



Bad Crazy

He's well off.
She's...well, off.

WALL STREET JOURNAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR

L. J. SHEN

Bad Cruz



Wall Street Journal and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

L.J. SHEN

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From Wall Street Journal bestselling author L.J. Shen comes a romantic comedy that will make you fall in love... or at least stumble your way to it, laughing.

I would say Dr. Cruz Costello is my archenemy.
But that would require acknowledging one another, which we haven't done in over a decade.

He's the town's golden child. The beloved quarterback-turned-physician.

I'm the girl who got knocked up at sixteen and now works at a diner.

He is Fairhope royalty.
I get my monarch dose from tabloid gossip.

He's well-off.
I'm...well, *off*.

When our siblings get engaged, Cruz's parents invite both families to a pre-wedding cruise.
Except Cruz and I find ourselves stuck on a different ship from everyone else.
Cue ten horrible, insufferable days at sea with a man I cannot stand.

(My fault, of course.)

But when the alcohol pours in, the secrets spill out, and I'm left with one question:

Can I take another chance on love?

“When women go wrong, men go right after them.”—Mae West.

“True love is singing karaoke [‘Under Pressure’](#) and letting the other person sing the Freddie Mercury part.”—Mindy Kaling.

To the real Mrs. Turner. You can have the Freddie Mercury
part any day of the week.

Prologue



Tennessee

The important thing to remember is that I, Tennessee Lilybeth Turner, did not try to kill anyone.

Look, I'm not saying I haven't *contemplated* killing people in the past, nor am I virtuous enough to declare that I would be terribly sad to learn if some people (fine, *most* people) in this town found their unfortunate, untimely demise.

But taking a person's life?

Nuh-uh.

That's something I am one-hundred percent incapable of doing.

Mentally, I mean.

Physically, I could totally take a bitch down if I put my mind to it. I'm in pretty good shape from working on my feet all day carrying twenty-pound trays full of greasy food.

Emotionally, I just couldn't live with myself if I knew I'd made someone else's heart stop beating.

And then there's the going to jail part, which I'm not super hot on, either. Not that I'm spoiled or anything, but I'm a picky eater, and I've never had a roommate. Why start now?

Plus, I sort of reached my sin quota for the past three decades. Killing someone at this point would be—excuse my pun—overkill. Like I'm hogging all of the bad press Fairhope, North Carolina has allotted to its citizens.

There Messy Nessy goes again. With her out-of-wedlock baby, throat-punching tendencies and spontaneous murders.

(I shall explain the throat-punching incident in due time. Context is crucial for that story.)

So, now that it is established that I *definitely*, certainly, unquestionably did *not* try to kill anyone, there is one thing I should make clear:

Gabriella Holland deserved to die.

One



Tennessee

There was a ninety-nine point nine percent chance I was going to kill someone in this diner this sunny, unassuming afternoon.

The teenager with the yellow *Drew* hoodie, colorful braces, and stoned expression deliberately dropped his fork under the table of the red vinyl booth he occupied.

“Oops,” he drawled wryly. “Clumsy me. Are you gonna pick that up, or what?”

He flashed me a grin full of metal and waffle chunks. His three friends cackled in the background, elbowing each other with meaningful winks.

I stared at him blankly, wondering if I wanted to poison or strangle him. Poison, I decided, was better. Might be a coward’s way to kill, but at least I wouldn’t have to risk a broken nail.

My gelled, pointy, Cardi-B-style nail art was precious to me.

His neck, decidedly, was not.

“Don’t you have hands?” I popped my pink gum in his face, batting my fake eyelashes, playing the part this town gave me, of the airheaded bimbo with the big blonde hair who was barely literate and destined to serve them burgers for eternity.

“I do, and I’d love to show you what they’re capable of.”

His friends howled, some of them rolling into a coughing fit, clapping and enjoying the show. I felt Jerry, my boss, glaring at me from across the counter while wiping it furiously with a dishcloth approximately the same age as me.

His gaze told me not to “accidentally” spit my gum into their fountain soda (Tim Trapp had it coming. He’d insinuated I should become a hooker to put my son through college). Apparently, we couldn’t afford the legal fee nor the problematic reputation.

Jerry was the owner of Jerry & Sons. The only problem with this wonderful name was that there were no sons.

I mean, there *were*.

They were alive and everything. They were just lazy and burned their unearned paychecks on women, gambling, alcohol, and pyramid schemes. Exactly in that order.

I knew, because they were supposed to work shifts here, and yet, most of the time, it was just me.

“Gotta problem, Turner?” Jerry chewed on tobacco. The leaves gave his teeth a strange hue of urine-yellow. He eyed me meaningfully from across the counter.

Dang it.

I needed to bite the bullet and just do it.

But I *hated* horny teenagers who only came in to check what was under my dress.

Jerry’s waitresses (or: me. I was the only waitress here) wore pretty skimpy dresses because he said it got them (again: me) better tips. It did not. Needless to say, wearing the uniform was a must. White and pink striped, and shorter than a bull’s fuse.

Since I was pretty tall for a woman, half my butt was on full display whenever I bent down in this outfit. I could always squat, but then I ran the risk of showing something even more demure than my tuchus.

“Well?” Yellow-hoodied boy slammed his fist against the table, making utensils clatter and plates full of hot, fluffy waffles fly an inch in the air. “Am I going to have to repeat myself? We all know why you’re wearing that dress, and it ain’t because you like the breeze.”

Jerry & Sons was the kind of small-town diner you saw in the movies and thought to yourself, *there’s no way a crap-hole like this truly exists*.

Checkered black-and-white linoleum flooring that had seen better days—probably in the eighteenth century. Tattered red vinyl booths. A jukebox that randomly coughed up “All Summer Long” by Kid Rock entirely unprovoked.

And Jerry’s claim to fame—a wall laden with pictures of him hugging celebrities who’d made a pit stop in our town (namely, two professional baseball players who got lost driving into Winston-Salem and a backup dancer for Madonna who *did* come here intentionally, but only to say goodbye to her dying grandmother, and looked every inch of a woman who had just said goodbye to a loved one).

The food was questionable at best and dangerous at worst, depending on whether our cook, Coulter, was in the mood to wash the veggies and poultry (together) before preparing them. He was truly a great guy, but I’d rather eat crushed glass than anything his hands touched.

Still, the place was full to the brim with teens sucking on milkshakes, ladies enjoying their refreshments after a shopping spree on Main Street, and families grabbing an early dinner.

What Jerry & Sons lacked in style and taste, it made up for by simply existing: it was one of the very few eateries around.

Fairhope was a town so small you could only find it with a microscope, a map, and a lot of effort. Your-worst-ex’s-dick small. And a real time capsule, too.

It had one K-8 school, one supermarket, one gas station, and one church. Everyone knew everyone. No secret was safe from the gossip gang of elderly women who played bridge every day, led by Mrs. Underwood.

And *everybody* knew I was the screw-up.

The town's black sheep.

The harlot, the reckless woman, the jezebel.

That was the main irony about Fairhope, I supposed—it was not fair and offered no hope.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted Cruz Costello occupying a booth with his girlfriend of the month, Gabriella Holland. Gabby (she hated when people called her that, which was why I did it sometimes, although only in my head) had approximately six miles of legs, each the width of a toothpick, the complexion of a newborn baby, and arguably the same intellectual abilities.

Her waist-length, shiny black hair made her look like a long-lost Kardashian (Kabriella, anyone?), and she was equally high maintenance, making outrageous changes to the dishes she ordered.

For instance, the triple-sized, Elvis-style beef burger with extra cheese fries became a free-range, reduced-fat organic veggie burger, no bun, no fries, with extra arugula leaves and no dressing.

If you ask me, no thigh gap in the world was worth eating like a hamster. But Coulter still went along with all of her demands, because she always whined if her plate had a smear of oil by the time she was done with her food.

“Just give it up, Messy Nussy. Pick up my fork and we can all move on,” the teenager hissed in the background, snapping me out of my reverie.

Heat flamed my cheeks.

While Cruz had his back to me, Gabriella was watching me intently like the rest of the diner, waiting to see how this situation was going to play out. I shot another peek at Jerry before sighing, deciding it was not worth getting fired over, and crouching down to pick up the fork from the floor.

Two things happened simultaneously.

The first thing was I felt the douchebag's fingers pinch my butt cheek.

The second was I saw the flash of a phone camera behind me as someone took a picture.

I turned around, swatting his hand away, my eyes burning like I'd just opened them in a pool full of chlorine.

"What in the hell?" I roared.

The kid looked me straight in the eye, chewing on the straw of his milkshake with a vicious grin.

"I heard the stories about you, Messy Nussy. You like to slip under the bleachers with boys, don't ya? I can take you back to the scene of the crime, if you feel nostalgic."

I was about to lose my temper, job, and freedom and *really* kill the kid when he was saved by the (Southern) belle.

"Waitress? *Yoo-hoo*, can I get some help here?" Gabriella waved her arm in the air, giving her extra shiny hair a casual flip.

I pointed at that kid. "I hope you choke on your straw."

"I hope *you* choke on *my* straw."

"That's probably about accurate for size, I'm guessing."

"*Turner!*" Jerry barked, suddenly paying attention to this interaction.

"All right, all right," I muttered.

My only consolation was that, with a face and pickup lines like those, *Drew* hoodie kid was bound to stay a virgin deep into his thirties.

Still, it sucked that I had to keep this job to be able to provide for Bear. Finding a job in Fairhope was no easy feat, especially with my reputation. Secretly, though, I'd always wanted to save up enough to study something I liked and find something else.

I stomped my way toward Gabriella and Cruz's booth, too angry to feel the usual anxiety that accompanied dealing with the town's golden boy.

Cruz Costello was, and always would be, Fairhope's favorite son.

When we were in middle school, he'd written a letter to the president, so eloquent, so hopeful, so *touching*, that he and his family were invited to the Thanksgiving ceremony at the White House.

In high school, Cruz was the quarterback who'd led Fairhope High to the state finals—the *only* time the school had ever gotten that far.

He was the only Fairhope resident to ever attend an Ivy League school.

The Great Hope of Fairhope (Yup. I went there with the puns. Deal with it).

The one who helped Diana Hudgens give birth in her *truck* on a stormy Christmas Eve and earned a picture in the local newspaper, holding the crying baby with a smile, blood dripping along his muscular forearms.

It didn't help that upon graduation from college, Cruz had followed in his retired father's footsteps and become the town's beloved family physician.

He was, for all appearances, holier than the water Jesus walked upon, more virtuous than Mother Teresa, and, perhaps most maddening of all, hotter than Ryan Gosling.

In. Drive.

Tall, lean, loose-limbed, and in possession of cheekbones that, frankly, should be outlawed.

He even had a pornstache he was unaware made him extra sexy. There wasn't a woman within the town's limit who didn't want to see her juices on that 'stache.

Even his attire of a blind, senior CPA, consisting of khaki pants, pristine white socks, and polo shirts, couldn't take away from the fact that the man was ride-able to a fault.

Luckily—and I use that term loosely because there was nothing lucky about my life—I was so appalled by Cruz's general existence that I was pretty much immune to his allure.

I stopped at their table, leaning a hip against the worn-out booth and popping my gum extra loudly to hide the nervous hiccup from being touched by that kid. Whenever the occasional urge to speak up for myself rose, I remembered my job prospects in this town were slimmer than Gabby's waist. Raising a thirteen-year-old wasn't cheap, and besides, moving back in with my parents was not feasible. I did not get along with Momma Turner.

“Top of the mornin’ to you. How can I help Fairhope’s Bold and Beautiful?”

Gabriella scrunched her button nose in distaste. She wore casual skinny jeans, an expensive white cashmere shawl, and understated jewelry, giving her the chic appearance of effortless (and possibly French).

“How are you, Nesy?” she asked without moving her lips much.

“Well, Gabriella, every morning I wake up on the wrong side of capitalism, I’m pretty sure my car’s about to die, and my back’s not getting any younger. So all in all, pretty good, thanks for asking. Yourself?”

“I just got a big contract with a cosmetic company that will probably gain my blog a lot of traction, so really good.”

“Wonderful!” I cooed, doing my best not to notice Cruz.

Gabriella did that thing where she posted pictures and videos of herself on Instagram, trying out new products, making you believe you could look like her if you used them, too.

She dragged her plate across the table like there was a dead rat on it.

“Look, I don’t want to be that person, but I don’t think my turkey burger is...you know...”

“Cooked?” I curved an eyebrow. *Or turkey...*

“*Organic,*” she whispered, shifting uncomfortably.

I had a Sherlock on my hands.

Did she think she was at The Ivy? She should be happy her lettuce was washed and that the bun didn’t come from a can.

“It’s probably not,” I agreed.

Her eyebrows slammed together. “Well, I specifically asked for organic.”

“And I specifically asked for a winning lottery ticket and a hot date with Benicio del Toro. Looks like we’re both having a bad day, hon.” I popped my gum again.

Cruz was quiet, as he usually was when I was around. The elephant in the room was that Gabriella Holland was my baby

sister Trinity's best friend. And my sweet baby sister was engaged to Wyatt—Cruz's older brother.

Sounds super *Jerry Springer*? Why, I think so, too.

Which meant that, technically, I had to play nice with both of these uppity gassholes. But while Cruz made a deliberate effort not to acknowledge my existence in any way, I was perfectly happy to show him what I thought about *him*.

“Do you think that kind of attitude will help you get a tip?” Gabriella asked incredulously, folding her arms over her chest. Some best friend to my sister she was, treating me like I was a dry horse turd on the bottom of her stiletto shoe.

“I don't think I should be given attitude over a diner burger's origin story,” I supplied.

“Maybe if you were nicer and more conscientious, your poor son could have more opportunities.”

Yup. She went there. She actually mentioned Bear.

A bullet of anger pierced my gut.

“Well, if you were just a little bit prettier, maybe you wouldn't have come in third on Miss America.”

I smiled sweetly.

Clearly, I was willing to go *there*, too.

Gabriella's eyes watered and her chin wrinkled and danced like Jell-O as she fumed.

“I would like to speak to management!” she cried out.

“Oh, you mean the big boss?” I asked. “The one in charge of this entire culinary empire?” I made a show of moving half an inch to turn to Jerry. “Management! Table three wants to speak to you.”

Jerry rounded the counter, spitting his tobacco into a nearby trash can, already looking alert while I turned back to the happy couple.

“Anything else I can do for y'all?” My silky smile was as big and fake as Gabriella's breasts. “Maybe offer you some complimentary white truffle oil while you wait? Perhaps some

foie gras?” I made sure to pronounce the ‘s’, to keep that uneducated bimbo label alive.

I definitely wasn’t doing myself any favors. But dang, getting sexually harassed by a kid my son’s age and patronized by my baby sister’s friend just about hurled me to the breaking point.

“Yes, actually. I can’t believe Trinity—”

Gabriella’s scathing remark was cut off when a choking sound came from booth number five, the one occupied by Grabby McHandson himself.

“Oh my gosh!”

“Jesus! No!”

“He’s choking! He is choking on the straw!”

Karma must’ve heard my prayers and decided to intervene, because the guy who’d pinched my ass was now lying on the floor, clutching his neck, his eyes wide and red as he kicked his legs about, trying to breathe.

The whole diner was in a frenzy. People ran back and forth, chairs toppled, women screeched. Someone called 911. Another suggested we flip him on his stomach. And one of his friends was recording the entire thing on his phone, as if we needed more reason not to put our trust in Gen Z.

And there he was.

Dr. Cruz Costello, running in slow-mo to the kid, his sandy hair swooshing about like a *Baywatch* montage.

He performed the Heimlich maneuver on my assailant and made him cough out the piece of straw he was choking on, saving the day once again.

The jukebox, on cue, started belting out Kid Rock’s “All Summer Long”.

It wasn’t like I genuinely wanted the kid to die.

Being a *gasshole* was not a sin punishable by death. But the fact that the entire diner glossed over the overt sexual assault I’d been subjected to was jarring, if not completely depressing.

And then there was the fact that Cruz Costello was standing there, tall and muscular and alive, bathing in the compliments

everyone around us showered upon him.

“...saved the boy’s life! How can we ever thank you? You are an asset to Fairhope, Dr. Costello!”

“...told your mother when you were three that you were going to become someone important, and whaddaya know? I was right again.”

“My daughter is coming back from college next year. You sure you’re set on Gabriella, sugar? I’d love for you to meet her.”

I leaned against the counter, narrowing my eyes at the scene.

One of the teenager’s friends called his mother, who was going to pick him up. Jerry tried to calm everyone down by announcing everyone would be getting complimentary ice cream, and Gabby clung onto her boyfriend’s arm like she’d been surgically glued to it, fussing in his ear, urinating all over her territory.

Cruz tried to pay Jerry, but Jerry shook his head exaggeratedly.

“Your money’s no good here, Dr. Costello.”

Luckily for Dr. Costello, his money was good and welcome in *my* pocket. I pushed off the counter and strutted toward him, stretching my open palm up.

“I’m ready for my tip now.”

Gabriella’s mouth fell open.

Something mean was about to come out of it—the fact that my sister and she were best friends, that we were both going to be Trinity’s bridesmaids in less than two months, didn’t matter.

Today had reinforced the notion I was fair game in Fairhope, and everyone had the agency, the *God-given* right, to be mean to me. But Cruz stopped her, patting her flat ass with a lazy, lopsided grin.

He knew I loathed his golden boy act.

“Go on and wait in the car, honey.”

“But Cruuuuuuz.” Gabby stomped her foot, dragging his name out with a pout.

“I’ll handle it,” he assured her.

“Fine. But don’t be too nice,” she sulked, catching the car keys he threw into her hands, and sauntered out of the diner.

Cruz and I stood in front of each other. Two cowboys waiting to draw their weapons.

“Aren’t I going to get a thank you?”

His whiskey-soaked voice stirred something warm and sticky and unwelcome behind my ribcage. He had that Justin Hartley kind of body you just wanted to feel pressed against you.

“For what?” I mused. “Being alive, being a doctor, or being a royal pain?”

“Saving that kid.”

“That *kid* pinched my butt and took a picture of my panties.”

“I didn’t know that,” he said evenly.

I believed him, but so what? My hackles were so high up, I couldn’t even see past them.

“Tip me or get gone,” I huffed.

“You want a tip?” he asked tonelessly, his dark-blue eyes narrowing on my face. “Here’s one: get some better manners. Pronto.”

“Sorry.” I pouted, making a show of examining my nails. “Fortune-cookie advice is not a currency I accept at present. Cash or Venmo work, though.”

“You don’t actually expect a tip after your argument with Gabriella, do you?” He looked a little concerned for me. Like maybe on top of being a bimbo, I also possessed the IQ of a peanut butter sandwich. Sans the jelly.

“I do, actually. She knows we don’t carry organic meat—or arugula. Why does she keep asking?”

If he was going to tell me the customer was always right, I was going to add him to my ever-growing list of people to murder. Actually, he was already in the top ten for every time he’d run into me at social gatherings and pretended I didn’t exist.

“*Why* don’t you give her a straight answer?” he quipped back. For a moment—for a small, teeny, tiny fraction of a moment—I

could swear his good ol' boy mask cracked a little, annoyance seeping through it.

“*Why* don't you mind your own business?”

I noticed his eyes dropped to my lips when I said that.

I was aware I had enough makeup on my face to sculpt another life-size figure of myself and way too much pink lipstick for anyone's liking. But Cruz being Cruz, he never said anything mean or demeaning about anyone. Not even me.

I could see the nostrils of his straight Roman nose flare as he drew in a calming breath and tilted his chin up.

“Very well, Tennessee.” That was the other thing. Everybody called me Messy Nussy. He was the only one to call me by my given name, and it always felt like punishment. “I'll mind my own business. Let's start now, shall we? Did you book our tickets for the cruise yet?”

Ah, yes.

Since my parents were paying for Trinity and Wyatt's wedding, the Costellos—Cruz's parents—had decided to invite both families to a pre-wedding cruise so we could all get to know each other better.

Because the Costellos were frequent cruisers, they used their loyalty points to book Trinity and Wyatt the honeymoon stateroom and two-bed staterooms for themselves and my parents.

My son Bear all but begged to room with my parents, who were going to have a private Jacuzzi and in-suite candy bar. Since it was his first ever vacation, I relented.

But that meant Cruz and I still needed to book rooms for ourselves, and since Cruz had a “real job” and I had so much free time (my mother's words, not mine), I was tasked with finding us rooms for the cruise.

“I'm working on it.”

“I hadn't realized it took such effort to book tickets.”

I patted my stiff, heavily-sprayed blonde mane.

“Maybe for you it’s easy. But us feather-headed people take a long time to do things. Where do I book these tickets, anyway? The internets, yes?” I cocked my head. “It’s that thing on the computer? With all the little words and kitty videos?”

His blade-sharp jaw ticked.

Just once.

But once was enough to spark unabashed joy. It was a well-known fact that *nothing* threw Cruz Costello off-balance.

“Book those tickets, Tennessee.”

“Yes, sir. Will you be needing the double bed or just the queen?”

“Are you asking if I’m bringing Gabriella along?”

“Or any other almost-underage woman of your choice.”

That wasn’t completely fair, or the most extreme age gap amongst the dating pool.

Gabby was Trinity’s age, twenty-five, and Trinity was marrying Wyatt, Cruz’s older brother.

Cruz dipped his hand into the front pocket of his khaki pants. He wore casual exasperatingly well.

“Try not to mess things up when you book it, will you?”

Now that made my mask of indifference slip and shatter against the floor. Being the one who always messed up in this town might be the way I’d been pigeonholed, but in my opinion, I hadn’t earned it.

“I’m perfectly capable of booking two cruise tickets.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“You know,” I mused, twirling a lock of blonde hair that spilled from my unfashionable updo, “you’re not even half as nice as people think you are.”

“Been saving all this venom ’specially for you.” He tilted his ball cap down like a cowboy. “Any parting words, Tennessee? I have a date waiting in my car.”

Right, right, right.

His shiny Audi Q8 to go with his shiny girlfriend and his shiny life.

To that question, I answered with my middle finger, taking advantage of the fact everyone around us was talking animatedly about what happened to Straw Choker to notice.

It wasn't my most elegant answer, but it sure was the most satisfying one by a mile.



That evening, I was in danger of letting the waterworks flow.

I tried not to dwell in self-pity, but some days were just harder than others.

My son really wanted the new Assassin's Creed game, but I couldn't afford it. The worst part was he didn't even ask me.

I'd had to find out through my mother, over a phone call on my way home from work while my Honda Odyssey stumbled its way up my street like a drunken sorority girl after a block party.

Apparently, Bear had offered to mow her lawn for cash to be able to purchase it.

"I would buy it for him in a heartbeat, honey, you know, but those games are mighty violent, and I'm not sure he should be playing them anyway."

It was pointless to explain to her it was a Sisyphean battle to have Bear not play video games. That was what he and his friends did. It was the norm.

At the same time, I felt depressingly inadequate as a mother. A true failure. I couldn't even buy my son a *video game*.

Maybe Gabriella was right.

Maybe I needed to shut up, tell her the burger she had was organic, and suffer the occasional abuse for a nice, fat tip.

I pushed the door open to the weathered rental bungalow. The exterior was pale blue. Bear and I had painted it ourselves to knock down some of the rent money the owner had asked for.

The inside consisted of not much more than hand-me-down furniture from friends and family.

But it was ours, and we were proud of it.

I kicked my heels off at the door and dumped my jacket and purse onto the credenza, feeling bone-tired and weary.

Weary of not being able to afford the things my son wanted.

Of pimply, rude teenagers who pinched my butt at work.

Of Gabriella and her slim legs and easy, fat-contracts life.

And of Dr. Cruz Costello, who seemed hell-bent on hating me.

I really needed to get out of this town, and was going to do so as soon as Bear graduated from high school.

“Care Bear? You here?” I called out.

Pans and utensils clattered in the kitchen, growing louder as I made my way through the darkened, small living room.

“Mom? I made pasta. Sorry, I had a ton of homework and forgot to take the chicken out to thaw.”

I entered the kitchen and pulled my son into a bone-crushing hug. After I took a step back from him, I took inventory of his face, before tugging at his velvety earlobes and smacking a wet kiss on his forehead, something he disliked, yet indulged me nonetheless.

At thirteen, Bear was already a head taller than me. Not a huge surprise, seeing as he took after his father, who was a six-three tight end in high school.

It probably should depress me.

How Bear used me as a womb-for-hire and came out the spitting image of Robert Gussman. The same floppy chestnut hair, impish emerald eyes with golden flecks, deep dimples that popped out even when they talked, and slightly crooked nose.

It should, but it didn't.

Because Bear was so much his own person, Rob had become nothing but a faded scar at this point. Like an old penciled letter, the words erased by time and nearly indistinguishable.

“Pasta’s perfect.”

I rose on my toes to kiss his cheek. For all his handsomeness, Bear, like other boys his age, smelled of socks, hormones, and farm goats.

I pulled away, noticing he’d already set the table and served our dishes. “How was school?”

We both sat at the table, digging into his extra al dente (read: completely uncooked) pasta, drenched in a suspicious supermarket sauce.

“Pretty good. I mean, Mr. Shepherd is still pestering me about joining the football team, which is a drag, but other than that, it was nice.”

“Don’t let him strong-arm you into anything. You are not Rob. You don’t have to play ball.”

“There’s no danger of me becoming a jock. It’s so much effort for basically nothing.”

“Anything else going on in your life?”

Bear scrunched his nose, which made those dimples pop. “Not really.”

Something inside me softened, turning into an almost-dull ache. He didn’t want to tell me about the video game. Didn’t want to worry me about it.

“How was your day at work?” He looped a forkful of red pasta and scooped it into his mouth.

Well, son, it was worse than Abraham’s on the day God spontaneously told him he needed to circumcise himself at the age of ninety-nine.

Now it was my turn to lie. Or at the very least, give him an edited version of the truth.

“Great. Jerry might be needing me for some extra shifts in the next few weeks. That means more money. We can splurge a little. Anything you need?” I hoovered pasta into my mouth.

Thankfully, the stupid cruise was paid for by the Costellos, who weren’t exactly strapped for cash.

“Nah, don’t worry ’bout me. You should spend that money on yourself, Mom. You never get yourself anything.”

“That’s nonsense.” I waved my fingers, gulping air like there was too much of it in my airpipes. Holy *sheet*-balls, had he put Tabasco in this sauce? “I get myself these nails.”

“Nice try. Auntie Gail does them for free. I’m not stupid.” He rolled his eyes.

He was, in fact, the opposite of stupid. Bright and wise beyond his years. It was time I stopped lying to him about the small stuff just to make myself feel better.

The rest of the evening was bliss.

Bear and I watched *American Idol* together while eating pistachio ice cream in front of the TV. We laughed and passed judgment as if either of us could hold a note to save our lives. Then he kissed my forehead, wished me goodnight, and retired to his room.

A few minutes later, I heard soft snores down the hallway, escaping from his ajar door. That boy could sleep through the Kentucky Derby. Whilst being *on* a horse.

I grinned to myself, shaking my head as I gathered our ice cream bowls and empty iced tea glasses, making my way to the kitchen. The doorbell chimed just as I began to rinse the dishes clean.

With a soft sigh, I turned off the faucet, wiped my hands dry, and made my way to the front door.

The doorbell rang again before I could reach it.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. Sheesh.”

Was it my mother, passing by on one of her nightly walks in a bid to lose weight to tell me she’d decided to buy Bear his video game after all? Or maybe my sister, wanting me to look over a last-minute change to the flower arrangements or the wedding menu?

I flung the screen door open, and all the air left my lungs in one shocked *whoosh*.

On my front porch stood Rob Gussman, my high school sweetheart and Bear’s no-show Dad.

Thirteen years after leaving me pregnant at sixteen.

“Messy Nussy.” He smiled. “All grown up and lookin’ good.”

Two



Tennessee

I slammed the screen door in his face.

I could see through the glass that Rob loitered on my porch, his big athletic body shifting as he tried to figure out his next move. He stepped aside and stared at me through a side window, channeling his inner Ted Bundy.

“Okay. I admit it sounded way better in my head as an opening line. Sorry. Sorry. My bad. Can you open the door, please?”

I knew a few things about Rob, mostly from whispers overheard around town, seeing as he’d used his two working brain cells not to return to Fairhope, after leaving me high and dry in high school.

He knew my dad, who’d served as the town’s sheriff for twenty years, would hunt him down with a rifle and I would finish him off myself, with my bare hands.

I knew he’d taken a scholarship when I was sixteen and fled to Arizona, hoping to eventually get drafted into the NFL.

Knew he never did get his shot to go pro, and he spent the last decade playing for amateur leagues and coaching on the side to make ends meet.

I knew he'd been married—twice—and gotten divorced, but he had no other children.

But the most important thing I knew about him was what a deadbeat he was. He'd never met his son.

Never sent a postcard, a birthday present, a note, not to mention a darn check. Never asked a goddamn question about the best thing in my life.

It was his complete rejection of Bear that was inexcusable to me.

Rob didn't have to stay with me. But walking away from what he referred to as *my* mistake?

Yeah, fat chance getting off my fist list (people I wanted to punch) in this century, pal.

“C'mon, Nussy.”

Rob pressed his hand against the window, mustering just enough sadness to look pathetic. On second glance, he didn't look like the old Rob at all. The one chock-full of ambition and dimples and opportunity.

He looked as worn-out, tired, and empty as I felt.

Good.

“Please,” he said softly. “I've been mustering the courage to come here for a week now. Give me five minutes.”

I pulled the door open again. I wasn't curious at all as to why he was here. The number of dangs I gave about his reasons were currently minus fifteen and counting.

But if he truly was in a bad state, I didn't want to be the person to shove him over the edge into the arms of suicide. Despite all of my internal wishes for people to die, I wasn't so big on the concept in actuality.

Plus, he was still the father of my child, even if he'd never acted it.

Rob wore a North Face windbreaker, an expensive haircut, and a cast on his right leg. Something hot and full of shame swirled in the pit of my stomach when I thought about what he saw when he looked at me.

I was no longer the fresh-faced, beautiful girl he'd left behind, with the sun-spun hair, a dusting of blonde freckles, and knockout legs. I was twenty-nine now. Heavy makeup, a few extra pounds, and not enough sleep.

"You look...*great*," he whimpered.

His voice was different, too. Resigned, somehow.

"You look out of place," I answered dryly, leaning against my doorjamb. "What on earth are you doing in Fairhope, Rob? And why didn't you think to call before dropping on my porch unannounced and about as welcome as a bag of flaming dog poop?"

Truth of the matter was, I would welcome dog poop with open arms if given the option between it and Rob. At least stomping profusely on an enflamed poop bag would make the problem go away.

He motioned to his right leg with his hand, choking on the revelation. "I broke my femur."

You broke my heart.

"So I see." I maintained my businesslike tone. "Still doesn't answer my question."

"I can't play football anymore. Can't really coach, either," he choked out.

"My heart bleeds for you."

"Seriously." His brows knitted. "I'll never get back on that field, Nessy."

"Well, you are thirty-one and never made it to a pro league, so I'm pretty sure the world will survive the loss."

Were we really talking about his amateur football career right now?

"But that's not why I came back to Fairhope." He shook his head, like he was trying to remember his lines. He made an

attempt to catch my gaze.

I focused on his receding hairline, not ready to see what was in his eyes. My heart beat a thousand times a minute. I simultaneously couldn't believe he was here and prayed Bear wouldn't wake up for a glass of water.

"It's not?" I drawled.

"It's time I face my responsibilities. As I lay in a hospital bed two weeks ago with no one around me, I realized I'd been missing the point of life all along. I want to be with my family. With my aging parents. To establish roots, find a purpose, spend holidays and vacations with the ones who matter. I want to play ball with my son."

"He hates football," I pointed out, relishing the fact Rob's and Bear's personalities were about as different as could be.

"What's he into?" he asked, his throat clogging around the question.

The need to wind him up and say *cemeteries and animal sacrifice* was strong in that moment. But I pursed my lips.

I wasn't playing that game.

"Heard he looks just like me," Rob continued. "Tall, dark hair. Handsome."

I gave a modest shrug. "You just described half the population of North America."

His eyes lit up with hope, and something inside me loosened. As a young woman, I'd dreamed of this moment. Of Rob showing up and reclaiming Bear and me as his. Saving the day.

But the years had dulled whatever optimism I still had left in me, and now I was all out of expectations when it came to the human race.

Men, specifically.

And even more specifically—Rob.

Selfishly, I admitted to myself that it wasn't fair. That Rob didn't get to just walk into the movie on the third act, so close to the resolution, and become a part of the happy ending.

He had missed all the awful parts.

The sleepless nights, the colicky newborn, the teething, and all the checkups. The urgent care visits, the ear tubes, boo-boos that needed to be kissed, and stories that had to be read, and ABC's that had to be learned.

He wasn't there to teach his son how to ride a bike, or to skateboard, or to angle his penis down when he peed (this, I *especially* held a grudge for). How to fish, how to hang a picture on a wall, how to be a man.

A ball of tears blocked my throat.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"No."

I heard the chill in my voice, and it scared me that it came from me. But how else could I respond? The man ruined me, my life, my hopes, and my dreams. True, he gave me my most precious gift—our son—but that was very accidental.

He bit down on his lower lip, staring at his shoes like a punished kid.

"I'd really like to make this work."

"Make what work?"

"I want to see him, Nessy. My son."

"He has a name."

He closed his eyes, agony painting his too-familiar features.

"His name is Bear," I said.

"I know."

"It's a weird name, don't you think?" I taunted, not exactly sure where I was going with this, but wanting to inflict as much pain as possible on him.

Rob looked up, pulling dead skin from the lip he bit on just a second ago with his teeth.

"I don't think I have the right to pass judgment. I wasn't there to name him."

"Dang straight, you weren't."

The fact that he was so pliant, so readily apologetic, took the sting out of my need to be rude to him. Some of it.

He raked his fingers through his hair.

“Look, Nussy, I know I messed up, and I know the best way to show you I mean business now is to prove to you, over time, how much I’ve changed. The last couple years really did shift something in me. Countless times I wanted to reach out as the years passed ...” He took a breath, shaking his head. “Well, anyway. I’m working for my dad now, right here in town. He has this realty business. I got a house just down the street from you, so you can holler at me if you need anything at all. Here’s my number.”

He handed me a business card. I took it and shoved it into my pajama pockets without looking, breathing through my nose to avoid tears. Rob hung around on the porch, looking a little hesitant and a lot wary.

“What is it?” I rolled my eyes. “I know you want to say something else.”

“Well...this may be too soon, but...”

“What?”

I searched his face, and realized that even though he looked familiar, he was also unrecognizable. A man. A total stranger, who now looked at me, his expression full of angst, and didn’t resemble one bit the boy I’d once dated.

“I want to make it up to *you*, too, Nussy. Not just Bear. I want to try to win you back, too.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No. I’ve never stopped caring about you, Tennessee. I—”

“Thanks, but I’d rather lick the door handle of the nearest public bathroom.”

This time when I slammed the door in his face, I didn’t open it again.

There was only so much bull a woman could tolerate in a day.



I was well into my third serving of fine—discounted, almost-certainly-expired—wine when I remembered to book those tickets for the cruise.

I fired up my ancient laptop and typed in the web address my parents had given me for the cruise company. They had warned me a thousand times not to screw it up.

They had a good reason to, too.

I had a bad, self-diagnosed case of ADHD and was pretty terrible about doing anything that required more than three minutes of concentration and/or heavy machinery. My mind constantly felt like a multi-lane highway with no traffic signs. And after Rob's appearance, I was justifiably rattled.

But it was *literally* just booking tickets—how hard could it be?

I really didn't want Dr. Punched-Him-in-the-Throat (I'm building up to this story, okay? Bear with me!) to pester me about it. Not that he did. Cruz Costello was somewhat of an expert at ignoring my existence.

But if I could ensure he and I wouldn't have to speak to each other before the cruise, I was going to give it my best shot.

On the cruise company's website, I entered the *Elation* into the search bar, the cruise ship we were going to be on. It sailed from Port Wilmington and proceeded on a ten-day cruise to various Caribbean islands.

Apparently, this was a long-time tradition for the Costellos, who took their sons on a cruise to a different exotic destination every summer. We, the Turners, had had a few summer traditions of our own before I gave birth to Bear.

Namely, to haul ass to Disney World every August, complain about the Floridian heat, and then, later, about the insane lines, swear we'd never, *ever* come back again, and frantically try to find my very drunk, very friendly dad striking up a conversation with whatever poor actress they had dressed as Elsa that day.

Admittedly, I was a *little* tipsy when I booked my and Cruz's tickets.

Things were a bit...blurry as I entered all our details and forwarded the confirmation via email to

cruzcostellomd@healthhelp.com. Which was why I peppered the email with middle finger emojis, just so he'd know who it was from.

In the end, I shut down my computer, took my wine to my room, and collapsed onto my bed for an honest, six-hour-long slumber. A slumber filled with dreams of Benicio del Toro, and lottery tickets, and no Rob Gussmans or Cruz Costellos.

Three



Tennessee

The next day, I went to my parents' house after dropping Bear off at school. I had an evening shift, and I'd promised to help my sister Trinity make goodie bags for the bachelorette party later that evening.

Yup.

That was right.

One of the two bridesmaids—*me*—wasn't invited to the bachelorette party. Or, if we were going to get all technical about it, wasn't available at that hour, on that date.

But Trinity knew dang well there was no one to cover my shifts—and Tuesday was a night shift. So what I gathered from this, was that she didn't want me to be there.

Which, admittedly, wasn't a huge loss, seeing as Trinity's friends weren't my biggest fans.

Still, it stung she'd chosen this date—weeks before the actual wedding—just because she knew I couldn't make it. Although, if

you asked Trinity, she'd say 0720 was her lucky number. Which we all knew was bull-bleep. *No one's* favorite number is 0720.

"Hello, hello, hello! I'm here!" I used my key to open the door to my parents' Cape Cod-style house, holding a huge box of donuts. I toed off my leopard-print heels, strutting my way to the kitchen and flicking the coffee machine on.

As far as interior design went, my parents' house was a disaster of global proportions. My mother, who was an art teacher at the local elementary school, had pretty eccentric taste. And by eccentric, I mean, of course, hideous.

They had turquoise wall-to-wall carpet, a painting of some kind of a freaky farm on the kitchen wall that was supposed to be pastoral, and the bathrooms and bathtubs were painted in hot red and orange, which gave the rooms the elegance of a whorehouse on fire.

"Coming!" I heard footfalls coming from upstairs.

Trinity was still living with my parents. I was actually mildly concerned about her getting married and moving in with Wyatt. Home at twenty-five, she'd grown up way more sheltered than I had.

Wyatt was almost a decade her senior, and even though he had a great job as an engineer in Winston-Salem, he was known for his love of booze, partying, and questionable decisions.

I could argue that if I wasn't such a thorough failure, Wyatt would take my place as the town's official Disrepute. Then again, he had Cruz to balance his horribleness. The perfect distraction.

Footfalls hit the carpeted stairs, and my fair-haired sister appeared in the kitchen, still in her satin, baby-blue pajamas, her hair in a long braid.

"Nessy! Oh, Nessy, I'm so glad you're here. I'm totally overwhelmed." She threw her arms around my shoulders, hugging me close. I patted her back. "Mrs. Underwood has been goin' around town telling people you made a kid choke on a straw yesterday?"

"That's a lie," I murmured into her hair, wishing Mrs. Underwood herself an unpleasant visit from karma.

“Yeah, I figured.” Trinity sniffed the air, looking around her. “Do I smell coffee?”

“And donuts.” I flipped open a small carton of the fresh goodies I’d picked up on my way there.

“Glazed?” Her eyes widened with hope.

“You know it.”

I poured both of us cups of coffee as Trinity perched on a repainted, bright-yellow chair and began nibbling the frosting off one donut. She only ever ate the frosting. And then pretty much nothing else for the rest of the day.

“Ugh, I wish you wouldn’t have brought them. Those last couple of pounds I’m trying to lose for the wedding are kicking my butt.”

She shoved the entire donut into her mouth, looking pained more than happy.

There was only one thing Trinity loved more than her figure, and that was donuts.

“You look beautiful,” I said.

“Easy for you to say. You were always stick-thin. Do you *want* me to look bloated in the wedding photos?”

You’re so welcome, little sis.

“Where’s Mom?”

I sat next to her, cradling my mug of coffee. I’d been cutting Trinity some slack on the behavioral front, seeing as she was about to tie the knot in six weeks. I’d watched enough episodes of *Bridezillas* to know that, on the anxiety scale, planning a wedding could be the equivalent to giving birth to triplets with no epidural.

“She went to exchange the macarons for the bachelorette party gift kits. She totally forgot Gabriella’s allergic to nuts and ordered normal macarons, with almonds and all. We had a screaming match last night, which ended with me telling her that if she was going to kill my maid of honor, she might as well fess up and I’ll just call the whole thing off. Finally, she managed to convince Mrs. Patel to remake them. Pretty sure Mrs. Patel didn’t sleep a wink last night, but what can you do, right?”

You could just tell Gabriella not to touch the macarons. It's not like she has consumed a carb in the last seven years, anyway.

“How does one make macarons without almonds?” I wondered aloud.

“One does not care, as long as the maid of honor doesn't drop dead at her bachelorette party.” Trinity snorted, dropping another frostless donut she'd nibbled on back into the pack and picking a new one. “Do you think this'll be enough?” She motioned to the table in front of us, which was laden with mini champagne bottles, personalized lip balms, *Mani Thanks* nail polish, bath bombs, and fluffy personalized socks. “I wanted to do matching Swarovski earrings for each of us, but Dad said he'd take me out of his will if I spent that much money.”

“I think this is more than enough.”

I also thought it was going to be really tedious to decorate each kit with multicolored raffia paper and miniature handmade candy, especially since I wasn't going to be the recipient of even *one* of these bags.

“Why isn't Gabriella helping you? She's the maid of honor,” I pointed out. With all her free time.

I was totally not bitter about it, by the way.

“She wanted to, but then she had to rush into the city to find a nice dress for a black tie charity event Cruz is attending. He didn't actually invite her, but you know men. So forgetful. You're not mad, are you?”

Trinity glanced at me from the corner of her eye, licking the icing from a soggy donut.

I never could say no to my baby sister, and she knew it. I'd pluck the moon and all the stars from the sky just to put a smile on her face. She'd been there for me the first five years of Bear's life and served as a second mother to him.

“No.” I grabbed one of the baskets we'd used for the kits and began stuffing it to get a head start. “Not at all.”

“Good. Because I had no idea you were working today.”

This, I knew, was a lie.

“And also, Gabriella has been giving me super weird vibes, and I just don’t want the drama. I know she’s just being immature, but I’m glad you’re the bigger person.”

This, unfortunately, was *not* a lie.

Gabby, Trinity’s best friend, had never liked me. But she especially hadn’t liked me ever since she had started dating Mr. Perfect. I had no idea why, and at this point in life, I didn’t care.

Some people were simply destined not to like you. If they didn’t have a good enough reason, I thought you should let them. As the old saying went, whatever people thought of me was none of my business.

Although, in Gabriella’s case, it truly was, because she seemed to avoid any pre-wedding event where I was included.

“It’s fine. Everything is fine,” I repeated firmly. I continued to fill the baskets with nail polish and fluffy socks and bath bombs while Trinity scrutinized me, licking donuts and pondering the situation with a somber expression.

“Good. Ugh, Nesy, you’re such a lifesaver. You have no idea how stressed I am about this whole wedding. The preparations, the fittings, the last-minute changes...it’s just too much. I know I should be grateful, but this cruise comes at *such* an inconvenient time. I have so much to work on. Not to mention I just know how it’s going to play out. Mr. and Mrs. Costello are going to look down at us the entire time. There’s no pacifying Catherine Costello.”

Trinity’s lips puckered, and it occurred to me that she hadn’t even asked me how I was doing. Or if something new was going on in my life. Or, you know, if my ex had happened to show up after thirteen years of radio silence and turn my life upside down.

“You know I joined the Ladies who Brunch church committee just to impress her? Catherine, I mean. I thought she’d be there every week. She doesn’t even show up, Nesy. She just throws money at the foundation every month to keep her title,” Trinity accused.

I was about to tell her she didn’t need to make her future mother-in-law her best friend when it was apparent Catherine Costello was colder than a fish in a frozen pond, when the door

flung open and Mom rushed in, her gazillion necklaces crashing into one another in a symphony of ill-advised fashion.

“I’m here. I’m here. Sorry I was late. I had to interrogate Mrs. Patel about the macaron recipe to accommodate everyone’s allergies.”

My mother hurried inside, her round face flushed, her graying hair a nest atop her head.

She looked eons less put-together than the glamorous Catherine Costello, who only had a handful of responsibilities, which included keeping up appearances by looking like a gracefully-aging movie star, looking appropriately scandalized when a popular food chain tried to open a branch in Fairhope and ruin what locals referred to as the “town’s authenticity”, and giving sizable donations to church functions in order to avoid participating.

“Nessy! You’re here. Have you started with the kits? We don’t have much time. I need to get your sister to her aesthetician appointment. Apparently, it’s best to get the glow facial a few weeks in advance.”

“I’m on it.” I made a show of waving one of the polishes in my hand.

“Good.” Mom wrinkled her nose when she saw the donut pack. She flipped it closed and picked it up between her fingernails, like it was contaminated. “No one needs these, Nessy. That was completely unnecessary. Your sister’s trying to lose weight—are you trying to sabotage her weight loss?”

“My sister looks like she hasn’t seen a sandwich since 1999.”

“Do you mind finishing up here and adding the macarons to the bags while I take your sister to get her blackheads removed? Oh, and each macaron needs to be individually cellophane-wrapped.”

They were leaving *me* to do all of this by myself? Alone?

“Of course I don’t mind,” I heard myself say through the strong Cinderella vibes.

I knew my family loved me. But I also knew they were, at this point, completely shuttered to what I was going through.

“You’re a star, Ness. Get dressed, honey.”

Mom patted Trinity’s shoulder on her way to the fridge to grab the iced tea Dad had made for her before he went fishing earlier that morning.

My father, bless his heart, was as involved in family matters as I was invested in the condition of mole rats in Uzbekistan. To sum it up, he showed up to important events when we asked him to.

“How’s Bear, Nussy?” Mom asked, finally showing interest in something in my life.

“He’s good.” I looked up from the kit I was making. “Actually, I—”

“I want to take him to Hanes Mall next week. Get him a new backpack and perhaps a few pairs of jeans. His pants fall down his butt. Did you know that?”

Intentionally so, but give it your best shot changing his style, Mom.

“He’ll love that,” I chirped. “Anyway, you won’t believe what—”

“I think he’ll grow to be as tall as his father. The only good thing that useless man had to offer was his height.”

“Ha! Well, speaking of Rob—” I tried a third time, a little more aggressively.

Trinity breezed back downstairs wearing a summery dress. A new, tight-knit braid was flung across her shoulder, and she was wearing some mascara, blush, and lip gloss.

