoning any attempt at

making it to the bar, I turn tail in search of her.

I should have realized Jazz is too invested in dancing with the guy from speed dating, her tongue so far down his throat she could test him for strep, to be any help. I scan the dance floor and spot a flash of blue sandwiched between two guys.

Oh. Hell. No.

I march over and yank on one guy's shoulder, sending him stumbling backward.

"What the hell?" he says. I glower at him until he puts his hands up in surrender. Smart move, asshole.

The other guy gives me a thumbs up as he rubs up on Abby's ass. Like I did him a favor by getting the other guy out of the way. Abby's slurred and much too polite, "no thank yous" are going unregistered by the guy. Time to intervene.

I'm beside him in two long strides. "Hands. Off." My voice has a proprietary edge I have no business to but can't help feeling.

"Find your own chick," he says, turning them so his back is to me. Clearly, Abby is wasted. Clearly, this guy doesn't give a fuck. Clearly, he needs to learn some manners.

Just as I'm about to do something that'll get me thrown in cruise jail, Abby's face peeks around the guy as she looks over her shoulder. She gives him a strong bump with her backside, and he backs up a step.

"Gray! My main homie," she says with a bright, unfocused smile that immediately melts my anger. "Dju get loss?"

I hold out my hand, which she takes, and move us away from the guy. He's scowling but doesn't try to follow. Smart move. I fit Abby's body against mine again, where it belongs.

"I got stuck in the middle of a couple dicks," I say, not sure if I mean the dildo fight or her dance partners.

She smiles up at me. "Me too." Then her head falls forward onto my chest, and she groans.

Time to go. I move us in the direction of Jasmine, sorry to interrupt her moment with speed dating guy.

“Jazz,” I wait until she detaches her suction and looks at me. “I’m gonna take Abby back to your room. Are you okay here?”

“I’ll take care of her, man,” the guy says. “I’m a cop. You can trust me.”

I look at his hands which, despite the rather intense make-out session, are on Jazz’s back and not up her shirt. His eyes are clear. I nod.

Abby leans against Jazz’s shoulder. “Imma little drunk. Prolly four shots wasn’t a great idea.”

Jazz kisses her forehead. “It was six. Sleep it off. We land in Jamaica tomorrow.” To me she says, “I’m trusting you with my best friend. Make sure she drinks lots of water.”

I give a little salute and maneuver Abby and I through the crowd. About halfway down the hallway to the elevators, her color goes ashen and her eyes widen to saucers.

Shit. She’s gonna be sick. We are nowhere near anywhere appropriate for her to do so. I steer her underneath a staircase, out of the way of prying eyes, and say a silent apology to whichever crew member will have to clean this up later.

She gets sick in the corner as I hold her hair and rub her back.

“Oh shame! Where’s thy blush?” she says, ending on a small burp.

“Tell me you’re an English teacher without telling me you’re an English teacher,” I mutter. Only Breezy would quote Shakespeare when she’s wasted.

“Are you okay to keep moving?” I ask, chuckling.

She nods shakily. I scoop her into my arms to carry her. It’ll be faster. She feels feather light. Another reason why the name Breezy fits. She’s always been small and light, a breath of fresh air, a glorious reprieve on otherwise oppressive days,

especially after my mother passed away. Of course, if I ever said that out loud, I'd immediately revoke my man card.

She lays her head on my shoulder and closes her eyes. "Did I ever tell you gray is my favorite color."

I snort.

"No, I'm serious," she insists. "It's the new orange, which is the new black. It goes with everything. It's like the sky before a storm."

"Like the color of your eyes when you look at me sometimes."

She continues as though she didn't hear me, which is possible in her state. "You're not gray though. You are bright blue. Sky blue. Caribbean water blue."

I chuckle and press the button for the elevator. I make the executive decision to take her to my room on deck 9. It's closer. I say, "Maybe I should change my name."

"You're my boy, Blue." She double taps her fist to her chest.

"Did you have anything to eat today?" I ask, stepping sideways into the elevator so I don't hit her head on the door frame.

A couple of girls get on with us and make little awww noises when they see me carrying her.

"Do margaritas count? They have fruit in them, right?"

"No, Breezy. Margaritas don't count." I frown down at her. No wonder she's wasted.

She puts a finger on my lips. "Don't frown at me. Isn't a girl allowed to get a little drunk on her honeymoon? Or not-honeymoon? Or jiltedmoon?"

The girls give me a look over their shoulders. I ignore them. Let them think what they want. We get out on my floor, and I manage to get us into my room without incident.

After another stomach purge and some forced water, I hand her one of my T-shirts. "You'll be more comfortable in

this.”

She pushes my hands away when I try to help. “Just unzip me. I can do the rest.”

I unzip her slowly, letting my knuckles trace down her spine, aching to do more, but knowing I will never forgive myself if I do. In the amazing way girls have of getting changed without getting undressed, she switches to my shirt with barely a trace of skin showing.

I tuck her into my bed. I use her face to unlock her phone and send a quick text to Jazz so she doesn’t worry when Abby’s not in their room.

Although I managed to get Abby into my bed, this is not quite the way I wanted the night to end, but as I push her hair back from her pale face, I find I’m happy taking care of her.

She flutters her eyes open. “Why are you here, Grayson Hamilton?”

“I told you. I’m on assignment photographing the cruise for my magazine,” I say quietly, crouching down and leaning my head on crossed hands on the bed beside her. Our faces are inches apart.

“No, no. Why are you *here*? Taking care of me? Why aren’t you out photographing all the things or hooking up with hot women instead of babysitting your friend’s drunk little sister?”

“There is nowhere else I’d rather be right now, Breezy.” I realize it’s true.

Her brow furrows into a cute little wrinkle. “Did Alex put you up to this? Did he tell you to watch out for me? Because he hasn’t been the boss of me in a long time. I’m an adult.” She tries to lean up on her elbow. “I’m a freaking school teacher!”

I push her shoulders back down, gently. “I haven’t even talked to Alex. He would definitely not want me in the same hotel room as his drunk sister. Trust me.”

“Why would he care?”

I run a hand through my hair. “Do you know how much shit he got in high school about his hot little sister? Half the time any of us came over to hang at your house was to catch a glimpse of you in your bikini.”

She grins as her eyes close again. “Perverts.” Just when I think she’s fallen asleep, her eyes pop open and the frustrated wrinkle is back between her eyes. “Wait. Is that why I never had any dates? Alex was vagina blocking me?”

I laugh. “Don’t tell him I told you. But possibly. He threatened us within an inch of our lives if we so much as looked at you sideways.”

“We’re going to have a talk, Alex and I. But tomorrow. Tonight, I’m really tired.” She snuggles deeper under the covers. “Tell me a bedtime story about how hot you thought I was.”

I shake my head. No one makes me laugh like Breezy Winters. I give in. “Okay. But only because I don’t think you’ll remember any of this tomorrow. One time I got to your house early, before the rest of the team. Alex was still getting changed, so I wandered out onto the deck to wait for him. You were laying on one of the lounge chairs in a white bikini, reading. You were always reading,” I break off on a small laugh. We used to tease her about it, but it makes sense given her chosen profession as a high school English teacher.

“I was a dork,” she mumbles.

“You were—are—gorgeous. You picked up your water bottle and held it to your neck. A tiny drop of water followed the lines of your chest to between your cleavage. I was mesmerized. I couldn’t blink or breathe for fear of missing what you’d do next.”

“What did I do?”

I smile and trace a finger down her nose. “You put down the book and the water bottle, lifted your arms over your head and stretched. Your back arched like a cat and your toes curled.” I close my eyes at the memory. “So fucking hot. That

was one of the first times I threw you in the pool. I had to put my hands on you, or I felt like I would combust.”

She laces her hands in mine, eyes still closed. “I had the biggest crush on you in high school. Out of all of my brother’s lame friends, you were my favorite. All tall and muscly and funny and kind. You were bright blue even then.”

My chest swells. She wanted me too? She’s not the only one who’s gonna have words with Alex.

“You know what?” she whispers, peeking at me through heavy lids. “I lied earlier. Blue is my favorite color. I used to dream about what you’d taste like. Blueberries? Leather? Pine needles?”

I smile sadly. It’s really too bad she probably won’t remember any of this tomorrow. I ask, “Pine needles? Why would I taste like pine needles?”

She ignores me again. “I used to antagonize you so you’d put your big hands on me to throw me in the pool. Your hands are great.” She squeezes them. “But now that I’ve seen your ass up close—really up close—I’ve switched to fantasizing about that.”

I laugh, remembering our encounter on the gangway. “Now who’s the pervert?”

“Shut up and kiss me, Blue,” she says.

I seriously consider it for about a half second.

“Not like this, Breezy.” I kiss her forehead instead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ABBY



BRIGHT LIGHT SEARING INTO ME. Elephants and hippos tap dancing on my head. Old, stale high school T-shirts from the back of the drawer stuffed in my mouth. Anchors holding down my limbs.

Shit. I am capital-H Hungover.

I throw an arm over my eyes—or try to anyway, but the anchors are too strong, and I can't move them. My hazy mind reels with reasons why I can't move my arms.

Jazz is playing a mean, mean trick.

I've been tied up in someone's cabin.

I've been paralyzed and my kidneys have been removed to sell on the black markets of Jamaica.

I'm tangled in the netting of the huge hammock on the top deck.

Through an act of strength I did not know I had, I blink my eyes open to see what horrible fate has befallen me in my drunken stupor. I brace myself for ropes or chains or hammock strings.

An arm. Not my own arm. I am slowly aware of the pressure at my back. Did Jazz fall into the wrong bed last night?

But this arm is too hairy and muscled to be hers. My eyes pop wide. This is a man's arm. I quickly take stock of the rest of me. All pink parts are covered; top and panties seem to be intact.

“Stop squirming.” The voice behind me is hoarse with sleep but still familiar. Grayson? What is Grayson doing in my room?

Then the details of the cabin come into focus. A man’s watch on the nightstand beside a charging station I don’t recognize. An unfamiliar laptop on the table. All of his camera equipment.

I’m in Gray’s bed. Ice floods my veins. I close my eyes, willing this to be a dream.

“Wake up. Wake up. Wake up,” I mumble. I pop my eyes open, but nothing has changed.

The night comes back in small snippets. I remember the shots—stupid tequila—and dancing. Did Gray carry me to his room? What did I say?

And why are all my memories draped in blue?

“Gray?” I ask quietly.

He grunts a response, tightening his arm around me and burying his face in my neck. I live there a moment, basking in his warmth. Trey never like cuddling; he said he couldn’t sleep with someone touching him, so no spooning for us.

Before I can get too comfortable, I say, “I should probably get going. Jazz’ll be worried.”

“She knows where you are. Just a few more minutes.”

“Gray?” I ask hesitantly again. “Did we...you know...last night?”

He sighs and rolls me onto my back. I do cover my eyes with my arm now. More out of embarrassment than the blinding light.

“No, Breezy, we did not...you know. I hope you don’t think I’d take advantage of you like that.”

I shake my head, still not looking at him. “Tequila makes me naughty.” I groan. “How embarrassing was I last night?”

The bed dips and moves as he stands. A moment later he presses a bottle of cold water into my hand. “Drink. You’ll feel

better.”

He waits until I sit up and sip the water. You know those memes of the girl with the perfect hair and sexy, sleepy eyes with the caption “I woke up like this #nofilter” that no one actually believes? Well, Grayson is the real-life male version of that meme. Never in the history of the world has anyone looked this good in a pair of flannel pants and a threadbare T-shirt. The pants pool perfectly around his tanned bare feet. His hair is mussed from sleep, but the effect just makes me want to run my fingers through it to tame it. His jaw is rough with stubble. And he doesn’t have any crust in the corner of his eyes or drool marks on his face.

I, on the other hand, can feel the remnants of the thick mascara sticking my eyelashes together when I blink. I’m sure my lipstick is smeared across my cheeks. And, having seen myself in the mirror many a morning, I can guarantee my hair looks like rats took up residence and threw an all-night bender.

I try to run a hand over it, but it’s like putting a Band-Aid on a knife wound. I give up and drink more water.

“You weren’t embarrassing,” he says. “We’ve all been there.”

He lifts the edge of the T-shirt a little to scratch the bottom of his belly, revealing a peek of hard abs and almost making me choke on my water.

I cover it well by saying, “Tell me I didn’t throw up on you.”

He smiles, tilts the water bottle toward my mouth again. I drink. “No. Not on me. In the hallway and the toilet, a lot, but not on me.”

I drop my head into my hands. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Thank you for taking care of me. And for carrying me to your room?” It’s a question to check my memory.

“Not a problem. You weigh less than my camera gear.” He tilts my chin with his finger so I look at him. His eyes are clear

and focused. Is he human? He drank almost as much as I did last night.

He asks, “What else do you remember?”

I shake my head. “Not a lot. For some reason my memories are coated in blue. Did we talk about colors or something?”

He chuckles softly. “Something like that.” He gets up from the bed again and sifts through one of his drawers. He throws some shorts at me. “Here. You can borrow these and my shirt to get back to your room. It’s already eight, so if you want breakfast before we leave for jungle river tubing, you’d better get a move on.”

I wrinkle my nose and try to process his directions. “That all sounds like a lot of work.”

“Come on, Breezy. You can recover as we tube down the river in the beautiful Jamaican jungle.” He pats my leg, then shoves it over the side of the bed. Reluctantly, I stand and stretch, looking out the window at the coastline of Jamaica. We’d docked sometime last night. Now the bright Caribbean sun hints at a perfect-weather day.

When I turn, Gray is staring at me. His eyes are laser-focused, intense. “Jesus, Breezy. Just keep the damn shirt. It looks a thousand times better on you.”

I swallow and lower my arms from my stretch. “Thanks.”

I don’t tell him I had no intention of giving it back. It smells like him.



A few hours later, Jazz and I are waiting in the queue to board the excursion bus. The very small excursion bus. Actually, it’s more like a van. A low-budget, rusty, I’ve survived generations of screaming, sticky children mini-van. I look from the deathtrap that should have been retired a decade ago to the twenty or so of us waiting.

“How are we all going to fit in this van?” I ask Jazz. “How did this thing pass inspection? Do they even have inspections in Jamaica?”

She shrugs, looking a little too nonchalant for my taste. “My motto this cruise is Everything Is An Adventure.” She smacks my arm and her eyes sparkle. “Ooo, maybe you’ll have to sit on Gray’s lap.”

Rubbing my shoulder, I follow her gaze as she looks behind me. Gray is walking toward us with a broad smile and a handful of granola bars. He brought snacks! Could he be any more perfect?

My still rumbling tummy practically reaches out to grab the bars. Just what the hangover doctor ordered—boring, beige foodies. My mantra for the rest of the trip is Eat First, Drink Second.

Gray looks at my ridiculously over-stuffed bag and shakes his head. “I was going to offer you some of these, but it looks like you packed the entire ship already.”

I snatch a few bars from his fingers and shove them down into my bag, careful not to show him what I have in there. I’m both dreading and excited for him to see.

“Look who’s talking.” I say, gesturing to the bulky backpack he’s carrying. “That thing could fit a small child.”

“This is my camera equipment. Necessities for my job,” he explains. “What’s in your pack?”

“Welcome beautiful people,” a small Jamaican man with a wide smile greets us. I sigh in relief, saved from answering by the driver.

He ushers us into the van. “Three to a seat, now. Don’t be shy,” he says in a strong Jamaican accent. “Make yahself small.”

Jazz, Gray, and I squeeze into a seat near the middle of the van. I am, of course, expected to squish in the middle. When I make noises of protest, Jazz pulls me down into the seat beside her.

“Sit your skinny bitch ass down.” She nudges me and wiggles her eyebrows when Gray sits next to me, pinching my thighs between them. She’s reminding me I could sit on his lap. I scrunch my face at her. But of course, I can’t help looking at Gray’s lap. Sitting on it would not be a hardship. At all.

Jazz begins feeling around beneath us. “Are you gonna buy me dinner first?” I ask.

“There are no seatbelts,” Jazz says.

Gray leans over me. “Don’t worry. Abby’s enormous bag can help cushion us in an accident.”

“That’s the spirit!” our bus driver says, overhearing our conversation and slinging himself behind the wheel. “No worries. It’s the Jamaican motto, mon.”

His words come back to me about ten minutes later when we are bumping along a dirt road on the edge of a cliff at an alarming speed. No worries, my skinny bitch ass. I am definitely worried. Jazz’s knuckles are white on the seat in front of us. Every time we hit an especially hard bump, there is a collective gasp from the passengers and a hearty laugh from the driver.

“You get used to the roads,” he shouts over the rattle of the van. “Not like American roads, ya mon?”

“Maybe you could slow down a little?” someone suggests.

“Go faster?” The driver laughs. “You got it.” He steps on the gas, and I swear the stupid van tips on two wheels around a turn. We all lean the other way to try to counter-balance. Another van comes careening around a corner also at top speed. It swerves at the last second. The drivers beep and wave. Ours is still laughing like this is the most fun he’s had in years.

Jazz mutters prayers under her breath as we careen around another turn.

“Did you just pray to Elvis?” Gray asks.

“If it works, I’m willing to convert to any religion,” she says through clenched teeth.

A motorbike slips past us on the other side, dangerously close to the edge. I squeeze my eyes shut and try not to lose the plain toast I had for breakfast. There were two river cruise excursions available for Jamaica: a longer, more intense one involving zip-lining and waterfalls, and stronger rapids, and this shorter one with just the river tubing. I thanked my lucky stars this morning that Jazz and I chose the shorter one. It was supposed to be mild and relaxing. The perfect way to overcome my terrible decisions surrounding alcohol consumption last night.

This is the opposite of that.

“We are going over the edge of the ravine,” Jazz says now with a crazy laugh. “This is not how I want to die. I haven’t even had sex on this cruise yet.”

“We aren’t going to die,” I assure her.

The driver says, “Did you know Jamaica’s number one cause of death is road fatalities. We have only small rules for driving. It’s like a video game, ya?” He laughs again and looks over his shoulder at us. “But no worries, mon! I haven’t crashed in a long time.”

“Dude, watch the road. Less talking, more concentrating,” Gray says. His face looks just as ashen as mine feels.

Through an act of sheer grace and some misguided prayers to Yoda and Captain Kirk, we manage to arrive at the drop-off point without pitching over the edge of the cliff to our fiery deaths. On shaky legs, we disembark. Two more men, who introduce themselves as T-spoon and Savion, greet us with more smiles and cups of rum punch which we all guzzle down quickly despite it being barely noon.

“We have a small walk to grab the life vests. There will be lockers for your bags. Come. Fun and adventure await,” T-spoon says.

“I don’t know how much more adventure I can take,” Jazz says as we fall in line to follow the guides through the dense

jungle.

“What happened to your motto?” I keep an eye out for poison ivy on the edges of the narrow path. I swear if it sees me looking at it, I get the stupid stuff. Does Jamaica even have poison ivy? Or is it just a special friend of America?

Things I should have Googled before we left.

“Forget the motto,” Jazz says. “New motto—do not die on this cruise. At least not before I get someone to conquer the pink fortress, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s a little long for a motto. I don’t think it’ll fit on a post-it.”

“I’m still workshopping.”

