



Another
**LAST
CALL**

CHERYL TERRA

ANOTHER LAST CALL

A STEAMY SMALL TOWN
ROMANCE

CHERYL TERZA



BANG IT OUT WRITING

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CONTENT WARNINGS

Please note that this book is written in Canadian English, which has rules and spellings from both UK and US English.

While not a dark romance, this book covers some heavier topics. I have tried to reflect those here as best I can without providing spoilers, but if you have concerns about any of the items listed and wish to know more, please reach out to me via email at info@cherylterra.com.



As a steamy romance, this book is intended for mature adults. There are multiple sexually explicit scenes, profanity, and discussions of adult topics.

This book contains scenes of rough/angry but entirely consensual sex. There is a relationship that involves cheating – while it is not between the main characters, one of the characters is involved in the situation. Parental death and abandonment are discussed as previous events but do not explicitly occur during this book. There are mild scenes of

sexual harassment and sexist language. As this book contains scenes set in a bar, there is alcohol use. There are also mentions of pregnancy in this book.

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ONE

CALEB

STALE DUST.

Stagnant air.

The musty, untouched scent of a room after months of abandonment.

I used to love that scent. It was the smell of vacation, of opening the cabin door for the first time after a long winter.

It used to be the scent of promise. Of fishing and grilled hot dogs for lunch and bike ride adventures with the kids I was sure would be my lifelong friends. Kids I was bonded with, the siblings I'd never had, who were my entire world for two endless months a year before we forgot each other during the school days that made up the other ten months.

I hadn't smelled that scent in a long time.

Too long.

Long enough that when I opened the door, it hit me like a wall. I had to stop and blink it away before stepping over the threshold and patting the wall for the closest light switch. My

fingers found it easily and I flipped it, but nothing happened. Glancing up, I saw there was no light bulb in the socket.

Typical Dad.

I smiled despite forgetting about the light bulbs. Dad had a cabin in Marble Beach—sure, it was the ugliest, cheapest, most basic cabin in that line of luxury lake houses, but it was shrouded by trees and forest on all sides except the one that faced the lake—but when the end of summer came, he took all the light bulbs out of every fixture so he could avoid having to buy more until he absolutely had to. There had always been a two-pack of spares in his glove box for those occasional trips out to check on the property, but the rest of the bulbs came with us for that first trip to the cabin each year.

“Can I go ride my bike?” I’d always ask as soon as we turned into the gravel driveway just wide enough for our car to pass through.

“Not until the bulbs are in and the windows are open,” Dad would reply.

And I’d sigh, but that was the rule. As soon as he parked, I’d grab my backpack and the bag full of lightbulbs. Mom would start unpacking the car as I tailed Dad around the cabin, lugging the bag of bulbs while he lugged the stepladder. I’d pass him a bulb, he’d screw it, I’d throw open whatever windows were in that room, and then we’d move on to the next one.

“Now can I go ride my bike?” I’d ask as soon as we finished the last room.

“Sure,” Dad would say.

Then I’d wait, then sigh.

“Dad,” I’d say. “Can you get it off the bike rack?”

“Sure I can.”

Another pause, another dramatic childish sigh. “*Dad.*”

“Yes, Caleb?”

“Will you *please* get my bike off the bike rack?”

“What?” he’d tease. “You can’t do it yourself yet?”

The first year I managed to do it myself, Dad had a strange look on his face. I didn’t think much of it at the time. Looking back, he might have been proud. But I think he was a little sad, too.

The smile faded as my heart tugged tighter in my chest.

Dad.

I tried to bury the thought of him as my eyes adjusted to the dark.

Late summer light filtered through the dirty windows. The cabin was dim, but I could see well enough. No lightbulbs this time, but the windows needed opening. Muscle memory kicked in, and I stepped further into the cabin.

A quick hop over the squeaky floorboard in the entranceway, particularly important to avoid when sneaking out the last few times I’d been at the cabin as a teenager. The patio door, which had to be pushed in before sliding it open. The furnace needed to be kicked twice on the left and once on

the right if it gave out on a particularly cold night. It might have been ten years since I'd been at the cabin, but I still remembered every quirk about the place.

The smile that had faded flickered back as I looked around. The whole place was old, dusty, and needed a lot of work to compete with the other cabins for sale on the lake. But I'd worked summers as a contractor while in university and intended on starting my own business doing just this, so renovating it was well within my skill set. Knowing Dad, that's why he'd left it to me in his will instead of lumping it in with the rest of the stuff left to Mom.

Even my inheritance was a lesson about working for what you wanted.

Not that I minded. Dad refused to let me be the kind of spoiled brat who felt entitled to my parents' money. And I respected it now.

I appreciated it now.

I understood now why it was so important to know how to work with my hands, just as much as it was important for me to go to business school and learn how to work with my head. That was how Dad had made his success, and it was how I was going to, too.

The cabin played into that. Mom had no desire to deal with it or keep it. She'd gone back to England, to her hometown so she could be with her parents while she figured out life as a woman widowed too soon. And I hadn't been there in years. As much as it had been a part of my childhood, it was prime

lakefront real estate in Marble Beach. Flipping it and selling it would earn me enough to invest in starting my business a few years ahead of when I thought I'd be able to.

Though... I mean, I would've rather had those few more years with Dad.

But that wasn't an option. So instead, I was going to take the savings I'd intended to start my business with and invest them in fixing up the cabin. I'd spend the winter sprucing the place up, then sell it in the spring. That would get me back my investment plus a small fortune that should see me through the early days of getting my business up and running.

First things first, though.

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TWO

CALEB

I WALKED THROUGH THE cabin, opening all the windows and letting in light and fresh air as I cleaned the upstairs bedroom. The kitchen still had all the old pots and pans we used to use, and I added the groceries I'd brought to the refrigerator and pantry. Before it got dark, I jumped in my car and drove the five minutes into town to grab light bulbs from the grocery store. Once I was back, I took a chilled beer from the fridge and headed to the deck to watch the sun go down over the lake.

Every summer of my childhood was spent here. For two months, we'd live in the cabin. Dad turned one of the spare rooms into a makeshift office and spent some mornings working. Once a week or so, he'd drive back to the city and take care of things at the office. He'd worked hard to create a business that had a team of people to take care of all the other pedestrian things he usually had to do so he could live his summers in a small slice of paradise.

I'd spend the days swimming, riding bikes down the dirt roads, and playing with the kids who lived in town. Once a

week or so, Dad and I would go fishing and we'd have a big fish fry on the patio overlooking the lake.

There were plenty of other “summer kids” who lived in Marble Beach for those two months, but I didn't know any of them well. The summer kids lived in fancy lake houses, not cabins; places that had entertainment rooms and pools and big screen TVs. They had jet skis and dirt bikes that they complained weren't nice enough, even though they usually had the latest models. And the few that did have bicycles got shiny brand new ones every single year, it seemed.

Dad owned a fishing boat. I had my bike, which got replaced a few times as I grew, but never just because I *wanted* a new one. And he'd flat-out told me “no” when I asked for a dirt bike. So I spent most of my time with the kids who lived in town, since they didn't have jet skis or dirt bikes either.

But things changed as I got older. I hit my teens, and suddenly bike rides were for kids. High school rolled around and I would complain about having to spend the entire summer at the cabin. Two months away from my friends—my home friends, at least—felt like torture.

“You have friends in Marble Beach,” Dad would remind me.

“It's not the *same*,” I would argue back.

And it wasn't. I would've never known it at the time, but summers with my Marble Beach friends were better. At home, I would've sat around playing video games, maybe hanging

out at the park or going to the movies or whatever. All the typical shit I did the rest of the year.

But in Marble Beach, I'd have lunch at The Sea Glass, the restaurant-slash-bar near the beach that my friend's mom owned. I'd go hiking. Hang out in the gazebo at the beach with my friends during the day and start a bonfire by the lake at night, passing bottles stolen from someone's parents' liquor cabinet back and forth.

The last summer I spent in Marble Beach was the year I graduated from high school. Dad insisted I go to the cabin before starting university, so I had. But he knew it was the last year I'd be there, and so did I, and at the end of the summer, I told my Marble Beach friends I wouldn't be back. There were tears and hugs and promises to keep in touch that no one intended to keep. A few nights before I was leaving to go back home, we'd had a final bonfire on the beach, where my friends surprised me with little parting gifts. They gave me things I cherished more than any jet ski or expensive dirt bike: framed photos and handmade jewelry and, in the case of one girl I'd known since we were kids, her virginity.

In fairness, she took mine too, so it wasn't like I left her with nothing.

It had been unexpected. I didn't even know she liked me like that. She was about a year younger than me, but when I'd come back that summer, she'd started looking... well. She had long, thick hair and these huge, expressive eyes. And even though I remembered her mom being kind of a hippie, before

that summer, she had always dressed like a bit of a tomboy. That year, though, it was tight jeans and tank tops that showed off skinny arms and the hint of curves and just...

Just perfection in the eyes of a teenage boy, you know?

And she had the cutest nose, too. It was such a weird thing to think was cute, but hers was. A bit turned up at the end and spattered with freckles, with a slight scar on the bridge that she got when we were kids.

But she'd never given me any sign that she was into me. I liked her, of course, but it hadn't even crossed my mind that... you know, *that* was an option. I didn't live there all year round like she did, and it didn't seem fair to be romantic with someone I knew I wouldn't be around for.

But she didn't mind, apparently.

It was just her and me sitting on the beach. The bonfire was down to coals and everyone else had gone home, but we'd been deep in conversation about God knows what and hadn't left yet. I remember we were sitting in the sand, her guitar case beside us—she'd brought it along to play around the fire like she usually did but had long since abandoned it for our conversation—and she had her legs bent, hugging her knees to her chest as she looked out at the lake when the conversation between us lulled.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“Couple of days,” I replied.

From the corner of my eye, I saw her nod slowly.

“Have you ever had sex?” she asked.

My eyes nearly burst out of my skull, but she didn't so much as glance in my direction as I gaped at her.

“No,” I finally answered. “Have... have you?”

She shook her head, then looked over at me. “D'you want to? With me?”

I did, and I told her that. She had a condom with her and we hurried down the beach to the gazebo so we had some semblance of privacy. It was chilly away from the bonfire, the coolness of fall creeping into the air already, but I barely noticed it at all.

She kissed me and let me touch her everywhere. That was thrilling in itself; boobs always were, and she let me feel her up for as long as I wanted. Which, honestly, wasn't very long. I *did* want to touch her boobs for as long as she'd let me, but while I'd made out with girls before, I'd always known we weren't going all the way.

So knowing I was about to... yeah. I was eager to get to the next part, let's say that.

I wasn't inside her for very long. After getting the condom on and sliding my cock into her, I got maybe five or six thrusts in before I let out a wavering groan and came. I tried to laugh it off, embarrassed, but she'd smiled and said it was okay, that she'd heard it was normal for the first time to be like that and that it didn't matter anyway, since she'd orgasmed. Which I

wasn't sure was true, but she said it was, and I was going to damn well believe her.

I thought about it often after the last time I left Marble Beach, that frantic, groping tryst in a gazebo by the lake. Neither of us knew what we were doing, but she'd been gorgeous and warm and willing and so, so special to me. But I hadn't heard from her after, and that was the last time I'd seen her.

That first year I was in university, I told friends the story of my first time on drunken nights when we were bragging. We'd laugh about it—not at her, never *at* her, but how she lived in Marble Beach and could've had her pick of the countless rich kids with parents who had big lake houses instead of crappy cabins. And instead, she'd been stuck with me, so instead of losing her virginity in a nice fluffy bed or a hot tub or hell, on the back of a jet ski or something, she'd been bare-ass naked on the sand-gritty wood of a gazebo on a cold night.

The poor girl. At least I'd made her... well. At least she *said* I'd made her come.

Years went by and I met more girls. Had more sex. Got arguably better at it. I broke my share of hearts and had mine broken in return.

That first girl, though.

Sitting on the back deck of the cabin that night with a beer in my hand, I looked out at the lake and wondered what had happened to her. Everyone I'd been friends with had plans to leave. Marble Beach wasn't big, and it was mainly a summer

town, so unless they wanted to work in shops or restaurants or one of the bed-and-breakfasts nearby, there wasn't much here for anyone.

I couldn't remember if she'd said what she wanted to do back then, but I imagined she must have left, too.

After finishing my degree, my next goal was to start my own business. I'd worked hard, found the best jobs I could, dedicated myself to earning enough to be my own boss like my dad had when he was my age. He always asked me to come back out to the cabin each year, even for just a week or two, but I'd always been too busy.

I wished I'd come here with him.

I wish I'd spent more time with him before he died.

The last rays of the sun were dancing on the horizon across from me. As they dipped their way into the lake, I lifted my beer bottle in a toast.

Six months without him now.

I wished we could have had one last beer together.

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THREE

MAGGIE

“COME A LITTLE CLOSER, sweetheart, and tell me about those specials again.”

I stared at the tourist, my expression somewhere between blank and disgusted. He was your typical well-off white asshole, with thick salt-and-pepper hair and a weak chin that he jutted out so it appeared more prominent. I wasn't sure what he did for a living, but he looked like he probably owned multiple suits. Not that he was wearing a suit, but something about the way his expensive golf shirt was tucked into those pressed khakis made it seem like he was the kind of guy who worked in a big, fancy office somewhere.

“Just the one special,” I replied blandly. “The Beach Burger's half-price until five.”

He chuckled, exchanging *looks* with the other men at his table before bending his arm so he could rest his elbow against the back of his chair as he turned towards me.

“No smile for me today?” The corners of his lips curled up, making him look about as friendly and approachable as a slime-covered toad. “Come on, sweetheart. We're all friends

here. I'm Peter. That's Todd and Les and Jake. What's your name?"

I was going to be sick.

Gritting my teeth, I glanced across the room. Mom was behind the bar, chatting with one of the regulars. It was a little surprising that she wasn't even facing my direction, considering she'd *just* finished lecturing me on providing better customer service.

Or at least not openly despising the tourists.

"Maggie," I finally replied.

"Maggie," the tourist—Peter—repeated, drawing my name out in a low rumble that made the other men laugh. "Miss Maggie. Have you been working here long?"

"A while," I said, since he didn't need to know I'd been working there almost my entire life.

He leaned a little closer to me. "Ever tire of the work, Maggie?"

"Are you going to order something?" I asked. As an afterthought, I tried to smile. "Sir?"

"Ah, in a minute. We've got time. How long have you worked here, Miss Maggie?"

I clenched my jaw again. "If you're not going to order something—"

"Are you from around here?"

Sighing, I tapped my pen on my notepad. “My mom and I have lived here my whole life.”

That was a mistake. The men all glanced at each other before Peter spoke again.

“Just you and your mom?”

“Mm-hmm,” I said.

He lowered his voice, looking up at me with whiskey-glazed eyes. “Miss Maggie, do you mean to tell me you’ve never had a daddy?”

My face flushed. The man, mistaking it for embarrassment, laughed.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, sweetheart.” He leaned in, putting one of his disgusting hands on my forearm. “But you know, if you’re tired of being a waitress in this dump and want to find out what it’s like to have someone, ah... be *like* a daddy for you...”

I knew what I was supposed to do.

I mean, I knew what my mom wanted me to do.

She’d told me approximately a million times that when a tourist propositioned me—not *if*, but *when*, because she knew what these men were like—that I should walk away and tell her. Then she’d get Big Tim or Tiny Steve to come over and kick them out. Other customers didn’t like how I dealt with men like Peter, she’d say, and it wasn’t good for business.

But the kitchen was busy. Big Tim was flipping burgers and Tiny Steve was probably getting in the way or something. By the time I got one of them, this douchebag would have already walked out.

And besides. Where was the satisfaction in having them deal with him for me?

So instead, I glanced at my mom, then flipped the cover of my notepad closed. They were sitting at one of the high tops, so I leaned forward, resting my elbows against the table. I'd just brought four icy pints of beer to the table and there was one sitting in front of Peter. Biting my lip, I traced a finger down it, collecting the cold condensation on my fingertips.

He looked like he'd won the lottery, and the men he was sitting with looked like they would each want a turn with me before the end of the night. They were all the same breed of asshole: all middle-aged, all well-dressed, all able to afford a nice vacation property on the lake. They probably all had wives waiting for them back at their lake houses, kids at private schools, and enough money to buy my silence should anything unsavoury happen.

Looking him dead in the eye, I smiled sweetly.

“You're a fucking pig, sir.”

With that, I picked up the glass of beer and dumped it over his head. Splashes of cold lager sloshed every which way and drenched his lap, splattering the men on either side of him.

“What the fuck!?” He shot out of his chair, drops of beer flying off his expensive golf shirt and landing on the tables in the splash zone.

“Oh, Jesus,” said Wanda, one of the locals who was sitting at a nearby table with her husband, Fred.

The man looked at me, seething anger in his eyes as his face turned red. “Listen up, you little bitch, you—”

“God *damnit*, Maggie! Not again!”

My mom was there in a flash. Despite the look on her face and the way she yelled, she immediately put herself between me and the man, bumping me backwards with her hip.

“Again?” Peter repeated, livid. “You’re telling me this little cunt has dumped beer on customers more than once and still has a job here?”

Fred and Wanda inhaled sharply, and for good reason. Josie Myers—a.k.a. my mom, a.k.a. the owner and operator of The Sea Glass Bar and Grill, a Marble Beach mainstay since before I’d even been born—was not a woman to fuck with. And calling me—Maggie Myers, resident grumpy server and known despiser of misogynistic tourists, also since before I’d even been born because that was what my father had been—a *cunt* counted as fucking with her.

A lot of tourists thought they could get away with it because Mom looked like a hippie, but she was really more like the lovechild of a hippie and a Hell’s Angel. People said I looked like her, but I think they only said that to be nice. Other than

the rose-beige whiteness of my skin, the auburn-kissed brown of my hair, and the somewhat distinctive shape of my nose, I didn't see much of myself in my mom's face. She had wild, puffy hair that she kept tied back with silk scarves, letting the ends dangle around her shoulders and join the silk scarves she wrapped around her neck. Peasant-style blouses were often covered with denim vests or leather jackets and she would stack her forearms full of bangles and cuffs.

Big earrings. Lots of necklaces. And tight, fitted jeans with shit-kicker boots or long, floor-length skirts with crocheted sandals—one or the other, there was no in between. Unfortunately for the men at the table, Mom had been standing behind the bar, so they hadn't noticed she was dressed in her shit-kickers that day.

And she wasn't afraid to use them, especially for me.

“This ‘*little cunt*’ is my daughter,” Mom growled, her voice low enough that only the men at the table and I could hear her. “And to date, she's only done that when someone gropes her, propositions her, or on one horrific occasion, insinuates they'd like to bring both me *and* her to bed with them. So which was it, *sir?*”

Peter's face went even redder, but some of the anger morphed to shame.

Typical. They never wanted to admit which one it was.

I plastered another sweet smile on my face, blinking innocently at Peter. He opened his mouth, then closed it and turned to Mom.

“I will get this shithole shut down,” he hissed.

“You’ve fucked with the wrong person,” said one of the others—Todd, if I was remembering correctly.

“Story of my life,” Mom said. “Now get the hell out of my bar.”

We stood there as he grabbed his jacket, then stalked out of the restaurant followed by his friends.

“Friggin’ tourists,” mumbled Fred from the next table.

“Jo, dear, could we get some more napkins?” Wanda asked, glaring at me.

“Of course.” Mom grabbed a stack from the cutlery station, then started towards the bar. “Maggie, office.”

“Mom, I—”

“*Office.*”

Sighing, I followed her to the back.

FOUR

MAGGIE

“GODDAMNIT, MAGGIE,” MOM SAID after pulling me into the small windowless room just behind the kitchen. She shut the door, cutting off the noise of the bar so all we could hear was the overloud buzzing of the fluorescents above us.

I settled onto the old green couch in the corner. Beside me, an old TV showed feeds from the two security cameras that actually worked. “He was being a pig, Mom.”

“Yes, but you need to remember that we are running a business here.” She sat down at the desk and put her head in her hands, the puffiness of her hair flattened beneath her palms. “Why can’t you just ask Big Tim or Steven to handle it?”

“I can handle them myself. Nobody wants the tourists in here anyway. This is the local bar.”

“We need the business, and never mind that you’re pissing off the locals,” she shot back. “That’s the third time Wanda’s gotten splashed after you’ve dumped something on a customer.”

“Well, you said I couldn’t pour coffee into their laps anymore. Beer on the head is really the only option.”

“Being a Taurus doesn’t give you the right to be full of bullshit.” She glared up at me. “The only option is to ask Big Tim or Steven to handle it. They will always have your back.”

“I don’t need Tiny Steve to look out for me.”

“Please stop calling him Tiny Steve.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s meant to be ironic.”

“It’s meant to be emasculating, you mean.” Mom looked at me, her eyes tired. “I know you’re not a huge fan of me dating Steven, hon, but he’s good to me. I wish you could see that.”

“It’s not that you’re dating someone. It’s that you chose to date a guy named Tiny Steve.”

“You’re the one who started calling him that.”

I tried not to laugh, especially since Mom didn’t seem to be lightening up. “He likes it when I call him that. It’s our thing. It’s funny because he’s not tiny.”

“Mags, things are getting more serious with me and Steven.”

I raised my eyebrows, stunned at her sudden admission. “Okay.”

“He’s kind. He’s always been here for me. And for you, hon.”

“I know, Mom.”

“He makes me happy.” She drummed her fingers on the counter. “I’m thinking of asking him to move in.”

That didn’t surprise me all that much. Tiny Steve had been a bartender at The Sea Glass since Mom first bought it. He only worked the bar a few evenings a week because the rest of the time, he worked on motorcycles in his local shop. Between their two schedules, Mom and Steve didn’t see each other as often as I knew either of them wanted to.

Despite Mom’s assumption that I didn’t like her dating Steve, I didn’t know why it took him so long to admit he was in love with her. I knew he was, and I knew he had been for a long time. And that was good; I wanted her to be with someone who loved her like that.

But she was my mom. She was protective of me, but I was protective of her, too.

I had to be. She was all I had.

“Do what makes you happy, Mom. If you’re ready for Tiny Steve to—”

“Maggie—”

I held my hands up in surrender, trying not to laugh. “If you want *Steven* to move in, I’m happy for you.”

She smiled the genuine, bright smile that made people in Marble Beach fall in love with her. “Thanks, Mags.”

Suddenly, it was back to business. “Now look, you have to stop dumping things on customers. I know they’re pigs. I know they’re saying horrible things to you. I know it isn’t

right. But not only are you wasting product, I'm also losing the money on their bill and the bills of everyone around them.”

Mom's expression was forlorn. “I'm sorry, hon. If I could make them stop harassing you, I would, but this is the last time I'm warning you.”

She sent me home for a while after that, probably so Wanda wouldn't have a conniption when I returned to the bar, with instructions to come back with my guitar around eight-thirty so I could play my usual live music set. Luckily, home wasn't far. After running her through my remaining tables, I hung up my apron in the office, then trudged up the stairs in the back of the building to the apartment above the bar.

Growing up, I'd lived in the small house with my mom just a few blocks away from The Sea Glass. She owned the building and had known about the apartment upstairs, but only ever used it to store away things she promptly forgot about.

As a teenager, I'd stolen the key from our junk drawer one day and turned the apartment into my personal hiding space. I'd cleaned it up, brought a few blankets and pillows and other miscellany up there to turn it into a little nest.

I spent hours hiding up there. My friends and I would sneak up and get drunk off booze stolen from their parents' liquor cabinets—not mine, since I was an only child and it would be far too obvious if I was taking liquor from my mom. I'd lost my virginity up there, at least twice if either of the boys had believed me, even though neither of them was my actual first.

When I finished high school, I begged my mom to let me move out. We had that perfectly good storage room above the bar, I argued. I needed independence and she couldn't very well expect me to take over the bar for her *and* live at home for the rest of my life.

I hadn't needed to argue, though. She was more than happy to get me out of the house. Part of me wondered if Tiny Steve had something to do with that, but the more realistic part of me figured Mom wanted to make sure I could take care of myself before she left the bar to me one day.

Because that was what my life was going to be. The Sea Glass was everything Mom had.

Looking back, I'm sure she knew I was using the apartment as a teenage hangout. She wasn't stupid. Mom was barely twenty when some rich white boy whose parents owned a nearby lake house knocked her up one summer. Once they found out, his parents sold the lake house and gave Mom a ridiculous amount of money to keep the boy's name off my birth certificate. That was the money she'd used to buy our house and the bar she worked at from the soon-to-retire original owners.

So, she would've probably known I was sneaking around to have sex, just like she used to. We never talked about it, save for her drilling it in my head to always be careful.

"Do what you need to do. I'm not a moron," she would say. "But always use a condom. And don't fuck tourists."

I'd only disregarded her advice twice. Not about the condom. I wasn't that stupid. But as for tourists, well.

The first one didn't count as a tourist, since we'd been friends since we were kids. He might have been a summer kid, but he... he was different. And I'd known damn well that it would be the last time I saw him, so it wasn't like I was disillusioned or anything.

The second one, though...

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FOUR

MAGGIE

HE'D BEEN REASONABLY GOOD-LOOKING for a man nearing fifty, at least in the eyes of a twenty-year-old girl who waited tables in a tourist town.

And he'd been... well, kind. He'd said sweet things to me. He'd made promises.

“Let me take care of you. Let me buy you things. Let me treat you like a princess.”

So I'd let him come upstairs to my apartment one night, and then another night, and then so often that I wasn't sure how he kept it a secret from the wife I knew was waiting for him at his fancy lake house on the other side of town.

The sex was okay. I'd expected it to be better, but that part of our arrangement wasn't about me. He bought me little presents, jewelry and lingerie mostly. New wine glasses after I served him a cheap red out of a coffee cup I'd stolen from a car dealership. Stupid little things that I didn't *need*, per se, but that made my quiet little life feel just a bit more special.

And really, the relationship—if one could call it that—wasn't bad. He treated me well. He was respectful towards me and complimented me all the time. I would never have invited him upstairs if he talked to me the way most of the men did. And, yeah, part of it was hot. The taboo of it, the sneaking around. I had a secret—a grown-up kind of secret—and at a time when I didn't have many friends because they were all leaving or had already left town, I had him.

I felt a little bad for his wife. But I told myself that it wasn't my problem. His marriage was *his* problem and that he knew what he was doing. And I believed it, too. As much as I looked back on it years later and wished I could say I hadn't been the other woman, or at least that I'd had a good reason for it, I couldn't.

I had to own up to what I did, which was ruin that woman's marriage. Sure, if it wasn't me, it would've been someone else. And I'd never, fucking *never*, do something like that again.

But I owned my fuckups, and that was one of them.

It ended when she stormed into The Sea Glass one day when summer was almost over. I was working and she was trailed by the very pale, very terrified man I'd been sleeping with. My stomach had dropped as the consequences of my actions flashed in front of me, but she didn't so much as glance in my direction when she entered. Instead, she slammed her hands on the bar in front of my mom and told her that

some whore of a waitress who worked here was fucking her husband and demanded to know who it was.

Mom had scoffed. “Neither me nor any of my girls are fucking your husband.”

She motioned to three women aside from herself that were working: another server named Vickie who was in her thirties with short-cropped hair and a long-term girlfriend, Annie, the tall Cree prep chef who had been my surrogate grandma since I’d been born, and me.

His wife’s eyes fell on each of us, resting on me the longest. I looked back at her blankly, hoping no one could see my heart pounding through my skin.

“It’s this one,” she declared. “You’ve been fucking my husband, haven’t you?”

“Bold of you to come in here and accuse my *daughter* of sleeping with your husband,” Mom said. “Look at her. She’s young enough to be *your* daughter and then some. How dare you?”

The man had gone even more pale, if that was possible. His wife didn’t notice, but I think my mom did. The woman left in tears, no longer accusing anyone in the bar of fucking her husband but despondent at the idea that she wouldn’t be able to find out who it was.

After closing that night, I had brought the cash drawer for my mom to count in the office. Sitting behind the desk, she looked up at me.

“Maggie, you know I’ll defend you to the death. But I have to know. Were you sleeping with that woman’s husband?”

I rarely lied to my mom, but I couldn’t meet her eyes and answer that question honestly.

“No, Mom,” I said.

I don’t think she believed me, but she let me have my dignity. “Okay, hon. Just remember. Always use a condom—”

“—and don’t fuck tourists,” I finished, nodding. “I know. I promise.”

And I’d kept that promise. After destroying that marriage, I hadn’t fucked anyone. No tourists. None of the locals who were left.

No one.

I should have invested some of my tip money in the sex toy industry, given how many I was buying. My reputation as a server was that I was quick and accurate, but cynical and surly. If people knew how long it had been since I’d gotten laid, they’d understand why I was cranky all the time.

That, and because this was the rest of my life. Mom had bought The Sea Glass as an investment after she got pregnant, figuring that at least she’d be guaranteed a job and a steady income that way. And she’d been right, mostly. We’d always had enough to get by.

But we’d never had enough for me to even think about leaving. I graduated high school and watched as my friends left one-by-one, off to different cities and colleges and

universities, while I stayed in Marble Beach with my mom. One day she'd retire, and she'd pass The Sea Glass down to me, and I'd replace her as the eccentric lady behind the bar.

I didn't mind it. Not really. Without The Sea Glass, I didn't know what I would do. I had never worked anywhere else. Even if I had the means to move away from Marble Beach, I'd just end up being a server at some other dive. At least here, I had my mom, and I didn't have to pay rent.

And I loved Marble Beach. I did. Crushing loneliness and pig-headed tourists aside, it was a beautiful place with beautiful people. I liked the work; I liked that The Sea Glass was *our* place, that my mom and I had made it what it was.

I just kind of wished I wasn't so alone.

The upside of being the owner's daughter was that I often got to do what I wanted. One of those things was performing. Mom let me play music at the bar a couple of times a week, especially in the summer when she had seasonal help and didn't need me to waitress all the time. As a kid, I'd begged her to buy me a guitar for Christmas one year, and she had. I had worked my ass off to learn to play it and was reasonably decent at it. Sometimes people came in just to see me play, which felt pretty good.

So at eight twenty-nine that night, I picked up my guitar case and headed back downstairs to the bar. Some of the locals cheered as I started setting up, and I smiled one of my increasingly rare smiles. Mom came over as I was settling in, kissing me on the cheek.

“Kick ass, sweetie,” she said.

“Yes, Mom,” I said, then started strumming my guitar and slipped into the world of music.

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SIX

CALEB

IT TOOK ABOUT A week and a half before I started having second thoughts.

Between cleaning out the cabin, drawing up plans for my renovations, and driving back and forth from the nearest city to order supplies, I'd been busy enough that I hadn't needed to think. Other than a couple of trips to the grocery store for essentials that I'd forgotten, I hadn't even ventured out into the town part of Marble Beach.

I'd learned to work that way from my dad. Head down and focused on the project at hand until it was done. I knew how to manage my time and find the most efficient way to do any given task. It was one thing to work hard, but hard work without efficiency was just a waste of time.