“Well, see you later, Nussy. Thanks for doing all the gift bags for me!”

“Oh, and honey, make sure to tidy up afterwards,” Mom called. “I’m going to have my hands full when I come back, what with getting the house ready for the party.”

They closed the door with a slam, just as my phone lit up with a new message. It came from an unrecognized number, with an Arizona area code.

Come on, Nussy. Are you going to let me see my son or what?

Not in this life, *gasshole*.

Four



Cruz

Two weeks later.

Gabriella Holland was a bad idea.

I knew that the night I'd met her at that bar.

The same night I took her home.

And the morning after it, too, when she casually examined the family pictures that hung on my living room wall, naked as the day she was born, and dropped the bomb that she was actually from Fairhope, too.

That her best friend, Trinity, was working at my clinic, and her mother would be delighted to know we knew each other. *Closely.*

What was an honorable man to do?

A man who had been crowned Fairhope's Most Likely to Become President?

Who couldn't afford to make a mistake, let alone four mistakes in one night, one of them in a pretty adventurous Kama Sutra position, resulting in a thoroughly compromised young woman?

I'd given my relationship with Gabriella Holland a fair shot.

There was, after all, absolutely nothing wrong with her as far as the eye could see. She was objectively stunning, had graduated from Columbia the previous year, and worked as a blogger and influencer, promoting beauty products and street fashion on social media.

She wanted to be a housewife, to pop out cute, chubby babies, and I supposedly wanted a wife who would do just that.

Our goals, plans, and ideologies were theoretically aligned.

Supposedly being the operative word, because I couldn't, for the life of me, take any more of her photographing every goddamn thing we ate before consumption, or getting a selfie in every public restroom she visited, citing the great lighting.

"But...but why?" Gabriella sniffed, patting her nose and eyes with a tissue demurely, trembling all over.

I privately disliked all the trembling. She trembled when she ate a chicken salad at Jerry & Sons, when she saw something sad in the news, and when a draft came in through the window.

She was so fragile, so gentle, she belonged in a museum, not a red-blooded man's bed (although, ironically, it should be said, Gabriella was pretty much game to do anything I wanted to do, just as long as I called the next day).

"Was it something I said? Something I did? I don't understand. You gave me a necklace the other day!"

She was perched on the edge of my upholstered navy sofa, her big doe eyes shimmering like broken glass.

I didn't have the heart to tell her the necklace had nothing to do with her and everything to do with me.

I prided myself in being the best lover in both Carolinas. I showered my girlfriends with expensive presents, took them anywhere worth going, never missed an important date, and

wouldn't let them leave for home without a complimentary orgasm.

I had high expectations of myself.

I was, after all, Fairhope's darling.

The idea of letting people down gave me anxiety, no matter how much I liked to pretend otherwise.

"Wait, was it the non-organic burger incident?" She snapped her fingers, having a light bulb moment. "I guess I could've been kinder to Messy Nessy. It's just that I've been under *so* much pressure recently, with Trinity's wedding, and the bridesmaid fitting..."

"This has nothing to do with Tennessee Turner." I handed Gabriella another tissue. I could tell as soon as she left here, she was going to start bawling her eyes out. "And nothing to do with you, either. You're perfect."

"Then why are you breaking up with me?"

I don't have the greenest clue, honey. I just know you bore me half to death.

There was something wrong with me, and I needed to figure out what it was.

I knew I wasn't asexual because sex was the only part I liked about my relationships. It was everything else about them I struggled with.

There had been no pivotal or inciting moment that changed me. No messed-up breakup or sob story to make me disinterested in settling down.

I came from a great home, with two loving parents who adored one another. I'd had girlfriends over the years. Some relationships stuck more than others. Some of the women I cared for deeply, and I definitely respected all of them—but something was missing.

Everything looked normal. Nice. *Fine*.

It felt fine, too. Not too good. Not too bad. Kind of like your favorite dish at a familiar restaurant. I was never disappointed with the women I was with, but never thrilled by them, either.

And I wanted to be.

Wanted to be driven to do dumb things, to push against my boundaries, to decode that one thing men my age had—a marriage—and I hadn't.

Ultimately, choosing one woman was pointless when this town was my oyster, and I could have my pick of a wife at any time (save for Tennessee Turner, who frankly, I wouldn't wish on my greatest enemy if I ever had one).

"I get it." Gabriella sat up, slapping her thigh.

She was having an entire conversation with herself. Never a good look.

"You do?" I seriously doubted that, but went along with the conversation, anyway.

"You're just getting cold feet because Wyatt's getting married and you know you're expected to be next. I can wait it out, Cruz. There's no pressure at all."

None whatsoever, other than the fact she'd already marked engagement rings in bridal magazines and left them where I could find them. Frankly, I thought three months wasn't long enough to figure out if you wanted to share a Netflix subscription with a person, let alone propose marriage.

"It's not about that. I need time to straighten my head."

"Promise me one thing."

Gabriella was now somehow full-blown sobbing, and I hated myself for ever getting into bed with her. In my defense, I didn't think I'd have to see her the next day or the three months following.

"Sure." I let loose a wintry smile, patting her knee. "Anything, honey."

She squeezed my shoulders, looking me dead in the eye. "You'll give it some serious thought and let me know when you come back from the cruise. I'll wait for you."

"Really, there's no need."

I didn't want her to wait for me.

More importantly, I didn't want to wait for *her*.

Cruises could go a few different ways. It was entirely possible I'd find a vacationer to have a brief fling with, and I didn't want to hold back. Not when I already knew I didn't want to be with Gabriella for another day.

"*You* don't have to wait for me, but I'll feel better if I wait for you." She mustered a weak, tired smile.

That sounded like a pretty screwed-up agreement to me, but maybe Gabriella needed a few days to digest this. I'd been trying to break up with her for two hours now, and we kept going back and forth.

If this was what it took to make her leave, I figured I'd take one for the team.

"All right. We'll talk again when I get back."

"And try to remember what made us get together in the first place," she suggested. "Maybe it'll rekindle something in you."

I was practically pushing her out of my apartment at this point.

Just when I thought I could close the door behind these hellish few hours and take comfort in the arms of the one love that never failed me—a bottle of beer—a pointy, red heel rammed its way between my door and the frame before I could close it all the way.

I opened it quickly, hoping it wasn't Tennessee Turner and her Australia-sized attitude.

My mother stood on the other side of my door.

Catherine Costello had the Nancy Pelosi hairdo, an extra-delicate frame, and Jackie Kennedy's wardrobe. She looked—and I say it with a lot of love—like every rich white woman you'd ever seen in a nineties' era boss-lady-powersuit wearing television drama.

"Oh, Cruzy. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

I opened the door all the way, knowing there was little point in telling her she was. "Not at all, Mom. Come in."

"I noticed Gabriella was in a bit of a sour mood." Mom began unloading the brown bag she'd brought with her. A home-cooked meal, no doubt.

She was, for all intents and purposes, a wonderful, overbearing mother that I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with, and at the same time couldn't wait to say goodbye to.

Confused? So was I.

"Yeah. We broke up." I opened the fridge, taking out a beer for me and diet lemonade I kept especially for her.

"That's extremely disappointing to hear."

She began popping open the containers. Smelled like her string bean casserole and steak.

"My apologies."

I sounded sincere, because I *was* sincere.

I wanted to make my parents happy. I just didn't want to get stuck with a woman who found more pleasure in taking pictures of desserts than eating them, and considered *Vogue* the authority on highbrow literature.

"At the same time, I could tell your heart was not in it. Come, sit and eat."

I did, because hell, there wasn't anything better than your mother's best cooking and a beer at the end of a long day, no matter how old you were.

She rounded my kitchen table and came to sit opposite me, propping her chin over her laced fingers.

"I'm not here to talk about Gabriella, though."

"Figured as much—that was breaking news." I speared a piece of steak and popped it into my mouth. "How can I help, Mama?"

"Rob Gussman's back in town."

I managed not to splutter my beer and steak out.

Barely.

"Really, now?"

She nodded. "I went to play bridge at Mrs. Underwood's place. She was gushing about you saving that boy at Jerry's when the subject arose. Mrs. Gussman, who dropped in to give us some of her famous apple pie, said he's back and a little worse for

wear. Had a few difficult years. He is twice divorced, you know?”

“I heard.” Rob was never really good at relationships, so I was hardly surprised. “Is he here to stay?”

“Seems that way. He rented a house and everything. Down on Norton Creek, not very far from the other Turner girl and their kid.”

“Weird that no one has seen him yet.”

“I think he is keeping a low profile for now. Anyway, why don’t you give him a call? I’m sure he’d appreciate it. I bet he feels isolated and more than a bit embarrassed after the whole debacle with the other Turner girl.”

Yup.

Tennessee Turner didn’t have any fans in this town. In fact, my mother was just coming to terms with having her sister Trinity as a daughter-in-law, she was so uncomfortable with the affiliation.

Me, I had my own views about the world, about the small-town cancel-culture mentality. I wasn’t a fan of Miss Turner, but I had to say, a lot of the crap spewed about her reeked of jealousy and pettiness.

“Sure thing.” I shoveled more casserole into my mouth. “As soon as I get back from the cruise. I have a lot on my work plate right now.”

“Oh! And then there’s Mrs. Vella’s son, Anthony. He is considering going to med school and asked if he could email you a few questions. I said yes, of course.”

“Of course,” I echoed, grounding my molars as I ate.

Saying no was not an option. I was the perfect son, the perfect neighbor, the perfect acquaintance. Always ready to help.

“One more thing before I go. Your father wants to know if you could help him go over his investment portfolio before we go on the cruise. You know how dreadful he is about these things.”

“Consider it done. I’ll drop in tomorrow.”

Yup.

Being perfect was exhausting.

Especially when, on the inside, I felt anything but.



Just when I thought the fifty-hour day couldn't possibly get any longer, I got a call to return to the clinic because Mrs. Borowski's kid, Jensen, had decided it was a good idea for his scrotum to get up close and personal with a Thomas the Train toy's wheel.

It was Borowski's second strike this month, as her daughter landed on my patient's table not even two weeks ago with a rainbow-colored poop sample and a Joker-like smeared grin.

Apparently, little Elin had thought it was a great idea to feast on her crayons.

I arrived at the clinic, removed the train of joy from Jensen's nut sack, good-naturedly explaining to him that it was not the last time this region of his body would land him into trouble, then peeled my elastic gloves off with a pop when Trinity, my soon to be sister-in-law and nurse, glided into my office.

"Dr. Costello."

"Please, Trinity, call me Cruz when no patients are around. We're about to become family."

"Cruz." Trinity tasted my name in her mouth, smiling shyly. "Got called in for an urgent procedure?"

She opened one of my file cabinets and dropped patients' folders into it.

Trinity was a cute blonde with braided hair, a reserved wardrobe, and a few too many freckles. She was well-mannered, well-meaning, and well...*boring*. You couldn't confuse her with her bombshell older sister, who gave some of Hollywood's best a run for their money.

Trinity was almost homely in comparison. More than anything, Trinity looked like a cherub and Tennessee looked like something the devil had created to lure you into sin.

Unlike her sister, though, Nurse Turner didn't possess the bedside manners of a wild boar, so I didn't mind her working

under me, even if she did take five hundred vacation days a year.

“Don’t ask.” A raspy chuckle escaped me.

“Okay. Let me ask you something else, then.” She turned to face me. Her hands parked over her waist, clad by the pale-blue nurse uniform. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Of course, sis.”

I smiled warmly. I also added the “sis” to ensure she understood none of the things I was willing to do included *her*.

Better be safe than sorry when you’re the town’s official hunk. Though, people kept mistaking me for Ryan Gosling in that movie where he dates a blow-up doll because he had a ’stache in it.

I contemplated getting rid of the mustache just because I kept suspecting people had a mental image of me dragging a sex doll around, but ultimately, I was attached to the fucker. Physically and spiritually.

“My sister Nussy needs a ride to the port tomorrow. Her car broke down and my parents are giving Wyatt and me a ride. Not to mention they’re taking Bear, too.”

Spending an hour in a confined space with Tennessee Turner?

Sign me up. Said no one. Ever.

But I was Mr. Perfect.

Saying no would make me a fraud.

Besides, I had to get over the throat-punching incident at some point. Tennessee and I were bound to spend countless Thanksgivings, Christmases, and baby christenings together in the future.

Better to Band-Aid it now than find myself getting nut-punched a few months down the line again.

“Sure. I’ll take her to the port tomorrow.”

“I mean, you’ll have to pick her up from Jerry & Sons. Is that okay?”

I unbuttoned my white lab coat, smiling good-naturedly. “Best milkshakes in town. It’d be my pleasure.”

“Will you help her with her bags, too? She doesn’t travel light.”

No shit.

Her hairspray and heels alone could probably sink the *Elation*.

“Honey, consider your sister my sister. I’ll help her with whatever she needs.”

Trinity squeaked, doing a weird thing with her hands, waving them quickly, like she was trying to take off and fly with them.

“Aww. Thank you so much! You’re such a star!” She was about to leave my office when she stopped by the door, biting down on her lips. “Oh, I just wanted you to know I’m so happy you’re with Gabriella. I think you two are super good for each other.”

Alarm bells rang in my head.

Gabriella still hadn’t told her friends we were over? Not telling everyone was one thing. Not telling her bestie?

I was going to set the record straight and ensure everyone knew I was a free agent.

...but first, I was going to survive this punishment of a cruise.

Five



Tennessee

We were running late.

Actually, running wouldn't be the best way to describe it.

We were *crawling* late.

My fault, naturally.

Cruz and I hit the afternoon traffic to Port Wilmington. His Audi was moving at a snail's pace, stuck among a hundred more cars.

He'd been admirably polite and silent the entire drive out of Fairhope, but by the throbbing vein in his temple, which was an interesting shade of pomegranate, I was pretty sure he was about to punch my tit.

"Remind me again," he drawled, choking his steering wheel to death. "What held you up in Jerry & Sons for forty-five minutes while I loitered around the parking lot like a B-grade drug dealer?"

I'd stayed late because my new trainee waitress, Trixie, a single mother of two's douchebag husband walked out on her for a younger model only three weeks ago.

She was having a mental breakdown—not entirely surprising seeing as it was her second shift and she'd never worked in her life—and I had to take over until her tables had been served.

Of course, I wasn't going to out her story or explain myself to this haughty prick.

I owed him nothing.

“Already told you.” I popped the passenger's sun visor down, sliding the mirror open to line my Cupid's bow again, a nice shade of rose. “I had to choose the best lipstick color to go with my outfit.”

“You're wearing your waitress uniform.”

“Exactly. Did you know there are over a thousand shades of pink?”

“Did *you* know,” he retorted, “the *Elation* boards in fifteen minutes and we are going to miss the cruise?”

“Nonsense.” I waved a dismissive hand at him. The secret was in the faux confidence. “We'll make it in time, and it'll be wonderful.”

“Those things are mutually exclusive. If you're there, it will not be wonderful.”

“Ouch,” I said, extra flatly, for emphasis that I couldn't care less. “Can't we all just get along?”

“The chances of us ever getting along flew out the window when you punched my throat six years ago.”

I could not believe his audacity at casually bringing *that* up.

“I was aiming for your face.”

“You're as untalented as you are violent, Miss Turner.”

“Whatever happened to letting bygones be bygones?”

“Those don't apply in our case. You would've kept beating me to death if we hadn't had an audience.”

I smiled nostalgically. “To death? No. But I probably would’ve damaged the crown jewels.”

He ground his teeth together, scowling at the traffic jam through his wire-rimmed Aviator glasses. Vintage and likely expensive as heck. He looked like a war hero in a Tom Cruise movie. Which made me weak-kneed every time I stared at him directly. Maybe that’s why I liked irritating him—that clenched jaw, though!

I turned my face to my window and cranked up the radio. Fergie sang about her lovely lady lumps. I idly wondered if I should try my luck at writing lyrics. It couldn’t be *that* hard if this song made it to the radio.

I tried to cheer myself up by telling myself that this was Bear’s very first real vacation and he was stupid excited about it. Also, the ten-day cruise was going to give me some much-needed distance from Rob, who had been calling every day for the past couple weeks, but otherwise had been keeping a low profile in Fairhope. Once again, I was keeping his secret...sort of.

I still hadn’t broached the subject of his father with Bear, but was planning to do so this trip. Take him to one of the nice restaurants on the cruise ship and conduct a serious, grown-up conversation with him. The kind Dr. Phil would find inspiring.

Mr. Perfect’s voice sliced through Fergie’s singing. “Look, this cruise is supposed to help our families get to know each other better. I’m willing to let the throat-punching incident go if you play nice, too. What do you say?”

“Fine. Yes. I’ll give it a try. Can I call my son?”

Why I asked him for permission was beyond me.

I was a grown woman, on the verge of thirty, in fact. But I guess it *was* his car after all.

Also, Cruz always felt so much older than me, even though there were two years between us.

Also, maybe it would be nice to stop bickering for half a second.

“Go ahead, sweetheart.”

I was pretty sure the sweetheart part slipped accidentally, but it still made my thighs high-five each other and my clit wake up from its hibernation.

Real classy, Nesy. Wait till he enjoys an ice cream on the trip. Your vagina is probably going to detonate all over the open bar.

I FaceTimed Bear, who looked adorable in his neon-green framed shades and floppy hair. There was a lot of talking and laughing and microphone announcements in the background, so I gathered he was already on the ship.

“Hey there, Care Bear.” I grinned. “How’s my favorite boy?”

“Real good, Ma. You have to see this place. It’s crazy big. Like a city.”

“Well, honey, I’m on my way. Are Mamaw and Papaw with you?”

“Nope. Found a local gang heading toward the South China Sea. We’re going to become pirates. Do you think I’ll look good with an eye patch?”

The silent chuckle next to me, coming from Golden Boy, told me that this was supposed to be a joke. I frowned.

“Don’t laugh about such things with your mama, Care Bear.”

He winced. “Please don’t call me that publicly.”

“Don’t become a pirate, then.”

“Deal.”

My mother saw fit to grab Bear’s phone just then, smiling sunnily at me. By her pink cheeks and margarita the size of a bucket she was holding, I gathered she was lush.

I noticed she went uncharacteristically tame on the necklaces and bracelets, and my heart squeezed that she’d altered her style to fit into Catherine Costello’s neat universe.

“Nesy, honey?” She peered into the phone, as elderly people often did, as though to ensure I wasn’t *physically* trapped inside the small device. “What’s taking y’all so long? Wyatt and your sister are already here. The Costellos, too.”

“I got held up at work.” I winced.

Mom gave me a look of despair. “Please be here on time, Nesy. You cannot begin to imagine how much it means to your sister.”

“I know,” I said somberly. “We’re doing our best. We’ll be there.”

I hung up, feeling antsy. If we missed this cruise, no one in my family would forgive me. I craned my neck, as if I could see past the windshield.

“Are we there yet?” I asked.

“Almost. We’re rolling into the port right now. That’s the holdup. Parking’s impossible in this place.”

“Hmm,” I said helpfully.

“Bear sounds like a cool kid,” Cruz said, and my heart swelled. Bear was, indeed, the coolest kid on planet Earth. Objectively speaking, of course.

“Naturally. He takes after me.”

“Not in looks.”

There was a brief silence. My brain screamed at me not to broach the subject of Rob. But my big mouth flipped it the finger and moonwalked right into the sticky conversation.

“You know Rob’s back, right?”

Cruz gave half a nod. “It’s a small town.”

“Had a chance to hang out with him?” I asked. “Reminisce about the good ol’ days?”

“Why do you care?”

We were now inside the parking lot area, and Cruz was looking for a parking spot, trailing behind a Buick manned by a ninety-two-year-old woman.

“Because you’re best friends.”

Inseparable during adolescence.

The chosen ones of Fairhope High.

“*Were*,” he amended. “And I intend to grab a beer with him soon. It’ll be nice. I missed him.”

Of course he would.

They were the same wise guy in different packaging. I had no doubt Cruz would've acted the exact same way Rob had if I'd gotten knocked up with *his* child at sixteen.

Suddenly, I remembered all the reasons I hated Cruz Costello with such a passion.

“Know what?” I sighed. “Pluck it. I can't do this. I can't be nice to you.”

“Same. It was good while it lasted, though.”

“Not for me.”

He pulled into a parking spot.

I unbuckled myself. “So you can just stop pretending to be a gentleman around me. I know the truth.”

The truth that got you throat-punched in the first place.

He let out an incredulous chuckle when he got out, rounding his Audi and popping the trunk open. He grabbed my hot pink suitcase and flung it at me, making me stumble back on my high strappy sandals.

He was going to make me wheel my own suitcase, too. SUCH a gentleman.

“Tennessee?”

“Yeah?”

“I strongly advise you to take off your high heels right about now.”

“Why?”

“Because we're about to make a run for it, and as of five seconds ago, I no longer have the inclination to carry your suitcase *and* your ass to the ship.”



My feet were burning.

This was not a figure of speech. They were on fire from running barefoot.

Currently, they were the size of the plates at Jerry & Sons and were a nice shade of red, with a few stripes of dead skin that resembled bacon.

I hobbled, shifting my weight from side to side by the check-in desk, in a one-player game of *The Floor is Lava*. Last week, I'd completed as much of the online check-in process as possible, purchasing an internet and drinks package, ensuring the correct card was on file, and printing and attaching the luggage tags beforehand.

Contrary to popular belief, I was not *that* messy.

The check-in ticket woman lady (I was too delirious with pain from sprinting through security to decipher what her actual title was) returned our passports, gave us our freshly-taken passenger ID cards (naturally, Cruz looked cover-ready in his, and she'd caught me mid-blink), and handed us a welcome packet, robotically reciting her lines.

“Thank you so much for choosing Allure of the Ocean cruise line! We sincerely hope you enjoy your stay here. Have a wonderful time!”

We tried to sneak past a photographer who forced Cruz and me to take a photo together in front of a cheesy fake background of the ship. Her smile faltered when she realized I could not physically muster a smile through the pain.

She quietly snapped the photos, told us we could purchase them at the photo gallery (hard pass), and sent us on our merry gangway.

Despite the pain, I'd never felt so happy in my entire life.

We'd made it.

We were *on* the ship, even if we'd had to wait at the check-in line that seemed to snake all the way up to New York (seemed we weren't the only late ones—*ha!*). Our suitcases had been checked in, too, and were supposed to be waiting by the doors to our rooms after dinner.

But we were past that line now.

Done.

Finished.

Finito.

Free as birds.

There's always a foolish sense of arrogance when you leave a trail of exhausted, irritated people behind you in a line you just crossed to the freedom of post-check-in, and in that moment, I felt it.

“Wanna stop somewhere, so you can put your sandals back on before we find our families?” Cruz's thick eyebrows furled, his chivalry, in that moment, trumping his hatred toward me.

I shook my head. “At this point, putting anything on is only going to make my feet feel worse.”

“There's a temporary solution for that.” He stared at me flatly.

Oh yeah.

That nonsense he'd been spewing back when we were still by his car.

“If I let you carry me, your reek of toxic masculinity will rub off.”

“How'd you guess?” He looked genuinely surprised and shocked. “That's my favorite cologne.”

So. Dr. Costello had jokes.

Yay me and the ten days I was supposed to spend with him.

Three minutes of jumping from foot to foot had passed before I realized I was punishing myself, not him.

“Fine,” I said, resisting the urge to remind him it was his fault for choosing the parking garage so far from the port. “You can carry me.”

“Are you sure you'll survive my stench?”

“I'll hold my breath. But no copping a feel.”

“I'll try my best.”

“Don't try, promise.”

“Do I look *that* desperate to you?”

I gave it some genuine thought. He was, after all, dating one of the best-looking women in Fairhope.

“Not particularly, but that ’stache gives you a flasher’s vibe. Better be safe than sorry.”

He scooped me up with such ease, an indolent purr escaped me. I let my arms flap aimlessly beside my body, because holding onto his neck seemed too damsel in distress for my taste.

Still, it felt divine, borderline euphoric, when he carried me honeymoon-style in front of dozens of people who boarded the ship and were now *aww*-ing and *ooo*-ing, smiling at us with open admiration.

Look at that couple. They’re like Gisele and Tom Brady, but sufferable.

He must give her oral sex all the time, they probably thought. Not just on weekends and after a few drinks.

If only they knew there was nothing Cruz wanted more than to hurl me overboard like an anchor and watch me get dismembered by an angry mob of seals.

One woman elbowed her husband and asked why he couldn’t be that romantic, and another man put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. “Yeah, baby. That’s how you get some.” Which, naturally, earned him a slap on the head from his partner.

“They said they were by the upper deck’s waterpark, drinking at the bar,” I supplied.

Cruz made his way to the stairway because the cruise would be over before the line to the elevators emptied. I decided that he was my favorite form of transportation.

And also that he had *extremely* strong biceps.

I tried not to think of other ways he could give me a ride.

“Call them,” Cruz instructed.

My phone was already pressed to my ear. “There’s no signal down here.”

“It’s pretty loud in here,” Cruz said when we got to the upper deck, and I finally got a signal only to get Bear’s voicemail.

The waterpark.

Bear wasn't kidding.

This place was as big as a city.

"Thanks, Captain Obvious."

"You're welcome, Catty Woman."

"Wit looks good on you, Dr. Costello."

"You should see what's underneath it."

That was the first time we'd treaded on the verge of flirting, and even that had enough venom to kill a herd of elephants.

"Might take you up on the offer," I drawled sarcastically. "Everyone in Fairhope knows I give out the goods easily."

He screeched to a stop, his chin sloping down, his deep-blue eyes darkening. Suddenly, we were staring at each other, our noses not even an inch apart, and the noise and shrieks and laughter and kids cannonballing into pools ceased to exist.

Cruz Costello looked...*hungry*.

And not for food.

My heart cartwheeled into a pool of something warm and goey, and I resisted to urge to lick my lips.

For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. He clutched me deeper against his pecs, muscular as a Greek god, and every nerve ending in my body sizzled.

My insides turned into thick, syrupy liquid...and then I remembered who he was and what he'd done to me.

And also, that he had a girlfriend I hated (sometimes. In my head).

I snapped my head to the other side, making a show of checking out my two-inch nails.

"What the heck was that, Costello?"

"Nothing, Turner. You were just looking at me weird, so I searched for obvious signs of a heart attack. Your pupils are dilated, by the way."

"Uh-huh. Just remember you have a girlfriend."

"I don't, actually."

I had no business feeling as gleeful as I felt when he said that.

He resumed his sauntering with me in his arms. Only now, he was trudging. I felt his irritated footsteps on my spine.

We still couldn't spot our families at the bar. It was packed, loud, and spilling over with people in different states of undress and intoxication.

The scent of BO, chlorine, and cheap alcohol drifted into my nostrils. *Heaven*. How come no one had ever bottled it into a perfume?

"*Nawwww*." I made an exaggerated gesture, placing a hand on my heart. "But you were so perfect together. Oatmeal Couple of the Year. So, am I your next conquest? Your rebound?"

"Rebounds aren't my speed."

Was it me, or had he not flat-out denied it?

"So why'd you look like you were going to kiss me? Is it because I don't fall at your feet?" I taunted.

"I usually like my dates at crotch level. If they're at my feet, they're doing something wrong."

"Gross. Also—sexist."

"Natural. Also—not if I'm reciprocating. Which, for your general knowledge, I always do. Anyway, you said I could be myself around you, right? That's me. Take it or leave it."

"I choose to leave it," I said emphatically, my heart beating a thousand miles a minute, because what was going on?

Were we actually discussing sex?

"Well, sweetheart, I was never yours to begin with. Now call your parents again. I'll try my mother."

He put me down, having had enough of my malice. I caught a glimpse of the ocean for the first time. It was endless and blue and promising, spread at my feet, and I reminded myself that in a few minutes, I wouldn't have to deal with Haughty McHotson at all.

I'd be too busy with my family, my son, and my tan.

No more basket making, no more tables to serve. Things were finally, *finally* looking up.

I called my mother, then my father, then Bear. I was waiting for Bear to pick up when I heard Cruz's mother's voice blasting through his phone's speaker.

"Cruz? Where are you, darling?"

"Upper deck. Waterpark bar. We're looking for you."

I whipped my head to catch him video-chatting his mother, pacing from side to side. I wasn't the only one who was staring. The entire female population of the cruise ship was ogling this piece of prime meat. Some of the men, too.

Stupid pride filled my chest. Everyone could look, but he was with me. But then I was also filled with dread, because not only were we NOT together, he was literally trying his hardest to get *away* from me.

"Yes. We're at the lounge, which is right at the back. You'll see the beautiful chandelier, made of empty vintage liquor bottles. So very pretty. I'm wearing an ivory dress and a straw hat, and Donna is wearing...oh, I don't know *what* she is wearing, darling. These people wouldn't recognize a good fashion choice if it whacked them across the tush."

Welp.

I was pretty sure I wasn't supposed to hear *that*.

I had no doubt I was lumped together with *these* people. The blue-collared folks of Fairhope.

Cruz had the decency to shoot me an apologetic glance before hurrying to the back of the waterpark's bar.

"I can't see the lounge. Are you sure you're at the waterpark?"

"By the waterpark."

"Yeah, I don't see any chandeliers, either. Just a bar that looks like a yellow submarine."

A panicky feeling began buzzing in the pit of my stomach. The ship's horn sounded, drowning out my heartbeats.

"How about we meet somewhere else? I can wait for you by the spa center on the nineteenth deck."

"The decks only go to eighteen, Mom."

“Nonsense, Cruzy. You’d think a man who finished med school would know how to count.”

The panic in my abdomen slithered up, up, *up* toward my sternum, making it almost impossible to breathe.

Cruz stopped pacing, rubbing at his face tiredly and shaking his head.

“It’s right in the brochure, Mom. The *Elation* has eighteen decks. Look it up.”

“The *Ecstasy* has nineteen decks. Check for yourself—why are we even having this conversation?”

The panic ball inside me was now blocking my throat.

I couldn’t draw a breath.

Nausea washed over me.

Pluck, pluck, pluck.

Cruz slowly turned toward me, his bottomless ocean eyes flaring with accusation. Meanwhile, the *Elation* chose this exact moment to begin sailing, leaving the port while hundreds of vacationers lazed against the bannisters, watching as it drifted farther from land.

“The *Ecstasy*?” he repeated, for my ears, not hers.

“Yes, darling. Why? Wait, what ship are *you* on?” There was a little, nervous, what-are-the-chances laughter at the end of the sentence.

“The *Elation*,” he said point-blank, his gaze not leaving mine, growing hotter, darker, scarier.

I want my mommy.

“Why on *earth* would you be on the *Elation*?” his mother exploded.

Around her, our families had begun conversing hotly. The words “why?” and “not again” and “her fault” were thrown in the air.

“That’s a very good question, Mother. Why don’t you let me get back to you with the answer after I find out for myself?”

With that, he killed the call and turned fully to me. My only consolation was that we were in front of a lot of people, so it was unlikely he was going to throw me overboard.

Yet.

“The *Elation*,” he said simply. His voice rough and dead and so chilly, a shudder rolled down my spine.

I bit my lower lip. “I remembered something with an E.”

“You remembered.” He strode toward me, cool as a cucumber, but also formidable as Michael Myers. “But you didn’t think to, oh, I don’t know, *double-check*?”

I stepped backward, retreating toward a raised ramp on which a wet t-shirt contest was taking place, trying to avoid his wrath.

More than stupid, I felt hopeless, because I knew everyone was currently discussing how useless I was. How it was probably a miracle I could even hold a tray and take a pancake order.

“*Perfectly capable of booking two tickets to a cruise,*” Cruz mimicked my voice and did a good job of it, as he took another step in my direction, like a predator zeroing in on his prey. “That’s what you said at the diner. Should I have specified that I meant OUR FAMILIES’ CRUISE?”

“I...I...I...”

But the excuses died in my throat.

There was no justifying what had happened.

I’d been drunk, flustered with Rob’s return, and made a huge mistake. I’d confused the *Elation* with the *Ecstasy*, and now I remembered why: as soon as my parents had told me the Costellos were booking us a cruise, I’d begun researching the different cruise ships.

The *Elation* was the one I’d kept coming back to, because it seemed the nicest and came highly recommended. Though it didn’t do me much good now that I was sharing it with a man who wanted to drown me.

“Can I have the nice and phony Cruz back?”

I winced when he was so close, I could practically smell him. The tantalizing scent of sandalwood with leather on a moneyed

man, and the sharp, potent musk of male.

His body was hard and large and flush with mine, humming with the need to break something. Preferably my bones.

My back was plastered against the raised ramp. Behind me, women were giggling and comparing wet t-shirts. I had nowhere to go.

“No,” he whispered, his minty breath fanning my three-tiered cake beehive. I squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe if I didn’t look at him, he’d disappear. “Nice Cruz is dead to you, Turner. Jesus. I can’t believe you’re actually so...fucking...*stupid!*”

Out of all the offensive things people had said about me along the years, I genuinely thought this was the most cutting.

First of all, because it came from Cruz, a man who was notoriously incapable of hurting a fly, even if the darned thing was me, and who’d specifically dedicated his life and work to making people feel better.

Secondly, because this time, I believed him.

I *was* stupid.

I looked away, trying hard not to cry, aware we were gathering a small and curious audience. My ability to burst into tears at a moment’s notice was legendary and was becoming a huge liability at the age of twenty-nine.

I tried to keep my voice calm. “I suggest we both go to our rooms to regroup and talk about it when you cool down a little.”

“You do?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Look at me now, Tennessee.”

I dragged my gaze up from the floorboards of the deck, using every ounce of courage in me to do so. He held up our boarding passes in front of my face.

“Does something about this look weird to you?”

I blinked. I couldn’t register anything, the adrenaline was so thick in my bloodstream.

Naturally, I felt even stupider.

I could practically hear his thoughts.

She can't read. Unbelievable. My brother is marrying a woman whose sister is illiterate.

“What’s the matter?” I huffed, frustrated.

“How many rooms do you see here?”

“One.”

“And how many of us are here?”

“Two.”

“Good girl. Now let those numbers sink in.”

I hung my head in shame. How drunk, exactly, was I when I’d booked those tickets?

Very much, by the looks of it.

I could no longer hold back the tears, and I didn’t want him to see me cry, so I pushed at his chest, turned around, and made a run for it, leaving him right there, surrounded by women in bikinis and wet t-shirts and men who catcalled them to get off the stage and give them some sugar.

My feet still burned, but I was too numb to feel the pain anymore as I wandered aimlessly around the ship. Bear tried to call me back, but I stuffed my phone into my pocket after switching it to silent mode.

I couldn’t face my son with hot tears streaming down my cheeks after screwing up yet another simple task. To be honest, I couldn’t even look him in the eye after the mistake I’d made.

Mom, Dad, and Trinity called, too, but I didn’t want to talk to anyone right now.

Instead, I kept hiking round and round in circles.

This helplessness, this *smallness* of my being, felt like a symptom of something bigger.

Of my entire existence.

Six



Cruz

I couldn't believe this woman.

She was a goddamn menace in a skimpy dress.

I should've never let her handle the ticket-booking. This was the girl who'd infamously gotten knocked up under the bleachers of Fairhope High's football field, while I spotted for her and Rob, the honorable wingman that I was.

I remembered that scene too well.

Cara Loughlin had been buttering me up, trying to get me to ask her to prom in roundabout ways, and all I could think about was the fact that Rob was taking Tennessee Turner's virginity not even a few feet away from me.

I heard his feral groans, like he was wrestling a pig, not making love with his high school sweetheart, and one soft sigh from her.

Four months later, Tennessee dropped out of high school and started wearing baggy clothes, and we all knew what it meant.

Didn't help that Rob broke up with her, and in one drunken moment post-prom, while we were all getting tanked at the gazebo by the library, he climbed onto the white pagoda's roof and hollered, "*I've been in Tennessee and it felt hella good, y'all!*"

The woman who, when asked what was good at Jerry & Sons, replied, "The restroom. Sometimes. When they get cleaned."

This was the woman I'd trusted to book us the tickets.

I had no one to blame but myself.

In lieu of plan B, I went to locate our stateroom, which was spacious for a cruise (a low standard) but far too small to avoid a woman with a personality the size of Mississippi.

Next, I retrieved my lifejacket and headed to the muster drill.

Anyone who's ever been on a cruise knows you have a better chance of becoming the first unicorn astronaut than getting out of muster-drill duty. Their announcements are loud enough to wake the dead, and they call your room and make your existence a living hell until you attend the mandatory exercise.

One of the cruise staff scanned my ID card, confirmed my identity, and pointed me to a seat in the corner of the stand-up comedy lounge, my assigned muster station.

While I waited to hear the thirty-minute safety spiel, I tried to think back to how Tennessee Turner had become my one (and only) enemy in Fairhope.

I knew exactly why I detested her, even though my reasons might not be so fair to her, but I hadn't the faintest idea why *she* hated *me*.

I only knew that she did, because she was one of the very few residents in Fairhope who opted to register with a physician all the way in Wilmington instead of staying local.

After the muster drill, I stopped by the guest services desk, which had emptied up considerably, and asked about getting off on the nearest island and joining the *Ecstasy*.

"Well..." The representative in the extra-ironed uniform beamed timidly. "The issue wouldn't be leaving the *Elation*, but finding available rooms on the *Ecstasy*. Not to mention, both

cruise ships would have to be on the same island at approximately the same day for that to happen, which may only occur on day four, depending on the weather.”

“What happens in case of an emergency?”

“We do have an in-house medical clinic, fully equipped, and a helicopter landing pad for medical emergencies. Could you explain the situation to me? Maybe then I’ll be able to help,” the representative encouraged.

I would, but even I don’t understand it very well.

“Do you happen to have any spare rooms, then?” I sighed. “I’ll pay anything.”

Anything.

My lease on the Q8 was ending in half a second, and I was going to upgrade to a Land Rover Sport, but screw it, avoiding this woman took precedence.

“No, I’m so sorry.”

“So am I,” I muttered.

I left her my details and room number, anyway, and asked her to let me know if and when I could escape this unexpected slumber party with the elder Turner.

I think I dropped the “money is not an issue” line three or four times, which made me feel like a smarmy L.A. pimp, but desperate times *screamed* for desperate measures.

After that, I gave myself a tour around the popular decks, familiarizing myself with the area. As far as cruise ships went, the *Elation* was probably the best one I’d been on.

It had a dozen restaurants, beauty salons, two waterparks, two casinos, a tennis court, a mall, libraries, bars, a movie theater, an ice skating rink, a performing arts theater, a submarine, and a rollercoaster.

I was beginning to cool off and subconsciously (but evidently not *that* subconsciously) kept an eye out for Tennessee. I was still angry enough that texting her was out of the question—she’d screwed both of us over and I wasn’t done reminding her—but she’d also looked genuinely upset when we’d parted ways, and I wasn’t used to seeing her wearing any other expression than

sheer, stubborn pride. Plus, I knew she was probably freaking out about being away from her son. They'd been attached at the hip from the moment he was born. That must've been hard realizing they weren't on the same ship.

I secretly liked her fight.

The thumb-in-the-nose attitude she gave Fairhope. How she didn't back down, didn't leave, didn't frantically try to convince everyone she was not who they thought she was.

She got a raw deal when it came to Fairhope, as far as I could tell, making one mistake, for which she'd been one-hundred percent accountable yet held one-hundred percent at fault.

True, she found it hard to concentrate and got some orders at the diner wrong every now and then, but I chalked it up to inattention or phoning in parts of a shitty job, not stupidity. Once you got talking to the woman, you could tell she was a lot of things, but by hell, she was not a moron.

I found Tennessee three hours after we'd parted ways, exactly where I was expecting to locate her—at the open bar, flashing her tanned legs and white teeth. Earlier, the check-in receptionist had confirmed all-you-can-drink packages on our ID cards.

And, of course, Tennessee being Tennessee, she'd already made good use of her package and was nursing a white cocktail, a Maraschino cherry dangling from her full lips, still in her work uniform, chatting up a man in his sixties.

Even from afar, I could tell she was shamelessly flirting. He wore Bermuda pants, a Hawaiian shirt, and a half-drunk smirk that told her wordlessly what he wanted to do to her.

She was probably working her way to his wallet. Rumor around town was that she'd gotten pregnant with Rob's child purposefully to try to lock him down. The other option, that she genuinely wanted to frolic in the cornfield with Mr. Rich Tourist, shouldn't have surprised me considering her reputation, but it did.

Either way, fresh anger roared in my blood when I saw her purring and giggling like all was well in the world.

I tromped my way over to her, plastering on my best, your-trusted-doctor smile as I ran my hand up her spine from behind, sprawling my fingers inside her sprayed blonde hair.

I'd have kissed her temple, too, if I didn't think it'd result in my not being able to have children in this lifetime.

She whirled back almost violently, ripping her body from mine. When she looked at me, the beam dropped from her mouth, and I had to admit—it pissed me off even more that somehow, even though I was the town's favorite, she was practically allergic to my face.

“Sweetheart.”

I pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear, marveling at how small and aesthetically pleasing everything about her was, even when she tried hard to look like the drag queen version of Christina Aguilera.

Her lips were plump and naturally pouty, her eyes somewhere between hazel and green, and her nose was so button-y, it begged to be pinched.

“Excuse me, sir, do I know you?” she asked coldly.

She looked at me like I'd had a personality transplant, not sure where my easygoing attitude was coming from. The man glimpsed between us, turning slightly in his barstool to take me in.

“Very funny, Mrs. Weiner.” I slid between the two of them, giving him my back as I propped an elbow onto the counter. I didn't mind being rude. No one on this cruise knew me but Tennessee, and her words were worth nothing in Fairhope. “Been lookin' for you all over.”

“Are you...Mr. Weiner?” I heard the man ask behind me.

“The one and only,” I confirmed.

“So this is your husband?” This question was directed at her.

“Also yes,” I said, at the same time she corrected, “Cousin.”

I took a step back so they could see each other's faces. For the first time since I'd gotten on this damn ship, I was having something that resembled, at least from afar, fun.

Tennessee's face was as red as a ripe tomato. The old man paled, but upon a second peek of her shapely calves, squared his shoulders, and decided to give it another go.

“You’re married to your cousin?” he asked her, slowly as though deciding whether or not that was a dealbreaker.

Tennessee swung her gaze my way, pinning me with a look that promised me a slow, painful death involving fructification, starvation, and asphyxiation.

“We’re in the process of getting a divorce.” She played with her plastic earring coyly, doing her whole vixen act.

I flung my arm over her shoulder and swiveled to him.

“We *were* in the process of getting a divorce. We’ve decided to give it one last shot. Hence why we’re here, on this cruise. This is our make-or-break second honeymoon.”

“Where was your first honeymoon?” The man looked between us with a frown, obviously getting suspicious.

“Paris,” Tennessee said, at the same time I answered, “Fiji.”

He took a leisurely sip of his beer, waiting for us to get our stories straight.

But while I couldn’t give two shits about what he thought about me—finally, I was in an uncharted territory, where I could loosen up and be less than perfect—it was obvious from the way my companion was pretzeling her limbs and changing shades of red, that she was having a hard time trying to explain my existence.

“We went to Paris first, for a weekend, but then he wanted to go to Fiji. And we *always* do what he wants. That’s why we’re getting a divorce. Because it’s always Mr. Weiner’s way or the highway. He is the town’s beloved golden boy, you see.”

The man nodded knowingly, burying his hand into a bowl of wasabi peas and throwing a handful into his mouth.

“Been there, done that. Twice divorced now, with three kids between the ex-wives. Life got me real good after that second divorce. Reminded me that the sun don’t shine from my ass.”

“Yes!” Tennessee clapped her hands together, delighted to have an ally. “I don’t wish bad on a lot of people, but I hope my soon-to-be-ex-husband learns that he is, in fact, mortal.”

“I don’t think you’re telling him the whole story, sweetheart.” I unfurled my arm from her shoulder to grab her mysterious

white cocktail, taking a sip. It tasted of coconut, charred marshmallow, and gin. “Tell him why we *really* found ourselves in a marital pickle in Fiji.”

She opened her mouth to stop me, but I was too far gone, driven by vengeance and anger and something else I couldn't exactly put a name on, but made my blood run hotter.

“What's your name again?” I asked Mr. Rich Tourist.

“Brendan.”

“So, Brendan, here I am, newly wed in Fiji, deliriously happy and deeply in love...with my *cousin*.”

This time I *did* drop a casual kiss on the crown of Tennessee's head. I felt her stiffening beside me. Even her hair was hot with shame.

She pretended to wrap an arm around my waist, actually digging her claws into my abs, going for blood.

I ignored the pain, continuing, “I wanted to surprise her by getting her a black pearl necklace. No better place finding 'em than Fiji, *amiright?*”

“Pearls aren't my favorite.” Tennessee made a show of examining her atrociously long fingernails. “They're basically an oyster's blisters. Did you guys know that? Oysters produce them to ease their pain when debris gets stuck in their bodies.”

“Please excuse her.” I smiled winningly, rubbing at her shoulder. “My bride here was raised by wolves. She doesn't do well with polite conversation. Anyway, my wife had told me she was going to wait for me in the hotel. Didn't think much of it at the time.”

“You should've,” Tennessee said adamantly. “I'd tried to escape our marriage five or six times at this point.”

I ignored her, chuckling as I shook my head, as if this was nothing more than our usual banter.

“Anyway, so here I am, purchasing her a grand black pearl necklace, to go with her grand black heart. I come upstairs to our room, and lo and behold...she is not alone.”

Tennessee rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her generous cleavage when she was sure she'd drawn enough blood

under my shirt.

“It was the maintenance guy. My loving husband made a mess and clogged the toilet after going ham on the seafood the evening before.”

I continued, feeling reckless, and unhinged, and completely *un*-like myself for the first time in years.

“Sweetheart, I don’t know what he told you, but what I caught him doing had nothing to do with unclogging the toilet and everything to do with bottlenecking *you*.”

Good ol’ Brendan choked on his beer, coughing and spitting some of the foam and pea wasabi. A bartender arrived, handing us three tall glasses of water. Brendan downed his in less than two seconds.

“You cheated on him?” He jerked his thumb my way, his face thundering as he took Tennessee in.

She shrugged noncommittally. “He cheated first. With my sister.”

“Maybe so, but you were the one who brought a third participant into our marriage.”

She twisted her head and threw me a violent stare. “*You* were the one who wanted a threesome!” She jabbed her finger in my chest.

“I’m talking about the gonorrhea.”

“*Okay* then.” Brendan stood up, patting his pockets to ensure his wallet, phone, and dignity were all in one place. “I’m going to head to my room now. Y’all obviously have some things to resolve, and frankly, it’s getting a little late and I had a big dinner. It was nice meeting you, Mr. and Mrs.... *Weiner*.”

The last name was uttered with a wince.

I waved him off with a smile. “Sure thing. Maybe we’ll catch a game of golf sometime.”

“Yeah. I don’t know about that. I’m not much of a golfer.”

He was already on the other side of the bar. World’s tiniest violin for this creeper.

I wrapped my arm around Tennessee and squeezed, my smile broadening.

“Say goodbye to him, *cu*z.”