When we reach the locker area, I fumble in my bag next to Gray. He’s snapping waterproof cases around his camera and lenses and not paying attention to me. Those butterflies from earlier are back. Will he think I’m stupid or crazy? Will he take back his offer to be my rebound? He might after I tell him the entire story. He’ll definitely join the bent neck crew when he looks at me. You know, that look women get when they feel sorry for someone and they cock their head onto their shoulder and slow blink? The “bless your heart” look. I’ve been living in that look since Trey left me.

Jazz catches my eye and senses my hesitancy. “You don’t have to do this, but I think it might be cathartic,” she says.

“It would be a shame to never wear it, right?” I ask.

She nods. “Absolutely. You look fucking amazeballs in that dress.”

Before I can think about what anyone else might think, I pull my unused wedding dress from my bag and shake it out.

“What’s that?” Gray says when the fabric hits his arm.

“I’m going to trash my wedding dress,” I say, stepping into it.

“You got as far as buying a wedding dress before calling it off?”

I ignore the question, but I know he'll ask again. I pull the silky fabric up over my bikini and shorts.

“Zip me up but leave the buttons open,” I say to no one in particular. Jazz moves to help me, but Gray gets there first. He lets his knuckles trace my skin as he zips. A hazy memory from last night niggles at my brain as a familiar shiver runs up my spine. He continues the line of my back even after the zipper is fastened, grazing the bare skin left visible by the low cut back of the dress.

When it's zipped, I do a little twirl. The A-line dress is simple as far as wedding gowns go, but it fits my body like a glove. I don't mean to sound cocky, but my ass in this dress could inspire poetry. Truth be told, the shorts underneath make it a bit bulky around the hips today, but the long slit up the right side of the skirt adds a bit of sexy to the otherwise straight cut and allows the dress to move like a dream. The top is what sold me: delicate lace, thicker in the precise places to keep my grandmother from clutching her pearls in church. Not that it's a problem with my pink bikini underneath today.

Jazz gives me a chef's kiss. “Just as gorge as the day we bought it.”

“Stay right there,” Gray says. He quickly grabs his camera. “Walk toward me slowly. Yes. Perfect. The light through the trees is perfect.” He snaps away, turning his camera this way and that. “Beautiful, Breezy.”

I don't realize I'm crying until he stands and, cupping my jaw, uses his thumb to wipe away a tear. “You okay?”

“The last time I wore this I had a very different vision of how my bridal portraits would go.” I square my shoulders and wipe away the rest of the tears. “I fucking love this dress.”

“It's perfect on you. You sure you want to trash it?” he asks. He tilts his head, not enough to be in the pity party zone, but enough to make me think he's waiting at the door to be invited in.

“It has bad juju. I can't wear it again. And I can't pass that bad juju to another bride.” Nope. Along with many other

things, Trey ruined this dress for brides everywhere.

“Then let’s have fun,” Gray says. “Grab your life vest and pose for me again.”

I laugh. “That’ll be quite the look.”

Savion comes over as I’m hamming it up for Gray’s camera. “You may be a little over dressed, Mama Mia. Or are we having a wedding on our trip today?”

“No. No wedding. I just want to ruin my dress,” I explain.

He laughs. “No problem! Come, come. Let’s get started.”

I grab my life vest and a handful of skirt and, ignoring the weird looks from other guests, follow them down the narrow path to the water.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GRAYSON



“ROW, row, row your boat, gently down the stream,” T-spoon yell-sings as we all awkwardly plop down into our rafts. “If you see a crocodile, don’t forget to scream.”

His song elicits a few polite, but nervous chuckles. When we’re settled, our tubes tied together in two lines with him at the front, he passes back disposable cups and a jug of strong-smelling dark liquid.

“Rum punch,” he says with a toothy grin. “You can never drink too much rum in Jamaica.”

“Hear, hear,” someone behind me yells.

“No. In Jamaica, we say ‘ya, mon.’ Let’s try it,” Savion says. He’s behind the group to make sure we don’t get separated. “How we doin’? Everyone ready to head out?”

“Ya, mon!” we all repeat back in unison.

“That’s what I’m talking ‘bout,” he says.

The beginning of the ride is slow and languid. I get some shots of the foliage around us and a few birds playing in the shallows of the river. I can’t stop looking at Abby in a wedding dress. A fucking wedding dress. When she said she and her fiancé had broken up, I just assumed it was early in the planning stages. Apparently, their relationship was a little more serious than I thought. If I can’t get the full story out of her, I’ll call Alex tonight and make him tell me.

We hit a medium sized rapid just as Abby is about to sip her punch. It spills on her dress. She’s momentarily horrified,

then her face relaxes into a laugh. Let the dress trashing officially commence.

“Hineys up, or the rocks get a little personal,” T-spoon calls from the front of our caravan. This sends Abby into even more hysterics. I am quick to capture her genuine joy on camera. I much prefer her tears of laughter to the tears of regret I saw earlier.

A loud splash behind us has us all craning our necks to see what happened.

“Woman overboard!” someone else yells.

“Ashley!” a woman shouts.

Savion rushes to her side as a few other excursion members abandon their tubes to help. They manage to lift her out of the water. “She’s breathing but in and out of consciousness. I’ll run her back to the post and meet up with you later.”

“I’ll let you say ‘I told you so’ forever if you just open your eyes,” the woman with Ashley says as she clings to her hand. Savion lifts Ashley into his arms and, with the friend following close behind, they disappear down a path.

“Holy shit,” Jazz says. “She must not have listened to the ‘hineys up’ command.”

“I hope she’s okay.” Abby’s worried tone underscores her nurturing teacher nature.

“Savion said she was breathing. That’s usually a good indication she’ll be alright,” I assure them.

I tuck my camera away as T-spoon gets the tubes moving again and tries to distract us from the excitement with the history of the Jamaican flag, but I couldn’t give two shits. I’m interested in Abby’s story.

“Tell me about the dress,” I say. I reach out my hand for hers but with the way the rafts are situated, we can only touch fingertips.

She looks at Jazz who gives a small nod. Abby widens her eyes. Jazz furrows her eyebrows. I swear these two are

telepathic. The entire exchange takes less than a second. Still, Abby hesitates.

“Come on, Breezy. I’d rather hear it from you, but I will call Alex tonight if I have to.”

She sighs, then leans over to whisper, “I swear to our new deity, Elvis, that if you look at me with even an ounce of pity, I will tell everyone about the time you passed out and peed your pants after prom.”

My eyes go wide. “How do you even know about that?”

“I was the little sister. I totally spied on you all,” she says without any remorse.

Avoiding my eyes, she tells me the story of her rehearsal dinner night to the backdrop of T-spoon singing, “If you’re happy and you love it, say irie,” at the top of his voice. The group around us, occupied by shouting back, doesn’t pay us any mind. Except for Jazz who shoots us furtive glances, no doubt gauging Abby’s comfort and whether my reaction to the story is appropriate.

I can feel my blood heating with every word. When she gets to the part where Trey already had a bag packed and went straight to his mistress, I barely contain my rage. How did Alex not put this mother fucker’s balls in a vice and squeeze?

Abby senses my mood, of course she does. She squeezes my fingers. “Relax your jaw, Grayson, or you’ll break your pretty teeth. This all happened months ago, so it’s over. I’ve moved on. This dress is the last piece of the healing process.” She gives a self-deprecating laugh. “Well, this and my weekly therapy sessions.”

But it isn’t over for me. I take a moment to process the story.

“So, this really was supposed to be your honeymoon? I thought you were just rambling last night,” I finally say.

She smiles and nods. “I thought about canceling this trip, too, but he’d taken so much already. I was really, really looking forward to the trip. Honestly, I’m having so much more fun with Jazz. And now you.”

We pause for a moment to go over another rapid. The group ooohs and aaahhs as we dip and spin. Everyone is properly soaked by this point.

“Why did you wait to plan the honeymoon during the school year? It would have made more sense to go in the summer, right? After the wedding?” I ask.

She scoffs. “Exactly. My principal was none too happy about me taking a week off. But we scheduled it around Trey’s work schedule, not mine. He had a big project he was working on last summer. October was more open for him.”

“What an asshole, right?” Jazz asks, picking up the end of our conversation.

“That’s not quite the word I would use,” I growl. More like Dead Man Walking.

Abby taps my hand. “Okay, enough sob stories. This is my vacation. T-spoon!” she calls.

“Ya, mon.”

“We are in great need of more rum punch back here.”

“You heard the pretty lady. Pass that rum.” He turns it into a chant. “Pass that rum.” Everyone joins in as the jug makes its way back to us. “Pass that rum.”

She fills my cup practically to the brim. “Drink up to lighten up, buttercup. I didn’t come on this trip to dwell on the past. This trip is about looking forward.”

She fills the cups of those around us. “A toast,” she declares. “To the people who love us”—she nods at Jasmine—“the losers who lost us”—a few ya, mons from the crowd—“and the lucky bastards who get to meet us”—she winks at me with a wide, flirty smile. I can’t help but smile back.

She’s so strong. So resilient. So amazing. I want to punch her ex-fiancé in the dick for ditching her.

At the same time, his loss is my potential gain.

Unless her declaration of not living in the past includes me. I down my rum punch on that happy thought.

By the time we reach the swimming hole, we are once again laughing and singing along with the guides. Abby's one of the first to slide into the water with a gasp at the chilly temperature. Her dress billows around her like a lily pad. Jazz helps her push it down.

"I don't know why more people don't swim in ball gowns," she says, splashing Jazz in the face. "This is super fun. Not at all dragging me down."

"Definitely a trend we'll bring back to the states," Jazz says, splashing her back.

Savion, having returned from his rescue mission, slaps his oar on the water near them, making them scream and jump. He smiles wide. "Just scaring away a crocodile."

They scramble to swim away. Abby is going nowhere fast in all the fabric wrapped around her.

"Just kidding, Mama Mia. No crocs here. It's the water snakes we have to watch out for." He laughs and swims to another group.

"I hope he's kidding. Do you think he's kidding?" Jazz asks, checking the murky water around her.

"I'm not taking any chances." Abby grabs her tube and drags it to the side of the river. When she emerges, the wet dress clings, almost translucent, to her body. She gathers the now mud-stained skirt to wring it out as the sun silhouettes her from behind. It reminds me of this morning when she stretched in my shirt in front of the window. The sunlight coming through the fabric highlighted her slim figure beneath. A hint. A tease.

I can't control my biological response. The cold water does nothing to soothe the heat coursing to my dick.

Jazz swims over to me. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"A goddess." I show her a picture on the back of my camera with a sun flare around Abby's head. This is the kind of juxtaposition photographers live for. A gorgeous woman in a gorgeous dress but covered in mud in the middle of the jungle.

Honestly, nothing could be more Breezy.

“Shit. You’re good. Make sure you get some of me on this trip too,” Jazz says. “I need to update my Insta.” She swims to the edge to join Abby. “Oh, and Gray. It goes without saying that if you fuck with her, I’ll gut you.” She gives me a megawatt smile and climbs out of the water.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I mumble. I snap a couple of them together. They are a striking pair.

“I think the one in the dress is one of my matches from speed dating the other night,” a guy behind me says. “I’m definitely contacting her now. The crazy ones are always spitfires in bed, am I right?” He nudges me with his elbow.

I glower at him.

“Didn’t mean anything by it. What, are you her brother or something?” he asks, holding up his hands.

“Or something,” I growl.

“Got it,” he says, moving away. “Hands off.”

Her dress dries a little by the time we approach the rope swing, but it’s already covered in dirt and torn a little in a few places. She doesn’t seem to mind. She’s lounging on the raft with her face turned to the sun.

I switch my camera to a go-pro so I can video my swing and jump. When it’s Abby’s turn, I hand the go-pro to Jazz with specific instructions on how to shoot. Then I grab my still camera to capture the movement of her dress. This is going to look stunning in slow motion.

The rum punch keeps flowing as we exit the river a few miles downstream at a jerk chicken shack. I sit with the girls as we eat a platter with rice.

“Feeling better, Breezy?” I ask.

“So much better. This was really fun. And freeing. I definitely had more fun in this dress today than I would have on my wedding day.” She dribbles sauce on her lap. Instead of wiping it with a napkin, she takes the bottle and dumps a little more on there, laughing.

“Do you have a different flavor? Add it to the mix. We aren’t done trashing this thing yet,” she says, grabbing my fork and flicking the sauce onto her bodice. Jazz squirts her across the table with more.

I move my camera out of the splash zone.

“What’s more Jamaican than a rum punch and jerk chicken tie-dyed dress?” Abby asks. Her eyes go wide with an idea, and she jumps up from the table. “I’m gonna have our guides sign it. They were so awesome.”

“Someone’s had a little too much rum punch,” Jazz says as Abby sprints away. “But I’m glad she’s having fun. I was worried she’d fall right back into her funk knowing this was supposed to be her honeymoon.”

“She seems to be handling it well.” I watch her talking and laughing with the guides. She gets one of them to unzip her and a ridiculous jolt of jealousy spins through me. She rolls the dress and stuffs it back into her bag for the ride home.

We are all a little hesitant when we see the same van driver waiting to take us back to the ship, but the roads aren’t as busy and we’re on the side away from the cliff, so it isn’t as bad. The rum punch has definitely mellowed us all out. Abby lays her head on my shoulder and practically falls asleep.

“You girls getting into anything tonight?” I ask as we join the line to get back on the ship.

Abby yawns. “Maybe.” She looks at Jazz. “I’m thinking something more low key, like karaoke or one of the shows.”

“Text me when you decide. I may join you if I finish part one of my article.” Which I haven’t started yet because my thoughts have been consumed by Abby. With the story she told me today, I’ll be hard pressed to concentrate tonight.

When I get to my room, I download the pictures from river tubing onto my external drive so I can cull and edit the best. They are already backed up to my cloud account as well, but I need to clear the SD cards to take more pictures tomorrow.

Frank calls when I’m a few paragraphs into my article outline. I’m sitting on the rope hammock on my deck and

watching the sun set over Jamaica. We should be leaving soon. It's an overnight trip to the Cayman Islands tomorrow.

"I'm working on the first part of the article right now," I say when I answer.

"What's going on with the pictures of the brunette in the wedding dress? You seemed to be laying into that angle a lot today."

It takes me a moment to remember I've shared my cloud account with him. "She was doing a trash the dress thing. This was supposed to be her honeymoon, but the wedding didn't happen," I explain. He doesn't need more detail than that.

"No shit." He's quiet a moment. "That's a great angle. Get her story. See what else she gets into this trip. Between her and the flirty granny, this could go viral."

"I don't think she'd want—" I start. He cuts me off.

"You are a journalist. Do what it takes to get the story."

I sigh and scrub a hand over my face. My intention in taking those photos was not to exploit Abby's pain in an article. There is little to no way she'd agree to this. I saw her face when she made me promise not to pity her. All this article would do is refocus pity onto her. Frank will have to deal. But I'll explain that later.

"Fine. I'll see what I can do."

"There's a lot riding on this. For the magazine and for you," he tells me again.

"I know, Frank."

"It definitely helps that she's a knockout. That one picture with the sunlight. Man. It made me wish I was on the trip with you."

"Tell your wife I said hello," I mumble. "I gotta go, Frank. I want to get these first few days written up before I forget."

"That's my boy. Write fast so you can go find this woman again."

Oh, I want to find her alright. Just not for the article. We have unfinished business from last night.

CHAPTER NINE

ABBY



IN CASE ANYONE IS WONDERING, Jamaica does have poison ivy. I know because it's all over my legs and arms. My limbs look like cottage cheese.

The itching started last night. At first, I thought it was a reaction to the dirty water, which T-spoon assured us was clean and would not make us shit our pants. But maybe there was a bacteria that reacted weirdly with my skin or something? Maybe little water worms crawled their way into my pores and laid eggs. Needless to say, I did not sleep well last night; although, this time it was because I dreamt bugs were swarming all over me instead of Gray worshipping my body. I much prefer the latter.

Then I deluded myself into thinking the reaction was psychosomatic because I wore The Dress. I used to get hives whenever I thought too deeply about Trey's betrayal. That hasn't happened in months though. Was I backsliding? My therapist did warn me that old feelings may get dredged up since this trip is another glaring reminder of what was supposed to be but isn't.

After a lengthy, cool shower and some time in the air conditioning, I enjoyed a blissful hour where I didn't want to rip my skin off as much. Until the bumps showed up. I've had poison ivy so many times in my life, I'd recognize it in the dark. A quick trip to the ship's infirmary confirmed it.

How special for me.

I say a quick thank you to pre-cruise me for packing antihistamines and all the poison ivy remedies, but still ended up staying in the cabin to itch the night away while Jazz went to the on-board show with Table Seven. I really should ask his real name.

Gray and I share a few flirty texts. He screenshots me a gorgeous picture of me in my dress from tubing that almost makes me cry again. I look like how I felt—a tattered, broken bride—just in amazing light.

And then I fall asleep early from the meds.

The next morning, I am less itchy and more rested for our fun-filled day in Grand Cayman. This is the day I've been looking forward to. Jazz and I chose swimming with the dolphins and then a lazy day on 7 Mile Beach. I'm gonna have to slow down on the booze today because of the meds, but that won't stop me from having fun.

Grayson is already in line for disembarkation when we arrive. Much to Jazz's delight, so is Table Seven. Apparently, they had quite the make-out sesh in the back of the auditorium last night. Jazz thinks she'll get to ride the bony express tonight—her words, not mine.

She saunters toward him, leaving me alone with Gray. For the record, I'm fine with that.

“Are you stalking us?” I ask Gray.

He reaches for my arm, then hesitates when he sees the patches of pale pink cream. “Get in a fight with a cotton candy machine?”

“Poison ivy,” I explain. “I'm highly allergic. There must have been some in the jungle yesterday.”

He grimaces, looking over my mottled skin. Guess my chance at a booty call tonight just disappeared into a tube of poison ivy cream.

“Looks painful.”

“Yeah. It kinda is. I have prescription cream to help.” Great job, Abby. Why don't you tell him about all your

ailments? Maybe he wants to hear about how you have irregular bowel movements on vacations as well.

“I missed you last night,” he says. “I’d much rather have spent time with you instead of outlining an article.”

I smile up at him, hope tapping at my naughty bits. “Why? Do you enjoy holding back hair as your date throws up all over the place?”

And the hope retreats. What is wrong with me today?

“I was hoping for a different end to our evening.”

I snort. “Like me passing out from allergy medicine after itching a layer of skin off? God, I’m so much fun lately.”

He takes my hand, kisses my knuckles. “I’m having more fun on this cruise than I’ve had in a long time. A lot of that has to do with you, Breezy.” He takes a step closer, his sexy smell invading my senses. “I’m still more than willing to be your rebound. Poison ivy or not.”

“Really?” I ask. When he’s this close to me, I have a hard time remembering to breathe.

He tips my chin with his finger, trails his lips lightly over my cheekbone. “A thousand times, yes,” he whispers in my ear. I’m going to pretend he knows that’s a quote from *Pride and Prejudice*.

I shiver, then shiver again when his chuckle tickles my ear. He takes my hand and leads me down the ramp to our shuttle.



Dolphin swimming is freaking awesome. I don’t want to leave. I want to live here forever with the dolphins, the sea turtles, and the crystal blue waters. Little fish nibble at my toes as they sink into the pristine sand. We each get a chance to feed, pet, and play with the two sleek dolphins. The highlight is holding onto their fins as they shoot through the water.

“Okay, I officially need a pet dolphin,” Jazz says when she finishes her turn.