"Time is money," I'd said to him once.

He'd been sitting at his desk in his office at home. Mom had sent me up there to get him for dinner and he'd sighed as he closed his computer, muttering something about how there weren't enough hours in the day anymore.

It was just meant to be a joke, but when I said what I said, he stopped and looked up at me, his brow furrowed.

“If that’s what you’ve learned from me, I’ve failed,” he said.

I must have looked confused. Dad stood up and put a hand on my shoulder as we turned to go to the kitchen.

“Time isn’t money, Caleb,” he said. “Time is all we have.”

To Dad, time was the reward. It wasn’t the thing to squander on something as stupid as money. I didn’t understand it back then. I thought he was just being typical Dad with his whole “money isn’t everything” philosophy.

But when he got sick, I got it. Time is all we have.

Until we don’t.

So that had been my work philosophy. Efficiency. Working as hard and as smart as I could so that I had as much time at the end as possible. And that’s how I was approaching the cabin renovation, right up until I got the massive delivery of materials I’d ordered.

The cabin was livable. I would never have said it wasn’t. But to compete with the other massive lake houses that dotted the shoreline, it was going to need a decent amount of work. And I could *see* what I wanted. Besides the obvious upgrades—new cabinets, new countertops, upgraded fixtures in the bedrooms and living room and all that—I had grand plans to take the cabin to the next level.

Dark, gleaming hardwood throughout with heated floors beneath. A three-level deck facing the water with room for a

hot tub on the lowest level. A steam shower in the basement bathroom and a large soaker tub in the master ensuite. A built-in wet bar. Every luxury that the other lake houses had that my dad had always scoffed about and deemed unnecessary.

I could see it all in my mind and had ordered everything I needed with confidence. But when the delivery truck got there and began unloading the supplies I'd bought into the garage...

"That's the last of it," the driver said, wiping his hands on his pants. "When's your crew getting here?"

"Huh?" I asked.

He motioned to the house. "Your crew. Who'd ya hire to do your renos?"

"No one," I said. "I'm doing them."

He started laughing. "Aw yeah, sure. You go with Platinum Contractors or...?"

I stared at him. "Uh... no. *I'm* doing them."

"You're not," he said, then the laughter faded as he looked at the very serious expression on my face. "Kid, you can't be serious."

"I'm not a kid," I said. "I'm twenty-eight."

"Doesn't matter." He shook his head. "No way you're doing this whole place by yourself. No way."

"I am. Besides the electrical and some of the plumbing, but I've got a few contacts to help me out."

The driver looked at the cabin, then back at me. “Buddy, this would take months with an entire team of experienced contractors.”

“Imagine how fast it’ll go without all the unnecessary delays I’d have with an entire team of contractors.”

That got a laugh out of him, surprisingly, but he was still shaking his head as he opened the door of the truck and reached in.

“Look, here’s a card for a guy I know,” he said. “He’s quick, like you think you are, and usually available for big projects on short notice. I’d say call him up right away, but you look dead-set on being the type o’ guy who’s gonna blow a bunch of money trying to do it all on his own and realize a little too late that he coulda saved it by just getting a pro from the start. So when you get to that point, call him up and say Carl recommended him.”

He wouldn’t leave until I accepted the card, regardless of how many times I told him I’d been doing this for years already.

“You think you know it all, but it’s different when you’re on your own,” he said.

I’d scoffed, but after he drove away and I peeked into the garage, I could hear his words echoing and dancing through the small gaps surrounding the materials he’d dropped off.

And I mean *small* gaps.

The garage was crammed full of everything from hardwood to lumber to the various tools I'd brought with me. There was no way I'd be parking my truck in there anytime soon. I'd be lucky if I could squeak it in by the time it snowed. But that was barely a fleeting thought. The much louder, much more insistent thought was that this was everything I had.

Seeing your life's savings sitting in front of you in any form was jarring. Sure, I still had some in the bank. I had to have something to live off of when I wasn't bringing in a paycheck. And I had a buffer for when things inevitably went a little over budget or I had to hire help. But the rest...

The rest of it was in that garage.

I stood there for a while, letting the second thoughts spiral as I fidgeted with the card the delivery driver had given me. What was I even doing? I'd never done a renovation of this level on my own. I was in a small tourist town with no family. No friends. I'd never been alone in Marble Beach before. I didn't even *know* anyone here.

I ran a hand through my hair, staring at the pile of materials in front of me. Then I took a deep breath, let it out, and forced myself to turn away and shut the door.

"Only idiots never fail," I said.

Another Dad-ism. Failure wasn't something to be ashamed of. Not when it was for people who gave a fuck in the first place.

Dad also would've told me to walk away for a bit. "You can't see the big picture when you're in the painting" was another one of his favourite sayings. I half-laughed as I locked the garage door, wondering if he'd known that when he died, his cheesy sayings would be what haunted me.

Not that I minded. It was one of the few ways I could still remember his voice.

I popped inside to grab my jacket, a plaid flannel thing that seemed too thick for the end of summer but in reality wasn't. The fall chill was already settling in and the breeze off the lake wasn't helping matters. Then I hopped in my truck and drove the five or so minutes into the town of Marble Beach.

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SEVEN

CALEB

THE TOWN HAD CHANGED a lot.

Main Street was as kitschy as ever, full of little souvenir shops all overstocked with crafts from local artisans. But the ice cream place I remembered was gone, replaced with a fast-food chain. And the mom-and-pop-style diner on Main Street had been turned into a liquor store, while what used to be the bike shop now appeared to be a Denny's. And I was certain the Starbucks hadn't existed at all the last time I'd been there.

As I turned off Main towards the beach, I worried a bit that the place I was looking for would be gone. The Sea Glass was where the locals went for a drink and a decent burger. Or at least, it had been when I was a kid. The occasional tourist would pop in, but it was far enough off Main Street that it was considered the locals' bar. And yeah, it was across the street from a beach, but it was the beach in town, not the one that most of the tourists went to for swimming or boat launching or whatever—that was on the other side of the town, where there was far more parking and much nicer sand.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that The Sea Glass was still there, even though it too differed from what I remembered, though not quite in the same way. The two-storey wooden building that housed the bar and grill was rundown, the painted sign faded and peeling. For a moment, I wondered if it was closed, but there was a neon sign in the front window and people going in. I parked my truck and hopped out.

As soon as I opened the door, it felt like home.

It didn't make sense. Marble Beach wasn't home and The Sea Glass wasn't anything like any home I'd ever lived in. But the dim, warm light and the sweet, maudlin sound of live guitar music made something welcoming wash over me. The restaurant itself was on the edge of busy, with most of the occupied tables being the high-top ones surrounding the back corner where the music was coming from.

It felt like home, but maybe not *my* home.

Because I was clearly an outsider. A few people glanced at me as I walked past the "Seat Yourself" sign and sat at an empty table near the entrance. At first, I thought I was imagining it, but after the third time I caught someone staring, I knew I wasn't. Awkwardly, I looked down at the drink menu in front of me.

"Whatcha having, hon?"

I didn't need to look up to know who spoke.

It had been ten years, but Josie Myers, the owner of The Sea Glass, looked exactly as she had the last time I'd seen her, save for a line or two in the corner of her eyes and a few streaks of grey in her reddish-brown hair. Her smile was warm, a hint of cheekiness showing off slightly crooked teeth, and I was almost certain I'd seen her wearing that exact outfit countless times before. Long, flowy sleeves dangled around her wrists, juxtaposed by a leather vest, and her hair was pulled back by a silk scarf with aviator sunglasses perched on top of it.

Unlike the last time I'd seen her, there wasn't even a hint of recognition in her eyes.

"A beer, please," I said. "Whatever lager you've got on tap."

"Sure thing. Any food?"

"Bacon burger would be great. With fries and gravy."

She nodded and walked away. I didn't blame her for not recognizing me. She might not have changed much, but ten years is a big difference when you're going from a baby-faced teenager to an adult. My hair was still the same sandy brown it had always been, but I used to cut it a lot shorter. And as a teen, I'd shaved religiously, not because I preferred being clean-shaven but because my beard was so patchy and wispy, I looked like I had tried to shave blindfolded while hanging upside down. It wasn't until I'd graduated from university that it started growing in nicely.

Now, I had longish hair that curled at the end and a beard I kept neatly trimmed. Instead of the ruddy white acne-dotted skin I would have after spending summers outdoors, I was a bit more tanned. And I wasn't as scrawny as I'd been back then; working as a contractor had kept me in decent shape.

So it wasn't Josie's fault that she had no idea who I was.

The wait for my beer and burger wasn't long, but it was uncomfortable. At the surrounding tables, people seemed to perpetually whisper about my presence. Some were more obvious than others, and I began to regret going to The Sea Glass at all. I tried to focus on the girl playing the guitar in the corner.

I couldn't see her from where I was sitting, but her voice was beautiful. She sang with the kind of heartfelt sorrow that runs through small towns like Marble Beach, bringing up feelings of longing and loss. I closed my eyes as I listened, trying to imagine what it would have been like to live in Marble Beach my entire life. Most of the friends I'd had over the summers as a kid lived here year-round, and I remembered being jealous of them. It was only when I got older that I realized summers in Marble Beach weren't the same as winters there. Winter was cold and dreary. The lake froze over and businesses in town nearly shut down for lack of customers.

My reverie was broken by Josie placing the beer and burger in front of me. "Here ya go," she said.

"Thanks."

“Anything else while I’m here, hon?”

“No, thank you.”

Hunger had set in, and I ate the burger quickly. It was as delicious as I remembered, a blend of salt and cheese and juiciness that threatened to drip onto my shirt. I washed it down with a few swigs of beer. Almost as soon as I was done, Josie came back for my plate.

“Dessert?” she asked.

“Just the bill, please.”

She brought the credit card machine over and handed it to me, then hovered by the side of the table.

“What brings you to town this late in the season?” she asked as I punched in my PIN.

I smiled. “That obvious, hey?”

She winked. “It’s a small town. Locals know when someone’s new. Most of the tourists are long gone by this time of year. It starts getting too cold at night.”

Chuckling, I met her eyes as I handed her the credit card machine. “I remember.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Do you?”

“I used to spend summers here as a kid,” I said, tucking my credit card back in my wallet. “I, uh, knew Maggie, actually.”

Her face changed as I said her daughter’s name. “Did you? I have to apologize, hon, I don’t recognize you.”

“That’s okay. I’m Caleb Vaughan. My family used to—”

“Caleb!” she exclaimed, interrupting me as she clapped a hand onto my shoulder and then stared at me with her mouth half-open. “Well, shit.”

I forced out an awkward chuckle, wondering if Maggie had ever told her mom... well. I mean, I wouldn't have told *my* mom, but my mom wasn't anything like Josie Myers.

“Is that, uh, a good ‘shit’ or a ‘get the hell out of my bar’ shit?” I asked.

She burst out laughing, a bright, musical sound. “It’s a ‘oh shit, am I getting old’ shit.”

“Old? You don’t look a day older than you did the last time I was here,” I replied.

She clapped her hand against my shoulder again. “Always the charmer, weren’t you? Jesus, Caleb.” She shook her head as she stared at me. “You look like an actual grown man now.”

A smile spread across my face. “Thanks, Josie.”

“Well, welcome back to Marble Beach.” She finally took her hand off my shoulder, though she was still looking at me. “What brings you in this late in the season?”

“Renovating the cabin. I’m going to sell it in the spring.”

She looked slightly put out. “Well, that’s too bad. You folks have been coming here for... well, decades. Your dad used to come here before I even bought this place. *Shit*, I’m old.”

“You’re not old,” I said again, laughing.

“Still.” She sighed. “How is your dad? I didn’t see him this summer, come to think of it.”

Fuck.

My heart did that thing every time I had to break the news to someone. It was a small ache, but a sharp one, like someone had literally taken hold of the organ and tugged on it just a bit, just enough that I wanted to wince in pain.

“He, uh, passed,” I said, my voice dropping a bit. “About six months ago.”

Josie’s lips parted and her eyes shone, just a bit. “Shit. Hon, I’m so... Oh, God. I’m so sorry to hear that. He was a good man, your dad.”

I nodded, blinking as I looked down at the table. “Yeah. But, uh, how’s... how’s Maggie doing? What’s she up to these days?”

Josie graciously recognized I was trying to change the subject. And by “graciously recognized,” I mean she let out another bright, amused laugh.

“Well, ask her yourself,” she said. “Mags is over in the corner. She’s playing right now.”

EIGHT

CALEB

I WHIPPED MY HEAD towards the girl playing the guitar, straining to see her. “That’s Maggie?”

Josie laughed. “Yeah, hon, that’s her. She’ll be a while yet, but I’m sure she’d love to say hello when she’s done.”

Another customer called her away just then. Sipping my beer, I tried to look past the throng of people surrounding the back corner, hoping to catch a glimpse of Maggie. But aside from the occasional hint of movement peeking through the gaps between tables, I couldn’t see her; there were far too many people there listening to her play.

She deserved the attention, honestly. She’d always been talented like that.

Talented enough that I couldn’t quite believe she was still in town. I don’t know if she ever had any rock star fantasies or aspirations, but I would’ve thought she’d leave Marble Beach. Though, I thought as I drank more of my beer, it made sense. She’d worked part time at The Sea Glass when we were teenagers, seating people or bussing tables or running food. It

only made sense that she'd eventually take over the business from her mom.

Speaking of which, Josie's conversation with me and her loud laughter had done nothing for the stares I was getting. If anything, people were even more curious.

And I just... I didn't enjoy being stared at.

I'd had enough of it. When Dad died, it felt like that's all people had done. Every time I looked up, there was someone looking away, trying and failing to stop me from seeing their pitying gazes. And even though I knew that wasn't why people were looking at me at The Sea Glass, it still forced the memory of discomfort.

I tried to ignore it so I could wait around and say hi to Maggie once she was done. But once I'd finished my beer and caught a woman whispering something to the man sitting with her as they both looked at me, I'd had enough. I could come back and say hi to Maggie another day.

Tucking my napkin under the empty beer glass, I got up and left the bar to go back to my truck.

Apparently, someone had not been a fan of my parking job.

A car sat just behind my bumper, boxing me into the spot I'd taken. I swore under my breath and looked to see if anyone was around, then headed back towards The Sea Glass. Just before I could open the door, someone bolted out carrying a paper bag of takeout food. Narrowly avoiding a collision, I held the door for him.

“Thanks, man,” the guy said.

“That doesn’t happen to be you blocking me in, does it?” I asked.

“Sorry. There was no other parking and I was just picking this up.”

“All good. Saves me from asking around.”

He got into his car and waved apologetically as he pulled away. Just as I had opened the door of my truck and had one leg in the cab, I was interrupted again.

“Leaving already?”

I turned, and there she was.

The Maggie I remembered had just been on the cusp of the one standing in front of me. I remembered her skinny arms and eyes that seemed to fill half her face, bright in the moonlight as she asked if I’d be her first. I remembered her freckled cheeks burning red as she waited for my answer, and how kissing her had made me feel both so mature and impossibly immature.

And I could still see that Maggie in the woman standing before me, but so much had changed.

She still had big eyes and beautiful freckles and that adorable turned-up nose, but her cheekbones seemed higher and pouty lips complimented the warm brown of her eyes. The tomboy style had morphed into something that was still casual, but more feminine. Rings adorned two fingers on each hand, as well as her thumb. Scrawling black tattoos wrapped around

her wrist and forearm, and another peeked out on her shoulder underneath the sleeveless top she wore despite the chill of the night. Her thick hair fell against her shoulders, and a necklace with two pendants rested against her chest.

She was as beautiful as I remembered, and more beautiful than I could imagine.

“Should I?” I finally replied.

Her face split into a wide grin and she laughed, a sound as musical as her singing had been.

“Shit, Caleb, I can’t believe it’s you!”

I got back out of the truck and shut the door just in time to catch her as she hugged me. “I can’t believe it’s *you*.”

“Mom told me you were back in town as soon as I was done. I almost died when I realized you’d already left.”

“I was going to come back when you weren’t busy. It’s so good to see you, Mags.”

I let go of her and she stepped back, looking me up and down. “What are you doing here? It’s been years. Why are you back now?”

“Renovating the cabin.”

She looked bewildered. “Why?”

“To, uh, sell it.”

“Oh.” She sounded almost sad. “Are your folks buying one somewhere else, or...?”

I shook my head and braced myself as my heart tugged.
“My dad died a few months ago. So...”

“Fuck.” Her face fell. “That’s horrible. I’m sorry. How are you doing?”

I put on the plastic smile I wore whenever I had to talk about him. “I’m okay. Thank you.”

She was holding a flannel jacket and shrugged it on. “Want to sit by the lake for a while? I’m done for the night and we have ten years of catching up to do.”

There was nothing I wanted more in that moment than to do exactly that. I clicked the lock on my key fob and crossed the street with Maggie, making our way to a bench on the beach.

The night melted away as we talked. Somehow, the words came easily with her: what it had been like in university, how hard it had been to get my business degree, what it was like working as a contractor. I told her how I’d intended to start my own business and why I hadn’t yet. All the things I’d thought, but hadn’t said out loud to... well, anyone.

“The cabin is worth a lot?” she asked when I told her why I wanted to sell it.

“The land is,” I said. “The cabin itself, not so much. I mean, people who come here aren’t looking to rough it, you know? But once I’m done...”

“And you said your mom moved to England?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Without you?”

I smiled. “I didn’t want to go.”

“Why did she?”

“She’s from there. I think once Dad died, she didn’t want to be around things that reminded her of him.” That familiar tugging in my heart happened. “I know I haven’t wanted to.”

“Are you really okay?” Maggie’s bluntness hadn’t changed since we were kids, either.

“As okay as I can be,” I admitted. “I wasn’t ready for it, even though we knew it was coming. And now that it’s happened, I’m not ready to go back to how life was before he got sick.”

I paused. I hadn’t really told anyone how I was feeling about my dad’s death, yet there I was spilling it all to her.

“I’m sure he would have wanted me to pick up and move on, but that’s a lot easier said than done.”

She nodded. “It’s rough. I’m sorry.”

We were quiet for a moment, staring at the gentle lapping of waves on the lake. All that time spent apart didn’t seem to matter. The silence between us was comfortable, not awkward.

“I can’t believe you’ve been in town almost two weeks and haven’t come to see me before tonight,” she said, breaking the silence.

“I didn’t know you were still here.” I shifted on the bench, facing her. “I’ve been yammering about myself all night.

What's going on with you?"

She didn't answer right away. "Hardly anything."

"Come on, something must have happened in the last ten years."

Maggie's smile had faded, her eyes reflecting a forlorn sadness. "Not much, really. Last I saw you, I was working at the bar part time. Now I work at the bar full time."

"You play music there, though."

"Sometimes. If Mom doesn't need me to wait tables."

"Any boyfriends?" I teased.

I expected her to laugh, or blush, or even smile, but Maggie just shook her head, her face serious. "Nothing worth writing home about."

"What about everyone else? Still in touch with any of the old crew?"

Maggie finally smiled. "Yeah. Alison comes back and visits her parents pretty regularly. I've been to visit her a couple of times. That's where my tattoo artist is, so it works out well."

She told me about the rest of the group. Most of them had moved, she said, but a few were still around, mostly on nearby farms. Of everyone, it sounded like Maggie was the only one who stayed in town permanently. There was a sadness in her voice, and I wondered how she had really been.

"The town's changed a lot," I said.

She nodded. "I cried when they closed the ice cream place."

“What happened to it?”

“Mabel wanted to retire,” she said. “They wanted to sell the business as was, but those developers just... they come in and they make offers people can’t refuse, you know?”

“Has your mom gotten offers on The Sea Glass?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not yet. We’re off Main, so we’ve got that going for us. But I’m sure it’ll happen one day.”

“Do you think she’d sell?”

Maggie shrugged. “I think it would have to be a hell of an offer. I’d be mad if she sold it, though.”

“You wanna take over one day?”

A sweet smile spread across her face. “You know, for a long time, I kind of hated that it felt like my life was set out for me and that all I was going to be was a bar owner one day. But I kind of like the idea now. I just wish...”

“Wish what?” I asked when she trailed off.

She shook her head again. “Nothing. I hope she doesn’t sell it and I can take over. If she does, I don’t know what I’ll even do.”

Her voice took on that sad tone again and I itched to wrap my arm around her shoulders and tell her it would all be okay.

“You’d be damn good at running that place,” I said instead.

“Yeah. And I could dump all the beer I wanted on asshole tourists who try to pick me up.”

I burst out laughing. “What?”

She looked at me, a mischievous lop-sided smile on her lips. “Don’t worry. You have nothing to worry about. You’re not a tourist.”

The words hung there for a moment, tense and inviting. I wasn’t entirely sure if she was implying I could try to pick her up. I mean, she might have just been saying that I wasn’t an asshole.

But I was kind of hoping it was that first thing.

Before I could figure out what to say next, though, Maggie shivered and pulled the flannel around her more tightly.

“You cold?” I asked.

“A little. It’s, um, pretty late.”

I pulled my phone out and looked at it. “Shit, you’re right. I lost track of time.”

She bit her lip. “Are you wanting to go home?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “But you should, if you want to. Did you walk here? I can drop you off.”

Maggie’s eyes seemed to twinkle. “I don’t think that’s necessary. My place is closer than your truck is.” I was confused and she rolled her eyes. “There’s an apartment above the bar. I live there now.”

“I would never have guessed.”

“Come up and see it,” she suggested. “We can have a beer and warm up.”

FOUR

MAGGIE

I TRIED TO MASK the way my fingers shook as I unlocked my apartment door, hoping Caleb wouldn't notice. Flexing my hands to work some warmth into them, I twisted the key and pushed the door open.

"It's not much," I said to him, suddenly nervous. "But it's better than living with my mom."

He stepped inside and I glanced around, making sure it was presentable. Downstairs, the dining room had a high ceiling, but the apartment was built over the kitchen and bar area. It was small, but tidy, the furniture old but clean. My bed sat in one corner, neatly made, and a living room area and makeshift kitchen took up the other wall. The bathroom was old but functional and even had a washer and dryer in it.

It wasn't much, but it was mine.

"It's nice," he said.

I knew he was just being polite, but I wasn't embarrassed. Caleb clearly understood what it was like to live like that. I couldn't imagine how much work it was going to be to turn his

cabin into something that compared to the other lake houses. I'd never been inside it before, but I knew what some of those houses on the lake looked like and the way he spoke about it, he had a lot of work ahead of him.

Smiling, I shrugged off the flannel jacket I was wearing, hanging it by the door before holding my hand out to grab Caleb's for him. He passed it to me, his cheeks turning pink as he thanked me.

It was adorable.

Fuck, had he gotten hot. Like, unfairly hot. The moment I'd seen him that night, the crush I'd battled with as a kid had come roaring back. As a teenager, I thought Caleb was the cutest guy I'd ever seen. But as an adult?

Fuck.

I wanted to play with his hair. I wanted to find out what kissing him would be like with that beard. He had that blue collar sort of look, wearing jeans and work boots and a plaid jacket that just...

He looked so damn good.

"When did you move in?" he asked as I went to the kitchen to grab a beer for each of us.

"After high school," I said, popping the cap off one bottle and handing it to him before opening my own. "I had a little hideout up here for a while before that. That would have been after you left, though."

“Damn, that’s too bad. We could have had crazy parties up here.”

I shrugged as we sat down together on the couch. “Or at least somewhere a little more private than that gazebo.”

Caleb glanced at me. I couldn’t quite look back as I pressed my lips together, unsure of how he would respond. We’d been talking for hours at that point, easy conversations that made me feel like those years apart had never existed.

Even with all that talking, we hadn’t even referenced the night I’d last seen him. That night, when I’d stumbled my way through asking him to sleep with me. When I knew he wouldn’t be coming back, and it was either tell him how I felt then or keep it a secret forever.

Then he chuckled, which was about as good of a reaction as I could hope for.

“Can I be honest with you?” he said, his voice deeper than it had been. “That night is still one of my top memories of all time.”

I smiled, looking down at my beer. “Mine too.”

Neither of us seemed to know what to say after that.

“Mags, can I ask you a question that’s really inappropriate?” Caleb finally said.

“Please do,” I replied.

He took a swig of his beer, as if for courage. “You told me that night that I’d gotten you off. I believed you, but now…”

He trailed off and I felt my face turning red.

“Did you actually?”

“At the time, I thought I had,” I admitted. “I wasn’t lying. But, in hindsight, well...”

I started giggling.

“Ah, shit,” Caleb said, and he laughed as well, the sound of it making something inside me shift.

Fuck. Fuck, I wanted him. I really, really did.

I could almost hear my mom’s voice in my head telling me to not fuck tourists, but I pushed that thought away. Caleb wasn’t a tourist. He wasn’t like the other summer kids. Every summer, he became one of us. I didn’t know how his family had gotten their cabin on the beach, not when all the other lake houses were ritzy, high-end places that were wastefully empty for over half a year. But he’d never gotten along with those kids.

He was different.

The question was whether I could handle him like *that*. It had been so long since I’d been with anyone that I was scared I’d be terrible at it. Then again, if anyone would understand, it would be Caleb. Biting my lip, I decided to take the plunge.

“You could make it up to me,” I suggested.

Caleb’s laugh faded. His expression was an echo of when I’d asked him if he’d ever had sex before, though more subdued than the shock he’d shown that night. After a moment

where I'm sure he was wondering if he heard me right, the shock was replaced by a wicked smirk.

“Maggie Myers,” he said in that low, panty-dampening voice. “Did you lure me up here just to get in my pants?”

I shrugged, trying to look casual and failing miserably. The corners of my lips turned up as I blushed and looked away, but he didn't call me out on it.

“You're the one who asked about orgasms,” I said. “What's a girl to think?”

I didn't see him do it, but after a moment, I heard the purposeful clink of a beer bottle being set down on the coffee table.

“So,” he said. “How would I go about making it up to you?”

Licking my lips, I reached forward and set my bottle down next to his. “However you'd like.”

Caleb leaned forward and brought one of his hands up to my face. I shivered inadvertently as he tilted my chin towards him, and he paused.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

I was and I wasn't, but he didn't need to know that. My amount of certainty had nothing to do with not wanting him, and everything to do with the fact that I hadn't touched a man in years. Instead of answering, I closed the gap between us, pressing my lips to Caleb's.

“Yes,” I breathed against his mouth.

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THREE

MAGGIE

THE LAST TIME I'D kissed Caleb, he'd been timid and uncertain.

It was a quintessential first kiss. Well, for me. I knew it wasn't Caleb's first kiss, but it had been mine. And I'd had all those quintessential first kiss thoughts, like "Wow."

And "I hope my breath doesn't smell."

And "Am I supposed to hold my breath or... okay, he's breathing, so I should breathe too."

And the ever-important "I didn't think it would be so *wet*."

It had been a wonderful kiss, honestly, after the first few moments of not knowing what in the hell I was doing. I had liked his tongue and how his breath felt each time it puffed against my lips. And I'd liked the little shivers of arousal, the sparks from where his mouth was touching me. I liked how *new* it had all seemed, how both of us were just a little unsure that we were doing it right, but too embarrassed to say anything.

But that wasn't the case anymore.

This time, Caleb's mouth captured mine as soon as I kissed him, confident and practiced and *eager*. His tongue was insistent as it explored my mouth and those little sparks were full-on electricity now.

His hand was still tilting my chin up when he nipped at my bottom lip. Another shiver ran through me and he moved that hand to the back of my head, letting his fingers toy with the hair at the base of my neck as he deepened our kiss. We stayed like that for a while, reacquainting ourselves with the feel of each other's lips.

Soon, though, Caleb's hands wandered. His other hand moved up to my shoulder, his palm rough and hot against my skin as he slid it down my bare arm towards my wrist. I loved the roughness of his skin and how it scratched an itch I didn't know I had, urging up all those little feelings of desire as he touched me.

I couldn't help it and shivered again. Apparently it was a strong enough shiver that Caleb pulled back, a slight crease of concern appearing between his eyebrows.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said a little too quickly.

He was still touching my wrist and took my hand in his. I watched as he lifted it beside us, letting the tips of my fingers rest against his index finger. "You're shaking."

So I was. I watched my hand tremble for a moment before sighing.

“I’m just nervous,” I said.

“We can st—”

“I don’t want to stop.”

“Mags, if you aren’t into this, I don’t *want* to go any further.”

“I am into this.” Sighing, I took my hand from him, putting the stupid double-crossing limb in my lap. “I’m nervous because it’s been a while.”

“That’s fair,” he said. “We can slow down. I mean, we haven’t seen each other in ten years and—”

I had to laugh, shaking my head. “I meant since I’ve been with anyone. Like... like this.”

“How long?” he asked.

I tried not to blush. “A few... years.”

A hand touched my knee. “Are you sure you—”

“Stop asking me if I’m sure,” I said, then grimaced as I looked up at him. “Sorry. I just mean I... I *am* sure. This is what I want. I’m just scared I’m going to be bad at it.”

The look on his face softened into one of amusement.

“There’s no way you’re bad at this,” he said, taking my hand in his again and bringing it up to his mouth so he could kiss my knuckles. “Besides, I owe you a minimum of one orgasm. That’s why we’re here. So you have nothing to worry about, Mags. I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

He helped me to my feet and led me over to my bed. Heart racing, I let him guide me up into another gentle kiss.

“Lie down,” he said. “Get comfortable.”

I did as he asked, settling back on my pillow and letting my hair fan out behind me. Once I was still, Caleb got on the bed and crawled towards me. He hovered over me as I looked up at him, a look of deep and intense yearning in his eyes. There was so much promise there, so much excitement, and my lips parted as soft breaths passed through them while I waited for his next move.

He studied me for a moment, then leaned forward to kiss me again. I responded eagerly, his lips warm and smooth in contrast to the roughness of his beard against my cheek. Just as I was relaxing against his mouth and enjoying myself, he shifted, and his lips pressed against the corner of my mouth, then my jaw line, then my neck.

Once his lips landed on my collarbone, he pulled back.

“Still okay?” he asked.

“Very,” I said.

He grinned, then kissed the same spot on my collarbone before letting his hands trail down my body. Over the thin fabric of my tank top, he caressed my breasts, ribs, waist, and stomach, before his fingers slid beneath the hem.

Another involuntary shiver coursed through my body as his fingers walked up my skin. Feather-light touches traced from my belly button to the edge of my bra, climbing over the fabric

between the cups and between my cleavage. He teased along the edge of the cup, his fingers tracing the skin there before they slipped into it. I sighed as his fingertips increased the pressure just the slightest bit, travelling deeper into my bra until he could hold my breast in the palm of his hand.

God, the anticipation was already killing me. I moaned as his hand cupped my breast and felt his lips curl up before they started moving again. He kissed along the collar of my shirt, tongue flicking out here and there to lick certain spots on my scorching skin. As he got to the spot where the collar brushed the tops of my breasts, I writhed just the smallest bit. My body wanted him, and it wanted him immediately. Beneath my jeans, my panties were catching the wetness I could feel dripping from my pussy.