“I’m going to kill you,” she muttered.

“Oh, sweetheart, not if I kill you first.”

Seven



Tennessee

For the record, I wasn't chatting up Brendan at the bar.

I wasn't even supposed to be *at* the bar to begin with.

I'd been headed toward the boardwalk, lost in thought and barely getting over another stream of tears and hiccups when I noticed from across the deck there was only one bartender manning the huge bar.

He was flustered, not a lot older than twenty-three, with two huge patches of sweat adorning his armpits.

Helping others had always given me a sense of direction and soothed my soul. Seeing someone who may be more stressed than me in that moment meant I could make something better for someone, if not myself. Plus, it wasn't like I had anything else to do while Cruz Costello was no doubt busy telling the entire world how much of an idiot I was.

Also—I was *still* wearing my Jerry & Sons uniform and looked like a waitress.

If that wasn't fate, I didn't know what was.

The bartender—Stevie—almost kissed me he was so grateful for the help. Apparently, both the barmaids who'd been supposed to work with him on this shift had fallen ill, and he was waiting for their replacements to get dressed.

I'd only helped him for twenty minutes before two veteran bartenders came to save the day. I was almost disappointed when they showed up, since I was making pretty neat tips and taking my mind off of the *Elation/Ecstasy* ordeal.

I even made a mental note to try to find work in cruises sometime before Bear went to college so I could, well, afford to send him to one. Hell, same job but not in a town that hated me? Where was the downside?

To show his appreciation, Stevie began sending all sorts of fancy cocktails my way—the type you had to pay for and didn't come free with the all-you-can-drink package.

And soon, I had to hand some of them over to people around me to avoid alcohol poisoning. One of them, a Brendan McGinn from Louisiana, had decided to strike up a conversation with me.

Everything was going well, and I actually began to calm down a little until Cruz stormed in and made both of us look like slimy perverts.

The worst part was that I'd been blindsided by his behavior.

He'd never acted like this before. Not now. Not in high school. Heck, not even when we were both booger-ridden toddlers at the local nursery.

I knew Cruz would never embarrass himself (and me) like this within Fairhope city limits. But now, away from our town—from our state—apparently, all bets were off.

I was officially his humiliation amusement park, designed solely for his entertainment.

He was golden, royal, and never wrong. But for the next ten days, he planned to be whatever tickled his fancy.

Namely—my tormentor.

Now, Cruz and I were heading to the room together, since I didn't know where it was, and trying very hard not to kill one another.

“Was that really necessary?” I hissed, plodding my way to the elevator.

Bad idea.

My feet still hadn't recovered from my earlier floor-is-lava experience. I didn't envy the poor maintenance person who had to scrape half of my dead skin from the deck tonight.

“Not at all, but it was really fun.”

“I wish the people of Fairhope could've seen you in action. Talking about adultery and incest.”

“Don't forget the gonorrhoea,” Cruz uttered casually.

“Seriously, how come people don't see past your bull-*peep*?” I asked, just as the elevator slid open.

We both stepped in, along with the three people behind us whom we hadn't noticed until right that moment, but they sure noticed us and stared at us with open curiosity.

Cruz didn't seem to mind at all that he was the center of the wrong type of attention, the flint in his eyes telling me he'd never felt so comfortable.

“Well, for one thing, people are not all that insightful. Easy to blow smoke up their asses. For another, I save this part of my personality 'specially for you, Mrs. Weiner.”

“I should record you,” I muttered.

“I should sue you.”

“Oh, yeah?” I belched. “For what exactly?”

“Punching my throat, screwing up my one and only vacation this year. You name it.”

“You punched his throat?” A teenage girl with purple hair and a septum ring beside us turned to me, raising her fist for a bump. “Dude. Neat.”

I leaned toward her, angling my hand next to my mouth, as if telling a secret.

“He went down like a Jenga tower. It was beautiful.”

Everyone laughed.

The elevator slid open, and Cruz stepped outside. I followed him down a narrow hallway with navy carpet and gold imprints on it. The doors were made of heavy deep-mahogany wood, and the lingering scent of citrus and cleaning products wafted through the air.

Cruz slid the electronic card through the slot on the door and pushed it open. I noticed that, despite his intense dislike of me, he held the door open for me to get in first.

Forever the gentleman.

“Shotgun on the shower.” I traipsed in, throwing myself onto the one queen-size bed the room had to offer and inhaling the scent of the sheets, still fresh from a wash.

Cruz tossed the electronic card onto a nearby desk and leaned against the sliver of wall the cabin had to offer. It was about half the size of an average Holiday Inn hotel room, but impeccably furnished and extremely clean.

Still, I had no idea how I was going to survive ten days inside this place with Cruz Costello.

“Go ahead,” he said. “You seem to need it more than me.”

“Are you saying I smell?”

“I’m saying I relish every minute spent away from you.”

“You should write love songs,” I beamed at him. “That’s real romantic.”

“You do know relish is more than a condiment, right?” He delivered a low blow, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

Determined to salvage whatever it was that was left of this trip, I opted out of arguing with him, unzipping my suitcase and taking out my toiletries and some fresh clothes.

As soon as I walked into the tiny bathroom, I turned on both faucets and the shower to the max for privacy and went about my business. I reserved the right to let out a few dainty farts without being judged for it while I was in the comfort of my bathroom.

I took my time, showering, shampooing, brushing my teeth, applying all sorts of complimentary creams and slipping into fresh clothes I’d had the sense to carry up in my purse, knowing our luggage might not get delivered until after dinner. (Okay,

Cruz had reminded me to snag the dress before we handed off our luggage with a snarky comment about dining room dress code.)

I even gave my hair a blow dry. I was tempted to pin it up and spray it to death like always, but then remembered I was not in Fairhope anymore. I could let myself be someone else, maybe the real me and not people's expectations of me.

“All right, Perfect McPerfson, the shower is all yours.” I got out of the bathroom with a spring to my step.

Cruz was gone.



I found Cruz in the dining room thirty minutes later.

Walked in with my Anna Nicole Smith red lipstick and tight black mini dress that didn't leave much room for imagination.

Our assigned table somehow boasted an ocean view (I did not believe luck had anything to do with it). Cruz shared his dinner with one of the cruise directors, whose sole job was to look sparkly and pretty while convincing guests they were having enough fun to book another cruise.

She was sitting in my assigned seat, giggling and tucking her hair behind her ears the entire time.

Disgusting.

Didn't she know we were fake-married?

I squinted, trying to figure out if it looked like a date or not. She was the kind of attractive woman men like Cruz went for—brunette, petite, slender, confident, and dressed in a lazy yet expensive manner.

Ultimately, though, it was hard to figure out if a man had the intention of bedding a woman when all you could see was him asking her to pass the butter.

I also spotted Brendan McGinn. He was sitting by himself at a two-seater table, eating a burger they only offered on the kid's menu. Brendan noticed both of us, too, and gave me a what-the-heck look when he saw Cruz with Cruise Director Lady Woman.

Marching over to Brendan, I took the empty seat, signaled his waiter, told him I'd have what Brendan was having, and struck up a conversation.

"Quite a husband you've got there." Brendan snorted.

"He's a doctor, you know," I bragged.

I was pretty sure this would be my only chance to ever flaunt having a doctor as my husband.

Or *any* husband for that matter.

"Also your cousin."

I waved my hand dismissively, unsure why I was entertaining Cruz's madness.

"Cruz's adopted. His mother was in the circus, and she did a lot of weird stuff with her body while pregnant. He came out with all sorts of problems. Haven't you noticed his head is shaped a little like an eggplant?"

"Well, now that you've pointed that out..." Brendan trailed off, narrowing his eyes at Cruz.

My, that felt liberating.

I nodded.

"What else is wrong with him?" Brendan asked.

"I really shouldn't say."

"Go on. I can keep a secret."

I was certain he couldn't keep his cell phone on him at all times, let alone a secret, but that was the point, wasn't it?

"He has...uhm, actually, there were a few articles about him back in the day." I cleared my throat and dropped my voice, "He has two penises."

"He *WHAT?*"

I repeated the lie, something fluttering behind my chest. It was so much fun to get back at Cruz.

"Now I understand everything," Brendan said. "It's a sex thing."

"What do you mean?" I asked darkly.

“You two are passionate. I can tell, even when you fight, that you have a great sex life.”

I sincerely hoped Brendan didn't serve this country in the FBI or CIA, because his instincts were way off if he thought this was a kink.

“Yeah, too bad he is about to nail the pretty brunette cruise director from the lido deck before the night's over,” I muttered bitterly.

Brendan nodded, probably deciding that he was going to take us for what we were and not ask too many questions.

We had a pleasant meal and an even more pleasant drink. When I peeked over my shoulder to see if Cruz was done with the woman, I saw he was only getting started.

A few more people, her colleagues, judging by their uniforms, had joined them, and now they were all having drinks.

Having drinks and glancing at me every now and then, like *he* was spreading lies about me, too.

A sudden zap ran through me, like an earthquake.

Cruz was here, having the time of his life without his family, free to be whomever he wanted to be, while I was away from Bear for the first time in my life and was probably not going to see him for the next ten days.

From the moment Bear was born, I hadn't been away from him for more than twelve hours.

This was unheard of.

The pain of missing him gnawed inside me like a nocturnal animal.

Quickly, and before my logic overrode my intense sense of pity, I kissed Brendan's cheek goodbye and retired to my stateroom. When I got there, I found my suitcase, along with Cruz's, waiting by the door.

Ours were the only belongings still waiting in the hallway, sitting side by side but still far enough away, like two quarreling lovers.

I decided to bring both of them in, mainly because I didn't want him to pin it on me if someone stole one of his precious Hermes socks or made-of-silver dental floss or whatever nonsense he was spending his salary on.

I shut the door, pressed my back against it, and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I noticed an upholstered crème vanity chair pushed beneath a mirrored desk. I pressed it against the door, its backrest jamming the door handle.

Then I slipped into my pajamas and slid into bed.

I was too tired to wait it out and see how Cruz would react to his position as a temporarily stateroom-less person.

Turned out, I didn't have to.

He banged on the door like bloody murder at one in the morning, waking me up.

“Tennessee Turner. Open the damn door right now.”

Sitting upright in bed, I held my breath and stared at the door like he was going to Hulk his way through it.

I wasn't mean.

I didn't want to share a bed with Cruz Costello.

I didn't trust him.

And besides, I hadn't shared a bed with anyone in my entire life. Even my virginity had been taken on a patch of cool grass under the bleachers, peppered with weeds.

But most of all—I thought Cruz might make a move, seeing as I was the town's favorite harlot. And I didn't trust myself to turn him down as I obviously should.

“I know you're awake,” he gritted out from the other side of the door.

“I am,” I said casually. “So what?”

“I'm not going to sleep outside.”

“Sure about that?” I yawned.

“Goddammit, Tennessee.”

“Don’t say God’s name in vain. He has nothing to do with this situation.”

“You’re going to pay for this.”

“Can I pay you with the same tips you give me? Because I think *you* should be investing in better manners now.”

Dropping my head back to a mountain of pillows, I grinned.

“Well, at least tonight you’re safe from my gonorrhoea, Mr. Weiner.”

Eight



Tennessee

“Could’ve happened to anyone.”

Bear shrugged adamantly the next day, referring to the CruiseGate debacle—again—while we were FaceTiming.

I held my phone high in the air, drifting around my room in my hot pink bikini, over which I’d thrown a pearl caftan that looked very much like something you’d find in Victoria’s Secret’s raunchier side of the store, *not* the beach.

I headed over to the bathroom where I slathered my face with makeup.

“No, it couldn’t. And anyway, it didn’t happen to anyone. It happened to *me*.” I pouted at the mirror in front of me.

“I just don’t understand why you’d make us look so bad.” My mother, of course.

She peeped behind Bear, joined by my father, who gave me a tired grin and said, “Hi, Nussy.”

“Hope you’re being nice to Dr. Costello, pumpkin.” Mom’s voice held a note of a warning. “He’s a stand-up guy. Doesn’t deserve to be stuck in the middle of this.”

That stand-up guy told people I was his cousin and we were passing sexually transmitted diseases to one another last night—before hitting on anyone in a skirt, I wanted to scream.

Instead, I told myself that I was currently riding this jerk’s overpriced internet package talking to my family, so it wasn’t like karma didn’t get him at all.

“Yes, he knows how terribly sorry I am.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* “Where’s Trinity?”

My mother looked over to the other side of the room and winced.

Oh, goodie.

So Trinity was there and didn’t want to talk to me. *Again.*

I didn’t know what had happened between us, exactly.

I’d always been so close to my younger sister—even after I fell pregnant and became an embarrassment to my family—but in recent months, she’d grown detached, cold, almost judgmental.

It made no sense.

Trinity had always been the one to jump at someone’s throat when they said something mean about me.

She defended me with everything she had and maintained that people gave me a heck of a bad time, conveniently ignoring Rob’s wrongdoings. Some even said they *understood* him for not choosing to screw up his life and stay.

Trinity and I hadn’t fought, or anything like that to warrant the sudden way we’d drifted apart. Though, I had an inkling why she was reserved.

Dr. Costello Senior and his wife Catherine were arguably the most honorable citizens of Fairhope. While Trinity didn’t give a *clap* about what her classmates had said about me, Catherine and Andrew’s opinion was an entirely different matter.

She didn’t want me to mess it up with the Costellos for her sake—for her future as part of their family.

Which meant I had to make an effort with Dr. Satan. If not for myself, then for her.

“Gotcha.” I popped my lips around a scarlet lipstick. “She doesn’t want to talk. That’s fine.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to talk.” Trinity’s face invaded the phone camera, two stains of blush marring her cheeks. She looked otherwise pale and worried. And, if I wasn’t mistaken, was also dressed like a nun in an attempt to impress her future in-laws. “It’s just that...Christ, Nussy, Catherine is already such a pain in the...”

“*Mass,*” Bear completed for her.

He knew I didn’t like profanity.

“That,” Trinity agreed. “And now she is going around muttering mean things under her breath about us. Oh, Nussy, she is so awful.”

Something in my chest eased that she was talking to me again. Maybe it was just wedding stress?

“Look, I’m sorry. It was an honest mistake. What does Wyatt say about all this?”

I applied a third coat of mascara, waiting to hear a knock on the door and find a wrinkled-looking Cruz. So far, the morning had been blissfully Costello-free, but I wasn’t counting on that to last.

“He’s not saying anything.” Trinity sighed. “His parents are his idols. He’ll never go against them.”

“Sounds like a catch.”

“Don’t give me lip, Nussy. You’ve no right after the life choices you’ve made.”

Ouch.

“Well, hang in there, okay? I’ll make it better when I see them. I’ll apologize a thousand times. I swear.”

After hanging up and looking overly made up—I didn’t need a weekly therapist appointment to know it was a camouflage technique designed to protect myself from society—I strutted out of my room, swinging a little faux-fur purse.

I looked about as classy as a ketchup stain on a strapless cropped top and was perfectly okay with that.

After all, I couldn't be accused of trying to bag a British royal on a cruise from North Carolina to the Bahamas.

I couldn't find Cruz anywhere during breakfast, which contributed greatly to my sense of urgency to fix whatever I messed up between my family and the Costellos.

Afterwards, on my way to the pool, I strutted by a glass-walled library overlooking the ocean and spotted him sitting by himself, looking fresh as a daisy, wearing an entire outfit I'd seen on a mannequin the day before from the boardwalk in Prada's window.

Black Bermuda shorts, a chunky navy top, and his big, bold watch.

He'd *so* spent the night in Cruise Director Lady Woman's room. If anyone was giving anyone STDs, it was this *gasstard*. I made a note not to get anywhere near Gabriella Holland's southern region when we did our bridesmaids' fittings.

He was sipping an espresso and catching up on the news on an iPad attached to the table by a security wire.

Taking a few calming breaths, I pushed the glass door to the library open and sashayed toward him, stopping right in front of him.

Low elevator music filled the room, which was full with men of fifty-five and over. I wondered at what point in time, exactly, Cruz Costello had morphed from a dashing Q1 with steel buns to a Floridian pensioner.

"Did you know constantly reading the news is almost as detrimental to your heart as smoking?" I blurted. Because saying stupid stuff had always been easier than apologizing.

He didn't look up from the iPad, swiping his finger across it to turn a page.

"I didn't know that, because it's not true. Cite your source."

"*Southern Belle* magazine."

"Allow me to be skeptical. Is this your version of an apology?" His words rippled through me.

Dang, he had a good, low voice.

“If I’m going to apologize, so should you.”

He looked up, lounging back on the plush, brown recliner he was occupying, a puff of his undiluted woody scent invading my nostrils, making everything under my naval tingle.

“What for?”

“Telling Brendan we were cousins, and married, and carrying STDs. In that exact order.”

“Fair enough,” he surprised me by saying. “You go first.”

I closed my eyes.

I wasn’t four anymore.

Then why was it so hard to apologize?

Your sister’s happiness is on the line. Now’s not the time to have pride.

“Sorry I booked us the wrong tickets. I truly, *truly* didn’t mean to.”

“In that case, I apologize for embarrassing you in front of your little friend, but reserve the right to do it again when provoked, on the grounds it was more fun than I’ve had in years.” He motioned toward the chair next to him. “Coffee?”

“Please.” I sat down, feeling a little awkward.

The truth was, I wasn’t used to being served. I’d always been the one doing the serving. Nonetheless, a waitress from the attached coffee shop came to take my order—a flat white and a French-sounding pastry I couldn’t pronounce, but could point out on the menu.

It occurred to me that I had to pay for my food, and I hated myself for not sticking with free breakfast, served earlier, or the free twenty-four-hour buffet on the lido deck I had too much pride to bail to.

But I had the tip money from yesterday in my purse, so I wouldn’t have to tally it up on my monthly Excel sheet. I could still get Bear his video game at the end of the month. Maybe.

“So. Did you get lucky yesterday?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“If by *lucky* you mean I didn’t have to spend the night with you, then yes.”

“Did you spend it with someone else?” I asked casually.

“Yes.”

Okay, that was *not* supposed to hurt. Certainly not the way it did. I was tangled in tight vines of jealousy that suffocated me.

“Nice. Is she from our neck of the woods?”

“Unsure.” Cruz flipped another page on the iPad. “*She* was a fifty-year-old Prada saleswoman who secretly rented me her top bunk on the staff deck and opted to sleep with your Brendan, making a hundred-percent profit margin.”

Holy *clap*.

Dr. Costello was resourceful.

He must’ve mistaken my surprised face for another emotion, because he said slowly and thickly, “Sorry it didn’t work between you and lover boy. Unless, of course, you don’t mind being Bonnie and Brendan’s fifth wheel.”

“He can have Bonnie.”

“From what she told me, when she came to get her electronic card back this morning, you also told him I have two penises.”

I could feel myself getting redder and redder, but I didn’t reply to this.

Cruz threw me a little patronizing smirk. “Actually, I have just the one, but I can see why you’d make that mistake, considering its length and width. I’m flattered you paid such close attention.”

“Why’d you say you weren’t alone, then? She wasn’t with you.”

“Just to see your face. You hate seeing me win.”

“True.” I sighed. “Which sucks, because you’re Dr. Cruz Costello, so you always win.”

“Not always.”

There was a lull in the conversation, and I felt the urge to fill it, somehow.

“I have to say, it’s pretty creative of you to find a way to take my potential sugar daddy away from me before I even made a move.”

The waitress served me my flat white and pastry and hurried to the next table, where people weren’t discussing penises and sugar daddies. Or were they? I took a bite of the buttery dough, washing it down with the hot liquid.

This was definitely better than an orgasm. Or so I told myself, since an orgasm wasn’t in the cards for me. I was bad at giving one to myself and always forgot to plug my vibrator into its charger, since I could only do it when Bear wasn’t home.

Anyone who had a teenage son knew better than to leave things in plain sight. Bear always looked for *something* in my room, be it a charger, a battery, an elastic band, or some change.

“You don’t need a sugar daddy.”

Was it just me or did Cruz Costello sound super annoyed all of a sudden?

“Why not?” I purred.

“You can get an actual damn husband if you put your mind to it.”

“Ha.” I took another sip of my coffee. “Not in Fairhope.”

“Don’t be so sure about that.” He gave me his superior look. The one that reminded me he was so much better than me.

“What’d you hear?” I cocked my head, curious all of a sudden. “Is it Tim Trapp? Because you know I cannot, in good conscience, marry that man and have my son become Bear Trapp.”

Cruz stared at me with a mixture of irritation and revulsion, shaking his head.

“I haven’t heard anything specific. All I’m saying is that if you put a bit of effort—and a lot more clothes on—you’ll find people aren’t as allergic to you as you think.”

“I thought guys liked big hair and boobs and tiny clothes.”

“Not the kind you want to attract.”

“And who should I want to attract?” The conversation was taking a surprising turn once again. “People like *you*?”

“For instance.” He took a sip of his espresso, crossing his legs like George Clooney in a private plane commercial or something. “Why? Would ending up with someone like me be so terrible?”

No, it’s just that someone like you would never look at me in a billion years.

“Yes,” I said curtly, the sting of rejection already prickling my soul before he blew me off. “It actually would.”

Cruz snarled, baring his teeth in what was supposed to be a smile but left me feeling cold and a little queasy. He stood up, setting the iPad down, handing the waitress his cruise ship ID card, so I wouldn’t have to pay.

If he thought I was going to take the high moral ground and demand to go Dutch, he had another thing coming.

“For the sake of this trip ending without any murder charges being pressed against either of us, I suggest we stay away from each other and meet in the stateroom at the end of every day,” he suggested.

“Sounds good.”

“Where we *will* share a bed, seeing as I’m not going to sleep on the floor or let Bonnie run my bank account into the ground.”

“That’s fair,” I said evenly. “But there’ll be a pillow barrier between us.”

“All the better.”

“Good. Great. Glad it’s all settled.”

“Oh, and Tennessee?”

“Yes?”

“Next time you lock me out of my own room, paid for by *my* family, I’m smearing you with blood and tossing you off the ship as shark bait. Understood?”

I could tell by the darkness gleaming from his ocean-blue eyes that he wasn’t completely kidding.

Still... I had to push.

It had become a game.

One I couldn't find the maturity to stop.

“Whose blood would that be?”



Two hours later, I found myself in what *should* be my natural habitat—poolside, on the upper deck, tanning my butt cheeks.

After talking to my parents and ensuring that Bear was having a blast (apparently, he hadn't left the arcade since ten in the morning and had even found a fellow smelling-of-goat teenage friend named Landon), I snagged a sunbed, grabbed a soft paperback someone had left behind, ordered a fruity cocktail, and did something I hadn't done since age sixteen—*relaxed*.

No double shifts at the diner, cleaning, washing, doing the laundry, or helping Bear with his homework—or Trinity with her wedding preparations. No bending over for teenage boys or braving the wrath of my ex-high school friends who sneered down at me, with their wedding rings and mortgages.

Even the book was really good for something I'd found with a discounted sticker and a suspicious white stain.

The day was turning out to be too good to be true, which was how I knew things were about to go sideways. Mark my words, if the *Elation* didn't suffer a fate similar to the *Titanic* by the end of the day, then the entire cruise was going to suffer from food poisoning.

Shortly after I had a refreshing salad full of fruit and nuts for lunch, me and my food belly returned to our sunbed. I turned on my stomach and flipped a page in the book when a shadow cast over my body, descending down to my right as someone took a seat on the sunbed beside me, even though the whole row was empty.

There's a special place in Hell reserved for people who choose to sit beside you when everywhere else is available. And I truly, sincerely hoped this place was overcrowded, and that everyone there had BO, because that's what these kind of people deserved.

“Why, hello there, sweet cheeks.”

He was definitely not referring to the pair on my face.

I squinted up, using my hand as a visor against the sun. The guy in front of me looked like your typical frat boy, not a day over twenty, with a baseball cap turned backward, Hawaiian swim trunks, and a *Bros Before Hos* tattoo across his chest that I wagered his fraternity friends had inked themselves with, too.

“Name’s Dale.”

Of course it was. I bet when his mother had an ultrasound, all they saw inside her uterus was a cardboard sign that said *douchebag*.

“Nessy.”

“That’s a cute name. You from around here?”

Where would that be?

The middle of the Caribbean Sea?

“Look, I’m real flattered you saw my tush and didn’t think I was a twenty-nine-year-old overworked, underpaid single mother, but that’s what I am. So can we skip the chitchat, and may I suggest you try the waterpark across the deck? Lots of girls your age there.”

I was entirely too direct. But struggling single moms did not have the luxury of blipping around with flunk-boys.

“I don’t mind you’re twenty-nine.” He was rolling a swizzlestick from one side of his mouth to the other.

“Well, I do.” I let my head drop against the sunbed and turned it in the other direction, considering the conversation over.

It wasn’t that I was against dating men, but if I were to end a thirteen-year man-strike, it wasn’t going to be with Dale here, who found it fitting to ink himself with something so classless, even by *my* standards.

“Age’s just a number.”

“That’s a very romantic take.”

Pucking chit, would this guy ever leave?

“Oh, I’m not a romantic. I’m only looking for something casual, honey pie.”

“Thanks for clarifying. I was just debating what kind of diamond I want on my engagement ring.”

I was going to have to evacuate myself from the spot soon.

I couldn’t afford to brawl with someone on this boat. The Costellos were already watching me with hawk eyes, waiting for me to deliver the final blow to my reputation’s back and make them beg their son to cancel his engagement to my sister. And their informer, Cruz, was on this boat.

Nope. I was walking on thin ice as it was already.

Stumbling, more like.

“Damn, Nussy. Just give me a chance. I’ll make it good for you.”

Douchebag Dale placed his hand on my elbow, giving it a squeeze. I withdrew quickly, like he’d put fire to me. Maybe it was an exaggeration, but I hated men touching me.

Perhaps because the last man who had left me in the most vulnerable position I’d ever been in. Or maybe because it was far too common in Fairhope to pinch my waist or pat the small of my back—too close to my butt—to grab my attention when someone wanted to place an order with me.

“Don’t touch me!”

The words didn’t mean to sound like a whimper, but they came out like it, anyway.

“Sweetheart,” I heard a familiar, raspy brogue. One that couldn’t belong to just any ordinary mortal. Every inch of my flesh blossomed into pebbles, and the fine hair on my neck stood on end despite the sun pounding down on me. “There you are. Sorry I’m late. I decided to take the advanced jujutsu class after kickboxing.”

Before I knew what was happening, Douchebag Dale’s hand was off of my elbow, tossed away physically by another, much larger male hand.

Cruz landed on the edge of my sunbed, making it dip to one side. He was shirtless now, wearing a ball cap the *correct* and

grown-up way.

I was glad I had my shades on, because now I could drink him in without him having the satisfaction of knowing I was looking.

His torso was mouthwateringly muscular, his skin golden and smooth. He had bulging arms, with veins that snaked all the way to his forearms. A thin strip of blond curls snaked from below his navel and disappeared somewhere under his shorts.

I wanted to follow that trail with my tongue.

I should really remember to charge my vibrator when I get back home.

Cruz polished a shiny red apple on his swim trunks, then took a juicy bite.

Slammed with this surprise lust toward Dr. Costello, and an unexplainable desire to switch places with his apple, I turned my head away and ignored both men.

“She your wife?” Douchebag Dale mumbled.

“The one and only,” Cruz replied. “The lucky Mrs. Weiner.”

“*Weiner*,” DD repeated, giving a Beavis-and-Butthead type snort.

“Problem?” Cruz asked.

“No. No. Great last name. German, right?”

There was a pause. Cruz picked up the sunscreen beside me, squirted a generous amount of white lotion onto his hand, and began massaging my back with it.

Holy wow, this feels good.

“Gotta keep you safe from the sun,” he said with the apple still trapped between his teeth. “You know I’m the only thing allowed to make your behind red.”

Oh. My. Grub.

His hands were strong and confident, his fingers long, and I told myself I was letting him do this because I didn’t need another fight on my hands with a Costello.

Not because it was stirring all kinds of things in the lower region of my body, or because the minute his skin touched mine, I realized that my back had really needed a massage for the last decade or so.

“You’re still here,” Cruz said casually, referring to Douchebag Dale. “Do you *want* your face punched, or are you waiting for me to forget you’re hitting on my wife and go grab myself a beer?”

“Uhm. Yeah. No. I’m...” Young Dale stood up, looking around him, as if he forgot something. Maybe his pride. “Sorry. My dad...I mean, bad! My bad.”

“Go on. And tell your friends she’s taken, too. I don’t want to see any of y’all getting anywhere near my missus.”

Cruz made a show of flexing his muscles, giving Dale a front-row ticket to the gun show.

I had to admit, I was impressed.

I knew Cruz was a runner and that he took it upon himself to coach the T-ball little league at our local elementary school (which, frankly, I found creepy considering he had no kids there), but I didn’t know he was *that* ripped.

He was considerably taller than Dale and had at least twenty more pounds of muscle on him.

“All right. Yeah. Fair.”

As soon as Dale was gone, Cruz withdrew his hands from me as fast as humanly possible, shifting to the sunbed next to mine. I mourned the loss of his touch, but celebrated the fact I might get to relax enough to nap under the sun for a couple more hours before dinner, now that the frat boy was gone.

“You’re welcome,” Cruz said, when I didn’t offer him a thank you.

I propped my cheek against the sunbed, staring at him through my shades.

“You really like being everyone’s hero, don’t you?” There was no cure for my pettiness where this man was concerned.

“What’s not to like?”

He braced the sunbed from both sides, his biceps poking out, his six-pack on full display. Beside them, his apple was eaten to the core. He'd demolished it.

I wonder if he eats his apple the way he eats pu...

"Heroes are such simple creatures," I heard myself exclaim passionately. "I, for one, am always hot for the villain in the movies."

"That could explain a few things about your life."

"Hey." I curved an eyebrow. "You calling your best friend a villain?"

Now that Rob was back in town, I was sure he and Cruz would rekindle their bromance.

"No, I'm calling you a woman with very few scruples."

I laughed throatily, turning on my back and propping one leg over the other. I noticed that not even Saint Cruz was able to rip his eyes from my swollen breasts, which made the strings holding my bikini top work extra hard.

"Nice truce, we've got here."

"What can I say? You bring out the worst out in me." He shook his head.

"Then why did you save me from Mr. Douchebag?"

"Only one person is allowed to give you a hard time on this cruise, and that person is me."

I mulled his words over.

On one hand, I liked the fact that despite our banter, Cruz Costello truly was completely harmless, in a sense that I knew he would never be cruel or downright mean to me. He just didn't have it in him. He was genuinely a good guy, and he would never do anything to spite me. He would protect me from Dales.

On the other hand, that was precisely what made him so dangerous. He was lovable to a fault, and I...well, I couldn't fall in love. I couldn't afford the distraction.

As it was, I was flailing to survive.

And he had Gabby. Or not? Why tell me that?

When I realized we'd been silent for over a minute, I told Cruz, "Look, we need to try to be cordial with one another. It's important to Trinity and Wyatt."

"I'm cordial."

"Can you pretend I don't appall you?" I stressed.

"I can try."

"Good. Your approval of me in Fairhope is like getting absolution from the pope. While you're at it, my eyes are up here." I motioned to my face, when it became apparent Dr. Costello couldn't stop looking at my cleavage.

His cheekbones flushed pink, and he swung his gaze to the pool.

"You're wearing shades," he said.

"Then look elsewhere."

"Already on it."

"They're not fake, you know."

I sniffed. It was one of the many rumors about me around Fairhope. That I got myself a new pair of tits for my eighteenth birthday to try to bag a wealthy husband who'd accept my toddler son as a package deal.

In truth, my breasts just never fully bounced back (pun definitely intended) from being Bear's open buffet for the two years I breastfed him (formula costs a fortune).

"I never bought into those rumors."

"Then why were you looking?" I challenged.

"Because I'm a red-blooded man, and you're..." He stopped himself from finishing the sentence.

"What?" I asked, almost frantically.

Up until a second ago, I found it impossible to believe he found me more attractive than a warm bucket of spit.

"Nothing."

I ripped the shades from my face, swinging my legs across the sunbed and sitting up straight. My harlot smile was scarlet-red and on full display.

“What am I, Cruz?”

“Hot,” he said gruffly, his voice low and measured and full of the things he wanted to do to me. “Extremely hot.”

“You think?”

“Now you’re just fishing.”

“Humor me,” I pouted.

“Why?”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, which was slightly pink in comparison to the rest of his bronze self.

Ha!

So Cruz Costello didn’t get an amazing tan all over. This insignificant imperfection made me feel way more happy than I should.

“Because we have eight more days after today to spend together in a stateroom the size of a postage stamp, and I want to know what to expect.”

“An abundance of alone time and zero hanky-panky.”

“You just said hanky-panky.” I may or may not have giggled.

“You say *gasshole*, lady. And I’m leaving.”

But he didn’t stand up, and I suspected I knew why. My eyes slid down to his crotch.

He shifted on the orange Moroccan deck chair, crossing his legs.

I pouted, pretending not to notice. “Not good enough for you, am I?”

“You’re full of bull, Tennessee Lilybeth Turner. You wouldn’t have me if I were the last man on Earth.”

He remembered my middle name.

A flutter passed under my belly button.

“And why do you think that is?”

“Because you hate men.” His ’stache twitched. “All of them. No exceptions. We scare you. You do realize Bear’s going to grow up to become one, too, right?”

Yes, and I'd rather not think about it.

There was a beat of silence. I didn't deny his analysis. There was no point.

We both leaned back on our sunbeds, watching people doing laps in the pool, couples making out and splashing one another.

"What're you thinking about?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Why're you asking?"

"You always think about weird stuff. Like that pearl thing. The blister story."

"That's a hard fact, Dr. Costello."

"Well." He tipped his ball cap down, like a cowboy, a smile tugging on his lips under his perfect mustache. "Indulge me."

I frowned. "I'm thinking there are so many germs and semi-exposed genitalia happening in this water every single day. There's absolutely no way on Earth you'll find me inside a cruise ship's pool."

He laughed.

"What are *you* thinking about?" I asked.

"That you're different from what I thought," he said. "Very different."

"Whatever," I answered, because he didn't seem like he said it in a bad way, but frankly, I had enough pride that I didn't want to be caught fishing for compliments twice in ten minutes.

"So. Wanna have dinner together? A *friendly* dinner," he asked.

"You're buying."

"It's free."

I sighed. "The drinks, too?"

"I'm afraid so."

A woman walked by in a fancy dress.

"Then how about a nice Prada dress? I really do want to live the kept woman life, even if only for a day."

"That's a no."

“Ugh.” I rolled my eyes. “You’re a *clappy* husband, Mr. Weiner.”

“And you have a weird aversion to profanity.”

He got up and offered me a hand, and I took it.

And that’s when the trouble began.

Nine



Cruz

If this cruise had taught me anything med school hadn't, other than the fact Tennessee Turner had no future in the travel business, it was that you could, in fact, have a three-hour erection without prescribed erectile medication.

Fine, five.

Six, but honestly, more like five-and-a-half.

Non. Freaking. Stop.

At first, I'd noticed her from across the pool, tiny pink bikini on her supermodel figure, tanning her ass.

There was not one man in the vicinity who didn't drink her up with his eyes, until finally, every self-respecting woman in the area dragged her beau from that row of seats, leaving Tennessee completely alone and easy prey.

I'd watched from a safe distance, the majority of my blood concentrated between my legs and again wondered why she was so hard to avoid on a cruise ship the size of Long Island.

I'd planned to catch up on some medical journals, but the only thing I learned during the afternoon was that Tennessee Turner had zero bad angles.

Trust me—I checked.

Finally, a tatted fuckboy put some moves on her.

I'd studied her reaction closely. Word around town was that she was a hussy, but I had a zero-bull-crap policy and only believed what my eyes could see when it came to people.

And what I noticed over the years was that Tennessee not only actively blocked everyone's advances, but she hadn't been seen with a man since Robert Gussman.

I could tell by her body language that Tennessee didn't appreciate her new admirer's attentions. I struggled with staying out of the situation, until the asshole put his hand on her elbow.

I was there in half a second, shooed him away, and stuck around for the—wait for it—conversation.

Because, as it turned out, Tennessee Turner was pretty damn entertaining to be around. Or, at least, she didn't blow smoke up my ass and treat me like I walked on water (although I didn't doubt for a second she'd unceremoniously toss me off the ship just to be sure).

She was the only person in Fairhope who saw past my shiny exterior, and I was curious to know what, exactly, she was seeing.

We made our way to our room. I carried her straw beach tote, grateful to have something to conceal my raging hard-on as she blabbered happily about the strategy we'd use for the open buffet we'd chosen for dinner.

She seemed to mistake a cruise vacation for a war, and was getting pretty animated about it.

“The poultry and meat section is always packed. The lines are terrible, I noticed yesterday. I suggest you stand there and get each of us double portions while I take care of the pasta and salads. Unless you want potatoes with your meat? I don't know. I don't think I can look at potatoes the same way since I started working at Jerry & Sons. Coulter has done some pretty dreadful things with them over the years.”

“I eat there every week, you know.”

She waved her hand to disregard me, something I found oddly endearing. Even her fingers were sexy.

“Nothing too unhygienic. Besides, you always order the BLT with a salad on the side.”

“Comforting.”

We left the elevator and rounded the hallway leading to our room. In the distance, I spotted two women dressed in management uniforms and a middle-aged couple talking animatedly.

“So how come you never looked for something else for work?” I asked.

“I’m not very bright.”

“Not many people are.”

Pointing out that she was smart, or at the very least more quick-witted and eloquent than anyone I knew, would be considered ass-kissing.

Plus, I had a feeling she wasn’t going to believe I saw her as a fully rounded, nuanced human being, no matter how fervently I pleaded my case.

“Fairhope is a small town. Not a whole lot of job opportunities.”

“They pop up every now and then.”

“Come on, Cruz. I appreciate it, I do. But people don’t like me, and it would be cruel to make me want to try.”

I was starting to get irritated, but I wasn’t sure if it was with her, with the town we lived in, or both.

“It’s a chicken and egg situation, Turner. No one knows what came first. You’re not even trying. Of course people think the worst about you.”

“Good. Let them.”

As we came closer to the couple and the management representatives, their voices grew louder. The middle-aged lady was crying and flinging herself against the wall dramatically,

while her husband rubbed her back to comfort her, looking at a loss.

“I just didn’t think it’d happen somewhere like this. Shame on all of you. This is completely unacceptable, and I’ll have you know I’ve already contacted a lawyer.”

“Ma’am, I promise we’ll get to the bottom of this. I’m sure it can be explained.”

“Nothing can be explained!” the woman shrieked, throwing her arms in the air. She was a solid woman, with bright red tresses and jewelry that looked heavy to carry. “I had fifteen thousand dollars’ worth of jewels in that suitcase. How could you just dump it in the hallway?”

The two management representatives exchanged helpless looks, while the lady began to sob again, burying her head in her husband’s shoulder.

“Well, ma’am, things like that don’t happen very often. If there was a mix-up—”

Tennessee and I swapped frowns as we came to a stop in front of our door, which happened to be the one directly opposite to the couple’s. We both smiled politely as I slid our electronic card into its slot.

“Maybe they have it,” the woman sniffled behind us.

Tennessee froze, grabbing my wrist all of a sudden, like a little girl.

“Ma’am, we cannot ask this couple to show us their room.”

“Yes. I remember the blonde woman. She hung out around our room a lot yesterday, lookin’ like trouble and sin,” the woman’s voice grew louder, bolder.

I turned around, giving her a frosty look.

“Well, the blonde woman happens to have a room here.”

“Hard to believe.” The woman swept a judgmental gaze over Tennessee, head-to-toe. “But she does, I guess, doesn’t she? What does it say about you?” She turned to look at me accusingly.

“That I have a good taste.” I grinned nonchalantly.

Her husband cackled, and she elbowed him.

“That’s very subjective,” she huffed. “But as it stands, she is my prime suspect. She looks like a crook, a common girl, and she’s been loitering around the hallway. Now show us your room. It’s already open.”

It was true. I’d pushed the door half-open at this point.

“No!” Tennessee cried, turning bright red.

She couldn’t look more suspicious if she tried, but I didn’t think she’d actually stolen anything. I’d been in the room briefly today after our conversation at the library, and everything seemed in perfect order.

She’d carried both our suitcases in, but there wasn’t a third one anywhere to be seen.

“You can’t go into our room,” Tennessee choked. “Just because I look suspicious to you doesn’t mean you can search me. This is America!”

One of the representatives—a black woman—gave Tennessee a *really, dude?* glare, winning ten points for sarcasm and another ten for timing.

Problem was, I was growing agitated with people giving Tennessee the wrong kind of attention everywhere we went.

True, she was over-the-top with the makeup, skimpy clothes, and hair inspired by sixties’ vixens. But that was her prerogative, and she didn’t deserve to get shit for it.

I didn’t know what made her want to ruin her good looks with war paint and lace, but that didn’t mean people had the right to call her a hooker to her face.

In other news, my hard-on became a half-mast at best. Good news for my bladder, which was currently the home to about a gallon of piss.

“We have nothing to hide.” I flashed her a good-natured smile.

“Great!” The woman flung her arms in the air. “In that case, show us your room.”

“No!” Tennessee insisted.

“Actually,” one of the representatives interrupted, “it is perfectly possible that management would ask us to knock on the doors of the rooms nearby and ask to double-check, so if we could have a look now, that would be great.”

“No problem.” I pushed the door open all the way, jerking my head to indicate they could come in.

We had nothing to hide. We were innocent, and I wanted to see that woman’s face when she delivered a humble apology to Tennessee.

Speaking of Tennessee, she bolted after me, heaving. The sobbing/rude woman trailed behind us, waltzing right inside.

“There it is.” The woman pointed at my suitcase, crowing. Her face was sweaty and red, and she launched herself at my navy luggage as if it was her long-lost twin, bending down and hugging it. “That’s my suitcase. I knew she stole it. I knew it. What’d I tell you, Fred? I have a *sense* for these things.”

“Lady,” I growled, “the only thing I sense is that you need to get your eyes checked. That’s *my* suitcase, and I’d appreciate it if you stop rubbing yourself against it.”

“Don’t try to cover up for her.”

The woman not only bared her teeth at me, she was also wheeling my still-zipped suitcase out of *my* room.

I stepped in front of her, blocking the way. Meanwhile, Tennessee was rocking in a corner, enjoying a nice, leisurely mental breakdown for one. I didn’t know her to be so sensitive. Or a sucker for a con.

This lady must’ve pushed one hell of a button.

“*Don’t*,” I warned the woman in front of me, my jaw ticking in irritation. I’d never been less than a perfect gentleman to a woman before, and this, too, felt more liberating than alarming.

Her eyes flared. “I’m leaving with my suitcase.”

“It’s not yours. My companion already said she didn’t steal it.”

“I don’t care what your *whore* said,” the woman enunciated extra slowly for impact. “I’m leaving with it. And, frankly, next time you take a sex worker on a cruise, at least get an expensive

escort. You're embarrassing yourself prancing around with her like we don't know what she is. Now, if you excuse me, I'm *leaving*."

"Wanna roughhouse it?" I lifted an eyebrow.

She almost fainted.

"You deserve each other," she spat.

"I wish."

Riling her up was fun, and I couldn't actually let her get out of here before making Tennessee feel better about the mix-up.

At some point in all this mess, her husband—poor Fred—had the good sense to pry my suitcase out of her hands and unzip it, revealing some flowery gowns, high heels, and jewelry I definitely did not pack for the cruise.

He crouched down, waving a handful of diamonds in the air in triumph.

"See? This is hers. Says right here on the suitcase tag. Ramona Warren. That's my wife."

For a second there, I was completely speechless. Probably because I'd never been in a situation like this before.

No one had ever accused me of any wrongdoings, and I'd never been caught with my pants down (ironically, other than that time I *was* caught with my pants down, junior year of college with Felicia Ralph).

Logically, I could tell that there was room for error—both suitcases were navy. Even I had mistaken it at first glance for mine.

And I definitely should've unzipped my suitcase and checked its contents—which I would've, given the chance, which Tennessee took from me when she locked me out the night before.

But then there were other things to consider. Such as—who the hell didn't read the tag on a suitcase before bringing it into a room?—Tennessee Turner, that's who.

Also, why had Tennessee been so stressed about our room being searched *before* it was revealed the suitcase belonged to

this woman? What did she have to hide? From what I could tell, there were no sex toys or human feces in plain sight to make a quick search in the room unbearably uncomfortable.

I turned to look at my companion. Tennessee glanced away, out the window, at the blue ocean, her chin upturned, her eyes two shiny crystals.

She was going to cry.

I turned back to Mr. and Mrs. Warren.

“My apologies.”

The management women began blabbering about complimentary drink vouchers and a new point system that would allow Mr. and Mrs. Warren an upgraded room if they chose the same cruise again.

“I bet you feel pretty stupid right now, don’t ya, Mr. Hot Shot?” The lovely Mrs. Warren stomped over the carpeted floor with a vicious grin as she passed me, her shoulder brushing my arm purposefully.

“All I feel is intense compassion for my companion, who made a human error, and had to pay for it with meeting with your sour face,” I maintained calmly.

Mrs. Warren snorted, already out the door. “Keep her on a leash, pal.”

“That’s a nice visual. I just might, if she’s into it.” I received the desired effect as Mrs. Warren paled to a shade reserved for the walls of mental institutions. “Does that mean you have *my* suitcase?” I asked, the practical prick that I was.

“There’s a couple suitcases in the lost and found cabin. We’ll check,” one of the representatives said helpfully.

And then, Tennessee and I were all alone.

Her, me, and the elephant in the room.



“It was an accident,” Tennessee blurted out before I even spun to look at her. Which turned out to be quite a task, now that I

believed she might've stolen the suitcase.

I could barely look at her face, I was so angry.

There was a ninety-nine percent chance that it was an honest mistake, of course. She made a lot of honest mistakes. But that one percent margin bothered me.

Tennessee proved to be obsessed with money. She'd asked me to buy her a dress earlier. Was she worried about fitting in? What if she'd thought she could steal a few items before returning the suitcase to its rightful owner?

"I believe you," I said, because it was the right thing to say.

"No, you don't." She tossed herself over the bed with a heavy sigh, even though she was coated with sunscreen and sweat and a day full of sun. "I can see it in your face. You think I did it on purpose."

"Nope."

Maybe.

She groaned into the pillow. "The look on your face was unbearable."

"You do seem to find my face generally punchable."

"I thought it was yours. I did. There were no other suitcases in the hallway. Someone must've taken yours. I thought it was a no-brainer. You have to believe me."

"I do," I said, and because I wanted this awkward conversation to be over, I added, "You're *Messy Nessy*. Things like that happen to you all the time."

She looked up from the pillow, and immediately, I knew I'd screwed it up. She looked so dejected, so goddamn unhappy, I wanted to...wanted to...

Don't complete that sentence, Dr. Costello. Not even in your head. She is not your problem. She doesn't want to be your problem.

"Tennessee..." I said instead.