“Did you know dolphins are one of the only other mammals that fuck for pleasure?” I quip, feeding bits of lettuce to the massive sea turtle by my knees.

“Now I definitely want one. Dolphins are my new spirit animal,” she says. “And I’m not even going to ask how you know that.”

“That’s what I do. I read stuff, and I know things.”

At one point, I lose sight of Gray. I find him crouching beside a group of local boys. They couldn’t be much older than elementary school. He’s holding his camera up and showing them what all the buttons are for.

He catches me looking and winks but doesn’t lose focus on the kids. He lets them take turns taking pictures with his very expensive camera, gives them high-fives when they get a good shot, and discreetly hands them mints from his pocket before they run off in a group. It’s so sweet my teeth hurt.

And so different from Trey. Trey would be bored and on his phone by now. He’d be annoyed that we have to wait our turn to play in the shallow pool with the dolphins. He’d never stoop so low as to talk to local children. He’d be constantly on me to do something about my itchy limbs. I can see it as clearly as I can see my feet in this pristine water.

I almost married that. It leaves a bad taste in the back of my throat.

Pushing all thoughts of my toxic ex back into their padlocked box deep, deep down into the cavernous recesses of my mind where they belong, I refocus on the right now instead of the what ifs. And the right now includes a handsome photographer named Gray.

I nearly spit out my strawberry daiquiri when he takes off his shirt at 7 Mile Beach. How have I not seen him shirtless yet? Serious oversight on my part.

I thought his arms were strong but damn, the boy has some nice abs. His swim trunks hang low on his waist, revealing that delicious V of muscle men have at their hips arrowing the way

to Fun Town. Of their own volition, my hands reach out to touch him. I manage to stop myself just in time.

His muscles tighten as he twists a little. Is he flexing for me? I peel my eyes away from his very adult, very toned body and look up at him. A mischievous smile plays on his lips.

“Are you checking me out, Breezy? You want to touch my—how do they put it in romance novels—chiseled abs?” He flexes again and the V at his hips pops a little more.

Touch? Not quite. I want to lay him out and lick him like an ice cream cone. I want to pour my daiquiri into the ridges of his abs and drink it like an ice luge shot. I want to wipe that smirk off his face with my talented tongue.

He makes a show of handing me a napkin. “For the drool.”

I smile politely and narrow my eyes. Two can play at this game. “It’s so hot out here I can hardly breathe.” I part my lips and pant a little, dabbing the napkin in my cleavage, then setting it aside. I roll the cool glass of my daiquiri on my neck, letting my head fall back onto the lounge chair.

I peek an eye open. I have his full attention now. I put the glass aside. “Maybe I’ll take a quick dip in the ocean.” I stretch my arms over my head, arching my back and making sure my toes curl just as he described in the memory. Oh yes. I may have been drunk, but the conversation came back to me with time.

“Oh, you little vixen,” he says, a laugh in his voice, when he realizes I’m recreating that memory.

Before I can register what’s happening, he lifts me easily off the chair and throws me over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I try to shout, but I’m laughing too hard and also very distracted by the view of his fine ass.

“You want to recreate moments from our misspent youth, right?”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I say, realizing what he’s doing. The ocean splashes around his feet and into my face as he runs into the waves.

I try to squirm loose, but he tightens his grip and gives me a playful slap on the top of my thighs. When he's about waist deep, he drops me unceremoniously into the water. Truthfully, the cool waves feel amazing on my poison ivy. And thankfully, I manage to keep my head above water.

Until he dunks me. I come up sputtering a little more dramatically than necessary, but all's fair in this game. He immediately pulls me to standing and brushes the hair from my face.

"Shit, Breezy. I thought you saw that coming. You okay?" The concern in his eyes warms me to my core, and I feel a little bad for tricking him.

But only a little. I wrap a leg around his knee under the water, bringing our bodies closer.

"I don't know. I might need mouth-to-mouth." I'm practically purring.

"I can help with that." He lowers his mouth. Just as his lips brush mine, I yank the leg around his knee. He buckles, and I give him a little shove to send him falling back into the water.

Yelping with laughter, I turn and try to run, but he grabs my ankle and pulls me back to him. We play fight, splashing and dunking and throwing each other around. Well, he throws me around. I try to dunk him by pushing on his shoulders, but he's a solid rock under me.

It's like no time has passed since high school. We're right back in my pool, flirting without realizing we were flirting. At least I didn't think we were flirting. I just thought Alex's friends lived to torment and tease me.

"Would you guys just do it already? All this foreplay is getting *me* worked up!" Jazz yells from the shore.

I flip her my middle finger as Gray's large hands come around me again. He lifts me easily against him. I take advantage of the moment to feel up his flexed biceps. Carrying camera equipment must be good upper body work because damn. I brace myself for the impact of the water, holding my breath and slamming my eyes closed.

When it doesn't come, I peek an eye open. Gray is staring at me in a way that makes my breath hitch. His eyes are molten as they flick between mine and my lips. One of his hands moves from my back to the side of my hip. He growls low in his throat as he digs his fingers into my flesh.

"Enough," he says, and crushes his lips on mine. The kiss is needy and hard and full of years of want. I thread my fingers in his hair, holding him to me as I moan into his mouth, needing to get closer, taste all of him, feel more. He seems to like that because his hand moves to my ass and he deepens the kiss, using his tongue to claim me.

I barely have time to register that I am finally kissing Grayson Hamilton. There is nothing but the sensation of his tongue sweeping the inside of my mouth, his hands holding me against him, his low growl urging me on, the sway of our bodies as the waves roll against us. Whatever I thought kissing Grayson would be like in my naive and Grayless past, it can't compare to the magic he is making with his mouth. Time will now be acknowledged in terms of BKG and AKG—Before Kissing Gray and After Kissing Gray.

Just when I think I'm about to pass out from lack of oxygen, he breaks the kiss to nip along my jawline, making his way to the pulse point in my neck. I gasp for air.

"I should've done that a long time ago," he says.

I blink my eyes slowly as he suckles my ear, his warm breath mixing with the cool water and causing shivers through my body.

Then I blink again to clear my vision because I swear I see a dark shape swimming under the surface near our legs.

Of course, my first thought is shark or barracuda or alligator. I squeal and kick my legs frantically, trying to get him to put me down so I can run out of the water.

"What the hell, Abby? If you want me to stop, just say so."

I kick some more as the thing loops around and heads back toward us. I only stop squirming when my foot connects with

his balls. Hard. He drops me, grabs his gonads, and doubles over.

“We have to get out of the water,” I say, pulling on his arm after I scramble to my feet. “There’s a shark.”

He shakes his head, looking a little pale. “Can’t walk. I’ll take my chances.”

“Suit yourself.” I take off for the shore as fast as I can through the water. About halfway to shore, I see people going the other way. Are they stupid? Why would they go toward the shark?

“It’s a stingray,” someone shouts.

“Don’t get too close,” a mother cautions.

I slow my steps to turn and look. Sure enough, a small stingray is gliding gracefully just below the surface of the waves. It’s making small circles around where Gray is still standing hunched over in pain.

“Oh no. Did it sting that guy? Sir, are you okay? You look like you’re in pain,” a woman asks, approaching Gray. She puts a hand on his arm, and I don’t miss the not-to-subtle way she checks out his form.

He holds up a hand. “I’m okay. Just a cramp.” He gives me a pointed look.

I wince and mumble, “Sorry.”

Holding his towel, I wait on the edge of the water for him to recover enough to move. He slowly wades through all the people trying to get pictures of the stingray.

He takes the towel and wipes his face and chest. His expression is stern, but there’s a playful lilt in his voice when he says, “If you don’t want to kiss me, you can just say so, you know. No need to resort to juvenile violence.”

“I thought it was a shark,” I say. “I’m really sorry.”

“Just a stingray. A harmless stingray. *You* are apparently more dangerous than it.”

“Stingrays are dangerous. That’s how Steve Irwin died. Rest his beautiful soul.” I link my arm through his. “Come on. I’ll buy you an early dinner to make up for it.”

“You could give my twins a massage. That would make up for it.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“Dinner it is,” he says, dropping a kiss on my head.

We dry off, grab Jazz and Table Seven, and find ourselves at the Agave Azul Tequila Bar. Of course, it’s tequila. I give myself a one drink limit.

We sit at a bar table with tall stools near the edge of the restaurant so we can still hear the crashing waves and see the white-sand beaches. It’s still early, but the beach is slowly clearing of swimmers as the evening progresses.

“I kind of never want to leave,” I say wistfully, gazing out at the scenery. “They probably need English teachers down here, right?”

“I know a lot of people that would miss you too much. Me included,” a familiar and unwelcome voice says. I snap my head to the newcomer and nearly pass out. This can’t be real. I was eaten by that shark, and now I’m stuck in some sort of torture version of Hell.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I hear Jazz say, but everything is a bit muffled and hazy, like I can’t quite get my senses to work.

He takes another step, and the world comes whirling back into real time.

I narrow my eyes and spit fire. “Trey.”

CHAPTER TEN

GRAYSON



WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING? Abby went from smiling to pale to fire in an instant. She stands up so abruptly her stool topples over.

“What are you doing here?” she parrots Jazz’s question.

“It was supposed to be my honeymoon too,” the newcomer says.

So, this is Trey. He’s got smug asshole written all over his pink polo shirt and too short khaki shorts. I instantly don’t like him, and not just because of what he did to Abby. He has his collar popped for early ‘00s sake. I’d bet my left nutsack he has a Chinese symbol tattooed somewhere on his body.

Abby huffs, crossing her arms defensively. “Well, you forfeited that when you cheated on me and left.”

Jazz begins moving the cutlery and glasses out of Abby’s reach.

“What are you doing?” I ask quietly, not taking my eyes off the douchebag. If he so much as tries to touch her, I’ll end him.

Jazz says, “The last time she saw him in a restaurant, a lot of things got broken.”

I smirk despite my foul mood. “Grace and poise, my ass,” I mumble.

“You should have seen her. Picked the cheap tilapia filet right off his date’s plate and flung it in his face. She was glorious in her righteous anger.” Jazz smiles proudly at Abby.

“I bet,” I say. I kinda wish I got to see it. Looking at her flushed skin and fiery eyes, I might just get to see it now.

“Anyone care to fill me in?” Table Seven says. He’s watching the scene with alert eyes, and I remember he’s a cop. I ball my hands into fists on my thighs and try to keep that in mind even though I’m sure he doesn’t have jurisdiction in the Grand Cayman.

Trey is trying to apologize but it sounds a few rungs short of sincere. “I’m so sorry, Abs. I made a terrible mistake. I miss what we had.”

She snorts and shakes her head. *Good girl*, I think. *Don’t believe his bullshit.*

“Is Crystal not classy enough to take to your swanky dinners? Do the partners frown upon dipping your dick where you work? That’s what you really miss, right? The idea of me.”

Trey frowns in surprise. I know that look. It’s the same one I gave when I wasn’t immediately forgiven after Morocco. He honestly thought he’d just apologize, and Abby would fall back into his arms.

He takes a deep breath to settle himself. “This isn’t about Crystal. This is about you and me. We’re great together, Abby.”

“I can’t listen to this,” she says, with a wave of her hand. “Please get out of my face.”

Trey isn’t giving up so easy. His voice gets a small edge. “We need to talk. I came all the way here, you owe me that.”

“I don’t owe you shit. In fact, it’s you who owe my family about fifty-K for calling off the wedding. Do you know how humiliating it was to have to call all the vendors? To explain to the hospital why I had all those flowers to donate? To beg the venue to please give back our deposit so I could pay rent on the goddamn townhouse you had to have and then abandoned?”

“Abby, please. I was a dick.”

“That’s an insult to dicks,” Jazz mutters.

Trey glares at her. “Fine, I’m worse than a dick. I’m here to apologize. I’m here to try to make things right.” He turns his attention back to Abby, his eyes a facsimile of pleading. “I’ll do whatever you want. You want me to get down on the floor and beg? I will. I’ll do it right here in the middle of the restaurant.”

Jazz leans forward. “You should make him do that anyway. Make him kiss your feet. Make him buy you the entire bar.”

Abby isn’t listening. She’s studying Trey’s face. *Stay strong, Breezy.*

“Tell me what I have to do. I’ll do anything,” he repeats. It’s satisfying for me to see him beg, I’m sure Abby is eating this up. I just hope it doesn’t work.

“I’ll tell you what,” she says, relaxing her posture a little. “If you can tell me my favorite flower, I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

Trey smiles widely. He thinks he’s won. “That’s easy. Roses.”

She makes a buzzer sound. “No. Sorry. That answer is not on the board. Your consolation prize is a solo trip back to New Orleans.”

She picks up her stool and sits, turning her back to him. Her fingers tremble slightly as she plays with the straw in her drink.

“What are you talking about? I always got you roses,” Trey says.

Abby rolls her eyes. “Always is stretching it. A handful of times you got me roses. Usually in lieu of you actually being there for special occasions like our anniversary or my teacher of the year celebration. Instead of you by my side supporting me, I got a bunch of roses.”

“Exactly. Even though I couldn’t be there because my job is demanding, I always remembered. Some guys don’t even remember.”

What an asshole.

Abby stands again. “Those stupid roses, which are not my favorite flower, just reminded me how lonely I was. They reminded me that my boyfriend put work ahead of me. That I was always second best. And roses? Always roses? Could you be any more impersonal?”

“What’s wrong with roses? They’re the symbol of love.”

“Roses are what you send when you don’t know someone’s favorite flower. They’re the cop out. The easy grab. The ‘I don’t have to think too hard about it’ flower.”

Trey throws his hands up, clearly not getting it. “Jesus, I can’t win with you. I try to do something nice and romantic —”

“Who sent the flowers?” she asks, cutting him off. Her voice is shrill, and the argument has caught the attention of several tables nearby.

“I did. We just established that.”

“So *you* called the florist and picked out the precise bouquet and told them what to write on the card? You did that yourself?” she asks, a small vein pulsing beside one eye. I’ve never seen Abby this angry, and she is a force. I hope I’m never on the other end of that.

Trey’s face goes red as he sputters.

She smiles derisively. “Exactly. I’m sure it was your assistant, Crystal. Tell me, was that during or after the blow jobs she was giving you under your desk?”

The group next to us murmurs a collective, “ooh.” The waiter, heading to our table with a tray of food, takes one look at Abby and turns on his heel back to the kitchen.

“That’s not fair,” Trey whispers. “You never wanted to do that.”

She gapes at him. I’m one second away from punching the guy myself.

She seethes but keeps her voice low and level. “You don’t get to tell me about fair. And maybe I’d have been more inclined to suck you off if you ever just once found my G-spot. Two years without an orgasm is too long. You fucking asshole.”

She grabs the closest drink from our table and hurls it at him, glass and all, then storms off down the beach.

Jazz and I stand at once. I put a hand on her arm. “Let me go.”

She nods. “I’ll handle the walking penis here.”

Before chasing after her, I lean into Trey. “For the record, her favorite flower is a daisy. Even I know that, and I haven’t seen her in a decade, you dick.”

He narrows his eyes at me but doesn’t try anything. Good thing; I have him by about two inches and twenty pounds. I’d wipe the ground with his pansy ass.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks.

“I’m the one she deserves.”

I give him one last withering look and follow Abby to the beach.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ABBY



I RUN. Like a coward, I run. But I can't stand looking at him for one more second. I can't trust myself not to break down crying or claw his lying eyes out or melt into a puddle of anxiety. What the fuck is he doing here? How did he find me?

"Shit. Fuck. Ass. Titties. Shit," I yell into the wind. A group of seagulls take off squawking. Luckily the beach is relatively deserted so there's no one around to see me fall apart.

"That's no way for a school teacher to talk."

I whirl around to see Gray walking slowly toward me. Like he's approaching a wild animal and needs to proceed with caution.

"Don't look at me," I say. "I'm a mess right now."

"You have every right to be a mess. What he did was a dick move."

I'm pacing, running through the conversation again. God, how many times have I imagined this moment? What Trey would say, what I would say. None of what I envisioned happened, of course. I can barely remember what I said.

I look up at Gray, trying to ground myself in his steady gaze. "Why would he come all this way? What kind of person does that? He's had months...MONTHS...to...to...to rediscover his feelings for me when we were minutes apart. Instead, he waits until I'm finally getting over him and stalks me to Grand Cayman? Did he think he was making a grand gesture? Because that's nuts. It's nuts, right? All he's doing is

flaunting money. A real grand gesture would be quoting Shakespeare to me. Or at least knowing any Shakespeare play beyond *Romeo and Juliet*, which is *not* romantic.” I look at Gray. “I shouldn’t take it as a grand gesture, right?”

I’m pacing again, wringing my hands, unable to stay still. The panic is rising. I rub my chest to try to tamp it down.

“I think it’s whatever you—”

“I mean, does he think coming here would just automatically make me forget all the humiliation and doubt? Does he think I’ll just forget about the part where he stuck his penis in someone else? ‘Cause he has another thing coming.” I turn to face Gray. “I was having a really great time on this cruise. Especially today. I kissed a really hot guy today. I drank tequila and kept my clothes on. And then he has to show up and ruin it. Just like he ruined my life.” I snap my fingers. “That’s it. He’s a ruiner. He just ruins all the things.”

“I would have to agree with you there.”

I’m vaguely aware of Gray speaking, but I’m on a roll and barrel right over him. “And why here? How the hell did he find me on this entire island? I could have been anywhere! But he knew exactly where I was. And of course, it’s after a day of swimming and the beach before I can redo my make-up and moisturize. Of course, I’m covered in poison ivy and sunburn and my hair is a tangled mess and I’m bloated from all the alcohol.”

“You are beautiful, Breezy. You’re glowing.”

I rub my eyes. “Shit. Why do I even care what I look like? I shouldn’t care. Why do I still care what he thinks?”

Gray pulls my hands away from my face. “You were together for two years. That’s a lot of history.”

“It is a long time. I agreed to marry him for Christ’s sake. If he hadn’t called it off, I would be married right now. I would be here with him.” I shudder. “I can picture it. And maybe things would have been different once we were married. We had lots of good times. Especially in the beginning. That should probably count for something.” I look

up at Gray. “Should I give him a chance to explain? Am I being too hard on him?” I gasp. “Am I the bitch now? I am, aren’t I? He’ll have the upper hand. He’ll be able to use this to his advantage. He flew all the way down here to surprise me and win me back, but I rejected him. I didn’t even give him a chance. I’m going to be the bitch. That’s almost worse than the jilted bride. He’s turned the tables.”

“No one is going to think you’re—”

I’m pacing again. Anger and panic are fighting for space in my chest. “Oh no. There are tables, and he’s turned them. That asshole! Oh, I’m going to kill him...I want to...I can’t...” I rub my chest. “Shit. I’m freaking out. How was I back there? Did I sound okay? Did I act like an idiot? I didn’t throw anything, right? Besides the drink, but he deserved that. I didn’t claw his eyes out, so that’s good. That’s progress. The only person I kicked in the nuts today was you. I was poised and coherent, right?” I rub my chest again. “Shit. I can’t breathe.”

Gray takes my hands again to stop my pacing. “Look at me, Abby.”

I can’t focus. I’m in a tunnel of yuck and can’t find my way out.

“Come on Breezy. Breathe with me. In and out. Let’s take your mind off it for a minute. You need a chance to decompress before you overanalyze everything.”

I’m breathing through my mouth like an idiot, but his calm tone is helping. When I look in his eyes, it’s all concern and no pity. I would have died if he pitied me.