Caleb paused again, eyes flicking up to meet mine.

“I’m fine,” I murmured.

That wicked smirk flitted across his lips again. “Good.”

Much to my disappointment, he withdrew his hand from my bra. Pressing another kiss to the tops of my breasts, he brought his hands to the hem of my shirt again. His head followed, and as he lifted the shirt up, he put his lips on my stomach. His removal of my shirt was agonizingly slow, and the movement of his lips as it followed even more so.

Inch by inch, he revealed my torso, making sure his lips didn’t miss a single spot of skin. Once the shirt was finally over my head and his lips were back on mine, a hand slid behind me and fiddled with the clasp on my bra. I let him

struggle for a few moments before shifting so I could twist my arm behind me and unhook it with a quick snap, grinning as he shook his head.

“Never quite got the hang of those,” he said.

Not that it mattered, because he certainly had the hang of removing it once it was unclasped. As soon as it was off, he pulled back again, still holding my bra in his hands.

I expected him to ask if I was still okay, but he didn't say anything. Laying there, topless in my jeans, I watched as his eyes devoured my body. He shamelessly stared at my breasts, taking in the hardness of my nipples, eyes roaming over every curve, every freckle.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Fuck no,” he replied. “Just trying to commit this view to memory.”

“Better than last time?”

“That's a loaded fucking question, and you know it.”

I laughed and he grinned, unceremoniously dropping my bra beside my bed before returning his attention to my body by way of his mouth. Again he kissed me, and again he touched my breasts, and again his lips moved down my chest as he kissed and sucked everything except my nipples.

Somehow, the absence of touch was just as erotic with Caleb. My breath started coming faster as my nipples ached for the attention he wasn't willing to give. Instead, he

continued to tease me, his fingers mimicking the pattern his mouth was making.

“Caleb, please,” I whimpered.

“What?” he asked innocently.

I glared at him, which he caught as he glanced up at me.

“Don’t make me beg.”

He held my gaze, his eyes sparkling and his lips parted.

“I wouldn’t dare,” he said, and in one swift movement, he latched his mouth onto my left nipple.

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ELEVEN

MAGGIE

MY HEAD TILTED BACK of its own volition as Caleb sucked on my nipple.

A relieved moan escaped my lips and my eyes fluttered shut, my fingers moving to Caleb's head. He sucked and licked the hard little nub, making relief battle with longing as his tongue circled it and made me crave more and more.

Once he'd had his fill of that side, he kissed his way to my right breast and repeated the actions there. This time when he finished, he nibbled on my nipple, tugging it between his teeth. He didn't bite hard—the pressure was no more than a firm pinch—but paired with the wetness of his mouth, it made me cry out and thrust my breasts into his face, eager for more of his attention.

And he gave it, willingly and eagerly and thoroughly.

Back and forth he went, like he was comparing each side and deciding which was his favourite. Each little ministrations added to the hollow, insistent desire in the pit of my stomach. Wriggling again beneath him, I searched for some sort of friction to relieve the need between my legs.

“Be patient,” Caleb muttered, his lips brushing my nipple as he spoke.

“Easy for you to say,” I gasped. “You have no idea how this feels.”

Caleb pulled back again, sitting up and raising an eyebrow at me.

“Is that so?” His hand moved to my wrist and, grasping it lightly, he guided it to the bulge in his jeans. “I have no idea?”

According to his dick, he may have had *some* idea.

I licked my lips as I touched his hard cock through the rough denim of his jeans. Moving my hand back and forth, I watched Caleb’s eyes flutter closed, relief written across his face as he indulged in the feeling. He was still covering the back of my hand with his palm, holding me in place as I rubbed him, and I relished in the sudden shift of power I’d created.

It didn’t last long, though. Caleb gripped my wrist again and pushed my hand away, pinning it back to the bed as he leaned over me again.

“Not yet,” he said, his voice stern. “I’m not done with you.”

I tried not to smile. “I’m not the one who put my hand on your cock.”

He kissed me hard, stealing my words and my breath.

“And I’m not the one pinned to the bed,” he growled. “So you’ll just have to wait your turn.”

Then he dipped his head to worship my breasts again, distracting me while he let go of my wrist and reached down to unbutton my jeans.

His tongue returned to my nipple as his fingertips skimmed along my stomach and slid past the unbuttoned jeans. A noise of longing left my throat as he touched my mound through the fabric of my panties, his fingers exploring the crevices and curves of the junction between my legs without passing that cotton barrier. He found the soaking spot below the entrance to my pussy, and I heard him make a satisfied noise as he traced back up my slit.

My throat was dry and I had to swallow before I could speak.

“Please, Caleb.”

The hoarse plea didn't go unnoticed, and he slipped his hand into my panties.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, a rush of air pushing out of my lungs as his fingers started moving.

While he continued to devote his mouth to my breasts, his fingers worked magic in my panties. His fingers explored my slit thoroughly, tracing along the folds of my pussy and circling the swollen, sensitive bud. Another shiver ran through my body as he brushed against my clit, and I cried out in relief as he dipped his finger inside me.

When I'd lost my virginity to Caleb, I'd let him touch me anywhere he wanted. His uncertain hands had run all over my

body, unsure of what to do. He'd kissed my breasts then, too, and had pushed his fingers against my pussy, probably trying to remember something he'd seen while watching porn. As a virgin who had nothing to compare it to, it had felt amazing.

But, of course, it paled compared to what Caleb was doing with ten years' experience after that first time.

He fingered me slowly, his hand restrained by my panties. Once he was sure I was ready, he added a second finger. I cried out again as the hollow arousal in my core was filled and whimpered when he withdrew his fingers a few moments later, but just a little. Almost as soon as he'd taken his fingers out of my pussy, he found my clit and began working tight circles over the sensitive bud.

Short, high-pitched moans escaped my throat as the sensations of his mouth on my breasts and fingers in my panties drove me crazy. Caleb seemed urged on by this, and the pace at which he flicked his tongue on my nipple matched the way he was rubbing my clit.

It didn't take long for me to feel the telltale signs of an approaching orgasm. Anticipation seemed to build up in my body, filling every inch of my skin from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. I was breathing harder, faster, and Caleb's fingers responded to the changes in my demeanour. He kept his pace but increased the pressure on my clit.

"Do it, Mags," he breathed. "Come on my fingers. Let me feel what I was supposed to get the first time we did this."

The building orgasm boiled over and I came with a shriek. White sparks flew through my eyes and I was distantly aware of the noises I was making, though I couldn't care less. I was too busy focusing on the intensity radiating from Caleb's fingers, from the way he was still fingering me even as I writhed beneath him, my back arching as my body failed to contain its bliss.

After a few long, mindless moments, my senses returned to me. Caleb's fingers still pushed against my clit, though the touch was light and mindful of how sensitive the spent little nub was. He was no longer sucking my nipple, instead nuzzling his face against my breasts as he waited for me to catch my breath.

"Holy fuck," I said, and he burst out laughing.

Removing his hand from my panties, he moved himself up to kiss me again. "Sorry it was ten years overdue, but there's the orgasm I owed you."

"Consider the debt paid, and then some."

His tongue darted into my mouth, and the talking ceased as our heated kissing took priority. I knew Caleb's cock must still be painfully hard and I trailed my hands down his arms to the waistband of his pants.

His jeans were tight from the swollen bulge beneath them. As we kissed, I fiddled with his belt, managing to undo it and the button on his jeans. I unzipped his fly carefully, and his cock seemed to push through the opening of its own accord, freeing itself from its denim prison.

Caleb groaned as I gripped his cock, still encased in his boxers. His lips left mine as he looked down to watch me handle him. I rubbed his cock a few more times, then began pushing his jeans down, followed by his boxers. There was a look of pure animalistic lust gleaming in his eyes just before I wrapped my fingers fully around him.

His cock was even better than I remembered.

Caleb was blessed with a beautiful cock. Hot and thick and curved just the slightest bit upward, it was almost like something out of a textbook. Even having just had an intense orgasm, I felt my pussy throb with the desire to have it buried deep inside me.

For a while he let me play with his cock almost idly as I traced my fingers up and down his length, feeling his veins and ridges and the sticky drops of pre-cum that leaked from his tip. But it wasn't long before he reached down and covered my hand with his again.

“I want to be inside you, Mags,” he said.

“I thought you'd never ask.”

He removed his shirt first, then tugged on my jeans, bringing them down at the same time as my panties. As he took his pants off, I reached into the nightstand drawer and dug through to find a condom I knew was somewhere near the back of the drawer. As subtly as I could, I looked for the expiration date. It may have been a few years since I'd gotten laid, but it wasn't like I'd set out to be celibate for the rest of

my life and I'd bought a box of condoms a couple of years earlier, hoping someone might break my dry spell.

They hadn't, obviously, but it had been recent enough that I could breathe a sigh of relief when the date on the packet was still good.

His jeans were off by then and he had returned to his spot between my legs, his cock brushing against my thigh. He stroked it a few times as I handed him the condom. With practiced hands, he tore the packet open and rolled it on, then positioned his cock at my entrance.

Without another word, he plunged into me, his thick head stretching my pussy lips. In unison, we sighed, and after a few tentative thrusts so I could adjust to him, he began a steady but deliciously satisfying rhythm.

It was intoxicating to have him inside of me. The walls of my pussy gripped him as he sheathed himself inside me, the slight curve of his cock meaning that the head nudged against those perfect spots inside of me. His weight was heavy against my body and my breasts squished against his chest, though it felt incredible. After a bit, he propped himself up on his elbows to keep from crushing me, though my nipples still brushed against his skin. I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him on harder, deeper, raising my hips to meet his as he penetrated me. I hadn't expected to come again, but the feel of his body against mine, his cock filling me, and his breath against my face was pushing me to the edge.

“I’m not going to last long,” he groaned. “Maggie, you feel so good...”

“Just a little longer,” I gasped. “Just fuck me a little bit longer...”

Looking back, I can see why that sentence achieved the opposite purpose.

“Fuck,” he grunted, his eyes squeezing shut. A pained expression crossed his face and he staggered, then groaned and stilled. Even with the condom, I could feel his cock twitch as he blew his load.

“Sorry,” he said miserably.

I refused to let it be over and pulled his face down to mine.

“Stay inside me,” I demanded, and I wriggled my hand between our bodies as I kissed him.

He held still as I finished, fingering my clit as his cock softened inside me. It wasn’t long before I came again, moaning against his mouth as my body shook beneath him. I gasped for air, my legs tight around his waist as my body tensed and relaxed.

Caleb kissed me one last time before pulling out. My legs flopped to the bed as he moved out from between them. I watched as he took off the condom and wrapped it up, directing him to the garbage can in the bathroom. When he returned, he lay back down beside me, his skin almost cool against the searing warmth of my body.

“Is this the part where I insist that I never come that fast, even though both times I’ve been with you are probably the shortest I’ve ever lasted?” he asked.

I chuckled, then curled up against his chest as he wrapped his arms around me. “I believe you.”

“Fuck. That means you don’t believe me.”

“You’ll have to prove it to me some other time.”

The arms enveloping me tensed. Caleb didn’t respond, and I felt my pulse quicken as I thought I’d said something wrong.

“Sorry. I made you uncomfortable, didn’t I?”

“Not at all,” he said. “I just can’t believe how fucking lucky I am to have found you again.”

I didn’t know what to say. Instead, I pressed my lips to the bare skin of his chest and closed my eyes, listening to his gentle breathing until we both fell asleep.

TWELVE

CALEB

THERE ISN'T ANYTHING QUITE like waking up next to a beautiful and blissfully naked woman.

It took me a moment to remember where I was after opening my eyes. Beside me, Maggie was still asleep, making the tiniest snoring noises I'd ever heard.

I'd never woken up next to her before. It wasn't like we'd slept in the gazebo on the beach that night ten years ago. No, we'd cuddled together for a bit and then gotten dressed. I'd walked her home, then jogged to my cabin and snuck back in. If Mom or Dad had heard me sneak out, they'd said nothing. And even though I woke up the next morning feeling like an entirely different person, it apparently hadn't shown on my face because they hadn't noticed that either.

So I didn't know that Maggie snored, if one could call that snoring. It was barely a vocalization, something louder than breathing, but not so loud as to be jarring. It was almost comforting in a way, a steady, peaceful sound that lulled me into a relaxed state.

For a while, I just listened and watched. I was on my side, facing her, and she lay on her back with her hip pressed against my pelvis. Her deep auburn hair was spread across the pillow, tangled and wild, and she clutched the blanket with her left hand while her right arm flopped over her head on the pillow. One breast peeked out from under the covers, her nipple perky and proudly sticking up in the cool air of her bedroom.

I couldn't help but stare at her exposed breast. It was just so... perfect. I don't know how Maggie ended up with tits like that, so beautifully shaped, her skin creamy and smooth and inviting, but she had. My cock twitched, part of me wanting nothing more than to lean down and take that pink nipple in my mouth.

I didn't, of course. She wasn't awake and I wouldn't pretend I knew her well enough to assume that was okay. My cock didn't seem to like that reasoning, though, and as much as I tried to stop it, I started hardening against her leg as I watched her chest move up and down in soft breaths.

Tearing my eyes away from her gorgeous body proved difficult, and I had just convinced myself to roll over when Maggie's eyes fluttered open. She blinked a couple of times before turning her head towards me.

"Morning," she yawned.

The blanket shifted as she stretched, sadly covering her exposed nipple.

"Morning," I said back.

There was no way of hiding the erection pressed to Maggie's leg, especially as she stretched her body alongside me. When she finished, she rolled on to her side, facing the other direction.

"Top drawer of the nightstand," she said sleepily.

"What about it?" I asked.

"Condoms. They're in the top drawer of the nightstand."

Grinning, I rolled over. It took a bit to hunt through the drawer, but I found a single condom hanging out beneath a vibrator. That made me grin even more as a picture of Maggie using it conjured itself in my mind. I bit back a comment about that, since maybe if I played my cards right, she'd let me watch her play with it one day, and instead just withdrew the condom and closed the drawer. Once I suited up, I rolled back towards Maggie.

She bent her legs, pushing her beautiful ass towards me. I sidled up behind her, guiding her hips closer until the tip of my cock was nestled between her legs, eagerly searching for the entrance to her pussy. She was already wet, heat radiating from the tight hole between her legs.

"How are you ready for me already?" I whispered, wrapping an arm around her body to grasp her breast.

Maggie wiggled her ass, making me groan as my cock slid along her slit.

"You just seem to have that effect on me." Her voice was still dreamy, as though she was not fully awake. "Now, fuck

me, would you?”

I buried my face against her neck, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair as I reached down to guide my cock inside her. I entered her slowly, relishing the feel of her pussy gripping every inch of me. Soft noises came from Maggie’s mouth until my balls were pressed against her, my cock buried as deep in her as I could go.

It was one of the best things I’d ever experienced. Maggie’s pussy was so tight, so wet, and so perfect. Her ass, thick and firm, was settled against me, and her body fit against mine like a perfect puzzle piece. I held her breast in my hand as I groaned against her neck, my other hand pressed against her back.

“You feel so good,” I said. “Fuck, Mags. You’re fucking perfect.”

I don’t know if she responded. As much as I wanted to stay in that moment forever, with my cock buried inside her and her body pressed against mine, I couldn’t hold myself back.

She moaned as I began to fuck her. As much as I wanted to continue holding her breast, I wanted to feel Maggie come on my cock, and there was no way I was finishing before her this time. I squeezed her breast one last time, then brought my hand between her legs.

“Yes,” she breathed as my fingers found their mark.

I rubbed her clit slowly, intensely, trying to match the pace of my thrusts. She reached up and swept her hair away from

her neck, and I kissed along her shoulder and back as I burrowed inside her. My lips traced the tattoo on her shoulder as her breathing came faster and faster. I nipped at the skin on her neck, and seconds later, Maggie's pussy was even tighter around my cock. She cried out, her hips trying to buck against me as she came. I held her in place, my fingers still making circles around her swollen clit as I kept fucking her.

She came once more in that position, another orgasm that shook her legs and made her tremble around me as I maintained a slow, intense speed. Once that one finished, though, I couldn't hold myself back.

"I need more," I murmured.

"Take it, then," she whispered, and I groaned against her shoulder.

Forcing myself to pull out for just a moment, I pushed Maggie on to her stomach. She slid her elbows beneath her, holding herself up as I mounted her and tunnelled back into her tight, dripping pussy hard and fast and deep.

"Fuck!" she cried out, as if I was forcing the word out of her lungs as I plunged inside her.

"Are you—"

"Yes, I'm okay, just fucking keep *fucking* me, Caleb."

I grinned, then wrapped my arms underneath her body. Taking a breast in each hand and squeezing, I did exactly as she asked and unleashed on her. I didn't think this part would last long, especially as I listened to Maggie's moans while I

fucked her. Her ass shook as I pounded her, my own orgasm closer and closer as I plunged inside her again and again.

Even without my hands on her clit, Maggie came again. Her wail was muffled by the pillow in front of her, and the telltale clenching of her pussy pushed me to the point of no return. I blew my load moments later, my heart pounding as I stilled inside Maggie's pussy, losing all sense of anything aside from the feeling of her wrapped around me and the cum spurting from my cock.

Pulling out, I rolled onto my back, eyes closed as I regained my breath. Maggie shifted beside me, pulling her knees under her as she sat up on the bed.

“Now it's a good morning,” she said.

I smiled, eyes opening to see her grinning down at me. Her hair was still wild around her head, but with her skin flushed, eyes bright, and lips swollen, she was about the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my entire life.

“Good late morning, in any case,” I added, glancing at the clock just beyond her head.

Maggie whirled around and looked at the clock. “Oh shit. Oh fuck.”

I sat up as she bolted out of bed. “What's wrong? Are you late for work?”

“No.” She started dressing quickly, passing my clothes to me as she found them. “I live above the bar, Caleb. My mom's going to be here to open in like twenty minutes. I don't need

her to know that you spent the night.” She glanced at me, her face twisted with guilt. “I’m so sorry. I feel like an asshole for kicking you out.”

It was a fair and reasonable point, and I said so.

“No hard feelings,” I said as I pulled on my jeans.

She still looked disappointed. “Yeah, but I was having fun. I like hanging out with you.”

The sadness in her voice shouldn’t have made me as happy as it did. There was some definite guilt as I realized it, but I couldn’t help it.

I liked that she wanted to be around me.

“Why don’t you come by the cabin?” I asked as I grabbed my coat from the hook near her door. “I can make you lunch, as long as you don’t mind sandwiches.”

Her face brightened. “Really?”

“Yeah. If you want.” I slipped my shoes on and looked up at her. “Just no judging the shithole, okay? It’s gonna look way nicer when I’m done with the renovations.”

“Best I can promise is to only laugh a bit and only when you’re not looking,” she said.

“What about that, but you also kiss me each time you want to laugh?”

She bit back a smile. “Deal.”

THIRTEEN

CALEB

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, MAGGIE was in my driveway.

She'd followed me in her car, a beat-up old hatchback with rust flaking off the bottom and a burnt-out brake light, since it would look weird if she was gone but her car wasn't. Which was fair, but also left a melancholy sort of feeling in my chest.

Not that I thought Maggie was embarrassed of me or anything. I mean, we'd spent the night together. That didn't mean it was anything more than that. Or maybe it did. Maybe it would be more than that. We'd see where things went. But it wasn't that I was *offended* that she didn't want her mom to know.

It was more that she was worried about her mom finding out in the first place.

Maggie had always been independent; she'd had to be, growing up with a single mom who worked in a bar. When we were kids and those little age gaps seem so much more significant, Maggie had always seemed like the most mature, even though she was younger than most of us.

But she was... well, twenty-six or twenty-seven now. I wasn't entirely sure when her birthday was, just that it wasn't over the summer since I couldn't recall ever celebrating it with her. Either way, mid-twenties and worrying about her mom seeing a guy at her apartment because her whole life seemed to exist in that one building.

Her whole life was about that bar, and I didn't know how happy she actually was about that.

But that was a conversation for another time. Right now, Maggie was staring at the cabin, looking delectable in a pair of jeans and another tank top that cut low on her chest and showed the hint of a mark I'd accidentally left there the night before.

And yeah, maybe I was kind of hoping there would be another first time for me today—the first time I'd ever hooked up with someone *in* the cabin.

The first time I'd had a friend in the cabin too, actually. None of my friends had ever come over. Most of their parents had told them not to, Maggie's mom included. Part of it, I think, was to keep us playing outside in the sun, but some of it might have had to do with me being an outsider and the summer people being different from the locals.

Not to mention, the summer properties weren't right in town. It was a good half-hour walk to get to the cabin from Main Street, so it wasn't overly convenient to hang out at my place. Regardless, it had never mattered; between the gorgeous weather in Marble Beach, The Sea Glass, and the ice cream

parlour that was long gone now, we had everything we needed in town.

But now Maggie was here.

“Come on in,” I said, jiggling my keys as I led her to the garage. “Sorry, we have to go this way. The front door is blocked right now.”

“It’s no problem,” she said.

I grimaced as I opened the door. “And sorry for the mess in here. I’ve taken some supplies out of here to bring in, but there’s, uh... a lot.”

“Right,” she said.

Most of the lumber was still in the garage, but I’d brought in the cabinets and all the different flooring, which is what was blocking the front door. I motioned to it as Maggie followed me into the cabin.

“It’ll look good eventually,” I said. “Right now it’s garbage, I know.”

“Mmm,” she said.

Internally, I grimaced in embarrassment. I didn’t think Maggie was the kind of person who would *actually* judge someone’s house, but looking at it through the eyes of someone who couldn’t see what I did in my mind, the place was in shambles. Pride kicked in and I ran a hand through my hair.

“The renovations will be awesome. I’m going to redo the kitchen. Tear out all the cabinets and put in new countertops.” I pointed at the stack of hardwood in the living room. “Hardwood pretty much everywhere. Non-negotiable. There’s no point in putting in lino or laminate or whatever, you know? It’ll cheapen the look of the whole place. But I’ll do tile in the kitchen and bathrooms, obviously.”

Maggie followed my gestures, her face unreadable.

“I figured the heated floors would be nice, too,” I said, then cleared my throat. “Good for later in the summer, when it’s chilly at night, you know? It was always cold in here by the time we left and Dad hated running the furnace.”

“Wow,” she said.

I motioned towards the patio doors. “Come outside. This is gonna be the best part.”

She followed me, looking from side to side as I led her onto the deck.

“So like, this is going to be the big seller.” I drew the plans in the air, imagining them as I spoke. “The entire deck will be redone. I’ll put a balcony up there. That’s off the master bedroom. Then over here, a set of stairs down to this level. This’ll be the main area with the barbecue and stuff, patio furniture and whatever for entertaining. Retractable awning and that kind of thing, obviously.”

“Obviously,” she repeated.

I licked my lips, hating the fact that I felt like I needed to impress her. “And then there’ll be stairs down to a patio over there. I want to put in a hot tub, a wet bar... just like, total luxury, you know? Paired with this view...” I shrugged. “It should sell for a good price. Once I’m done, at least.”

Still, Maggie didn’t say anything, just stared at the cabin as I spoke.

“Sorry to disappoint,” I said, laughing awkwardly.

“You think I’m disappointed?”

“Well... yeah. I mean, I tried to tell you it wasn’t that good and—”

“What, you think I’d be impressed if you had a huge lake house?”

“No, I just mean that I know it isn’t that great of a house and that it seems like you were expecting more.”

She finally looked at me. My heart sank as I realized her eyes were cold and her jaw clenched. “More? What, like you think I’m some kind of gold digger?”

“What?” I said dumbly. “Why would I think you were a gold digger? I told you this place was crappy.”

“You did,” she said. “Too bad you’re a liar.”

I frowned. “What?”

“This is shit to you?”

“Well, I mean... comparatively,” I said.

“Comparatively. All those years, we thought you weren’t like the other summer kids, and now...”

“Now what?” I asked. “This is nothing like the other houses.”

She laughed bitterly. “This is nicer than the house I grew up in. You know that?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“The way you talked about ‘the cabin’—” She did exaggerated quotes in the air as she spoke “—I thought it was like a single room with a fireplace and no indoor plumbing.”

I glanced at the house, then back at her. “You thought I lived in like... a shack? Every summer?”

She snorted. “I didn’t think you lived in a mansion.”

I hadn’t meant to upset her, and I wasn’t sure what I’d specifically done wrong. “I didn’t mean to imply anything. I just thought, you know, compared to the other places on the lake—”

“The things people call their vacation homes could fit my mom’s house inside them four times over. I didn’t expect that your ‘cabin’ was actually a lake house.”

“So you’re upset that it’s too nice?”

She let out a dry laugh. “No, just stupid of me to think you’d be different from any other tourist. You seem all down to earth, but you have this place that’s a friggin’ palace and it’s not good enough for you.”

“Why are you upset?” I asked.

“I’m not upset,” she spat. “Aside from you thinking I’m some kind of fucking gold digger. You know what? Forget it. You and I are apparently on very different pages when it comes to what *shit* is. This was a bad idea.”

“Maggie, wait.” She started storming around the side of the cabin to the front. “Just a sec! Can we talk about this?”

“No.” She crossed the driveway towards her car. “I have to go. Goodbye, Caleb.”

She slammed the car door and started the car, reversing down the driveway before I could even respond. As the dust on the driveway settled, I finally managed to close my jaw.

“What the fuck just happened?” I muttered.

I slowly turned and headed back inside the cabin.

No, not the cabin. The lake house.

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FOURTEEN

MAGGIE

“WHO WAS THE CUTIE?” Annie asked as I walked through the kitchen at the start of my shift.

I froze in my tracks, my eyes wide. “What?”

Annie laughed, tightening her apron around her as she glanced to make sure Big Tim wasn’t listening.

“That fine piece of work I saw you sneak away with earlier?”

“Annie, I—”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry.” She put a calming hand on my shoulder as she reached past me to grab a head of lettuce.

“Your secret’s safe from your mom, not that she’d care. But humour your auntie and spill the dirt, Maggie. Because he was a *fine* piece of work.”

A tremble ran through my jaw as I tried not to clench it. Of course Annie had seen me and Caleb leave. She got to the bar hours before anyone else to prep ingredients for the day.

“So?” she pressed. “Who was he?”

I sighed. “A mistake.”

Annie’s voracious smile faded and she put down the head of lettuce, though not the large knife she had intended to chop it with. “Are you okay, Mags?”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. “He was just a bad decision. I’m not *hurt*. I’m just... hurt.”

“Hmm.” She eyed me carefully, then apparently decided I was telling the truth and picked up the lettuce again. “And what made you make this decision?”

“He was... nice,” I said.

“And hot,” Annie added.

“Yeah. But I can’t see myself with someone who complains that his lakefront palace is a piece of garbage because it doesn’t have heated hardwood floors and a hot tub.”

“Ah, there’s the bad part of the decision.” A gossipy smile spread across Annie’s face. “A tourist. I thought your mom’s rules were—”

“—always use a condom, don’t fuck tourists.” I blushed even as I grimaced. “Does it make it better if I was friends with him growing up?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really? What tourist were you friends with growing up?”

“Caleb Vaughan.”

“*That* was Caleb?” she said.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Wow. He certainly grew up.” She shook her head, then frowned. “He was complaining about his dad’s cabin?”

I nodded.

“That family seemed so down to earth.” She started chopping the lettuce again. “I can’t imagine he would’ve gotten along with you kids back in the day if he wasn’t.”

“Yeah, well, he’s delusional,” I said. “Or a liar.”

“How so?”

“He has no idea what it’s actually like to be... I don’t know. Poor.”

Annie looked at me warily. “You didn’t grow up poor, Maggie. Not like some.”

“I know, but I didn’t grow up well-off, either.” I folded my arms. “I’m not complaining. But I also never pretended like I was anything I wasn’t. He has this gorgeous cabin that’s nicer than any house I’ve ever even been in before and he spent the whole time complaining about how it wasn’t as good as the other lake houses.”

She tilted her back in a slow, knowing nod. “I see.”

“And he kept... *ugh*.” I leaned against the counter and looked up at the ceiling, yellowed with age and smoke and grease. “He kept telling me all the things he was going to improve, all the... the upgrades he wanted to make. You know, like putting in hardwood because linoleum makes everything look cheap, like he hadn’t just seen my kitchen with the scratched up lino from probably five decades ago. And then

had the audacity to say that I looked like I was expecting more and apologized for disappointing me. Like I'd be shallow enough to think his fucking mansion wasn't good enough."

"Is it a palace or a mansion?" Annie asked.

"Huh?"

"You said it was a palace earlier." She glanced at me as she kept shredding the lettuce, a sparkle of laughter in her eye.

"That's bigger than a mansion, usually."

I pressed my lips together and stood up straight, but before I could walk away, Annie put down the knife and touched my arm.

"Mags, I understand why you're insulted," she said. "But I doubt he meant—"

"He made me think of my dad."

Annie fell silent, her lips pursed. "You don't know your dad."

"I know I don't *know* him, but I know about him."

"And what do you think you know about him?"

I folded my arms, not quite able to bring myself to look at her. "He was some charming tourist who made my mom think he was relatable and nice, then when he got what he wanted out of her, he left."

"That's... somewhat accurate."

"Well, it's as accurate as I'll ever get, seeing as no one ever tells me more," I said.

“There isn’t anything more to tell you,” Annie said. “He *was* a charming tourist. He *did* seem relatable and nice. And yes, he’s the reason your mom always harped on the ‘don’t fuck tourists’ thing. Because that man was garbage, Mags.”

“Right. And I just found out that Caleb is more like that than he’d ever let on.”

“Do you really think that?”

“How could I not? He spent his whole life pretending to be just like the rest of us when he...” I sighed. “How am I supposed to get past that?”

“Have you considered, perhaps, talking to him? Finding out a bit more about why he acted like he did?”

I felt my face turning red. “I don’t know if I can even look at him again. Just thinking about what he said and how... how *clueless* he was. And thinking it wasn’t good enough for me. That hurt, Annie. And what if he does what my dad did? Mom always said he made her all these beautiful promises and then fucked up everything for her.”

“I couldn’t tell you what promises that man made to your mom, but I can promise you he wasn’t just some out-of-touch rich kid who thought growing up without heated floors was the epitome of hardship.”

“And you think that’s all Caleb is?”

She shrugged. “I couldn’t tell you, Mags. I understand why you’d still be upset, even if he’s just some ignorant rich bitch.”

“That’s still a good enough reason to not want to see him again, right? That he’s... that he was just like my dad this whole time?”

“I mean, you’d have to be the judge. You’re the one who took a ride on the beef bus with him.”

“Ride on the... *Annie!*”

She cackled and slapped my arm. “You promise me he didn’t hurt you? Make you do something you weren’t wanting?”

“Hearing you call it ‘riding the beef bus’ was the most painful part of all of this, I promise.”

“Didn’t like that one? What about a long clam jamming marathon?”