"Shotgun on the shower," she said flatly, unplastering herself from the bed and making her way to the bathroom. "Make sure

your valuables are out of sight by the time I get back. Wouldn't want my sticky fingers all over them."



By the time my roommate got out of the bathroom (why did she have to turn on all three faucets? Weren't there more practical ways to drown oneself on a cruise?), one of the representatives came into our room with my suitcase, explaining that it had been in the lost and found cabin.

I tipped him well, wheeled it in, and decided that despite my sliver of doubt, stemming from Tennessee's general unfounded bad reputation in Fairhope, I was going to give her the benefit of the doubt.

We had a good thing going today, and by 'good', I mean no one had threatened to physically harm the other, and I wanted to keep it that way (although now I thought about it, I *had* told her I was going to bathe her in her own blood and throw her to the sharks if she locked me out again this morning).

She got out of the bathroom looking like something out of a Victoria's Secret catalog. Mrs. Warren was dead wrong. If Tennessee were a hooker, she would cost at least two grand a night.

A lacy black mini dress clung to her curves with a pink satin ribbon crisscrossed diagonally on her back, tying the whole garment into place. Her big Marilyn Monroe hair looked impeccable, and her heels were tall enough for her to see the Empire State Building on a sunny day.

She didn't have any makeup on yet, and I had to admit, natural-looking Tennessee made my stomach flip like a teenage boy finding his father's *Playboy* stash for the first time.

She glanced at my suitcase without comment, passing by me over to what I assumed she claimed as her nightstand, producing a makeup bag from the drawer.

"They found it," I said, referring to the suitcase.

She unzipped her makeup bag, flushing under the weight of my stare. "Oh, well, that's good. Maybe if you manscape

regularly, your penis won't be so hard to locate next time."

We were back to being enemies.

"I said I believe you."

"Oh, but I *don't* believe you believe me," she countered. "Anyway, it's fine. You didn't look like you were up to getting us a double portion of meat, anyhow."

We weren't going to dinner together now?

That was bull, but I wasn't going to chase her. I had never chased a woman in my life, and I wasn't about to start with Ms. Sulky Pants.

I took out some clean clothes and trudged into the shower. What kind of water temperature did she shower with? The place looked like a sauna.

When I got out, she was flung over the bed—*our* bed—FaceTiming with her family. A cheerful smile marred her face—I could tell she was faking it.

There were a million things I wanted to say to her. Somewhere within them was also an apology for being a shithead. But before I could do any of those things, my own cell phone rang. It was Wyatt, my brother.

I picked it up.

"Hey."

"How's it going over there?" Wyatt sounded like he was eating something crunchy. "Is the bimbo giving you trouble? You're sharing a room with her, aren't you?"

I ground my teeth together. I didn't like how Wyatt talked about Tennessee, but it wasn't much different from how anyone else spoke about her.

For years, I'd quietly accepted the verbal assaults because they were not directed at me or my close ones, but the truth of the matter was, Tennessee was a human being, and no human being should be subjected to this kind of treatment. Just because she was an adult didn't make it right.

I glanced at my roommate from my spot by the vanity, my phone pinned to my ear so she couldn't hear anything. She was

still lying on the bed, looking like a call girl.

Why couldn't she dress like a normal person?

She'd have attracted so many suiters without all the crap covering her face. I was sure Tennessee thought the prejudice toward her was because of Bear.

Matter of fact, from what I'd heard, Bear was a good kid. He never got into trouble and never found himself on my doctor's bed with a fracture or broken bone he couldn't explain.

A lot of water (and scandals) passed under the small-town bridge since she'd had him. Mrs. Kimbrough had a plastic surgery gone wrong, Meghan Harris and John Smith left their spouses for one another, and we were pretty sure our newest resident was under witness protection.

The real reason people looked down on her was because she added gasoline and thick eyeliner to every bad thing people had said about her.

"It's fine," I said curtly. "She keeps a low profile."

About as low as Everest if we're getting technical here.

"Think you're going to hit it?" Wyatt popped another crunchy item into his mouth. Nachos? Tacos? His fiancée's dry p...ersonality?

I dug the heels of my palms into my eye sockets. "Too messy."

"I was going to say—use two condoms. I don't want any complications, especially so close to my wedding day. Mom and Dad are uptight as it is."

"Why do you think?"

I started rummaging through all the crap she'd left on the vanity, which was a lot. Her imprint was all over the room. Her hairspray, stockings, cheap plastic accessories, and gum wrappers.

Messy Nussy indeed.

"They want to make sure it doesn't end up in a divorce, too," Wyatt winced.

My older brother was an engineer at a Wilmington-based company. A real catch in Fairhope. Or at least he had been, before he'd married his first wife Valerie.

He'd met Valerie while she waited on him at a titty bar—his words, not mine—and thought it would be a good idea to bring her home and make an honest woman out of her.

Three years, Valerie's cocaine habit, and an emptied bank account later, Wyatt had been back on the market. This time, he hadn't wanted stormy and electrifying.

He wanted the dullest version of a woman the world could offer him. Someone who was tame and didn't need to be constantly watched and entertained and pacified. Sweet, unassuming Trinity Turner was the human equivalent to the color beige.

"I don't think it will," I said, putting the mouth of a hairspray bottle to my nose and sniffing. Smelled like an impending accidental fire and a Yankee candle.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Wyatt chuckled. "Anyway, Mom is having a heart attack thinking Messy Nussy is going to seduce you."

"She's not my taste."

"She's everyone's taste when it comes to a one-night stand. But long-term?" Wyatt *tsked*. "Hard pass."

My older brother knew so little about me, about my life, sometimes it felt like I was conversing with a complete stranger.

"Anything else I could help you with, bro?" I was done badmouthing Tennessee for one day.

"Nope. Just work on that best man's speech. You know I wanna read it and give you the OK beforehand."

"No problem."

"Oh, and Cruz?"

"Hmm?"

"If you happen to take a picture of her sleeping naked...well, you know my number."

I killed the call, catching the tail of the conversation between Tennessee and her sister Trinity.

“I didn’t want to say anything next to Bear, but Rob’s been calling nonstop, Nessy. He said you were not picking up.”

My roommate caught her lower lip with her teeth, releasing it slowly.

“Yeah. I still haven’t told Bear Rob’s in town. He doesn’t know.”

“He does now,” Trinity said apologetically. “Rob got his hands on Bear’s phone number somehow. And since Bear has been raiding the Costellos’ internet package...”

It was good to know some things ran in the Turner family. Like their need to hijack other people’s online network.

“No!” Tennessee gasped, sitting upright on the bed. “Are you kidding me? The gasshole! I can’t believe him.”

I couldn’t believe she said gasshole. Intentionally.

How old was this woman, three?

And how come she didn’t have any problem dressing like a streetwalker when she gave strong prude vibes in other regards?

“Yes,” Trinity said hotly. “But let me tell you, I was there when it happened, and Bear did not appreciate Rob going behind your back at all. He told him, and it’s a quote, ‘I don’t want to see you. Not because of what you did to me. We don’t know each other, so I’m not gonna take it personally. But because of what you did to my mom.’ That’s what he said. Said he couldn’t imagine betraying you like that. Then he hung up on him. It was epic.”

I expected her to cheer this development, but her frown surprised me.

“He wouldn’t be betraying me. I want him to have a father figure in his life.” Tennessee gnawed at that bottom pouty lip now, forgetting I was in the room. “I just hate that Rob did that without telling me. Shows that he hasn’t changed at all.”

“Well, you *did* ghost him for two weeks,” Trinity pointed out.

“He ghosted me for thirteen years!”

“True. The flip-head.”

There was so much wrong with this family and their vocabulary I didn’t know where to start.

“Can you do me a favor?” Tennessee asked. “I need to ensure this doesn’t get out of control. Can you ask Bear to hand over his cell phone so that Rob cannot get to him? I want to give this man a piece of my mind and don’t want Bear to feel pressured.”

“I don’t think Bear’s gonna like being punished for Rob’s actions,” Trinity warned.

“Me neither. Tell him I’ll buy him the video game that he wants. *And* take him to that burger place in Salem.”

“All right. Stay safe, sis.”

“You, too.”

They hung up.

Tennessee still ignored my existence. She tapped her fingers against her knee worriedly. I appreciated how much she cared for her son, and how protective she was of him. She was obviously crazy about that kid.

“Want me to talk to him?” I asked.

Her head whipped up, like she’d just remembered I was there.

“Rob,” I explained. “Not Bear.”

I didn’t know Bear. He wasn’t my patient—his mom took him to an out-of-town clinic—and I had seen very little of him over the years, which suited me fine, considering the circumstances.

“I can handle my own *blip*.”

“The fact that you use the word *blip* in this scenario tells me differently. I’m just trying to help.”

“Help by making yourself as scarce as possible.”

Here we go again. I bit on my inner cheek, using every ounce of my patience not to snap at her.

“It’s not me you’re mad at, so I suggest you take a deep breath.”

“You’re just as bad as him,” she snapped, pinning me with a look.

“Why? Because we used to be friends in high school?”

“Because you’re the same brand of privileged gasshole.”

“If I’m a stereotype, then today proved so are you.” I let loose a vicious smile.

“I may be easy, Dr. Costello, but rest assured, for you, I’ll always make life difficult.” She got up and grabbed her purse. “Stick to your corner of the ship today.”

And she slammed the door in my face.

That went well.

Ten



Cruz

I spent dinner reading over Gabriella's many text messages. She sent me pictures of her jugs (this was not a euphemism—she was launching new water bottles for women who went to the gym) and her modeling new lingerie she got for free as promotional material for her blog.

I answered curtly, but I answered nonetheless.

There was no point avoiding her the entire ten days. Not only was it cruel, but also unnecessary.

It wasn't like I had many people to talk to, with my companion hating my guts and a growing number of people on the ship thinking I had two penises and was married to a thieving hooker who gave me gonorrhea. (I noticed Brendan and the Warren couple were sharing a table at the dinner buffet.)

Tennessee was nowhere to be seen, but knowing her, she did not miss the free dinner and kept to herself.

Usually, I studied the itinerary during cruises and planned my days and evenings ahead. Not this time. I was too distracted to be

my usual, calculated self. I winged it and walked around aimlessly after dinner.

I ended up in the arcade.

The past seven years, every time I got on a cruise with my family (and oftentimes with a designated girlfriend), I hadn't had the chance to enjoy the arcade.

It was considered juvenile, and I was in a different chapter in life. A chapter where I played golf and tennis with my father and discussed world politics and the stock market at the library with Wyatt and his balding friends.

I didn't know when would be the next time I could do this uninterrupted and unobserved by everyone who knew me.

The average age at the arcade was fifteen, and that was only because I brought it up from twelve with my own thirty-one years. Apparently, there was another arcade on the cruise ship, which served alcohol, and that's where most people chose to be. Everyone around me was at least two heads shorter, with tie-dyed clothes, gelled hair, and disproportioned amounts of cologne and perfume.

I started with some NASCAR racing, switched to Donkey Kong, and then hit the Galaxian. I burned about an hour before I noticed the place was suspiciously emptying out.

Or, to be more specific, everyone was moving toward one side of the arcade, huddling around the air hockey table in clusters of fours and fives.

An air hockey connoisseur, myself, I headed over to the table to see what all the fuss was about.

I should have known from the start the only person with the ability to attract the attention of every male on this cruise was Tennessee Turner.

She leaned forward on one side of the air hockey table, her breasts spilling from her lacy dress like fountain soda at a loosely regulated movie theater.

She pressed her finger pad to striker by the nub, like she couldn't be bothered with holding the entire thing, stopping the puck from slipping into her slit.

I glanced over at her competitor and found a man who looked to be in his late twenties, trimmed and decent-looking, who actually paid attention to the game and not her jugs (this *was* a euphemism, by the way).

My pulse quickened. I ignored the weird sensation, chalking it up to the fact I was spending ten days with the village's official idiot/harlot in the middle of the ocean.

They went on for ten minutes. She smoked the poor guy, then another dudebro—younger, this time—took his place while the twenty-something man retired and returned a few moments later with a cocktail for the lady. And by 'the lady' I mean the current bane of my existence.

She wiped the floor with dudebro number two, too, and then with the girl who replaced him, and the middle-aged man who stepped in—he was someone's dad and had been called to save the day.

Tennessee was indisputably talented at air hockey, I remembered from our adolescent years. In fact, there was only one person she hadn't beaten in the entire town.

Me.

Even though we were supposed to keep away from one another tonight, I couldn't turn down competition when one presented itself. So when more and more people gathered and begged to play with Tennessee, I stepped forward, in front of her, from the other side of the air hockey table, and dropped three Benjamins at the center.

"Wanna make it interesting?"

"This, coming from the most boring man on planet Earth." She pretended to blow on her fingernails, like they were on fire, a sarcastic smile on her face. "What are you offering?"

"Bet I could win this next game with one arm behind my back."

Everyone around us sucked in a breath.

Tennessee straightened her posture, giving me her all-business look, which I'd been used to from Jerry & Sons. I'd secretly loved it when she waited my booth. Any crumbs of attention from her were welcome.

She arched an eyebrow. “Mr. Weiner, I’m surprised.”

“Why’s that, Mrs. Weiner?”

“I thought I told you to leave me alone tonight.”

“That was before it came to my attention that you were the main event at the arcade.” I made a point of dropping my gaze to her cleavage, letting her know I didn’t only mean her air hockey skills.

She threw me a sex kitten smirk. It killed me that I wanted her and killed me even more that I couldn’t have her, even after I’d been given every advantage to make her mine.

I was the one with the money, the impeccable reputation, and harem of prospective girlfriends. And yet, I couldn’t get more than an eye roll from this woman.

“Honey, I thought it was established you can’t handle me.”

Low whistles emerged from the thickening crowd forming around us. It seemed like half the goddamn cruise ship was watching. I waited for the dread of being caught doing something less than perfect to sour my insides, but it didn’t happen.

I’d never felt more alive than I did in that moment.

“Try me,” I drawled.

“Make that three hundred a grand.” She lurched her chin to the money between us.

“And when you lose?”

“I won’t lose.”

“And *if* you lose?” I amended. “What do I get?”

“Your pick.”

“I’ll get to pick what you wear for the remainder of the cruise. Take you out shopping and put you in what I want to see you in. I’ll dress you...” I paused strategically, “and *undress* you as I please.”

The crowd hollered in elation (pun intended, obviously). I was surprised at their responsiveness for a moment until remembering our sham marriage...

Her sharp hazel eyes, the lovely shade of a heart of a tree, flared for a fraction of a moment, before she fixed another sneer on those bright red lips.

“As far as I’m concerned, you can ask me to walk around naked until we touch land again. You’re not winning, so I don’t really care what you want from me.”

“Is that a deal?” I arched an eyebrow.

She gave me a quick nod.

The crowd cheered.

I collected the money between us, stuffing it into my pocket and reached to shake on it. Her hand was cold and clammy. I withdrew from her, hating the sensation her simple handshake had on me.

“Seven rounds or first to score seven points,” I laid down the rules.

“Yeah, I know how to play air hockey, pal.”

She annihilated me the first two rounds, but only because I let her. I wanted to build her confidence, and also to ensure that she thought she had a fair chance. By the third round, I stepped into the game. In our youth, Tennessee and I had always found ourselves competing in air hockey at the local arcade. We were simply the best at it. Rob used to be oblivious to how I looked at his girlfriend while I played with her. Probably because he was busy showing off to the other girls his claw machine talents—that bastard always got the teddy. He had a secret technique he wouldn’t share.

I won the third, fourth, and fifth rounds, and planned to see where the wind blew with the sixth one. Tennessee was good—but I was better, and I also wanted to change her entire wardrobe and bring her back to Fairhope a new, respectable woman and get the brownie points for it.

The perfect Dr. Costello gave Tennessee Turner a makeover and now his sister-in-law’s sibling looks like someone we might let babysit our kids.

“You’ve gotten rusty,” Tennessee commented from across the table, blocking the puck I sent spinning toward her and sliding it back to me with force. She was panting.

“You’ve gotten cocky,” I replied. She wanted to shatter my cool exterior. She was in for a great disappointment.

“Yeah, well, the past few years were just a breeze.” She blew a lock of blonde hair that escaped her hairspray and fell across her eye. “So naturally, I let my guard down.”

“Are you going to complain about your life every time we talk?” I sent the puck careening her way at the speed of light. “Because in that case, I’m not the only boring one here.”

“You should have more empathy for me, you know,” she huffed. “Not all of us have perfect lives.”

I have a lot more to offer you than empathy, if you’d just descend from the cloud of self-pity you’re stuck in.

“Aren’t you two married?” a confused teenager in the crowd wondered aloud, scratching a pimple open on his cheek.

“My life is not perfect,” I said, blocking the puck she sent my way. Damn. She had some moves on her. I forgot how fun she was to be around when we were actually...well, left to be our real selves.

“Of course it is.” She let out a throaty, sexy laugh. “Why’d you dump poor Gabriella? Did you not like the test drive?”

“We wanted different things,” I said curtly.

“What *do* you want?” Tennessee asked, trying to distract me and slide that puck into my hole.

You, I thought bitterly. I want you.

But I didn’t have nearly enough alcohol in my system to say it, and anyway, I wasn’t sure I really, truly wanted her. I mean, I wanted her, but in the same way I wanted four cinnamon rolls. It would feel good to have, but might kill you afterwards.

“Not sure.” I leaned a hip against the air hockey table instead, making a show of getting bored. And, while I was at it, sent the puck straight into her hole. It landed inside in a clean strike. She groaned, hanging her head down as I continued, “I always figured when I found her, I’d know. Four-two to me, by the way.”

She grabbed the puck and placed it on the table again, delivering the strike of a woman possessed by the devil. “You’re getting a little old.”

“Aren’t you nearly thirty?” I asked conversationally. “Did you know that any pregnancy of a woman thirty-five and above is called geriatric pregnancy?”

“You’re a real smooth talker, aren’t you, Mr. Weiner?”

People chuckled around us. I had to remember we had an audience. It helped with keeping my heartrate—and that thing inside my pants—in check.

I won another round, making it five-two to me, and wasn’t in the mood to offer her some grace in a form of letting her win a round.

“You’ve always hated me,” I accused. “Why?”

“That’s bull.” Her mouth hung open in outraged shock. “*You’re* the one who always looked down on me. Even before I started dating Rob.”

“How so?”

“Who is Rob?” someone asked.

She put the puck back on the table, sent it my way, and nailed it straight into my goal.

Fine. Maybe I was a little distracted.

“Five-three to you.” She winked at me suggestively. “And I once overheard you telling him you thought he and I had nothing in common and that he shouldn’t ask me out. You said girls like me are a lot of work.”

I didn’t want to tell her I had told him that because I’d had a horse in that race.

“And you were.” I shrugged, putting the puck back in its place and starting another round.

“You wouldn’t look me in the eye after I started dating him. You couldn’t bear that he didn’t listen to you, could you?”

Yeah. That’s what it was. Sure.

“I was right, wasn’t I?” I sent the puck spinning again.

“Guess so, but that thing everyone called a mistake?” She held my gaze, stopping the game for a few seconds. “He’s the best thing that ever happened to me, and I wouldn’t replace him for anything in this world.”

“Good for you.”

I slammed the puck with my striker and won again. “Six-three.”

I had one more round to win before I put her in a sensible dress and flat shoes. I was probably the only man on Earth who wanted to see the woman he desired dressed like a senior librarian, and not because of some kinky fantasy.

“So how are you going to handle an actual pair of jeans? And I don’t mean the Daisy Dukes kind. Is your body allergic to fabric?” I wondered.

“It’s allergic to nonsense. That’s why you give me hives.”

“I love our love,” I cooed sarcastically.

She made gagging sounds. But she was still here.

“Don’t chicken out on me,” I warned.

“A bet is a bet.”

With that, I delivered the final strike. I straightened my posture, an unbearably smug smirk decorating my face.

“Seven-three.”

The crowd around us clapped and whistled, cheering for me. Tennessee’s mouth fell open, but nothing came out of it. She looked genuinely confused.

“You lose,” I drawled. “*Again*. You should be getting used to it by now, shouldn’t you, Mrs. Weiner?”

The jest was peppered with a wink, designed to give her a chance to throw another verbal curveball my way. I was even fully prepared to let her have the last word. But she didn’t take the bait. Instead, she squared her shoulders, stepped back, congratulated me on my win, her voice quivering around the words, and ran away.



She wasn’t in the stateroom when I got back from nursing two whiskeys and a headache at the bar. It was eleven-thirty, and even though going to bed early and letting her prowl the ship and sulk

like the crazy woman she *obviously* was was tempting, I couldn't do it.

I groaned as I traipsed out of my room, stumbling upon Mr. and Mrs. Warren, who'd just returned from the casino, looking lush and unfairly lucky.

"Where's your little wife?" Mrs. Warren sneered with derision, seconds away from blowing a raspberry at me. I swear if she had a heart attack right here, right now, I'd piss all over my Hippocratic Oath and let her kick the bucket.

"Admiring her flawless face and knockout figure in front of the mirror in our room," I bit back, still holding a Cyprus-sized grudge against her for what she'd done to Tennessee. "Being with a woman of such beauty is a blessing and a curse."

"Well, I don't see no ring on either of y'all's fingers."

"That's right. We're updating the diamonds in her ring, so we had to send it to South Africa. Best 500k I've ever spent."

"And what about your ring?" She parked her hands on her waist, while Fred waited for her inside the room, holding the door open.

"Mine was lost while we were playing a very grown-up game at the buffet today. Let me know if you find it in your dessert tomorrow morning, will you?"

With that, I proceeded to the elevators.

I looked for Tennessee (almost) everywhere. To be honest, I didn't know what to make of that woman. One second she was the ball-busting, mouthy little thing I'd grown to admire, fear, and want to bed the past decade-and-a-half, and the next, she was sensitive, withdrawn, and shy. Almost like the girl who'd dated Rob.

I knew a better man—or maybe just a man who hadn't spent his entire life with an imaginary golden crown on his head—would've simply owned up to what'd happened in the past and cleared the air.

Growing up, I'd always had something for Nessy Turner. How could I not? In my mind, she was supposed to have been *my* high school sweetheart. Beautiful, kind, and dignified, with straight A's and a spot on the debate team (no surprises there).

Even when I'd found out that Rob had a boner for her, I didn't do the usual Cruz thing and step back. We'd rock-paper-scissored it, three times, in fact, and I ended up winning.

But then Rob went ahead and asked her out anyway, beating me to the punch and revealing the first sign that he was a horse-crap friend in the process.

After that, there was nothing I could do about it because Tennessee told him yes.

She. Told. Him. Yes.

She didn't like me, and that was a big enough blow to wreck my teenage ego and make me dislike her for the rest of high school.

Of course, in retrospect, I'd wondered.

Wondered what would have happened if I'd been the one to ask her out first.

Would she have said yes?

I suspected I knew the answer to that.

She didn't like Rob all that much, yet she still gave him a shot. He'd taken her for an ice cream downtown and secretly laughed in the locker room about how he hoped to hell she didn't order more than two scoops because his ass had been broke that week.

I knew I never would have let us end up in the position she and Rob were in. I'd have never taken her virginity the way he had, unprotected, publicly, with people watching.

And if I had, for whatever reason—if we'd been drunk or high or just completely witless one unfortunate night—I would have owned up to it and married her.

I would have.

But I wasn't the one she chose.

So, this was my truth.

My two-whiskeys-and-a-beer truth.

And I was taking it to the grave with me.

I ended up finding Tennessee on one of the decks, leaning against the pulpit, watching the black waves crash against the massive vessel. Her hair had submitted to the wind, dancing around her face in ashy, frosty tendrils.

She hugged herself with her back to me.

It physically hurt to see her like this. So vulnerable and out of place.

Not wanting to startle her, I spoke before I advanced toward her.

“I’m sorry.”

She didn’t turn around to look at me. Instead, her head shook a little, the gesture so light I couldn’t even tell if it was intentional.

“What for?”

“Being an idiot.”

“Consider yourself forgiven. Most men are.”

“That’s no excuse.”

I came to stand beside her and saw that her face was full of tears. Black mascara crawled across her cheeks like spiderwebs, and her nose was red, swollen, and puffy.

She looked less than gorgeous, and my chest felt full and warm. She looked...*real*. Without all the plastic smiles and dramatic eyeliner.

“I know today has been challenging for you, and—”

“Don’t,” she cut me off.

“Don’t what?”

“Do the whole nice guy shtick. I can’t handle it right now.”

I pursed my lips. She’d had a disastrous day, with a slime ball who’d put his hand on her, a woman who accused her of being a thief—and a whore—Rob, who for reasons undisclosed, took it upon himself to bypass her and speak to their son for the first time ever, and then the cherry on the shit cake was my beating her—then telling her she must be used to losing.

Real class move, Costello.

“For the record, I don’t think you’re a loser,” I said somberly.

“Why?” She spun her head my way, the tears drying on her face caking her distorted makeup into place. “You were right. Hit the nail right on the head. I *am* a loser. In fact, I can’t even recall the last time I won something. *Anything*. I’m an embarrassment to my family and will bring shame on my son once he grows up and realizes just how much of a cluster pluck I am. I don’t have a real job, any prospects, or anything to look forward to. And you’re also right that I’m bitter about it. I’m an idiot, a failure, and I—”

I kissed the living hell out of her.

Pulled her into my embrace, circled my arms around her, shielding her from the world, from the wind, from *herself*, and did what I should have done all those years ago—I put my lips on hers, hoping to hell she wasn’t going to reject me.

Her lips were cold, her nose was *freezing*, but I didn’t care, because she didn’t push me away. She smelled of her coconut-and-marshmallow cocktail and that high school girl I used to follow with my gaze under my ball cap when no one was watching.

I wanted to open my mouth, dart my tongue out, taste more of her, *all* of her, but I was afraid she’d withdraw.

She was skittish and guarded all over, like a stray cat, her instincts frayed. She was ready to run any second when it came to men.

So instead of digging my fingers into the ass I’d dreamed about ever since I was sixteen, or pushing a knee between her thighs and making her ride me to Orgasmville, I concentrated on nibbling my way softly from her mouth to her neck, nuzzling my nose against her ear, giving the spot under her earlobe a quick lick, and then blowing air on it to make her shudder.

She seemed to like it, her fingers curling around my dress shirt as she swayed into me. There was something innocent—almost chaste—about the encounter, and it sent a rush of desire through my veins that made my body go haywire.

My cock was so hard I was pretty sure it could tear through my pants if I wasn’t careful. I moved from her neck and her ear to

her cheek, the tip of her nose, and crown of her hair, peppering all of them with feather-light kisses that made me ache.

It was weird, I knew.

Intimate more than it was hot.

But I felt like it was exactly what she needed, and after all these years, I thought it was better to have her on her terms than not at all.

“I’m telling you, buddy. These two have the most dysfunctional relationship I’ve ever seen. Did you know he cheated on her with her sister and has two dicks and she gave him gonorrhoea? Then he choked her with a black pearl necklace and gave her blisters.”

Our heads reared back in unison to follow the source of this nonsense. We both looked up to see Brendan and a male companion drinking beer on the patio of one of the open bars, looking down at us.

The male companion frowned.

“Wait, her sister has two dicks?”

“No, he has two dicks and cheated with her sister. But she cheated, too. First, I think,” replied Brendan.

“Did you know she’s a thief? And Ramona says he’s some mob guy. Blood diamond stuff. Business all over South Africa.”

Both Tennessee and I burst into laughter, still holding each other close.

“See? They’re shameless. I told you. Most dysfunctional relationship ever,” Brendan cemented.

“You’re not wrong about that one, Brendan.” Tennessee hugged her midriff as she stepped toward the elevators, pulling away from me, and I followed her. “But it’s not nice to talk about people behind their backs.”

“You were right here, sugar pie,” Brendan drawled in his Southern accent.

“We were in the middle of something,” I pointed out to her, my dick nodding in my pants in agreement.

“Consider it the ending. Just got my wits back.”

“Dammit,” I muttered, following her like a lovesick puppy.

We entered the elevator. I was about to turn to her and persuade her with my tongue when another couple squeezed in and joined us.

Double dammit.

Silence filled the small space while the man beside me slid his hand over the curve of the woman’s ass.

At least one of us was getting some tonight.

When we reached our floor, I let Tennessee slip out first, then put my hand on the small of her back when we made our way to our room. I’d now successfully moved from acquaintance to someone who touched her occasionally, and I wasn’t about to give up my new privileges.

“You can drop your hand and the charade anytime now, there’s no one here.” She tried combing her hair back into its usual state.

“No charade. Is wanting to spend time with you a crime?”

“Depends on the state. As far as I’m aware, Nevada’s the only place with legalized prostitution.”

“Stop that right now.”

I hoped to hell Mr. and Mrs. Warren weren’t coming out for a late night snack, because I was bound to strangle both of them if they showed up and did something Tennessee found triggering.

“Let me guess—you want to spend time with me *without* clothes.”

“Clothes are okay, but not the ones you choose to wear.” I cracked a smile.

“Funny. I always thought it was women who wanted to change men, not vice versa.”

“I don’t want to change you. I want to help you discover your full potential.”

Great.

Now I sounded like her school advisor. Or her pimp.

Either way, it was patronizing. I opened the door, then locked it behind us. She strutted toward the bathroom, her ass swaying from side to side. Back to being a sex kitten.

I couldn't keep up with this woman's moods and personalities.

"No one asked for your help, Dr. Costello. Go be someone else's Captain Save-a-Ho."

She slammed the bathroom door in my face.

"I'm not coming out until you go to bed. We're not continuing our little mistake," she announced once she was in the safety of the bathroom.

I plastered my forehead to the door. "What makes you think it was a mistake?"

I was pathetic, even—and especially—in my own eyes.

Why was I bothering?

I had so many other women to choose from back at home.

"I don't do one-night stands," she called out from the other side of the door. "Might sound surprising, even old-fashioned to some, but that's the way I roll."

"Doesn't have to be a one-night stand," I heard myself say. "Unless the gonorrhea thing is true."

"Just as long as no one finds out about it, right?"

I groaned.

She had me there. Not that I was ashamed, but...

"Your parents won't approve, either," I pointed out.

"No," she agreed. "Which brings me to my previous statement—no hanky-panky. I don't want to be your dirty little secret."

"You're an infuriating woman." I pressed my fist against the door.

"And you should be used to hearing a 'no' every now and then," she deadpanned.

I heard her brushing her teeth and removing her makeup using that battery-operated thing that gave your face a deep clean.

“And another thing,” she added, knowing full well I was still outside, waiting for her to grace me with her presence. “There better be a pillow barrier between us when I get out.”

“Like hell, sweetheart.” I withdrew from the door, glaring at it like it had personally wronged me. “You want a barrier, make it yourself.”

With that, I went on to rip the swan-shaped towel waiting on our bed next to tomorrow’s itinerary and tossed them along with the red rose petals into the trash.

Mrs. Weiner didn’t deserve anything nice tonight.

Eleven



Tennessee

The next morning, I cracked one eye open to find Cruz's triangular, infuriatingly athletic back as he...wait, what the heck was he doing, exactly?

"Cruz?" I hiccupped, gathering my limbs into a sitting position.

My back was hurting from the mountain of pillows I'd arranged between us which dug into my spine, and from the lack of a pillow to put my head on so that I could make said mountain happen.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

He glanced over his shoulder, throwing me an under-the-mustache charming smirk as he stuffed my clothes into trash bags. The worst thing about him was that he made me believe he could be good to me. That was just downright horrible of him.

"What're you doing?"

"Exactly what it looks like."

“Articulate it to me. It’s six in the morning.”

“Quarter to nine. And I’m throwing away your clothes.”

“*Why?*” I demanded, straightening my back alertly. I didn’t have money to replace those clothes, no matter how horrid they were. Didn’t he know people who didn’t have his money valued every little thing they owned?

He didn’t stop what he was doing, carrying on with the same smooth motion as he emptied out my side of the closet.

“Well, because we had a bet, and in that bet, you promised you’d let me get you a whole new wardrobe, and since you’ll be wanting to take those clothes with you back home, you won’t have any room for these ones. Shame, really. But that’s life for you.”

I knew what he was doing, and I didn’t appreciate it. He wanted to help me look good and proper so the people of Fairhope would accept me.

Well, despite my bitterness, I didn’t *want* to be accepted.

I liked to stick out like a sore thumb, a weed in an otherwise picturesque rose garden, and remind them that this town wasn’t all that.

“Leave my clothes be.”

“A bet’s a bet.”

“I’ll honor the bet, but I still want my clothes.”

“*Why?*”

“Because you can’t change me. I am who I am, and if you don’t like it, you’re welcome to join Fairhope’s general population and ignore me.”

Or engage in sexual warfare where you low-key sexually harass me.

That seemed to be the trend, too.

“Thing is, it’s not, in fact, who you are.” He swiveled toward me, giving me a stern look. His eyes could melt panties in the same way Uri Geller could bend teaspoons. “You’re the closest thing to Virgin Mary I’ve ever kissed, yet you prance around lookin’ like a man-eater. Your self-destruction button is big and

shiny and red, and I want to break it. You lost yesterday, and I don't like sore losers. Now get your ass up. We need to get an early start. It's breakfast and duty-free shopping."

If it weren't for the fact that it was me he was bossing around, I could appreciate Cruz's domineering streak. I momentarily toyed with the idea of refusing him and getting into another argument, but the truth was, I was fresh out of fight after the day I'd had yesterday.

The Rob thing really worried me, and the kiss with Cruz didn't help matters at all. Like bangs in fifth grade, it never should've happened, and I wouldn't let it happen again.

I knew he'd been drunk beforehand—I could taste the whiskey on his lips—and figured it was a human error on both our parts. But dang, he made some convincing points about why we should hook up.

"All right. Let me call Bear and make sure he's okay, and then we'll go."

Cruz seemed surprised by my flexible attitude. His eyes skimmed over me suspiciously as I moved around the room, as if he knew I was planning an escape.

There was something lethal about those dark blue eyes and strong jaw. I wondered if I was the only person who noticed that about him. That he was not always chivalrous and suave.

"Why Bear?" he asked out of nowhere when I got out of the bathroom, wearing a pair of cropped shorts and a cherry blossom top that showed off my midriff.

Funny. Even Rob hadn't asked me that.

"Oh, I don't know." I applied a second coat of lipstick in front of the little mirror by the entrance door. "I suppose because I grew attached to him in the last seven years or so and would like to know if he slept well, ate this morning, that kind of stuff."

Cruz leaned a shoulder against the wall, one stylish sneaker propped against my suitcase, watching me intently.

"No. Why'd you choose that name?"

"Promise you won't laugh." Was I actually going to give up this info? Our families were merging—he'd hear things sooner or

later.

“I cannot, in good conscience, promise you that, considering the things that tend to leave your mouth unfiltered.”

“Fair enough.” I slid the lipstick into my little fake-fur purse. “I called him Bear after Bear Rinehart, Needtobreathe’s lead singer.”

“That Christian rock group?”

“One and the same.” I waited for the blow to come.

“Isn’t Bear the guy’s nickname, though? His first name is William or something.”

“Well, I didn’t know that at the time, did I? And I couldn’t afford the fancy name books people buy before they give birth and think of something more fun, like Axel or Cosmo.”

I watched him, expecting him to cackle—I *did* feel dumb after finding out about it myself—but to my surprise, he shrugged the whole thing off, joining me by the door and opening it for me.

“Well?” I raised my eyebrows. “That’s it?”

“You gave me an explanation to my satisfaction. Yes. That’s it.”

“Do you think it’s a weird name?”

“I wouldn’t choose it for my own son, no. Then again, I wasn’t the one who pushed a seven-pound human out of an intimate hole in my body after eight hours of contractions and nine months of heartburn, so I’m not sure I’m the best person to ask.”

“Nice answer. And it was ten hours, not eight.”

“Christ. No wonder you turned to Jesus.”



After I called Bear to make sure he was okay (he and Landon were hitting the ice rink later today), we went up to the breakfast buffet. Cruz had freshly-squeezed orange juice with egg whites and some fruit, while I had everything else the continental breakfast had to offer.

I hadn't been on a vacation since the summer I'd turned fifteen and, now that I'd resigned myself to not getting to enjoy the trip with my son, I wanted to squeeze the heck out of this occasion before I went back home.

Cruz made no comment about the amount of food I was shoveling into my mouth at a Guinness-record speed, and I had the dignity to not try to explain my chipmunk-like behavior.

But when I arrived with my seventh course for the meal—my dessert, a chocolate chip ice cream—and began seasoning it with salt, he couldn't take it anymore.

"You put *salt* in your ice cream?" He dropped his newspaper, glaring at me.

"The saltiness heightens the sweetness."

"Your craziness heightens your hotness."

"Cruz!" I chastised. "What did you drink? It's unlike you not to hate me."

"I never hated you, you fool."

There was something wary and unguarded about the way he looked at me. Something so completely un-Cruz-like. But I chose to ignore it because...well, because I was a mess and knew nothing about men and did not want to make any mistakes.

He might be harmless, but he still didn't make me feel safe.

From there, we moved to the shopping mall, or arena, or whatever this hell was. Duty free or not, none of the prices were within the range I liked to pay.

Let me rephrase—I did *not* like to pay anything at all for the atrocities I called my clothes, a fact that oftentimes landed me at different thrift stores, where apparently, a lot of the clothes belonged to women of a certain ancient profession.

It wasn't that I couldn't find anything sensible. There were modest cardigans aplenty to choose from, which I was sure used to belong to equally pleasant grandmas of Mrs. Underwood's type, but I suppose I needed to go with one streamlined fashion choice and therefore went for tart.

"I just want you to know that I feel mighty uncomfortable about you writing a check to pay for my stuff," I lied brazenly.

Cruz had money and came from an upper-middle-class home. If there was one thing I didn't feel for him, it was bad.

"I just want you to know that I couldn't care less," he deadpanned.

He first dragged me into Ann Taylor, but couldn't convince me to try anything on, on the grounds that I didn't want to look like Margaret Thatcher breaking it to England that they were getting into the Falklands.

Cruz faced the same challenges at the Gap, where the clothes were significantly younger, but somehow also blander.

"I'm going to look as appealing as a tax return," I choked out.

"Well," Cruz insisted, "one way or the other, you're ending today looking like my missionary-loving wife."

Things took a turn for the better when we entered Anthropologie. Their clothes seemed to have a lot of color and swagger, like the type of outfits you'd see a Hollywood spawn wearing on a coffee run to impress the paparazzi.

I picked three ankle-length sundresses in different patterns and cuts, each one of them more costly than my rent, and watched Cruz's poker face as he swiped his credit card to pay for them.

I assumed he might be doing that on Wyatt's order, or even Catherine Costello's, to try to reform me into something digestible for human consumption.

This whole day made me feel super prickly, but I still went with it. Unfortunately, I had no say in this, since I *had* lost a bet.

Then there was Trinity and my parents' wrath to think about. And the fact Bear deserved a mother who didn't look like she practiced the most ancient profession in the world.

Also, privately, I could admit I really, *really* liked the Anthropologie dresses.

"I think I'm starting to get a feel of what you're into," Cruz said when we got out of the store, which by the way, smelled like a new car and someone's upscale bathroom.

I ignored his observation. I already felt like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* without being told I was on the cusp of self-

discovery and inner transformation.

Next, we went to Free People, where I grabbed a few pairs of pants and some casual shirts and jackets. Then we went to a bohemian boutique, something small and not too pricey, and Cruz splurged on two pairs of sandals for me—both orthopedic but surprisingly not hideous—and a little purse that didn't look like a tie-dyed squirrel.

I didn't thank him one time during the entire shopping trip, careful to remind him that it was his idea, not mine.

Finally, around two in the afternoon, when I was ready for my lunch (more like in danger of eating my own arm), he stopped in front of Prada.

He jerked his chin inside. "Ladies first."

"Are you crazy?" I glared at him. "I'm not *really* going to let you buy me anything from there."

I knew I'd joked about it the other day, but I also joked about having Benicio del Toro's babies, and I sure as heck was closed for business.

"It's an outlet."

"It's *outrageous*," I countered. "I don't care how much money someone has, a five hundred dollar scarf is excessive."

"Quality costs."

"Say that to my Kmart shoes. They've been servin' me well for three years and counting. Even when I work double shifts." I was surprised my feet didn't slap my face for lying.

"I try not to converse with inanimate objects as a general rule. Why do you even care? It's my money. I get to decide what I want to spend it on."

"Why would you want to spend it on a semi-stranger you don't even like?"

"This semi-stranger I don't even like is about to become my family. Besides, I'm a shitty tipper."

We were blocking the entrance to Prada, but that was all right, because no one but us seemed irrational enough to wander in.

There was also a guard at the entrance. A flipping *guard*. It made me want to throw up. I would never, ever walk into a store where some people might not feel welcome.

People like my mom.

Or like me, for that matter.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” I thumbed my nose at him, adamant to put up a fight. “I’d hate to be associated with you. You may ruin my reputation.”

“Your reputation’s in the shitter,” he reminded me kindly.

“Yeah, well, maybe it’ll find your kissing technique there, since it seems to be in the same destination. What the hell was that about yesterday?”

Classic aversion.

I was a master of misdirection.

“You enjoyed it,” he said calmly.

“Did not.”

“Did, too.”

Lord, I had.

And not only had I enjoyed it, but the fact that it had been sweet and intimate and not filthy and carnal had completely disarmed me. I still felt my pulse against my lips. Both pairs.

Mental note number one hundred and sixty: Charge. That. Vibrator.

Also, why was Cruz flipping everywhere? I had no privacy whatsoever in this place. In case I needed to, oh, I don’t know, get reacquainted with my dormant libido and touch myself (the “Drunk in Love” by Beyonce way).

“Feed me, Dr. Costello.” I tossed my hair dramatically, adopting an English accent I stole from the Bridgertons. “For I am famished and no longer want to debate that imprudent, fortuitous kiss.”

“Why do you sound like you swallowed an Oxford dictionary?”

We both laughed, then shook our heads, forcing ourselves to look away.

We stopped at a hot dog stand and sampled a few of their sausages. Not one innuendo flew in the air throughout the quick meal. A pleasant surprise, seeing as *Weiner* jokes were obviously not beneath us.

We did a bit more shopping afterwards, then retired to the room, planning to grab a shower, get dressed to grab an early dinner, and then go to the casino. I'd never been to a casino before, which Cruz said was criminal.

When we got to our room, Mrs. Warren was waiting for us, sans Fred, looking mighty smug as she sipped a colorful cocktail with extra umbrellas.

“Been waitin’ for you.” She grinned around her straw. She held an uncanny resemblance to Ursula the Disney sea witch.

“Let me guess. Lost your butt plugs and immediately thought to check in to see if we stole them,” I muttered, clutching my purse closer to my body instinctively.

Cruz’s head twisted as he flashed me a look full of amusement and murder.

Clap.

I’d forgotten I had company and wasn’t supposed to be my usual rude self.

“Butt what now?” She put her hand to her ear.

I shook my head. “Never mind. Why’re you here, Mrs. Warren, other than the obvious—to bless my life with more happy moments and fond memories?”

We stopped by our door, which she was blocking. She crossed her arms over her ample chest. The other day, when she demanded to get into our room, I’d lost it.

I lost it, because I knew it was exactly the kind of mistake I could make, then remembered that the suitcases were, in fact, placed quite far away from one another.

But I also knew (sensibly) that no one would believe it was unintentional *if* I’d gotten it wrong. When teenage boys can take

pictures of your ass...while pinching it, you know the world isn't fair or on your side.

“Just thought you should know everybody on the ship knows that you tried to steal my jewelry. I thought it would be a general service to warn people.”

“Okay. Let's pretend like I care. Now move away.”

“But you should care.”

Her eyes swung from me to Cruz, her smile widening.

Pluck, she was rotten.

I didn't understand what inspired some people to want to hurt others so much. Surely if you disliked someone so deeply, you would avoid them at any cost and forget their existence.

Trying to inflict pain on someone only showed one thing—that *you* were the one who was hurting.

“You should care, because there's someone on this boat who knows who one of y'all really is.”

My heart fell.

For real? How was being a teen mom as many years ago newsworthy outside of my tiny town's limits.

“That's right, Dr. Wiseass.” Only for once it wasn't me with the spotlight of shame—she was looking at Cruz. “Apparently, one of your med school buddies is here with his wife. He knows you're here with a call girl. Or whatever this woman is to you. Not your actual wife. Don't think we're that dumb. No one in their right mind would marry this trailer trash.”

“Call her that one more time to my face, and I'll be sure you spend your night being interrogated by security once I report you. You're harassing us, and I won't stand for that,” Cruz delivered the words like bullets, blow after blow, icy and poised.

“Aw. You've gotten attached, haven't you? You're just a meal ticket to her.”

“You're in my way, Mrs. Warren. Move, or I'll be sure to move you myself. Friendly tip: I won't be nice about it.”

Satisfied she'd delivered quite a blow, Mrs. Warren flounced across the hallway and toward the elevator bank. I pushed the

door open, waiting for Cruz to walk inside.

“Look, it’s all cruise gossip. And what are the chances this med school person even knows someone in Fairhope they could tell this to? It’s nonsense,” I said. “And why would anyone even care?”

I hated that I had to excuse my existence, but I had to admit I was far from the realm of the women who usually hung on his arm. I wasn’t a petite brunette with a liberal arts degree in gender studies and dance management.

Although I did have a three-hundred-dollar dress that looked deliberately wrinkled now, so we were definitely getting somewhere closer.

Cruz seemed cold and unresponsive as he moved around the room. I got it. I did. Up until now, it was all fun and games.

We’d adopted a false last name—Weiner. Under the guise of a married couple with a very strange sex life.

No one knew us here, and our little shenanigans had been nothing but harmless fun. Now, reality was mixing up with the bubble he’d thought was unburstable. He wasn’t used to being less than perfect, and I was cramping his style, big time. This served as a reminder that out there, in the real world, our lives couldn’t intertwine. They’d forever collide.

“It’s fine,” Cruz drawled. “Hop into the shower.”

“I’ll talk to Mrs. Warren myself. Explain everything.” I followed him around the tiny room, apologetic all of a sudden.

He turned to me sharply. “*Don’t you dare.*”

“Why not?”

“She’s a mean piece of work, and I don’t want you to contribute to her power trip. Besides, you’re right. As far as I know, this person knows no one in my life. I only kept in touch with a handful of friends, and I know for a fact that none of them are on this cruise.”

“And anyway,” I added cooperatively, my soul dying inside, “even if it’s someone who knows you—so what? Our families know we’re together on a cruise, and I am the one who is accused

of being a thief and a prostitute. You're just the man who begrudgingly shares a room with me."

"True." Cruz stroked his chin, mulling this over.

Wow. Surprisingly: ouch.

He really didn't want people in Fairhope to know we had any affiliation to one another.

"But see." I gestured to the room. "This is exactly why we shouldn't be kissing anymore. You're ashamed of me."

"I'm not ashamed of you."

But his words lacked their usual lethal heat and sincerity, and he didn't elaborate.

Dejected, I hopped into the shower and got out wearing one of the complimentary bathrobes while he hopped in right after me.