He smiles and says, “Word association game. When I say a word, tell me the first thing that comes to mind.”

“I don’t think I can. I’m not good at this game.”

He smiles, amused. “There are no wrong answers. Look at me. Nothing else matters. Look at me and listen to my voice.”

I do and feel steadier already.

“First thing that pops into your head. Ready.”

I nod.

Gray says, “We’ll start simple. Apple.”

I say, “Pie.”

He smiles at me like a proud parent. “You are a natural at this game. I knew you would be. Let’s pick up the pace. Beach.”

“Ball.”

“Cruise.”

“Tom.”

“Tom?” he asks.

“Holland.”

“No. I was asking why you said Tom.”

“Tom Cruise. Of *Mission Impossible* and *Top Gun* fame?”
I explain.

“I know who he is. I just wasn’t expecting that. We are literally on a cruise right now, remember? I expected something to do with that.”

I shrug. “I had a huge crush on him before he went crazy.”
I take a deep breath. “Hit me with some more. I think this is helping.”

Amused, he shakes his head and looks down. “Hands.”

“Blood.”

His eyes snap to mine and narrow. “Do you need to tell me something?”

“I’m in the middle of teaching *Macbeth* to my juniors. You know, ‘Out damn spot. Out I say.’”

“If you say so. Moving along. Uh, pumpkin.”

“Bug.”

“Your mind is weird, Breezy.”

“Keep going. No time outs,” I say. It’s helping calm me down.

“Jazz.”

“Ride or die.”

“Grayson.”

“Edible,” I clamp a hand over mouth.

He raises an eyebrow. “We’re gonna put a pin in that and come back to it. Bread.”

“Butter.”

“Fire.”

“Blood.”

“Trey.”

“Mouth-breathing bag of dicks.”

Gray snaps fingers. “There you go. That should tell you something. Any pangs of longing zipping around in there?” He taps my chest.

I give it a minute to assess. The only thing I’m thinking about is calling Gray edible out loud. I say, “No. No longing for Trey.”

Grayson tugs me closer to him, rubbing my arms. His voice is low and soothing. “Even if this was his idea of a grand gesture, it doesn’t mean you have to accept it. It doesn’t mean it’s enough to fix what he broke between you two. From where I’m sitting, you owe him nothing.”

I let out a deep breath, channeling all the things my therapist told me over these last few months. “You’re right. Thanks.”

“I mean it. Every word.”

“The word association thing was your mother’s idea, right?” I ask.

He nods.

“She was a smart woman. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

A tenderness passes across his face for a moment. Then his signature smirk is back in place. “Speaking of the game. Why did two of your answers involve blood? I get the Macbeth-hands one. But why blood for fire?”

My face heats. *Because my blood feels like it’s on fire when I’m around you.*

I say, “I don’t remember. That was the lightning round.”

He narrows his eyes but doesn’t press. “Fine. Keep your secrets. Can we go back to the Grayson-edible answer?”

“No.”

“Because I honestly had myself braced for you to say annoying. Or know-it-all. I don’t think I’ve ever been called edible before.”

I avoid his gaze. “I was still thinking about the pumpkin.” Liar, liar, pants on fire.

Gray steps even closer. Our bodies are touching, and I can’t breathe again, although this time it’s for a good reason. He wraps a hand around my neck, settling his thumb by my earlobe. My eyelids flutter closed as I tilt my face up to his. Is he going to kiss me again? He better kiss me.

“I think you’re pretty tasty too, Breezy. What are we going to do about that?”

I part my lips slightly in anticipation. The air around us hums. I am acutely aware of how our bodies fit together, how our legs are entwined like they were when we danced, how his hands are so large yet so gentle. *Kiss me*, I will him.

Kiss me. Kiss me. Kiss me.

I feel his breath on my lips.

Suddenly, I’m yanked roughly from Gray’s arms.

“Get your hands off my fiancée!” Trey bellows, gripping my arm so hard I’m sure it’ll leave bruises.

“I’m not your fiancée,” I yell up at him, trying to peel his fingers off my skin with my other hand. “Let me go, Trey.”

He isn't listening to me. He's dragging me up the beach. "You and I are going to talk, Abigail. We're going to work this out." He scowls over his shoulder at Gray. "Can't you see all he wants is to get in your pants?"

"Maybe I want him in my pants," I say.

That makes him stop in his tracks. He yanks me to his side.

"What did you say?"

I glare up at him. "I'm a single, independent woman. If I want to drop my pants for the entirety of the Love at Sea Cruise, that's my business not yours. Now, let me go."

He gets in my face. "It is my business. I love you, Abby. We belong together. You just need to be reminded."

I pull on my arm again. He's got a patch of poison ivy under his sweaty palms that's adding to my discomfort. "Let me go."

He turns to walk up the beach again but runs into Gray's solid chest. I didn't even see him move. He's glaring at Trey with such animosity I'm surprised the beach doesn't catch on fire.

"She has asked you three times to let her go. That's two times too many. So, you have two choices. Respect her wishes and let her go, or I will break your arm and then your face. Either way, you're done here, Trey." Gray's voice has an edge I've never heard. He's towering over Trey. There is no doubt in my mind that he can follow through on his threat.

It's actually kind of hot. I never thought I'd be turned on by the alpha male come to my defense bravado, but damn, Intense Grayson is a force.

Trey weighs his options for a second too long. Gray steps to him, and he immediately drops my arm. I rub at it to ease the itchy burn.

"Good choice, mother fucker," Gray says. He puts himself between me and Trey. "Now, if you're smart. You get on the next plane out of here. You don't contact her again. In fact,

you don't even think about her. If she ever wants to see you again, she'll get in touch with you. Are we clear?"

Trey straightens his shirt and with one last long look at me, turns on his heel and storms up the beach. A small round of applause comes from the few onlookers around us. Gray's body thrums beneath my fingers when I touch his bicep.

He turns, his eyes still intense. They flash when they see the mark Trey left on my arm, but his touch is feather-light when he runs his fingers over the red mark.

"Are you okay?" he asks, voice strained.

I nod.

"Holy shit. I thought he left," Jazz says, running up to us. "I had him contained, but then he stormed off. I thought he finally got the hint and left. I'm so sorry. Did he hurt you, Abby?"

"Just a small mark on my arm," I say. "But it definitely helped me realize I want nothing to do with him."

"Good. I hope he gets a rare incurable genital disease that makes his already small balls shrivel up and fall off," she says.

I laugh. Genuinely laugh. "This is why you're my best friend. Come on, I could use another drink."

We start walking back to the restaurant. I look back to see if Grayson is following, but he's still standing on the beach.

"Gray?" I ask. "Come on. I owe you dinner *and* a drink now."

"I'm right behind you. Just give me a minute."

He turns to face the water and runs a hand through his hair. I can see his muscles still trembling beneath his shirt.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ABBY



WHEN WE GET BACK to the ship, Jazz pulls me aside. She and Table Seven were all but naked on the ride back to the ship.

“Girl, you are my ride or die. So if you need me tonight, I am here for you one hundred percent. You need to decompress with some more drinks at the champagne bar and curse Trey with bloody urine, I’m there. Just say the word.” She gives a longing glance to Table Seven. “But if I don’t ride that soon,” she points to Table Seven, “I’m gonna die. So if your breakdown could wait an hour, my vajayjay will never forget your kindness.”

I laugh. “Go. I’m fine.”

She gives me a pointed look.

I reassure her. “I swear. Rejecting him was cathartic. I feel energized. Relieved.”

She looks unconvinced. “Forget it. I’ll just tell him you need me. We still have three nights left on this floating den of debauchery. Plenty of time to make him my love slave and beg to pleasure me.”

Grayson steps up then, placing a protective arm around my shoulders and tucking me against his side. “I got her, Jazz. Go have fun.”

She raises her eyebrows at his possessive tone and shoots a look to me. I give her a small nod. She returns with a sly, knowing smile.

“Well, alright then. Hopefully I won’t see you until the morning.” She goes in for a hug, but since Gray doesn’t let go, it ends up being a group hug. “Seriously, call me if you need me. I’m here for you,” she whispers, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek.

She sultry-walks over to Table Seven. They flirt for a minute before Seven swings her around into a piggyback ride. Jazz squeals in delight. When she looks over at us, she mimes giving a blow job. I laugh and wave.

Gray takes my hand and escorts me to my floor, adrenaline coursing through him still. He’s been unusually quiet since the Trey incident on the beach. One word answers, half-smiles. It reminds me a little of my rehearsal dinner. Things left unsaid. Awkwardness swirling in the air. I stop in front of my door.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I ask, hoping that asking this time doesn’t backfire like it did the night before my wedding.

His jaw clenches as he considers. I can’t read his expression. He squeezes my hand in his.

“Say something,” I whisper. “You’re scaring me.”

His expression softens a little. He pulls a strand of my hair through his fingers. “I don’t know whether to apologize to you or go find the fucker and break a few laws.”

I touch his jaw, smoothing my thumb over it. Then I move to his furrowed brow. I trace the deep lines with my fingertips.

“No apology necessary. Your alpha-male Gray wolf alter-ego was pretty hot,” I admit.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” I rub the pad of my index finger over his lips. He nips at it, sending a jolt of lust straight to my naughty bits. I let out the smallest gasp, and his eyes laser focus on me.

“You haven’t seen alpha, yet,” he says, pressing me back against the door.

And then his mouth is on mine. I dive my fingers into his hair, holding him to me, afraid we might be interrupted again. He lifts one of my legs onto his hip and grinds his erection

against me. I lift the other leg until he's holding me suspended against the wall.

His mouth is everywhere—my lips, my jaw, my neck, my collarbone, my earlobe. He's saying my name on little breaths and lighting fires wherever his mouth lands. I think it's me sighing and moaning and demanding more, but I can't be sure. All I'm sure about is how good he feels against me. How big and strong his hands are. How good he tastes. How much I want him.

“Key,” he says.

“Right arm,” I say, dropping it to my side. He moves over so I can press the bracelet against the door lock. He carries me inside and kicks it shut behind us.

“Bed?”

“Just one.”

“Condoms?”

“Drawer.”

It seems we're playing the word association game again. Although this time not because of panic, but because I don't want to waste a moment on words when my lips could be on his skin. He tastes so good.

Okay, he tastes a little like sunscreen and sweat, but I'm here for it.

Gripping my thigh with one hand and supporting my back with the other, Grayson expertly lays me on the bed. He pulls the loose dress over my shoulders to kiss along my collarbone. I suck in a breath as he lingers where my shoulder meets my neck. My toes curl on the bedspread.

He rubs a palm over my thigh, gripping it tightly to hold me close to him. I grind against him, not caring that I seem desperate to feel him. I am desperate to feel him.

I am also itchy. The skin under his hand on my thigh begins to burn.

Fuck me.

I push him away slightly. He looks at me with glassy eyes so full of desire I could burst from happiness. I wish fifteen-year-old me could see this moment. Grayson Hamilton wants me. He wants to alpha-male the fuck out of me.

“If you want to stop, I will, Abby. We don’t have to do this. But just know it will probably kill me,” he says, his eyes pleading.

“Oh no. This is absolutely happening.” I grab his dick through his jeans for good measure, and he shudders out a groan. “But my poison ivy is acting up.”

He supports himself over me in a push-up position. “What do you need?”

“Skin transplant?” He gives me a look. “A cool washcloth should suffice.”

He gives me a quick kiss on the nose. “Don’t move. Unless it’s to undress,” he says then disappears into the bathroom.

I take off my dress, leaving me in just my bikini, and stretch out on the bed, one knee bent and arms thrown over my head. It makes my little boobies perk up. That’s it girls, reel him in.

He takes one look at me and growls—actually growls. “Tell me where to put this.” He holds out the washcloth.

I instruct him where it hurts the most. The cool fabric soothes the itch.

“Sorry I’m such a mess.” I say as he dabs it onto my thighs.

“You could be covered in hives and still be gorgeous. In fact, I know that’s true. Remember when you had that allergic reaction to those cookies your aunt brought over?” he asks, a smile on his face.

I cover my eyes with my arm. “Don’t remind me. I blew up like a puffer fish. That’s when I realized I was allergic to coconut.”

He takes my arm away from my face. “You were the most beautiful anaphylactic patient I’ve ever seen. I wanted so

badly to take away your pain then. Just as I want to now.” He rubs a thumb over the bruise forming on my arm.

I tilt his chin away from the mark when I see his brows furrowing again.

“Oh no. Don’t you dare go back there. I want your full attention on me.”

He throws the cloth on the bedside table and crawls over me again, my favorite crooked smile on his beautiful face. “That’ll be easy, Breezy.”

I groan at the bad pun. “A little less talk and a little more action.”

He kisses me again and puts his hand back on my leg. I pull back.

“Nope. Don’t touch me there.”

He moves his hand to another spot and kisses me again. His tongue sweeps the inside of my mouth, tasting every part of me. I wrap a leg around his waist, still annoyed that he’s wearing too many clothes. Reaching down, I pull his shirt up his back. He reaches over his shoulder and tugs it off in one swift move.

“Yes,” I say, running my hands up his taut abs. Then I give in and trace his pec with my tongue. When I give his nipple a little flick, he gasps and grips my hip.

I jolt. “Poison!”

He moves his hand a little lower.

“There too,” I wince.

He hesitates before putting a single finger on my knee cap.

“That’ll work.”

He traces the finger up my leg, around my poison patches and between my legs. I am suddenly very still and very curious where that finger is going to go.

He moves it over the outside of my bathing suit. I grind my hips reflexively, needing him closer.

“Don’t get greedy, Abby. If this is the only place I can touch you, I need to make the most of it.” He drops his head to my ear. “I plan to be right here until you come, hard and screaming my name.”

He teases me by dipping his fingers just underneath the edge of the fabric.

“Please, Gray,” I say. “Touch me.”

It’s been so long since someone touched me for my pleasure. With Trey, it was usually a means to an end. The faster he got me wet, the faster he could get inside me and get off. At first, I thought it was sexy. That he couldn’t wait to feel me, but I quickly realized it was because he didn’t much care if I got off or not.

Shit. Why am I thinking about that asshole? I crumple his image into a little ball and set it on fire. I’m done thinking about him. For good this time.

Gray kisses me, angling my head with one hand, while he finally, finally circles my clit with his finger. I moan and use my hand to press his against me.

“Fuck, Abby. That’s so hot.” He dips a finger inside me, and I cry out. I clamp a hand over my mouth in embarrassment.

“Oh no. No embarrassment tonight. It turns me on knowing I’m making you feel this good. Don’t you dare hold back.” He slips another finger inside me as he moves down my body.

My bones melt. Shit, if he makes me feel this good with his fingers, what’s going to happen when he fucks me? I might actually burst into flames. Or just slip into a passion-induced coma.

“I’m going to taste you now, Abby.” I don’t have time to decide if it’s a promise or a warning before his tongue flicks lightly over my nub at the same time he dives his fingers deep inside me. I squeeze my thighs around his head. He laughs against my skin.

“This would last longer if I could breathe, Breezy,” he says.

“Sorry. It’s been a long time since anyone...you know.” I release my thighs. He holds one down with the hand that isn’t knuckle deep inside me.

He continues his ministrations until I am indeed calling his name as I come apart. Fireworks. Waves crashing. Earthquakes rumbling. Pick an image. That is what’s happening to my body as Grayson shows me that sex is so much more than I’ve experienced before.

When I’m panting and boneless, he sits up and wipes the back of his hand across his mouth. “I could do that all night long.” He crawls up my body. “But I have other plans.”

“Yes, please. Whatever it is yes. I want it,” I say with my eyes closed. I can barely function right now. Between the lack of sleep last night, swimming in the ocean all day, my emotional encounter with Trey, and finally having all my teenage dreams come true, I’m a bit done.

He kisses my forehead. “Not tonight. I prefer my partners to be awake and active participants.”

“I’m awake. Or I can be. I will rally.” I attempt to sit up but fall back with only the slightest touch of his fingers on my shoulders.

“I have no doubt. But I can wait. You’ve had an emotional day.” He kisses my forehead, my cheekbones, my eyelids which are closed again. Then he leaves the bed.

“Don’t go. Jazz is out for the night. Will you stay with me?”

He sits down beside me and begins rubbing little circles around my skin. At first, I can’t figure out the pattern. I peek an eye open. He’s reapplying my poison ivy cream. I want to cry from the sweetness.

One time, I worked out (yes, the one time I actually worked out) and ended up hurting my neck. I asked Trey to help me apply Icy Hot to the muscles, but he wrinkled his nose and outright refused. He didn’t like the texture of the cream,

complained the smell would permeate his skin for days, and insisted that since I injured myself by doing something I couldn't, I should figure out how to remedy it on my own. I should've known then he was Satan Reincarnate.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I ask. A sudden sense of déjà vu hits me. I've asked him this before.

“Because I like you, Breezy. So, so much. I like taking care of you.”

I nudge him with my toes. “I can think of another way you can take of me. I'm getting a second wind.” Another yawn gives me away.

“There is nothing more I want in the world than to make love to you right now. But I don't want it to be a reaction to what happened on the beach tonight.” He leans over and cups my jaw. He waits until I look up at him to say, “When I fuck you, I want nothing between us but sweat and desire.”

“G-g-g-got it,” I stammer right before he takes my mouth in another searing kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRAYSON



I CAN STILL TASTE Abby the next morning. She's a drug, and I can't get enough. I stay most of the night with her but through some act of sheer willpower, I manage to drag myself away before the sun comes up. Mainly because I needed a little me time in the shower with an Abby playlist running through my mind.

Now I'm looking at the amazing buffet breakfast offerings and can't drum up an appetite for any of it. Part of me wants to bang down Abby's door and finish what we started last night, residual feelings about ex-fiancés and high school crushes be damned.

And fuck being a rebound. I don't want to be just a rebound. I don't want to be a retaliation against Trey. I don't want to be a vacation fling. I want it all. I've had a crush on this girl since high school and now that I've had a taste, once is not enough. Twice isn't enough.

I have a feeling I'll never have enough of Abigail Winters.

As if sensing my thoughts, my cell phone buzzes with an incoming text. I smile, hoping it's Abby wondering where I snuck off to. I can imagine the cute little line between her eyebrows as she gives me a scolding for not staying all night. Or maybe she'll give me one of her coy, flirty smiles—a promise of what we still have on the table.

I frown at the phone. Not the Winters I was hoping for.

ALEX: Are you on a cruise with my sister?

ME: Yup. Coincidence. I'm here for work. How'd you know?

ALEX: Jazz's Insta. The three of you are all over it.

ME: Of course. Can you talk? I have a story you'd be interested in

ALEX: Yup

I grab a container of yogurt and an apple and find a table away from eavesdroppers. Then I call my oldest friend. Alex is the one that, no matter how much time has passed between our last conversation, we can pick up exactly where we left off. No questions asked. No guilt trips.

What did Abby say about Jazz? Ride or die? That's Alex for me. Which is why I have to wonder the reason he didn't immediately call me to have me help him tar and feather Trey after he crushed Abby.

"What are the chances you'd be on the same cruise?" Alex asks after we exchange hellos.

"It's a little crazy. Listen, she told me about what happened with her and Trey."

His voice drops to a growl. "The only reason that fucker is still alive is because Abby begged me not to kill him. She said he wasn't worth jail time."