“Annie!”

“Riding the bony express? Exploring the hidden valley? A good old session of souring the kraut?”

I gagged. “Remind me not to order a Reuben today.”

She threw her head back as she laughed. “It’ll be okay, Mags. Things will work out.”

As much as my conversation with Annie made me both laugh and also want to lose the grilled cheese sandwich I’d made myself after storming away from Caleb’s cabin, I was still upset about the whole thing.

I shouldn’t have slept with him.

I couldn't blame myself for that. It wasn't like I knew he was a giant fraud. Although I guess I could blame myself for not suspecting it in the first place.

He was a tourist, after all. One who convinced me he was just like me and my friends growing up, even though he was a spoiled rotten summer kid.

He honestly thought that house was hideous. As he talked about all the things he wanted to do and replace and change, I couldn't help thinking he was just like every other person who owned property around the lake.

And then he thought I was the one being shallow because I thought his house would be nice? Like he *hadn't* heard me complain about tourists a thousand times before and didn't realize he was one of them?

It was stupid of me to think he was different.

Stupid of me to fuck him.

Stupid of me to feel let down.

I couldn't help it. His presence had injected some semblance of hope into my life. Hope for what, I didn't know. Maybe just a hope for something interesting to happen. Or a hope that I wouldn't be lonely for a while, that I could share my little slice of the world with someone who might make me smile. Hell, it might have just been hope to have an orgasm that wasn't caused by a vibrating piece of silicone.

But with hope came pain, and the knowledge that Caleb and I were very different people. And I guess it was better to learn

that sooner rather than later.

It would hurt less in the long run.

In the short term, though, it still hurt enough that I was grouchier than usual over the next few days. I didn't pour beer over anyone's heads, but Mom did have to comp two bills after I told someone to make up their fucking mind, it didn't take all day to pick a burger.

"Goddamnit, Maggie!" She had pulled me into the office again, having seen me flip off a customer on the security camera. "What the fuck is going on with you?"

I sat on the old green couch, folding my arms as I glared at the wall. "I'm on my period."

"Bullshit."

"Fine. Mercury is in retrograde and I'm an agent of its chaos."

She threw the bar towel that was hanging over her shoulder at me. "Don't give me that crap. Mercury's retrograde ended at the beginning of the month."

"Maybe it's a retro-retrograde."

Mom leaned against the desk, putting her hands to her head and working her fingers beneath the silk scarf in her hair as she rubbed some sanity back into mind. "I cannot ask you again, Maggie. Please be nice to the customers. Please stop swearing at them. Please." She looked up at me. "Go home for the day."

“But—”

“I can’t just send you out there after you treated a customer like that. So leave. You can make it up to me by starting early tomorrow so I can walk around with the building inspectors.”

I frowned. “What building inspectors?”

“It’s just a routine inspection.” She held her hand out so I could pass her bar towel back to her. “Mags, I can’t afford to keep covering your ass. Next time I have to comp a bill because of your behaviour, it’s coming out of your tips.”

“You can’t do that. That’s illegal.”

“Watch me.” Mom’s eyes were hard, the kind of look that I knew meant she wasn’t joking.

So, in addition to being grouchy, I had that threat looming over my head when Caleb walked into the bar one slow afternoon a few days later.

FIFTEEN

MAGGIE

IT WAS WINDY THAT day.

Windy enough that I could hear it whistling through the kitchen and feel it shaking the building. We'd had to put rolls of silverware on top of the stacks of napkins and I'd taken the cardstock trifolds off the tables because every time someone opened the door, the gust of air sent all paper products flying.

It was only because of the wind that I saw Caleb before he saw me. It gusted through the restaurant and I glanced up to see him stepping through the front door. Turning on my heel, I ducked into the kitchen before he saw me, my heart pounding.

It had been nearly a week since I'd peeled out of his driveway, upset that he wasn't the person I had wanted him to be, and not nearly long enough for my frustrations to fade.

It was mid-afternoon, which was the worst time for him to come in. Annie was washing dishes while Big Tim cooked, but I was the only server on duty. Mom usually watched the bar or took over when I needed a break, but she had some business meeting that afternoon, so I was stuck.

Fuck.

I wasn't ready to talk to him. And the fact that he'd just show up, that he'd come and find me at work when he *knew* I wouldn't be able to leave? That was such an asshole thing to do. Why should he get to dictate when I talked to him again?

Sighing, I closed my eyes briefly, then took a deep breath and squared my shoulders before walking out of the kitchen.

Caleb was sitting at one of the high tops. When he caught sight of me, his face brightened, a disgusting amount of hope in his eyes.

“Maggie,” he said. “I—”

“Welcome to The Sea Glass, happy hour’s on from now till six,” I said, slapping a menu on the table in front of him.

The hope faded instantly. I would’ve considered it a success, but a look that was reminiscent of a kicked puppy replaced it.

“Maggie, please,” he said. “Can we talk?”

“The Beach Burger’s on special for half price till five. I’ll be back in a minute for your order.”

“Maggie—”

But I turned on my heel and walked away, checking on every other customer before popping into the kitchen until Annie gave me a pointed look that said she knew I was slacking off. So I left the kitchen, checked on every customer again, then dragged myself to Caleb’s table.

“What are you ordering?” I asked.

“Just wait a second.” Caleb’s voice was quiet and his eyes begged silently.

“I can come back when you’re ready.”

He grabbed my wrist before I turned away. “Mags, please.”

“Don’t call me Mags.” I wrenched my wrist from his hand. “And don’t touch me.”

“Just tell me what I did wrong. I didn’t mean to offend you or upset you, and I think we’re both overreacting to a misunderstanding.”

“Just because you want an explanation doesn’t mean you’ll always get one,” I said, my teeth clenched. “That’s how the rest of us live our lives. We can’t always get what we want.”

“I’m not... when did I ever give you a reason to think I was like that?”

I stared at him incredulously. “Were we not at the same lake house last week, Caleb? Or were you still stuck in that alternate reality where you had some shitty ass cabin and thought I was so shallow that it would disgust me?”

“I don’t think you’re shallow!” he said heatedly. “And I’m pretty sure you *know* that. I’m not asking you to stop being angry with me or to change your mind, okay? I just want to know *why* you went from sleeping with me to screeching out of my driveway without even talking to me about it.”

I stuttered for a moment. Caleb held my gaze, his long sandy brown hair shifting as though it were blowing in the breeze. I could feel my cheeks flushing as I tried to come up with a response.

“You know what?” I finally said. “I was an idiot.”

“What?”

“I was an *idiot* for thinking you’d understand. You come from a life where you can just quit your job to go renovate a lake house to work through your feelings, hoping some time away from the daily grind of getting anything you ever wanted will lead to some epiphany.” I snatched the menu off his table. “I, on the other hand, am a fucking waitress. That you’d think, even for a second, that your goddamn castle wasn’t good enough is an insult. Now, why don’t you get out of my bar and my life?”

“Maggie Myers, I swear to God.”

Caleb jolted but I full on jumped, whirling around as Mom stormed up behind me. I hadn’t even heard her come in, but then, why would I? She would’ve come through the kitchen door. She was still wearing her well-worn leather motorcycle jacket, her hair messier than usual from the wind outside, and her eyes full of fury.

“Caleb, hon, good to see you again,” she said, struggling to keep her voice steady. “Don’t leave. Whatever you want to order is on the house. Maggie, office. Now.”

She gripped my shoulder and practically dragged me from the room. As soon as we got into the office, she slammed the door.

“That was completely unacceptable,” she spat.

“You don’t know what—”

“I don’t know why you think it’s okay to—”

“You have no idea!” My face was burning, and I threw the menu I was holding onto the couch. “Mom, he’s a fucking asshole!”

“Oh, is he?” she asked, her voice high-pitched. “Is he *such* an asshole, Maggie? What the hell did he do that made you go from rushing out of the bar to see him, to telling him to get out of my bar?”

“He’s... when I... what does it matter? Why can’t you take my word for it?”

“Because you couldn’t even tell him why you’re mad at him!” she exploded. “You are my daughter, and I know you better than anyone. I know exactly what your face looks like when you realize you’re being unreasonable because trust me, I’ve seen that face in the fucking mirror.”

“I barely look like you,” I muttered.

“Refusing to acknowledge what I’ve just said because you know I’m right? Check,” she said. “Classic Myers move, Maggie. I should know. I perfected it.”

“Right, because you know everything.”

“I’m not a moron, Maggie. I heard what you said, and all I can damn well hope is that you were safe when you slept with that boy—”

My mouth dropped open. “Mom—!”

“—I’m not done! You’re a grown woman, it’s your choice what you do. But if you’re going to act like a grown woman, you need to *act* like a *grown* woman. What in the fuck did he do that was so bad that you just told him to get out of my bar?”

“Nothing!” The word came out loud and sharp, heat burning my face as I finally said it. “He didn’t do anything specific. You’re right. He’s just another fucking rich, spoiled tourist. His ‘cabin’ is four times the size of our house. He’s renovating it with more money than I’ll ever see in my life. And it pisses me off because he made me think he was different, just like the asshole who was my dad made you think he was different.”

Her shoulders tensed at that, but I couldn’t stop myself from continuing.

“But no, Caleb didn’t *do* anything specific. He wants me to explain why I’m mad and I didn’t expect him to actually give a fuck. And so now I’m supposed to tell him I’m mad because I’ll never be the kind of person who understands why heated fucking floors are so goddamn important and I don’t know how I’m supposed to be friends with someone who does. And yes, I hear how fucking *stupid* that sounds, but I can’t help it. He’s got the whole world and doesn’t think it’s enough.”

The words hung between us and Mom stared at me. I waited for her to start yelling at me again, my fists clenched as I braced myself.

But I wasn't ready.

I wasn't ready for her to walk around to the other side of her desk. I wasn't ready for the calm way that she sat down in her desk chair or for the way she kept her shoulders square as she sat with impeccable posture.

And I was *not* ready for her to burst into tears.

My mom was not the crying type. Any woman who lived life like her didn't have time for tears. She wasn't close to her parents, so when they died, I didn't see her cry. She didn't have time to watch movies, and when she did, she watched comedies and not tearjerkers. The closest I'd ever seen my mother to tears was when I graduated high school and caught the slightest glimpse of wetness in the corner of her eye as I posed for a photo shaking my principal's hand.

So that sight? The sight of my mom sobbing like I didn't even know was possible for her?

It was terrifying.

"I... I'm sorry," I said.

She kept crying.

"I didn't think... Mom, please don't—I'll go tell Caleb I'm sorry. Or... or something. I won't—"

"It's not that."

I looked around, frantically helpless. “Then what... are you... are you sick? Are you dying?”

She let out a dry laugh. “Don’t be stupid. I wouldn’t cry over something as menial as that.”

I finally managed to make myself useful and pushed the box of tissues on her desk towards her. “Then what’s *wrong*?”

It took a moment longer for her to calm down enough to take one of the tissues. Then she blew her nose loudly, took a deep breath, picked up a tore-open envelope off her desk, and handed it to me.

“Maggie,” she said as I opened the envelope. “We’re losing the bar.”

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SIXTEEN

CALEB

I DIDN'T KNOW WHY I thought Maggie would return from the office in a better mood and be willing to talk.

Probably because I was an idiot sometimes.

I wasn't expecting her to burst from the kitchen like a bullet, untying her apron as she flew through the dining room. She was moving so fast, her hair fanned back from her face, and I caught a distinct glimpse of tears in her wide eyes. The front door opened with a slam and wind blew into the restaurant as she left.

Without so much as a second thought, I jumped off the barstool and followed her out of the restaurant. By the time I reached the door, she had already crossed the street, walking as fast as she could onto the beach.

"Maggie!" I called out, though she either didn't hear me or didn't react.

I jogged after her, catching up just as she sank down on the wooden bench where we'd chatted for hours the week before. The beach was deserted, the wind pushing waves onto the

shore with a fierceness that seemed appropriate. With the same caution I would have taken with an injured animal, I approached Maggie, any frustrations I'd had melting away to concern as her hair whipped around her head.

“Maggie, are you okay?”

It was a stupid question. She clearly wasn't.

The last time I'd seen Maggie cry was when she was maybe nine or ten and had gotten that scar on the bridge of her nose. We were running through the woods near the beach—not the one we were sitting on, but the other beach, the one surrounded by trees and nature and tourist families—playing tag or something. There was a group of us running from someone and I was just a few steps behind her, laughing my head off, when a loud *thwack* echoed through the trees and Maggie screeched.

She stumbled and I almost tripped on her, but she hadn't noticed; between the tears and the blood on her face, she was a little preoccupied. Whoever had been running in front of her had pushed a branch out of the way and it had snapped back at the perfect angle to whip Maggie across the face, and *hard*.

I remember being terrified. The way she was crying, all the blood... I thought she'd lost an eye. And I remember helping her up, trying to stay calm and using my shirt to mop up the blood on her face while the kid who'd moved the branch—God, I couldn't remember who the hell it was, couldn't even picture them—apologized over and over again. She'd sobbed,

wailing and leaning on me as we walked back to The Sea Glass to get help from her mom.

That wasn't how she was crying this time.

This time, she cried quietly. Her legs were pulled up on the bench and she hugged them to her chest as she buried her face in her knees. I was sure she'd heard me ask if she was okay, but she hadn't answered. I didn't think it was because she was ignoring me this time, though. Tentatively, I sat beside her.

"Mags, I know you're pissed at me, but please tell me you're going to be alright," I whispered.

A choked sound left her throat. I thought it was a sob, but it might have been a laugh.

"My mom's losing the bar."

My stomach dropped. "What?"

"The building." She sniffled, lifting her head and wiping her eyes. "Someone r-reported it or something. For being unsafe? I don't know how... It's old and I guess the... the soil's shifted or something. They did an inspection. And the foundation needs work, they said. And the wiring. The plumbing. The... the whole fucking thing." Her voice cracked and she wiped her face again, choking back a sob. "If we don't fix it, they're going to condemn it."

"They... no," I said, staring at her.

"Mm-hmm." Her voice shook. "So she's going to sell the land to the town. They'll tear the building down and resell it to a developer and someone will build another Starbucks here or

something. We only have one, after all.” She shook her head. “I should have taken up more of those old guys. Gotten a real sugar daddy. I could have saved the bar.”

She sniffled again, still hugging her knees to her chest as she stared out at the lake.

“She went to the bank today to try getting a loan, but they won’t approve her for something big enough. She’s got some savings, but she said even if she poured everything she had into it, it wouldn’t be worth it. We used to do good business, but not so much anymore. We’re not trendy enough for the tourists, and we’re getting too touristy for the locals.”

“That can’t... there’s got to be something. Isn’t there a landlord or...?”

She shook her head. “My mom owns the building.”

“How’d she buy it?”

The air suddenly felt colder, but it wasn’t from the wind.

“She got knocked up by a rich tourist who made her think he was different from the rest of them,” Maggie said, her voice bitter. “Let’s just say she got paid eighteen years of child support in advance. She bought the bar and a house. That was it.”

“Wait, what?”

“To which part?”

“Your dad paid your mom off?”

She shrugged. “His parents did.”

“Did you ever find out who he is?”

“Yep. She told me his name so I can avoid ever having to meet him.” She took a deep breath, then let it out shakily. “So now everything she’s worked for and everything I’ve ever known is going to be gone in two months. Two months, they gave her, for the thing that’s been my entire life.”

The timing was shit, but as she spoke, I was struck again by just how beautiful Maggie was. Her hair swirled around her head, her eyes shining with the remnants of her tears. I understood at that moment why she’d been upset with me, why she’d felt alienated as I talked about the lake house. Sitting next to me was a girl I’d grown up with but had never known anything about.

“Mags, I’m sorry about the other day.”

She glanced at me warily.

“I was careless with the way I talked and I didn’t realize it was upsetting you until it was too late.”

She moved her eyes back forward, glaring towards the water. “I thought you weren’t going to ask me to stop being angry.”

“You don’t have to forgive me if you don’t want to.”

We sat quietly on the bench, staring out at the lake and listening to the wind as it howled.

“Apology accepted.” Her words were quiet and begrudging. “More importantly, I’m sorry.” She chuckled dryly, her voice thick as though she was going to cry again. “I’m what they

warned you about when they said ‘don’t stick your dick in crazy.’”

“I don’t believe that for one second,” I said. “Overdramatic, maybe. Crazy, no. And apology accepted.”

“Definitely overdramatic,” she agreed.

After another moment of silence, I couldn’t help asking. “At the risk of making you mad, can I ask about something you just said?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“When you said you should have taken up ‘more’ of those old guys...”

Maggie’s shoulders tensed as I trailed off.

“I slept with a guy who liked to buy me things. And was older than me. And a little bit... married. If I’d taken up even ten percent of the sleazeballs who’d tried to buy me over the years, I’d have enough to save the bar.” She looked at me sidelong. “Judging me yet?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Yes, you are. But thanks for pretending.” She looked back out at the lake. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t think I have what it takes to be a sex worker.”

“I don’t think that counts as prostitution.”

“Close enough.” She shrugged, finally unfolding her legs from in front of her, shivering as another gust of wind blew past her bare arms. “I’m going to save the bar. We have two

months to make all the repairs. If I can get the money by the end of the month, we'll have time to fix it.”

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SEVENTEEN

CALEB

I DID MY BEST to help The Sea Glass, but there were only so many bacon burgers I could stomach.

I mean, I tried. For the next few days, it became my go-to food, though I did finally break down and order a Caesar salad instead of fries and gravy. But when I woke up one morning and seriously considered ordering a bacon burger and just dropping it in the garbage so I could have a bowl of fruit for breakfast, I knew my plan needed some work.

The problem is that I didn't know *what* I could do.

The obvious solution would have been to give Maggie the money. From the moment we'd walked off the beach and back into The Sea Glass, she'd set to work with a fierceness and concentration that I recognized and related to. What was missing, though, was any sort of plan or efficiency.

I didn't blame her for that. She was on a time limit. Stepping back and trying to come up with the most efficient option of raising money was hard enough without the emotional attachment and personal stake Mags had in the bar.

There were a few problems with outright giving her and Josie the money, though. The first being that Maggie would be *pissed*. I was sure that, if the way she'd reacted to my cabin had been any indication, it would be the end of any sort of friendship I had with her. And maybe I should've done it anyway. Maybe I should've made Josie take the money and told Maggie that she could hate me and call me an out-of-touch tourist all she wanted, but I wasn't going to stand by and let her and her mom lose their lives' work.

Or maybe I could've just bought the building. Paid for it, repaired it, charged The Sea Glass a reasonable amount of rent to cover the cost of the repairs and the eventual taxes and such. Maggie would have made the same argument and I could've given her the same answer, although she would've been more justified in her anger, I think. Being her landlord of not just her business but also the apartment Maggie lived in was just... it was a power I didn't want. It would've for sure cost us any friendship we could have.

But the biggest problem of all was that I didn't have the money for either.

A month earlier, I might've been at least close. A month earlier, I wouldn't have a shit-ton of hardwood and lumber and cabinets sitting in my garage. And it wasn't like I could take what I had left and just throw it at The Sea Glass. I still needed to eat and keep the lights on until I sold the cabin and started my business.

It was unfair.

That was why Maggie had been so pissed when I bitched about the cabin. Yeah, I worked hard. Yeah, my dad had worked hard, too. I wasn't going to pretend like I hadn't worked for what I had because I had. My parents hadn't handed me everything in life.

But Maggie worked hard, too. So did her mom. They worked just as fucking hard as I did and my dad did. Harder at times.

It was unfair that they were about to lose everything. I felt like I'd lost everything when my dad died, but realistically, I hadn't. I had my mom, my friends, my degree, my experience as a contractor. I had plenty. And I had to recognize that my dad helped me get to where I was.

Maggie didn't even have a dad.

It was something I thought about a lot over the next little while as I worked on my renovations. Maggie was busy doing anything she could to raise money for the bar, so other than a few minutes to chat if she was working when I went to get food, I didn't see much of her. Aside from stopping by The Sea Glass for a burger daily, that was all I did: work, think of how to help them, work, think of how unfair life was to Maggie and how much it sucked that I couldn't do anything about it, sleep.

Until I needed to go into the city to pick up some supplies that had been on backorder.

It wasn't that far of a trip and I figured I'd make a day of it. You know. Pick up some other stuff I'd need from somewhere

that wasn't one of the kitschy shops on Main Street. Stop for lunch somewhere that wasn't The Sea Glass. Maybe grab a coffee with one of the old friends who kept telling me I was crazy for living up in Marble Beach by myself.

Truth be told, I was looking forward to it. It was almost like a day off.

I didn't think the line for contractors at the hardware store was too bad, but there were a few blue collar guys with dirt caked on their faces and fingernails who begged to differ. As I walked in, one of them was leaning on the counter and hollering loudly towards someone in the back.

“—Todd, you lazy fuck, come help ya' girls out here! We got shit to do!”

I tensed, but there was a loud peal of laughter and a man wearing dress pants and a button-down shirt appeared in the doorway. Between the two women dressed in rugged polo shirts working behind the counter and the customers waiting around in everything from jeans and t-shirts to grease-stained coveralls, he looked out-of-place enough that it was obvious he was either the owner or a high-up manager.

“Simmer down, Cooper,” the man—Todd, apparently—said in a smooth, easygoing voice. “Some of us were making sure the girls' paychecks were signed, you know?”

Cooper huffed and rolled his eyes, but it seemed to be in a good-natured way.

Between Todd and the two women, they made quick work of the contractors milling around. Most of them were just picking up a few things or paying off invoices, so it wasn't long before it was my turn. As luck would have it, Todd was the one who waved me over to the counter.

“How can I help you, bud?”

“Just picking up a back order.” I showed him my invoice.

“Gotcha. You got one of your crew to help load this?”

“No, I'm working alone. But I can manage.”

He waved his hand at me dismissively. “I'll grab the cart and help you out to your truck. It's no problem.”

It was definitely nice of him. I distinctly remember thinking the service at this place would keep me coming back, right up until we got out to my truck and he started helping me load the supplies.

“That was quite the order,” Todd said, referring to my invoice. “What kinda project are you working on all by yourself like this?”

“Renos,” I said as he passed me a box. “I'm flipping a cabin. Uh, up in Marble Beach.”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I know the place. My buddy's got a lake house up there.”

“It's a popular spot,” I said.

He nodded. “But not too popular. Keeps it kind of nice and quiet, you know? You said you're flipping it... to sell?”

“Yeah.”

He hummed softly. “You know, the last time I was up there, I was thinking about looking for a property.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Is that so?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “How much were you thinking of selling for?”

“It won’t be ready for a while,” I said. “I’m aiming for next spring. I won’t know the final cost until then.”

“True, but...” He put the tailgate up for me, then leaned on my truck. “I mean, I could probably do a lot of the work myself, you know? Save you the hassle of doing the renos only to maybe have them torn out if the person buying it doesn’t like what you’ve done.”

I hoped I didn’t look as unimpressed as I felt. “Too bad I’ve already bought all my supplies. From *you*.”

Todd grinned. “Well, I could still use the supplies. I’d be willing to include the cost of that in an offer. And maybe there would be some discounts in it for you on your next project, you know?”

I considered it.

I mean, I wouldn’t get what I wanted, price-wise. I’d get back what I put into it, plus maybe a little more for the few upgrades I’d already made. But I wouldn’t *lose* anything.

And I’d have the money to help Maggie.

Faced with the reality of it, it was crazy. I hadn't seen Maggie in ten years. It wasn't like she was family or a close friend. She was the girl I'd lost my virginity to. A childhood friend.

And someone who'd made me open my eyes a little.

It was crazy to even consider it, but...

"You know, I might be interested," I said. "Maybe you should come up and look at the place first."

After all, there was no harm in him looking. Maybe he wouldn't be interested. Maybe he would. I could always change my mind.

Todd kept a practiced, cool look on his face, but I could see the eagerness in his eyes. "That sounds great. You around this weekend? I can be there Saturday around noon."

"Yeah." I pulled out my phone. "Give me your number. We can meet up in town first and I'll show you where it is. You know The Sea Glass? The bar near the beach?"

He laughed. "Uh, yeah. Why don't we meet at the Starbucks instead?"

"I mean... sure, I guess," I said. "I prefer The Sea Glass. They're... they're kind of struggling right now. I'm trying to help support them so they don't have to shut down."

He raised his eyebrows. "What d'you mean, shut down?"

"They need to make some repairs to the building they're in," I said, then looked up hopefully. "They don't have much

time, but it's... I mean, it's a Marble Beach staple. Actually, if you're interested, they're taking donations and I bet a place like this could—”

I didn't even finish the sentence before Todd burst out laughing, throwing his head back as he shook it. “Oh God. I can't believe it. No way. No offense, my friend, but no way. Let the place shut down.”

“What?” I said. “Why would you... I mean, that's someone's business. They're nice people.”

He snorted. “Nice people? That little waitress who works there dumped a pint of beer on Peter—my buddy with the place up there—the last time we were there and her mom, the friggin' loopy hippie chick who owns the place, harassed him right out of the building.”

Anger started curdling in my stomach. “What did he say to her?”

“He was just joking around with her,” he said pointedly. “And anyway, it doesn't matter. I called up a buddy who works for the town to inspect the place and Peter's planning on buying the land when they go under.”

I stared at him. “So you're the reason Marble Beach is losing one of their local businesses and a family is losing their livelihood? And you think that's funny?”

He rolled his eyes. “I'm sure they'll be fine. Tell you what, you sell me your cabin, I'll put a word in with Peter and see if

he'll turn it into a strip joint on the weekends so that pretty waitress can make herself useful.”

It was somewhat funny to me that he thought I'd still consider selling my place to him after that. I mean, he was lucky I didn't run him down with my truck. Instead, I just decked him, then got into my truck and pulled out of the parking lot, my heart beating so fast I could see it pulsing in my eyes.

Then, when I was a few blocks away, I pulled into a grocery store parking lot and turned the truck off as my heartbeat transformed into shaking hands that clutched my steering wheel.

A police siren sounded on the road beside me, but I didn't look at it. Todd hadn't called the cops about me punching him; he was a douchebag, but he was the kind of douchebag who would be too humiliated about the fact that I'd hit him hard enough to knock him down to tell anyone about it. Instead, I waited for it to fade, then dug my phone out of my pocket.

I couldn't let The Sea Glass shut down.

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EIGHTEEN

MAGGIE

THREE WEEKS IN, I knew it was hopeless.

Every night, I counted out exactly what I needed to live off of from my tips and put the rest in an envelope for my mom. On payday, I cashed my check like I always did, then added that money to the envelope.

I organized a huge dinner event and invited everyone in town, practically begging them to spare whatever they could to help save The Sea Glass. Big Tim cooked up burger after burger, Tiny Steve was the bartender, and Annie volunteered to be a server for the night so I could play my guitar. Every cent we earned, I added to my envelope, plus all the donations that had come in.

I even wrote a song. It was terrible, but I hoped it would go viral online when I shared the story about what was happening to The Sea Glass.

It did not.

Despite being known as the town grouch, the locals banded around me. The Sea Glass was *part* of Marble Beach, they

said. Destroying the building would be another hit to the charm of our little town.

But Marble Beach was a small place and tourist season was over. People could only give so much and the rich tourists who descended on us every summer were long gone, along with their wallets.

I was desperate. The Sea Glass—and Marble Beach—was my home. I had nowhere else to go. I had no other skills. And aside from being lonely, I liked what I did. I loved working with my mom, as much as she drove me crazy. I loved the routine of it. I even loved the stupid tourists, except the awful ones, which were most of them.

But some of them were okay.

Like Caleb.

He came around the bar almost daily, though I barely had the time or energy to talk to him. Despite our apologies and acceptance of them, things were different. I was embarrassed about my behaviour, though he insisted we were okay. I didn't know if we would get past it, especially now that... well.

I wondered if he could see why we were so different now that he was renovating his cabin and I was about to lose everything.

For three weeks, I worked my ass off. Every night, I counted my envelope of money and refused to acknowledge that we'd barely made a dent in what we needed to save the bar.

I couldn't stop trying.

I *couldn't* let The Sea Glass shut down.

Even though I'd lived above the bar for years, Mom had rarely visited me. So when she knocked on my door a few days after the fundraising dinner I'd planned to save the bar, I was astounded.

“What are you doing here so early?” My hair was wild around my head, and I was still in my pajamas.

“It's eleven in the morning.”

“That's early for me. I work nights.”

“We're not open that late.” She followed me into the apartment and sat on my couch. “You and I need to have a talk, hon.”

My heart dropped as I settled beside her. “Mom, I still have a week. The video's online still, it might still go viral. I can send it to—”

“It's too late, Mags.”

“Mom, no—”

“It's not what you think.” She sighed. “I sold part of the business.”

I stared at her. Selling the business hadn't even been on the table. “What?”

She tried to smile. “I had an interested investor. He's going to take care of the repairs and help renovate the bar.”

“Who?”

“So now he owns half the business,” she continued. “Which is a good thing, hon. Because the business needs as much help as the building does.”

I could feel tension knotting my shoulders. “*Who*, Mom? Who’s the... the new owner?”

“Half-owner.”

“Mom!”

She paused, then sighed. “Caleb.”

I had wanted her to say Tiny Steve. Or maybe a regular tourist. Hell, I would have almost preferred she say my sperm donor’s name.

But no.

No.

“Caleb,” I repeated. “Caleb bought half the bar. Just... bought it.”

“Hear me out—”

“Because he’s just got that kind of money. To just... buy my life.” A giggle burst from my lips. “I guess I should be thankful.” Another giggle, though that one was a lot shakier. “Is this weird? Don’t you think this is weird, Mom?”

“You can get past your issues with his money. He’s a smart man, Maggie. He has a business degree and a soft spot for The Sea Glass.”

“He’s not a local. We’ve been working the ‘local charm’ angle this whole time and he’s not even from here. What if he

changes everything?”

“He won’t. He only owns half the business.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, ‘only’ half. And now he’s my boss.”

“He’s not your boss.”

“He’s half my boss, then.”

“Maggie.” Mom’s voice was commanding, and I stopped my freak out. “He’s not your boss. He’s your business partner.”

“No, he’s *your* business partner.”

She shook her head. “You’re taking over.”

I stared at her, my mouth half-open. “No. No way.”

“Should I sell him the whole business, then?”

“No!” The words screeched out of my throat. “What do you mean, I’m—Mom, I can’t! I’m... I don’t know how to run a business! I’m too young. And you... you—”

“You’ve been working at the bar since you were able to hold a tray. If you don’t know how to run the bar by now, there’s no hope for you. Anyways, Caleb will help with that side of it.”

“And what exactly are you going to do?”

“I’m going on a road trip.”

I’m not sure what the expression on my face looked like, but Mom laughed.

“I’ve worked at this bar day in and day out since you were born. I was younger than you are now when I started running it, and everything turned out fine. So I’m taking a break. Next week, Steven and I are going on a road trip. It’s still warm enough to take his motorcycle down south. I might even buy one of my own.”