I slipped into one of the outfits he'd bought for me during our shopping spree—a knee-length dramatic black dress with a sweetheart neckline and satin ruffles around the hem—and strappy, camel-hued sandals.

Instead of making my hair big enough it could be recognized from Mars, I opted to let it fall down, allowing it to cascade in natural waves past my shoulder blades.

And, in the same spirit of trying to ease tensions, because I genuinely felt bad about the entire situation, I opted for minimal makeup, determined not to embarrass him as a companion by sticking out more than I already had.

Some blush, mascara, and lip gloss. No eyeshadow, contouring, and using the bronzer as a weapon of mass destruction.

After I was done, I stared in the hallway mirror and hardly recognized myself. I looked like a grown-up. A pretty grown-up. One with a sensible job. In insurance or medical equipment. Maybe even a teacher. But somehow, younger, too.

My fingertips fluttered over my ribcage, floating up to my lips.

I looked good.

I felt good.

And that was dangerous.

Hope was a very dangerous thing.

“You are, and always will be, the most beautiful girl in Fairhope, North Carolina.”

I let out a little gasp of surprise.

The words made me turn around.

Cruz stood, hands shoved deep into his front pockets, his shoulder leaning against the doorjamb, staring at me with unabashed hunger.

There was something so unbelievably sexy about him, with his dark wheat hair slicked back, his perfectly groomed mustache and carved-in-marble body.

He wore a navy dress shirt, designer jeans, and a pair of pointy loafers that made men look extra rich. He smelled woodsy and earthy and clean, his scent seeping into my nostrils even from across the room.

I threw him a mischievous grin. “Don’t let Gabriella Holland hear you say that.”

Or Fiona Sandford.

Or Mariah Navarro.

Or Alyssa Williams.

Funny, how I was the harlot while he was the one who slept around with half the town. Double standards and all.

Sometimes it truly sucked being a woman.

“Gabriella must know. That’s why she dislikes you.”

My heart did a violent flip. Did he just realign his alliances and move over to Team Nessy?

Unlikely, but a girl could dream.

“You’re breaking my heart here, Cruz. I thought she could be my best friend.”

“You don’t have any friends.”

“That’s because I’m a liability.”

“It’s because you are too beautiful, and no woman in their right mind wants to stand next to you. Now, can I buy you dinner?”

I flipped my hair, which felt a lot lighter without three pounds of hairspray on it.

“Dinner’s free.”

“Drinks, then.”

“We have all-you-can-drink packages.”

His grin widened. “Then I guess your only incentive to join me is my company.”

“It’s not much, but I’ll take it.”

Twelve



Tennessee

Being the talk of the town and getting bad press was what I called just another Tuesday, but since Cruz was used to being the golden child, I made an effort to be who I thought he wanted me to be when we arrived at our assigned dinner table.

My back was straight, my face serious, and I only laughed *quietly* whenever it was appropriate. I was determined not to cause him any reason for embarrassment for the rest of the trip.

More so because I wanted to stay on my family's good side than wanting to impress Cruz, although it had to be said, the fact that he dropped about two grand and his undivided attention on me today did make me like him considerably more.

"How's your shima aji?" he asked tightly, stealing a glance at me.

Small as heck, I wanted to reply.

This time we went for the exclusive dinner, not the all-you-can-eat or the complimentary dining room, and the food was

miniature. You'd find more on a Jerry & Sons plate *after* the customer was done with it.

"Exquisite, thank you." I dabbed the corners of my mouth unnecessarily with a napkin. "And your white quail?"

"Good." He gave me a cynical once-over, knowing very well I was faking it. "Wanna share the dessert assortment?"

I tried to think what a girl like Gabriella would reply to that. That's what he liked, right?

That's the company he willingly *chose*.

"Thank you, but I don't eat sugar after six," I murmured.

"You destroyed a sleeve of Oreos last night. *On* the bed. Then I caught you munching on the crumbs this morning."

I felt myself flushing pink. "I'm trying to get better about it. I have to watch my figure."

"Your figure's perfect."

"Is that a medical assessment or a personal one?"

"It's a goddamn fact I wish wasn't true because it has been distracting me since my years on the high school football team when you'd come to Rob's games. What's gotten into you?"

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.

That was a lot to unpack, but he delivered the barb with such ease, with an almost mocking smirk, I forced myself not to pry the subject open. I couldn't afford to argue with him publicly and/or kiss him.

Not tonight.

"I'm trying not to cause you any trouble."

"By being the most boring woman on planet Earth?"

"By trying to act like someone you'd actually be *seen* with," I snapped, my nose and eyes feeling unbearably hot with humiliation.

I wasn't going to cry, of course, but I was feeling all kinds of weird about trying to pacify a man who wasn't my father or Bear. It went against my religion or something.

He groaned, flagging down our waitress.

“My only issue with you is that you like to dress the part people in town gave you. The rest of your personality is amusing to me. I can handle crazy. I speak the language fluently.”

The waitress approached, hugging a round black tray to her chest and looking at Cruz like *he* was her dessert assortment.

“Can you please get my wife that coconut cocktail she likes?”

“Upside-down Christmas margarita?” she beamed.

“With extra marshmallows,” I murmured quietly. Because dang, it was good. “And a whiskey for the gentleman, please. I don’t want to get drunk alone.”

“Any preferences?”

Cruz gave her his preference—of course he had one—and a moment later, I was sucking sweet, alcoholic goodness from a straw.

“You know you can drop the married undercover story. People must know we’re not a real couple by now.”

“I like to keep ’em guessing.” He threw me an enigmatic look. “I have a confession to make.”

“Will it make me want to punch your face?” I asked.

“Very possibly.”

“Then please wait until we go back to the room. I’m trying my hardest not to embarrass you.”

“Drink your cocktail, Tennessee. You’re impossible when you’re sober and eager to please.”

“Why do you call me that?” I dutifully sucked on my straw. “Tennessee. To everyone else, I’m Messy Nussy.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think you’re all that messy. And besides, Nussy reminds me of the Loch Ness monster, and frankly, I think you’re giving it a bad rep.”

I polished off the cocktail quickly and ordered another one with the dessert assortment, which, by the way, I pounced on, not giving Cruz the faintest opportunity to even taste a crumb.

“Where does all this food go?” Cruz finally asked, his eyes big and full of surprise.

I patted my flat stomach. “I have a fast metabolism.”

Oops.

That was just another way of saying I pooped a lot, wasn't it? I wasn't as guarded after two drinks in me, but I gave myself a free pass because we were still having a pleasant evening.

“I remember you used to eat a donut every morning and dissect the sprinkles one by one with your index finger and thumb and nibble on them slowly in high school.”

My mother used to take it as a personal offense that I did not gain weight from that habit. My lithe body was a genetic gift from my father's side.

Trinity had taken after my mother. They were both always falling in and out of diets. Weight Watchers. South Beach. Ketogenic. Mediterranean. The baby food diet.

The clip-your-nose-while-you-eat diet was the worst. They did that so they couldn't smell the food. Unfortunately, they also couldn't breathe, which put a real dent in their efforts to survive it.

Anyway, and back to our subject, it surprised me that Cruz had paid any attention to me at all. I grew up thinking he was blissfully oblivious to my existence as more than Rob's little, annoying girlfriend. If even that.

I curved an eyebrow. “You seem to remember a lot about me in high school.”

“I have a good memory.”

“Or stalking tendencies.”

“Ah, there she is. Soft as barbwire and just as subtle.”

“I'm starting to think you're enjoying this.” I narrowed my eyes.

“I am. You're giving me trouble. No one ever gives me trouble.”

“Such a hard life.” I put the back of my hand to my forehead, like an outraged Victorian duchess.

He leaned forward, letting his elbows drop on the table. Such a small gesture, and still, it filled me with unexpected delight to

know that even the Almighty Dr. Cruz Costello could use a few table manner tweaks.

“So. What do you want me to teach you first?” he asked.

“How to make an entire town believe you’re the Lord’s gift when it is perfectly obvious you are Mr. Average with a fabulous ’stache?”

“I mean in the casino.”

But his smile widened further, making my knees part involuntarily under the table. I licked my lips when I thought about the dusting of dark blond hair peppered on his chest.

Yesterday at the pool was the first time since I was sixteen that I’d wanted to climb someone like a tree. My sexuality had been so dormant in recent years, I hadn’t realized it was still buried inside me.

“Oh. I don’t know. I think I’ll just go for the fruit machines.”

Translation: I couldn’t afford anything else.

He shook his head. “C’mon, Tennessee. You’re more hardcore than that.”

“I may be hardcore, but I’m also broke.”

“I’ll foot the bill.”

“You’ve done enough of that already.”

“Not nearly. The truth of the matter is, I want to have a good time on this cruise, and if that means spending a few bucks, then I’m all for it. It’s not about you, Tennessee, it’s about me. If you really want to be like Gabriella Holland, you should let me treat you well.”

“I don’t want to be like Gabriella Holland,” I corrected him. “And I don’t want your charity.”

“You call that charity?” He snorted out. “Sweetheart, if I didn’t enjoy you, I’d leave you in the room and find someone else to keep me entertained.”

That was a backhanded compliment if I’d ever been slapped with one.

“You don’t expect me to put out, do you?” I cocked my head sideways.

“Expect? No. Hope? Always.”

I mulled this over.

It was true that I didn't let men treat me well. In fact, I didn't let them treat me at all. The very few men in town who had wanted more than a tumble between the sheets with me and actually went through the effort of so-called courting me were met with a cold shoulder.

I threw Tim Trapp's flowers into the trash in front of his very eyes, donated the gifts Roy McCarthy sent me to charity, and flat-out refused a job with Eamon Levy as a secretary at his workshop, even though it had great benefits and medical insurance, because I knew he was going to ask me out.

But maybe this was the perfect solution. To play make-believe with a man I could never have in real life. To heal myself and practice a little through this little adventure.

“All right. Teach me your ways, Master Costello.”

“Miss Turner, I thought you'd never ask.”



There were a few things that immediately stood out to me the first time I stepped into a casino.

First things first—this was *not* a place for people suffering from epilepsy.

The bright colors, blinding lights, constant *ding-ding-dings* echoing in your ears and dark surroundings made the place look like what could have happened to Alice had she stepped into Wonderland under the influence of LSD and way too many tequila shots.

It looked like the grown-up version of an arcade, only slimy instead of fun. With waitresses dressed in uniforms that made my Jerry & Sons outfit look like it belonged in a nunnery, floating between tables and handing drinks to sweaty men and women.

Cruz was right that the slot machines were probably a bad call. The only people occupying them were seventy-five and

over, and it looked like you had to rely solely on luck, which, I was aware, was something I was not endowed with.

Plus, obtaining control of a situation—or at least having the illusion of having control—was important to me.

My eyes immediately drifted to the blackjack tables and the roulette. There was something downright sinister about them. Some magnetic force that made people look extra alert and nervous when the dealers slid cards on the tables.

I felt Cruz's arm brush mine, and a shudder rippled through me again. I had to be careful. My inhibitions around him were already loose.

He stood beside me, glancing in the direction my head was turned.

"I think you'll enjoy blackjack."

"Why?" I asked.

"Lax rules, low-house edge, and fast pace. You're a straight-to-business type of girl. You'll like it."

"I don't know how to play."

"That's what I'm here for."

He laced my arm in his and tugged me forward, toward one of the velvet-green tables with the cards and the chips. The croupier gave us a quick smile as he dealt the players their cards, and I followed everyone's hands carefully as Cruz's lips skimmed over my ear tenderly.

Desire ripped through my skin, veins, and bones. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was press my body to his and drink him in like fine champagne. He was waking the volcano again.

"Here's the skinny of it. Each player wants to beat the dealer, meaning you don't play against one another, you play against that gentleman over there. The way you do that is by getting a count as close as possible to twenty-one, without actually going over the number."

My nipples puckered to attention at his husky voice, but I was entirely uninterested in the game and fully invested in feeling more of his body pressed against mine.

Yesterday's brief kisses left me breathless, and now, semi-drunk and fully-horny, I wanted *all* of Cruz Costello.

"It's your choice whether your ace will be worth one or eleven. Face cards are ten, and any other card is its pip value. So far so good?"

"Yup."

I didn't register *anything* he just said.

Something about a pimp. The only thing that got to me was the way he smelled, the way his lips moved over the shell of my ear, and his heavy arm against mine.

Cruz went on to explain about the betting, the shuffle and cut, the deal, splitting pairs, doubling down, and the naturals.

I successfully blocked every bit of the information with my piece-of-rock brain, instead focusing on the rhythm of my breaths as I wondered what would happen if I rubbed myself against him.

Note to self: do not drink and think. You are not good at that.

Cruz played a couple rounds, patiently reciting all the things he'd explained to me about blackjack throughout, even though I could tell it was annoying the men around us and entertaining the women draped on their arms.

I nodded vehemently, flagging down the waitresses for more and more cocktails whenever he looked away. I'd never gotten drunk publicly. Actually, I very rarely had more than a couple glasses on my own.

I got knocked up before I had the pleasure of getting trashed, and getting trashed *after* bearing a kid seemed unwise, if not completely impossible. Even if I'd wanted to, I was no longer attending high school and therefore hadn't hung out with my former classmates. Drinking alone while breastfeeding? Not even on my worst day.

This meant that now, at the ripe age of twenty-nine, I was finally checking the box on my bucket list and getting completely tanked.

Cruz wasn't aware of how much I drank.

He was too engrossed in his game and in explaining the game to me. Plus, I did a pretty good job at holding my drink under the

table and being sneaky with my straw.

All in all, I still sported the mental age of a preteen.

Awesome.

When it was my turn to play, I proved to be talented in more than just being a fashion criminal and a terrible waitress, and lost him a whooping three-hundred bucks in three consecutive games.

It was swift and painless, seeing as I had no idea what I was doing, and slow to react when the dealer explained my next moves to me. But Cruz had a remarkable poker face and seemed casually amused, as opposed to murderous and upset.

“Wanna try again?”

He leaned way too close to me for me not to take advantage and sniff into his chest. His neck smelled amazing. I was momentarily blind with rage when I thought of how Gabriella must’ve enjoyed all this male goodness in bed for months and months.

“Are you crazy?” I hiccupped. “I’m a national disaster.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. State hazard, maybe. And you’re still learning.”

“At your expense.”

“As I said, that’s my problem, not yours.”

“And what a beautiful problem to have on your hands, eh, Dr. Costello?” A man’s voice drifted from behind my shoulder.

I swiveled around to face a hunky man, muscular as Robocop, with trimmed graying hair, and a button-up shirt that threatened to burst. He reeked of enough cologne to drown a beaver, and next to him was a woman with bleached-blond hair and a red dress that highlighted all of her enhanced assets.

Her nipples were so prominent through her clothes, I wondered if it was a fashion statement of some kind. I mean, the place was air-conditioned, but it wasn’t *that* cold.

Suddenly, I saw myself in that woman. The skimpy clothes. The in-your-face sexuality. It was all a front and made me feel uncomfortable.

“Dr. Wootton. It’s been a while.”

The two men shook hands. You could cut the tension in the air with a butter knife.

Two things I knew for sure—Dr. Wootton was the colleague Mrs. Warren had referred to, the person who'd recognized Cruz, and that these two men were *not* on good terms.

“This is my wife Jocelyn.”

“My pleasure.” Jocelyn extended her hand to Cruz for him to kiss.

He obediently did so, the obnoxious gentleman that he was.

“Honey, this is Dr. Costello, the guy I told you about yesterday after Ramona told us about the...*incident*.”

Here we go.

“This is Dalton,” Cruz ignored Dr. Wootton's lukewarm introduction, placing a hand on my shoulder. “We went to med school together. Dalton, Jocelyn, this is my lovely date for the evening Tennessee.”

“Ah, date. Is that what you kids call it these days?” Dr. Wootton guffawed.

“What else would you call having a drink with a friend from town?” Cruz asked nonchalantly.

“Ramona says—”

“Ramona's looking for a headline,” Cruz said. “Really, Dalton. I thought gossip was beneath you. We're not in kindergarten anymore.”

Jocelyn suggested we grab a drink together, and both men were too polite to point out it was a terrible idea, so here we were, sipping drinks.

There were no empty seats at the bar, so we opted for a round table with four stools by the roulette tables. Personally, I thought Jocelyn's nipples deserved a stool of their own. Were they enhanced, too?

I sat opposite her, and Cruz was in front of Dalton.

I guessed that it wasn't a good time to confess to Cruz that I'd had three more drinks he wasn't aware of while he was playing

blackjack, and that I was tight-roping the line of drunk as a skunk.

Jocelyn couldn't stop undressing Cruz with her gaze while Dalton seriously *eye-plucked* me into oblivion.

Were they swingers?

No judgment here, but there was no way I would participate in that kind of thing with this nipple-wielding power couple.

I decided to go for the same wine Jocelyn sipped, while the men stuck to whiskey. It occurred to me that I should probably stop drinking, but this was my first real experience with alcohol. Pathetic, considering I was near thirty, but also true. And this was the trip of new experiences, apparently.

"Where are you working these days?" Cruz asked Dalton, obviously trying to steer the conversation into safer territory.

"I'm a plastic surgeon in Greenville. At the Green View Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Clinic."

That could explain why his wife had enough plastic to mold an industrial trash can.

"Nice. That's what you've been gunning for."

"How 'bout you? Heard you ended up taking your old man's job after all?" Dalton scooped an ice cube from his whiskey tumbler into his mouth, crushing it with his teeth. "Thought you had second thoughts about that?"

Cruz stiffened next to me. The good-natured smile still played on his lips, but I could tell something had shifted inside him.

"I was on the fence for half a minute. Ultimately, though, I like it in Fairhope."

Dalton took a swig of his whiskey. "The Gambler" by Kenny Rogers was playing in the background.

"Thought you said it gave you too many dark memories."

I couldn't help but snort out an unladylike giggle.

"Dark memories?" I echoed. "Cruz was, and always will be, Fairhope's guiding light. I think his only unpleasant memory is being born, and that's only because that's the moment people

began to fawn over him twenty-four seven and he got tired of being admired.”

Dalton turned his gaze toward me, seeing this as a direct invitation to answer my breasts.

“That’s what I heard, too. But he said something about an ex and some stuff going wrong. Last I talked to our boy here, he said he was looking for apprenticeships in Charlottesville. That was before we graduated.”

“Ex?” I whipped my head toward Cruz, frowning. “What ex?”

Cruz had fooled around with a few popular girls in high school, but he was too bright, too untouchable to settle down with one of them. And besides, people in our school had this small-town mentality that ensured almost zero drama where breakups were involved—the dating pool was too small for you to feel weird about dating a friend’s ex...or an ex’s friend...

In fact, I was pretty sure mine and Rob’s was the only messy story from Fairhope High during his graduation year.

Also, on a side note—why was everyone blurry? And how come my legs felt like they were too heavy to move, but also kind of warm and nice? Was this how being hammered felt like? No wonder alcoholics were grumpy people.

And also did this a lot. I laughed once.

Cruz kicked my ankle under the table, signaling me to shut up.

“You don’t know my whole life story, Turner.”

“I know you didn’t have a messy girlfriend back home or dark memories,” I countered, peppering my statement with a hiccup.

Dalton and Jocelyn looked between us, grinning.

“Who wants some shots?” Jocelyn purred.

“Not me,” I was about to say, when Cruz bit out, “Great idea.”

Oh boy.

He was going to be so pissed when I ended up puking on his friend's wife's pointy nipples.

A round of tequila arrived, and we all emptied the content of our glasses. Dalton and Cruz switched to beer and started talking about football while Jocelyn ordered "us girls" some bubbly.

"So." Jocelyn gave me a slow once-over. "What'd you get done?"

Telling her I got nothing done seemed impolite and haughty, even if it was the truth. I pointed to my chin, nose, and a few more areas in my body.

"Everywhere, pretty much. The only thing that's real about me is my heart. And I've been told it's not the best. How 'bout you?"

Cruz's quaking shoulder, pressed against mine, told me he heard me and was wildly amused by my answer.

My walls were coming down, fast and hard, and I was growing more and more enamored with the idea of fooling around with Cruz Costello. *With* clothes on.

Because when you think about it—it was the perfect crime.

He didn't want word to get out.

I didn't want word to get out.

I was feeling frisky.

He was... a man.

And we both knew this cruise had an end date, and neither of us had any ideas to continue this beyond the here and now.

Plus, I'd learned my lesson from a decade-and-a-half ago. I wouldn't let him go all the way. I wouldn't get pregnant again.

So what was the big deal?

Cruz was a gentleman. He'd never kiss and tell.

Tactically, I slipped my foot out of my sandal and used my big toe to brush his inner calf suggestively under the table while nodding at something Jocelyn said.

"...jawline reduction, but I told him, 'Baby, while you're there, give my nose a little shave, would you?' Of course, I didn't

think he'd *actually* go for it..."

Meanwhile, Cruz nodded and sipped his beer, ignoring my undercover advance.

Fortunately, I was far too drunk to take offense. *Or* the hint.

Maybe I was being too subtle. There was no way he wasn't game. The way he'd kissed me yesterday pretty much cemented the attraction was there. Also, he'd admitted I was a hottie at the pool.

I slipped my hand under the table and placed it on his knee.

Dang it, his thighs were as hard as a statue.

"...Chris Wade had 1,794 yards receiving, you don't have to go ham when you're running wide open," Dalton explained to Cruz hotly, while his wife continued droning on, "...dimple creation will be my next procedure. I think I'll be asking for one for our anniversary. Seven years of marriage counts as a big anniversary, right?"

When Cruz still didn't get it, I dragged my hand up his knee, my little finger skimming his inner thigh. I hoped the rest of him was as hard as his leg. I chanced a glance at him.

He was frowning at something Dalton said and added, "They also have one of the worst pass protection units in the NFL, so that's not saying much."

My little finger almost got to his crotch, and finally—*finally*—Cruz's left hand snaked under the table, too. Instead of stopping my hand, he placed *his* directly on the edge of my dress where the fabric met my skin.

A shot of pleasure ran through my spine at the contact on my sensitive flesh.

He pressed an ice cube on my inner knee.

Whoop.

"Two can play this game," he muttered under his breath, pretending to be engrossed in Dalton's football chat.

"Game on," I uttered through a close-lipped smile directed at Jocelyn, who was now contemplating removing excess labial skin

from her vag after she and Dalton had their third and final child, which she was planning on having next year.

I knew depressingly too much about their sex lives.

And shape of their nipples.

“...could be a smokescreen for Roberts. But if he makes this move, I think we’ll be in good shape,” Cruz continued conversing with Dalton, as his hand hiked up my inner thigh with the ice cube, which was literally melting against my sizzling skin.

My pinkie brushed his package through his jeans.

He was hard, fully loaded and ready to go.

Now if I could just figure out how far I wanted to take this.

“Better to stay put than trade down,” Cruz replied to something Dalton said as his cock pushed back on my pinkie.

He pretended to rearrange himself on his seat while giving a little hip-thrust into my touch.

Boy, oh boy.

This was happening.

The ice cube continued its journey between my legs, almost resting on my panties. I let out a soft moan. It was such a nice touch, not to move my panties aside and tease me by pressing it against the fabric.

In other (related) news, I was never going to make eye contact with this man ever again.

“Tennessee? Are you with me?” Jocelyn snapped her fingers in front of my face.

Holy *fug*, what now? “Huh?” Did she want to know if I needed some of her extra labia skin for my butt enhancement?

“I asked if you know the mysterious ex who made Cruz swear off Fairhope back when he was in med school.”

“Uhm.” I cleared my throat, shifting in my seat to gain more friction against my clit. “Can’t recall. Did he ever describe her?”

“I don’t know. Honey, did he?” Jocelyn elbowed her husband.

Dalton’s eyes shot straight to my girls—I swear, the guy was a first-grade sleazeball—and he shrugged.

“I don’t remember, it was so long ago. And Cruz and I moved in different circles. But lemme see...”

Cruz slipped what remained of the ice cube through the side of my panties, letting it melt against my slit, and holy sh...

“Blonde, I think he said. Brown eyes? No. No. Hazel. Long legs. Said she was a horrible human being. Zero tact when it came to affairs of the heart. She had a weird name,” Dalton recited. “Lessy? Noriana?”

Wait a minute...

Cruz chose that moment to toss my hand away from his crotch, get up, and finish the remainder of his beer.

“All right, buddy, it was good seeing you. I’ll settle the bill at the bar. Send Joyce my regards.”

“She’s right here,” Dalton faltered. “And it’s...”

“Yes. Of course she is.” Cruz began pulling me out of my stool, not even bothering to listen to the rest of it. “Nice meeting you, Joyce. You’re utterly unforgettable.”

Unfortunately, I was both hammered and enjoying the sensation of the tip of an ice cube teasing my clit, which resulted in my stumbling all over my feet like a baby deer, giggling uncontrollably.

“Come on, sweetheart, let’s go.”

Cruz grabbed my hand and practically raced through the casino toward the exit, throwing a wad of cash at the bartender on his way out.

I tried to keep up with him, panting. So many things went through my head. But the most pressing issue was...

“Why on earth did you tell your friends at med school we were a couple?”

It was me he’d described.

I knew.

And I thought Dalton and Jocelyn knew it, too, because they kept looking at me like a puzzle they had to put together. The woman behind the conundrum.

It hadn't been about them being swingers. Well, maybe not all about them being swingers—they'd stared at me trying to connect dots, not our genitals.

Maybe both? Pluck no.

And it had only just hit me.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but you've been cockteasing me all evening and it's high time we do something about it. Where're the elevators?" Cruz muttered. He was lit like a Roman candle, looking left and right frantically while holding onto my hand like I had immediate plans to disappear.

We passed by Brendan and a group of middle-aged guys who cackled on their way into the casino in a uniform of Hawaiian shirts and beer bellies.

"Lookie, here. Today they are lovebirds," Brendan whistled as he strolled past us. "Tomorrow, who knows?"

"It was me Dalton described. What the heck was that about?" I trailed behind Cruz, trying to keep up.

"You're not the only blonde in Fairhope."

"Hazel eyes? Weird name? Questionable personality?"

"I meant Taylor Cunningham."

"Taylor's not a weird name."

She wasn't a blonde, either, and had a perfectly pleasant temperament, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt since her hair was light.

"You think?" He took a sharp turn to the right, after trying to find the elevators to his left. "I think it's a guy's name. Used to be, anyway. It's all gender fluid these days."

I wanted him to stop.

I wanted to talk about what it *meant*.

But...I wanted him in my panties more, so I put a pin on the conversation.

"Where are the *damn* elevators?" Cruz seethed.

It was the first time I'd seen him even remotely flustered, wanting something instead of having it automatically given to

him, and it gave me a lot of pride and joy to know it was me who made him that way.

“Not sure, but there’s a maintenance room about a hundred feet from us.”

“Good enough.” He made an actual beeline toward the door. “I can’t chance you changing your mind on me again. No time.”

A second later, we were huddled in the maintenance room. It was nestled in a corner of the deck, unseen by others, full to the brim with tool bags, brooms, a ladder, toiler paper rolls, and cleaning products.

Cruz locked the door behind us and pinned me against it, his arms resting on either side of my shoulders as he looked down at me. His breath skated down my face, sweet and alcoholic, hitting all my systems, giving me goosebumps.

“I—”

I started to say something to fill the unbearable, tension-filled silence, but his mouth crushed against mine with force before I could take a breath.

“No, Turner. You’re not going to sass your way out of this one.”

This kiss was *way* different to the one yesterday.

To put it mildly, Cruz Costello went for broke and pulled out all the stops.

It was animalistic, raw, and bruising. An RSVP to the invitation I’d given him earlier that evening, when my pinkie grazed the buttons of his jeans.

My head swam with a heady, raw need.

He pushed me flat against the wooden door, grabbing the backs of my thighs and wrapping my legs around his narrow waist like in the movies. A broomstick crashed beside us, sending a row of cleaning products sitting on a shelf raining down on the floor.

Neither of us seemed to care under the haze of liquor and hormones.

He hissed into my mouth when I opened for him, my tongue dancing with his. He tasted so good, so male, and I wanted more of him. I wanted *all* of him. I couldn't remember why I'd ever hated him.

I threaded my fingers through his hair, tugging him to me, twisting my head here and there, to kiss him from different angles, deeper, faster, more passionately.

We kissed like teenagers. Groaning and pulling and biting and sighing. Like the world was about to end, and we had to get our fill before it was all over.

Even when I closed my eyes, his mustache reminded me that it was Cruz Costello I was kissing, and it made me so wet I was pretty sure that mop in the room we were occupying was going to be put to good use by the time we were done.

“Tennessee Lilybeth Turner.” My name fell from his lips in astonishment, like he couldn't believe what we were doing. “The most beautiful girl alive.”

Okay, that was a stretch, but I wasn't going to argue.

He dropped his head down at the same time he pushed my breasts up through my dress, French-kissing said breasts through the fabric. It was even more erotic than having him pop them out and going to town.

Because there was anticipation in this.

I watched him working, licking, suckling my swollen and sensitive nipples. They ached for more and for less and for I-wasn't-sure-what-else. He scraped his teeth over them, rubbing them in a way that felt so delicious, so good, I thought I was going to burst.

“What's the protocol on women climaxing too fast these days?” I mumbled, forgetting to tuck my drunkenness in, my hands all over his firm butt.

Luckily, Cruz was too busy not busting his own load to notice. He seemed like the kind of bothersome nobleman to stop whatever we were doing if he knew how trashed I was.

I. Needed. This.

He dropped to his knees in front of me, his big strong hands clutching my waist as he kissed his way down my body, skimming past my belly, navel, and continuing south.

“Haven’t you noticed already?” he murmured into the fabric of my dress. “You can do whatever the hell you want and still be golden in my eyes.”

Whoa.

That had to be hands-down the sexiest thing anyone had ever said to me.

Which, granted, didn’t mean much, seeing as the runner-up was “*Hey, baby, wanna show me them tits?*”

I let Cruz fling one of my legs over his shoulder, pull my panties to the side, and draw a generous, long and deep inhale.

There.

I’d never received or reciprocated when it came to oral sex, never got that far in my sexual repertoire, although I’d watched enough porn to know the technicalities of it.

Though I had to admit, I found it much less embarrassing when some pixel-faced stranger on a porn site in a homemade video was getting her lady bits licked while moaning in a language I was pretty sure belonged to *The Sims* than it did in real life.

“Uhm. Oh. Kay.” I giggled.

He stopped, about to pull away from me, no doubt to ask if I was okay with what was going on. I was. Not only was I okay, but I was also morbidly curious. I jerked him back into my center, burying his beautiful face between my thighs.

“How do you like it?” He nuzzled his nose into me. Like, straight up *into* that part of me.

There was a *menu?*

“Surprise me.”

He used his thumbs to pry me open, then licked me from my butt crack to my clit. I let out a happy sigh, holding onto his head and making sure he didn’t go anywhere.

I watched acutely as he began licking me there, enjoying every drop of my arousal, making noises as he used my desire to coat my clit and suck on it.

That was when I began suspecting I was going to faint. The pleasure was so intense, so heightened, every muscle in my body clenched in expectation of what was about to come (pardon the pun).

“You’re so tight.” Cruz used his index and middle fingers to penetrate me while he worked on my clit.

Well, I practically am a virgin, if you disregard the day Bear was conceived!

Luckily, even though I was drunk, I still had some basic verbal filters in place.

My orgasm felt different to all the ones I gave myself. I knew that before it even hit me.

First, because I couldn’t control my limbs at all. They basically turned to that thing that happens to your Frappuccino after you leave it in the sun for half a day.

Second, because I arched and arrowed like I was ready to shoot myself straight into another continent.

Third, because the wave of shivers rolling over me drowned me to the outside world, and for a moment, it was just me, sailing on a cloud.

Best.

Climax.

Ever.

The cloud popped under me and brought me back to planet Earth when the musky scent of my sex invaded my lips as Cruz kissed me, fumbling with his belt to set his willy free.

That’s when I pushed him away, shaking my head violently.

“No. No way. No way.”

“Why not? Are you okay?”

He stood in front of me, panting, his hand still on his buckle. His chest rose and fell to the rhythm of his heartbeat. His hair

was a mess—my doing. I loved that his lips were red and swollen from pleasuring me.

...but not enough to screw up my life and officially become Fairhope's running joke. "I'm okay..."

"I'm clear." He pointed at himself. "I make it a point to check every three months."

"I'm not on the pill."

"I'll pull out."

I gave him a double-gross look, pushing my dress down. It was hard to be taken seriously when my vag was still making eye contact with his erection through his jeans.

"Are you kidding me? That's the one thing they warned us about in sex ed. And I didn't listen. Spoiler alert: the pull-out method is not a bulletproof plan!"

"Actually," Cruz's mouth pulled into a devilish smirk, "if withdrawal is done correctly, the pull-out method is ninety-six percent effective. *Not* that I've been testing it on anyone else."

"Yeah, well, you won't be testing it on me, either." I gave him another push, feeling sober all of a sudden. "I don't do sex, mister."

"You mean, in general or with me?"

"I mean in general. Can't take any chances."

A low, gravelly chuckle escaped him. "Never." His smile was perfect, his straight, white teeth gleaming.

"*Never.*"

"That's ridiculous. If that were true, it means you've never had sex after having Bear."

I knotted my arms over my chest, my lips turning downward in a wince.

His eyed widened. "*No.*"

"Yes."

"Tennessee, you... you can prevent pregnancy these days."

"Agreed. And I do so in the most effective way of all. One-hundred percent effectiveness, actually, if you exclude Virgin

Mary, and versions vary on what happened to her—I. Don't. Have. Sex. And I especially—*especially*—I unknotted my arms to point a finger to the ceiling as I continued my righteous speech —“am not having sex with a man who has already sexually assaulted me.”

“Sexually assaulted? *You?*” he spat out, his eyes flaring in alarm. “You played with my dick while I was discussing the Panthers not even an hour ago.”

“I meant the time I throat-punched you. Don't act like you forgot about that.”

“You thought I was assaulting you?” To be fair, he did look horrified.

I guess it was time I revisited that day.

Buckle up, gang.

Thirteen



Tennessee

Okay. So about that context...

I kind of, sort of, throat-punched Fairhope's MVP back in the day.

When I was twenty-four and Cruz was...what? Twenty-six? And had just come back to town from med school.

There were a few different ways to tell this story, but the main facts remained as follows:

1. I'd just gotten my job at Jerry & Sons. Before that, I had to clean houses and mow lawns all over town to pay for Bear's school tuition, swimming lessons, judo practices, and, you know, general life.
2. Cruz was in his prime. He was so sought-after, the folks from *The Bachelor* had given him a call to see if he wanted to audition. He'd just purchased his first house, before he'd even started practicing medicine. A

stunning, lime-washed colonial with six white columns, black shutters, and rosebushes at the entrance. It looked like Barbie's Dreamhouse and had been occupied by a glamorous ex-model and a baseball player before they retired to Florida. Growing up, I'd fantasized about buying it for myself and my family with the hypothetical money I was going to make becoming a Hollywood actress (despite the fact I didn't have one acting bone in my body and largely didn't think I'd be any good at it). Now, it belonged to that tool bag.

3. It was July Fourth, and the entire town was in a frenzy. There was a parade, BBQ stands everywhere you turned, and horse-drawn carriages rolling through downtown. Floats were made the morning of, and there was face-painting, music, clowns, fireworks, and the kitchen sink (True story. Wannabe comedian Charlie Spacey brought his kitchen sink as some sort of a political statement about the wastefulness of that day that nobody cared about).

Jerry & Sons had been closed for the day, so I'd let my parents take Bear downtown for the festivities while I'd stayed home, nursing a Costco tub of ice cream, a beer, and my never-ending fountain of self-pity.

It was the first time I'd ever missed a Fourth of July celebration. Even at the height of my scandal, these parades were so deeply nostalgic and sweet to me, I couldn't refuse them.

Problem was, I'd known Cruz was going to be there, and I really hadn't wanted to face him. He was a constant reminder of the fact he and Rob had gone and built lives of their own while I made unfair sacrifices and paid my dues for my reckless behavior, even if it had given me the most precious thing in my life.

It was probably nine in the evening, just before the fireworks had started, when I'd heard a knock on the door downstairs.

Weirded out (my parents and Bear wouldn't be there until well after ten and Trinity was out with her friends until the next morning), I'd gone to answer.

"It better not be a serial killer," I'd muttered as I'd jammed my feet into my father's checked slippers and swung the door open.

And there he was.

Cruz Costello.

Looking gorgeous, muscular, chosen, and...*tanked*?

On second thought, a serial killer wasn't *that* unwelcome considering the alternative.

"Your tits are great," he'd hiccupped, his dusky cobalt gaze sweeping over my chest.

It was summer, hot as sin, and I wasn't wearing a bra under my white tank top. Odd thing to say, only the last time we'd seen each other, I think I'd been breastfeeding. Luckily, I was done nursing Bear. My nipples were no longer the size of a family-size pizza each, and the blue veins as thick as sausages were long gone.

For a while there, I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to mess with Bear's buffet. And every time I got into a hot shower to massage said breasts (because I had a ton of milk ducts), I would cry out in pain and my breasts would cry with me, leaking yellowish milk.

Truly, parenthood was a wonderful thing.

"What can I help you with, Costello?" I'd sighed, wanting him gone.

It was hard to believe I used to have a crush on this guy before Rob had asked me out. Cruz was so nauseatingly perfect. In a totally off-putting way. Like, the way a professionally-made cake was so perfect and smooth you didn't want to cut it.

Though I did want to cut Cruz Costello, sometimes.

"You cuhn let me in and ass-plain to me whad Rob had dat I didn't."

Dang, he was three sheets to the wind.

“A general grasp of the English language for a start,” I’d deadpanned.

Was he here just because he couldn’t tolerate the fact I hadn’t flung myself at him years ago when all the other girls had?

Talk about fragile male egos.

Behind him, the night parade had passed through, banging on drums and singing.

Cruz made a disgusted face. “He used to kiss and tell.”

“Real classy.”

I’d rolled my eyes, but tears prickled the back of them, making them sting. I’d paid so dearly for my mistake, it seemed so unnecessarily cruel to bring it up again and talk about the intimate details.

How many times could I atone for it?

I did everything right now. Or as right as I could, anyway, considering the circumstances.

Cruz took a step forward. He smelled like bonfire and amber and sandalwood. Woodsy and musky at the same time. I had to remind myself he wanted what all the others did before him—to get me in bed, because apparently, that was the easiest task within Fairhope limits.

“Get away from me,” I’d warned, stepping backward.

“Not before you give me what I want...”

“What you want?” I’d asked, incredulous.

“Yes. What all-weeze belonged to me.”

He was going to take another step, I could tell, and in that moment, the only thing I thought about was what it was going to look like.

Slutty Messy Nussy, letting Fairhope’s minted doctor-slash-quarterback into her house while her parents (and son!) were away.

Of course she’d have asked—begged him for it.

It would be the golden boy’s word against the jezebel’s.

I'd swung my fist and gone for his cheek, but he was tall, and I'd ended up slamming my knuckles against his Adam's apple.

I must've underestimated my strength, or maybe Cruz had been too drunk to abide by the rules of gravity, because he went down like a sleep-deprived toddler, falling flat on his butt on my parents' front lawn.

He'd groaned in pain while the parade marched past with drumlines and trumpets, and it had occurred to me we were drawing attention and that I was going to be toast.

"Shut up, Costello. Get up and dust yourself off," I'd hissed, stepping outside to ensure he heard my warning.

This, of course, had only made him moan louder.

Seriously, why did I even bother?

I should have just grabbed Bear, shoved him in the car, and moved to another state. There was no way Fairhope was going to let me be.

"She assaulted him!" Mrs. Underwood had cried from the other side of the street.

"Punched him in the throat!" Mr. Thomas had whimpered.

People had begun rushing from the parade toward my front lawn. I'd retreated, feeling my cheeks flush.

Great.

Now I was getting into trouble without even leaving my doorstep. I really was a lost cause.

They'd helped pick Cruz up and asked him if he was okay. I'd rushed inside and closed the door, peering through the peephole, my face so hot with mortification I'd thought it was going to explode.

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, honey, what did she do to you?"

"I'm so sorry. She's always been a hellion!"

Cruz just nodded and sulked, staring at my door like he'd known I was behind it.

So, you see, this was the infamous throat-punching incident.

Totally called for.

Now let's move on, please.



“A chance.” Cruz rubbed at his square stubbled chin in the maintenance room.

“What?” I asked.

“What I deserved, what I came to talk that night, was a chance. The chance you gave him instead of me. Not a kiss. And not anything beyond that. A simple chance.”

For a moment, I just stared at Cruz, stunned. I thought he'd wanted the chance to bang me, not the chance to...ask to bang me?

He stared at the floor as he rubbed at his cheek, continuing, “I wasn't trying to pull any funny business with you. Truth was, I'd always had a bit of a crush on you.”

“Umm, what?”

“I'd been waiting to tell you at the Fourth of July parade when I got home from med school. Thought you'd be there, since you'd never missed it, no matter what. I didn't really care about your reputation at the time. Figured I couldn't let a bunch of strangers dictate what I could or couldn't do with my life. At first, I'd waited for you to show up. I had a beer, and then another one, and then another. The fourth was overkill, let me tell ya, because that's when things began to go sideways, and I moved to shots. The road to finding myself slurring something offensive on your front porch was short from there, and we all know how it ended. But at the time, I came to you because I wanted to see if you'd have dinner with me. And I wanted to see if you'd have dinner with me not because I wanted to embarrass you, but because the entire time I was away, in med school, every time I kissed a girl, I always thought to myself—*I wonder what Tennessee tastes like?*”

I'd thought he'd come for the one thing the town hadn't offered up on a platter—the one thing his friend had gotten that he hadn't—me.

“You didn’t say any of that. You said I had great tits,” I accused, tears prickling my eyes.

He bit on his inner cheek. “I take it back.”

“Oh?”

“They’re not great. They’re *perfect*.”

“You expect me to believe you really wanted to ask me out?” I cried out, emotional all of a sudden, and not the good kind.

I’d have said yes in a heartbeat, my anger and hurt toward him be damned. But now, now too much water had gone under that bridge, and it was no longer an option.

All the women he’d dated.

All the rumors I’d been subjected to.

All those years.

I didn’t really care about your reputation at the time.

He used past tense.

Not present.

Dating was no longer on the table.

“I’m not expecting you to do anything. This is the truth. Do what you will with it.”

Yup.

I was crying now.

The first hot, fat tear rolled down my cheek, making its way into the corner of my mouth and exploding its saltiness all over my tongue. It was horrible, because somehow, I’d managed to keep myself from bawling even after we found out I’d messed up the cruise tickets.

“You bastard,” I hissed.

“I’m sorry.” He sounded genuinely apologetic.

“Why’d you never try again?”

“You physically assaulting me that first time kind of put a damper on my plans—not that I remembered everything.”

“That means nothing!”

“No means no.”

“No means maybe, depending on the context. I had no idea what you were offering, only what it looked like you were trying to take. So that ex you told people about in med school...”

He shook his head. “I didn’t want to come back and see you with Bear. It was too much, after crushing on you all throughout high school. But ultimately, sometime after the throat-punch and my third serious girlfriend, my feelings subsided, and I’d gotten over you.”

“Good to know. Thanks,” I muttered, two tears chasing one another, skating over my cheek. “Now we can never be together. Our siblings are getting married, and I’ve been Lot’s wife for far too long. There is no way the town is going to let me get away with dating someone like you. Let alone our families.”

And then there was the other part.

The part where I truly didn’t think I deserved him and, anyway, never wanted to have sex again in my entire life. Or have other kids. That sort of fun stuff.

“I agree,” he said, taking a cautious step toward me. “But we still have this trip, and I suggest we make the most out of it.”

He squeezed my arms, looking deep into my eyes. I shouldn’t feel insulted, considering this was exactly what I’d been hoping for when we entered the maintenance room, but somehow, everything had changed in the last few minutes.

I felt like I was starring in my very own, messed-up *Sliding Doors* movie. Only I wasn’t Gwyneth Paltrow and Cruz wasn’t... well, I forgot who else starred in that movie, which meant he was definitely not *that* hot.

More pieces added to the puzzle that was Cruz Costello as I digested the new revelation.

“Question.” I stepped out of his embrace again.

“Shoot.”

“Why did Gabriella start hating me extra hard when you two started dating? What did you tell her?”

“I didn’t tell her anything.”

There was a pause.

“But she *did* catch me looking through your Instagram account one day.”

“I don’t even update my account. It’s all pictures of landscape and desserts and John Lennon quotes.”

“It’s pretty depressing,” he agreed.

We stood in front of one another. It seemed like there wasn’t much more to say after that.

And yet, nothing had been resolved.

Cruz rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t mean to sound like an asshole, but if you’re not planning to do something about my hard-on, at least put me out of my misery and let me go make the bald man cry in the shower.”

“There’s a bald man in our shower?”

“Masturbate,” Cruz said flatly. “I need to take care of my blue balls.”

“Right!” I stepped aside, feeling myself blush. “Of course, of course. Don’t let me stand in your way.”

“A little too late for that.”

A few seconds later, we both evacuated the room.

Fourteen



Cruz

I'd always had a thing for Tennessee Turner.

From the moment I first saw her at the nursery, wobbling along, delivering a clean and confident smack to the back of the head of another toddler to snatch away a rag doll, I knew this girl was special.

Actually, if I was going to be petty (and I was definitely *not* going to be petty), I was the one who was *supposed* to ask her out between Rob and me. As I mentioned, we rock-paper-scissored it, and my paper wrapped his rock.

But he smashed my chance, anyway.

Straight up crapped all over the bro code and asked the pretty blonde out.

Was I pissed? Yes.

Did I punch his face? Also yes.

Did I hate Tennessee Turner for accepting his offer for an ice cream and vow to ignore her existence from that moment on? I

plead the fifth.

See? Not bitter at all.

Now I was in the shower of our stateroom while Tennessee was probably building a pillow fort and hiding behind it to avoid me while my cock wept tears of cum onto the tiles as I remembered how she tasted in the maintenance room.

Thanks to Dalton and his big veneered mouth.

If one good thing came out of it—and I was really struggling to find the silver lining here—it was that I had the chance to clear the air and explain to her that I did not, in fact, try to mess around with her that Fourth of July.

I could tell from Tennessee's reaction today that she would have said yes, had I asked her out like a decent human being. Now I couldn't stop thinking about Tennessee and me in an alternate universe, screwing like bunnies three times a day.

I'd have given her a job as my secretary or something. We'd have had date nights and I'd have taken her to black-tie events and verbally sparred with her the entire way there.

I still couldn't believe the woman was practically a virgin.

She'd had sex *one* time her entire life.

The craziest thing was, I knew she hadn't had anyone go down on her or given any head, because Rob used to give us detailed reports of their doings before he hit the home run.

Let's just say there was a lot of tit-sucking and fingering, but nothing else. Which I had to admit, gave Tennessee the gleam of an unexplored land, wild and unmapped, waiting to be discovered.