"You might feel differently after I tell you what he did yesterday." I fill him in on Trey's impromptu visit to Grand Cayman, Abby's triumphant refusal, and our almost fight on the beach.

I can practically see Alex seething through the phone. "That asshole! Who does he think he is?" He takes a few deep breaths. His voice is a bit calmer when he asks, "How is she?"

"Rallying like a champ," I say. I leave out the part about bringing her to orgasm with my tongue. "Really. She had a small freak-out right after it happened, but I managed to talk her down. I think she felt good after rejecting him. And no glasses were broken in the process."

“Good,” he says on a sigh. “That’s good. I’m glad you’re there to watch out for her.” He pauses a moment and I wait for the reminder to keep my hands off. “It goes without saying that if you take advantage of her vulnerability, I’ll have to kill you too.”

There it is.

“Your list is growing,” I say, trying to keep my voice light.

“It was no secret you had a crush on her in high school.”

I try to protest, but he barrels over me.

“Don’t deny it. It’s fine. I know you honored our pact back then. I’m trusting you to do the same now. She’s been through a really rough time this last year. She doesn’t need more complications.”

I scrub a hand over my face, a little hurt at Alex’s assumption.

“You think I’d take advantage of her? You really think I’d hurt her?” I ask.

He’s quick to backtrack. “Not on purpose. But look at your life, Gray. You travel all the time. You’re hardly ever in one place for more than a few months. Abby wants stability. She wants to get married and have a family. I think she was more upset about that dream being taken away than the fact that it was Trey who did it.”

I sigh and a knot grows in my stomach that has nothing to do with the mention of her ex. Alex is right. Where is this thing going with Abby? She’s a teacher at the high school where we grew up. If that doesn’t scream “I want to put down roots,” I don’t know what does. And if this article takes off, my career could finally be going in the right direction. It would mean more travel, more work, more time away.

Suddenly that doesn’t sound quite as appealing as it did a week ago. What Alex doesn’t realize is that I’m the one in danger of getting hurt.

“We are just enjoying catching up. It’s been a while since I’ve really hung out with her. Especially without an

overprotective brother chaperoning.” It’s not a lie. I am very, very much enjoying our time together.

She wanted me last night. She practically begged me to stay.

My phone beeping from call waiting pulls me out of my vivid memories of Abby’s skin under my fingers.

I glance at the read out—Frank—and roll my eyes to the Heavens. The universe is conspiring to tell me getting involved with Abby is a bad idea.

To Alex, I say, “Listen, I gotta go. I just thought you’d want to know about the misguided grand gesture in case you see Trey around town or something.”

“Thanks, man. Talk at you later. It might be a call to bail me out of jail.”

“I have a separate account just for that occasion.” With a laugh, we disconnect, and I switch over to my boss.

“Good morning, Frank. Did you get the pages I sent?”

“Yes. Good stuff so far, but I want more on the jilted bride. See if you can reach out to her ex and get a comment. How does he feel about being left behind on his honeymoon cruise?”

I clench my jaw. “I have limited service on the ship.”

“Connection seems fine to me. Listen Hamilton, I don’t know what your hesitation is, but if you really want to be a journalist, you have to get over whatever hang-ups you have after Morocco. Journalists talk to people. They ask pressing questions to get the story.”

I spot Abby across the room. She’s holding a breakfast tray and looking for somewhere to sit. She looks refreshed and unburdened in the morning light streaming in from the floor to ceiling windows. I’d like to think I had a part in that. I left the decision for a vacation fling in her court. I’ll put the ball back there now. If she only wants a rebound, I can be that for her. Even if it kills me.

I wave her over.

“This has nothing to do with Morocco,” I say through gritted teeth. “And I don’t appreciate being reminded about that every time we speak. Yes, it was my mistake initially, but then it was blown way out of proportion by those lovely journalists you so admire.”

Frank is silent a moment, probably shocked since I’ve never talked back to him that way before.

“It would have helped if you’d spoken with them directly instead of becoming a recluse and a no comment parrot. Get me the damn story, Gray.”

“You’ll get the story I want to write,” I counter, then hang up with a forceful jab of my finger.

Abby gives me a shy smile when she sits down at the empty seat at my table. I take her hand to kiss her knuckles. “Good morning, beautiful.” My voice is harsher than I intend.

“Everything okay? Who were you talking to?” she asks, nodding at my phone.

“No one interesting.” I expect her to press, but she lets it go, sprinkling bacon bits onto her avocado toast instead.

She looks amazing this morning. The Caribbean sun has kissed her skin perfectly and added a few more freckles to her cheeks and shoulders. The poison ivy seems to be going away and there is an extra glow about her this morning. I smile knowing I’m the one who put that there.

“How did you sleep?” I ask, peeling open the top of my yogurt.

“Great. Until I woke up to this awful sawing sound. I thought the ship was breaking in half like the Titanic. Turns out, someone snores.” She taps my nose with her fork.

“I do not snore.” I definitely snore. I just hoped she was sleeping deep enough not to notice.

“Oh, but you do. Since I wasn’t waded out of my dress last night, I could appreciate the cadence and tone of the melody. And by appreciate, I mean, want to cover your head with a pillow to silence you.”

“Such violence.”

She shrugs. “I’m not apologizing for my sleep-deprived brain waves.”

I shrug back. “I’m not apologizing for a biological condition I have no control over.”

She smiles. “Good thing you are an A-plus snuggler.”

“If you tell Alex I like to spoon, I will tell everyone about the time you mistook Jeremy Callaghan’s muffin for a hamster and tried to pet it in the hallway.”

She gasps. “I can’t believe you remember that! That goes in the vault with the prom pee incident and me face-planting into your ass. Pinkie promise.”

She holds out her pinkie finger, and I link it with mine, using it to bring her fingers to my lips.

“I had a really, really good time last night,” I say.

“Same. I’m glad my bones regrew overnight.” She slowly pulls the fork from between her lips, never breaking eye contact. I’ve never wanted to be a utensil so bad in my entire life.

In what world does someone cheat on this woman? If she were mine, I’d never be able to keep my hands off her. And if we were apart, I wouldn’t stop thinking about putting my hands on her.

Shit. She isn’t even mine, and I still can’t keep my hands off her.

“What excursion are you going on today?” she asks when I’m too caught up in my fantasies to form any sort of coherent response.

“Uh, Save the Sea Turtle, I think?” That sounds familiar. “You?”

She shrugs. “I think we were supposed to go to snuba, but I haven’t been able to get in touch with Jazz today beyond a quick ‘I’m still alive’ text. She did mention wanting to check out the spa at some point. We’ll see.” She pauses to take

another bite of her breakfast, which shouldn't be seductive, but somehow very, very much is.

“What is snuba anyway?” she asks after a moment.

“It sounds like something dolphins do in the dark.”

Her laugh is quick and loud. Suddenly I don't want to save any turtles. I want to be wherever Abby is doing whatever snuba is.

Then Alex's words spring back to mind. *Look at your life, Gray. You travel all the time. Abby wants stability.*

Maybe some space will be good for both of us. Not to mention I don't want to give Frank any more fodder for an article focused on Abby. The sea turtles will make great copy.

Resigned, I say, “I guess you'll have to survive without me today. Think you can manage?”

She gives me a wry smile. “I somehow managed to live without you for the last decade. I think I can manage the next few hours.”

I bring her fingers back to my lips and run my tongue around their tips. She gasps. I whisper, “That was before you knew how skilled my tongue is.”

Her neck goes pink. She sucks in a breath. “Aren't we cocky this morning.”

“You have no idea.” I shift in my seat to accommodate my reaction to her taste.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ABBY



JASMINE TEXTS TO say she'll meet me at the excursion disembarkation line. She wanders in carrying a to-go carafe of coffee, a dry piece of toast, and what looks like a really big hangover. I contemplate yelling good morning in her face, but since she was good to me after my hangover, I refrain.

I'm such a good friend.

"Good night, then?" I ask with a smirk. "You're, uh, walking kinda funny."

"I am not!" she protests.

"Kind of like you've been riding a horse or a, I don't know, a Table Seven."

She peers bloodshot eyes over the rim of her sunglasses and smirks. "Let's just say I didn't get much sleep last night. We ended up at The Manor, drank way too much tequila, and fucked each other sober for hours. And man oh man the man has some moves."

I slow clap in appreciation. "Lucky number seven. Are you seeing him again today?"

She shrugs. "He was still passed out when I dragged myself out of his bed to find coffee." She takes a grateful sip from her mug. "But I hope to run into his dick later. I mean him. Run into him."

"Chances are good. You still have two more nights of no-regrets bacchanalia," I remind her.

“And we are in Mexico, baby!” she swings her hips side to side and holds up her coffee like a cocktail. Then groans and grabs her head. “Nope. Too soon for that.”

Eduardo Montoya, the cruise director, claps his hands to get our attention. “You are in for a treat today, our final stop on this amazing Love at Sea cruise. Or as I like to say *Amor a la Mar*. I hope you enjoy your adventure in my beautiful country, Mexico. Cozumel is full of many wonders, endless margaritas, and handsome locals.” He gestures to himself with raised eyebrows. “There’s no wonder it’s my favorite stop on the cruise. *Todos se divierten!* Enjoy!”

In his typical over the top fashion, he steps aside with a flourish and sweeps his arm toward the small ship waiting to take us snuba-ing. To snuba? Snubing? What the hell are we doing again?

We find a seat near the middle of the small speed boat. Once our small group is on board, we’re off. It’s barely eleven o’clock, but the guides are already passing around disposable margarita glasses filled to the brim. Jazz passes on this first round. She looks like she’s ready to hurl over the side.

She’s picking apart the toast in her hand but not really eating any of it.

“Are you going to eat that or just save it for fish food?” I ask.

“I need this boat to stop moving, pronto. I’ve been fine on the big boat, but this little one is making me regret my life choices.” She throws the toast bits over her shoulder into the water. “Tell me a story to take my mind off it.”

I smile. “Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona where we lay our scene,” I begin.

She groans and smacks my arm without any real power behind it. “Not Shakespeare, bitch. Tell me about your night. Did Gray rock your boat? Cruise right into your ocean? Set his anchor in your—”

“Okay! I get it. Enough with the boat puns, for ship’s sake.” I smirk at her.

“So, spill the tea. The way he devoured you on that beach yesterday I thought he was gonna rip off your bikini and teach the dolphins a lesson.”

A few of the other patrons turn to look at her.

“What? It’s a Love at Sea cruise. People are doing it. Prude much?” she asks. They turn around and refocus on their drinks.

“Anyway,” she says, “you show me yours, and I’ll show you mine.”

I smile at the memory of last night. “Before you get excited, we did not go all the way.”

“Go all the way? Who says that?” She purses her lips. “People who don’t go all the way say that, obviously. There better be a good reason why not.”

When I fuck you, I want nothing between us but sweat and desire.

I clench my thighs together. “He didn’t want our first time clouded by what happened with Trey.”

“Son of a cock-blocking bitch!” She throws her hands up, sending the margarita in my hand flying. It spills all over the person beside me.

“What the hell?” the woman yelps.

I stand to grab a towel, but the guide yells at me to sit before I topple out of the boat. He hands the margarita-wet woman a towel and me another drink.

“I’ll tell you what the hell,” Jazz says. She’s on a tirade. “My generous, gorgeous friend’s cheating ex-fiancé showed up last night in the Grand Cayman to try to win her back with flat platitudes and more lies.”

“Awww,” a woman beside us starts. One glare from Jazz has her quieting.

“No awww. Trey is an epic level douche baguette. Not only did he cheat on her and call off their wedding the night before it was supposed to happen”—I groan and put my head

in my hands—“but now she’s finally found someone she wants to assault her with his friendly weapon, and Trey found a way to take that from her too.”

“Hey. You’re the girl in the wedding dress from the tubing excursion,” someone says.

I give a small wave. “That’s me.”

“What did you do when he showed up?” the woman I spilled margarita on asks. She’s still dabbing the wet spot but doesn’t seem angry any longer. At least not at me.

“I told him to eat a bag of dicks,” I yell. Hey, if you can’t beat them, join them.

“Yaasss, queen!” a beautiful man snaps at me. I swear his make-up is more on point than mine is.

“Jeez. And I thought I had a hard time picking guys,” someone mumbles.

I open my mouth to say anything in my defense but am interrupted by our guide.

“We’re here! Let’s get ready to snuba,” the guide shouts like he’s starting a Mega-Truck rally.

Everyone busies themselves with grabbing gear, slurping down the rest of their margaritas, and shooting precious glances my way.

“Did you really have to scream my business to everyone?” I ask Jazz. “And for the record, Gray and I basically did everything but have sex.”

“Oh please. We’ll never see these people again. Who cares?” She pulls on a weight belt. “So, oral?”

I shake my head at her. “Yes. And he wouldn’t let me reciprocate. He was the perfect mix of dirty intensity and sweet gentleman.”

She smacks me with a fin. “You did find a unicorn! A horny unicorn.”

“Ow,” I say, rubbing the spot. “Why does your love hurt so much?”

“I may have found one too. Or at least one of those one-horned goat-deer things we saw at that drive through safari that one time. My man certainly knows how to eat a cookie. He had me praying to Elvis and his twin brother.” She makes the sign of the cross. “If I’m walking funny, it’s because we used almost an entire pack of condoms.”

“Look at us. Making the most of this Love at Sea adventure.” I throw my arms around her. “I’m so glad you are here with me and not Trey. I’m having like a bazillion times more fun.”

She holds me at arm’s length and gives me a rare, serious look. “You sure you’re okay? You’re not just putting on your teacher face and leaving your baggage at the door? I mean, did you listen to that crazy ass story I just told? That will go viral in a minute on TikTok. I’m surprised half the people in that bar last night didn’t have their cell phones out.”

“I think I’m fine. I used to imagine the moment Trey came to his senses and apologized. I played the conversation over and over in my mind an unhealthy number of times in the months after we broke up. But as soon as I saw him yesterday, my first thought was ‘he’s going to ruin everything.’ I could finally see him for who he was and not masked in all my excuses for him,” I say.

She raises an eyebrow. “Okay, white Oprah. Preach.” We hug again. “I’m so glad. To be honest, I never liked Trey.”

“Lovely ladies, are you going to join us in the beautiful water? See some fishes?” the guide says, interrupting our love fest.

“I’m sorry. My friend and I are having a moment. Did you not just hear the story I told? She is going through it.” She gives him a saccharine smile. “But please, tell us more about how we can see fish.”

I nudge her. “You know he controls our air supply, right?”

He drops his smile. “I’ll be at the front when you’re ready.”

“Thank you.” Jazz turns back to me. “Gray offered you some rebound sex. Take it. It’ll help you really feel like you’re over Trey once and for all.”

I sigh. “I was ready to last night. But I don’t know. I have some trust issues to work out.”

“Can you trust that Gray will put his round peg in your round hole?” she asks.

I laugh from surprise. “Based on the way he kisses, I think he knows how it works.”

“Then what is the problem? He’s not offering for you to jump right into a full-term relationship. He’s offering you a night of passion to forget Trey for good.”

“But it’s Grayson Hamilton. I’m worried my stupid heart will revert back to fifteen-year-old me and get crushed when he simply says goodbye in two days. Off on his next great adventure. I’ll just be another stamp in his passport.”

She grabs her fins to join the annoyed guide by the drop-in point. “Or you could think of it like he’s a stamp in your passport to an actual orgasm. Look, obviously no pressure. Do what you think is best for you. I’ll support you, you know that. Just after I get my own round two. Love you, bitch,” she says as she disappears into the water.

“Your turn, *bonita*. Ready to swim?”

That was the burning question of the day.



After snuba-ing—snubing? Snubaed? Snubed? Really, it’s a silly word—Jazz and I head back to the port and hang around at some local bars. The tequila and margaritas flow as easily as the music. It doesn’t take long until we’re dancing in the aisles. At first with ourselves and then with the locals who teach us how to bachata. Which as far as I can tell is mostly a lot of hips and sexy turns. The margaritas tell me I’m freaking amazing at bachata.

When I feel like I'm still spinning even when I'm not, I gather up Jazz and we head back to the boat to detox.

"Pool?" I ask.

"Pool," she says. "Maybe we can absorb the water straight through our pores, and I'll stop feeling this floaty."

"That has to be true. It's science."

A half hour later we are lounging in the pool with mugs of coffee and lots of bread.

"You know what I'm going to miss most about this cruise?" Jazz asks, taking a big bite out of a baguette.

"Table Seven?" I ask.

"Girl, I'm taking him home. He's a souvenir." She shakes her head like I'm crazy. "No, the buffets. Why isn't everything a buffet? Why haven't they invented auto-refillable buffets for the home? We have robot vacuums. Who needs those?"

"I would like a Keurig but for cupcakes. Like you put the little cup of ingredients in and then a minute later—poof, a perfectly cooked, perfectly iced cupcake." I take another slow sip of the coffee. It's helping counteract the many, many margaritas.

Jazz points her baguette at me. "That's brilliant. Like hashtag trademark, people. Do not steal our ideas. Do we know any engineers?"

"I have an entire math and science department at my disposal. One of those nerds has to be able to figure it out, right?" I say.

My phone buzzes beside me. I look down to see about fifteen missed messages from Gray and realize I haven't checked it all day.

I scroll through them now. He's sent a picture of a baby sea turtle inching its way to the water. He asked about snuba. But my favorite is the last one.

MY BOY BLUE: Missing you

So simple. So perfect. I'm smiling at my phone when suddenly it's snatched out of my hands.

"Hey! Give that back!" I yell at Jazz.

"Damn this boy has it bad. Are you going to put you both out of your misery and sleep with him or what? I think a decade of foreplay is sufficient," Jazz says, scrolling through his texts.

"It's one thing to have rebound sex with a stranger, but I've had a crush on Gray since high school. What if it changes things between us?" I ask.

She scoffs. "Of course it's going to change things. It's going to open doors to more 'I'm in town for the weekend, let's hook up' sex." She hands me back my phone. "I should not have to try so hard to talk you into this, Abby. I'm just going to relax, eat my bread, and ignore you overanalyzing this like you do everything."

She's quiet for a moment as I stew in my corner of the pool. I do not overanalyze everything. But this thing with Gray can't really go anywhere. Isn't that what I want though? No strings attached, get my feet back in the pool, sex? And I like him and know him. Trust doesn't really have to be a big thing since we aren't technically an item. Still, I've never had a one-night stand. I've only ever had sex with men I was dating.

"Shit. I am overanalyzing it."

She throws a cracker at me. It sticks to my wet chest, slowly dissolving into mush. I leave it there to spite her.

"We both know you're gonna do it. Text the boy, figure out where he is, grab some condoms from the bucket, and go get you some. And don't text me until tomorrow morning 'cause I'm working on my own hook-up."

I sigh. She's right. Who am I kidding? I can't keep letting Trey's cheating ass ruin anything new. I text Gray to see where he is.

ME: Back from the excursion yet?

MY BOY BLUE: Yup. Culling photos in my cabin.

ME: I'm back too.

MY BOY BLUE: Come look at the turtle pics.

ME: Is that what the kids are calling it these days?

I groan at how cheesy that was.

MY BOY BLUE: Come here Breezy.

“He wants me to come to his room,” I tell Jazz.

“Of course he does. You are available, familiar, and sexy as hell. If I wasn't already hooking up, I'd go after you myself. Now get your skank ass to his room.”

I squeal and do a little happy dance...and promptly drop my phone in the water. Crap on a cracker. I fish it out, but it's waterlogged and not turning on.