“Down south? How long are you going for?”

“Well, until we can come back up after the snow melts.”

My entire world had just changed around me, and my brain still hadn’t quite caught up. Mom patiently stood up, wandering to my kitchen and busying herself making coffee. When she came back a few minutes later with two steaming mugs, I took it gratefully.

“Why didn’t you talk to me before doing any of this?”

My mom, the eccentric astrologist, the quick-witted bartender, the woman who loved to shake things up and throw people off, grinned at me.

“Mercury is in retrograde and I’m an agent of its chaos.”

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NINETEEN

CALEB

I HADN'T INTENDED TO keep what I was doing from Maggie.

Truly.

She was so completely consumed with raising money for The Sea Glass that I barely had a chance to talk to her. And I didn't want to get her hopes up if things didn't work out.

I'd approached Josie at the fundraising dinner Maggie had planned. After all, *she* was the business owner. And if she wasn't interested in my proposal, that would be that. All I'd intended was to ask her what her opinion on the matter was.

"I'm of the opinion that you're crazy," she said when I explained my idea, but asked if she could sit with it for a bit, which was more than reasonable.

What was slightly less reasonable was her showing up at my cabin unannounced.

That same night, after the fundraising dinner.

At two a.m.

“Josie?” I said groggily when I answered the pounding at the door. “What’re you—”

“So this is the infamous cabin,” she said.

I blinked the sleep out of my eyes. “Mags told you about that?”

She nodded. “Let me see this place, will you?”

“Uh... okay.”

I let her in and gave her the same tour I’d given Maggie, albeit in a way that felt far more surreal given that I was in a baggy pair of sweats and a hastily pulled on hoodie while Josie wore the same floor-length skirt and leather vest she’d been wearing at the dinner. She was interested in the renovations, asking about paint colours and flooring types, about how I knew what to do and what experience I had. Finally, I took her out on the deck so I could explain my vision for the backyard.

I don’t know that she heard a word of it. Instead, she walked to the railing, staring out at the stars reflecting on the smooth glass of the lake.

“God, Caleb,” she said. “This view is priceless.”

I nodded. “We spent almost all our time out here when I was a kid. Dinner at that table there every night, unless it was raining.” I sighed, staring at the empty chairs surrounding it. “The lake is the whole purpose of the house. Hopefully, whoever buys it will see things the same way.”

She was silent for a moment, then turned and leaned against the railing. “Hon, I gotta ask one thing before we get down to

it. Don't take it the wrong way."

My shoulders tensed and I hoped she wasn't about to ask about what happened between me and Maggie. "What's that?"

"Why do you want to own half the business?" She folded her arms across her chest. "You've got money. You've got this house. You don't *need* to be the part owner of a dive bar in a tourist town. Frankly, if I agree to this, you're not going to make back what you put into it for a very, very long time. So why not just walk away?"

I almost told her about Todd, the fucking bastard, but held it back. If I knew anything about Josie and Maggie, it was that Maggie's way of handling asshole customers was a sore spot between them. And even though Maggie would probably be pissed at me, I didn't want to do something that would cause tension between her and her mom.

So I decided, then and there, that it was something I was going to take to the grave with me.

"I don't want The Sea Glass to close," I said.

"Why not just donate to Maggie's cause then? Not to sound entitled, but—"

I laughed softly. "I thought about it. But..."

Her eyes sparkled as she smiled. "It's a lot of money for nothing."

I shrugged. "And I didn't have that much just lying around. I called my mom to ask if she'd give me a loan and—"

“—she would only agree to it if you were buying the bar, not just throwing money at it and hoping for the best,” she finished.

“Something like that.”

“I remember your mom being a very smart lady. That was a good decision. So why not just buy me out entirely, instead of only owning half?”

“I don’t want to own the whole thing. It’s your bar. I want to save it, not change it.”

“And you think you can do that?”

“I can make it work,” I said. “Between my mom’s loan, what I could contribute, the money Maggie’s raised, and the work I’ll be able to do myself, you’ll be in good shape. I’ll need to hire people for the major structural repairs, but I called up a company someone recommended to me and they’ve got availability right away. I can do a lot of the other work myself. Then I’ll just be behind the scenes. It’s your bar and you make all the calls.”

“Well then, I’m making the call that you’ll need to be more involved.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“The bar needs help from someone who knows what he’s doing.” She straightened up and started towards the door to go back inside. “I don’t want a silent partner who foots the bills. You’re a business guy, so you need to help run the business.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what I need.” She opened the door to go back inside, then stopped. “Or, more accurately, it’s what Maggie will need.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, then frowned. “Wait, does this mean you’re saying yes?”

She smiled at me over her shoulder. “I hope you’re ready, hon. We sign the paperwork tomorrow.”

In hindsight, it made sense. We had to hurry in order to get the repairs done in time for the bar to be re-inspected. The next day, Josie and I met with lawyers and started getting the red tape taken care of. Then, almost immediately, I put everything else in my life to the side to start planning the repairs.

Including... you know. Telling Maggie. Which Josie wanted to do anyway, so it wasn’t like...

Yeah, okay. I should’ve talked to her. I shouldn’t have chickened out and avoided her until Josie and Steven left on their road trip like, three days later, with the only notice to me being that they stopped by the cabin on their way out of town to say goodbye. I’d hoped that when I talked to Maggie again, I’d at least have the buffer of Josie to absorb some of the frustration I knew would be directed at me.

But I guess I should’ve expected Josie to cut and run unexpectedly. I mean, she also threw Maggie into the fire with no notice, either.

After Josie and Steven’s visit, I drove to The Sea Glass and parked my truck. Steeling myself, I got out and walked

through the front door. It was another slow afternoon, and Maggie was standing near the cutlery station, wiping down the laminated menus.

“Hey Mags,” I said.

She glanced up, her face stony. “Hey, Mr. Moneybags.”

I tried not to wince. “We should talk.”

“This is crazy. You realize that, right?” She put the menus down with a loud clap. “You realize this is entirely fucking insane?”

“It’s been a whirlwind, yeah.”

Maggie’s eyes were wide. “Last week I was a server trying to raise an insane amount of money. This week, my mom’s gone, you bought part of my bar, and—oh yeah—it’s *my* bar now, because my mom just hefted it on me before she took off for God knows how long. Caleb, this is fucking ridiculous.”

“I know. But it’s where we’re at, so let’s get to work.”

Maggie led me to the office, asking Big Tim to keep an eye out for customers. She hesitated, then sat down behind the desk, looking uncomfortable.

“Here’s the renovation plans and schedule,” I said, passing her a stack of papers. “I can’t give you an exact amount of time, but I think we can swing it so that we only have to be closed for a little over a week. Two at the most, but that’s if something goes horribly wrong while they fix the foundation.”

“What’s this stuff?” She was flipping through the papers and had stopped on a sketch.

“That’s my plan for the renovations. Since we have to close anyway, we should update the look in here.”

“No.”

“Mags, your mom said the place has never been updated.”

“She’s not the owner anymore. I am.” She flipped through the rest of the package. “I say no. We don’t need all this. The bar is perfectly fine the way it is.”

I pressed my lips together. “We’ve already approved all this, and a lot of what’s currently there has to get torn out so they can fix the structure.”

She continued to fight me on every possible thing she could. She hated every suggestion I made, from putting a new hood fan in the kitchen to refinishing the bar stools and high tops. By the time I got to the end of the package, I was as grouchy as Maggie was.

“Look, you can hate all these ideas, but they’re happening,” I said. “Your mom and I discussed this and—”

“She’s not here!” Maggie snapped. “She left this place in my hands and what I say goes.”

“Half of what you say goes,” I shot back. “I don’t want to swing my dick around and tell you we’re doing it my way or no way, but we are. We *have* to pull a lot of this shit out anyway, so we’re updating it. That’s final.”

“Oh, of course, so sorry, Mr. Moneybags, sir. Can you please forgive me? I only have worked here my entire fucking life.”

“I’m not saying I don’t want you to have a say! Maggie, this shit would have to be done even if I wasn’t here. If you’d raised all the money, you’d still have to do all this stuff.”

She seethed quietly for a moment before pushing the stack of papers at me. “Fine. You’ve got the money, you’ve got the business degree, you call the shots.”

“I’m not—”

“Just answer me one thing,” she interrupted. “You came here to renovate your fucking mansion and then sell it. Now you’re investing in my bar. So what’s your game here, Caleb? What’s your priority?”

“The bar,” I answered without hesitation, staring directly at her. “I’m committed to this, Maggie. I wish you’d stop looking at me like I’m the enemy.”

A flash of what I thought might be guilt crossed Maggie’s face, and she looked away.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s go with your plan. Just do it.”

I swallowed hard. “There’s one more thing.”

“What?” She glared at me, and I braced myself for the reaction I assumed was coming.

“You can’t live in your apartment while they’re doing repairs.”

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TWENTY

MAGGIE

I WOULDN'T ADMIT IT to anyone, but staying at my mom's place during the renovations was pretty nice.

It wasn't until I stayed there that I realized how loud my apartment could be. Even when I wasn't working, I could hear noise from the bar downstairs or people chatting in the streets. The building was old, the pipes made noise when the water ran, and sometimes the floor shook when the heat was running. Wind from the lake was constantly shaking the windows.

Mom's house was old, too, but it was quiet. The only sounds I ever heard were the neighbours opening their garage doors or rolling their garbage cans out to the curb. My first night there, I slept better than I had in the years since I'd moved out.

I had packed up a week's worth of clothes, my guitar, and a few other items to bring with me to Mom's place. We had announced that The Sea Glass would be closed for two weeks. Caleb was fairly certain we'd only need one, but he figured it was better to reopen early rather than late. And truth be told,

that week off was the first real vacation I'd had in years. Aside from the occasional weekend trip to visit Alison or other friends nearby, I hadn't left Marble Beach all that much.

I still didn't entirely trust Caleb. The whole situation was ridiculous, and the people who I'd told about it agreed. Though, in fairness, most of them said that my mom was the craziest one in the whole situation, and that Caleb was doing the best he could and was far nicer to me than I probably deserved.

Being away from the bar and my apartment and the whole situation for a week had helped put that into perspective. I was still annoyed that Caleb had gone behind my back and bought half the bar without even telling me, but The Sea Glass wasn't shutting down. And really, that was what mattered.

I hadn't heard from him at all that week, though I wasn't expecting to. He had brought in a crew of people to repair the major issues, and as soon as they cleared him to go in, he'd taken over the renovations. I had given him my keys to the bar and my apartment, told him to call me as soon as I could move back in, and that was that.

My time was spent reading, sleeping, watching trashy TV, and playing my guitar. For the first time in what felt like forever, I had the energy to learn new music. I played for hours, stopping only so my fingers wouldn't bleed, and then going back to it.

On the fifth evening of my blissful, solitude-filled vacation, I broke my G-string.

And yes, every guitarist ever has heard all the jokes, innuendos, and anecdotes about the G-string. It didn't change the fact that the sudden snap shocked me. I stared at my guitar in disbelief. It had been a long time since I'd broken a string while playing, and the shock gave way to frustration as I realized I hadn't brought any spares with me.

Putting the guitar in my case, I contemplated my options. I hadn't heard from Caleb yet, though at his earliest estimate it would be another two days before I could get back in my apartment. I could go ask him if he'd let me in so I could grab the spare string. Or I could wait until the morning and drive to the city to get a new string.

That would take the better part of half a day, at least, which was not appealing. The bar was just down the street, and I was sure Caleb wouldn't mind letting me in the apartment for a couple of seconds to grab a spare string. Mind made up, I shrugged on my flannel jacket over the old T-shirt dress I'd been lounging around in, then grabbed my keys and went out to my car.

The air was cold and I shivered, but didn't bother going back inside to put on leggings or jeans or anything. I mean, I was going to be five minutes.

Except when I pulled up to the bar, the parking lot was empty. I frowned as I put my car in park. It was early evening, and while theoretically, I knew that meant Caleb could have gone home for the day, his renovation plan had him working

long hours so we didn't have to be closed longer than necessary.

Could he be there without his truck? I jumped out of my car and went to the front door. It was locked tight, and I peered through the window. The lights were off, and I couldn't see anything inside. Maybe it was done, I mused, and that made me frown even more. If the renovations were done, why couldn't I go back to my apartment?

As I walked back to my car, I tried calling Caleb. The phone rang a few times, then went to voicemail. I hung up. Frustrated, I got back in the car and tapped my fingers on the steering wheel.

There were plenty of perfectly good reasons for Caleb to not be at the bar. However, it didn't explain why he didn't answer his phone. And I really... I *really* wanted to get my G-string. Sure, he could have been in the city or something, but he also might just be at home taking a break or eating dinner or... I mean, it wasn't a big deal for me to just check, right? He lived five minutes away. Licking my lips, I put my car in drive, turned around, and went to Caleb's lake house.

I breathed a sigh of relief as my car bumped up the gravel driveway and I saw his truck parked out front. Parking next to it, I jumped out of the car and went up to the door, knocking three times loudly.

Then, I waited.

He didn't answer right away. Shivering, I shifted from side to side, rubbing my legs together as I regretted again not

putting a pair of leggings on. Just as I was considering ringing the bell, the door opened.

Part of me had wanted to be annoyed with him for not being at the bar. I mean, I technically couldn't go home because of the renovations, so it was frustrating that he wasn't there. But I'd suppressed that and as he opened the door, I internally congratulated myself for not getting angry.

Maybe it was a stupid thing to be proud of, but considering how frustrated I'd been with Caleb over the whole thing, I figured it was a small personal victory.

Ragged was the only word I could think of to describe how he looked. There were flecks of paint on his cheeks and forehead. His hair was tangled and sticking up on one side, and dark, puffy bags hung under his eyes. He was shirtless, wearing baggy grey sweatpants that hung on his hips, and he stared at me blearily before blinking as if to clear a haze out of his eyes.

“Did I wake you up?” I asked.

His voice was hoarse. “Mags, please don't lecture me. I came back for a few hours' sleep while the paint dries. I swear to God I've been working my ass off all week.”

“I wasn't trying to be a bitch,” I said as evenly as I could. “I was going to apologize for waking you.”

He considered me for a moment, then looked down and shook his head. “Sorry. Yes, I was sleeping. But I was

supposed to get up half an hour ago and go back to do a second coat. I missed the alarm.”

“You look like hell.”

He frowned, his lips moving as he tried to respond.

I grimaced. “Sorry. I meant it like, are you okay?”

Again he considered me, as if processing what I was saying. Finally, a grin broke out on his face and he laughed.

“Shit. If I look half as tired as I feel, I’m surprised you didn’t run away screaming.”

I tried to hold in a laugh, looking down and smiling as Caleb shook his head. “So you’re mostly okay, then.”

“Mostly okay,” he agreed. “Wait, what... why are you here?”

“I was hoping you’d let me into my apartment. I broke a guitar string and wanted to grab a spare.” I looked at his puffy eyes again. “But honestly, don’t worry about it. You should go get some sleep.”

He was shaking his head as I finished talking and motioned for me to come inside. “I have to get the last coat of paint done. So yeah, I can let you upstairs to get your guitar thing. Just wait for a sec while I get changed.”

Sighing, I stepped inside as Caleb jogged up the stairs.

“It works out great, actually,” he called down. “They’re doing the final inspection tomorrow afternoon. I was—”

“Wait, what?” I said, eyes wide. “They’re doing it already?”

“Uh-huh. I called in some favours to get it bumped up,” he said from somewhere above me. “I was going to call you in the morning, get you to come check it out. There’s still some aesthetic stuff to finish, but it’s almost done. Just ignore that the wall needs one more coat. Oh, and the high tops aren’t done. I was going to varnish them in the morning. Oh, and...”

He kept talking as I looked around. He’d started some of the renovations on his cabin, but not much, from the looks of it, at least not on that level. Maybe he was working more upstairs.

I still didn’t quite understand what was so terrible about this place. It was warm and cozy, maybe not the newest or most modern looking place, but it had the feel of lived-in memories. Through the windows, I could see the sun setting over the lake, and the warm glow filled the house with hazy, dreamy light.

When Caleb bounded back down the stairs, he looked slightly more refreshed. He’d splashed water on his face, and a few errant drops of water clung to the scruff on his cheeks.

“Come on,” he said with a grin. “I think you’ll like the new bar.”

TWENTY-ONE

MAGGIE

LESS THAN TEN MINUTES later, I was waiting behind Caleb as he unlocked the front door. My stomach was doing flips and I wasn't sure if it was from excitement or dread. He pushed the door open and stepped in, flicking on the lights just as I crossed the threshold.

The light spilled across the bar and I stopped in my tracks.

It wasn't what I expected. I didn't know what I expected. But it was exactly what I wanted.

Caleb had redone almost everything, but it was still The Sea Glass. The light fixtures were new but still cast the same warm glow. The flooring was new, dark hardwood instead of the old vinyl tile that used to be there. It gleamed under the soft lights. Along the walls and pillars, Caleb had added dark wood panels and painted the rest of the wall a lighter shade of the rich brown that used to coat them.

The bar front was redone, and new cabinets lined the wall behind it. Tiles lined the floor there, and a band of them ran around the front of the bar where the stools would eventually sit. The liquor shelves were empty, but he had added a feature

wall of frosted stained glass that seemed to glow on its own. Sea glass, I realized.

As I stared around the room, it slowly dawned on me that I'd seen these materials already.

“Isn't this the stuff you bought for your cabin?” I asked.

Caleb shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah. I hope you don't mind. With the time constraints, I needed to use stuff that was available and that I could get more of right away. But I bought most of it direct from the supplier, not from... not from the place I got it from before.”

I didn't respond, just took a step further into the room. In the corner where I used to play my guitar, there was a short platform.

“What's that?”

“A stage.” Again, he looked uncomfortable. “The first night I came here, you were playing, but I couldn't see you. This way... well, if you still want to play, I mean... everyone can see you.”

I didn't respond. He cleared his throat.

“It's easy to take out if you don't want it. Or just leave it and not use it as a stage. I figured we could use it as seating for a bigger table, like if we get a group of ten or twelve or something.”

“You did all this in less than a week?”

“I had help,” he replied. “And it wasn’t too bad. Anything I could do before we shut down, I did. We had all the materials and stuff ready so we could get in and put it all together. Then they let me work up here while they were finishing up the electrical and stuff.”

“I can’t believe you did all this.”

Caleb cleared his throat again. “So, does it look okay?”

I finally turned and looked at him. He looked uncertain, almost terrified, as though I was about to lose it. I thought maybe he was expecting me to scream or gush or throw things, and even though I was just trying to process how I felt, I couldn’t blame him one bit for thinking that.

I hadn’t been especially kind to him about this whole thing, after all.

“Caleb, it’s fantastic.”

He blew air past his lips, finally smiling. “You like it?”

Emotional catch-up was hard, and as the numbness of my shock faded away, I felt my heart clenching. With a start, I realized I was about to cry, and I turned away from him hurriedly.

“Is it just out here, or is the kitchen new too?”

He’d redone a few things in the kitchen. New hood fan, updated electrical, and the countertops he’d intended for his own cabin. The office was the same, aside from a fresh coat of paint and the absence of the old security TV.

“I put a new system in. It’s all computerized. The cameras aren’t hooked up yet, but that can wait until the last minute,” he explained as we wandered back into the front of the bar. “I added a few more, too. There’s one in the office now, since that’s where the cash is kept.”

“That’s smart,” I replied.

It was warm inside, and I’d taken my jacket off and laid it on one of the barstools while he showed me all the renovations and repairs. I picked it up as Caleb grinned.

“Shit, Mags. I’m so glad you like it. I was really worried.”

He shouldn’t have had to be worried, and a sense of guilt crept through me. Caleb was putting up with far more than he needed to, considering everything he was doing for me, my mom, and the town in general.

“I owe you an apology,” I said. “I’ve been an asshole this entire time.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I need to worry about it.” I turned to him, heart racing. “It’s not your fault my mom decided to throw this at me. You bought into the bar to help us, and even though you’ve never given me a reason not to trust you, I haven’t trusted you. I’m sorry, Caleb. I’ll try to do better.”

He touched my arm, calloused hands warming my skin. “I know you’re doing your best. It’s okay.”

When we looked back on the next moment, I always insisted that Caleb had kissed me first, and he insisted I had

kissed him. Truth be told, it was more likely a mutual action. However it happened, moments after I apologized, Caleb's lips were on my mouth and his hands were around my waist.

And I was lost to him.

Nothing about it was soft, or innocent, or romantic. Our kisses were electric, urgent, firm and deep and needy. My body responded to him instantly, my pussy dampening and my nipples hardening as our bodies pressed together. His lips tasted sweet and fresh and familiar all at once and I reached up, tangling my fingers in his thick hair as if he'd float away unless I held him to me.

Our lips spoke another language, one that didn't involve words. One that couldn't involve words. Urgency and brazen desire bounced between us as Caleb touched me, his hands moving up and down my body, grabbing me through the thin fabric of the T-shirt dress. The scent of dust and sweat and musk filled my senses, and I struggled to hold back a moan.

This was Caleb. The man groping me through my dress, the man with eyes full of pride in his exhaustion. I'd created some other version of him in my head, some spoiled rich kid who thought only of himself, and I'd been so *wrong*.

I was so wrong.

Caleb had never been a spoiled rich kid. He'd never been too good to hang out with us locals or to get covered in dirt as we rode bikes around town. He wasn't too good to work with his hands or fix the bar himself.

The version of Caleb with the rough hands and the demanding tongue probing my mouth was the reality, and I liked it.

Untangling my hands from his hair, I brushed them down his body, feeling his muscles through his shirt. Caleb let go of me only to yank the hem of my dress up and slide his hands underneath it, caressing my stomach as the skirt bunched around my waist.

My body was on fire as he continued to touch me, his hands moving up to cup my breasts through my bra. My nipples were hard, and he pinched them through the fabric of my bra as he bit down on my bottom lip.

I gasped and he released my lip from his teeth, sucking it as he continued to dig his fingers into my breasts.

“Tell me to stop,” he growled. His voice was masked with yearning, asking permission as much as he was trying to communicate that he’d stop if I wanted him to.

I wanted him—*needed* him—inside me. My pussy was dripping, a hollow ache in my stomach begging to be filled.

“Don’t you dare,” I breathed.

Caleb groaned at my words, and he pushed me towards a bar stool. It tilted slightly as my ass bumped against it, and Caleb nudged me until I was sitting on the edge of the stool. The dress was pooled around my hips and he tore it out of the way so he could yank my panties down. The edge of the bar dug into my spine as I leaned back against it so he had full

access to my pussy. He shoved his hand between my legs and I cried out as he plunged two fingers inside me.

“You’re fucking soaked,” he grunted.

“I need you.”

He withdrew his fingers and unbuttoned his jeans quickly, dropping them to the floor followed quickly by his boxers. His cock was jutting out, fully erect, and weeping pre-cum already.

I licked my lips as I saw it, eager to have him inside me, and reached for him.

“Mags, wait.” He stopped, his hands on my bare thighs. “I don’t have... do you have a condom on you?”

Fuck.

I didn’t think I even had any left upstairs in the apartment.

I stared at him for a moment, heart racing.

I wanted him. I needed his cock inside me. I felt like I’d collapse in a pool of unrequited angst if I didn’t have it.

“Don’t come inside me,” I said.

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TWENTY-TWO

MAGGIE

CALEB LOOKED DOWN AT my glistening pussy. He hesitated again. “Are you sure?”

“Are you?” I asked.

“Fuck. Yes. I’m not... I’ve never had any STIs or anything. I haven’t done it without one before. Ever.”

“Me neither. But I’m on the pill, and just... I trust you. Don’t come inside me.”

“Tell me to stop,” he said again.

I shook my head. “Fuck me, Caleb. I need you. Please.”

His hands pushed my thighs apart and suddenly he was buried inside me, skin against mine, no barrier between the throbbing of his smooth cock and the sensitive walls of my pussy. I looked down and gaped at the sight of my pussy lips stretched around his bare cock. The heat, the sensation... maybe it was just the knowledge that there wasn’t anything at all between us, but everything felt different.

That was the only moment that wasn’t about raw, lustful pleasure. Caleb’s breath came in short gasps as we both stared

at his cock inside me. He looked up, eyes full of desire and concern.

“Are you okay?” he breathed.

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now fuck me already, would you?”

Just like that, we were back to being creatures of instinct. Caleb pounded inside me as I leaned back, my arms bracing me against the bar as he fucked me hard and fast and so fucking *deep*. My breasts were thrust forward, and he grabbed at them, squeezing hard through the fabric as he pumped in and out of my dripping pussy.

The feeling of his cock inside me was pure pleasure, and I knew I was going to come. The hollow ache in my stomach became a dam, and Caleb’s cock was there to break it. As he dug his fingers into my tits, I grew closer and closer, high-pitched cries coming from my throat as he embedded his cock inside me.

“Are you gonna come for me?” he asked stupidly, like it wasn’t completely obvious I was clinging to his body and already starting to tremble.

But I was a bit too distracted to come up with some kind of snarky response.

“Yes,” I gasped. “I’m so close.”

He let go of my breasts and grabbed the bar behind me, leaning in as he shoved his cock inside me.

“You’re going to ruin me,” he growled, then pressed his lips to mine in a bruising kiss. “Letting me fuck this amazing little pussy raw so I can feel how goddamn hot and wet you are for me? ‘Cause it’s for me, Mags. Don’t ever fucking forget that *I’m* the one who got you like this for the first time. I got your very first time, and I got your first time bare, and that means that no matter what, this wet little pussy was always meant for me. Understand?”

“Yes,” I whimpered.

“*Mine.*”

“It’s yours,” I said, then dug my nails deeper into his shoulder and used my legs to pull him in closer. “Just like your cock has always been *mine.*”

He didn’t fight back as I clamped my legs around him. Instead, he groaned, burying his head in my neck, then thrust in me deeper, harder, stuffing himself so fucking far in my pussy that I was sure I was completely full.

“It’s always been yours, Mags,” he murmured against my skin, and that was it.

I came hard, pussy clenching as I cried out. He moved his lips away from my neck and captured my mouth again, absorbing my shout of pleasure as I moaned into his mouth. My body shook as my orgasm took over, nerves singing and firing all at once, my mind short-circuiting from the pleasure

surging through it. Caleb didn't stop fucking me, keeping up his pace as I came around his bare cock, though I could hear him struggling to hold back.

Once my muscles relaxed and the last of my orgasm faded, he slowed.

"Mags, I'm so fucking close," he panted. "How... where?"

I pushed him away from me, disappointed as he slid from my folds. Hopping off the barstool, I fell to my knees on the tiled floor in front of him. His cock was glazed with wetness from inside me, shining in the soft glow of the bar lights. I took him in my mouth immediately, tasting the sweet tang of myself on his throbbing cock.

His knees almost buckled as I swallowed him, a loud groan echoing through the bar as I felt him fill my mouth. He steadied himself by grabbing my head, his fingers wrapping through my hair, and seconds later, I'd lost all control.

"Fuck," he grunted. "You're so... *fuck*, Mags, I can't—"

He thrust forward and his cock hit the back of my throat. I held back a gag, breathing through the sensation of choking as he fucked my mouth recklessly. I braced my hands on his hips, focusing only on trying to breathe as he used me, his cock so deep that my nose kept hitting his pelvis. Saliva dripped from my lips as he used me, and sloppy, wet sounds came from my mouth as his balls slammed against my chin.

"Coming," he grunted moments later.

My nose was buried in his pubic hair and he pulled my hair as I felt his cock pulse. Hot spurts dripped down my throat and I tried to relax, tried to keep my throat open for him as he held onto my head like he'd fall off the edge of the world if he let go.

It was probably the least sexy I've ever looked after a blowjob. I could feel wetness around my eyes and my nose was dripping. My chin was coated with saliva and as Caleb finally let go of my hair and took his softening cock from out of my throat, I coughed pathetically. He was looking down at me, the soft glow of the bar lights creating a halo effect around his head.

“Shit, Mags. Are you okay?” He grabbed my hand, helping me to my feet. “Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head, wiping my face with my hand. He tugged the hem of his shirt up, using it to help wipe some of the wetness away.

“Shit, I'm sorry,” he murmured as he helped clean me up. “I wasn't even thinking. You just looked so hot. It was so hot. I'm so sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.” My voice was hoarse, and I giggled before clearing my throat. “I'm not hurt. That was amazing.”

TWENTY-THREE

CALEB

IF I HADN'T JUST blown my load down Maggie's throat, and if I hadn't felt so guilty for the way I used her mouth, I probably would have gotten hard all over again.

Maggie was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. Something about seeing her gorgeous face wrecked like that was... I shouldn't have liked it as much as I did. She wasn't crying, but wetness glistened under her eyes. Her hair was tangled from the way I had yanked it, and her chin was covered with spit that had spilled from her mouth as I fucked it.

I almost lost it when I was wiping her face and she smiled, promising me she was okay. I wanted to push her over the bar and fuck her every which way I could.

Instead, I pushed those feelings down and finished wiping the various fluids off her face before smoothing down her hair.

"We shouldn't do that again, though. Not using a condom, I mean," she said.

My heart skipped a beat as she clarified she meant the condom, not the sex itself. I swallowed back something that

felt like hope and nodded. “You’re right. That was... well.”

“Stupid,” she said, then looked at me with a secret smile in her eyes. “And amazing. But it was dumb.”

I grinned. “Yeah. Yeah, it was... all of that.”

She helped me wipe down the bar and the stool we’d fucked on, then pitched in to help put the last coat of paint on the wall. With the two of us working on it, it didn’t take long to complete.

“So if I’m part owner, does that mean I can help myself to some of the beer that’s in the fridge back there?” I asked as we finished painting.

Maggie laughed. “Just don’t drink us into bankruptcy. Go grab one. I’ll clean up the trays.”

I grabbed a bottle for each of us and popped them open. Maggie was bent over when I returned, closing the lid on the gallon of paint. The hem of her t-shirt dress was tantalizingly close to the curve of her ass, showing off the creamy expanse of the back of her thighs. And God, that view was... I tried not to stare, but it was a losing battle. How she could look that good in a dress that looked like she’d bought it around the last time I’d been in Marble Beach was beyond me, but she did.

She looked fucking phenomenal.

“Have a beer with me? We should be the first to have a drink at the bar,” I said.

She joined me, sliding back onto the barstool I’d fucked her on. “We’re going to have to move all the stools around so I

can't tell which is which, otherwise I'll never be able to keep a straight face when someone sits here."

We drank quietly for a moment, the air thick with the smell of paint.

"I want to help, Maggie," I said suddenly. "I want The Sea Glass to do well."

"I know." She sighed, picking at the corner of the label on her bottle. "I just don't want it to lose what makes it what it is, you know? It's a part of Marble Beach. And a part of my family."

"I know. And that's why I refused to buy it outright. I can't make this place successful on my own. It needs you."

She nodded, not looking at me.

"But I have some thoughts, too. I don't mean to brag, but I did go to business school. I'm not just pulling ideas out of my ass. I'm doing this because I *want* The Sea Glass to succeed."