Unfortunately, it seemed like she wouldn't let me get anywhere near her, ironically after finding out that I *hadn't* sexually harassed her.

I always thought I had a pretty decent grasp of what women wanted, but apparently I'd been wrong, because I hadn't the greenest clue what Tennessee Turner needed or craved.

All I knew was that if it was a relationship she wanted, my parents were going to kill themselves, and then Wyatt was going to off me and run with the inheritance money.

At twenty-six, I'd been fresh out of med school, new to adulthood and real life. My parents had been so happy to have me back in town, they'd have accepted a farm animal for a potential daughter-in-law, anything to make me stick around.

Now, they had all kinds of ideas.

I'd held back on marriage for far too long. They weren't going to be happy with anyone less than a Windsor.

And it wasn't just them.

I had my own reputation to think of.

Being with Tennessee was going to ruin everything I'd built since I'd come back. My reputation, social standing, thriving business, and steady deliveries of homemade pies by grateful clients.

...so why can't I give a damn about any of those things?

I turned off the faucet, wrapped a towel around my waist, and stepped out of the bathroom. I found Tennessee flung on our bed, wearing one of the shirts I'd bought for her earlier today, makeup-free and edible to a fault.

She played with a tendril of her blonde hair, looking thoughtful as she peered up at me.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Hardly."

"I thought you weren't into puns."

"I have my moments." I advanced toward our shared closet, tugging out a pair of briefs. I noticed her pillow fort was not in place yet. "Fair warning—I sleep in my underwear, so if that's a problem..."

"It's not a problem," she replied quickly, turning scarlet everywhere visible. "Actually..."

I turned around almost violently, searching her face.

"Yes?"

Eager much, asshole?

"I was wondering..." She drew a circle with her finger on her thigh. "If you could teach me how to make out with a guy. Sorry I

freaked out on you earlier. I'm pretty much out of my depth when it comes to the opposite sex. I know we don't have much time here, but I think you're right. It'd be nice to get the best out of the situation, seeing as we both know we don't have any future together and this thing stops as soon as we go back home."

I yanked the briefs up my legs under my towel. It was an ambitious move, but I'd seen women do something similar with their bras and shirts.

"No one at home can find out," I clipped, feeling like an asshole, and no doubt sounding like one, too.

In my defense, I'd been so thoroughly rejected by her since age seventeen, I didn't want to lose one iota of my charmed quality of life for the pleasure of having her as a fling.

"I know." Tennessee sat up straighter in bed. "Trust me, my parents and sister would kill me a hundred times over if they find out I touched a hair on your golden head. Plus, I'm super damaged. There's no way I could handle a relationship. I have a lot to lose, too."

"And then there's Rob," I added, dropping the towel and advancing toward the bed, my junk safely covered by the briefs.

There was no way I was letting Gussman think I'd been pining for his ex-girlfriend for decades. That a small, awful part of me had been glad that he'd screwed off the way he had, because that meant she'd never take him back.

And now he was back and what the fuck did *that* mean for all of this?

"Yeah. Some friend you are." Tennessee let out a throaty, sexy laugh. "Don't worry, I'll never tell your buddy you've sampled my goods."

She thought I was doing it out of loyalty to him. Well, the real reason—my fragile ego—wasn't going to win me any personality points, so I decided to keep it to myself.

"Right," I said, sliding under the covers.

A fresh rush of desire ran through my veins as my body found hers under the blanket. She looked so young without all the makeup and hairspray, I could almost imagine us as teenagers.

My cock, which had absolutely zero business getting up again not even ten minutes after I masturbated, already poked at her stomach between us, lazily swinging itself from side to side as it tried to catch her attention like an eager puppy.

“Holy *cheat*-balls. That thing’s huge.”

She touched my crown with the tip of her finger through my briefs, before jerking her hand away, like it was going to clamp its jaws on her.

“Seriously, you can put it on a leash and take it for a walk downtown.”

“Don’t you dare make another Weiner joke,” I warned, playing with the hem of her shirt for no reason at all other than the obvious—I had fondling privileges today.

“That thing has a mind of its own.” She lifted a speculative eyebrow, looking down between us. “Can I touch it again?”

You can take it home, put it in an aquarium, and call it Sally if it makes you happy.

“Absolutely. You can pet it, too. Squeeze. Lick. Suck. Fondle. It doesn’t bite, but it does occasionally spit. I’ll give you a heads-up before it does.”

She looked up at me excitedly, her eyes zinging with exhilaration. “There was a pun there, Dr. Cruz. Good job.”

She just talked to me like I was her preschool student.

...and I just plastered a goofy smile on, *also* like a preschool student.

Her long, pointy fingernails ran down my six-pack to my briefs, making my skin prickle deliciously. She slipped her hand into the fly, jerking my erect cock out like it was a chicken that was about to become her lunch.

I didn’t comment on the lack of finesse. Didn’t want to make her feel self-conscious.

She stroked it gently, mesmerized by it.

She was so fucking beautiful I didn’t know what to do with myself. Having her touch my dick after fourteen years of imagining it happening, did weird things to my chest.

“Is it good for you?” she murmured.

“It was good about three minutes ago, when you were sitting on the bed, simply existing. Now that you’re touching my dick, we are deep into divine territory, spiraling onward.”

I watched her intently.

She flipped the covers off of us so she could take a better look at my dick. She shifted and sat up straight as she played with it, her yellow hair falling across her face like glittering sunrays.

My cock grew more engorged and heavy in her hand. That bastard had its own pulse at this point.

“I’m going to lick it now.”

“*Please,*” I grumbled, my voice breaking mid-word.

I didn’t even care.

The things I was willing to do in that moment to get her mouth to touch my dick worried me, frankly. Let’s just say Mrs. Warren wasn’t safe from a violent and quick death if Tennessee said the word.

Speaking of the wonderful state, the girl who was named after it lowered her head, holding my cock still as she gave the crown a quick lick.

Stars burst across my vision. I caressed her hair as gently as humanly possible to encourage her. She lowered herself again, her tongue swirling around the crown.

“I’m doing it wrong.” She looked up at me, biting on the side of her lip.

“Sweetheart, even if you danced around it to try to make it rain, it’d still be perfect.”

“I know what I’m supposed to do. I’ve seen enough porn. I just...it’s so big.”

“You don’t have to take the entire thing in. Cover the base with your hand.”

I shepherded her by the wrist, draping her small fist around the root of my shaft. This was so high school, and I was so into it I seriously suspected I’d just unveiled an unexpected kink of mine.

Things had become so boring in bed recently, the Gabriellas and Karens of the world blurring together in a mix of wannabe-porn stars who sought to prove to me that they were the chosen ones, the woman I couldn't do without.

It never occurred to me that the one I was actually fantasizing about was a woman not acting her way into looking like a pro. A woman who was engrossed in the moment, fully present for the pleasure of it instead of faking it to turn me on.

Refreshing.

Tennessee leaned down, taking some of my cock into her mouth. She gave it a thorough suck before bobbing her head hesitantly to perform oral sex.

As far as giving head went, she had a long way to go, but just the sight of her doing it threw me close to the edge. I was about to come, sitting on this strange bed, watching her suck me off.

Also, I couldn't stop stroking her hair.

My cock jerked in her mouth, and it was becoming more and more clear I was about to blow my load after three seconds.

“Sweetheart, let me make it good for you, too.” My voice was so thick, it sounded like I'd swallowed a football.

She looked up, a little perplexed.

“It's not good for you, is it?”

“No. No. It's great.”

“Then what's the problem?” She was still holding my dick—hostage, some would say—which wasn't the best way a man wanted to negotiate his position.

“No problem. You can continue doing what you're doing.”

“No, tell me.”

“Fine. If you don't stop sucking my cock, I'm going to come all over that nice oversized shirt of yours, and since it's new, and since I'm over thirteen, I would very much like it to not happen.”

“Oh.”

“You asked me to tell you.”

“I did. So what else can we do? Now that I’ve learned how to give head.”

She didn’t really know how to give head, but I wasn’t going to correct her. For one thing, it was rude and disheartening. For another, I was already setting up the guy who’d come after me for an awkward conversation, if not complete failure.

I hoped she’d dump him.

Actually, I hoped he’d die before he had the chance to meet her.

I obviously needed therapy.

“There’s a lot we can explore,” I murmured, pushing her backward.

Her head fell on the pillow. I laced my fingers through hers from both sides, pinning her down to the bed, my lips fluttering over her neck.

“Can you do some bodice-ripping?” Tennessee blurted out eagerly, like a schoolgirl at her first theme park outing. “Or maybe just shirt-ripping? Any kind of ripping would be good, to be honest. I’ve always been such a fan of the whole guy-tearing-a-woman’s-clothes in books.”

“Honey, consider it my contribution to society to destroy your clothes.”

With that, I grabbed the collar of the shirt I’d purchased earlier and ripped it in one smooth movement, her perfect, round breasts popping out in front of me. Pear-shaped, with nipples the color of flamingos.

I crashed my mouth over hers, breathless.

My brain still couldn’t comprehend that this was happening. She bucked her hips toward me, moaning, and I moved my lips to kiss her tits, lick around her nipples, dip my tongue into her navel.

“I’m so mad,” she groaned, as I rubbed my stubble all over her inner thighs. “All this time I could’ve enjoyed all of these things without having sex with anyone. What a waste.”

I bit her inner thigh, shooting my arm up to squeeze one of her tits in warning.

“Not all hookups were born equal.”

“No blip, Costello. You think Rob held a candle to what’s happening here the eight months I was with him?” She laughed softly.

My hard-on lowered to a semi just from hearing his name. A cool feeling washed over me, like someone threw a bucket of ice into my gut. I pushed through it, but it was the first time I found Tennessee to be less than absolutely delightful.

Bringing up an ex in bed was a dick move. I didn’t care how inexperienced she was. She wasn’t dumb. She was just so used to fucking up relationships, she didn’t care what came out of her mouth.

Rob’s mention did give the desired result of pissing me off, and so I ripped her underwear from her waist with little regard to the fact they snapped over her skin in the process.

She grouched but immediately angled her hips toward my mouth, chasing my tongue.

I pressed my palm against her pussy, lowering her ass back to the mattress, looking up, my eyes meeting hers.

“A few ground rules, Turner.”

She blinked at me rapidly, waiting.

“No ex-talk in this bed. That’s not sporting.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course. Sorry.”

“If something gets too much, just say the word.”

“*What* word?”

I almost forgot she was the most literal geek in the whole, entire world. With her undiagnosed ADHD and puns and aversion to profanity. I thought about it for a moment.

“Banana.”

“All right.”

“And promise me one thing.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I won’t fall in love with you.”

My chest tensed, but I threw her an offhand smirk.

“Cute, but what you choose to do with our mutual attraction is none of my business. You’re a big girl. No. I want you to promise me you know I will not let you get pregnant, so don’t worry about it. Just let me make it good for you.”

She hesitated, her eyebrows pinching together.

“I don’t—”

I shook my head. “I’m not Rob.”

“You *just* said no ex-talk in bed.”

“This trumps all the rules. I’m not him. I’ll never do that to you. Or to myself. *Or* to our hypothetical baby. Trust me that much, at least?”

She gulped, her eyes dancing in their sockets. I could tell when it happened. When she decided to put her trust in my hands. To let go.

Her hazel eyes shone, and her lower lip trembled.

“Yeah,” she rasped. “Promise.”

“Good girl.”

I sucked her *entire* pussy into my mouth.

She whimpered and sank her fingernails into my skull, so deep I could almost feel them digging into my brain.

I made her finish first, got another orgasm out of it—because I was that kind of gentleman—then ascended over her body, dropping kisses and bites along her skin as I glided one finger in and out of her, pressing my hot, swollen erection against her stomach.

I filled her mouth with my tongue again and every inch of her skin was chasing mine.

“I’m going to get a condom now, sweetheart. I’ll put it on, then I’ll make sure to pull out before I come, too, okay? I’ll do both. I promise.”

I would promise her my whole house, newly mortgage-free, if she said yes. So I made sure to highlight how much I was going to be careful about it.

She shook her head, still kissing me. “No, no. I’ll do anything else. Just not that.”

Anything?

I wasn't bastard enough to suggest anal, although let the record show it did cross my mind.

"Sweetheart..." It wasn't the sex she was scared of, it was pregnancy. But—

"Banana! Banana, banana, banana!"

She grabbed my shaft between us and squeezed at the root, moving her hand up and down, trying to get me off. I wanted to try to convince her one more time, but she said the safe word, and even though I was attached to a dick, I wasn't one. "You're supposed to *stop* when someone calls the safe word."

"Here," she mumbled into our dirty kiss, not stopping her hand. "I'll get you off, too."

The worst part was that my cock, which was not known for its astuteness, was absolutely okay with the deal. It sprang in her hand happily, bobbing along each time she gave it a thorough stroke.

I could feel my balls tighten and knew I was going to come all over her chest. I ripped my mouth from hers, looking down between us as she jerked me off, my cock angled between her tits.

I didn't want to miss it when it happened.

"Am I doing that okay?"

"Maybe go a little faster."

She did.

I closed my eyes, dropping my head backward.

"Faster?"

She went faster.

I was at her mercy.

I was never at women's mercy when it came to sex. I dated good old-fashioned belles who did what I told them to do in the bedroom. Took instructions well, always over-performed, and never suggested anything outside the box.

"Shit, sweetheart, I'm close."

“Awesome,” she breathed underneath me, and I could feel the tips of her tits bouncing to the rhythm of her movements.

And then it happened.

My cock shot white congratulatory confetti at her breasts for making me come. This was hands-down the best orgasm I’d ever had. And I’d had many.

I plopped beside her, jerking her into my arms and kissing her forehead.

“That was amazing.”

For the next few minutes, she didn’t talk. Just pressed herself against me.

After a few moments, her breathing became slow and shallow, and I realized she’d fallen asleep.

In my arms.

It was almost romantic, if it wasn’t for the soft snores coming from her little nose.

Or for the fact that my cock was now completely happy, but something else inside me sure wasn’t.



My entire life, I’d never slept in.

My body wasn’t programmed to sleep beyond six-thirty A.M.

From a young age, I’d had school, football practices, Sunday mass, summer jobs, volunteer work. You name it, I woke up early for it.

So, of course, the one and only time I slept in, something catastrophic happened.

The first signs of disaster occurred around the time I realized there was someone who was not Tennessee inside the room, while I was lying on my stomach, my ass completely visible to whoever was there.

“Hello, Mrs. Costello! We have good news for you and your husband.”

“You do?” I heard Tennessee ask. “What is it? Did Mrs. Warren have a stroke?”

I turned my head slowly at the same time I dragged the cover over my ass. Not that I wasn’t proud of my buns of steel, but flaunting them was pure vanity.

The staffer let out an uncomfortable giggle.

“No, Mrs. Warren is fine. Your husband has expressed his desire to leave the cruise early and move from the *Elation* to the *Ecstasy*. We told him that it might not be doable. Well, we are extremely happy to inform you that it is. We’ll be making a stop at Green Turtle Cay in a few hours, where you will be able to switch cruises. I took it upon myself to check with the control center aboard the *Ecstasy* personally, and they can accommodate you. We only ask that you check out by eleven, so we can get all the paperwork ready.”

There was a brief silence, followed by the sound of Tennessee clearing her throat.

I felt like a complete jackass.

Not that she didn’t know I’d tried to get off of this ship when we had just found out we were stuck together, but the timing couldn’t have been more horrible.

To be honest, I didn’t even *want* to join our families at this point.

Now that I had Tennessee all for myself, the prospect of rubbing and licking each other’s genitals for six more days seemed much more appealing than playing golf and bridge with Wyatt and Dad.

“Thank you.” I caught my childhood crush standing straight as a ruler in front of the representative, wearing one of her trashy before outfits. “I appreciate it. We’ll make sure to check out on time.”

After she closed the door, Tennessee began packing her things silently. I flipped on my back, my cock swinging up, ready to reacquaint itself with Turner again.

Shut up, cock. We have bigger fish to fry.

“It was before,” I said hoarsely.

“I don’t care.” She was stuffing all of her old clothes into her bag but made no move to take the new ones I’d bought for her.

“I had no idea we were going to hit it off. Or that you felt anything other than pure disgust toward me.” I sat up, running a hand through my hair.

“Desire is not a good enough feeling to lose family time over.” She shrugged, trying to look unfazed. “And it doesn’t matter, anyway, because it was going to end in six days. So really, who cares?”

I did.

I cared.

“We can forget this conversation happened,” I suggested.

I meant the one with the cruise staffer.

“Sure. Or the days before that,” Tennessee said, referring to the talk we were having right in that moment.

There was no more talk after that when we checked out, got off the *Elation*, and boarded the *Ecstasy*.

Some ecstasy it was.



Later that evening, Tennessee and I were sitting around a large dining table, joined by the rest of our families. I sat in one row with Wyatt, Mom, and Dad, and she was with her own parents, Trinity, and Bear.

Bear looked so much like Rob, I did a double take the first time I saw him. The kid was a replica of my ex-best friend, dimples, chestnut hair, and all.

He wore a denim shirt and black jeans, and I had to say, he looked like a well-off kid from a good family. It made me feel guilty that it surprised me.

I remembered Tennessee mentioned that she bought his clothes. Anger slammed into me. How could I not see it all those years I’d ignored her? How she always put her son first? How she

prioritized making people (other than herself) look like a million bucks?

“What are you playing these days, kiddo? Fortnite?” Wyatt asked Bear.

“No flicking way.” Bear shook his head, munching on a tip of a French fry. “I’m more into the story of the game. Character-building. Stuff like that. Fortnite is all about running and shooting aimlessly. I need context.”

“So what are you playing?” I interjected. I used to be big on video games before I became the town’s healer and saver full-time. “If not Fortnite.”

Bear turned to look at me for the first time. I wondered if he knew about his mother’s deep dislike toward me, at least until a few days ago, but judging by his blank face, he had no idea.

“God of War.”

“Isn’t that the game where the characters are a father and son?” Wyatt shoved a whole rib into his mouth, smacking his lips together as he ate.

“And so what?” Bear frowned defensively. “It’s still good.”

“If you like God of War, you are going to love Assassin’s Creed,” I commented.

“I know.” Bear’s eyes lit up as he turned to me again. “I’m saving up for it.”

“I have it.”

“You do?”

Wyatt seemed relieved to be able to get back to conversing with my dad about football.

I nodded, and because apparently, I was not above shameless manipulation, I added, “Anytime you wanna play, just let me know. I have a game room with every console you can think of. Air hockey table, too.”

I shot a glance at Tennessee.

Her neck immediately extended, and she put her hand on Bear’s arm.

“Honey, Dr. Costello is just being polite.”

“I’m not being polite.” I popped a piece of chicken into my mouth. “If he wants to come play, that’s perfectly fine with me. We’re practically going to be family now.”

“That’s entirely unnecessary.” She shot me a faux-polite smile.

“Just trying to be a good brother-in-law.” I flashed my teeth right back at her.

“So how did you survive Nussy for four days, anyway?” Mrs. Turner twisted toward me in her seat, chuckling lightly. “I hope she didn’t give you too much trouble.”

The only trouble Tennessee was currently giving me was the fact that she was back to wearing *Pretty Woman* clothes and was drawing attention from every male in the dining room of the *Ecstasy*.

“We were perfectly civil.” I shot my childhood crush a look, daring her to defy me.

“Perfectly,” she said with a sweet smile.

“Well, I apologize if she caused you any...discomfort.” Trinity shifted in her seat, looking boring as white paint drying on a wall in her nun-like black dress. Had she always been this... yeah, come to think of it, she had.

Anger began slithering its way back into my system.

I didn’t like the way Tennessee’s family was bringing her down. Or the way she shrank like a wilting daisy, even with all of her hair and bright colors and red lipstick, when they spoke.

“No discomfort whatsoever.” I pinned Trinity with a dry, casual look.

Trinity visibly winced. “Of course. She is great. My favorite sister.” She laughed, resting her head on top of Tennessee’s shoulder. “My only sister, too.”

Hilarious.

Also, she should definitely not quit her day job, which she was at risk of losing anyway, because her boss—me—had her ass in a sling.

Tennessee stiffened, looking the other way.

“Everything went fine?” Now her dad asked her directly, like I was covering up for her. He seemed to be the type to repeat whatever his wife was saying.

Still. Tennessee was twenty-nine, for goodness’ sake. What kind of bullshit was that?

“Cruz already told you, it was fine,” Tennessee drawled in barely-contained anger, pushing her food around her plate with her fork.

I noticed she didn’t drink wine with all the adults. Rather, that she wasn’t offered wine in the first place by her family, or mine. Another telltale sign that in her family’s eyes, she was still the kid who’d messed up.

“Anyway, Dr. Costello, we are *so* sorry about the mix-up,” said Donna Turner.

“Tennessee already apologized. Several times, in fact.” I leaned in on my chair, my jaw ticking with irritation. “No need to make a big deal out of it.”

“That’s my Cruzy,” my mother cooed, resting a hand on my shoulder. “So wonderfully forgiving.”

This went on and on for the entire three-course meal.

The conversation seemed to go in circles:

Wyatt and Trinity’s wedding.

When was I going to finally get married to Gabby?

Messy Nussy would need to learn how to settle and give Tim Trapp a chance if *she* wanted to get married, even though he had a BO problem, two ex-wives, and a sinking business.

All throughout, the only thing I cared about was that the older Turner sister looked miserable. So, when everyone retired to their rooms (both Tennessee and I got our own separate bedrooms), I immediately made my way to her stateroom to check if she was okay.

I didn’t care if she didn’t want to see me. Someone had to show her they didn’t see her as a royal fuck-up—because she wasn’t. She was the best of the bunch of them.

I raised my fist to knock on her door just as it swung open and her mother came out. Donna Turner's eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Dr. Costello! This is Nesy's room. I'm guessing you are looking for Trinity and Wyatt's room?"

"You're guessing wrong." I flashed my teeth in what I hoped was a smile. "I came to see Tennessee."

"But...why?" She looked genuinely surprised.

"She seemed a little quiet over dinner. I wanted to make sure she was all right."

I could spot my object of desire behind her mother's shoulder, inside the room. She was hugging her arms and looking out the window. The room was pretty crappy. Not as spacious or new as mine.

"Oh, well. Just be careful. I can't imagine Gabriella would be thrilled to know you've been spending so much alone time with another woman lately."

Donna flashed a ditzzy beam before strolling down the corridor, back to her room. I watched her go, reminding myself I wasn't going to give up my good-guy reputation, and all the power that came with it, because of someone else's problems.

I pushed the door open, not waiting for Tennessee to invite me in. I propped a shoulder against the wall, shoving my hands into my front pockets.

"What the hell happened out there?"

"What do you mean?" Her back was still to me, her timbre weak and idle. Like she'd mentally checked out.

"They treated you like a kid."

"Maybe that's how they see me."

"Well, maybe it's high time it stops. Respect has to be demanded, no one's going to give it to you for free."

"Is that what you came here to say?"

She spun on her heel, still hugging herself. Even though her eyes were dry, the lights were out behind them. The same girl who threw sass my way on a weekly basis at the diner was gone.

I wanted her back.

Not the ghost of her, which was standing right in front of me now, pretending everything was fine.

“Or did you come here to tell me how great Bear is, how you’d love to give him some guidance, to let him play your video games, or whatever this bull-*blip* was? Because I don’t need your assistance, either, Cruz.”

Funny, she seemed to be at a loss for words when her family berated her but had no trouble busting my balls for the crime of breathing in her vicinity.

“Nah, the kid’s got a dad who wants to be in the picture. I just know video games are expensive as hell.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“To ask you out for a drink. Right now. You need it. I need it. Your kid is with his grandparents. Let’s be grown-ups again. Just for an hour or two.”

She was tempted.

I could tell, by the way her hand fluttered over her plastic necklace, rearranging it over her delicate neck.

“You mean, at the bar? Our families could see us.”

“I’ll try not to come on your bare chest, then,” I deadpanned.

She suppressed a smile. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Not coming on your chest? Me, too. Publicly, anyway. But having a drink should pose no problem. Then we can go to my room and do all the fun stuff.”

“No, I don’t think we should be seen together, period.”

“Being my friend will give you a lot of pull in Fairhope. It’s the first step toward gaining respect.”

“Lord, you really are a nice guy, aren’t you?” She sniffed, exasperated.

“If it makes you feel any better, rumor has it we finish last.”

“Not last night, you didn’t.”

Touché.

Fifteen



Tennessee

“And so, that’s my big, bad secret.”

A couple of drinks later, at one of the *Ecstasy’s* many bars, I peeled off my inhibitions and told Cruz the truth. As it was, he seemed to be the only person other than Bear who was on my team at the moment.

“I’m secretly a decent person. Or at least, I try to be. The reason I was late to the cruise on the day you picked me up was because I had to help Trixie, the new waitress. I just couldn’t leave her like that. And I guess your big secret is that you can be a jerk.”

“Not all the time.” Cruz took a swig of his beer. He looked extra hunky tonight. Maybe because I knew what was waiting under his clothes. All that potent muscle. “But I can’t say I’ll miss the Warrens or Dalton and his wife, who by the way, looked like a melted candlestick with a wig.”

“A bad wig.” I cackled. “I have a confession to make.”

“If you’re about to tell me you faked it with me yesterday, don’t bother. I’ll just fling myself off the deck right now.”

I laughed, hating that he was so darn irresistible.

“The good news is...I definitely didn’t fake it.”

“The bad news is that you’re lying?” He arched an eyebrow.

“No. But I was kind of drunk. I remember everything but... things were a bit hazy.”

The smile dropped from his face, and a blast of sorrow shot through me. Somewhere down the line, I’d started caring what Cruz thought, what he wanted from life.

I didn’t want to disappoint him, even if I knew I was not equipped to give him what he obviously deserved.

“Seriously?” he asked. “I haven’t seen you knock down more than a few.”

“At the blackjack table. When you weren’t looking.” I gave him a sheepish look.

He stroked his jaw, mulling this over. “Should I feel like a scumbag for taking advantage of you? Because I kind of do.”

“Are you flipping kidding me? I basically mauled you in front of your old pal. I just didn’t want to...you know, lie to you. Or omit the truth. Or whatever.”

“I’ll be sure to have you sober and present next time.”

There won’t be a next time.

“Yes, there will be.”

Clap.

I said that out loud?

“You did. And you said *that* out loud, too.”

Plucking my fruity cocktail from the sticky bar, I put it to my lips and sucked on the straw. “We promised each other no hanky-panky when we left the cruise.”

“Exactly. And technically, we’re still on a cruise.”

“A cruise full of our family members.”

“Fortunately, we both have our own rooms and are of consenting age, in case your family really has convinced you you’re not an adult.”

“It’s dangerous here.”

“Tell me you don’t want me,” he challenged, his face growing serious and intense all of a sudden.

“If our parents find out, that’s going to be the end of me. I—”

“You’re a grown-up, capable of making your own decisions. Tell me you don’t want me, Tennessee.”

“And don’t think I’m suddenly going to be okay with you putting your thing in me and getting me pregnant by accident...”

“You’re not listening. I asked you something very simple: tell me you don’t want me.”

“I can’t!” I flung my arms in the air, exasperated. “Christ, I can’t say that. Because it’s not true.”

“Then let me do this for you. Let me be at your service, help you get over the uneasiness of getting into bed with a man. We’re a perfect match. It’ll be seasonal, fleeting, and great. Stop letting others dictate your life. Take charge. You earned it.”

Afterwards, Cruz escorted me back to my room, but when we reached my door, he kept sauntering toward the end of the hallway, leading me with him across the burgundy and gold carpet.

I didn’t ask where we were going.

I knew.

And I was game. He was right. It was time I unlocked my sexuality, and what better way to do that than on a ship named the *Ecstasy*?

This time, when he undressed me, there were no jokes, no banter. He did so meticulously and slowly, keeping his gaze on mine the entire time, his fingers shaking a little.

He kissed my bare shoulders first, then my breasts. My open palms came next—he licked between my fingers, his hot tongue swirling in and out of them—and when he reached between my legs, he licked every inch of me there, sucking and biting.

When I was sprawled in his bed, completely naked, feeling precious and powerful, he circled the mattress like a caged tiger, watching me from all angles. He flipped open his wallet, which was sitting on his nightstand, and yanked out a condom.

“You were going to hook up with someone here, anyway, weren’t you?” I murmured, following him through half-lidded eyes.

“Not one of them would have been half as memorable as you.”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“I can’t believe we’ve waited so long,” he replied.

He made a show of rolling the condom over his penis, and I took a ragged, anxiety-filled breath when he poked my entrance.

He kissed my eyelids, then my forehead, then my cheek.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with so much bullshit, but I promise I won’t allow anything you don’t want to happen between us.”

But I already knew it not to be true, because my heart flipped upside down every time he looked at me, and I knew I would never allow myself to have him.

I was too scared.

Too fragile.

He kissed me as he entered me. At first, it hurt like hell, and I squeezed my eyes shut and held onto him for dear life. Even though I should’ve felt pathetic—a twenty-nine-year-old, single mom virgin—he made me feel beautiful, valuable, and rare.

When he began moving inside me, my heart did dangerous, joyous, anxious flips inside my chest, and I was eighty-three percent sure I was having a heart attack.

I rarely thought about it anymore, but what had happened with Rob truly screwed me up. Every time I closed my eyes, flashbacks would zip behind my eyelids.

Rob sticking his hand down my panties and chuckling gruffly as Cruz spotted for us.

Rob sticking it in me while I closed my eyes and tried to think pleasant thoughts, because I was his girlfriend, and I wanted to keep him, and Molly Hough told me he would dump me if I didn't give him the goods before he went off to college.

Rob telling me it'd be okay. That no one got pregnant their first time. And that anyway, I just finished my period, right?

Rob shaking his head when I finally managed to corner him outside his house door, frantic and in hysterics.

"Look, Nussy, it's nothing personal. I'm just too young, okay? Do what you gotta do, but leave me out of this."

Tears began to slide down my cheeks.

I was worried Cruz was going to stop, but he didn't.

Cruz kissed each and every one of them, sliding in and out of me, not because of his own pleasure, I suspected, but because he knew if we stopped, I'd feel like a complete failure and couldn't face him or myself anymore.

"I'm sorry." He kissed my nose, and I believed him.

"So sorry." He kissed the side of my jaw.

"Terribly sorry."

But then after the first few minutes, it became pretty good. Not *insanely* good. I was still much more comfortable with Cruz Costello eating me out than coming dangerously close to putting a baby in me.

But still, A for effort and B+ for the way it made me feel. Full and fuzzy and sated.

I didn't come, but I came close.

He did, and just as he promised, as soon as he knew his boys were swimming north, he pulled out, gave himself a few yanks with the condom still on, and found his release inside it.

Afterwards, we just stared at his ceiling silently. His arm was flung under my shoulders. Annie Hall was playing on mute on the TV in front of us. I was torn between crying and picking a fight with him.

I did neither.

Instead, I tugged at the curly blond hairs on his chest and murmured into his armpit, “Will it be okay if I spend the night here?”

He kissed my hair, but he didn’t answer.

I took that as a yes.

Sixteen



Tennessee

The next six days were unexpected bliss, full of quality time with Bear during the days and scorching hot nights with Cruz.

Our families did a lot of things together, but I managed to bail out of most of them, citing the fact that I wasn't the one the Costellos truly needed to get to know and I had a teenage son who didn't find bridge and golf too entertaining.

(That part was a lie. I mean, it wasn't, Bear didn't find bridge and golf entertaining. But he was with Landon most days, leaving me to work on my tan and read whatever books Trinity had brought along with her.)

Since Bear was still rooming with Mamaw and Papaw, I had the stateroom all to myself. I still made sure to always visit Cruz for our sexcapades.

Our families blindly trusted Cruz's virtue (and sanity) to not want to touch me, so no one could have guessed how much time we were spending together. Especially when they still all thought he was with the perfect Gabby. Not even when it became

apparent neither of us ever went to any of the meetups for after-dinner drinks.

I *did* suspect Catherine had an inkling.

She tried to corner me one time after dinner and casually asked me if I knew Gabriella, whom she referred to as her future daughter-in-law, even though any sane person could tell you the name Gabriella Costello simply had too many L's in it.

"She's my sister's maid of honor," I'd replied dryly, taking a sip of my iced tea.

"How interesting. One would think Trinity would have chosen you."

I'd shrugged. "Trinity's entitled to her decisions. Either way, I'm pretty sure Gabriella and Cruz broke up."

I'd said that to remind her I wasn't threatened, even though I really was. Not because I had any ideas about dating Cruz.

"I'm sure they'll get back together. He cares about her so very deeply."

"He sure does, ma'am."

I wanted to tell her that it was not true. That it was me he cared about. That in another world, another time, we could've been a couple.

If I hadn't throat-punched him.

If I hadn't gone out with his best friend when really, it was him I was pining for, like the rest of the town.

I was such a cliché. Loving Cruz Costello was like having a Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise poster on your wall in the nineties.

Even though I hadn't packed any of the clothes Cruz had bought for me and insistently dressed in my own stuff, I toned it down for the sake of Bear and gave my hair a break from the spray and my nails a vacation from the acrylic.

Sure, Mom and Dad were their usual selves toward me, and Trinity was a real pain, running after Catherine Costello the entire time, sucking up to her, cooing over every pair of earrings, shoes, or caftan she put on.

But overall, I had a good time. So when our trip came to an end, a big chunk of my happiness stayed on that ship.

As soon as we were poured back to earth and concrete, the two families got into logistics mode.

“Honey, Wyatt and Trinity are renting a car. They can drive you and Bear home. You don’t mind, do you, Wyatt?” My dad turned to him.

Wyatt, who had a bratty, almost childish pout, a dashing face but none of the charm and charisma his brother possessed, kicked a stone in the parking lot. “It’s a bit of a detour, but anything for my sis-in-law and Bear.”

Yeah. He definitely lacked something in the magnetism department.

“I’ll give them a ride,” Cruz volunteered.

“Oh, Cruzy, there is really no need.” Catherine put her hand on his arm. “We can drive them back. I’m sure you want to stop at the clinic before you get home.”

“Multitasking is my forte.” Cruz walked over to Bear and me, and my heart leaped like a fish out of water.

Every time he’d been nice and sweet to me publicly, butterflies wreaked havoc inside me. I didn’t know why. He was nice and sweet to *everyone*.

Probably *because* he was nice and sweet to everyone.

Cruz picked up my suitcase, carrying it toward his Audi.

Mrs. Costello said *noooooo* in slow-mo.

“Shotgun!” Bear fist-bumped the air.

Cruz chuckled. “Maybe next time, son.”

Son.

The idea of anyone calling Bear that made me want to cry. Then again, everything made me want to cry when I was next to Cruz.

This is good, I told myself. That means you don’t truly like him. No love story starts with ‘she couldn’t help but want to bawl every time he was in the same room...’

“That’s nice of you.” I offered Cruz a polite smile, like we hadn’t ridden each other’s genitals and faces three times a night every night for the past seven days.

I couldn’t quite bring myself to thank him.

I didn’t know why.

It just felt crucial to me to come off as a woman who didn’t need him and didn’t take much interest in him, either. None of the needy, overenthusiastic variety he was used to dealing with.

The drive back to the bungalow passed pleasantly, with Cruz and Bear talking about video games and me staring out the window, watching the landscape slide by, and forcing myself not to pretend we were a small but happy family unit.

I’d spent so many years not allowing myself to fantasize, that starting to do so with someone who was both within reach and so far away was a bulletproof recipe for a mental breakdown.

I had to guard my life.

My heart.

And most of all, my panties.

No more babies, Tennessee Turner. You’re getting out of this town in a few short years, not deepening those roots.

When we pulled up in front of my rickety house, Cruz cut the engine and turned to Bear.

“Mind if I have a private word with your mother?”

“You’re not going to be mean to her, are you?” Bear’s hand halted on the door handle in the backseat. He looked between both of us, acutely protective of me.

My heart lurched.

“Scout’s honor.” Cruz lifted up two fingers.

I liked how he didn’t call Bear buddy or pal like Wyatt did. In a patronizing way I found irksome.

Bear nodded, and Cruz extended his hand to offer him a fist bump, which Bear reciprocated.

“You sure you’re gonna let me play in your game room?” Bear asked again, skeptically.

“*And* order us some pizza. Send me a text. I’ll let you know when I’m free.”

This conversation definitely shouldn’t have made my panties melt, but it did.

“I’ll be right in, Care Bear.”

“Kay, Mom.”

Bear exited the car, rounding it to pop the trunk open and take out our suitcases.

Cruz turned to me. “I want to see you this weekend.”

“You see me every week.”

Play it cool. Play it cool.

“Don’t be cute.”

“I’m not being cute, I’m being a practical person. Whatever happened to you not wanting me to tarnish your name with my reputation and me not wanting to get on my family’s last nerve?”

Cruz opened his mouth to answer, but a rap on the passenger window made me jump in my seat. I rolled it down to find Bear’s thunderous frown staring down at me.

I’d never seen him so openly mad. Bear was the chillest kid on planet Earth.

“What’s going on?”

“He’s here.”

“Who’s he?”

Bear jerked his chin toward our front door.

I whipped my head to find Rob sitting on the stair leading up to our porch. He stood up when he saw that we’d noticed him, offering a lame, uncertain wave in our direction.

He looked a little better than he had the first time he came over about three weeks ago. The cast was gone now, and he was freshly shaved and sporting a suit.

“Cruz?” Rob’s face brightened, and he momentarily forgot he’d come here for the family he left behind. “Holy shit, man. Costello?”

“Rob!” Cruz put on his I’m-on-a-horse, Old Spice-handsome smile and slipped outside his car, rushing toward Rob.

The two men did the whole clap-on-the-back hug thing and laughed, circling each other, aging backward as they spoke. I didn’t know what to expect, but it certainly wasn’t *this*.

Cruz hadn’t spoken about Rob fondly—or at all—during the cruise. After a while, I’d naturally assumed he was Team Tennessee.

“Aw, Uncle Cruz is friends with this creeper.” Bear snapped me out of my reverie, opening the passenger door for me and helping me out.

I felt seasick.

I couldn’t believe Cruz gave Rob such a warm welcome after everything we’d shared these past ten days.

“Please stop calling him Uncle Cruz. He is not your uncle.”

“Is that what we’re focusing on right now?” Bear wheeled both our suitcases to our door, sulking.

“Let me do the speaking when we get there,” I told him.

“Why? He was a jerk to me, too, remember?”

“Trust me, I do, but this needs to be handled with subtlety.”

“Mom, you and subtlety can’t even coexist in the same universe.”

My stomach felt like someone had filled it with stones before I even reached the threshold of my door.

Bear was right beside me, and when Rob took him in for the first time—this carbon copy of himself when he was thirteen—he stumbled backward from the impact. As if Bear’s face alone wounded him in some way.

“Jesus Christ.” He put his hand over his mouth. His eyes were two, bright green moons.

“Yup.” Bear popped the P, completely disregarding my request that he wouldn’t speak. “It’s called genetics, *Dad*. Look it up on the internet.”

“I’m sorry I called, Bear. I just...” Rob was trying to find the right words.

Yeah, good luck with that.

Bear let out a metallic laugh. “Be sorry you haven’t been here for thirteen years, jackass. See you on the flip side. I’ll be inside if you need me, *Mom.*”

With that, Bear kissed my cheek, pushed the screen door open, and stormed in with our suitcases.

I’d never loved that kid more.

I turned to Rob with a scowl. “I cannot believe you called him.”

Though, actually, I could. What else could I expect from a selfish, narcissitic bas...*card?*

“You left me no choice,” Rob said pliantly, his shoulders sagging. “You wouldn’t take any of my calls.”

“I ought to sue you.” Sue, strangle, shoot, whatever.

“I have the right to see him,” Rob reminded me sensibly.

Cruz stood next to Rob, like a useless albeit beautiful houseplant.

“How was your cruise?” Rob tried diversion as a strategy.

Great, I rode your best friend.

“None of your business.” I gritted my teeth. “This is the last unannounced visit you ever pay me, you got that, Gussman?”

“I worked on your front yard while you weren’t here. And wrote you a check. I’m going to start paying child support from now on. Here.” Rob reached into his pocket, fishing out a crumpled piece of paper.

I took it, tore it in front of his eyes, and made a show of throwing the shreds in the air like confetti, thinking it wasn’t as pleasant as people made it look like in the movies, since I really *did* need the money and also would now need to clean up the mess of paper bits afterwards.

“You’ll pay me child support. But the court will decide what sum you’re going to pay and it’s all going to be official. We’re not pretending you’re doing me any favors.” And, because I hated that Cruz was watching this entire ordeal, I turned to my spring fling. “Well? You had your show for today. Thank you for

the ride. Why don't you go along to your clinic now, Dr. Costello?"

Cruz's eyes darkened. I knew I was being needlessly mouthy, but I had no other choice.

I couldn't show weakness and I wasn't ready to show our... whatever this connection was or was going to be. Not until we'd figured it out better.

"Catch you later, Rob." Cruz clapped my ex-boyfriend's shoulder before getting off of my front porch, ignoring my existence.

It was just Rob and I now.

"I'm not going to give up, Nessy."

I wanted to physically recoil from the nickname. To pick it up like it was an inanimate object and hurl it back at him.

"I'm not asking you to, and it's Tennessee now."

Or at least, I wanted it to be.

I liked the way Cruz used my given name.

"Let me talk to him. But don't ever bypass me again. I mean it, Rob. You messed it up. Now you're going to play by our rules."

"Fair," he said. "I'm sorry again. It was a bad night. I didn't know y'all left for a cruise. Only found out after the fact. I thought that you...that you just took him from me and ran."

I bristled. "I'd never do that."

Unless I won the lottery, but he needn't know that. And I could see how it may have sort of—okay totally—looked that way.

"Yeah. I know that now. My mother filled me in on the Costello-Turner cruise. He's a good-looking kid. Looks like me when I was his age."

"The arrogance of you to think you were that beautiful or innocent."

"Come on, you know it's true."

But no matter how much I wanted to *want* to stab Rob to death, it was hard when he ultimately gave me the best gift of all, my child, and it seemed like he was genuinely eager to get to know Bear now.

And he had done the yard... demonstrating willingness to put in more effort than writing a check.

Plus, I couldn't let my personal history impact Bear's choices to get to know his family—maybe even his other grandparents—and gaining more loved ones in the long run.

“Let me talk to Bear. I'll ease him into the idea of finding out more about you, but I'm warning you right now, Robert, I'm not going to pressure him. If he is not open to the idea, you're going to have to give him room to breathe until he comes around.” I lifted one finger in the air in warning.

Rob nodded. “Is there anything I can buy him? Anything that he particularly wants?”

I thought about the Assassin's Creed game. I shook my head.

“Bear is not bribable.”

“Good kid.”

“Yeah, no thanks to you. Don't look so proud.”

“Can I ask you something off-topic?” Rob scratched the side of his jaw, a gesture that brought back fond memories that made me want to be sick.

I wondered how many people already knew he was back in town and who the woman he'd decide to date would be now he was home.

“No,” I said flatly. “The only topic you and I have in common is Bear.”

But Rob went ahead, anyway.

“Is there anything going on between you and Costello?”

I let out a laugh, shook my head, turned my back, and slammed my door in his face.

I wish.



Later that evening, Bear and I were flung on the couch in front of a reality TV show where celebrities were stuck on an island, eating worms and uncooked rice, drinking raindrops to survive, while fighting one another about existential threats like hair extensions or who really had butt implants.

“What do you think about giving your dad a chance to explain himself?” I asked casually, passing Bear a bowl of freshly made popcorn.

Bear buried his hand in the bowl and tossed a handful of it into his mouth.

“I think it’s never going to happen.”

“Never is a strong word.”

“It’s an accurate one, too.”

I thought about it for a moment.

My feelings were torn.

A part of me wanted to protect Bear at all costs, to make sure he wasn’t going to be disappointed if Rob decided to up and leave in the next few months, or even years from now. After all, the man hadn’t shown a terrific track record with his life choices.

On the other hand, I couldn’t bear the idea of preventing my son from having a male figure in his life—his own father, no less. I didn’t want to deprive him of anything. He deserved to have two loving parents, and Rob claimed he was a changed man.

“You know,” I said, crushing a piece of popcorn in the bowl between my fingers. “When your father and I first met, everyone thought he was going to become a professional football player. He was a rabid Panthers fan. He had a football with all of the players’ signatures. All of them. And he kept it in a cold, dry place in his garage so the signatures wouldn’t fade. He once told me he wanted to give the football to his son. I’d thought it was such a sweet thing to say.”

Bear looked at me like I’d peed in his popcorn bowl, before rolling his eyes.

“I don’t even like football.” I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could, he stood up and shook his head. “And I don’t like jerks, either. So this doesn’t bode well for him. If you let people walk all over you, you’re giving them the power to hurt you. Good news is, Dr. Costello is off the hook even though they’re friends, but only because I want to play Assassin’s Creed real bad. Good night, Mom.”Tennessee

Seventeen



Tennessee

The next day, I'd texted Rob during my morning shift at Jerry & Sons and told him that Bear had asked for more time.

Rob: Thanks for the update. Will you keep me posted?

Me: Yes.

Rob: I ran into your dad downtown yesterday. He had a flat tire. Helped him fix it.

Me: Surprised he didn't murder you.

Rob: He wanted to. It helped that we had an audience.

Me: Shame.

Rob: What would you say if I asked you to have dinner with me?

Me: I would say you are completely delusional and should probably lay off the drugs.

Rob: Gotcha. Will try again next week.

Cruz, however, was another story.

I had no responsibility toward him, and there were no loose ends for us to tie. He tried calling me in the morning, but I sent him straight to voicemail and sincerely hoped he wasn't going to drop in at the diner.

We'd agreed to put our little affair behind us after the cruise, and now that we were back in town, there was no point in prolonging the inevitable.

Three days later, after a long shift full of patronizing customers and snafus, a local woman who accused me of trying to write down her credit card details when she paid (I didn't) and Coulter, who had decided he was going to stop making food with onion since it made him cry, I rushed to the bridal salon where Trinity had a fitting.

I burst in midway through the event to find my mother sitting on a crème upholstered couch at the back of the bridal shop, bawling her eyes out, and Gabriella sipping from a flute of champagne with a sour face and a bright pink gown.

Trinity stood on the bridal viewing riser in her wedding gown, a flawless lace corset with a chapel train and an embroidered diamond belt.

She was pouting to the mirror, whining to the salon employee that the zipper was digging into her nonexistent back fat.

"How am I supposed to even drink water in this thing? I knew the cruise was a bad idea. I should've never hit the all-you-can-drink bar. Oh, hi, Nessy."

She caught a glimpse of me through the floor-to-ceiling mirror in front of her. My mother and Gabriella turned their heads to look at me.

"Hi, honey." My mother peeped, wiping the tears from her face. "Look how beautiful your sister is."

Gabriella said nothing. I huddled across the parquet floor toward the sitting area and clapped my hands together.

"Trinity, you look divine."