“I thought these things were supposed to be waterproof,” I say, squeezing it in a towel and sending up a prayer.

“Yeah, like if you spill a beer on it not if you decide to swim with it,” Jazz says. “Stop by the buffet on the way to the room to grab some rice. See, this is exactly why we need buffets everywhere.”

“You gonna be okay here by yourself?” I ask.

“I'm not by myself. I've got my two best friends—Carbs and Beans.” She points to the bread and coffee. “Seriously though, text me if you guys go out later. But you better be too busy to go out.”

“Love you,” I say, getting out of the pool and wrapping the towel around me in lieu of a cover-up.

“Love you too.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GRAYSON



I STARE at the blinking cursor on my blank computer screen waiting for inspiration that apparently isn't coming. I've written this article three different times and all of them have been shit. With all the Trudy quotes, bachelorette party antics, excursions, and group activities, the article should write itself.

The problem is Frank might be right. Abby's story has the most bite. I know she won't want me to tell it though. It took her three full days just to tell me the entire story. I roll around the possibility of using an alias instead of her real name. But Frank will want the pictures of her tubing in the wedding dress.

I flip to my photo editing software. Working with pictures is really my true passion. The only reason I've considered getting into writing is because of what happened in Morocco. Editors have been hesitant to publish my photographs even after assuring them I've learned my lesson.

As I work on the photograph of a backlit Abby wringing out her dress, I'm struck again by her strength and resilience. Even though this photo might not ever see the light of day, it's one of my favorites I've ever taken. The pure joy on her face in that moment is breath-taking. Even though she'd been through a shit storm, she still found a way to take back her joy.

I love that. Photographing all raw, unchecked emotions is the goal, but for me, joy is the best. I think that's what got me in trouble in Morocco. I got so caught up in the joy of a group of village children having the time of their lives in a sinkhole filled with muddy water that I put ethics aside. Like smiling

Abby in her ruined dress, a symbol of one of the worst days of her life, those kids found happiness in a mud puddle despite their hardships. There is something uplifting and human about beautiful disasters that tugs at my soul.

When I've upped the contrast, emphasized the rim light around her form, and enhanced the colors to my liking, I save Abby's photo and flip reluctantly to my blank page.

When I'm lulled into a trance from the never-ending blinking, I slam the laptop lid closed and check my phone instead. It's been about twenty minutes since I sent the come-hither text to Breezy. She hasn't answered. Not even when I texted her again asking where she was.

I could use a distraction right now, in the form of a beautiful brunette with a sassy mouth and a kill me now body. I don't care if I have to cover her head to foot in itchy cream or take her into a cold shower, nothing, not even poison ivy, is going to stop us from making love tonight.

I check my phone again. Unless she never actually makes it here. I text her my room number again just in case she's forgotten. Still no answer. I call her number, but it goes right to voicemail. She didn't block me, did she?

I look back through our text thread from today and cringe. Fifteen messages from me. About three from her. And another dozen from me. Desperate much?

If this were a friend, I'd tell him to take the hint and back-off. But she was totally into me, right? She practically begged me to stay last night. The way she kisses me back shows me she's as desperate for me as I am for her.

Right? Fuck. I get up to pace around the tiny room. I haven't been this tied in knots over a girl in ages. I have to get this right. For her sake and for mine.

As I pace near the door, I think I hear someone calling my name. I press my ear to the door and listen. Faintly, but yes, someone is definitely calling my name. Or I guess they could be saying 'hey.' Or 'day.' Hard to tell through these thick doors.

I decide to check anyway. When I peer into the hallway, I can't help but smile.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ABBY



I GET to the ninth deck and look down the long hallway of doors that all look the same. It's then I remember I don't remember Gray's cabin number. I was way too drunk the last time I was there and didn't think to look in the morning. I'm sure he told me at some point, but that point was many, many alcoholic drinks ago.

I reach for my phone to text him only to find a bag of rice stuffed in my cleavage instead. Right. Phone is taking a rice bath.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to remember how far down the hallway I had to walk to get to the elevators the last time I was here. At least a few feet. I meander down the corridor hoping I can sense his sexual prowess on the other side of the door.

No luck.

I press my ear to a door, trying to hear anything at all. If I hear voices, I'll know it isn't his room because presumably he's alone, waiting for me. Process of elimination. Like a sadistic Sudoku puzzle I have to solve to have sex.

I hear nothing at any of the doors. Either everyone is still out, or the entire place is sound proofed. Huh, if that's true, maybe I actually can scream his name when I let him Slytherin my Hufflepuff.

I shake my head. No. Ew. I need to stop listening to my high schoolers' conversations.

I put my mouth to the crease in one of the doors and whisper-yell, “Grayson? Are you in there?”

No answer. I try the next door. “Gray? Open up.”

Nothing. Three more doors and same results. The doors are heavy and close tight against the frames, but maybe the bottom threshold isn’t as secure. I crouch down and bend my head so it’s by the floor. “Grayson? Gray Hamilton?”

I lean a little more, not caring that my ass is in the air. This time I really yell, “Gray. It’s your booty call. Open up.”

A door opens behind me, and I nearly fall over. A man peeks his head out. I look at him upside down through my legs.

“I can be your booty call,” he says. “And you can call me any color you want.”

I straighten, excited that my buzz has worn off enough I don’t want to vomit at the sudden recalibration and point my finger at him. “No thanks. Do you know Grayson Hamilton? Famous travel photographer.”

He gestures to his upper body covered in tattoos that trail below the waist of his leather pants. “Do I look like I know a photographer?”

I shrug. “I don’t like to make assumptions.”

He points to his door number. “If you can’t find him, come find me.”

I smooth down the very sexy towel that I’m wearing. “No promises.”

He smiles, gives me another once over, and shuts his door.

I move down the hallway a little further, trying my under the door technique on the other side of the hall. I’m not even attempting to keep my voice down now. It’s only—I check my watch—a little after nine. No one is asleep.

“Grayson!” My voice has a sharp edge now. I’m losing my nerve. What if this is the universe’s way of telling me this is a bad idea? First the phone, now this. Well, really, first last night

when he basically rejected me after I threw myself at him. Was it really sweet? Or was it a nice way for him to tell me he's had his no thank you bite and he's declining the entire plate.

I stay in my crouched position and hold my head in my hands. I'm sure I look like a sad little frog, but I don't care. It's been like half an hour since Gray sent the last text. The text I didn't even respond to. He probably thinks I'm not coming. He might be out at the club looking for a different hook-up instead. He could have his tongue half-way down—

“Breezy?” His voice comes from right above me. “What are you doing?”

I stop rocking and look up at him. “I, uh, thought I dropped a contact.”

“You don't wear contacts.”

I stand abruptly, almost knocking my head into his chin, but he swerves at the last moment.

“Sorry it took me so long. I dropped my phone in the pool and had to find some rice to dry it out.”

He points at my chest. “That explains part of what's happening here. Where does the soggy cracker come in?”

I swipe at the mush. “Jasmine was having some pool side snacks.”

“Well, that answers my next question which is why you're standing in the hallway in a towel,” he says, unable to control the smirk tugging the side of his mouth. He's teasing me.

“I'm a mess. Let me go back to my cabin and clean up. I'll text you in an hour if my phone starts,” I say, trying to step around him.

He takes a step to block me. “You aren't going anywhere, Breezy.” He puts his hands in my hair, angles my head, and makes me forget my name with his kiss.

I wrap my hands around his waist and under his T-shirt, digging my nails into the muscles along his back. His mouth is hungry. I gasp for breath when he finally releases my mouth to kiss my collarbone.

“You did miss me today,” I say while trying to climb him like a tree. I have one leg wrapped around his hip already and am standing on my tippy-toes like a ballerina. A ballerina who can move like a bachata-hipped siren. I put my new moves to work, and he moans.

“You have no idea. By hour three I was tempted to commandeer the boat or swim back to shore,” he says against my throat.

His hands are on my lower back, pressing me into him, and I can feel exactly how much he missed me. Poor thing must have blue balls from yesterday since he wouldn't let me reciprocate. I devour his mouth with mine, showing him how much I missed him too.

A tsking sound reminds us we are not in closed quarters but blocking the narrow public corridor. Gray lifts his head to look over his shoulder.

“Ms. Trudy?” he asks, blinking the lust haze out of his eyes. I look behind me.

She's standing there in a rainbow sparkle jumpsuit that, truth be told, I'm kind of jealous of. On her feet are dangerously high wedges, also rainbow. Also sequined. She has her signature cane—you still can't convince me it isn't a penis—in her crossed arms and she's looking at us like we are idiots.

“You're doing it all wrong,” she states. I begin to lower my leg from its perch on Gray's hip, but with surprising speed she hooks it with her cane to keep it in place.

“This is good. Very sexy. But where are your hands, young man?” she asks, giving him a pained look. She takes one of his hands and places it on the outside of my hip. The other she puts on the back of my head. “Now squeeze. Hold her like you can't get her close enough. Show her and everyone else in this hallway she's yours.”

Gray does as he's told, gripping his fingers into my hip and back of my neck. It makes me lift higher into him and gasp. His strong forearm rests against my spine, caging me against

him. Our mouths are open and inches apart. We breathe each other in, noses rubbing.

“Now that’s more like it!” Trudy says encouragingly. She hooks the cane under my other leg and lifts, forcing me to jump up and wrap that leg around Gray too. My towel, and a handful of condoms I’d stuffed into my bathing suit, falls to the floor. “Now take her to your cabin before you catch the hallway on fire.”

She toddles off muttering, “Kids these days. Can’t teach them nothing,” under her breath. I see her retrieve one of the many condoms. Get it, Granny!

“I think I love her,” Gray says.

“Same,” I whisper against his lips. “I wouldn’t blame you if you dropped me like a hot potato and ran after her instead.”

“I happen to really like potatoes.” He squinches his eyes. “Sorry. That isn’t as sexy as it sounded in my head.”

“Shut up and kiss me, Gray.”

He does, using his hand to hold my head in place.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GRAYSON



SOMEHOW, we make it into my cabin. As soon as the door closes behind us, I press her back against it. I could take her right here. Just push aside that thin layer of fabric covering her and pound into her like the heathen inside me wants. I need her. I need to be closer to her. To be inside her.

She must be thinking along the same lines because her hands are clawing at the button of my shorts. “What is wrong with these stupid things?”

Her ass fits my palm perfectly as I grip her tighter and move to set her on the little counter that runs the length of the room. Unceremoniously, I push the papers, lens caps, and cords aside. She rips the bag of rice from her cleavage and drops it on the desk, then grips the edge of the counter as I bombard her neck and chest with kisses. I move to her perfect breasts, savoring them, worshiping them one by one. She leans her head against the wall and buries her hands in my hair.

“Too many clothes,” she says, eyes still closed.

“I agree.” I untie her bathing suit top and throw it over my shoulder. Several more condoms fall out. I spend half a brain cell wondering how many she brought, but then her nipples tauten in the cool air of the room, and I am lost in her again.

“I was talking about you. How am I always naked while you’re still dressed?” she asks.

“Don’t know. Don’t care.” I’m refocused on making her moan like she did last night. My fingers slip beneath the fabric

of her bottoms to find her wet and welcoming. It's me who groans instead.

"Lose the shirt, Hamilton," she commands. Draping herself over my shoulder, she tugs the bottom of my shirt, lifting it up my back. I release her only long enough to strip it off. I drink her in now that I can see the full picture. Her hair is mussed from my fingers. Her lips kiss-swollen and parted. She's leaning back slightly against the wall, which perks her breasts toward my eager mouth. Her legs are open on either side of my hips.

"You are so beautiful, Abby. So fucking beautiful."

She lets her eyes linger on my now bare upper body and bites her bottom lip. "You're not so bad yourself."

Her fingers once again find my short's button. This time they pop it easily and she pushes my shorts and boxers down my legs until my very hard, very appreciative appendage is on display. When the clothing falls to my ankles, I step out of them.

"There. Now I'm fully naked first. Happy?" I ask.

She's staring at my penis. "Yup. Very happy. Happy, happy, happy."

I take my dick in my own hand and stroke it. She swallows and licks her lips.

"You make me this hard. I've been in a state of semi-hardness over you since the first time I saw you in a bikini."

She pouts up at me. "Poor baby. Sounds uncomfortable. Let me make it up to you." Then she puts her perfect lips around my cock and rolls her tongue just under the head. I grip her shoulders and try not to make a fool of myself. Abigail Winters is giving me the best blow job of my life.

When she moans a little and grips my shaft in her hand, I back away. She nearly falls off the counter but manages to catch herself on my hips.

"Sorry." I step into her to straighten her out. "I want this to last."

“I want you inside me. Like yesterday. Actually, literally yesterday.”

Who am I to deny her anything? Scooping her up in my arms, I move us to the bed. She lifts her hips so I can remove the last bit of clothing between us. I take a moment to run my hands over her body, skimming my fingers over her shoulders, down her stomach, across her sex, down her legs. She arches into my touch, begging without words for more. I’ve never been with anyone so expressive. It’s fucking hot.

I replace my fingers with my tongue on her skin, starting at her ankle. Running my jaw up her leg, pausing for a moment to taste her, then moving quickly to her hip bones, I bask in every moan and whimper and intake of breath. I revel in the sound of my name gasped from her lips. I thank the dear Lord her poison ivy has healed.

After covering myself with one of the many condoms she so thoughtfully brought, I wrap her in my arms and position myself at her opening.

“Are you sure about this, Breezy?” I ask.

She smiles and squeezes my ass. “So very, very sure. You weren’t the only one with a semi hard-on since high school.” Then she frowns. “That’s not what I—not an actual hard-on, ‘cause I don’t have—you know what I mean. I had a crush on you too.”

I lay my forehead on hers and whisper her name. Capturing her mouth in a kiss, I slide slowly inside her for the first time. Her mouth opens as she clenches around me.

“Grayson,” she gasps, digging her fingers into my back. “Closer. Deeper.”

I tighten my arms around her and adjust my hips to sink deeper. “I don’t want to crush you.”

“Do it. Let me feel the weight of you. I want to know this is real and not another dream.”

“Another dream?” I ask.

She bites my bottom lip in hers, eyes slitted with desire. “So many dreams.”

And that’s when I lose myself in her. She owns me. I kiss her like I’m a starving man and she’s a feast. My fingers hold her jaw as I take and take.

“Move, Gray. I can’t stand it.” Her voice is clipped and pleading.

Slowly at first, I grind my hips to prolong each thrust. Quickly, urged on by her encouraging little noises, I increase the speed and intensity. She meets me thrust for thrust, driving her hips up, and holding onto my ass.

I lift her hip to change the angle and she cries out. “I’m gonna come.”

“Yes, baby. Come on me.” I press her harder against me, so her clit rubs my lower abs. She clenches around me, and I still for a minute to watch her come down from the peak. She buries her head in my shoulder, and I hold her there to steady her.

“Watching you come is my new favorite thing,” I whisper in her ear. “Let’s see how many more times I can make it happen.”

“Yes, please.”

I sit up on my knees and drag her down the bed so the backs of her thighs rest on mine. She puts a leg on my shoulder; I grab the other to join it and hug them to my chest. When I move this time, I have full view of her face and can watch every furrow of her brow, every flare of her nostril, every bite of her lip. She grips the bedspread behind her, arching her back to take me deeper.

When I don’t think I’m going to last much longer, I drop her legs to the side and lay behind her, wrapping an arm around her chest and using the other to finger her clit. I bury my face in her neck not caring that her hair is practically suffocating me. I will die a happy man.

“You feel so good. So perfect.” Her words are like fuel to my already raging fire.

Holding her tight against me, I glide into her again and again until I'm on the edge. She turns her head to kiss me over her shoulder, as hungry for me as I am for her.

"Breezy," I whisper in her ear. And the knowledge that it's her I'm holding is enough to plummet me over. I can't stop it and hope she's right there with me.

Panting, we come down together, hips still moving in a slow circle, not ready to be finished quite yet. I drop kisses on her shoulders and the back of her neck.

"Shit, Gray," she says after a moment. "If I'd known it was going to be that good, I'd have jumped your bones a long time ago."

I roll her onto her back and lean over her. A satisfied smile plays on her lips. I almost hate to kiss it away. Almost.

"I don't want this to be a one-time thing," I say.

"Good. Get cleaned up and let's go for round two." She pushes on my chest to get me move.

I don't budge. "Let me rephrase. I don't want this to be a one-night thing."

"Good thing we have tomorrow night too."

"And then?" I ask. When her brow furrows just a little, I immediately wish I hadn't ruined the moment by opening my big mouth. My original offer, the one she signed up for, was for vacation-fling rebound sex. Now I get one dip in the deep end, and I'm messing everything up.

"We can talk about it later." I roll off the bed and disappear into the bathroom. Throwing cold water on my face, I give myself a stern look in the mirror. "Get it together, Gray. You are not what she needs long term. Take what you can get and shut up."

When I emerge, she's sitting on my bed with the sheet wrapped around her. My breath whooshes out in relief. I half-expected her to be gone.

Her stormy blue eyes draw me to her. I lean in for a kiss to start on round two, but she puts a finger on my lips to stop me.

“What happened in Morocco?” she asks.

“You heard that this morning, huh?” I ask. She nods.

I sigh, resigned to telling her the worst of me, and reposition myself to sit beside her. She threads her fingers in mine.

“About the time Trey was ruining your wedding day, I was ruining my career. Against the warnings from my assigned guide, I wanted to explore Morocco on my own. I didn’t want to stick to the touristy places. So, I told him I’d meet up with him in Marrakesh and struck out on my own with my camera and a high-tech compass. I was stupid and full of American privilege. I wandered through a small village near the Atlas Mountains. There was a group of kids playing in a huge sinkhole filled with muddy water. Without thinking, I took out my camera and snapped away.” I squeeze her hand for strength. “Turns out, one of the children was the daughter of a neighboring village big shot. She was in hiding because her father pissed off some really bad people and they threatened his family.”

“Oh no.”

I can’t bear to look at her, so I barrel on. “Yeah. That was mistake number one. They got in touch with the US Embassy and basically revoked my press privileges for life. I can never publish another picture taken in Morocco again.”

“That seems a bit harsh.”

“I thought so too, which is why I decided they can’t stomp on my First Amendment rights. I published the picture of the kids playing in the sinkhole anyway. Mistake number two. But only after I edited out the girl in hiding. I manipulated the layout of the image to make it more balanced without her in it. Mistake number three and the one that nailed shut my coffin.” I finish. I haven’t said the entire story out loud in a long time. A pressure lifts from my chest slightly, hovering just above to see how Abby will respond.

“How is cropping her out mistake number three? I’d think they would be thankful.”

“Documentary photography has very strict rules about how much editing can be done on a picture. I didn’t just crop her out. I changed the entire composition. That’s a big no-no. I guess I thought people would understand once they heard the full story.” I shake my head at my naivety.

“How’d anyone find out?” she asks, still holding my hand. I take that as a good sign and soldier on.

“The picture was nominated for an award. I had to submit the raw, unedited file along with the published version. Not only did the jurors and the rest of my colleagues find out how much I doctored the image, but the Moroccan government found out I published it in the first place. The media got wind of it all and my reputation was all but ruined.”

“They didn’t listen to your side?” she asks, indignant on my behalf and I fall a little more in love with her.