"Tell me your ideas," she said.

It was the best impromptu business meeting we could have had. Both of us were calm and, dare I even say it, excited as we worked together. Somehow, a few hours went by, and we each had a second bottle of beer in front of us as we looked at the papers we'd spread across the bar while planning out the next year of our business.

Our business.

We both agreed that we wanted to keep ourselves focused on the locals, but not unattractive to tourists. She immediately squashed my idea of a loyalty card for Marble Beach residents, but countered with the idea to send out coupons to local addresses to bring people from the community in.

“And we should figure out something for larger groups,” she said.

“Of locals?”

“Of anyone.” She flipped through a few pages she’d dug out of the office. “We’re one of the only places open late in town and there are a lot of, you know, bachelor parties and stuff that rent out cabins or campsites nearby.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Or like, family reunions and stuff. We get people coming in on occasion, but we’ve never had the right setup for big groups. But with the stage and maybe some planning...”

I glanced up at the high ceiling of the dining room, then at the wall that closed off Maggie’s apartment from the restaurant.

“One day, I’d love to renovate the upstairs,” I said.

“The apartment?”

“Yeah, but turn it into part of the bar.” I motioned upwards. “We could just take out the wall that has your dining table on it and make a railing or something there, move the cutlery stand and add a doorway in the back wall that leads to the

staircase, and bam. Upstairs seating area. Perfect for large groups.”

“One problem,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“I’d have nowhere to live.”

I chuckled. “It’s a pipe dream. You know it would look cool.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” She looked back down at the papers in front of us. “We’re really doing this, huh?”

“Seems like it.”

She looked up at me, a pained expression on her face and I knew.

I just fucking *knew* what she was about to say, and that hopeful little feeling I’d had earlier crumpled in my chest.

“We can’t keep fucking,” she said.

I nodded.

“I... it’s too much of a risk.”

“You’re not wrong,” I said. “As much as I hate to say it.”

“Of course you would hate admitting I’m right.”

I looked up at her. There was a sad but cheeky smile on her face, and I laughed quietly. “Sure, Mags. Let’s go with that.”

She bit her lip. “I just—”

“No, you’re... you’re right.” I looked up at her. My heart was more than a little broken, but I tried not to show it. “We’re

business partners. We need to be professional. Hooking up when we have more to think about than just us is... it's a bad idea."

She nodded. "I'm... I'm glad we agree."

"Me too." I smiled at her. "And I'm glad we're working together, Mags. I really am."

She smiled back. "You know, I'm kind of excited about it now."

"Good."

An awkward silence fell between us and after a moment, she slid off the barstool, grabbing her jacket. "I should get home. It's late."

"Yeah, me too. Final inspection tomorrow." I didn't move off my bar stool. "I'm just going to clean up a few things tonight so I don't have to in the morning."

Maggie paused beside me, put her hand on my shoulder, and leaned in to kiss me on the cheek.

"Thank you for everything, Caleb."

TWENTY-FOUR

MAGGIE

I'D NEVER BEEN AS terrified as I was the night we re-opened.

It was firmly fall at that point. Tourist season was long over. And we opened a few days ahead of when we said we were going to. So when I woke up that morning, I wasn't worried. I was certain it was going to be an easy, chill sort of day, the perfect kind of day for me and Caleb to get our toes wet and discover how well we were *actually* going to work together.

Because that was what was happening. I tried to argue with him when he said he was going to bartend, but he shook his head.

"Mags, your mom and Tiny Steve are gone. We haven't hired anyone to replace either of them."

"I could bartend," I said stiffly.

"Yeah, you could, but then who's going to wait tables?"

"Well..."

"I mean, I can, but—"

I scoffed. “You’ve never waited a table in your life. Do you know how much multitasking it takes to keep track of everything?”

He looked at me pointedly. “So maybe keeping me behind the bar where I’m focused on *one* task in *one* section is the better business decision.”

I glared at him, but he wasn’t wrong.

“So we need to hire a new bartender is what you’re saying,” I said.

“Well, yeah, but I work here too, Mags.”

“You have enough other stuff to deal with. Like renovating your lake house.”

It was his turn to glare at me. “I can do both. Besides, until we get some money flowing into this place, there’s only so much I can do at my cabin.”

“Lake house.”

He sighed. “Lake house.”

I told myself it wouldn’t be that bad, that it was actually the ideal situation for Caleb to start out in since we wouldn’t be that busy. We were only planning on opening for dinner and nobody was even expecting us to be open for another couple of days, right? So it would be perfect for him to learn the ropes and the system and all that.

Then Annie happened.

I heard her squeal the moment she walked in. Considering I was still upstairs in my apartment, that was saying something. Startled, I'd shoved my shoes on and hurried down the stairs, worrying that she'd tripped or hurt herself or something.

But when I burst into the kitchen, she had her arms around Caleb, whose face was turning steadily redder. Whether it was because he was embarrassed about her constant stream of gratitude and praise or because she was hugging him so hard that he couldn't breathe, I couldn't tell. The moment she saw me, she wrenched one of her arms off him and extended it to me.

"Get over here, Mags," she said in a teary voice. "Come hug me."

"But—"

"Maggie Myers, if you don't hug me this instant, I'm going to quit."

It was a baseless threat, but I joined her and Caleb for a group hug anyway and immediately confirmed that his face was red from the vice-like hug she had us in.

"It's amazing, you two," she said, her voice muffled. "It looks so good in here. And my *counters*. The fryer... oh, and that *grill*. God, I feel like a real-life TV chef."

"The grill isn't new, just clean," Caleb choked, but Annie didn't hear him.

It was a while longer before she let us go, but she did, shooing us away and insisting on making us lunch before she

started on her prep for the day.

“What are you doing here so early?” I asked him after Annie let us go.

He shrugged, rubbing his neck. “I figured it’d be good to see what she does in case she ever needs help or a day off or something. I mean, I should probably know... you know. How our business works.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “I should get a head start on some stuff, too.”

“Mags, you can go home. You’re working tonight. I just—”

“I said I wanted to do some work.” I glared at him before turning towards the office. “Besides, it won’t be that busy tonight.”

And boy, the only thing I ate faster than those words was the cinnamon sugar bannock Annie plied me with as I sat in the office going through resumes for the bartender we’d need to hire.

“Hey boss,” Big Tim said, poking his head in the office at the start of his shift a few hours later.

I wrinkled my nose. “No.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t... don’t call me that. Call Caleb that if you have to, but not me.”

He chuckled. “Right, Mags. That kid’s not the boss till he’s earned it.”

“I’m twenty-eight,” Caleb said from his spot on the old green couch that was blocked by the open door, where he was reading the resumes I’d put in my “not as stupid as the rest of them” pile.

Big Tim peered around the door, not an ounce of shame on his face. “No offense. But I can’t call you ‘boss’ on principle, you know?”

“None taken,” Caleb said pleasantly. “Just clarifying that I’m not a kid. Technically, Mags is the youngest.”

“Hey!” I said.

Big Tim laughed. “Good point, rich boy.”

Caleb raised his eyebrows. “If the choice of nickname is between that and ‘kid,’ wanna go back to ‘kid’?”

“You got it, rich boy.”

I was worried Caleb would be upset, but he just laughed and shook his head.

“Anyway, Mags,” Big Tim said. “I dunno if we’re ready to go or not, but I don’t mind jumping in early if you wanna get a head start on that lineup.”

I frowned. “What lineup?”

“The one wrapping around the building waiting to get in and order food. ‘S gonna be a busy one tonight.”

I shot out of the office so fast that I nearly knocked Big Tim over, and considering his name was Big Tim and mine could have been Not Quite Average Height Mags, that was saying

something. Sure enough, a glance out the front window showed what seemed like all of Marble Beach standing out in the cold, patiently waiting for the doors to open.

“What the hell?” I gasped as Caleb came up behind me. “How did they even know we were opening today?”

“Great turnout, eh?” Annie said brightly. “I called my cousins and asked ‘em to spread the word.”

I nodded mutely.

“It’s okay,” Caleb said. “We’ve got this. We’ve totally got this.”

“Don’t worry.” Annie put an arm around my and Caleb’s shoulders. “I did some extra prep, just in case. There should be more than enough.”

It was nowhere near enough.

Luckily, no one really seemed to mind when we ran out of burgers and Annie had to race out to the grocery store to get more ground beef. And no one yelled at me when every single table in the place was full and they had to wait for forty-five minutes before getting a seat. And when Caleb mixed up the soda lines and accidentally sent out a round of Long Island iced teas with splashes of root beer instead of coke, he put up with the good-natured razzing from the locals and smiled.

“Well, I just figured you’d want to try our signature drink,” he said smoothly. “That right there is a Marble Beach iced tea.”

He spent most of the rest of the night serving those up. To be honest, they were surprisingly good.

We'd been at it for a few hours and I was balancing a stack of dirty dishes in one hand and a tray of drinks in the other when Fred called out to me.

"We need some music at this party, Mags!" he said.

A few cheers of agreement went around the bar, even as I shook my head.

"Go get your guitar!" someone else suggested. "Play some music for us, Maggie."

"If I stop to play the guitar, who's gonna bring you your drinks?" I said, laughing.

Fred shrugged. "Sounds like you gotta hire someone to help out."

"You offering?"

"With these old knees? You gotta be joking."

I smiled politely as I set a few pints of beer in front of the people at the next table. "Well, if you know anyone looking for a job, tell 'em I've got an extra apron ready in the back."

"Um... I'm looking for a job," said a quiet voice to my left.

The source of it was a girl who didn't look a day over eighteen, even though she was closer to nineteen, which I only knew because I'd IDed her when she ordered a Marble Beach iced tea. She had long, light blonde hair that was pin-straight, white skin that was tanned and freckled, and a shy, sweet air

about her. She was sitting with her parents, people I vaguely knew who owned a farm a few minutes outside of Marble Beach.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Hannah,” she said.

“You ever waited tables before?”

“No, but I’ve been feeding the chickens and pigs since I was old enough to walk.”

“That’s about the same as feeding this lot,” Fred said.

I regarded her for another moment, then shrugged. “Alright. You want a job, it’s yours. Go to the back and ask Annie to give you an apron.”

It probably wasn’t the smartest way to hire someone, but it worked out. Hannah was as quick to learn as she’d said, and since most people were done ordering food, Big Tim stepped out of the kitchen to help her while I went upstairs and grabbed my guitar. There was a loud cheer when I returned and though I didn’t play for long, it was enough to keep the chaotic spirit thriving until closing time.

“Well, we did it,” Caleb said when we’d finally managed to shut down for the night.

“Barely,” I said, sighing as I turned around to survey the disaster that was the dining room.

It took us a while to clean up, but Big Tim and Annie stuck around to help while Caleb took Hannah to the office to do the

paperwork so we could officially hire her. Once she was done, Annie offered to drive her home and I went into the office so we could count the tills and close the books for the night.

“Kitchen’s all cleaned up,” Big Tim said as he came into the office a while later with two plates of food. “Here. You kids haven’t eaten yet tonight. Bacon burger with fries and gravy, and the spicy chicken sandwich with poutine for you, Mags.”

Caleb let out a groan that was almost sexual as he reached for the bacon burger. “Thanks, man. This is amazing.”

“Anytime. You need anything else from me tonight?”

I shook my head. “You’re free to go. Thank you for dinner.”

“Night, Mags. Congrats on a kick-ass grand re-opening.” Then he clapped Caleb, who’d already taken a huge bite of his burger, on the shoulder with one large hand. “You too, boss. See ya tomorrow.”

TWENTY-FIVE

CALEB

IT WAS THE BEST and worst winter of my life.

Re-opening The Sea Glass went better than either Maggie or I had ever dared to hope. Some of the renewed loyalty from the community was probably because they'd almost lost their only local bar, but the changes made a huge difference, too. There weren't any nights as insane as that first one, but business stayed steady.

Although she was hired because we were busy and she happened to tell Maggie she was looking for a job, Hannah ended up being a great employee. She was young—*very* young—but eager and smart. She only worked a couple of days a week, mainly to earn some extra cash and get off the farm when she could, but that was okay. We trained her as both a bartender and a server so whatever role we needed most on any given day, she could fill.

We fell into a routine at the bar. I wanted to hire another server, since Maggie had taken over more of the management stuff that her mom used to do, but she steadfastly refused. We weren't busy enough for that, she said, and between me and

Hannah, we'd replaced the hours we'd lost when Josie and Tiny Steve left town.

"And Mom'll be back in the spring," she would add. "She'll want to come back to work. Maybe Tiny Steve, too. We can make it work for the winter."

So she worked six days a week, taking Tuesdays off when the bar was closed. Annie would come in early to prep for the day like she always did, and Maggie would go in just before the bar opened at lunch. I'd go in later in the day so I could bartend in the evenings, though I spent most of the afternoons dealing with marketing and the few bits of paperwork Maggie hadn't got to. Big Tim was off Tuesdays and Wednesdays, Hannah would work weekend evenings, and we had our few other staff members who would fill the other gaps.

It left me able to take Mondays and Tuesdays off most weeks so I could keep working on the renovations at the cabin. The plans had changed a bit, of course; earning back the money I'd put into The Sea Glass would take ages and I didn't have tons of extra cash lying around to replace the supplies I'd used in the bar. But I technically had an income from the bar, so I could dip into the savings I'd put aside. So I opted to refine the bones of the house rather than completely redo them. As spring rolled around, I'd finished most of the interior work, and was just waiting for the weather to improve before I started on my dream deck.

More than anything, I felt... welcome. I felt like I was *part* of Marble Beach. There was something freeing about the

routine I'd built, something calming about that place, and something that almost felt like home. Big Tim became not just a co-worker but a friend in the most Big Tim way he possibly could have: late one Monday night, someone knocked on my door while I was watching TV. Confused, I'd answered, and Big Tim was standing there with a twelve pack and two bags of chips.

“Hey boss,” he said.

“Uh... hey,” I replied.

“We're having beers tonight.”

“Um... okay.”

I stepped out of the way and he came inside, plunked himself on my couch, and put his feet up on the table.

“Nice place,” he said.

“Thanks.”

He passed me a beer as I joined him on the couch and I waited for a moment, thinking he was about to bring up some issue he had at work or something, but he just cracked his beer and opened one of the bags of chips.

“So, what're we watching?”

Looking back, I had no idea what we watched. We drank the entire twelve pack and Big Tim passed out on my couch. The next morning, he asked if I wanted to go for coffee with a couple of guys, and suddenly I had a group of friends.

It was strange, but I felt more at peace that winter than I had for a long time. Since even before my dad had died.

So that was why it was the best winter. I was happy. I felt at home. I felt like I had a purpose.

It was the worst winter of my life because of Maggie.

Not because we were fighting or anything. I mean, we did, the same as any other people would in a situation like ours. Little fights, bickering over stupid things like the cost of reprinting menus or if we should hire someone to shovel the sidewalks rather than doing it ourselves.

For the record, I had voted in favour of hiring someone, but Maggie insisted she would shovel them herself since she lived there anyway. I'd finally just agreed with her, but the next time it snowed, I made sure to get to The Sea Glass before Annie so I could shovel the walks. There was no way Maggie was going to be awake in time to do it. Not when she was working the long hours and late nights that she was.

So we argued here and there, but nothing major.

No, it was the worst because I wanted the one woman I couldn't have.

She didn't want me. I knew that.

We couldn't fuck. I knew that, too.

It was for the sake of our business, the business we'd been thrown into together. There were people relying on us. *We* were relying on us. Mixing sex into that was asking for disaster.

But fuck if that didn't make me want her even more.

Even as busy as we were, she still found time to go up on that stage I'd built in the corner of the bar. When Hannah and I were both working and things were slow enough that she felt like she could leave things in our hands, she'd go upstairs and get her guitar, then settle in and play for a while.

Those nights were the hardest ones. Remembering to keep things professional was difficult when she was up there, eyes closed as she sang, her face warm and relaxed under the lights...

God, I wanted her.

But she didn't want me. Not like that.

It was one of those nights, early in the spring, when everything changed. The snow wasn't quite melting yet, but it was close enough that the promise of relief was in the air. The bar had been busy, but things had slowed down and Big Tim had gone home for the night. Maggie was playing her guitar while Hannah and I stood behind the bar, listening between the occasional order for another drink.

"I wish I'd learned to play guitar," Hannah said as we leaned against the cabinets and watched Maggie.

"Why's that?" I asked.

She shrugged, a dreamy half-smile on her face. "Just something about being able to make all that music with your hands and some string."

"It's definitely a talent," I said.

“Do you like working with your hands?” she asked.

I told myself it was an innocent question.

Hannah was young. She’d just turned nineteen a few months before. She was sweet, cute as anything, but *young*. Maggie had my heart, whether or not I wanted to admit it, but I wasn’t blind to Hannah’s looks.

I mean, not in a way that I was attracted to her. But I could state that she was objectively pretty. The tips she earned didn’t lie about that. With her girl-next-door sort of look and soft but high-pitched voice, she was endearing in a way that I almost wanted to protect.

She was a kid. Big Tim might’ve called me a kid a million times, but she was *nineteen*. And I was a lot closer to thirty than I was to nineteen. Not to mention her boss. She was off-limits, even if I *had* been interested in her.

And I wasn’t.

So her asking me if I liked working with my hands had to be an innocent question. I laughed softly and shrugged.

“I mean, I guess,” I said. “I enjoy building stuff, if that’s what you mean. But I can’t play the guitar.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, I’m pretty good with my hands, I’ve been told.”

I laughed again and excused myself to help Fred, who had thankfully wandered up to the bar to get a refill of his Marble Beach iced tea.

And I wanted it to be my imagination. I wanted to pretend like Hannah wasn't inching closer and closer to me as Maggie played her guitar. And that I was just particularly clumsy that night, since she'd bumped into me no less than five times. And maybe I'd put on some weight or something, and that's why it was so crowded behind the bar that she brushed her hips against my ass whenever she had to sneak past me to get something.

I was definitely, for *sure* imagining that right after I started making Fred's drink and another customer asked for a rum and coke, Hannah purposely leaned across me to grab ice from the bin and pressed her perky tits against my arm.

Just like when we finished serving our respective customers and leaned against the cabinets to listen to Maggie play again, I had to be imagining that Hannah's shirt was coming undone.

Maggie and I hadn't set a strict uniform policy. We'd agreed on jeans and no T-shirts, but any other top was fine. Everyone had a name tag, and the front of house staff all wore half aprons while the kitchen staff had full white aprons. That night, Hannah was wearing jeans—incredibly tight jeans, though I was probably imagining that—and a plaid button-down shirt. I was sure at the beginning of the night, the buttons were all done up. But as I glanced sidelong at her, I realized that at least three were undone.

She seemed to have a tank top underneath, or at least something lacy that was peeking out where the shirt was still

buttoned together. More importantly, those perky tits I'd felt brush against my arm were on display.

Like, *proudly* on display.

I didn't imagine the wave of disgust that washed over me as soon as I had the thought. Swallowing hard, I looked determinedly back at Maggie, refusing to think about the soft skin and deep cleavage that was being shown off beside me.

She had done it for the tips, I reasoned, running a nervous hand through my hair. Friday night, lots of customers. Everyone loves a hot bartender. I wasn't going to blame her for doing what she could to earn more money.

"Is something wrong, Caleb?" Hannah asked in her soft, breathy voice.

"Nope," I said. "Just gonna... I gotta go check the kitchen quick."

Then I high-tailed it out of there.

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TWENTY-SIX

CALEB

FOR THE REST OF the night, I avoided Hannah however I could. It was easy enough to leave her on the bar by herself and pitch in elsewhere, so that's what I did. After we closed, I stepped into the office and started processing the deposit for the night while Maggie cleaned up the front of house.

I thought I was home free, but a gentle tap on the door as I was counting proved I wasn't.

"Caleb?" she asked, standing in the open doorway.

"Hi, Hannah," I said. "Did Mags tell you to head out? If not, you can head home. We're good from here."

"She did, I just wanted to ask you something first." She moved into the office and closed the door behind her.

Shit, I thought. "What's up?"

She stepped forward slowly, making her way to the side of the desk. "Well, I just thought maybe we should talk about you looking down my shirt earlier."

My mouth went dry. "I didn't intentionally—"

“I’m not stupid,” she said. “I know you did. And maybe... maybe it’s because I kind of wanted you to.”

“Hannah, don’t,” I said. “I can’t do this. Please.”

She was in front of me now, and I was trapped between the desk and the wall. Slowly, her hands raised to the buttons on her shirt.

“I thought maybe you’d like to see everything,” she said in that breathy voice.

I protested.

I shook my head.

I told her to stop.

She kept unbuttoning that stupid plaid shirt anyway, leaving it on as she lifted what I’d correctly identified as a tank top over her breasts. Her stomach was tight and flat, muscled from years of working on her parents’ farm. And then there were her tits. They spilled out of an incredibly impractical looking bra that hooked in the front. Hannah reached forward, unclasped it, and suddenly they were bouncing free.

And I just...

I was as horny as anyone had ever been after spending months around the one woman I wanted more than anything and who didn’t want me. I was only human. And I loved tits. So yeah, I looked, just for a second. I took in the sight of her perky round breasts, big and firm and natural, with hard nipples poking forward from areolas so pale they were almost indiscernible from the surrounding skin.

I looked at them, and then I tore my eyes away, staring down at the desk as anger surged through me.

I don't know if I was angrier at myself or at her.

"Do you want to touch them, Caleb?" she asked.

"Please put your shirt back on," I said quietly.

"Don't pretend you don't want to." She was still holding her shirt up, and she took another step forward. "I'm okay with it. I've wanted you to—"

"Hannah," I snapped. "Put your fucking clothes back on and get out of my office."

I knew it was harsh. I knew I sounded angry. I knew my face was burning red beneath my beard and my eyes were trained to the desk as though they were glued there. And I knew it would hurt Hannah to get shot down like that.

But I wasn't that guy, and I refused to become him. Fucking my staff was not an option. And I didn't want to *be* in that situation. One misunderstanding, and I could've been completely fucked over.

One word from her, and everything I had in Marble Beach would be gone.

Hannah recoiled at my words. She wrenched her shirt down, doing up her bra after her tits were covered. Her face was red and she looked utterly humiliated.

"Look, I won't say anything—" I started.

"Oh, fuck you," she said.

“There’s a camera in here, Hannah.” My voice wavered as I spoke, betraying how fucking terrified I was just then, though I wasn’t sure if she realized it. “With audio. I won’t say anything about this, and we can pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Don’t bother.”

She slammed the office door behind her and I released the breath I’d been holding, nausea washing over me as I did. My hands shook as I lifted them to wipe away the beads of sweat on the side of my face.

I’d barely recovered when Maggie flew into the office seconds later, gripping an apron in her hands. “What the fuck just happened?”

“Mags, I—”

“Hannah just threw her apron at me and said she quit. What did you—”

“She flashed me.”

Maggie stopped, her eyes wide.

“She was hitting on me,” I continued, my voice as steady as I could make it, though I couldn’t bring myself to look at her. “She took off her shirt. I asked her to stop. Repeatedly. She didn’t listen until I yelled at her to put her clothes back on and get out of the office. If you don’t believe me—” I motioned at the camera in the corner “—check the security tapes.”

“Caleb, I—”

“I swear to God I didn’t fucking touch her,” I snapped.

“I believe you.”

My eyes were stinging. I blinked the wateriness away as I looked up to see Maggie with a concerned expression on her face.

“She won’t try to twist it,” she said, her voice unusually soothing. “I know Hannah’s an idiot, but she’s not like that. And like you said, there’s the camera. Are you okay?”

I couldn’t quite bring myself to speak, but I nodded.

“I know you... you wouldn’t,” she said. “Like, I... I know you probably want to hook up with people or whatever, but I know you wouldn’t do that kind of thing with our staff. Believe me, I appreciate that about you.”

“That I’m not a fucking pig?” I asked.

She sat on the couch, rubbing her eyes. “Yes. Be pissed about that if you want, but I’ve dealt with more than my share of pigs in this place. Me being thankful that you aren’t one of them isn’t meant to be an insult.”

I nodded again, though I doubted she saw me do it. “So we’re down a bartender now, I guess.”

“Seems to be.” She looked up at me. “I’m stretched pretty thin as is, Caleb. Any chance you’d be willing to cover a bit more while we try to hire someone?”

Of course I was.

TWENTY-SEVEN

MAGGIE

A FEW WEEKS AFTER the Hannah Incident, as I'd come to think of it, Mom just had to make everything worse.

“What do you mean, the *end* of summer?” I cried.

Her voice was crackly and distant. “Like, the end of August. Maybe early September.”

“You said you'd be back after the snow melted,” I said. “The snow is melting. It's almost gone. Mom, we *need* you to come back.”

“No, you don't.”

I rested my head against the hand that wasn't holding the phone to my ear. “Yes, we do. The bar does. *I* do.”

“You said yourself the bar is doing great. And Annie's been in touch. She says you and Caleb have everything under control.”

I tried not to burst into tears. “Yeah, but we've been putting off replacing Hannah because I was counting on you and Tiny Steve being back for the summer rush. It's already started to pick up.”

“So hire someone else.”

I didn't respond. I couldn't. If I opened my mouth, I would've started wailing, and I didn't need Annie or Big Tim bursting into the office to see what was wrong.

“Hon?” Mom asked.

“I've been trying to hire someone,” I forced myself to say. “I just had an interview.”

“That's good! So hire them. What's holding you back?”

“Nothing,” I said. “She's great. Her name is Tamara. She asked to be called Tammy. She and her husband moved nearby for their retirement. Her family is from India and she said she would love to add some new recipes to our menu if we'd let her. She's wonderful.”

“So what's the problem?”

She's not my mom, is what I wanted to say. Instead, I sighed and drew myself up from my hunched over position at the desk.

“I wasn't counting on having to hire *three* people,” I said. “Tammy is perfect, but she's only one person. It's not like I'm getting a ton of resumes, Mom. It's a small town.”

She was silent for a moment. “Hon, I... I've never gotten to do anything like this before.”

“I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

“Because I'm the reason you never—”

“Oh, don’t you fucking dare,” she snapped. “That was *not* meant to guilt you for existing. I love you more than anything in the world, and you damn well know that.”

I swallowed back another set of tears. “Okay.”

“If you needed me to come back, I’d fly there tomorrow,” she said. “I’d tell Steven to sell my bike and get on a plane and be there. And if I believed for one second that you couldn’t handle this, I would do that. But you need to make your own way in the world too, hon. And everyone I’ve talked to says The Sea Glass is doing better than ever under you and Caleb.”

I closed my eyes briefly. “I just miss you.”

“I miss you too, hon. Just let me have a couple more months, okay?”

We hung up a few minutes later and I locked the office door so I could finally let the tears out.

It was the first warm week of the year and had started giving us a taste of the chaos we were in for. Not that it was anything new to me, not after having practically grown up in the bar, but it sure was different when my mom wasn’t handling everything.

I was at the bar constantly. Even on Tuesdays when we were closed, I was in the office making orders, posting schedules, and doing accounting. I was sure Caleb suspected how much time I was putting in, but I refused to ask him for more than I already had.

It wasn't that he wasn't dedicated. He was, and I knew he was. The whole situation with Hannah had just been more proof of that. I'd never admit it to him, but I did look back at the tapes after we'd left that night.

Not that I didn't trust him, but... I mean, I was a server. Being hit on and harassed by customers was a regular part of my life. I owed it to Hannah and to myself and to every other girl who no one believed to make sure that what Caleb said was the case actually was.

And it was. Because Caleb was a good person. And it made me even angrier to see what Hannah had done to him. He was working as our main bartender, not to mention picking up the occasional shift in the kitchen with Big Tim so he could fill in when help was needed. On top of that, I knew he was still working on his cabin, so I was trying to give him a bit more time to do that at the cost of my own days off.

And it was only about to get worse.

After my cry in the office, I dried my tears, wiped my face, and unlocked the door. Just a few minutes later, Caleb walked in to start his shift, a grin on his face.

"Busy out there," he said, as if that was a good thing.

I mean, it was. But I was moping.

I broke the news about my mom and Tiny Steve in a dull, monotone voice, then let him know that I wanted to hire Tammy and would he be okay with that or did he want to meet with her before offering the job. He shook his head and said he

trusted me, frowned as he asked if I was okay, then lifted his hands defensively as I snapped that I *was* and excuse me, I had to get to work.

We didn't get a chance to talk again that shift. The bar stayed busy all night and was almost at capacity when a group of women in their mid-twenties walked in.

They were definitely tourists. One of the girls was wearing a bushy tulle veil and tiara with a bright pink sash over a white mini-dress. She was white and had long, red hair and a toothy smile. On her chest was a large novelty button proudly proclaiming, "Buy me a shot, I'm tying the knot!" The women with her had matching pink sashes over equally short dresses and skirts. "Maid-of-Honour" was a short, curvy woman with russet brown skin, stomping around in heels that would have made me break my ankle. "Bridesmaid," "Bridesmaid," and "Bridesmaid" were wearing identical navy blue dresses. And the rest—"Cousin," "Sister," and a few that said "Friend"—were made up, covered in glitter, and giggling constantly.

"Let me guess," I said as I walked up with a slightly-stressed-but-hopefully-welcoming smile. "You're celebrating a birthday."

The girls hooted.

"Any room for us?" asked Maid-of-Honour. "We saw your ad at a place on Main Street and thought we'd escape the rental for a few hours to party!"

"There's just room at the bar right now," I said apologetically. "But you're welcome there, as long as you

don't mind.”

I didn't need to be apologetic about it. Bridesmaid One, a pretty girl who was Asian and had long, dark hair and bright red lipstick, saw Caleb standing behind the bar and her eyes lit up. “We don't mind!”

It was amusing at first. Caleb seemed to be caught off guard as the group descended upon his bar, but they weren't overly obnoxious. They were fun and chatted with the locals at the tables around the bar just as easily as they chatted with each other.

And with Caleb.

Soon, it wasn't amusing. Soon, I was seeing the girls lean over the bar each time I glanced in that direction, their voices flirty and carefree. Soon, Caleb was shooting that winning smile at them, his eyes glimmering with a wicked gleam that I knew I'd seen before.

Which was fine.

Caleb was single. He could flirt with girls at the bar. I had customers flirt with me all the time. Just because I didn't believe in flirting back for tips didn't mean he shouldn't.

It was *fine*.

Until it wasn't.

It was fine until I was frantically busy picking up all the slack Caleb was leaving on the floor behind him while he dealt with the bachelorette party. Until I had customers sniping at me about how loud the girls were being and how slow it was

to get a drink because Caleb was busy chatting with them. As the night wore on, I found it harder and harder to maintain my fragile customer service smile. Each time I passed the bar or picked up a round of drinks, Caleb was flirting with the girls, who were leaning closer and closer to him. Their dresses seemed to ride up higher on their thighs, their necklines pulled lower and lower as the night wore on.