"I agree about the zipper. You could really use a bit more space. Or maybe just go on a crash diet. Atkins, anyone?" Gabriella murmured, her eyes hard on her phone as she scrolled

through Instagram, liking people's pictures with a grim expression on her face.

"She doesn't have any extra weight to lose," I pointed out, taking a seat next to my mother.

"There's always weight to be lost," Mom said longingly, patting her own midriff, which was genetically a little wider than she wanted it to be.

The shop employee excused herself to go bring her sewing kit and dashed out of the room. Trinity spun from the mirror, stepping down from the riser and approaching us.

"I was just telling Gabriella about the cruise. It was pretty lavish, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Very posh." I tried not to bring too much attention to myself, knowing Gabriella and I were not exactly best of friends.

"Yeah." Gabriella flipped her dark hair onto one shoulder, sipping her champagne. "Cruz told me all about it."

Did he now?

I didn't think they'd have much reason to talk, considering they'd broken up.

Then again, I didn't really think Cruz would be so happy to see Rob, either, and he'd had a back-slapping good time on my lawn.

"You guys are still talking?" Trinity chirped, her eyes lighting up. "That's a good sign."

I wanted to strangle my sister in that moment, but I reminded myself that she didn't know Cruz and I had a thing.

Gabriella put her champagne on a nearby table, stretching her shapely legs. "Oh, yeah. We're kind of finding our way back to each other. Slowly. I think we both freaked out a little, what with you and Wyatt getting married. It's just a lot of pressure on both of us, you know? I have my new business—"

"Your new business?" The words flew out before I could stop them.

She preened. "My blog. It's really taking off."

Sounded insta-great.

Gabriella continued, “And I think he knows I’m the real deal, so he is...like, I don’t know, *anxious?*”

The word you are looking for is uninterested, honey.

“Makes perfect sense,” Trinity said. “I see the way he looks at you. He cares for you so much.”

I wanted to throw up so much.

“Did Cruz tell you Gabriella and he were on a break?” My mother turned to face me, oblivious to the bomb she’d just dropped in the room. “You two seem to be friends these days. I hadn’t even realized you were close until you boarded the right ship.”

Trinity’s and Gabriella’s gazes snapped toward me so fast I was surprised their eyes didn’t roll out of their sockets. I picked up a bridal brochure and flipped through it, feeling their stares scorching a path into my internal organs, willing myself not to blush.

“He might’ve mentioned that,” I murmured, but only because I wanted it to be known, in case word ever got out that Cruz and I had shared a fling, that he was single at the time.

Homewrecker was *one* thing I hadn’t been accused of.

Yet.

“Poor thing must’ve been beside himself.” Trinity put a hand to her heart.

He did all right. Especially when my mouth was wrapped around his penis and he kept telling me I was the most beautiful girl in town—the town in which you also reside...

The saleswoman returned to the room with her sewing kit, smiling broadly.

“Miss Turner, please return to the riser. I’ll take your measurements again so I can fix the zipper situation.”

Trinity did as she was told. I felt Gabriella’s eyes lingering on me, narrowed and menacing, and pretended to study a bridal article about skid marks on wedding gowns.

“By the way...” Trinity raised her blonde braid up so the woman could press the measuring tape to her waist. “Any news

from Rob?”

“He was waiting for us outside when we came home from the cruise. Bear was upset about it. I spoke to him afterwards, and he doesn’t really seem ready to give Rob a chance.”

“It’s not his choice, though, is it?” Mom patted a piece of used tissue to her nose. “He’s just a kid. He should do whatever you tell him to do. And you should tell him Rob is his father and he needs to suck it up.”

That grabbed my attention.

I pinned her with a look of disdain.

“Excuse me? Are you expecting me to throw the trust and bond I have with my son out the window to appease and abide by the whims of a man who, until less than a month ago, pretended we weren’t in existence? *Crew* that.” I left the S out intentionally.

“I expect you to do the sensible thing and let him help you out.” Mom squared her shoulders, a haughty look on her face.

“We did fine before him. Bear’ll meet him when he’s ready, and not a moment earlier.”

“You’re being stubborn,” my mother stated.

You’re being judgmental.

Her lips pressed into a tighter line. “Take the money.”

Take your nose out of my business.

But I couldn’t say that.

I didn’t have the balls.

“Listen, Nussy, I honestly think he’s a changed man. I mean, he is trying really hard. Got a job with his old man and everything,” Trinity cooed, still staring at herself in the mirror. “Wyatt told me he came to visit the Costellos last night. They had a big dinner and all. Cruz and Wyatt were there, too.”

“Yeah. Cruz told me. We talked about it,” Gabriella automatically said, making it known that she and Cruz were speaking.

Just piss on his leg, honey, why don’t you?

What bothered me more than my mother telling me to rush Bear into meeting Robert was the fact that Cruz seemed to become his buddy again right away. I felt so stupid for tumbling into bed with Cruz.

The two were probably comparing notes about me yesterday over beers.

“Look, I’m not saying Rob can’t see Bear or can’t live in this town. All I’m saying is that we’re taking it one day at a time and getting used to having him around again. That’s all.”

After Trinity had her measurements retaken, the three of us poured out of the store into the bright summer day. Gabriella air-kissed my sister on both cheeks and hugged my mother.

Mom laced her arm in Trinity’s and was about to guide her back to their car. Trinity put her hand on Mom’s elbow.

“Mom, get the car, will you? I have to talk to Nussy for a sec.”

Uh oh.

This couldn’t be good. Whenever my sister wanted to get me alone, it was because she wanted to chide me. More often than not, because of my manners and reputation. Last time that happened, she tried to force me to apologize to Tim Trapp for not going out with him.

I stood next to her like a punished child, awaiting the verdict after giving the dog a makeover.

When Mom was out of earshot, Trinity turned to me, a polite smile on her face. Like we weren’t two sisters with an unbreakable bond but strangers who’d happened to occupy the same house for twenty-three years before I moved out.

“Nussy, you know how much I love you.”

“I sense a but coming my way.” I folded my arms, already on the defense.

Trinity heaved a sigh, playing with the clasp of the Gucci tote Wyatt had bought her for Christmas. “But I noticed you were kind of throwing yourself all over Cruz while we were on vacation. Honestly, it was a little embarrassing to watch. Gabriella is my best friend and my maid of honor. I know I have

no right to ask this of you, but could you please try to...back off? For me? I just couldn't stand to see you hurt when you're rejected like that, you know?"

I wanted to throw my head back and laugh. Instead, I stared at her, deadly calm.

"I have not been throwing myself at Dr. Costello."

"You have to promise me you won't make things complicated. I love you so much..." Again, that *gass*-covering, the thing she said before something hurtful came out of her mouth. "But you're Messy Nussy, and a lot of people in Fairhope are calling this the wedding of the year. People are seeing *me* for a change. Please don't ruin it for me. Please. I finally think I'm getting somewhere with Catherine."

I was glad I was so good at hiding my feelings, because every single part of me wanted to puke on her sensible shoes. Instead, I flashed her one of my infamous pouts, shrugging as I let her comments roll off of my back.

A few construction workers passed us by and whistled at me on their way to a sandwich shop.

"Howdy, Messy Nussy. Oh, how I'd like to take you for a spin."

Trinity scrunched her nose, disgusted.

"Worry not, little sis. I'm staying the heck away from Mr. Fancy Pants. Gabriella can have him." And because I was tired of being the harlot who couldn't bag a man, I added, "Rob wants another chance. I don't know. Maybe I'll give it to him. For all his faults, he's still pretty hot."

"Oh, Nussy, I heard he's still gorgeous! A friend of mine saw him at a steakhouse out of town and said he's a real dreamboat. You should totally go for it."

She looked so relieved, so happy to share a piece of gossip so normal between sisters yet foreign to us, for a moment, I was actually tempted to.

Okay, not, but still.

Trinity threw her arms around me, squeezing me into an excited hug.

“Think about the story. Robert Gussman came back after all these years and got his family back! That’s practically a fairytale.”

Robert Gussman never *had* his family in the first place, but now wasn’t the time to correct her.

“Yeah.” I smiled, patting her back. “That’s a nice story.”

“Just stay away from Cruz. We don’t need that kind of drama on our hands.”

“Sure don’t.”

Eighteen



Tennessee

My promise to stay away from Cruz Costello lasted for a little over twenty-eight minutes.

Twenty-seven and fifteen seconds, if I were counting, which clearly, I wasn't.

Not my fault, seeing as I walked through the door—to *my* house, mind you—and there he was, perched on the couch next to Bear, both of them holding joysticks, staring at the TV, wide-eyed, shouting at each other both directions and profanity in decibels more suited for Madison Square Garden.

“Take him. *Take. Him.* You have enough dexterity. I got your back, dude. Just aim for the heart,” Bear practically growled, elbowing Cruz. “Do you know where the heart is?”

“Yeah, jackass, I'm a doctor.”

“Well, good thing Mom takes me to Dr. Finch outta town, because your degree says heart, but your aim says leg.”

“I'm trying to get to the center, but the bastard keeps on throwing spike-bombs at me.”

“Dude!” Bear screamed, punching his joystick’s buttons with his thumb. “*I’m a bastard.*”

My throat clenched in horror, shame, and...yup, there it was, guilt, too, like I had a choice in the matter. I’d tried to shield Bear from this term for so long, had done my best to ensure he never felt less-than...

Cruz rolled his eyes, still staring at the TV as he moved his joystick from side to side. “If you’re looking for sympathy, better try next door. Here. I finished him off for you, n00b. Now let me trail back and find some life potions before I fucking expire.”

That finally made me snap out of the weird haze that had taken over me.

“Language!” I roared, slamming my purse against the credenza by the door. “This house is an F-bomb-free zone.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Cruz murmured, eyes still glued to the TV. He then threw Bear a side-eyed smirk. “Your mom’s cute.”

“Shut up, dude,” Bear snarled, hitting Cruz’s arm with his joystick.

Cruz chuckled. “Payback’s a b—witch.”

“What are you doing here?” I strode in and stood in front of the TV, blocking their view of medieval-looking characters in capes running through a dark maze while fire bombs landed all around them while they shouted at me being in the way.

“Well, I live here.” Bear threw up his arms in surrender, as if he wasn’t at fault for letting Cruz in.

“And I gave him a ride because I saw him walking with a broken skateboard under his arm while I was on my way back to work.”

“Yup.” Bear looked up at me innocently. “That happened, too.”

“How’d y’all get from Dr. Costello giving you a ride to Dr. Costello sitting on your couch, helping you stab a gory monster to death?”

Also, I so didn’t have any extra money for a new skateboard. Was I going to have to take out a loan?

I spun around to turn off the TV, aware Cruz's eyes were probably focused on my ass. I was still mad at him for hanging out with Rob and calling Gabriella, and frankly, for simply hogging oxygen on a planet where our resources were slowly but surely dwindling.

Note to self: donate to an environmental charity when and if I get my bleep together and pay back my debt.

"Bear said he was hungry, so I offered to make him dinner." Cruz smiled winningly, undeterred by my less-than-eager reception.

"Good news is Bear is not three anymore and can make his own food."

"But it's better when other people make it for you," Bear pointed out.

"Which reminds me." Cruz stood up, throwing the joystick on the couch. "I need to check on the pasta sauce and chicken nuggets. Be right back."

"I'll come with you," I volunteered.

We needed to exchange a word or seven.

In the kitchen, I closed the flimsy door behind us, trying to ignore the mouthwatering scent coming from the pot on the stovetop and focusing my gaze on him.

"What the *heck*, Cruz?"

"You're not returning my calls," he explained casually, dipping a finger into a pot full of tomato sauce and popping it into his mouth. He then proceeded to stir the sauce, before moving toward one of the cabinets with a familiarity I should have hated.

"That's because we said we were done after the cruise."

"About that. I changed my mind. I don't want to be done after the cruise." He moved around my kitchen like he owned the dang place, adding the pasta to the sauce and stirring everything.

"Sadly for you, it takes two to tango."

"I'll never tango with you, sweetheart. You're one of the clumsiest people I've ever come across."

“It’s a figure of speech. I don’t want to be with you.”

“Now, that’s just a flat-out lie, and as a policy, I don’t accept lies. Give me one reason why we shouldn’t continue sleeping together. Make it good.” He ambled to the oven to check on the chicken nuggets.

“I’ll give you a handful, just because I’m generous like that. One—you’re best friends with my ex, with whom I might get into a legal dispute with over our son.”

Cruz pulled the tray with the steaming chicken nuggets from the oven, waving me off. “Calling Rob more than an acquaintance at this point is a stretch. I met him for dinner because my mother invited him. We’re not going to shoot the shit anytime soon, and anyway, it will never go as far as a legal dispute, because Rob knows everyone in town would kill him if he pulled anything shitty.”

I snorted. “Yeah, because *I’m* Fairhope’s favorite darling.”

“No, but you’re the one who stayed and sucked it up. People’s loyalty lies with you, even if you’re not their choice for citizen of the year. Next reason, please.”

I let out a quick breath. Could it be that simple? “Gabriella. You’re still in contact with her.”

“She calls every now and then. What am I supposed to do, hang up the phone in her ear? So what?”

“She thinks you’re getting back together.”

“I think nudist beaches should be opened for hot people only. So what if she thinks something? It hardly makes it true. *Neeext.*”

“Your mother is starting to suspect we’re sleeping together,” I hurried to point out, watching as he set three plates at the round, chipped dining table in my kitchen, inviting himself to stay. “She insinuated as much when we were on the cruise.”

“While you wouldn’t be my mother’s first choice of daughter-in-law, it is not her business who I sleep with or who I choose to live the rest of my life with. Don’t worry your pretty head with things that have nothing to do with you. Now that that’s settled...”

“Wait, I have more!”

He grabbed me by the waist, picked me up, and removed me from blocking the fridge with ease, placing me by the counter and opening the fridge to pull out a bottle of Diet Coke. He set three glasses on the table, too.

“I’m listening.”

“Trinity specifically asked me not to start anything with you. She doesn’t want any wedding complications.”

That made him freeze mid-stride. He turned around slowly, his jaw ticking again as he watched me through narrowed, hawk-like eyes.

“You mean our lives are now being managed by a ditzzy twenty-five-year-old who cannot even recognize a class-A douchebag when one asks her to marry him?”

He had a point, but it wasn’t that simple. Trinity was my sister. I couldn’t go against my entire family for a fling.

I swallowed hard.

Cruz set the Coke on the table, making his way toward me with purpose and confidence. I knew Bear could come in any second now, and the thrill of getting caught made my pulse quicken. But it was more than that—I’d missed Cruz.

Every nerve in my body tingled when I thought about Cruz’s hands on me. Again. His big, strong body against mine. He parked his arms on either side of me on the countertop, his lips an inch from mine.

“I’m sick and tired of people telling me what I should and shouldn’t do. How I should and shouldn’t act. I want you, and you want me, and that should be enough. Am I understood?”

I never thought I’d be one of those women who’d take a liking to the possessive, Me-Tarzan-You-Jane alpha male. But in that moment, when I could feel his erection pressing against my middle, when his eyes were liquid velvet, so blue you could drown in them, I knew there was a fairly good chance I was going to hump his leg.

Tilting my chin up, my lips moved over his.

“As long as you keep your mouth shut and don’t tell anyone, I might keep you as temporary entertainment,” I murmured.

Ah, why not? Let’s admit it. I was never going to remember to charge that vibrator.

“Define temporary.” His lips were on mine when he spoke, and it felt divine.

“A few weeks.”

“No. Details to be discussed.”

“You’re missing the point of temporary entertainment.”

But really, I just couldn’t see myself going out with anyone, not to mention a man who could break me in a hundred different ways without even touching me.

“Your temporary entertainment is staying over after dinner. And wants you in black lace as soon as the kid goes to sleep.”

“I don’t have black lace.”

“Wearing nothing’s even better.” He snatched a quick kiss and pulled away from me just in time. Bear walked in, dragging his sneakers across the floor before plopping in his usual chair at the dining table, oblivious.

“Pasta and chicken nuggets. Sweet.”

“Did you wash your hands, young man?” I asked primly.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Dinner was surprisingly stress-free. Cruz and Bear exchanged notes regarding their video game, coming up with new strategies on how to kill the boss monster.

Afterwards, Bear told us about his upcoming trip into town with his mamaw, which was supposed to happen this weekend.

Cruz snuck a peek at me. “How long are you going to be away?”

“Dunno. Like, six or seven hours, I guess.” Bear shrugged.

“Interesting.”

I kicked Cruz under the table. Hard. He chuckled in response, obviously still unfazed by my panic.

“Are you going to ask my mom out or something?” Bear looked between us, more intrigued than repulsed judging by his expression.

I choked on my Coke, spitting some of it out, with a good portion shooting out of my nostrils.

Cruz seemed perfectly at ease as he studied Bear casually.

“Undecided. What’s your take?”

Bear used a fork and a spoon to roll as much pasta as he could fit into his mouth and took a huge bite. The food, I had to admit, was edible, which was astounding, seeing as Cruz was a single male and largely considered to be God’s greatest gift. He had no business being talented in the kitchen *and* in the sack.

“I’ll have to think about it. If you guys date and then break up, we won’t be able to play video games anymore.”

“But if we date and end up getting married, you’ll have your own game room.”

I almost coughed out a lung, as flustered as I was. This was straight up cruel. A man like Cruz would never marry a woman like me. Bear had to pound my back because he thought something got stuck in my air pipes.

“No one’s getting married!” I shrieked.

“Auntie Trinity is,” Bear said, turning back to Cruz, “Anyway, yeah, you can ask her on a date if I can have your game room.”

“That’s not how it works. At any rate, if we ever decide to go out, your mom would want you to keep it a secret. She’s ashamed of me.”

“Why?” Bear cocked his head sideways, glaring at me accusingly.

I bought time by shoving a chicken nugget into my mouth and getting a third-degree burn on my tongue.

“This has nothing to do with shame. We’re just not compatible, that’s why. People might have somethin’ to say.”

“People always have stuff to say about anything,” Bear spat out. “So what?”

Cruz gave him a fist bump, and now I was officially the opposition in this dinner dynamic. I couldn't believe all Cruz had to do to form a coalition with my son was play a video game with him and throw a few microwave-friendly nuggets into the mix and that was me, sold off for marriage?

After Bear went to bed, Cruz poured both of us a glass of cheap wine. We stuck around in the living room, giving Bear a chance to fall asleep.

We watched the news without really watching the news, sitting on the edge of our seats, waiting anxiously for my son to fall into slumber.

Unlike other thirteen-year-old boys who were perfectly content to stay up all night and then struggled to wake up for school the next day, Bear went down like a log.

The kid could sleep his way through a third World War. I suspected it was due to his busy schedule during the day, which normally included lots of skateboarding from place to place, school, homework, and helping his papaw with some handiwork every afternoon.

"Think he crashed?" Cruz asked when the clock hit eleven.

"There's a good chance, but let me double-check."

I got up and padded to Bear's room, feeling Cruz moving behind me. When I got to the narrow hallway, I pushed Bear's door open, revealing a cozy room full of posters of Zelda and Halo and Tony Hawk and Rodney Mullen.

Bear was snoring, sleeping sideways, his entire upper body out of the bed. I resisted the urge to shift him into a normal position.

"Out cold," I whispered.

We tiptoed our way to my room and closed the door. As soon as we were alone, surrounded by the silence of the night, my queen-size bed and nothing else, I felt self-conscious again.

I moved to my old, door-less closet, removing my cheap earrings as I spoke.

"Don't say things like that again. About getting married to me, I mean. It's unkind to Bear. He is going to start thinking you

mean it. He's a kid. He's literal."

"You're a grown-up and you're literal." Cruz began unbuttoning his black dress shirt. "And besides, I wasn't kidding. I refuse to let other people's opinions fuck me if they're not giving me an orgasm, too. I reserve the right to do whatever I want to do to you, and *with* you."

"When did you decide that?" I asked, outraged.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Sometime this week, when I found myself being given a phone number of a woman I didn't want to call, then heard a rumor that you were selling weed at Fairhope High to pay for your Botox, but found myself completely unfazed by what it said about me if I went out with you."

It was bull, and we both knew it.

He had too much to lose.

Even if he didn't, dating him wasn't worth the wrath of my family and the townsfolk. I opened my mouth, but he shut me up with a scorching-hot kiss, soaked with sweet memories and hunger and the garlic from the pasta sauce he'd made.

Biting down on his lower lip, I tugged his slacks open, fumbling unsuccessfully with the buttons and zippers.

"What is this thing, a darn chastity belt?"

He laughed into our kiss gruffly, pushing down my uniform from my shoulders, clawing it off me.

"I still have the clothes I bought you at my house." He unbuttoned the front of my mini dress. His fingers sank deep into my skin, leaving dents.

"Burn them." I bit down on his stubbled neck, pushing a hand into his pants and cupping his massive erection brazenly.

It jerked happily into my palm in greeting.

Hello to you, too, handsome.

"Only if you come and help me," Cruz challenged.

"I plan to come, all right."

But weirdly, when I thought about those clothes, I wasn't full of stubborn, defiant dread. I happened to quite like those

ridiculously expensive garments and some of the memories created in them.

Especially the floaty bohemian style ones that made me look like one of the Olsen twins taking her trash out. I missed them (the dresses, not the Olsens. I mean, they were great in *Full House*, but I never got into their newer stuff).

A minute later, I was on my back in my bed, watching him slap a condom on. He rolled his hips, sliding into me in one, achingly slow movement, grinning down at me.

He rotated his hips, gathering my hair in his fist and tugging it to extend my neck and make me look at him. The planes of his face, his heartbreakingly stunning cheekbones, were too much for me.

I moaned loudly, with no regard to the fact there was someone else under this roof.

“I missed this.” My breathing was choppy, my voice strained.

“I missed *you*.”

In that moment, I hated to admit it, but Trinity did not chart in my universe. Neither did Wyatt, Gabriella, Catherine Costello, my parents, nor the entire state of North Carolina.

Only Cruz, and the way he made me feel.

“I think you just found my G-spot.” I caught his face in my hands.

“You mean, here?” He pulled up and thrust deep inside me again, a husky rumble coming from his chest.

“Y—y-y-es.”

“Just to make it clear, that spot over there?” He withdrew and sank into me once more.

“Ohhhhh.”

“This one, right?”

I was so close to the edge, I didn’t know what to do with myself. Luckily, I didn’t have to know. Cruz did all the work for me.

He entered me fast and hard, his cock gliding into me again and again, creating delicious friction. My climax spiraled up like

climbing ivy, encircling and chaining every organ in my body.

It was so intense. So delicious, I couldn't stop panting. My body begged for release.

“Cruz. Cruz.”

He kissed me roughly, stuffing his tongue down my throat to shut me up.

“Shhh. You'll wake the kid up and then I'm never going to visit Tennessee again.”

Laughter bloomed inside my chest, a weird mix of happiness and horniness taking over me. A minute later, I was riding the most intense wave of chain-orgasms I'd ever had in my entire life.

Period. Full stop. Exclamation point.

As soon as Cruz felt my release, he flipped me on my stomach, like I was light as a feather, and entered me from behind.

Spreading my thighs for him and coming up to my knees, I felt him pushing me back down, a little more roughly than your trusted MD should.

“Legs closed and ass down, sweetheart. More friction.”

“You have a dirty side. I like it.”

“Good, because there are a lot of filthy things I want to do with you.”

He was right. This was *so* much hotter than the classic doggy style I'd watched in porn (okay, let's just get it out of the way—I'd watched a *lot* of porn prior to having sex with Cruz).

It was exquisite, and rough, and full of passion. I felt like he was setting me on fire. Another orgasm rippled through me in no time.

Cruz came, too.

This time inside me.

When he rolled off of me, he kissed my temple and said, “And no, you're not pregnant.”

I shuddered. “You know me nauseatingly well.”

He placed his lips on my hairline, mulling it over. “I do, don’t I?”

“Since kindergarten.”

“Nursery,” he corrected me.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “We’re old.”

“Better than staying young forever. The implications are not so great.”

“What really happened today?” I asked into his hard chest, my fingers once again tangled in his chest hair. “Has Bear really broken his skateboard?”

Because *I* was going to have to break a few piggy banks to buy him a new one. It was his favorite form of transportation.

“Yes.”

There was a brief silence.

“With my encouragement, I suppose.” He propped himself on one elbow, studying me with his confident, quiet gaze that made me feel like a seed blossoming into a flower in the sun.

“You tricked me.”

His chest rumbled with a chuckle that quaked against my ear.

“We needed a good excuse.”

“You could’ve found a *cheaper* excuse,” I protested.

“It’s just a small chip. He said his grandpa can superglue it back together. If not, I’ll give him my old skateboard that I have lying around in my basement. I’m in no risk of ever using it again. Kids are into vintage stuff like that these days.”

“Leave some room for Rob to try to win his son’s affections.” I giggled, marveling at how good Cruz and Bear were together.

That made Cruz tense.

My nose twitched, and I tried hard not to look embarrassed. What kind of weird thing to say to the man you’d sworn off (to your sister) who was currently inside your bed.

I truly was a piece of work.

“I’ll tread carefully,” Cruz said, finally.

I knew he meant with Rob, but I so very wished he'd take mercy on me, too.

Nineteen



Cruz

“There he is, the man of the hour, the town’s beloved.” Mrs. Underwood, who was approximately a thousand years old, wobbled her way toward me outside the clinic after I closed shop.

I stilled, inwardly punching my own face for forgetting to check the windows before I got out of work. There was always someone wandering past wanting a favor. A ride, a quick medical diagnosis, some life advice.

“Heard you’re treating Beau Duggar’s pregnant wife under the table ’cause she’s got no insurance. That’s kind of you.” She waved her walking cane in my direction, flashing her blindingly white dentures at me.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

And then, because it was still ingrained in me, because I was so deeply and acutely attached to the role this place designated to me, I forced myself to add, “Can I take you anywhere, Mrs. Underwood? Home, maybe?”

“Oh!” She put her hand to her chest. “Are you sure?”

No.

“Absolutely.”

“How nice of you to offer. I was actually on my way to your mother’s, if you can believe it. We’re working on the next luncheon.”

“It’d be my pleasure.”

It would also be my hell.

Mom lived on the other side of town, which meant a longer drive in the opposite direction of my destination, in the presence of the town’s biggest gossip. But I couldn’t backtrack, could I?

“Lovely. She’s telling me you are going to help her with the seating arrangements at the rehearsal dinner next week. You must be excited to see Wyatt getting married again.”

“Bursting at the seams.”

“You next?”

“Unfortunately for the future Mrs. Costello,” I jested mildly.

“Ah, c’mon. Anyone would love to have you, Cruzy.”

Not the town’s most infamous and gloriously scandalous waitress, so it seemed.

After I dropped Mrs. Underwood off—and walked her to my mother’s doorstep, arm-in-arm—I went back into town to take some promotional pictures for the Wellness Awareness Program I was taking part in.

I was going to run a marathon with a few more folks to raise money for a foundation designed to help children suffering from obesity. When I was done with the promotional stuff, I checked my watch to see if I had a moment to check in on Tennessee at the diner.

I had about three minutes before I needed to go back home and get ready for Wyatt’s bachelor party in the city.

My showers, my snacks, my coffee breaks—everything was timed perfectly with a stopwatch to ensure the utmost time efficiency.

I was about to open the door to Jerry & Sons—could almost spot her through the windows—when a small figure reeking of

flowers blocked my way.

“Dr. Costello! How nice to see you. I’ve been hopin’ to run into you, actually.”

Mrs. Holland threw herself in front of me, in a pastel cardigan, designer jeans, and a Chanel purse. Her brunette bob was sharp, her eyes shrewd and cold. You could tell Gabriella was her spawn, because they both looked perpetually put-together and hungry.

“Ma’am.” I smiled patiently, peppering the gesture with a brief kiss on her cheek. “How’re you feeling today?”

Translation: unless you’re about to drop dead and require medical assistance, step away from the door and let me say hi to my girlfriend.

But was Tennessee really my girlfriend?

Probably not.

In fact, she would no doubt hit me with a sharp object if I ever called her that in public. Still, in my head, I could call her whatever I wanted.

“I’m well, thanks. And yourself?”

I looked past her shoulder at Tennessee inside the diner, serving a table of snotty teenagers who pretended to drop some utensils to look up her skirt. They laughed when she bent down, and for once I really paid attention to *them*, not her.

My blood ran cold. How dare they.

“Good. Good,” I heard myself say, anyway.

She turned her head to follow my gaze, realized who I was looking at, then pierced me with a look.

“Gabriella said you and she are taking a break.”

“We decided to stop seeing each other, yes.”

“Well, that’s just a shame. Listen, I know what it’s like, all right? Gabriella’s daddy was exactly like you. Very sought-after. Handsome, rich, well bred. He had trouble settling down, finding peace with just one woman. I understand the charm and allure certain women have on men.” Her voice became high-pitched, almost shrill. We both knew exactly who she was referring to.

“But I’m here to tell you, honey, that Gabriella’s still interested. You had your fun on the cruise, and now you two can put it behind you. Sometimes a man needs to blow off some steam. Get things out of his system before he moves on. Better you did it now than after you got married.”

I wanted to tell her that her daughter couldn’t even compete with Tennessee Turner’s little toe.

Gabriella was a pretty present tied in a ribbon and Tennessee was a tempestuous ticking time bomb wrapped in a booby trap... and yet, she was the one I wanted.

But because I was me, the greatest guy alive, I bowed my head with faux-humility.

“I’m terribly sorry, Mrs. Holland, but I really have to run.”

She grabbed my forearm with her bony fingers, pressing hard to stop me from going.

“Heard you were getting some kind of a medical award. That true?”

“Yes. The AAFP. American Academy of Family Physicians.”

She grabbed me by the collar, stepping into my face, her smile melting into a scowl.

“Listen here, Dr. Costello. My daughter is smart, beautiful, and earns a good paycheck. The best catch in this godforsaken town. She is willing to go a long way to make you two happen. I’d hate to see you blow it on some one-night stand that has stretched into a month or two. Not to mention, people’ll start talking, and I’d hate for that to happen.”

I had no idea how Mrs. Holland came to the conclusion Tennessee and I were an item, but asking her would be a way of confirming our relationship, something my reluctant girlfriend didn’t want and I didn’t need.

So instead of feeding my curiosity, I took a step back.

“Ma’am, I have the utmost respect for your daughter, but I’m in a place where I need to think long and hard about my next step, and it wouldn’t be fair on her if I jerked her around.”

By the time I got out of Mrs. Holland’s pacified (retracted) claws, I was about ten minutes behind on getting back home. I

threw another annoyed look into the diner. Tennessee was now swatting away a truck driver who'd passed by town and looked to be persistently flirting with her.

Truth was, I didn't feel powerful at all in that moment. I felt like a pushover. Cornered to let the townsfolk treat Tennessee however they pleased. And restricted by Tennessee herself to claim her as mine and protect her the way I'd always wanted.

But ultimately, answering Mrs. Underwood, or Mrs. Holland, or just taking whatever the fuck I wanted from my girlfriend was out of the question.

I was too good.

Too *decent*.

I shook my head and went home.



An hour later, I was in hell.

More specifically, in my brother's Mercedes as we made our way to Winston-Salem to his bachelor party. I was the designated driver, because Dr. Cruz Costello—you guessed it—was always on DD duty.

That, in itself, wasn't too bad.

I needed to cut back on the alcohol, anyway, if I wanted to keep that lithe runner's body. But the fact Wyatt had gone ahead and invited *Rob*? That was unforgivable.

Downright stupid.

It was bad enough I'd had to endure the douchebag's presence over dinner the other day while my mother fawned over him and moaned about what an embarrassment Tennessee was to Fairhope, but now I had to spend an entire night with him, along with Tim Trapp and Kyle, one of the useless sons who was responsible for Jerry & Sons' title.

"Why'd your first marriage end?" Rob asked Wyatt from the passenger seat, cracking a beer open. He looked much less heartbroken than that day I'd found him on his ex-girlfriend's front porch.

“She was a cokehead and bled me dry financially, but man, she was a hot piece of ass. How about yours?” Wyatt sucked on his vape pen.

“My first marriage broke up due to the fact that Julianna was a goddamn *bitch*.” Rob did a hiccup and snort kind of mix, that didn’t earn him any points, taking a pull of his beer. “She was straight up a moody cow and always bitched when we had to move places because of my jobs—how was it my fault that I needed to travel from school to school to coach? And Dani, well, Dani was a sweetheart.”

He downed the rest of his drink.

“Then what happened?” Kyle asked from behind, sitting in the backseat, rolling himself a joint.

“She found out I had a son.”

“Women.” Wyatt sighed, sucking on his vape. “Always so dramatic.”

Everyone laughed.

“She planned a trip to Fairhope to surprise me for my birthday, bring me back to my hometown, see my parents, and I had to explain to her why we couldn’t go,” Rob whined.

“You hid the fact you had a son from her?” I asked.

It was the first time I’d spoken since we hit the road, so everyone turned toward me to ensure they heard right.

Silence descended on the car before Rob answered.

“I’m not exactly proud of that, man.”

“Sort of sounds like you only came back home because every other plan fell through,” I said roughly.

Rob’s face sobered, and he put aside his empty beer can. “I came home because it was time to man up. I made a mistake. I’m paying for it now.”

“Water under the bridge.” Wyatt waved a hand, trying to calm things down. “You’re back, it’s all good.”

“Look, I know I really fucked it up with her. Nussy, I mean.”

Julianna and Dani, too, Sir Fucks-a-Lot.

“You gonna try to win her back?” Kyle licked the rollie paper of his joint from side to side.

Tim was napping in the backseat at this point between Kyle and Rob, totally checked out. That’s what happened when you had to pay child support to two different women and held onto three jobs.

“Hell yeah.” Rob chuckled. “Nessy still has a killer body, a sassy mouth on her, and she is the mother of my son. Bonus points—she pays her way through life, which can’t hurt in my financial situation. Figure if she hasn’t come for my throat financially yet, she’s not going to.” He cackled, shaking his head. “Though I mean it about helping her out. I’m going to start paying for Bear’s stuff. In the meantime, I’m going to play the tortured saint for a few months and hopefully crawl back into her bed for a bit, at least. Think she’ll have me?”

“Sure,” Wyatt said.

“Maybe.” Kyle cocked his head.

Snorting out, I said, “She’s not stupid or desperate, you know.”

“What’d you say?” Rob’s hand found my shoulder.

I shook him off.

“Nothing.”



We got into a swanky sports bar twenty minutes later.

There was a black vinyl booth reserved for us. Country music blasted through the speakers, football games were playing on huge flat screen TVs on the walls, and there were people grinding and dancing a few yards from the bar, which connected to some sort of a dance club.

I had the acute sense of being the only responsible grown-up in this bar, with the average IQ in the place equating to that of a half-eaten sub. Wyatt was my brother, so loving him was part of a package deal, but I never understood his decisions.

Especially the one to invite one of *my* ex-best friends to his bachelor party.

The waitresses—who wore even less than Tennessee’s diner uniform—served food in black thongs, a matching bra, and a white silk tie. We started with a round of drinks and some tequila slammers, ordered food, and then more tequila slammers.

Everyone downed their alcohol like it was a competitive sport while I watched and prayed no one puked in the Mercedes on the long drive back home. The car wasn’t mine, but the headache of getting it cleaned afterwards would be.

Seven shots and four beers later, my brother and his friends were treading close to disaster territory with a side of alcohol poisoning. They were about half a step away from getting matching, horrible tattoos they’d definitely regret later.

Wyatt, Kyle, and Tim—the latter seemed visibly more awake after drinking his own weight in shots—dragged their nearly-middle-aged asses to the dance floor, grinding their crotches against college girls to the sound of Sam Hunt and Blake Shelton.

Rob stayed behind. Didn’t take a genius to know it was because he had a bone to pick with me. I studied my glass of water like it was the most interesting thing in the universe, wondering if I could make him drown by pushing his head into it.

“So,” Rob said.

“So.”

“I kind of figured you’d at least pick up the phone and call me after you found out I was in town.” He sat back on the vinyl, eyeing me behind the rim of his whiskey glass.

“Same could be said about you.” My voice was terse, smooth. “I wasn’t the one who went MIA for thirteen years.”

“First time I saw you again, you were with Nussy, and you didn’t seem all too happy to see me.” Rob put his whiskey down, angling his entire body toward mine. “What’s going on between you and my ex, Cruz?”

It took everything in me not to tell him the truth. That we were fucking, and laughing, and bantering, and getting to know each other.

That lately, Tennessee stopped spraying her hair into something that resembled plastic, and dropped the weird nails, and slowly began to realize people might see her for who she was if she just gave them a chance.

It was like Cobain's quote: "I'd rather be hated for who I am than loved for who I'm not". She decided to be herself, unapologetically. Honoring herself and who she was. Not making amends or trying to appease the people in town.

That I was more than ready to pick up the pieces he'd left behind, and I didn't think he deserved half a chance with her, even if, unfortunately, she had to put up with his existence for her son's sake.

But I knew she would never forgive me if I told her ex-boyfriend the truth.

I took a sip of my water. "Not sure how it's any of your business."

"I'm her ex."

"You were kids, and you fucked off before you pulled out of her. You want to know something about Tennessee's life, ask her, not me." I slammed my glass against the table.

"Don't think I don't remember how you used to pine for her." He looked angry, contemplative, and constipated. Guess he tried to appear tough.

A lopsided smirk met my lips. "You're drunk."

"That might be so, but I'm also right, aren't I? Am I going to have competition here? The least you can do for me is be frank."

"Actually, Rob, I owe you jack shit where Tennessee Turner is concerned. If my memory doesn't fail me, and it rarely does, *I* was the one who was supposed to ask her out all those years ago. *I* won the game."

Was I actually bringing up the rock-paper-scissor encounter from before my balls had fully dropped as though it meant anything?

Wyatt, Kyle, and Tim were taking shots from the inside of waitresses' cleavage and howling to the ceiling while Rob and I

were engaged in a stare down that would have been tense had he been able to focus properly in his drunken stupor.

“You’re seriously still stuck on this?” His mouth dropped. “She wanted *me*.”

“You fucking *left* her.”

“You don’t know the whole story.”

Rob’s head reared back, and he stared at me with so much hatred, I wondered if I’d ever known him at all. I was putting a dent in his carefully designed plan to make Nussy wife number three.

He wasn’t prepared for resistance from any of us.

Thought he’d walk right in and play daddy to Bear and husband to Tennessee.

His on-hold family, that he’d kept on the back burner, in case all else failed.

And that Tennessee, the town nobody would be so happy, so grateful she’d welcome him back as though she had no pride or self worth. As though she didn’t deserve better than him—hell, than all of us.

“Enlighten me, then.”

Wyatt was now French-kissing a woman who was definitely not his future wife in my periphery. I’d have felt worse for Trinity, if she didn’t patronize her older sister as if she herself had her life all figured out.

Rob blew out air, standing up and sliding out of the booth.

He began to pace.

“I was too young. *Way* too young.”

“So was she.”

“Cruz, I asked her to abort it.”

I saw red. All. Fucking. Red. I couldn’t see anything but the blood I wanted to draw from that bastard at how he’d just reduced *Bear*—a fucking amazing kid he’d had nothing to do with shaping—to ‘it’.

“*It* has a name now. A personality, too. Likes. Dislikes. *It* was growing inside her. Keeping *it* was her right.”

“If I’d stayed, I would never have had a chance to be something. I wanted more for myself.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re giving me your side of the story after being so self-sacrificing and stoic for so long. I’m really starting to root for you on this hero’s journey of self-discovery,” I said sarcastically. “You planning on backpacking through Europe to find yourself next?”

“She decided for both of us. It wasn’t fair.” Rob yanked at his hair, shaking his head.

“Fair flew out the window the moment you turned your back on her, you bastard.”

Rob reached for his drink, emptying the glass in one swig and slamming it against the table, sneering.

He looked up, his eyes empty and cold.

“You’re still in love with her.”

And you’re still not.

If he loved her, he never would have acted the way he had. Or like this.

“Just remember, Cruz. Even if you fucked her, she is, and always will be, my leftovers. I was there first. I tasted her first. I ___”

I didn’t let him finish the sentence.

I tackled him to the floor, throwing the first punch, which landed square on his nose. He got up and stumbled backward, steadying himself by grabbing the edge of another booth and someone’s wig with it.

The person slapped Rob’s hand away. Rob smiled at me, his teeth bloodied with the popped vessels I probably damaged with my fist.

Blake Shelton sang that God gave him someone, and I was about to hand the Almighty another son of His in the shape of Robert Gussman.

My ex-best friend hurled his entire weight at me, crouching down to try to get me in the stomach. But I was faster, not to mention sober, and sidestepped, making him land against our empty booth in a heap of limbs.

He groaned in pain, and I heard the music lower and people behind us running to break up the fight.

I grabbed the hem of his collar, lifting him up and tugging at him until his eyes found mine.

“Don’t.”

I punched his face.

“You.”

I punched his stomach.

“Dare.”

I kicked him in the balls.

“Call her leftovers.”

Punch. Punch. Punch.

Rob’s entire face was bloodied, but he still managed to throw a hook straight into my eye socket when I wasn’t expecting it. I tripped a few steps, Wyatt’s arms catching me before I bounced back and went for Robert’s full destruction.

Tim and Kyle pulled Robert away, breaking us up.

“Holy shit, Cruz. What the fuck?!” Wyatt boomed, pushing me violently toward the door, his expression roaring, his lips still glittering with a stranger’s watermelon lip gloss.

Rob, Kyle, and Tim stayed behind. We spilled out to the humid summer night, and I blew out air, my body buzzing with violence.

“He’s a son of a—*gun*.”

“He was one of your best friends.” Wyatt pointed at the door to the club.

The two bouncers outside looked at us like we were guests on *Jerry Springer*—when the baby daddy who impregnated five women in a span of three days just walked in to hear his paternity results.

“What’s happening to you, brother? Don’t think I haven’t noticed you got cozy with the other Turner girl. I didn’t say shit because I figured you’d drop her after the cruise, but Jesus Christ, this is getting to be too much.”

“Too much what?” I challenged him, arching a brow.

“Too much trouble for someone like her.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “You’re marrying her *sister*.”

“Her sister’s different. Trinity’s harmless. A church mouse.”

“Well, Tennessee is all venom and honey. Dangerous but irresistible. She’s better than Trinity. Better than all of them.”

“In the sack, maybe. But—”

I grabbed the hem of his shirt, no longer giving any damn about my precious reputation.

I pressed my nose against his. “Don’t. This is the last time you talk about her like that, got it? Next time, your face will be the shape of my fist.”

“Wow. Okay.” He pushed me away, taking a few steps back. He turned around and kicked a trash can, pouring its contents onto the sidewalk. “Goddammit!”

He paced back and forth.

Robert, Kyle, and Tim trickled out of the club, sweaty and disoriented.

Rob looked at me with murder in his eyes, pointing a finger to my face. “I’m not getting into a car with this psycho.”

“Better get a head start if you want to make it home by morning. West’s that direction, in case your drunk ass needs a map.” I spun the keys on my index finger, starting toward Wyatt’s car.

They all trailed behind me, Robert included. Wyatt was the first to catch my step.

“Is it serious?” he asked.

I knew exactly what he meant.

I weighed the pros of telling him the truth. There was no way at least some of this evening wasn't going to make its way to Mrs. Underwood, who'd make sure to tell everyone else in Fairhope.

No point in pretending otherwise.

"Yeah."

"Does Mom know?"

"No."

"Are you going to tell her?"

I rubbed my chin. "If Tennessee's okay with it. Either way, we'll wait until after your wedding. I don't want your bride to die of a heart attack."

"I appreciate it. Finding a third one would be a hassle."

"Don't sell yourself short. You still have most of your hair and a respectable chunk of inheritance. You'll be all right. Just don't tell anyone before Tennessee and I are ready to."

"You got it, bro."

There was silence for a few moments. I wondered if the other guys had heard us. I wasn't sure if I wanted them to know or not.

"You kissed someone else," I pointed out to Wyatt.

He sighed. "Baby bro, not all relationships are the same. Trinity and I have a very good idea of what we want from each other. I doubt she expects faithfulness from me. She just wants to marry into money and stop working."

"Good," I said. "Because she is a pretty crappy nurse."

"Nessy is a good waitress. Kyle says Jerry told him she gets the best tips."

"She's talented."

"I hope she makes you happy."

"Wyatt?"

"*Whaddup?*"

"Tell Trinity what happened tonight. Because if you don't, I will."

Twenty



Cruz

The next day was a Saturday, and my day off. A real blessing, considering I couldn't show up at the clinic looking like someone punched the daylights out of me.

A blackish-purple bruise formed around my right eye over the course of the night, and by morning, I looked like I'd been mugged.

I screwed on a baseball cap, put on my Aviators, and made my way to Jerry & Sons, where Tennessee was floating between booths, popping her pink gum loudly and joking with the customers.

I slid into an empty seat and waited for her to notice me, admiring the way she worked her audience like a starlet from the fifties. She had too much charm, which made her burst in colors and personality.

She was insufferable in the eyes of those who couldn't be her or be *with* her.

My chest filled with sharp pride when I noticed she wore a black pair of tights under her uniform, so no one could see under her dress anymore.

I ripped my sunglasses off and slipped one stem into the collar of my polo shirt. Looking like I got punched square in the face trumped looking like a creeper. Wearing glasses indoors was only passable if you were:

- 1) Brad Pitt, or
- 2) Blind.

I was, at least to my knowledge, neither.

A few moments passed before Tennessee swept her head sideways, her laughter rolling from her throat at something Jerry said, before noticing me. Her smile dropped and she put down a tray full of soda and burgers on the counter, rushing to me.

The color drained from her face, and that's how I realized not only was she wearing leggings, but she also *wasn't* wearing enough foundation to moonlight as a circus clown.

She was evolving, becoming the most authentic version of herself I'd ever seen, and I wanted to grow right along with her.

“Holy *sheep*, Cruz!” She slid into my booth, grabbing both my cheeks in her hands and studying my face. It looked much worse than it felt. “What happened to your face?”

“I fell.”

“What'd you fall on?”

“A class-A jerk.”

“You're going to have to give me more than that. But first things first—can I get you anything? Water? Coffee? A milkshake? Maybe some Tylenol? Scratch that, I'm going to get you a Tylenol anyway. This looks nasty.”

“It's mostly harmless, but what I'm about to say to you isn't, so get me a cup of coffee and sit your cute ass down.”

I wasn't used to courting women.

I especially wasn't used to popping into their lives unprompted, which was exactly what'd been happening with Tennessee. Ever since we started sleeping with each other on the

cruise, she hadn't called, texted, or given me any indication she wanted anything serious with me.

At some point, I had to get a shred of commitment from her, too. But for now, I gave her some leeway, considering her insecurities and history.

She pinned me with an unreadable look, her concern morphing into trepidation. "That doesn't sound too good."

"Depends on who you're asking."

"Wait here."

A minute later, she came back with a fresh cup of coffee and an apple pie that had seen better days, probably in the early nineties. She slipped two Tylenols into my hand discreetly.