“Eventually. But the damage had already been done. Everyone remembers the scandal, they forget the less exciting explanation. My current boss took pity on me and is giving me another chance. He likes to remind me of that every conversation we have.”

She rubs the back of my hand with her thumb. “That’s who you were talking to at breakfast. Your boss.”

It isn’t a question.

“And you have a lot riding on this article.” Also not a question.

“Only my entire career as a travel photographer and potential writer.” I take a deep breath. “Our magazine is looking to lock-in Festival Cruises to an exclusive release deal. Whenever they have something new and noteworthy, our magazine would get the first call. It’s a big deal. It’s my last shot,” I explain. I almost tell her about my reservations. That if being a journalist meant walking all over people’s pain—at least if I was working for Frank—then I really wanted no part of it.

“Are you going to use me in your story?” she asks quietly, staring at our joined hands.

“Not unless you tell me it’s okay. Right now, I have the focus on Ms. Trudy.”

“Good choice.” She’s quiet a moment. “I know this is important to you, and I really want to help in any way I can. But seeing my story splashed all over social media again makes me nauseous. I’m just now, almost six months out, getting people to stop staring at me like I have an incurable disease.”

She pauses to unlink our fingers and wring her hands. Oh no. I snatch her hand back in both of mine.

“I want you to picture it,” she continues. “You should be able to as a photographer. Our wedding was supposed to be in June, right at the start of summer break. I spent weeks answering questions from my family, my neighbors, our mutual friends. And just when I think I’ve explained and re-explained and told everyone I was fine a bajillion times, school is back in session, and I have to start all over again. Students from last year were calling me Ms. Dubois and asking to see pictures of the wedding. Colleagues were unabashedly curious. It made it fresh again.”

Now it’s my turn to squeeze her hands for comfort.

“That was the end of August. I’ve just now resettled into almost normalcy. I have new students who weren’t witness to me getting all googly-eyed over a wedding that didn’t happen. And the adults have all told their friends and family, so I’m pretty sure all of NOLA and the surrounding suburbs knows. But if you publish a story about me, it’s going to bring it all back and I’ll really only ever be Abby Winters, Jilted Bride.”

I bring her fingers to my lips to kiss them. I’ll do anything to wipe away that pained expression on her face, so I lie. I lie to protect her. “It’s no problem to take you out of the article, Breezy. You are a small part right now anyway. More of a passing mention in a list of reasons to go on a Love at Sea cruise. And as much as I’d love to publish the pictures of you trashing your dress—because you in that light is just perfection—I won’t. Not without your permission.”

She looks up at me with wide, trusting eyes, and I die a little inside. I will call Frank as soon as I'm alone and tell him the jilted bride story is dead. He'll have to deal with a sassy octogenarian instead.

"Thanks for understanding. Maybe if I were a few years out it would be different. You just caught me at a messy time."

I force a smile. "No worries. I can put a pin in it for now."

"Okay," she says, shaking herself a little. "Now that I put a downer on our wonderful night together, do you want to go get pizza or something?"

"No. I don't want pizza, Breezy. I want you."

"Still?"

"Always. As long as you still want me." I shift our positions so I can pull her to me for a kiss. It quickly escalates into more.

She stops us again. "Wait. About what you said earlier. About wanting more than just one night."

"Forget it. We can talk about it another time." I've had just about enough soul searching for one evening.

"I'm not ready to fall in love again," she says softly and my heart sinks. "That's what I've been telling myself for months. It's too soon. I need to be able to trust again." She takes a deep breath. "Then you stumbled into my life."

"You actually stumbled into me, remember?"

"That's supposed to be in the vault. Now let me finish." She takes a deep breath. "It's too easy to fall in love with you. I mean, I've been half-way there since high school. It's just not fair to you that I'm still a bit broken. And you need to focus on your career, not on a relationship. It'll be way too complicated."

I sit back, away from her so we aren't touching. "So you're giving up on us before even giving us a chance?"

"I don't know. I guess so. Isn't it better to get out now than wait until one of us gets hurt?"

“No.”

She barks out a laugh at my abrupt answer. “No? Just no? No explanation?”

I sigh. “All I know is that I really like spending time with you. A lot. Both in and out of bed. There aren’t many people I can say that about. When we get off this ship, I don’t want to go years before I see you again. I can’t. I won’t.”

Unless I can’t convince Frank to drop her part in the article. Then she’ll cut me out of her life forever.

“Gray—”

“Let me finish. If you are only able to offer me friendship, I’ll take it. I won’t like it, but I’ll take it. I can’t promise I won’t join Alex in cock-blocking whomever you do choose, but I can be your friend. Until then, we have two more days of vacation-fling no-strings-attached play time. We can deal with the rest after we disembark.”

She blinks at me warily. “You mean that?”

“No pressure.” I smile and yank her into my lap. “Enough talk. We have at least a dozen more condoms to use. Did you dump the entire bucket down your pants?”

“I just grabbed a handful as I ran by,” she says on a laugh.

“Sounds like someone was in a hurry to find me.”

“Yes. Yes, I was.” She traces a line down my stomach. “You have an amazing body. I’d like to be under it again.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I flip her on her back. “One last thing, then I’ll shut up about it.” I trace her features with my fingers. “I am not some random stranger. I’m definitely not Trey. I’m just a boy hoping his crush gives him a chance.”

Before she can answer, I kiss her. And kiss her. And kiss her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ABBY



I SIP coffee on the terrace of our room watching the ocean spread before me. The vastness of it all is a little overwhelming, and I try not to think about what could be swimming right under us. The hammock rocks slightly with the motion of the boat, lulling me into a sort of trance.

I'm sore in all the right places from my marathon sex-session with Gray last night. He fucked any last residual doubts I had about rejecting Trey right out of my system. They are now at the bottom of the trash can with our many, many condom wrappers.

Gray's declaration that he wants more washes over me like a balm. His original offer of a week of debauchery was enticing enough. Knowing that I could have more is dangerous. Can I trust him? I mean, I lived with Trey, and he still managed to cheat on me in our hometown. Gray is constantly out of the country on assignment. How will I be able to trust him? I don't want to be the jealous, nervous girlfriend who smells affair every time he goes away.

I sip some more coffee, wishing I had a shot of Bailey's to pour into it. I bet if I called downstairs, someone would bring me one. If I weren't so freaking comfortable in this hammock—read my legs are too wobbly to figure out how to get out right now—I just might.

But alcohol is probably not the best idea when trying to figure out the affairs of the heart.

By the time Jazz stumbles in around ten, I've decided to take it one day at a time. And to refortify the fortress around my cracked heart so I don't fall too fast.

She joins me on the balcony, collapsing into the lounge chair and looking like she had the same kind of fun last night that I did.

"Girl," she says. "Someone reeks of sex. Tell me that it's you and not just the residual scent coming off of me."

"I think it's a little of both." We high-five. "Tell me about Table Seven. Did he use his cop handcuffs?"

She leans her head back on the chair with a cat-that-caught-the-mouse smile. "No handcuffs, but he has some moves to rival any paltry *Magic Mike* routine. My lady bits haven't been pampered like that in a long while." She peeps an eye open. "Have I told you how much I love you for bringing me on this cruise? I mean, I will name my firstborn child after you."

I laugh. "That good, huh?"

"Better. What about you? Did you call him Mr. Gray and submit to his every desire?" she asks.

"More like he submitted to mine. I forgot that sex was supposed to be a partnership. It's so much better when I get to come too. And come again. And again. And again..."

She smacks my knee. "I get it. He's a machine. And we are goddesses sent on this cruise to get men to fall at our pink parts."

"Gray said he wanted to continue seeing me after the cruise," I tell her.

She sits up straight. "That's awesome! You do have a magic vagina." Then she sees my face. "Wait. Aren't we happy about this? I thought you said you *like* like him."

I sigh, resting the coffee cup on my knee. "I do. That's the problem." I explain my trepidation over his long trips away from NOLA. "Long distance relationships are hard enough. Long distance relationships with a clingy girlfriend with trust

issues is impossible. I'll drive him away and get my heart broken again. I come with too much baggage."

"That is ridiculous. That is fear talking. If he wasn't scared away by Trey following you to another country, then I think he's willing to put up with your baggage," she says. "Don't let Trey ruin another good thing."

I squeeze her hand in mine. "You're right. You're absolutely right. I shouldn't have to give up a great guy, who has a very skilled penis, just because some other asshole lied to me. Right?"

"Exactly! You grab that penis and don't let go. Except in public because you'll probably get arrested and not be able to teach any longer." She grabs the coffee mug from my hand and sips.

"No, help yourself. I was finished anyway," I tease.

She hands me back my mug. "Too sweet for me. Anyway, what are we getting into today? It's our last day on this amazing ship."

"You don't have plans with Table Seven?" I ask.

"We're gonna meet up later. Maybe the four of us could hang for a bit. What's Gray up to?" she asks.

"He's working on his article for a bit this morning. He wants to get some testimonials from people on the ship now that the excursions are over."

She slaps her legs and stands. "I'm gonna take a shower, then we're going to hit the buffet. Mama worked up quite the appetite last night."

"What is Table Seven's name, anyhow?" I ask as she opens the sliding door to our room.

She blushes crimson and tries to hide it with a smirk. "I'll tell you if it gets any more serious."

"You don't know, do you?" I ask.

"It seems a little inappropriate to ask now."

I throw a pillow at her. “You skank. Did you yell out, yes Table Seven as you were doing him last night?”

“Of course not. I called him baby,” she says with a smirk and disappears into our room.



After we are clean and presentable, we make our way down to The Galley which is populated with several buffet offerings and food carts. Today I try Acai You Over There, an acai bowl buffet full of fresh fruits, granola, yogurts, honeycomb, nuts, and about a million other fun things. Jazz settles on an avocado taco from one of the other stations. We meet at a table by the windows.

“What am I going to do when I have to start making my own food again?” Jazz asks. Her eyes widen with an idea. “What if we both sell our belongings and live on a cruise ship? We could just book one after another and never have to cook again.”

“I don’t think my offering of second-hand Ikea furniture and Rae Dunn dishware is going to fetch enough on Marketplace to fund one cruise much less a lifetime. Besides, I actually like my job. And my liver.” I dig into the wonderful fresh mix in front of me. Gray’s words from one of our sexcapades last night jump to mind.

I want to eat my next meal off your body. I really am one lucky bitch right now.

“How early is too early to start drinking on our last night of a cruise?” Jazz asks, eyeing the wine bar that is not surprisingly already open.

“If the bar is open, it’s not too early,” I say. Although I’m pretty sure the bars on the ship never really close. Hmmm, that may be another check in the pro column to be a cruise-dweller.

“Are you still on G&Ts, or do you want something else?” she asks.

“You know what? Let’s live a little. Add a splash of cranberry to that bad boy.”

“Wow. One night of sex and she’s a wildcat. Watch out.” Jazz meows and heads off to the bar. Remembering my motto from Jamaica—Eat first, Drink Second—I work on finishing my acai bowl.

From out of nowhere, a couple in their mid-to-late forties, if I had to guess, rush up to the table. The man has his phone out as though he’s videoing. The woman, winks at me and then—I can’t make this up—starts humping the corner of the table. Like full-on straddles the edge and gyrates like she’s riding a mechanical bull. She leans forward on both hands, moaning and panting and... holy shit, is she masturbating on my brunch table?

The man laughs. “It’s supposed to be a fake orgasm, babe. Don’t get too into it.”

She ignores him and throws her head back, really getting into it now. Is she faking? Hard to tell.

I snatch up my acai bowl before she gyrates it right off the table and scoot my chair back. The dining area is quiet except for her breathy moans and the table squeaking. It’s like an auto accident or a really embarrassing middle school talent show—I want to look away; I should look away; I can’t look away. I’m transfixed.

From the corner of my eye, I see Jazz leaning against the bar counter, sipping her cocktail like this is just a typical brunch-time activity.

“Do you want some privacy?” I ask the woman. “I can use my teacher voice to clear the room.”

Instead of answering, she reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing it as she throws herself onto her elbow.

“Oh! Okay. This is happening.” I look at Jazz for help, but she’s now doubled over in laughter. I take back our ride or die status.

The woman slaps the table with her open palm. She’s really getting into it now. Meg Ryan has nothing on this girl in

the fake orgasm department. I even see a small sheen of sweat beading around her forehead.

“Damn, Tracy,” the man says. “End this so we can go back to our cabin. You’re making me unfit for public.”

“Too late for that,” one of the other diners quips.

Finally, she releases my hand and grips the edge of the table. I back up so fast, the chair tips over onto two legs. I’m able to right myself at the last second before toppling onto the ground, but the rest of my brunch splashes into my lap. Granola bits roll under the table followed by a few blueberries. I abandon them in my haste to get away.

I grab Jazz’s arm on the way by. “Let’s go.”

She doesn’t budge. “I want to see how this finishes. Ten bucks says the guy takes her from behind right there. Look at what he’s packing. Maybe we should start showering them with condoms.”

I hadn’t even looked at the guy holding the phone. I’d been too busy saving my lunch from the horny humper. But Jazz is right. The bulge in his pants looks uncomfortable.

“I’ve seen enough.” I take my G&T from the bar and down it in three big gulps.

The man lowers the phone as the woman finally stills, her performance complete. She stands as though nothing happened and smooths down her shirt.

“Did you get it? We have to win, right?” she asks the man.

“Looked very realistic to me.” He pulls her against him for a kiss.

“Did you get a scan of the crowd? The scavenger hunt judges have to verify there were at least ten witnesses,” she says when they finally unsuction from each other.

“Yes, dear. What’s next on the list? Do we have time to take a little break?” he kisses along her neck. She shoves him away playfully.

“No. We still need to give a drag queen a piggyback ride.”

Jazz claps her hands and turns to me. “Oh, a scavenger hunt! That sounds fun! I bet you could do a better fake orgasm than she did.”

“I’m not so sure that was fake.” I flex the hand she squeezed.

“Let’s go sign up.” Jazz grabs my hand to track down Eduardo, the cruise director.



A few hours later, we’re lounging in the huge catamaran net on the top deck. Think of a trampoline, only made of hammock ropes and suspended two-hundred-fifty feet over the ocean. I’m on my third cocktail. Still not enough to scrub the image of the woman humping the table from my mind. Will I ever be able to look at a diner table the same way again? Every time I go to a fast food restaurant, I’m going to think of today. Every. Single. Time.

I take another healthy sip of my drink.

“Bummer the scavenger hunt was all booked up,” Jazz says for the millionth time.

“This is fun though, right? I feel like we’ve been all go, go, go instead of just being able to relax.”

The ocean water turns below us, the rhythmic sound lulling me into an almost trance. A few other couples lounge on the catamaran with us. I close my eyes, mainly because looking down through the open netting gives me vertigo. As the wind washes over me, I realize this is exactly what I need. No worries. No “what’s next?” No papers to grade.

That’s the best part.

“So this is where you ladies have been hiding.” Gray’s voice is an added layer of yum to my already perfect moment. I reach out a hand, which he takes, and tug him down next to me.

“We got to the scavenger hunt too late,” Jazz pouts. “But Abby got to help a lady hump a table.”

“Do I even want to know this story?” Gray asks.

“Probably not. I’m scarred for life,” I say. “Although one more drink might help take the edges off the memory.”

Jazz sits up beside me. “I’ll get them. I have to pee anyway.”

When she bounces off the side of the hammock, Gray leans over me, planting a not so chaste kiss on my lips that has my fingers diving into his hair. He breaks it on a laugh when I try to hitch my leg over his hip.

“Hi,” he says softly, amused eyes staring into mine.

“Hi,” I whisper back, kneading the back of his head. “Did you get what you need to finish the article?”

“Almost. Just a few loose ends to tie up. Did you get what you need to finally put Trey behind you?” He arches an eyebrow.

“That and a whole lot more.”

Gray runs a hand up my leg, stopping to caress my hip. “What did you do with your wedding dress anyway?”

“It’s in a garbage bag in the closet. I should probably just throw it away, but I can’t bring myself to do it. I fucking love that dress.”

“You looked amazing in it.” He kisses the corner of my mouth. “Selfishly, I’m glad Trey never got to see you in it. He may have changed his mind, and then I wouldn’t be able to do this.” He kisses me again. And again. He slides a knee between my thighs, layering himself over me.

“Want to get out of here?” he mumbles against my lips.

“Does Ms. Trudy’s cane look like a penis? Hell, yes! But we should wait for Jazz. I don’t want to leave her hanging.”

“Then I’ll have to keep this PG-13 for now.” He runs a hand under my shirt to cup a breast, making me arch into him. “You fit me so perfectly,” he says, palming my breast.

“Mayday! Mayday! Stop the presses! Hold the horses! Shit. What do they day on ships?” Jazz’s frantic voice pulls me out of my haze. “Abandon ship! That’s it. Abandon ship!”

The net begins to bounce as the other passengers sit up in alarm. Those around us in the lounge chairs also take notice.

“What is it? A fire?” someone asks.

“An iceberg?”

“There are no icebergs in the Caribbean. It’s gotta be a fire. Or pirates. Is it pirates?”

People begin talking at once, all scrambling to reach the edge of the net. It’s beginning to feel more like a trampoline than a hammock.

“Everybody stop moving!” I yell. They all obey, because, well, teacher voice.

Jazz is panting and holding up her phone. “Sorry. I just meant Abby. The ship’s fine. Nothing to fear.”

“You can’t just yell abandon ship. It’s like saying there’s a bomb in an airport,” a guy says, frowning. He grabs his date’s hand, and they move down the deck away from our dramatic tableau.

“What’s wrong, Jazz?” I ask, ignoring the grumbles from the crowd around us. “You look like they turned off the champagne bar.”

“Abby. Get away from that dick-face pronto. Do not let him stick his tongue anywhere else on you,” she says, her eyes on fire as she stares down Gray.

Gray and I exchange a look.

“What did I do?” he asks, rolling away from me to look at Jazz.

She holds her phone out at the same time Gray and I each get incoming messages. Jazz’s phone is too far for me to see, so I check my text message while she climbs back onto the netting.

ALEX: Did you give him permission to do this?
Otherwise, he's a dead man walking

What is he talking about? Gray is also checking his phone, his face ashen and alarmed. When he lifts his head to me, his eyes are full of apology.

“Can someone please tell me what’s going on? Why is Alex threatening to kill someone? Is it Trey? What did he do now?” I ask, my heart thrumming in my chest.

“Not Trey this time. This fucker.” Jazz hooks a thumb at Gray. “Seems like he found the perfect angle for his article. And it’s you.”

“What?” My phone pings again. Jazz sent me a link.

“Let me explain before you click on it,” Gray says, trying to push my phone down. I wiggle out of his way and open the link.

It’s the landing page of his travel magazine website. Prominent is a teaser for an upcoming article about the Love at Sea cruise. The picture of me in my ruined wedding dress from Jamaica is centered under the headline: Jilted Bride Trashes Dress and Ex on Would-be Honeymoon Cruise.

The blood drains from my body. I’m unable to move.

“Breezy. I didn’t mean for it to come out like this. Frank must have—” Gray starts, trying to take my hand.

“Was all this for an article?” I gesture between us. A swirl of mistrust and unease clouds my senses. “You used me to get your story?”

“No. It’s not like that.”

I’m not really listening. All my old doubts and mistrust and anger roll to the surface like a tidal wave. I knew I shouldn’t have trusted this quickly again. I knew my heart wasn’t ready. “You...you asked all those questions about my past. I thought you were interested. I thought you wanted to get to know me better. But you really wanted a story.”