“Oh, come on, Mr. Barkeep,” Bridesmaid One begged as I passed by to grab the bill for one of my tables.

“No way,” Caleb replied, shaking his head as he laughed.

“Come on, please?” the three bridesmaids whined in unison.

“Just one body shot,” Bridesmaid One said.

I felt the hair on my neck stand up.

“No body shots,” I said, turning to them. “I don’t want anyone’s ass touching my bar top.”

“What if we put a napkin down?” asked one of the cousins.

“It’s a hard no,” I said. “I don’t want any of you lying down on my bar.”

Bridesmaid One glanced at Caleb, then back at me. “What if Mr. Barkeep is the one we take the shot off?”

Screeching laughter echoed through the bar. Caleb’s face was turning red, but he caught my eye and shrugged as if he was game.

“No body shots,” I snapped at him, then turned on my heel and walked away.

“Oh no, is that your wife?” I heard one of them ask Caleb.

“No, we’re not together,” I heard him reply.

“Oh, so you’re... unattached?”

I couldn’t hear his response, but I knew I’d gone beyond Resting Bitch Face and was firmly in the territory of Trying Not To Strangle Anyone Face. It took everything in me not to chuck the bill at my table. As soon as they paid, I ground my teeth together and stormed off without a word.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

MAGGIE

WHEN LAST CALL CAME around, I was ready to scream.

Business had slowed to where I'd sent everyone else home besides Caleb. There was no point in people sitting around doing nothing. I cleaned up most of the place myself as Caleb kept entertaining the bachelorette party, my mood darkening more and more each time they laughed.

And they laughed a lot.

It was past time for last call when I glanced over from the table I was wiping to see if Caleb was done yet.

Bridesmaid One was leaning over the bar, nearly crawling on top of it to get as close to him as she could. He was leaning against the bar top, deep in conversation with her about something or the other. Even from across the room, I could see that she had her chest thrust forward. Caleb had that wicked smirk on his face, the one that told me he was about to say something horribly filthy and incredibly sexy.

“Caleb!” I called out, trying not to shout.

Both he and Bridesmaid One jumped, heads whirling to look at me.

“Did you do last call?”

“Uh, wow, is it that time already?” He glanced at the clock on the till. “Yeah, sorry ladies. This is last call. We’re closing up soon.”

They acted as if we’d told them they needed to stop what they were doing and join a convent.

By the time the girls were finished and their bills sorted, I had refilled the cutlery stand, swept the entire room, and finished every closing task besides the deposit and whatever needed to be done behind the bar. Then, as he stood around and bid the girls farewell, I started cleaning up the mess they’d left, trying my hardest not to scowl.

“Thanks, Caleb,” the girls were saying as I attempted to wipe up the trails of glitter on the bar stools.

“This place is so amazing.”

“You were so much fun. We love you!”

“Best bachelorette ever!”

“Bye, sexy!”

Bridesmaid One lingered as her friends left.

“So, do you live nearby?” I heard her ask.

And that was all I could handle.

I tossed the rag onto the top of the bar, grabbed a stack of glassware, and stormed into the kitchen. The glasses rattled

against the counter as I slammed them down before going into the office. But of course, even that wasn't an escape; I couldn't hear what Caleb's response was, but the security cameras were up on the computer screen and I saw her hand him a piece of paper.

Her number, I thought. Of course.

When he swaggered into the office a few minutes later—and he did, he fucking *swaggered* like he was hot shit or something—he grinned as he put the till from the bar on the desk in front of me.

“Well, I was right,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

He rapped his hands on the desk. “Putting that ad up on Main Street. I *said* those large groups would see it there and what d’ya know, *first* weekend, it pays off.”

I grunted, pulling the till tray towards me so I could start counting out the deposit.

“They might have been loud, but they dropped money like it was nothing,” he continued. “Like, frig. I don’t think I’ve ever pulled that much in at the bar. Not even at our grand opening.”

“Is that before or after you count the phone number?” I muttered.

He was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, all the smile had gone from his voice.

“What, am I not allowed to get a girl’s number?”

I grunted again, teeth clenched. I tried my hardest not to react, but I could feel my face starting to turn red.

“Well?” he pressed. “Am I?”

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” I said steadily.

He sighed. “What are you getting on my case for this time, Mags?”

Anger flared through me. “Really? It’s ‘getting on your case’ to be frustrated that I had to run around dealing with everything by myself all night while *you* sat around the bar flirting and laughing and undressing that goddamn bridesmaid with your eyes?”

“Her name is Tina.”

I scoffed. “Like I care.”

My hands betrayed me, and I dropped a pile of coins on the ground.

“Sure you don’t,” he said, sounding mad. “What, I’m supposed to watch tourists flirt with you all the time, but I get one night of women flirting with me and it’s a problem?”

“That’s not even a comparison. I don’t *like* when tourists flirt with me. And you... that was way past flirting.” A dry laugh coughed from my throat. “If it weren’t for the bar between the two of you, you’d have been in her panties hours ago.”

He was silent again. The tension in the office was so thick I almost choked, an almost tangible sensation of anger and

frustration and annoyance creeping up the empty spaces between us.

“What is this actually about, Maggie?” he asked, his voice cold.

“Nothing,” I said. “Is it too much to ask for you to finish cleaning up the bar before you go fuck her or do I need to do that for you, too?”

“That’s uncalled for.”

I didn’t respond.

“Are you jealous?”

Still, I said nothing. After a moment, he chuckled.

“You are, aren’t you? You’re jealous.”

I glared at him. “Fuck off.”

He threw his hands up. “Seriously? You’re the one who said we had to keep things professional between us. We agreed it was a bad idea for us to continue where we were going. So what, I can’t be with anyone else?”

“That’s not what this is about.” My heart was pounding, and my fingers trembled as I tried to continue counting the deposit.

“It’s not? You have another reason to sit there and be pissed at me for flirting with someone who might’ve been into me?”

“That’s not —”

“So what is it, then? What is it *this* time? Because every time I so much as turn around the wrong way, you act like it’s the end of the fucking world. Now you want to be in control of

everything, including who I talk to? Sorry to break it to you, Mags, but we're not dating. Even *you* can't be crazy enough to think you get a say in who I fuck."

I slammed my hands on the desk as I stood up, the desk chair flying back and hitting the wall. Caleb took a step back, shock on his face.

"You're such an asshole," I said.

"Mags—"

"Go to hell, Caleb." Leaving the deposit on the desk, I pushed past him out of the office, my heart racing as I stormed through the kitchen and up the stairs to my apartment.

He was right, of course. I couldn't stop picturing him with Bridesmaid One, fucking her against the bar the way he'd fucked me, pushing that stupid little dress up her hips and making her scream for more.

It wasn't until I was upstairs, the apartment door slammed shut behind me, that I let out an infuriated sob.

TWENTY-NINE

CALEB

A DOOR SLAMMED AND two loud thumps sounded from the apartment above.

My guess was that Maggie had thrown something. Or kicked her shoes at the wall. Or maybe she'd fallen down. Twice.

Angry wasn't quite the right word for what I was feeling. Livid was closer. Aggravated. Annoyed. Disgusted. Exasperated.

Somewhere in there, a little flattered. Maybe. If Maggie was jealous, that meant she might still... but *God*, the way she'd just acted was disgusting.

Then again, I had kind of... well. I should've maybe taken the high road. Or at least, I shouldn't have called her crazy to her face.

For the record, I had no intention of calling Tina. She was hot, sure, but she was completely hammered. I'd told her as much when she asked if I lived nearby, and she'd insisted on giving me her number anyway.

Not that it should have mattered. Maggie had been clear. We'd agreed that we needed to keep things professional between us. Thinking I wouldn't want to meet other women was her problem, not mine. It was unreasonable for her to think I'd never want to date someone else.

Frankly, I was so annoyed that I was secretly a bit happy that Maggie was hurting.

As soon as I had that thought, I felt guilty. I didn't want Maggie to feel hurt, but at the same time, it was her own doing. It wasn't my fault that she was jealous. And it certainly wasn't my fault that she didn't think enough of me to know I wouldn't have fucked Tina that night.

Depending on how horny I still was after a good night's sleep, I might have called her the next day, but that was beside the point.

After finishing the deposit Maggie had so kindly left for me, I cleaned up the rest of the bar. It didn't take long, and my blood was still boiling as I flipped the lights off and locked up. As I stepped out the back door, I glanced at the staircase that led to Maggie's apartment and paused.

I don't know what possessed me to do it. I was still upset, and I got it in my head that Maggie shouldn't get to dictate when the fight was over just because she lived close enough to storm off first. Before I could think anything through, I was climbing the stairs.

I knocked three times on the door, loud bangs that echoed in the stairwell. I had every intention of continuing our fight, of

telling Maggie exactly why she was being unreasonable and that she didn't get to have it both ways. I had no intention of apologizing, and certainly no intention of anything besides telling her off.

When the door flew open, I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Maggie's eyes were red, and the look on her face was something I'd never seen before. It wasn't quite a scowl, and it wasn't quite embarrassment or anger or guilt. It was all those, and more. She had taken off the black button-up shirt she'd been wearing at work and stood in front of me in jeans and a pale pink camisole, her skin flushed beneath the scrawling tattoos on her arms and shoulders.

She looked beautiful, as she always did, and I was even more frustrated that I couldn't stop myself from thinking it.

I started to say something, but the second I made a noise, she grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me towards her. The moment our mouths met in that bruising, crushing, almost painful kiss, I knew that was why I'd been drawn there.

And I knew I wouldn't leave until I'd buried my cock inside her.

I don't think either of us were capable of anything soft or sweet at that moment. I could feel the anger radiating off Maggie, and I fed off it, my own frustration growing and boiling over as I pushed her inside her apartment. The door slammed behind us and she pushed me back against it with surprising strength.

“You’re such a fucking asshole,” she growled and kissed me again.

I grabbed her hips, squeezing her ass as I brought her body close to mine. “That makes two of us, then.”

She thrust her hips forward hard, biting down on my lip. I inhaled sharply at the shock of pain, and turned suddenly, maneuvering us in one swift twist so I could force her back against the door.

“You had no right to be pissed at me,” I said, my voice hoarse. I brought my hand to her chin and turned it up towards me roughly, capturing her lips with mine. “You didn’t want me.” I pushed her face to the side and kissed her neck, sucking hard on the skin there.

“I always wanted you,” she gasped. I pulled back and looked at her, wide, red-rimmed eyes staring back at me. “Don’t you dare think I didn’t fucking want you this entire goddamn time.”

I didn’t have a response for that.

I couldn’t have a response for that.

Instead, I kissed her again, inhaling the feel of her mouth and the taste of her breath. She grazed my lip with her teeth, her hands reaching up to grab at my hair. She pulled hard, holding my head against hers as she shoved her tongue in my mouth.

I let her be in control for a few moments, my cock straining painfully in my jeans as I pushed against her. But I wasn’t in a

patient mood, and I fought to be in charge again. Grabbing the hem of her camisole, I yanked it up, revealing her midriff. As I tore it over her head, I could hear threads snapping in the hems.

“You ripped my shirt,” she whispered.

“Good.”

I threw it across the room and pushed the straps of her bra down, grabbing at her tits as I slid the cups down to her ribs. I wasn't in the mood to bother trying to unhook the damn thing. If she wanted it off, she could do it herself. I gripped her breasts hard as I kissed her again, my fingers digging into the sensitive flesh beneath them. She cried out and tried to move forward.

“Am I hurting you?” I asked.

“Yes,” she gasped. “But don't you dare stop.”

I used my body to shove her back against the door. “If you want me to stop, tell me. If you want me to leave, kick me out. Otherwise—” I let go of one of her breasts and reached up, winding my hand through her hair “—don't fucking tell me what to do.”

She cried out and I flattened the hand that was still on her tits, pushing down so I could feel her nipple through the rough palm of my hand. She whimpered again and tilted her head back against the door, breathing hard. Her hands moved to touch me, but I released her breast and her hair so I could grab her wrists, pinning them beside her shoulders.

With her unable to grab at me, I brought my head to her chest, licking and tasting her skin selfishly. I took one of her nipples in my mouth and sucked hard before grazing it with my teeth, then sucked on it again. She whined beneath me, her hips shifting. Each one of her high-pitched cries as I tortured her breasts made my cock throb, and finally, I couldn't handle the pain of it pressing against my jeans.

I released one of her hands so I could adjust myself. As I moved my cock, Maggie put her hand on my head, weaving her fingers through my hair and pushing me even harder against her chest. The breast that didn't have my mouth attached to it pressed against the side of my face, hot and firm against my skin. I circled her nipple with my tongue, teasing and nipping at it until she was panting.

The sounds urged me on and I released her other wrist. I took a moment to squeeze her tits hard again, then continued to suck her nipples as I unbuttoned her jeans. I pushed them down as I fell to my knees in front of her.

I could see the wetness of Maggie's pussy through her panties. The damp fabric clung to the curves of her mound, molding to the slick lips beneath it. She was always so wet and I had never gotten to bury my face there. Should this *actually* be the last time we fucked, I wanted to make sure I got to taste her.

Her jeans were scrunched at her ankles and I wasted no time getting her panties to join them. I guided one leg out of them, then forced her legs apart so I could see her shimmering folds.

“Stop wasting time and lick my goddamn pussy,” she demanded.

I glared up at her. “What did I say about telling me what to do?”

“Fuck off, Caleb. Make me come.”

I shoved her hips against the wall again, holding her in place. “I’ll do what I want.”

She was about to say some other snarky thing, but whatever it was turned into a guttural moan as I pressed my face against her and finally tasted her sweet juices. Her pussy was completely drenched with hot arousal. I licked her inner lips, the tip of my tongue dipping into her entrance, before taking her swollen clit into my mouth and sucking it.

Maggie held nothing back. She pushed on my head wantonly, her hips struggling under my hands as I devoured her. I let her grind against my face, my nose pressed hard against her mound as I lapped at her hard little bud. The view from my position between her legs was amazing. As much as she pissed me off, Maggie was still the most gorgeous girl I’d ever seen. Her bra hung awkwardly around her ribs, her tits thrust up in the air as she leaned against the wall, clutching my head to her core like a life raft.

I ate her vigorously, her wetness coating the scruff on my chin and cheeks as I inhaled her scent with every breath. I made sure she felt every move I made, deliberate and urgent, demanding she surrender herself to me.

One of the most wonderful things about Maggie was how obvious it was when she was close to coming. Her breathing would get faster, those perfect tits heaving as she took in short, gasping breaths. Her hands pressed harder on my head, her eyes fluttered closed, and her neck tilted just a bit further back.

When I was sure she was almost at the point of no return, I pulled my mouth away from her.

“No!” she gasped, grabbing at my head. “Caleb, I’m close —”

“Not yet,” I said, standing up.

“But—you...”

“I told you not to fucking tell me what to do.”

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THIRTY

CALEB

I WAS SORRY THAT I didn't get to feel Maggie gush against my mouth as she came, but it was worth it to see the realization of what I was doing dawn on her.

“Oh, you fucker!” she screeched. “You *fucking*—”

She tried to push her hands between us, but I caught them and pinned them against the wall again. I pressed my sopping face to hers, kissing her as she continued to lament her lack of orgasm. She bit at my lips, twisting beneath me. I used my weight to hold her against the wall and let go of her wrist, grabbing at her face to still her. She finally kissed me back, but beat her hand against my shoulder lightly. Slowly, the twisting and wriggling stopped, anger turning to pleading as she kissed me back eagerly.

“Please let me come,” she mumbled against my lips.

“Begging already? I've barely started, Mags.”

“I want you.”

“Can't always get what you want, you know.”

She let out another frustrated groan and I felt her nails digging into my shoulder. “Fuck you.”

“Planning on it. You got condoms?”

“A new box,” she said, her voice shaking. “In the nightstand.”

I let go of her hand and stepped back. She almost fell, the sudden shift startling her, but I turned and walked across her apartment to the nightstand. A brand-new box of condoms sat in the top drawer, just like she’d said, and I grabbed one and turned back.

Maggie was leaning against the wall, and she had shoved her hand between her legs. She was fingering herself furiously, hand moving hard and fast as she worked desperately back towards an orgasm.

“Oh no, you fucking don’t,” I said.

I was back in front of her in an instant, wrenching her hand away from her pussy as she protested. As she struggled beneath me, I slammed her against the wall again, holding her in place. My cock throbbed between us, digging into her hip as I regained control of her.

“I’m in charge,” I hissed once I had trapped her against the wall again. “Understand me? I will fucking tell you when you come.”

She glared at me, cheeks flushed and lips swollen.

I cupped her chin roughly. “Understand?”

“Yes,” she sneered.

“Lose the attitude.”

“Or what?” she taunted.

Without responding, I pushed her towards the couch behind us and bent her over the armrest. Maggie let out a soft puff of air as she fell against the couch, propping herself up with her hands as she tried to turn to look at me. I pushed on her back, forcing her down until her face was pressed against the cushions, her round ass up in the air.

I made sure she heard me unbuckling my belt. The buckle clanked against the floor as I dropped my jeans and boxers. As I put the condom on, I stood directly behind her. Her ass was amazing, firm from spending so much time walking around the bar, a perfectly shaped heart at the right level for me to pound her hard. Her pussy peeked out from between her legs, and the juices had dripped down her legs by then, glazing her inner thighs.

My cock was harder than it had ever been in my life. I wasted no time: as soon as the condom was on, I grabbed Maggie’s hip with one hand, positioned my cock at her entrance with the other, and plunged inside her with one hard thrust. She shrieked and I grabbed her other hip, then began fucking her harder than I ever had before.

I pulled her hips toward me, her ass slapping against my pelvis as I impaled her again and again. I fucked her as hard as I could, her body shifting beneath me with the force. Maggie

grasped at the cushions on the couch, struggling and failing to prop herself up as I did my best to destroy her pussy.

Her walls were slick and hot, enveloping my cock as I tunnelled inside her. I was as deep as I could get, my balls pressing against her each time I thrust. Maggie moaned as she tried to brace herself so her face wasn't buried in the cushions, but failed.

Most of the time, I liked to think I was the kind of guy who was empathetic and kind and understanding. But at that moment, I was vindictive. I relished watching her struggle beneath me as I used her body selfishly. Finally taking pity on her, I slowed my thrusts and slid my hands to the front of her hips, helping lift her just enough to get her hands steadied on the cushions.

The change in angle meant I couldn't get quite as deep, but it didn't matter. I resumed my pace, grunting as I pumped my cock inside her. Maggie's ass jiggled each time I drove into her pussy, and I was mesmerized watching it.

"Is that all you got?" she taunted, her voice breathy. "Come on, Caleb. Fuck me like you mean it."

I knew she was just trying to get at me, but it worked. I grunted as I dug my fingers into her hips, fucking her as hard as I could.

"Come on. Fuck me harder."

I responded by slapping her jiggling ass. She shrieked and jolted forward.

“Asshole!” she shrieked. “Do it again.”

I spanked her again and she squealed. The sound of the slaps was amazing, loud cracks that were like music to my ears. Again I spanked her, and again she squealed. Her skin started to redden under my palm, and I slapped the same spot again, and again, and so many times that I lost count.

Maggie moaned with each one, pushing her ass back against me hard.

“Pull my hair,” she demanded. “Grab it, Caleb.”

I might have been the one doing the fucking, but she was in control. I obeyed immediately, wrapping her thick locks in my fist and yanking her head back as she cried out. Her back curved, and there was very little I wouldn’t have given to see her tits thrust out on the other side. I was gasping, both from the amazing view in front of me and for breath, sweat dripping down my face as I tried to continue pounding her. It wasn’t going to be long before I had to slow down or stop.

Luck was on my side, though. As I pulled Maggie’s hair, she started panting.

“Gonna come,” she gasped, forgetting that I was the one in charge of when she could.

I pulled my cock out of her and she nearly lost her balance as she slammed her ass against my stomach.

“Not yet,” I said.

“No!” she wailed. “Caleb, *no*, please, not again!”

I caressed the red skin on her ass where I'd been spanking her as I fucked her. "Not yet, Mags. Trust me."

"You fucking suck!" She pitched forward, nearly sobbing into the couch.

I tried to catch my breath discreetly while also stopping myself from plunging back inside of her.

"Trust me," I repeated.

I wanted Maggie to have the orgasm of a lifetime. I wanted her to be so close to the edge that a slight breeze against her clit would send her into fits of passion. And I knew the longer I made her wait for it, the better it would be.

Once I caught my breath, I pulled her ass towards me. She didn't fight it, just let me guide her back towards my cock. I thrust inside her again, slower this time, withdrawing almost completely from her before plunging back in. She was quiet at first, almost hesitant to enjoy it, but soon enough she couldn't help it. She pushed back against me, moaning softly as I held her hips.

I decided quickly that it was time for Maggie to come. I was close, and I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I had denied her all that time, only to finish before her. Slowly, I moved one hand around Maggie's body.

My hand was almost on her mound before she seemed to realize what I was doing.

"Not again," she whimpered. "I can't take it again."

“I think you could,” I said, despite having no intention of making her do so.

“Please,” she choked. “Caleb.”

“What are you begging for?” I asked, amused.

She made a disgusted, frustrated noise. “I’m not begging, asshole.”

“You sure about that?”

“You said you’d never make me beg.”

“And yet here you are... begging.”

“Fuck you,” she grumbled.

I hovered my fingers teasingly over her clit, not quite touching her, not quite ready to let her have what she wanted. Leaning forward, I pressed a kiss to the back of her neck.

“What are you begging for, Mags?” I breathed in her ear. “Are you begging me to stop? To pull my cock out of you, push you away, jerk myself off while you watch so after all this, you don’t even have the satisfaction of knowing you made me come?”

“N-No,” she said.

“No? So you want me to keep going? You’re begging me to finger this swollen fucking clit so you can finally come all over some asshole who pisses you off, pushes you down, spanks your sorry ass and pulls your hair and uses your little pussy however he wants it?”

She whimpered and I shoved my cock inside her as deep as I could, hard and sharp and fast, making her cry out.

“Is that what you want, Maggie? You want to come on my cock?”

“Yes,” she said, spitting the word out disdainfully. “I want to come.”

“Then beg for it.”

A high-pitched whine left her throat, an animalistic sound that burned itself into my mind. Then it morphed into something between a groan and a shriek, a painful noise as she let out her frustrations.

“Please, Caleb,” she choked. “Please let me come. I’m... I’m...”

“Begging?”

“I’m fucking begging you, you fucking asshole,” she sobbed. “Please let me fucking *come*. Please. Please, Caleb.” Another choked sob. “Fuck, just... *please*.”

I didn’t respond, just kissed her neck again as I held my hand above her mound. Small, high-pitched noises escaped her throat and I could feel her muscles tensing in anticipation. Already, I was holding back, and I knew the second I felt her clench around me, I would be done.

The tip of my finger brushed her clit and her hips jerked. I continued, rubbing her hard little nub, and she slammed back into me. Unintelligible noises came from her mouth and she

panted in time with my thrusting, bursts of breath and noise filling the room each time I buried myself in her.

It didn't take long. Before I knew it, Maggie was writhing beneath me, screaming as she came. Her pussy clenched, gripping my cock, and that was it for me. I came hard, my cock spasming, my mind going blissfully blank. As I finished, Maggie stilled beneath me, and I stayed buried inside her for just a moment longer before pulling out.

Aside from her shoulders heaving back and forth as she gasped for breath, she didn't move, just lay over the armrest of the couch. I touched the flushed skin on her ass and she shivered.

"I'm going to clean up," I said.

Maggie made a soft noise in response as I walked to the bathroom.

THIRTY-ONE

MAGGIE

I HAD NEVER COME like that before.

Distantly, I heard Caleb finish and felt him pull his cock out of me. He said something, but my mind didn't quite process whatever it was. I was in a haze, somewhere dazzling and fuzzy, my body spent and numb and electrified.

I had never felt anything like that before. Angry, frustrated, impossibly turned on. Wanting him, needing him, and hating him for it.

The feeling in my body slowly returned, my feet landing on hard ground after floating through clouds. I crawled onto the couch, fiddling with my bra and finally removing it, pulling the throw blanket I had on the back of the couch over me.

I had never been fucked like that before. My pussy ached, my legs were stiff, my stomach sore from the armrest of the couch digging into it. My ass was sore, the spot he'd spanked warm and stinging. My arms trembled, though whether it was from bracing myself as Caleb had plowed into me or from the magnitude of my orgasm, I wasn't sure.

And that orgasm.

I had never come like that, never. I had never had someone deny me an orgasm. I had never had it happen *twice*. I'd never hated someone as much as I'd hated Caleb in those moments he told me 'no' when I was so fucking close, and I'd never hated him more than when he made me fucking *beg* for it.

But I'd also never felt an orgasm that seemed to rip my soul from my body, making time stand still and my vision go dark. I'd never lost all sense of where I was, never felt the world return so slowly, never felt as weightless and liquid and clear as I did in that moment. I'd never adored someone as much as I'd adored him for putting me through that.

I was lying on my back on the couch with my eyes closed, breathing in deeply through my nose and out through my mouth, when he came back into the room.

"Mags?"

His voice was quiet, uncertain. That wasn't the voice of the person who had just brought me to the edge of existence and back, who had taken every bit of me, who had squeezed and pinched and spanked me as he drove his cock deep inside me. It was Caleb's voice, the unsteady, questioning voice of the Caleb I'd lost my virginity to.

And fuck if it didn't make me adore him even more.

I opened my eyes to see him standing a few feet away, his eyebrows furrowed with concern.

“I brought a wet cloth. And your lotion. I thought it might, uh, help.” He knelt beside the couch, taking my hand. “Are you okay? Did I... were you...”

“I’m okay, Caleb,” I said. “I’m sorry I called you an asshole.”

“I am an asshole. I’m sorry I—”

“Don’t. Don’t ruin this with an apology.”

He looked at me, then nodded obediently. “Roll over. I need to make sure I didn’t hurt you.”

I did as he asked, shivering as he ran the cool cloth over my ass. The skin was tender, but I knew it would fade quickly. He patted my ass gently, and I relaxed as the coolness of the cloth soothed the spot he’d slapped. His fingers caressed me, and I sighed as he rubbed lotion on my ass. The scent of lavender filled the room. For a few minutes, everything was perfect. Soft and sweet and quiet, post-orgasmic bliss.

It couldn’t last forever, of course. Once Caleb pulled his hands away, I sighed and rolled back over, pulling myself up to a seated position. “Come sit with me?”

He sat beside me and took my hand. “I feel like we should’ve talked about that first. I didn’t want to actually hurt you or—”

“Caleb.” I squeezed his hand, probably a little harder than necessary. “I’m fine. I loved every second of it.”

He relaxed a bit. “I was so fucking mad and then so...”

“Me too,” I said. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“I wasn’t going to call her, you know.”

I felt my shoulders tense at the mention of Bridesmaid One. “It doesn’t matter if you were. It’s none of my business.”

“It bothered you, and I pushed your buttons instead of being mature about it.”

Sighing, I leaned back against the couch. “You were right. I was... I was jealous.” The word stuck in my throat and I felt my face turn red. “And I had absolutely no right to be because we agreed we shouldn’t hook up.”

“It doesn’t excuse me being an asshole about it.”

“It doesn’t excuse me either.” I closed my eyes, a wave of exhaustion washing over me. “I’m at the bar every day. Morning to night. I can’t even play my guitar anymore because I’m too busy. And it’s only going to get worse. Tourist season hasn’t even officially started.”

“Let’s hire someone else to help, then. A front of house manager or something.”

I chuckled dryly. “From where? There were hardly any resumes that came in for the last position. And we can’t just keep throwing money at staff and hoping it’ll solve our problems. Maybe once summer’s over, if the season goes well. Or maybe Mom will actually come back and...”

“Let me help more, then,” he said when I trailed off.

“You already work almost every day.”

“I own half the place. I can work as much as I want.”

Shaking my head, I let go of his hand. “I’m just whining. I have to sort my shit out and get used to it.” Caleb looked at me and I met his eyes. “We shouldn’t do this again.”

He nodded. “This is the last time.”

“Right. Just, can you maybe be subtle about... you know. Hitting on people? At least at work? I promise I’m going to try not to be jealous, but...”

“Scout’s honour.” He leaned forward and kissed me suddenly, startling me. “Sorry. Last one. From here on out, we keep it professional.”

He left soon after, making me promise one more time that I was okay and that he hadn’t hurt me. Locking the door after he left, I sighed miserably.

I wasn’t okay, but not for the reason he was thinking.

Every time I slept with him, it got harder and harder to not want more. He was an addiction. The more I had, the more I wanted. The more I tried to quit him, the more I craved.

I didn’t want to keep it professional, but it was what we had to do.

I promised myself it was the last time.

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THIRTY-TWO

CALEB

IT WAS NOT THE last time.

The next week of work went well. At first, Maggie and I were completely in sync. Tammy, the new bartender Maggie had hired, was great. She caught on easily and was a fun, easygoing person who the locals quickly grew to love. I spent most of the week working with her, teaching her the ins and outs of the bar and its quirks. For that reason, Maggie ended up taking care of most of the behind-the-scenes stuff. She was understandably frustrated, and it was just one thing that snowballed into more and more frustration, until we had another fight after a long shift.

Somehow, I ended up in her apartment again. That time, I didn't take charge. Maggie was the one who was in control, and she made sure I knew it as she sat me on her couch and rode my cock. Her fingernails scratched up and down my back as she fucked me, digging into my skin and leaving marks that lasted for days.

Again, we said it was the last time.

A week later, we fought about changing our hours. I insisted we could close early on the slower weeknights. Maggie hated the idea, seeing as The Sea Glass hadn't changed their hours in years. I got my way, but only after eating her pussy until she screamed and then fucking her from behind on her bed. She begged me to spank her and pull her hair again, and I swear half the town heard her shrieking as she came.

That was the last time, too, and the week after that, and the one after that.

That summer, I fucked Maggie for the last time on a weekly basis, if not more. We never did it in the bar or the office, but at least once a week we ended up giving in to the tension between us. Each time, we swore it was the last, that we'd stick to it this time and stop sleeping together. Each time, we failed, and I was feeling less and less guilty about it.

I had a feeling that we were finding things to argue about on purpose.

The Sea Glass was doing well, business-wise. We were busy almost every night and made sure we took care of our local regulars, but were just as welcoming to the tourists who, honestly, dropped way more money with us than I'd expected. Big Tim's burgers were classic, but it was the new Indian fusion dishes he and Tammy came up with that kept people coming back. If someone told me that the butter chicken burger would start outselling the bacon burger, I wouldn't have believed it, but it did. The locals loved their coupons. The staff seemed happy with how things were going and if there was

something they didn't like, they weren't afraid to tell me, which I respected.

Despite trying to help Maggie as much as I could, she still worked harder than anyone else. We were busy enough that we started opening Tuesdays, previously Maggie's only day off because the bar was closed. She was there before opening every day, often staying until after the dinner rush and sometimes even until close if it was busy. All the while, she insisted she was fine.

She also insisted that I take days off, even though she steadfastly refused to. Her excuse was that I needed the time to work on my renovations, which was fair, but looking back, I think it was a control tactic. But it was an argument I let her win.

That fight did end with a particularly memorable blow job where I came all over her tits, watched her wipe it away and lick it off her fingers, and got so hard from the view that I ended up bending her over the couch again. But she would have won the argument with or without sucking me off. Maggie was protective over everyone's work-life balance, except her own.

It was about a month before the end of summer when I walked into the bar one evening to start my shift. It was comparatively quiet when I went in, and the evening staff had all arrived. Tammy was on the bar, Big Tim was in the kitchen, and we had two servers working the floor.

I expected that meant Maggie was catching up on things in the office, and that I'd be more helpful with that. Tammy could easily handle the bar herself already. I opened the door and was about to greet her, but stopped when I saw no one was sitting behind the desk.

Frowning, I was about to go back to the kitchen and ask if anyone knew where Maggie was when I heard that sweet little snoring noise I'd heard once before. Looking around the open door, I saw her lying on the old green couch, arm thrown across her face and fast asleep.

Quietly, I entered the office and closed the door behind me. As she slept, I sat down at the computer and began working, typing as softly as I could so the sound didn't wake her.

There was a decent amount of stuff to do, but I got through quite a bit of it. By the time Maggie woke up, I had posted the next schedule, prepped our liquor order, and done payroll. I was just starting on a tax report when I heard her gasp and bolt upright on the couch.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"I don't know," I said, still typing. "Couple hours, at least."

She stood up, patting her hair down frantically. "Shit. Caleb, why didn't you wake me up? It's dinner and... fuck, I need to ___"

"It's okay, Mags. Everything's under control."

She didn't listen and bolted out of the office as though the kitchen was on fire. I glanced at the cameras and watched as

she stopped short, surveying the restaurant. Customers were taken care of, the bar was stocked, and Big Tim was happily flipping burgers while Tammy chatted with Fred and Wanda at the bar. Slowly, she walked back to the office, shutting the door behind her.

“They had no idea, did they?”

I shook my head. “I came in here when I arrived and haven’t been back out.”

She sat back down on the couch. “I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

I stopped typing. “What time did you get here this morning?”

She didn’t respond, just blushed.

“And what time did you leave last night?” I pressed.

“A couple hours after close. One-thirty, maybe?”

“I looked at the cameras. You turned the lights out at twenty after three.”

Again, she didn’t respond.

“Mags, you’re here a minimum of twelve hours a day, every day. You’re exhausted.”

“What am I supposed to do, Caleb?” Her face twisted, and for a moment I thought she was going to cry. “There aren’t enough hours in the day to get everything done.”

“We can hire someone to help.” She started to protest, but I interrupted. “We can absolutely afford it. I’ve looked back on

the sales reports from the last five years. Even with us closing to renovate, we made more money during the off season than any previous year. We've already doubled last year's profit this season, and there's still at least a month to go. Six weeks if the weather holds up."

"And what about paying you back for the renos?" she asked. "How can you consider this all profit when we haven't paid you back yet?"

"I knew what I was getting into," I said. "Besides, what good does it do to pay me back at the cost of you burning out? Long term, that'll cost us more. We can't run this place without you, period."

She stammered for a moment. "My mom's going to come back, though."

"Yeah, and Steve too, if he wants. There's enough money for either two full time positions, or a full time and two part time."

"And where are we finding this mysterious staff member to help us run the restaurant?"

"Well, if we offer a bit of a higher wage, we can probably attract someone who works at the Starbucks or something." I shrugged. "Make it clear that they're not the only gig in town. We'll find someone."

Maggie sighed. "Even if we can afford it, I live here. I wake up in the morning, and I'm at the bar. We close, and it seems stupid to go upstairs when I have work to do down here."

I'd seen Maggie in a number of states. Years ago, I'd seen her eyes flash nervously as she asked me to take her virginity. More recently, I'd seen her angry to the point of screaming, her face red and flashing.

I'd watched her deal with nuisance customers, turning down piggish tourists who treated her like an object, and I'd watched her surprise customers with the little things she'd do to make them feel at home.

I'd seen her beg for me to make her come.

I'd seen her laugh begrudgingly at stupid jokes I made, and I'd seen her smiling softly in post-orgasmic bliss. I'd looked down at her with my cock in her mouth, and up at her as I licked her pussy. I'd seen her cry, albeit only a handful of times, and only once as an adult.

Day in and day out, I'd seen Maggie handle a myriad of emotions, sometimes with more grace than at other times. Sitting in our shared office, cradling her head in her hands, I was seeing her in a state I hadn't before, and couldn't quite name. I think she felt hopeless. Overwhelmed, definitely. Probably scared. Dejected. Hurting in a way that tortured me, denying help when all I wanted was to take her in my arms and make everything better.

Despite the arguments and drama, I saw Maggie as the perfect being she was. Imperfect as anyone, and perfect to me.

There was no denying it anymore.

There was no way for me to promise her another last time.

I couldn't tell her that sitting in our little office, though.

“Mags, let's get out of the bar for a bit. Come over to my place after we close. We'll have a drink and figure things out.”

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THIRTY-THREE

MAGGIE

MARBLE BEACH IS FAR enough north that the summer days are longer than most.

During the winter, it's dark in the morning when people leave for work, and dark when they leave work to go home. It gets cold, snowy, and depressing. Sometimes people come to the lake to ice fish, but most of the time they go to the other side of the lake for that kind of thing. It's quiet and isolated and lonely.

At the peak of summer, though, it's light out until nearly ten-thirty at night. The tourists love it. They start roaring campfires long before the sun sets and drink well into the night. Kids ride their bikes through the streets, stop for dinner, then still have enough sunlight to go back and play for a few more hours.

The night that Caleb asked me to go to his place for a drink was past the peak of summer, but it was still mostly light out when we locked the doors. Even so, it felt strange to me to be out. I'd been working past sunset every night.

After Caleb left the office to help Big Tim clean the kitchen, I dug out the reports he was referring to. He was right, of course. The Sea Glass was having a record year, and we were doing it with two less staff members than my mom usually had. Of course I was working insane hours. I'd taken over my mom's role but had never filled my own. It hadn't made sense to me to spend money hiring yet another person when I could just do it myself.

I finally understood why my mom had used the apartment as a storage room. Even when things were tight growing up, having a home to escape to at the end of the day was worth more than what she would have saved by living where she worked.

I followed Caleb to his place in my car, convincing myself it would help me stick to our promise of not hooking up again. Caleb probably thought I was a joke at that point. We had sat in my apartment weekly that summer, naked and sweating, vowing it was the last time. I swore each time that I meant it, but a week later I would fail to stop myself from ending up over him or beneath him, pleasure shooting through my body.

But I was scared to let us fall into the trap of being something more. Sure, we were breaking the rules constantly, but I didn't know if getting rid of the rules was the right way to go.

Caleb was my business partner. He was tied to my life, my livelihood. And while I trusted him completely, he still lived in his cabin. In his lake house.

He was going to leave someday.

The sun was just going down when I parked on his driveway. He was already standing on the gravel, waiting idly as I got out of the car. I couldn't help the tingle of attraction that ran through my body as he stood there, the golden light glowing around his face.

He unlocked the door and I followed him in, then stopped in my tracks.

“By the way,” he said casually. “I finished the renovations.”

It wasn't at all what I had expected him to do with the place. Everything was fresh, yet cozy. The floor was new, but a different colour than what he'd ended up using for the bar. He hadn't replaced the cabinets, but had refinished them, and they gleamed under the soft rays that floated through the back windows. There was a plush sheepskin rug on the floor in front of the fireplace, but instead of looking like something from a trashy romance novel, it made me want to settle on the couch and pick at my guitar.

When it came right down to it, it was modest compared to the other luxury houses, but it looked like an actual home. Caleb had updated a lot of things, but I could see the marks of care and pride in everything he'd done. It was nowhere near the extravagant things he'd planned to do, but it was...

It was perfect.

“Holy shit,” I finally managed to say.

“What do you think?” Caleb asked, grinning.

I wandered into the house. “It looks amazing. When did you finish?”

“Beginning of the summer,” he said.

He grabbed two beers from the kitchen, where he’d replaced the appliances, and led me out to the deck.

It was different from the last time I’d seen it, and the only thing that seemed to have stayed from the initial plan. Caleb had built the dream deck he’d talked about, with stairs leading up to a patio off the bedroom and another set leading down to a stone terrace. The railings were done in glass so there was a seamless view of the lake. The same patio furniture was still there, old but sturdy, giving the place a lived-in feel. I walked past a lounge with a striped cushion on it to the railing, looking out over the lake.

“It turned out great, Caleb,” I said as he came up behind me.

“It might not be what I planned, but I think it’s exactly what I wanted,” he said.

We sipped our beers quietly. Caleb’s property was surrounded by trees, and if any of his neighbours were out enjoying the amazing sunset, I couldn’t hear them.

“You’ll rake in the money when you leave. Private lot like this, all those upgrades.” I tried to smile, but the thought of Caleb leaving made me miserable. “Will you still come to the bar?”

He didn’t answer right away, and when I turned to him, I realized he’d been watching me intently.

“I’m not selling it, Maggie.”

My stomach fluttered. “You’re going to stay? And live here?”

“Yeah.” He looked nervous, his lip trembling just the slightest bit. “Mags, I’m about to say something, and it’s going to change things between us.”

The fluttering in my stomach stopped abruptly, dropping in terror as my mind raced. He had met someone. Or wanted to buy me out of the bar. Or worse.

“Okay,” I finally managed to say.

“Move in with me.”

Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn’t that. I stared at Caleb, frozen in place.

“I can’t. We... we’re business partners. We have to keep it professional,” I finally stuttered.

“Yeah, and every time we agree to stop fucking, we end up back together.” Caleb put his beer down on the patio table. “I can’t pretend anymore. I spend almost all my time with you. I see you every day.”

“We fight all the time.”

“We fight because it means we’re probably going to fuck after,” he shot back. “Do you think we’d fight all the time if we could just be together whenever we wanted?”

I flushed. The last time he came to my apartment after a shift, we’d argued about changing a beer we had on tap. I had

no strong opinion either way, and it was only after he'd pulled his cock out of me that I realized I'd disagreed with him just to get him upstairs.

"I want you to live with me," he continued. "I want us to be together. I want to stop pretending like neither of us wants that. Don't you?"

His eyes seemed to stare straight into my heart.

"Yes," I whispered.

He let out a breath, his eyes flashing hopefully. "You do want me?"

"I've always wanted you," I said, but my voice cracked painfully. "But this isn't just a summer fling or something, Caleb. The bar is my whole life."

"And you don't think it's mine now?" He took the beer from me and put it on the table next to his, taking my hand. "It is. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. We've been making some stupid rule that we can't be together because, what, we work together? We own a business together? The Sea Glass is *our* place, Mags. We can make whatever fucking rules we want, and I want to make a new rule."

"What rule is that?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"The rule is that I'm going to tell you, every single day, that I love you. That I'm in love with you. That everything I do is for, because of, and dedicated to *you*. Because I want you. I always have, I always will, and even though you tell me I can't always get what I want, this is one of those 'wants' that I

will fight to have.” His throat flexed as he swallowed. “I like that rule better than the one where I don’t get to be with you.”

There were probably a lot of reasons for us not to be together. But just then, with Caleb standing in front of me, holding my hand and telling me he loved me and asking why we had to deny ourselves what we both wanted, I couldn’t think of any.

So instead, I kissed him.

He dropped the hand he was holding, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me in close. Warm rushes of relief poured through my body, and when I stopped to take a breath, I looked up at him.

“I love you too, Caleb.”

Having said the words, I knew they were true. Caleb grinned and brought his face to mine again, and as we kissed, I felt more at home than I ever had in my life.

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THIRTY-FOUR

MAGGIE

THE LAST WARM RAYS of the sun glowed on our skin as it set across the lake. Caleb put a gentle hand on my cheek, his thumb caressing it as he explored my mouth with a tenderness we had both been missing. Anger and frustration had fueled our trysts over the summer. With the admission that we wanted to be together, we had replaced those emotions. There had always been passion, but now there was an exciting kind of affection making my heart race.

I let my fingertips trail up Caleb's neck and into his thick hair, where I lightly dragged them along his scalp. He shivered against me, pressing his body closer to mine. Already I could feel his cock thickening, a gentle prodding against my pussy.

My body was responding, too. Under the thin lace of my bra, my nipples were hardening, and the warmth between my legs would soon be a dripping mess of arousal. Caleb ran his hands down my sides, tracing the curve of my waist and hips, and I sighed against his mouth as he brought them up to my breasts.

I wasn't used to Caleb like this anymore. I was used to hair pulling, spanking, and urgent fucking. The softness of his touch was driving me crazy in a way I hadn't expected and couldn't get enough of. He cupped my breast through my shirt and bra, skimming his fingers across the underside of my breast and up to my nipple. He circled the hardened nub, tantalizing me as I continued to play with his hair.

The world around us was darkening, turning the sky a deep blue as the sun finally sank below the horizon. The surrounding air began to cool, but Caleb's hands were leaving trails of warmth on my body, and the feel of his cock coming to attention against me added to the fire in my core. I pulled at his shirt, eager to remove it from him and feel the heat of his skin.

He helped me lift it over his head, tossing the fabric to the ground. As he moved to wrap his arms back around me and kiss me again, I stopped him.

"Go sit there," I directed, pointing at the lounge.

He nodded and moved onto it, leaning against the back as his legs stretched along the striped cushion. I stood at the edge of the lounge, and once he was settled, took off my shirt.

Caleb watched me undress with his lips parted and his eyes wide. My shirt followed his to the ground, and I unbuttoned my jeans and slid them off while he looked on. Once I was down to just my bra and panties, I moved onto the lounge, straddling Caleb as I pulled myself close to him.

“Mags,” he breathed, his hands tracing the same patterns they had earlier, only against the bare skin of my waist and sides and hips. “It kills me how fucking beautiful you are.”

“It better not,” I said. “You’re no good to me dead.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he laughed. Then he began to worship me, kissing and caressing and every spot on my body that he said was so beautiful or perfect or amazing that it was going to end him. He kissed my neck and shoulders, traced my tattoos with his tongue, and brought my hand to his mouth so he could kiss each of my fingertips.

When he got to my breasts, I moaned softly. His fingers slid between my cleavage as he whispered sweet nothings, then he went quiet as his mouth found my nipple through the thin, lacy fabric. I couldn’t help but push against him, the barrier of the fabric adding a delicious friction against my sensitive nipple. His thumb brushed over the other one, and then he was reaching behind me to fiddle with the clasp.

For the first time, Caleb was able to unhook my bra.

“Yes!” he exclaimed as the band came apart, and I laughed as he pulled the straps down my arms and threw it unceremoniously to the side.

He continued his list of things as he touched me, his hands rubbing my sides and back, flitting over my stomach and belly button. Beneath me, his cock twitched, and I was sure his jeans were restricting him painfully.

I slid back on his lap, my ass resting just above his knees. He watched as I fiddled with his belt and unbuttoned the jeans, tilting his head back and sighing as I slid his straining erection out of his jeans. Bringing the elastic of his boxers down, I licked my lips as I released him.

He groaned as I wrapped my fingers around him. The smooth skin of his cock was hot, and pre-cum already leaked from his swollen tip. Caleb's eyes closed as he leaned back on the lounge, but he opened them a moment later when I stroked his cock. His hand inched forward and found its mark between my legs.

Unlike weeks prior, he wasn't trying to tease me. He slid into the waistband of my panties, immediately finding my tender clit and swiping his fingers over it. I gasped and my eyelids fluttered as he worked his fingers at the same speed I was stroking his cock.

It felt amazing. I watched as he played with my pussy, his hand moving delicately in my panties. Then I watched his cock running through my hand, appreciating the way his veins felt under my palms. When I looked back up at him, he was watching me, a small smile on his face.

I smiled in return, blushing. "I like to watch us."

"Yeah?" he breathed. "You like how my cock looks in your hand? And how my fingers look when they're buried in that wet little pussy of yours?"

"I do," I said.

He groaned softly. “I do too, Mags. But what I like most is seeing the look on your face when I do this...”

He slipped a finger inside me with a confident familiarity. I cried out, my pussy tightening around his finger as he let out a strangled chuckle.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just like that. Do you know how fucking hot it is to see that how much you love having part of me inside you written all over your face like that?”

“Imagine how much better it’ll look when it’s your cock instead of your finger,” I gasped.

He chuckled again, then groaned as I tightened my grip on his cock and stroked intently. “Maybe you should let me take a look at that expression. Just to compare, you know.”

“If you insist,” I replied, and he withdrew his hand from my panties.

Caleb reached for my hips and pulled me forward, forcing me to let go of his cock and slide it between my legs. My panties were soaked, and I was sure he could feel my wetness through them. Leaning against Caleb’s chest, I kissed him again, my breasts pressing against his naked torso. Gently, I ground myself against the stiff rod between my legs, moving my hips in a tight circle.

He groaned and ran his hands up and down my back, squeezing my ass and dragging his fingers along my spine.

“Please tell me you have a condom,” I whispered.

“In my pocket,” he replied. “Stand up and take your panties off, Mags.”

I wasn't sure if he had planned to get me naked, or if he just happened to carry condoms around all the time since we were fucking weekly anyway, but I didn't care. I pushed myself off the lounge and watched as he grabbed the condom from his pocket before kicking his pants off. I waited until he had unrolled it on his cock and his eyes were back on me to slide my panties down my legs.

As I stepped out of them, he licked his lips. I stood in front of him for a moment, pausing in the cooling night air so he could trail his eyes up and down my naked body.

“Come here,” he murmured, his voice needy.

I tucked my hair behind my ear and crawled back onto the lounge. He had one hand on his cock, ready to guide himself into me, and the other rested on my hip. I hovered over him, feeling him ready at the slick entrance of my pussy.

“I love you,” I whispered. Leaning forward, I kissed him and lowered myself onto his waiting cock.

The sigh of relief that left my lips matched Caleb's, and I paused for a moment once he was inside me. My arms were around his neck, and his around my waist. Our chests pressed together, my legs squeezing against his thighs, and his cock filled me completely. I wanted him more than anything in the entire world. I wanted the closeness between us to last forever, to live in that moment where our bodies touched everywhere they could.

As I began moving against him, his lips left mine and he buried his face against my breasts. His hands moved to my hips, guiding me up and down as I rode him. He managed to get his mouth around one of my nipples as my tits bounced against him, and I cried out as he sucked on it.

His hips rose to meet me, and before long, we were moving against each other in unison. His hand slid to the small of my back, helping push me down against him as he thrust up into me. With his mouth on my tits and the thickness of his cock stretching my pussy, my mind was gone, focusing only on the pleasure radiating throughout me, working only towards feeling Caleb explode inside me.

Deep inside my body, I could feel the telltale signs of an orgasm approaching. Each time he buried himself within me, it got closer, and I panted as my fingers and toes began to tingle.

And he knew. Somehow, he always fucking *knew* right when I was about to come. I didn't know if I loved or hated that about him. On the downside, he might deny me an orgasm again.

On the upside, he might deny me an orgasm again. And again. And then he'd finally let me come, just like he always did, and I would... well.

But that wasn't what he was there for that night.

"Come for me," Caleb murmured, his breath hot against my chest. "I fucking love when you come on my cock, Mags."

I tried to say something back, though I could never remember what it was, but he pushed me over the edge. Bolts of pleasure rushed through my body and I cried out, bearing down on his cock as my orgasm moved through me like electricity. Caleb continued thrusting up into me as I came, and I clutched him like a life preserver.

As the waves of pleasure subsided, Caleb came. He held me tight to him, his face still mashed against my breasts, grunting as he stilled within me. I held him as he panted, only moving when I was sure every spurt had finished.

Moving off his cock, I stretched my legs alongside him. His arms cradled me to him, our bodies pressed together in that lounge that had just enough space for the two of us.

“I love you, Mags,” he mumbled, kissing the top of my head as I nestled onto his chest.

Together, we lay on the lounge, listening to the sounds of the night and the waves on the lake, and I closed my eyes.

This was home.

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EPILOGUE

CALEB

IT WAS THE BEST and the worst summer of my life.

It was the best because The Sea Glass did better than either Mags or I could have ever hoped. Once we announced we were together, things went even more smoothly. I did get a stern talking to from... well, everyone. Annie and Big Tim and Tammy, even though Tammy had only known Maggie for a few months. But all of them wanted to make sure I knew how much trust Maggie was putting in me not to hurt her, not when her livelihood and her home and, most importantly, her heart were all on the line.

I did know that, and I promised each of them that all three of those things were safe with me and always would be.

And it was also the best summer because Maggie moved in with me just a week later. It didn't take us long to pack up her apartment, and it took even less time for her to make the cabin feel like it was the home we'd always been meant to have. The first time I walked downstairs to see Maggie sitting in the living room with her guitar, singing softly beneath her breath

as she taught herself a new song... I'm not even a little ashamed to admit the sight of that made me hard.

Though, the fact that she was doing said activity while completely naked and lounging on the sheepskin rug may have had something to do with it as well.

And that's why it was also the worst summer of my life. Because Maggie moved in with me. And Maggie moving in with me meant I got to have all of those moments.

I got those lazy mornings with the sunrise filtering into our bedroom, making love to her from behind as we curled up in our bed.

I got passionate moments in the kitchen, bending her over the counter when she got home from work late at night and went to make herself a snack.

I got Maggie, naked and sinking into the plushness of the rug as I thrust into her, her legs around my waist and her moans replacing the guitar as the music that was filling the room.

It was the worst because I got spoiled. Because every moment I wasn't with her, I was miserable, wishing I could be back in our home with her hair in my fist or her thighs squeezing my head or her nipple in my mouth.

Not that I was complaining.

But it was an amazing summer. Sales were so good that we decided we'd do another renovation during the winter. Unlike the previous year, we didn't have to close to do it, since there

was no real rush. Adding the archway to the back wall was a single Tuesday's work and cutting the upper wall down to a half wall was another Tuesday. Then we spent a few more Tuesdays finishing and finessing, making the whole area perfect.

There was a slight delay before the final approval. Some kind of anonymous tip that the building might not be structurally sound due to the very thoroughly planned, fully permitted, and extensively inspected renovation. I didn't mention the delay to Maggie; she'd given me full reign of that reno, and I saw no reason to worry her when I had a feeling I knew what was happening.

As luck would have it, she wasn't around when an inspector from the town showed up a few days later. That was especially good, since said inspector was accompanied by two men who not-so-subtly took a seat at one of the tables to watch the whole thing go down.

And as luck would have it, I was in the office when all that happened, so I had the distinct pleasure of walking out of the kitchen with a smile on my face as I went to greet the three of them.

"You're the owner?" the inspector said, frowning as I walked up.

"Sure am," I replied.

"Thought it was, uh... Josie Myers," he said, looking at his papers.

“Your info seems to be outdated,” I said. “Josie sold me half the business a while ago. Her daughter, Maggie, owns the other half.”

Then, I turned to the men who had sat down.

“Todd,” I said. “Interesting to see you here. Didn’t you say you were trying to get this place shut down so your buddy could buy the land in some kind of insider deal with the town?”

I’d never seen a man go so pale.

“I said no such thing,” Todd said. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“Caleb Vaughan,” I said. “Remember, I was going to renovate my cabin and you wanted to buy it off me? I bought a shit-load of supplies from you to renovate this place. Well, some of them. After that whole thing where you commented that my girlfriend could be a stripper once your buddy got her business shut down because he was pissed she dumped a beer on his head after he made some inappropriate comments to her?” I looked at the other man. “You don’t happen to be the buddy now, are you?”

“I have no idea what you mean,” he said in a way that sounded like he totally knew what I meant.

“Probably a good thing,” I said. “I can’t imagine I’d be pleased to meet someone who talked to my girlfriend like that and then tried to get her shut down over it, especially if he was trying to do the same damn thing again by reporting our recent

renovations to the town in the hopes that they'd condemn the building. In fact, I can't imagine that he'd be very welcome in Marble Beach at all."

After the inspection—which we passed easily—I was surprised to see one of the lake houses on the far end of town go up for sale. Unrelated, I'm sure, but I didn't ever see either of those men around town again.

Once all that red tape was taken care of, The Sea Glass had an upstairs seating area that looked down on the stage I'd built for Maggie.

She started playing her guitar more, too. More and more, she trusted the staff to take care of things on their own, and that allowed her to do the part of the job she loved most. Many nights, people came just to hear Maggie play and have a drink or two.

We hired a person full time to manage the front of house and added another part time bartender and part time cook. By the time the next summer rolled around, we were in great shape, and things were even busier than the previous year. It didn't hurt that The Sea Glass got a write up in a regional travel guide as a "must visit" for people planning the perfect bachelor or bachelorette party in Marble Beach.

My mom came to visit that winter. She was worried, I think, about going to the cabin. Too many memories. Too many moments with my dad that would never happen again. The fear that I'd turned that beloved piece of our family history into the kind of place Dad would have hated. But when she got

to Marble Beach and saw the place Maggie and I had turned the cabin not into a lake house, but to our home, I think she understood.

“Your father would’ve loved this,” she said when she saw the deck, and even though it was snowing that day, we’d bundled up with blankets and winter coats so we could sit out there and watch the sun go down.

Josie and Tiny Steve returned a week before the snow did. I knew that she and Maggie talked regularly while they were away, but I don’t think Maggie had told her mom that she’d moved in with me. Though, Josie didn’t seem too surprised. I suppose when you’re the kind of person who would drop everything, bequeath her business to her daughter, and take off for a year-long road trip with her boyfriend, you tend to take these things in stride.

Steve moved in with Josie as soon as they got back. He didn’t come back to bartend much, though he said he was willing to cover shifts here and there if we needed him. Josie came back part time, insisting she didn’t want the business back from Maggie. I think that alarmed Maggie at first, but when Josie promised to be there as much as she was needed, she relaxed.

Which was good, because we were about to cash in on Josie's promise.

Because even after Annie and Big Tim and half of Marble Beach told her to sit down and relax for a while, Maggie stayed out there, waiting tables. God knows she wouldn't listen

to me, so I don't know why they'd think she'd listen to any of them. Her mom was ready to step in as soon as she was needed, but everyone knew Mags would be out there right up until her water broke.

Even then, I thought she might tell our baby it needed to hold off until she was done her shift.

I wouldn't expect anything less from her.

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And finally, to the man I love more every single day: I love you. You're my everything. Thank you for standing with me, encouraging me to follow my dreams, and being my happily ever after.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cheryl Terra began writing because she's greedy. She wanted to see stories that combined all her favourite things: love, drama, sex, comedy, and the empowering values she shares, plus a little Canadian pride for good measure. She blends humour, romance, and emotion together to make stories that are touching and relatable. Her writing often focuses on relationships and character growth, spinning tales in a way that makes the flawed people she writes about lovable and realistic.

When she's not writing, Cheryl can be found listening to the same song(s) on repeat for hours at a time, spoiling her dog and cat, keeping way too many house plants alive, and knitting or crocheting. She lives in Alberta, Canada with her husband.

For more information and to get free books, visit Cheryl's website at cherylterra.com

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WHEN IT RAINS

*When he met my sister, I knew he was going to
leave me for her.*

*Just like when I met his dad, I knew I wanted him
more than anyone I'd seen before in my life.*

What I didn't know?

*Just how far my sister would go to hurt me.
Just how many secrets it takes to keep a family
together.*

*And just how many knots would begin to unravel
when I found solace in the arms of the one person
I shouldn't.*

But it's like they say, I guess.

*When it rains...
It pours.*

Jocelyn “Joss” Miller's family is, in a word, disastrous.

With a boyfriend-stealing sister and a father who's decided she's clearly not the favourite, she's not sure how much longer she can give in to her mother's pleas to keep the peace. But when her sister does the unthinkable at her own wedding and Jocelyn is blamed, she finds comfort with the one man she shouldn't: a rugged carpenter and motorcycle enthusiast... who just so happens to be her ex's father, Derek Thompson.

With a sister dead set on revenge and an ex-boyfriend trying to repair his relationship with the father Jocelyn has fallen for, will the secrets revealing themselves one after the other lead to heartbreak, or can Jocelyn and Derek weather the storm and find love on the other side?

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RUNAWAY

“Guess I'm going to Vancouver now.”

“What? Why?”

“'Cause if I don't, you're gonna get yourself in trouble. Then I'm gonna have to hear some sad news story about a pretty small-town girl named Lacey Stephens who ended up dead in a ditch somewhere.”

After the boy she's crushed on for years plays a cruel prank, Lacey Stephens ends up stranded in Winnipeg with nothing but what's in her backpack. In a moment of recklessness she doesn't realize will change her life forever, Lacey boards a train headed west to find the brother she hasn't seen since their religious father kicked him out of their house ten years ago.

But when trouble finds her first and she's saved by a tall, stoic man with dark eyes, a tight smile, and a good heart,

Lacey starts to realize the life she had in her small, northern town was anything but normal... or safe. Determined to break free, Lacey contends with her family, her surroundings, and feelings she didn't know were possible.

Part coming-of-age story, part love letter to Canada, part sweet romance, Runaway follows the twists and turns of Lacey's journey, with plenty of steamy stops along the way.

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THE DEVIL MADE ME

When good things happen to Sean Lemieux, he knows something is about to go horribly, horribly wrong.

It's what he's come to expect. Five years after being kicked out at seventeen by his religious zealot of a father, he's learned to protect himself by keeping his hopes, fears, and secrets heavily guarded. Sure, he might not exactly be happy... but he's safe.

That is, until the day Rick McDougall walks into the firm Sean works at. The tall, immaculately good-looking redhead is the personal assistant of Sean's newest client: a world famous musician who's a little too busy to attend appointments himself. Even Sean can't deny the chemistry between the two of them.

But Rick is the definition of "too much of a good thing." Just as Sean starts letting his guard down, everything comes crashing down at once.

After discovering the baggage of his past and uncertainty of his future, will Rick be just another person who lets Sean down? Or is the tall redhead with startling blue eyes be the angel Sean needs to save him?

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WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS

*I can tell you anything about the man of my
dreams... except his name*

*Or what his voice sounds like. Or where he's
from. Or, well, anything else I'd have to learn by
actually talking to him.*

*But I can tell you exactly what shade of brown his
eyes are and how broad his shoulders are and that
his smile could melt ice. Day after day, I see him
working in the bar across from mine and think
about how hot he is. He's toned, tattooed... and
totally unattainable.*

*At least, for a shy, somewhat naïve virgin like me
who managed to get herself stuck in Las Vegas
after moving here with her cheating ex-boyfriend.*

But after my dream guy steps in to help me in a rough situation, I start to think there might be something... different about him.

Who is he?

Why are all these women flocking to his bar in the hopes of seeing him?

How come he pretends to be my boyfriend when my ex shows up one night - and how is it possible that a fake kiss from him can feel SO real?

And what does any of this have to do with Scrabble?

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