Tears prick my eyes, but I refuse to shed anymore tears on assholes. I swipe at them and begin to crawl away from him.

“Even just now. Asking about my dress and my closure. Was that so you could wrap up your last paragraph in a nice little bow? Would you like to capture me ripping up a picture of Trey? Or maybe a selfie of us kissing so you can show how you helped me get over him? That might add a little personal flavor to the article. People eat that shit up.”

“Abby wait. I can explain.” Gray makes a grab for my ankle, but I swing it around out of his reach. I’m trying to make a mic drop exit but crawling along a huge, bouncing net between other couples is not easy or fast.

“My editor must have used the picture. I haven’t even finished the article yet.” Gray is following behind me, his voice pleading.

After what seems like forty-seven years, I finally make it off the catamaran and around the guard rails. Pushing the hair out of my face, I glare at Gray, still scrambling to follow us.

“Am I or am I not in your article?” I ask, crossing my arms.

His face falls. His shoulders slump. And it’s all the answer I need.

“You know I don’t want to be defined by what Trey did to me. This is just going to remind everyone about it again.”

“I’m so sorry, Breezy.”

“I trusted you. I trusted you after I couldn’t trust anyone else,” I whisper. “And you lied right to my face.” Then I square my shoulders. I am a bad-ass bitch, and I am better than him. “I hope your article turns out to be a roaring success for you. At least then you’ll constantly be continents away.”

“Abby, stop. It’s not what you think. I was going to show you the article before—”

I hold up my hand to stop his excuses. “Enough, Gray. Please. I can’t listen to it. It’s one thing to sleep with me to get your story. That I could almost forgive. But why take it as far as you did? Why bring feelings into it?”

“Abby, please.”

“No. Enough.” I turn away and mumble, “I swear I’m joining a goddamn nunnery.”

Jazz takes my hand and, with one last scornful look over her shoulder and a whispered “I’ll gut you,” she drags me away from Gray.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GRAYSON



FUCK FRANK. And fuck my life. I watch Abby half-run, half-walk away while supported by Jazz.

When she's out of sight, I jab the office number into my phone.

"Talk to me," Frank says like the asshole he is.

"What the hell, man?" I yell, detangling myself from the hammock and storming off toward the elevators.

"You should watch your tone," he warns.

"I told you to drop the story. I told you it was dead. But you ran it anyway."

"It's my magazine. I run what I see fit, not what my employees tell me to run." He says employees like it's a dirty word. "Besides you edited that photo, so I figured we had the go ahead."

"We did not. Abby is pissed."

"Abby? Sounds like you got a little too close. You are making the same impulsive mistakes that you made in Morocco."

"No, Frank. You made the mistake this time. When she sues you, I want it on record that I had no part in it."

"No part in it? You brought me the story in the first place. You took and edited the best damn photo I've seen in a long time. And you wrote most of the article that, might I remind

you, includes the jilted bride.” He punctuates each point by hitting the desk, probably with his open palm.

“I haven’t submitted an article yet.”

“You’ve submitted pages. And I can see all your notes in your cloud account. I got Stotten to contact the ex-fiancé. Boy did that guy have a lot to say.” Frank chuckles. I want to reach through the phone and strangle him.

I’m never going to get through to him over the phone from a country away. “Please, Frank. I’m begging you. Just wait until I get back to publish the story. I think it’ll be better if we can talk in person.”

“No promises. Really, Hamilton, I thought you wanted this bi-line. I thought you were one to fight tooth and nail to get back to where you were a year ago. Guess I thought wrong.”

“It’s not about that—”

He cuts me off with “Either think about a career change or grow a pair, Hamilton. This business is not for the weak-balled.”

He hangs up, and I look at my phone in disbelief. Seven short days ago I was focused, determined, and on my way to greatness. How the hell did I get here?

More importantly, how am I going to fix things with Abby?

CHAPTER TWENTY

ABBY



ONE MONTH LATER

“OKAY HOMIES. Time to pack up. Be sure to submit your exit ticket *before* the bell rings. It’s time stamped, so I’ll know,” I say, standing by the door to my classroom to make sure no one sneaks out before the bell.

“No one says homies anymore, Ms. Winters,” a student calls out.

“I’m bringing it back.”

The bell rings and the students start filing out into the already noisy hallway. I step to my computer to reset for the next period, ignoring the small pang of regret in the pit of my stomach when I see the class couple holding hands.

I haven’t heard from Gray since the cruise. Not that I expected to after the scene I made by the hammock. I was righteously angry in that moment. He’d lied to me and used my story to get ahead. I guess he hadn’t learned his lesson after Morocco after all. It just goes to show, you can’t trust anything with a penis.

Except maybe Table Seven—real name Treyvon and whom we affectionately call Good Trey. He and Jazz are still as hot and heavy as they were on the cruise despite living almost forty-five minutes apart. I’m happy for them, really. But I’m totally reminding Jazz she promised to name her first born after me.

When the article came out a few weeks after disembarkation, I was still a part of it, along with Trudy, but Gray’s bi-line was not attached. It was more about the cruise itself with Trudy and I as examples of what kind of people would enjoy a cruise like this. There were a few paragraphs about my failed wedding, but it didn’t have quite the ripple effect I was expecting.

Did Gray kill the story for me? Why didn’t he get to write it? Did he get in trouble for not getting my permission first, like what happened in Morocco?

I've picked up my phone a bullshit number of times over the last month to text and ask him, but just couldn't bring myself to actually type out a text. If he wanted to contact me, he would have, right? Maybe my reluctance to sign anything caused him to lose his job for good and now he hates and resents me.

The more time that passes, the more I believe the latter is true. Even Alex, Mr. Hands Off My Sister, has been dropping not-so-subtle hints that Gray is a great guy and deserves another chance. Of course, that could be because I had a come to Jesus talk with my dear, sweet, overprotective brother about the fact that I'm an adult and can make my own life decisions. Still...

Thoughts of the Love at Sea cruise, and how it ended, have filled my days. I've replayed every moment and every conversation with Gray to see where we went wrong. At the end of the day, though, I've been through worse. Jilted bride, remember? It wasn't like Gray and I were dating or even in love. We had a very intense one-week long affair that benefited us both while it lasted. He helped me get over Trey. I helped him with his article.

Or so I thought.

Now? Now I don't know what to think. Except that I think about Gray enough that I tell my therapist about it. I think of the way his eyes sparked fire when he saw me in my cocktail dress. I think of the way his hips moved against mine as we danced and did...other things. I think of the way his large hands felt against my heated skin.

"Excuse me, Ms. Winters?" a squeaky teenaged voice jolts me back to the present. I immediately drop my hand from my neck and straighten.

"Jamal. What can I do for you?" I ask, clearing my throat and my mind. I am a school teacher. There is no room for naughty thoughts in front of a classroom full of teenagers. They smell weakness and embarrassment a mile away.

He hands me a gorgeous pink gerbera daisy with a small tag attached.

“Oh, Jamal. I—”

“It’s not from me,” he rushes to add, a small blush creeping up his face. “I’m just the delivery guy.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, taking the proffered flower.

He shrugs, smiling with a mouth full of braces. “I was asked to give it you.” He turns and walks to his desk.

Frowning, I open the card. It’s an amended quote from Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. “When you departed from me, sorrow abided and happiness took its leave.”

“What the—?” I look around the room, but no one is paying attention to me.

Ricky comes in and hands me another daisy, this one yellow. He doesn’t say a thing. Just shoves it at me and moves away to talk to his friends.

This tag says, “Lady...I am yours. I give away myself for you.”

More *Much Ado*. I wonder if Mr. Klipper, the tenth-grade teacher next door, is using this as a fun way to start his Shakespeare unit. I start to walk out to ask him, when Shelby hands me yet another daisy.

This one says, “I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes.”

Right after her, another daisy joins my growing bouquet. This quote is from *Hamlet*. So maybe not Mr. Klipper after all?

“Doubt though the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love.”

And a fourth from *The Tempest*, “I would not wish any companion in the world but you.”

“Okay people,” I say addressing the class. “Is this some sort of Winter Formal-proposal prank? Am I going to go viral on Tik-Tok?”

They shake their heads. Ricky laughs, “That’s not a bad idea. We should start that trend. Hashtag

teachersreactiontopromposals. It'll be lit."

"Keep your phones away," I warn with a finger.

The bell is about to ring to start class and I have yet to make it to the hallway to see who is behind this prank.

"Get started on the warm-up," I instruct. "We'll share when I get back."

I step into the now empty hallway to find a smiling, handsome man standing there in a suit that hugs his body like a wet suit. Bells go off in my brain as I rake my eyes over Grayson Hamilton.

"Hi," he says, but I barely hear him.

Okay, the bells are not in my brain, but echoing around the building to signal the start of class.

"What are you doing here?" I ask when they finally stop.

"I'm making a grand gesture." He hands me the last flower. I look at the card, reading it as he recites it out loud. "I am not Shakespeare, so this is pretty cheesy, but falling for you has always been easy, Breezy."

I snort out a laugh, but tears prick my eyes. "Daisies are my favorite," I say lamely.

He steps to me, hesitantly, and takes the hand that isn't holding the bouquet of beautiful daisies.

"I know."

"And you quoted Shakespeare." I twist the bouquet, making the cards dance.

"Not a single one from *Romeo and Juliet*," he confirms. He brings my knuckles to his lips. It's then I remember what I said on the beach after the Trey fiasco.

"I can't believe you remembered this."

His dark eyes bore into mine. "I remember everything. Every word. Every breath. Every touch. You are all I think about. I know I have a lot to make up for. I know I need to earn your trust again. I'm asking for the chance to do that."

“What happened with the article? Your name wasn’t on it.”

He sighs. “My editor and I had a disagreement over whether I should make your story the feature. After seeing the pictures of you trashing your dress, he wanted that to drive the article. I told him you didn’t consent, and it would be unethical to run it. He disagreed under the veil of public interest. He said we could verify your story, so technically we didn’t need your permission.”

He takes another step closer, running his hand up my arm to my shoulder. “I told him to fuck off, and I quit.”

“You quit your job?”

“I quit the entire industry.”

I gape at him. That’s the last thing I expected him to say. “But you were trying so hard to get your reputation back.” This doesn’t make any sense. I’m also having a hard time concentrating with him so close to me. His nearness is intoxicating.

“The only person’s opinion I care about is yours, Breezy. I haven’t been happy in a while, even before the cruise. Even before Morocco. Seeing you tackle your life after what Trey did gave me the courage to start over too. I’ve reinvented myself as a wedding photographer in the greater NOLA area. I specialize in trash the dress sessions after the ceremony.”

I look for any trace of mockery but find none. “Are you fucking with me, right now? Wedding photography?”

“I swear.” He laughs lightly. “I realized I really like photographing joy. And what’s more joyous than weddings, right? I have zero regrets. At least where that’s concerned. The only regret I have is not telling you how I feel about you sooner. And by sooner, I mean back in high school. Although now those feelings are well beyond a teenage crush.”

“They are?” I swallow, my traitorous eyes flicking to his lips.

“Yes, Breezy. I fell for you. Hard. The same offer I gave you our last night together is still on the table. I want you in my life any way I can have you. If that’s friendship while we

rebuild trust, I'm fine with that. At first. But I can't guarantee I can keep my hands off you now that I know how your skin feels against my lips." He leans down so our faces are inches away. "So, I came here with the intention of asking you to dinner. A proper date. Will you have dinner with me, Ms. Winters?"

I look into his eyes and think about everything we've shared. He took care of me, not advantage of me, when I was drunk. He shared a precious memory of his mother to help me not have a panic attack on the beach. He listened and remembered when I told him what I liked. He is generous and kind and standing before me with his heart in his eyes. He's holding his breath waiting for my answer.

"Come on, Ms. Winters," a voice says behind us. "Put the poor guy out of his misery. He knows Shakespeare. English teachers love that ish."

I look over my shoulder to see my entire class hanging out the doorway watching us.

"You're supposed to be working on the warm-up," I scold. But I'm smiling.

"No way. Not until you say yes."

"Yeah. You always tell us to make good choices," Shelby says. "And he's a snack and a half. Seems like a great choice to me!"

Gray chuckles, and I turn my face back to his.

"Nothing like a little peer pressure," I say. "It's almost like we're back in high school."

"Should I pass you a note that says, 'Do you like me? Yes, no, maybe' with check boxes?"

I hold up the flowers. "I like these notes better."

"Will you have dinner with me?" he asks again.

I only hesitate a moment before wrapping my free hand around his shoulders. "Yes. Now kiss me."

He crushes my lips with his, kissing me like he's making up for the month where he didn't. I even dip back a little in his arms. A chorus of "awww" and "daammnn" rise up around us.

Abruptly, I pull away. His lips are still moving a little. He stops to look at me and fixes his face.

"You have to promise to communicate. Even if you think it'll make me mad. I want to know everything that's going on in your mind and your life," I say.

"I have a bit of a bunion on my left big toe. I've been calling him Paul," he says with a serious face.

"What else would you call it?" I deadpan.

"I also have an inexplicable fear of someone tripping into my ass."

I purse my lips to hold back a smile. "Inexplicable, huh?"

"Yup. The last time it happened, I fell so hard my world turned upside down." He tries to kiss me again, but I put a finger on his lips.

"And if you ever have any doubts about us whatsoever—even the most infinitesimal, grain of sand sized doubt—you talk to me about it."

"Do not drop my anchor in another port. Got it," he says, reading between the lines. "I have a condition too."

"Oh, really?" This ought to be good.

"When I try to tell you things that might make you mad, you have to stay put and listen."

I smirk, draw him closer, and read between the lines. "Do not abandon ship. Got it."

He mirrors my smirk. "God, I missed you Breezy." We kiss to the soundtrack of thirty teenagers hooting and hollering behind us.

BONUS

I hope you enjoyed reading Grayson and Abby's story! I had so much fun collaborating with the other authors to create this world. If you want to stay with them a little longer, check out the bonus chapters to get a glimpse into what Jazz was doing while Abby and Grayson were occupied.

[Sign up for Karigan's Newsletter to get the FREE bonus chapters now!](#)

TOTAL SHIP SHOW

A FAKE RELATIONSHIP ROMANCE

Continue your voyage with the next book from the LOVE AT SEA SERIES.

Total Ship Show by Susan Renee

Love at Sea, *Book 7*

Releasing on 11/28/22

Buy [*Total Ship Show*](#) today!

My old college friends decided we need to take a group cruise, significant others included.

There's just one small hiccup...I'm woefully single.

I ask a friend to come with me to pose as my boyfriend, but he backs out on me at the last minute. What's a girl to do on a cruise as a single person?

Wait...what?

It's a lover's cruise?

Ooh ship!

No way am I spending the week with my friends as the only single in the group. I've got to find myself a hot, fake boyfriend, or better yet, a fake fiancé for the week. It can't be that hard. There have to be plenty of single men on the ship.

One of them is bound to say yes. I'll just board the ship as early as possible and hope I bump into someone worthy.

Okay, yeah. This could work. It'll either be a genius move...

Or a total ship show.

Total Ship Show is a fake romance rom com, part of the Love at Sea multi-author series. Get ready to set sail through the Caribbean on Festival Cruises' most alluring voyage with eight of your favorite authors - happily ever after guaranteed!

Experience everything the Love at Sea series has to offer. From speed dating to masquerades, guests are sure to enjoy the hot days and steamy nights. Explore hidden waterfalls, swim with dolphins, and watch as eight couples find their forever on the open ocean.

LOVE AT SEA SERIES

Experience everything the Love at Sea series has to offer, each story features a brand new couple and a fun trope. Get ready to set sail on the most alluring voyage with eight of your favorite authors - happily ever after guaranteed!

[Ship Happens by Kate Stacy](#)

A Friends with Benefits Romance

[That Ship Has Sailed by HM Thomas](#)

A Widow Romance

[Sick of this Ship by Mari Sol](#)

An Enemies to Lovers Romance

[Ruin the Friendship by S.A. Clayton](#)

A Best Friend's Sibling Romance

[Ship Got Real by T.L. Anderson](#)

A Blind Date Romance

[Abandon Ship by Karigan Hale](#)

A Jilted Bride Romance

[Total Ship Show by Susan Renee](#)

A Fake Relationship Romance

[This Pucking Ship by A.M. Williams](#)

A Sports Romance

ALSO BY KARIGAN HALE

HOW TO DATE SERIES - SNARKY COMEDIES

[How to Date Your Boss](#) - a grumpy boss office romance

[How to Date Your Ex](#) - a second chance romance

[How to Date Your Brother's Best Friend](#) - a friends to lovers romance

[How to Date a Rockstar](#) - a mistaken identity romance

MCALLISTER BROTHERS SERIES - SNARKY COMEDIES WITH A SPLASH OF SUSPENSE

[McAllister Brothers Boxset](#) (all the following book in one yummy package)

[Cowboy, Remember Me](#) (free novella) - a second chance, friends to lovers romance

[Cowboy, Take Me Away](#) - an enemies to lovers romance

[Cowboy, Save Me](#) - a slow burn romantic comedy

[Cowboy, Marry Me](#) (a companion novella) - features couple from Book 1

[Cowboy, Forgive Me](#) - friends to lovers romance

ANTHOLOGIES/MULTI-AUTHOR SERIES

[Abandon Ship](#) – a jilted bride romantic comedy & part of the [Love at Sea](#) multi-author series

[Mine This Winter](#): A Contemporary Romance Anthology (includes a Love Snack story)

[Heroes with Heart and Heat, Volume 1](#) - A 9/11 Charity Anthology

[Heroes with Heart and Heat, Volume 2](#) - A Grassroots Wildland Firefighters Charity Anthology (includes a Love Snack story)

[Heroes with Heart and Heat, Volume 3](#) – A Wounded Warrior Charity Anthology (includes a Love Snack story)

[Six Summer Flings](#): A Romantic Comedy Anthology (includes a Love Snack story)

LOVE SNACK SERIES – SHORT, STEAMY HAPPILY-FOR-NOW STORIES

[Cherry Bomb](#) (free novella) - Love Snack Speed Dating origin story

[Charm City CEO](#)

[Kiss My Ax](#)

[You Had Me at Merlot](#)

Just My Type - included in [Heroes with Heart and Heat, Volume 2](#)

Love on the Lifts - included in [Mine this Winter Anthology](#).

Crash Into Me - included in [Six Summer Flings](#)

KINDLE VELLA EPISODIC STORIES

[The Quarterback Sneak](#)

STAY CONNECTED!

Website: <https://kariganspencil.wixsite.com/books>

[Amazon Author Page](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[BookBub](#)

[Facebook Author's Page](#)

[Gimme That Slow Burn](#) (Facebook Reader's Group)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[TikTok](#)

ABOUT KARIGAN HALE

Hi Readers! I am a writer, reader, wife, mother, teacher, and photographer. I married my high school sweetheart - a real-life second chance love story! - and have been a hopeful romantic ever since.

I'm highly susceptible to sudden summer thunderstorms and happily ever afters. Highly allergic to poison ivy and early mornings. And highly addicted to fountain sodas and true crime.

When I'm not reading or writing swoon-worthy romances, I'm usually stalki... I, mean, chasing my two daughters around with my camera, grading papers, or cleaning up after the animals on our mini-farm (at least emus, goats, chickens, dogs, and cats are cute, right?).