A waitress I guessed was Trixie, the new girl, took over Tennessee's tables while we spoke, patting her shoulder to show her allegiance.

I began by explaining I hadn't known Rob was going to show up to the bachelor party, and then the thing he'd told me, about me getting his leftovers, and how he'd left me no choice but to punch him square in the face.

"So now he knows we're hooking up?" She paled.

Was that what we were doing? Hooking up?

I felt a second hit, this time to the gut.

I wanted to correct her definition, but now wasn't the time.

"Not necessarily. I kept it vague. Shouldn't you be more concerned with the fact he called you leftovers? This is the so-called reformed man who wants a second chance with you."

Translation: he is getting a second chance with you over your dead body, right?

"I wish you'd let me deal with Rob. This only brings more attention to me, Cruz." She rubbed her forehead tiredly. "Messy Nessy strikes again, causing trouble between two best friends. Trinity's going to kill me."

"You've done nothing wrong," I pointed out.

"She told me to stay away from you."

“We’re not having this conversation again. You need to stand up for yourself.”

“Says who? Someone who is still trying to be everyone’s darling?”

This was getting old.

And tiresome.

Even though I knew she was right—I was still far too agreeable to everyone around here, even those who needed a good ass-kicking—I stood up.

“Where’re you going?” she looked left and right, whisper-shouting.

God forbid someone knew we were having an intimate conversation about something that didn’t have anything to do with how I wanted my eggs fried or our siblings’ wedding.

“Gonna go find a girlfriend with a spine. If you see one, send her my way, would you?”

“A *girlfriend*?” She jumped up from her seat, her eyes big and wild.

I gave her a defiant, what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it look.

She rubbed the back of her neck, her cheeks crimson-stained. “I guess...I just...” She chuckled. “Okay. Wow. This is moving fast.”

“We’ve known each other since nursery school. You were pretty late to be potty-trained, by the way,” I said flatly.

“I had nightmares.” She punched my arm, laughing. “And what I mean is a month ago I didn’t even know that you liked me.”

“Well, I do.” I softened on a sigh.

“I like you, too. I just...” she trailed off, shaking her head. “I’m scared of my family, and to be perfectly honest, I’m scared of myself, too. I’m Messy Nessy. I mess things up. And I’m pretty scared of you. Can we keep it on the down-low for now?”

Ah, yes.

Messy Nessy didn’t deserve anything good. Especially when that something could overshadow her precious sister’s wedding.

“Until after the wedding,” I said curtly. “I’m not going to live in shame. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“A girlfriend,” Tennessee murmured, her eyes wide. “I haven’t been someone’s girlfriend since I was sixteen.”

“Well, it’s high time someone tamed you, Miss Turner.”

I turned around and walked away, out of the diner.

I watched from the reflection on the glass door as she ran to whisper something in Trixie’s ear, then followed me out, not bothering to say goodbye to Jerry.

Tennessee slipped into my car, ducking her head to make sure no one saw her.

“Are you following me?” I asked extra loudly as she buckled up, just to be a dick.

She grinned at me like a loon, her head tucked next to the glove compartment, still in hiding. “Maybe. Where am I following you to?”

“My house.”

“Nice. Bear is with his mamaw all day and mentioned he wants a sleepover so he can help my dad tomorrow morning with putting together a tree house for their neighbor.”

“All I heard was quality time with my girlfriend.”

She reached across the center console and kissed my thigh, still out of sight from whoever peered into my car.

It was secretive, and forbidden, and even a little crazy.

A calamity waiting to explode in my face in a very public, very un-Cruz fashion.

And I fucking loved it.

Twenty-One



Tennessee

I woke up in Cruz's bed to hot coffee, a heated croissant, and a note.

Dear girlfriend,

Shanna Duggar, Beau's wife, went into labor earlier this morning and they called me to help. I'll be back as soon as possible. Your clothes are on the right-hand side of my walk-in closet (don't freak out).

—Cruz.

I clutched the note to my chest. Instead of freaking out, I contemplated how nice it would be to actually date Cruz.

After I woke up and used a spare toothbrush he left for me in his bathroom, I gave myself a tour. I'd never been inside my Barbie Dreamhouse before.

Yesterday, we were too busy having sex and wolfing down takeout food for it to be appropriate to ask for a tour. Plus, a part of me was still heavily guarded around him.

It wasn't exactly an even playing field.

He had so much leverage over me, being who he was, and me being who *I* was, that I didn't want to point out I'd had vivid dreams of living in this house ever since I was pretty much a (not yet potty-trained) toddler.

The house was gorgeous from the inside. With chevron accent walls, ranch-style furniture, and golden light switches. He had a classic white kitchen, sprawling with space and filled with patterns and textiles.

The bathrooms had claw-footed baths and all kinds of soaps I bet were strictly decorative, but wanted to use anyway, the philistine that I was.

There was no doubt in my mind this place had been the passion project of a pricey interior designer from out of town, and for a minute, I wanted to cry, I was so impressed with how beautiful and yet familiarly intimate it felt.

I rushed to find the game room, the one Bear had wanted to visit, when I heard the doorbell ring.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

My instincts told me not to answer it—it wasn't *my* door after all, and Cruz and I had both planned to keep this a secret at least until Wyatt and Trinity's wedding (and, let's admit it, long after it, too, if I had my way).

Then again, Cruz had left the house so hastily. What if he'd been waiting for something and was now counting on me to receive it?

I slipped my phone out and shot him a quick text.

Tennessee: Hey, boyfriend. Your doorbell's ringing. Should I get it?

His answer came less than five seconds later.

Cruz: Please.

Well.

At the very least, I was wearing one of the beautiful Anthropologie dresses he'd gotten me. So if it was someone from town, I could always say we were working on last-minute arrangements for our siblings' wedding.

The doorbell chimed again, and I raced from the second floor to the entrance, flinging the door open.

Gabriella stood on the other side of the threshold, her big shiny black curls and thin smile in place. She had a deep tan and a knee-length, trendy powder-blue dress, not much different than the one I was wearing.

Her smile dropped as soon as she saw me.

"Messy Nussy."

There was no question mark in her voice.

Not much surprise, either.

I leaned a hip against the doorjamb, disappointed I didn't have gum to pop in her face as I took her in. "Sherlock. How can I help you?"

I allowed myself an attitude with her when Trinity wasn't around. My personal payback for all the times she'd mistreated me while we were in company.

"What are you doing here?" She clutched her straw purse in her fist, baring her too-white teeth.

"Cruz and I are running the RSVPs against the seating arrangement one more time before the rehearsal dinner." The lie slipped from between my lips so naturally, I made a note to pat myself on the back after she left.

She raised a skeptical brow. "You expect me to believe that?"

"I have no expectations from you whatsoever, but I would like to get on with my day. So if you could tell me how I can help you sooner rather than later, I'd appreciate it."

"I want to talk to Cruz."

She tilted her chin up. I had to hand it to her, she handled the situation with (relative) grace. I knew better than anyone how desperate she was to bag Fairhope's favorite bachelor.

"Sorry, he went to help the Duggars give birth."

“And he let you stay at his house?” She craned her neck to look inside.

On principle, I narrowed the door a little, to keep the interior away from her prying eyes.

“Don’t sound so shocked. I couldn’t steal *all* the valuables even if I wanted to. I mean, how the heck am I supposed to remove that antique Astoria grand sofa? Unless you’re up to giving me a hand?”

That really set her off.

“Oh, this is nonsense!”

Gabriella pushed me into the house in one swift movement, joining me inside and closing the door behind her. For a moment, I suspected she was going to try to kill me, but then remembered I could take her.

Not to mention, she’d never be able to hide my body. She was the least creative person I’d ever met.

“Listen here.” She poked my chest, advancing toward me like a lethal tiger in a cage. “I know what you’re trying to do, and I’m not going to let you get away with it, homewrecker.”

“Dang, I finally graduated from a hussy to a homewrecker. Took me a decade, but here we are.”

“You’re trying to get knocked up again, thinkin’ Cruz is not the sort of guy to turn his back on you.”

Another step toward me.

I took a step back on instinct, mainly because I suspected she would tear me limb from limb if I pushed her back and didn’t want to engage in a cat fight in a house that wasn’t mine (as much as I wanted a fistfight, I did *not* want the accompanying headline).

I laughed, because I was trying to do the exact *opposite* of getting pregnant. So much so, I put it on my phone calendar to make an appointment with my OB-GYN, who hadn’t heard from me since Bear was born, to go on the pill.

“Get lost, Gabriella.”

“I’m telling you right now, Nussy.” She cornered me into an alcove, her body pressing against mine, her face so close her spit peppered my skin. “If you don’t back off, I will make sure your life is a living hell in this town. First, I’ll make you lose your job. I have no idea what you even have worth taking, but then, I’ll make you lose everything else you’ve ever cared for.”

“Is that a threat?” I smiled, but inside, I was screaming.

I didn’t need this. Didn’t need to go head-to-head with Gabriella Holland. With the entire hometown. Because they would choose her. They were always looking to trample me to stand a little taller. They really needed new hobbies.

“It’s a promise. Leave Cruz alone.”

“On your request?”

“On my *order*.”

“You should know.” I pushed Gabriella off me, tired of her attitude. “I don’t take very well to threats. You may think you have huge pull in this town, but I’ve been holding my own for a long time, and I plan to do so long after you’re gone. Now, if that’s all, I suggest you call Cruz and try to arrange for the two of you to meet. Unless, of course, he’s been ghosting you.”

I made a pouty face.

According to the look on Gabriella’s face, I hit the nail straight on the head.

“This is not done.” She wiggled her finger in my face.

“Shakin’ in my boots here, Holland.”

She slammed the door behind her.

I collapsed against the wall, letting out a ragged breath.

Note to self: get boots whenever I can afford a pair. Because the shaking part? That was real.

Twenty-Two



Tennessee

Two days later, I walked into my parents' house to drop off the handmade straw baskets I'd made for Trinity's flower girls.

Technically, Gabriella was supposed to get them from a boutique out of town. But, also technically, Gabriella was a *beach* of massive proportions and cited headaches which had prevented her from making the trip.

I was wearing one of my Cruz dresses (that's how I called them in my mind, which had made me imagine him *inside* said dresses, which was equally hilarious and sexy). I'd also let my hair down, both literally and figuratively, and it now fell gently on my shoulders.

The appeal of looking like the designated washed-out diner waitress who needed a shower and a clue had dissipated ever since I realized I could cut thirty minutes of preparation each morning only to make myself look *less* attractive than I was.

Donna Turner, my mother, my childhood idol, and the woman who had compassion for anyone and everything, fruit flies

included, flung the door open and smacked a wet kiss on my cheek.

“Hullo, Nessy. Come in. I’m making an afternoon snack.”

I stalked inside, a little stung she didn’t say anything about my attire.

The other day, when Gabriella showed up at Cruz’s house acting like a woman ready to boil a bunny (if you don’t get the reference—congratulations, you’re young), I’d decided it was time to stop giving this town a reason to hate me and packed all of the clothes he’d bought for me, vowing to wear them exclusively.

Later that evening, I’d stuffed all of my hooker clothes into black trash bags and re-donated them. I couldn’t run the risk of having them around. I didn’t want to revert back to looking like what this town wanted me to look like.

“Where’s Care Bear?” Mom floated into the kitchen and returned to the assortment she’d made on the counter, of baby carrots, celery, and raw broccoli with low-fat ranch dressing at the center.

The official Turner pre-wedding breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I’d been told.

The answer to her question was that Bear was playing video games with Cruz at his place. Since no self-respecting single mother let a treat go without a provision, there was a stipulation attached to the monumental event.

Rob had been getting on my last nerve, calling almost every day, begging to see Bear and me. Dropping off groceries, checks, presents, and, I suspected—if I didn’t acknowledge him soon, human sacrifices.

I’d basically told Bear he could hang out with his new adult friend Cruz if he agreed to meet his dad, even if just for an hour, in the safety of our bungalow, with me serving as buffer.

Was it the most ethical thing to do? No.

Was I using it as a teachable moment? Also no.

Was I feeling bad about any of it? Not even a little.

Bear had grown up fatherless, under financial and cultural strain, what with him being *my* son, and his forgiveness muscle was nonexistent. I knew that he needed to flex it a little to make it work.

And no matter how much I disliked Rob—and I truly, sincerely loathed him from the bottom of my black, cold heart—there was no denying he was honestly trying to make it up to Bear.

Rob left presents for Bear on the front porch. All the time. Presents Bear totally ignored as he went about his day. The kid was colder than the Costco produce section.

I didn't know if I should be impressed or concerned.

"Bear's with a friend." I propped my hip against a kitchen cabinet, popping a baby carrot into my mouth.

"How is he getting on with Rob?"

My mother opened the fridge, pulling out fresh strawberries for dessert. I found it ironic that the Turners had officially adopted a hamster's diet, seeing as they were as good at eating their young.

"He's not getting on with Rob just yet, but we're talking about Bear meeting him for dinner in the near future."

"You ought to give the man a chance." Mom shut the fridge with her foot, rinsing the strawberries in water and salt in the sink to wash out all the dirt. "Did I tell you he helped your father with a flat tire the other day?"

"Only about seventeen times."

"And he dropped by last week with some fresh flowers for me, asking how we'd feel if he asked you out."

I let out a low whistle. "And they say chivalry is dead."

"Come on, Nussy, let's get real here. You can't really do much better than him. He's got a steady job, he is still handsome, and he's your son's father. Why are you being so obstinate? You made your point. He's been waiting around for you for weeks now. He's been in the dog house long enough."

"I'm not interested in him."

“He seems to be ready for a commitment, though.”

“He’s twice divorced, Mom.”

“Third time’s the charm.”

I shouldn’t have been offended, considering all the other things Mom had said about me over the years, but I was. The complete confidence with which she said I could never do better than Rob hit me straight in the feels.

But not enough to tell her I was dating Fairhope’s treasured upstanding citizen.

“I’d rather die alone than get back together with Rob.”

“Well, that’s just fine.” She used her hip to slam a kitchen cabinet shut. “Because apparently, you’re headed for that exact fate.”

Our conversation was interrupted by a storm in the form of my baby sister, who threw the front door open with enough force to disconnect it from its hinges, rolling up looking like every person in town had kicked her puppy.

She was red, sweaty, and buzzing. Her dress was half torn in what seemed to be a hasty escape, and her braid had come undone. I’d never seen my sister looking less than the wholesome church girl that she was, so naturally, it gave me pause.

“Where is she?” my sister bellowed, kicking away a box full of wedding goodie bags which was standing in her way (my doing, naturally).

She looked left and right, searching for her object of fury. She zeroed in on me, baring her teeth like a rabid animal.

She stomped her way into the kitchen, not bothering to answer my mother’s cry as she flung herself between us, trying to hug Trinity or maybe just prevent her from tearing every hair from my head.

“There she is. Tennessee Turner. The object of every man’s desire.”

That seemed like an unlikely way to start a conversation with someone you wanted to thank for all of their hard work on your wedding, but I still kept an open mind.

You never knew when someone might get struck by the realization that you would give up the world for them.

Refusing to look flustered, I turned around and filled my glass with tap water. I reminded myself that I hadn't done anything wrong (*other than Cruz*). That whatever it was, it was a simple misunderstanding (*other than Cruz*), and that I had nothing to hide (also, *other than Cruz*).

After taking a few quick breaths, I turned back around to face her.

"Hello to you, too, little sis. Want to see the straw baskets I made for the flower girls? I laced some flowers in them." I thought it was a nice touch.

"Not even a little. Let me ask you something." A rictus smile marred her face. Taunting and angry and wrong. Like it had been painted in blood. She slithered toward me, like a snake about to strike. Panic clogged my throat. "Remember when you dropped out of high school? When you were pregnant? And everybody at school taunted me, stuffed my locker with condoms, and called me names because of you? How I had to eat my lunch in the restroom because I didn't want to be harassed?"

"I remember," I swallowed.

My whole body reacted to that memory. Hot tar spread inside my stomach. Sweat beads began forming on my brow.

She stopped behind a chair across from me, gripping the back of it. Mom stood between us in the kitchen, looking to and fro, unsure how to stop what was unraveling before her eyes.

"And remember when Bear was born and cried all night, *every* night, and you were losing it, and Mom and Dad had work early in the morning, so I volunteered to take care of him half the night, thaw breast milk for him, cradle him while you were catching up on sleep?"

"Yes," I answered quietly.

Because she had done all those things.

She was just a child herself, full to the brim with compassion. It was us against the world. At least until Wyatt Costello had come into the picture and her need to ensure her future would be different from mine overrode her love for me.

And she hadn't thrown any of it in my face until now.

"And remember when Bear needed that ear surgery, and you didn't have the money, and I gave you all my savings from my summer job at the Children's Ministry?"

The question was answered with a weak nod from me. I closed my eyes, trying to draw a deep breath, but to no avail.

I wanted the floor to crack open and swallow me whole. To disappear from the face of the earth, I was so ashamed of what I'd put everyone through. And of my selfishness, for yet again doing as I pleased.

For conducting this pointless affair with Cruz.

Who cared why she didn't like us as a couple?

She was allowed to ask me for this after everything she'd done for me. It wasn't like Cruz and I ended up together in real life anyhow.

"One thing is for sure—I was always on your side, Nesy. Always did things for you. Always helped you out. I wouldn't let anyone talk badly about you." Trinity's eyes filled with tears. I didn't correct her and explain that even if her friends didn't talk *sheet* about me to her face, they did so behind her back and sometimes to *my* face. "So what I want to know now, my dear sister, is why couldn't you abide by my one rule, my simple request, my *plea* to you not to ruin my wedding?"

My mother gasped loudly and clutched her (numerous) pearls. She was wearing a lot of jewelry today and reminded me a bit of Mrs. Warren. "What do you mean, Trinity?"

"This *whore* you raised," my sister pointed at me accusingly, raising her voice, "is sleeping with my maid of honor's boyfriend."

"He is not her boyfriend!" I cried out, hating that I sounded desperate. "Cruz and Gabriella aren't together."

"They're on a break!" Trinity yelled from across the table. "Gabriella's beside herself. She said she might not be in the proper mental state to make it to the wedding!"

Wow.

I could see this coming from a hundred miles away, blindfolded and without a map. Maybe I was selfish, but so was Gabby.

“You’re sleeping with Cruz Costello?” My mother choked on the revelation, and a piece of raw cauliflower.

“Some break it is. He won’t take any of her calls and crosses the street when he sees her!” I roared back at my sister, attempting not to come across as the biggest pushover on planet Earth.

“That’s because you’re poisoning him against her.” Trinity was crying now, tears running down her face. “The entire town knows! Gabriella is humiliated.”

“Are you sure I’m the one who is using poison as a method?” I chuckled incredulously, hiding all the pain behind laughter because I’d washed my armor off my face. “Because your so-called best friend just told you she might not be your maid of honor, and also dropped by the other day to call me a homewrecker and threaten to ruin my life.”

“How can she ruin your life when you’ve already done such a fantastic job of it all by yourself?” Trinity snorted out.

“My life is not ruined!” I banged my fist on the table. “I have a son that I love and a family I would die for, if you haven’t noticed. Maybe I could have a better job, but at least I’m not so desperate to quit mine that I’m marrying a man with the emotional maturity of a grapefruit who pretty much ignores my existence.”

“Nessy!” My mother cupped her mouth. “For shame! Wyatt is a lovely man.”

“Wyatt barely knows your names.”

“Take that back,” Trinity ordered, barking at me.

“Even if I did, it wouldn’t make it any less true!”

Trinity charged toward me, bitch-slapping me so hard, so zealously, my face flew in the other direction and my opposite cheek slammed against the kitchen cabinet.

For the first few seconds, I couldn’t feel anything. Then the burn began spreading everywhere, like wildfire.

My jaw.

My eyes.

My nose.

My soul.

I turned my head, staring my sister dead in the eye.

This was my time to stand up to my family like Cruz had been telling me to, over and over again.

To tell them that, in fact, I was allowed to date whomever I wanted.

That my life wasn't over or less meaningful than theirs.

That I was not a complete screw-up, and that even though they'd been there for me through thick and thin, I deserved not only their help and guidance, but also respect. *I'd* been there for *them*, too.

But the words, all the words that I'd had to tell Trinity and my mother, got stuck in my throat when I thought about everything I could lose.

Bear's grandparents, whom he loved so dearly.

And Auntie Trinity, who took him into the city every year before Christmas for some serious shopping and made him his favorite key lime pies for Thanksgiving, even though absolutely nobody else loved those horrible custards.

I thought about potentially losing the only constant thing in my and my son's life, for a man who was great—perfect, even—but ultimately, just a man.

And I froze.

“Well?” Trinity spat into my face, her teeth clenching against her words.

My mother moved beside her, lacing their arms.

They had an alliance. They were a fully formed unit, and I wasn't a part of them.

I took a step back.

“Call it off with Cruz,” Trinity said. “Or I won't have a maid of honor.”

“Your maid of honor hates you,” I said simply, my voice tiny, and resigned, and not completely mine. “Haven’t you noticed she does nothing for you other than getting the desired title of a maid of honor? She scares you so much you just slapped your own sister to make a point.”

“Gabriella deserves Cruz. She worked hard to get him and had him, too. They just need time to figure things out,” Trinity said defensively, calming down a little. “And anyway, what do you think’s gonna happen? He’s gonna go on to marry you or something? Quit dreamin’, Nesy, and just do the smart thing for once in your life. Have some self-respect for once in your life. Oh, and before you leave.” Trinity turned around, kicking the goodie bag box between us toward me. “Make sure nothing is broken. The last thing I need is to give my guests broken glass in a cellophane wrap because of you.”

I grabbed the box, humiliation burning through my chest, turned around and walked away.

Note to self: stop trying to appease people who don’t want anything to do with you once you grow a pair. Over and out.

Twenty-Three



Cruz

“Thanks for letting me play Assassin’s Creed. It was awesome. I’d kill to have your game room, dude.” Bear unbuckled himself in my passenger’s seat, his grin threatening to split his face in two.

“Please don’t. Your mother would find a way to pin it on me, and the bail’s going to be through the roof.”

I cut the engine, my gaze touching the front door of the rickety bungalow. There was a brand new skateboard box leaning against the door.

I frowned.

“Did your mom get you a new one?” I was under the impression she was saving up to get him a video game.

“Negatory. That would be Rob, that pain in the butt. I know he’s your friend, but for real, he’s pushier than a good bra.” Bear’s brown hair flopped over his green eyes. He blew it away, shaking his head.

“He’s showing promising signs of turning into a semi-decent guy,” I forced myself to say.

True, he mouthed off to me at Wyatt’s bachelor party, but nothing could take away the fact he was genuinely trying, even though he was getting nowhere with Tennessee.

“He’s a glorified sperm donor,” Bear said.

“He’s trying to make it up to you.”

“It’ll take more than a skateboard and a few Dwight Schrute pining faces to get me on board with that family reunion.”

The kid was a fan of *The Office*. How dumb was Rob to give up on what he’d left behind?

Bear bent to retrieve his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder.

“Anyway, thanks for the game. And the pizza. But *not* the pep talk.”

“Bear, wait.”

I put my arm on his shoulder. He turned to look at me expectantly. I really didn’t want to play this game again, where I sought Tennessee out. It made me feel like a desperate fanboy.

She hadn’t called me after our last hookup, and even though I pretended I didn’t give a shit and called her the next day, this whole one-sided relationship was starting to get on my last nerve.

“Tell your mom to come outside.”

“You seein’ her?” A lopsided, dimpled smile that reminded me too damn much of Rob stretched across his face. I liked this kid a lot, but also had to come to terms with the fact he would always be connected to the man who was now my enemy.

I’m seeing her. Not so sure she’s seeing me.

“Ask her.”

“Mom has never had a boyfriend. Doubt she’d admit to having one now.”

“Well, tell her that her whatever I am to her, is waiting outside and wants a word.”

Bear slid out of my car and jogged to the front porch, kicking the skateboard away as he unlocked the screen door. A few moments later, Tennessee waltzed out said door, wearing a pair of snug jeans and a ruffled white tank top.

She looked somber, and again, that sinking feeling, that I was doing this all by myself, even though I had my own can of worms to deal with, crashed into me.

She sauntered toward my car, parking her elbows against my window, her tits almost in my face.

“What’s up?” She kissed my cheek.

See? Everything’s fine. You’re just being paranoid. You’re so used to women fawning over you, you cannot accept that your girlfriend doesn’t want to elope right this minute.

“You tell me. We haven’t spoken all day.”

I officially sounded like all the women I’d ever let down in my life. I had to admit, being on the other side of that equation felt pretty shitty.

“I didn’t want to interrupt you and Bear.”

“Then why aren’t you inviting me in right now?” I challenged.

She looked left and right, her face falling as she dropped her voice.

“Gabriella’s been telling everyone we’re sleeping together. Remember I told you she stopped by your house when you were away delivering the Duggar baby?”

How could I forget?

Tennessee’d almost had a nervous breakdown.

I knew I needed to sit Gabriella down and explain to her, for the millionth time, that we were over. But I didn’t trust her not to try to pull some next-level, *Days of Our Lives*, Roman-is-not-dead-nor-is-he-Roman bull crap.

Secret pregnancy, emotional blackmail, exorcism—Gabriella wasn’t above any of those tricks to make us happen, and I wanted to give my relationship with Tennessee a few more days to stabilize.

“I remember,” I ground my teeth.

“Well, I guess that’s her payback. Everyone knows we’re sleeping together now.”

“Great.” I shrugged. “Now we don’t have to keep it a secret.”

“Trinity wants me to call it off.”

“She’ll come around.”

And if she didn’t, well, too bad for Trinity, then. Tennessee was a terrific sister. Her life revolved around making Trinity happy.

“Now, can I come in and have dinner with my girlfriend?”

“I...well, I’m...”

My eyes widened.

She wasn’t actually thinking about calling things off because of Trinity, was she?

Only, she was.

Of course she was.

This was Tennessee we were talking about.

“You’re considering it,” I said flatly.

“I’m trying to figure out the best course of action.” She let her head drop to the edge of my window.

“You’re a medical miracle, you know,” I said.

She looked up, resting one cheek against my window frame. “How so?”

“You’re the only person I know who can stand upright without a spine.”

She winced, pulling away from the car.

I snatched her jaw, trying to get her to look at me. She made a low, moaning sound and pulled away, rubbing at her cheek. That’s when I saw she was back to wearing an unholy amount of makeup. And that the makeup was designed to hide something ugly...instead of concealing something beautiful.

I narrowed my eyes, realizing that one of her cheeks was red and had the imprint of fingers on it.

“What the—”

“I’m okay.” She took a step back.

But it was too late.

I’d already gotten out of the car and slammed the door shut behind me.

“The hell you are. Who did this to you? Was it Rob?”

I was going to kill him and then feed him to the coyotes bit by tiny bit.

She snorted. “I’d bitch-slap Rob before he bitch-slapped me.”

My jaw went rigid, and my muscles clenched.

“Trinity.”

“I’ve got it handled.” She tried to scurry away from me.

“The little witch.”

“She was mad.”

“She’s about to be furious when I kick her ass to the curb and make her jobless.”

“Cruz, no.” She clutched my arm, tugging hard. “Please let me handle this my way.”

“Your way is lying on the road waiting for her to run you over. This isn’t just about you—you think I want someone that heartless taking care of vulnerable patients? No, thanks.”

“My way is giving my family time. Easing them into the idea.”

“What idea? Of you going out with a respectable member of the community?”

“Of me starting another scandal.” She jutted her jaw out. “They hate it when I’m the center of attention.”

I hate them for making you feel like a burden.

And myself for not taking charge, because God forbid I do something less than pristine and make someone uncomfortable.

“I’m starting to lose my patience here, sweetheart,” I said, dead serious. “I’m not going to chase you forever. I like you,

Tennessee, but I don't like the way you make me feel, and that's starting to become a problem."

"I know," she said firmly, placing her palms flat on my chest.

My heart was beating like mad.

Goddammit, I wanted her. I wanted to run. But her eyes were sincere.

"Just give me a few seconds to make sense of it all, all right? I'll see you at the rehearsal dinner tomorrow."

I drove back home, feeling a weird sense of calamity taking over me. When I parked in front of my front door, I realized why.

She was slipping away from me. Letting me down easy, the way I'd let down Gabriella and all the women before her.

I need to think about it.

I need to make sense of it all.

I need some alone time.

I punched the steering wheel so hard, I tore the motherfucker.

I was losing Tennessee Turner, and I felt it.

Twenty-Four



Cruz

“You didn’t have to do that, you know,” Trinity told me the following day at my clinic.

She collapsed on the seat in front of mine while I was scribbling some notes about my latest patient. She looked like something that’d been dragged out of a sewer to destroy New York in a climactic sci-fi film.

I didn’t look up from my notes, because I knew eye contact would cause her to lose her job. “Care to be more specific?”

From the corner of my eye, I could see her picking at the tail end of her braid and splitting the fine blonde hairs in it.

“Wyatt. The kiss. The bachelor party. He said you bent his arm to tell me. But I didn’t want to know.”

“Well, I don’t particularly care what you did or did not want, to be honest. It was more about my clean conscience than your comfort.”

“I’m embarrassed you saw it.”

“Really?” I asked casually. “You have so many more things to be embarrassed about, seeing my brother making out with someone else shouldn’t even be in your top one thousand.”

Her eyes darted up from her split ends, widening. “Have I done something wrong, Dr. Costello?”

Yes. So many things, I can’t stop counting them.

“Now, why would you think that?” I closed the file I was working on, stood up, and went to return it to my cabinet.

“You’ve never spoken to me in such a... such a...”

“Candid, no-bullshit manner?” I supplied.

“Yes. It’s like—”

“A slap in the face?” I finished for her again. She made a whimpering sound I took as confirmation. “Shame. You seemed like you could use one.”

She stood up, smoothing her blue uniform nervously, watching me as I walked around the room. She tried to angle the penholder on my desk and knocked it over, spilling ink all over the mahogany wood.

She fumbled to set it back up, whispering, “*Sheet, sheet, sheet.*” I disposed of my files into the cabinet, enjoying the sight of her sweating. “Is it about Tennessee? Did she tell you anything about me? Did she? Because I—”

“Don’t try to explain yourself to me, Nurse Turner. I wanted my brother to tell you, because I thought you should know. Also because I think it’s high time you enjoy a big, fat slice of humble pie.”

I was on my way out when she caught my wrist, panic swimming in her eyes.

Trinity may have wanted to quit her day job to pop out babies, but I bet the prospect of marrying my brother had just become a lot less secure, now that she knew he was sampling other women.

“I’m not a bad person, Dr. Costello. I’ve been through so much. I just want a normal life. That’s all. To be an ordinary woman with an ordinary family. Nessy is amazing, but she tends to...complicate things.”

I shook off her touch, storming out of my office.

Tennessee wasn't a complication.

Her family was.



Rob showed up at the rehearsal dinner.

Either that or his ghost came to visit. But that would mean he'd died, and such blessing wasn't in my goddamn luck, unfortunately.

“Don't look at me.”

Wyatt raised his arms in submission as soon as we spotted Rob getting out of his swanky new Toyota Supra, making his way into the wedding venue with his head down.

He smoothed his tie, reminding everyone he was gainfully employed, and used that particular expression of a man unsure whether he was welcome or not.

The setting was a bore. A barn with a wraparound deck, lounge chairs, and Pottery Barn furniture. Everything was white. Including Tennessee's face, once she realized he was here.

Rob made his way directly to us.

“The hell's he doing here?” I turned to my parents sharply.

As far as I knew, Gabriella's gossip train hadn't made a pit stop in their ears just yet, but everyone in my family, other than Wyatt, kept their cards close to their vests.

My parents, who were dressed in a tux and a purple sheath dress (you guess who wore what), both shook their heads, perplexed.

“But why would you mind? You two were thick as thieves growing up,” Mom groused, licking her thumb to wipe imaginary dirt from my cheek.

Add it to the never-ending list of things I hated about being a full-sized, hunky teddy bear who held the Favorite Child title.

“He's still thick and a thief.”

“Oh, Cruzy, I wish you wouldn’t be so surly. You’ve changed since the cruise.”

I pushed away from my family, trying to find Tennessee so I could warn her.

I found her standing with her family on a lush patch of green lawn by the dining area. The Turners were all talking animatedly.

At first, I thought maybe Trinity was having second thoughts, what with Wyatt almost scooping up someone else’s tonsils with his tongue the other day.

Who knew what could have happened if Rob and I hadn’t decided to reenact every bad teen movie ever made and pick a fight over a girl at the bar?

Wyatt could have slept with that woman.

But as I got closer, I realized that no, Trinity wasn’t upset over Wyatt at all. Tennessee and Bear were standing as a united front on one end of the lawn, while Trinity, Donna, and Bryan occupied the other side.

“Nothing is in my control anymore. Gabriella has bailed on me. I can’t believe she’s not here because of another *headache*.”

“I can,” Tennessee mumbled. “I’d believe it if she skipped the event due to a split nail.”

Her sister threw her a frosty gaze.

“Not only is my best friend not here, but my sister’s baby daddy is. Can I just have one day where it’s about me and not her?” Trinity wailed.

“Honey, the day’s all yours, but Rob has the right to see his son.” Donna rubbed at her favorite daughter’s back.

So Donna was the one responsible for Rob showing up. Bet she didn’t bother asking her elder daughter what she thought about the arrangement.

Tennessee’s face looked tight and resigned, her posture stiff.

Yup.

She definitely didn’t have anything to do with this.

I approached them, placing a hand over Tennessee’s back as I flashed them a good-natured smile.

“I see someone’s got your trousers in a twist. Anything I can do to help?”

The sight of my hand resting against Tennessee’s back sent Donna reeling. She went into a coughing fit while Bryan looked at me like I’d just landed back from Mars sporting a brand new green latex body suit.

Trinity grimaced, probably realizing she should’ve toned down her bitchiness toward her boss’ girlfriend.

Fuck it. The secret was already out in the open. It was better not to Band-Aid the situation.

It didn’t hurt that Robert was here to witness this with his own eyes.

To my surprise, Tennessee leaned a little into me, seeking my touch. Warm, pathetic liquid spread inside my chest, and I rested my chin atop of her head casually.

“It’s all under control. Sorry Rob’s here.” Tennessee cleared her throat.

“I’m not sorry,” Donna said defiantly, sticking her nose up in the air. “Bear needs a father.”

“You could’ve consulted us.” Trinity sighed. “What if Bear’s not ready?”

“Bear’s a child. He should do whatever he is told to do,” Donna pointed out.

Interesting take on parenting.

Effective one, too.

If you were a tyrant.

“You should’ve asked Mom.” Bear leaned into Tennessee, which made us look like a family of our own.

“Don’t talk to your mamaw like that,” Bryan tried to convey some authority, but his heart wasn’t in it.

His eyes were roaming the golf course across the lawn.

“Bear?” I heard a voice behind me.

We all turned around.

Rob was standing there, right in front of us. He didn't look at me, even though the bruises from our fight had barely faded from both our faces. He didn't look at Tennessee, either.

Just his son.

Bear's face looked pained. A mix of dismay and longing I hadn't seen on anyone before.

He'd seen him before, I knew, but only when Rob was about to get the boot and be kicked out of the vicinity.

And just like that, I realized I hadn't taken into consideration the one leverage Rob had over me in this situation—*bloodline*.

"Rob," Bear squeaked, separating himself from the group and pulling his shoulders back, extending to his full height to show his dad how big and strong he was.

"Hey, buddy." Rob's eyes went glassy. He rubbed the back of his neck, looking around. "I got you a bunch of presents. I know you threw most of them away, but I...I...I'm just glad your mamaw and papaw invited me here. Because I really want to get to know you. And, well, I can't blame you for being hesitant, but..."

Tennessee's shoulders slumped under my touch, and her face was overtaken by every emotion on the spectrum.

"Nice speech." Bear shrugged it off. "But Mom beat you to it. *Again*. She already told me I have to see you. She said she won't let me hang out with Cruz otherwise."

Okay. That was not completely true. It also sounded terrible. It *also* made Tennessee and me sound like a couple.

An evil couple.

Rob nodded quickly. "Cruz's fun to hang out with. We used to be best friends in high school. Would it be okay if I'm here tonight? I won't sit next to you or anything. I just want to... *watch*."

Silence rolled over the open barn. Everybody looked at Bear, waiting for an answer. The kid reddened, digging his sneaker deep into a patch of mud in the lawn and gnawing on his lip.

"That makes you sound like a creeper," he said, finally, drawing chuckles from Tennessee and me.

“I promise I’m not a creeper,” Rob said.

“Mom said you got divorced twice.”

“That makes me hasty, and possibly a tool bag, but definitely not a creeper. What do you say?”

Bear lifted an eyebrow, glancing at Tennessee. She gave him a brief nod of confirmation.

“I say whatever, but you better not be telling Dad jokes. Too early for that.”

And that was that.

Robert was here, and we all needed to suck it up and play nice.

At the rehearsal dinner, I had to sit next to Wyatt and my parents and watch Tennessee from across the table. She was seated right next to Rob, an empty seat on the other side of her, where Gabriella should have been.

I had to weed out the conversation on my side of the table to be able to hear them, which wasn’t easy, seeing as Trinity and Wyatt were arguing under their breaths.

“...said you would at least try. If you’re not taking this marriage seriously, why do I even bother?”

“Feel free to stop being a bitch at any point, honey.”

“Maybe I should listen to Nussy and find someone who pays attention to me.”

“Yeah, she’s a great source of life advice.”

“Said the guy who married a tweaker. At least she made her mistake in her teens, not full adulthood.”

“She seems to be making new ones every day. With my brother, for instance.”

Meanwhile, things were looking better for Tennessee and Rob, which, frankly, made me want to shove my head into the nearest meat grinder and set the power on high.

“I’m sorry I didn’t give you a heads-up. Your mother called me not even two hours ago. I tried to call, but you didn’t answer.” Rob turned to catch my girlfriend’s expression, looking wary.

“That sounds like a classic Donna move,” she clipped. “Apology accepted. Now if we could move on, please. No need to converse with leftovers. Do you always talk to food before you throw it in the trash?”

“I was very drunk,” he explained by way of an apology.

“You were a *gasshole*.”

“I was. Vindictive and stupid and jealous and so depressingly aware of everything I’d lost over the years. It’s no excuse, but it’s a reason. And I’m sorry for that, too.”

“You should be sorry for existing,” Tennessee said with dignity.

“I mostly am. But who knows, maybe Bear will need an organ transplant at some point and I’ll make myself useful. Dream big.”

“My big dreams died the day you ran away and left me to fend for myself.”

“Have you been getting my checks?”

“Yes.” Tennessee tore a piece of sourdough bread, popping it into her mouth, but that same fury I saw in her the first time I’d dropped her off was gone. She was getting used to his presence in her sphere. “I got them.”

“You still say *gasshole* and holy *sheep*.” Rob smiled.

She rolled her eyes. “Put your efforts where they matter. With your son.”

“Why?” Rob studied her, his hand twitching. He wanted to swipe a lock of hair off of her face. I knew, because I wanted to do the same. “Am I too late? Are you Cruz’s now? When I asked around town, no one said they knew anything about you two.”

That could also explain how half the people in town knew about Tennessee and me. Between Gabriella and Rob tag-teaming it to “fact check”, their lack of graces covered all the social bases.

I leaned forward at the table, my elbow sinking deep into some kind of beetroot dip, and listened to her response.

It came swiftly and airily, like she hadn’t even given it a second thought. “In his dreams. Cruz is just a plaything, an

interlude to pass the time. I belong to no one, Robert Gussman. Only to myself.”



Cruz is just a plaything, an interlude to pass the time.

In his dreams. I belong to no one.

That was what Tennessee had said.

Clear as the August sky.

She had one chance to own up to our relationship, to show me that she gave half a shit, that I wasn't the only one here doing the heavy lifting, and she blew it all to hell.

I knew it was bullshit posturing, but the fact that she didn't take the goddamn chance to legitimize me hurt like a bitch.

I mean, for puck's sake.

Did I just say for puck's sake? Even in my head? God, I needed another drink.

“Where are you headed?” Wyatt asked as I made a quick exit out of the rehearsal dinner minutes after we were finished.

My parents stayed behind to discuss canapes and honeymoon arrangements with the Turners. Tennessee was sneaking looks, no doubt waiting for me to come to her side.

Unfortunately for her, I had no appetite to be her designated fanboy for the evening.

I made a beeline to my car, feeling like a jackass for not telling Bear goodbye. The adults had no excuse—they were all shitheads—but Bear deserved better.

Wyatt followed my steps stubbornly, trying to catch up. I was secretly proud of him for not giving me shit even though his confession to Trinity got him in hot water.

Maybe he was finally growing up.

“Where you off to, baby bro?”

“Getting a drink downtown. I need something strong.” I stuck a finger into my tie, loosening it as I cracked my neck.

“Sign me up. I’ve been pre-gaming before the rehearsal dinner, but I need more.” Wyatt slipped his entire tie off.

“Sure about that?” I slid into my car, turning on the ignition. The engine purred. Wyatt got into the passenger seat. “Don’t want you to end up yielding to temptation again.”

Wyatt shook his head, cranking the volume of my stereo up as soon as I hit the gas pedal. Classic rock filled the car.

“No way. Cheating is way too much hassle. I think I’ll have to be faithful from now on.”

“Smart guy.”

“I take after my baby brother.”

“If only.”

We ended up at the only bar downtown. The Drunk Clam was a fine establishment that only served three types of beer, one type of whiskey, and peanuts I was pretty sure had expired pre-World War I.

“So what’s up with Nessy? You two seemed cold.”

Wyatt ordered both of us beers and perched himself on a stool at the bar. From the corner of my eye, I detected one of Trinity’s little girlfriends, who always came to the clinic to pick her up for Pilates class.

I groaned but shot her a polite smile, anyway. I didn’t want any company tonight. The woman texted on her phone furiously, while I redirected my attention to Wyatt.

“She’s a chickenshit.”

“Why?”

“She won’t own our relationship.”

“And that’s important to you because...?” Wyatt took a pull of his beer.

“I’m not some dirty little secret.”

I expected him to laugh, but he squinted thoughtfully.

“Maybe she’s trying to protect you. *Her* reputation’s tarnished.”

“Mine’s pristine and can take the hit. It could elevate hers.”

“Not if she knows everyone’ll talk about how she hooked up with the best man at her sister’s wedding and whether that was before or after he dumped the maid of honor... Why’d you think Trinity was so against y’all getting together?” Wyatt tilted his beer bottle in my direction.

“Because she’s a self-centered cow.”

Wyatt chuckled. “Well, I suppose there’s that, too. But she didn’t want the scandal to overshadow the occasion. It is supposed to be the one time in a woman’s life where everything is about her as the bride.”

“Do you even love her?”

Wyatt rubbed his chin, narrowing his eyes at a spot behind the bartender’s shoulder as he gave it some genuine thought.

“Dunno. I loved Valerie, and that turned out to be a disaster. I guess I love the idea of Trinity, and she loves the idea of me, and that’s enough. For what we want. For now.”

A few minutes later, Gabriella swaggered into the bar, dressed in something I could not describe as anything other than a self-important bikini. It didn’t have enough fabric to pass as a skirt, and that cropped shirt barely covered up her nipples.

And she had on *a lot* of makeup—I’m talking every shade of eyeshadow and enough red lipstick to paint a particularly gory crime scene—and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and you’ll get the train wreck.

Trinity’s friend was an informer.

Shocker.

Wyatt snickered and clapped my back as Gabriella’s eyes zeroed in on me. She sliced through the throng of bar-goers like Moses parting the sea.

“My, my. It sure ain’t easy being Cruz fucking Costello.”

“Cruzy,” Gabriella pouted, squeezing between Wyatt and me, parking her ass on my knee. Barely.

Most of her weight was still propped over the bar, which was why I couldn’t exactly push her away. Also, she called me by my mother’s nickname, which sent my already-soft dick shriveling into the rest of my body.

At this point, I was cracking so deep and wide, I didn't have it in me to be perfect Cruz anymore.

"Gabriella. Fancy seeing you here after your shift at Hooters."

"I figured that's the type of girl you like, considering your recent plaything." Gabriella flipped her hair, which barely moved, it had so much hairspray in it.

"She is not a plaything. She's a pain in the ass, and most days, I wonder why the hell I bother with the relationship."

"*Relationship?*" Gabriella sucked in a breath. I spun myself on the stool to get her off of my knee. "Cruz, really. Aren't you getting a little carried away here?"

"I'm not the one who missed a rehearsal dinner to throw a fit."

Damn, it felt good to be bad.

"I had a headache."

"Not anything that a few Tylenols couldn't solve, seeing as you're here now."

Just then, Tennessee walked into the bar, her head twisting here and there. My heart almost fucking screamed at the appearance of her face. She was looking for me.

Wyatt must've texted Trinity where we were. I couldn't fault him for being truthful to his future wife. No one wanted to start their marriage in the courthouse, obtaining divorce papers.

Her chest rose and fell.

Tennessee was panting, out of breath. Looking for me frantically.

I waited for her to find me. When she did, she began making her way toward me, and my heart leaped inside my chest.

But then she saw Gabriella standing next to me, and instead of proceeding, instead of claiming what was hers, showing me she was all in, she stopped, looking uncertainly across the darkened room.

Goddammit. Just make a move. One move. I'll do the rest.

But she obstinately waited by the entrance, crossing her arms, expecting me to take the first step.

Like always.

It shouldn't matter that it looked bad right now. She owed me the first move to show she *got* it.

Gabriella noticed Tennessee standing by the door. A scarlet smile bursting with venom touched her lips. She pressed her hand against my chest.

I let her.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Nessy just needs a little courage to approach her boyfriend.” Wyatt laughed, signaling for the bartender to get us another round of drinks without asking Gabriella what she wanted.

“Maybe she doesn't want you enough,” Gabriella murmured into my ear. “I know someone who does.”

She was all over me without really being all over me, her hands on my shoulders, arms, face.

I watched Tennessee with a lazy, whatcha-gonna-do-about-it smirk and hoped to hell she had a bit more balls than what I'd given her credit for.

Do it.

Come to me.

Tell the world that it's not just a fling.

My eyes begged her to come closer, my entire body hot with anticipation.

She was on the verge of something. I could tell.

She took a step forward, toward me...then three steps back.

Then turned around and ran away, leaving me at the bar with Wyatt and Gabriella.

I would say I was a fucking mess, but that would be an insult to messes all over the world. I finally understood the idea behind the word 'gutted'. I felt like a fish, my insides hooked, ripped, and thrown into a frying pan.

Great, now I was disappointed *and* hungry.

A minute later, I stood, letting Gabriella slide off of my knee again. She went down with a loud bang when her bony ass met the floor. I slapped a twenty onto the counter.

“I’m heading home.”

I gave my brother a fist bump.

Then proceeded to go back home and lick my Tennessee-shaped wounds.

Twenty-Five



Tennessee

Three days had passed since the rehearsal dinner.

I'd made sure Bear didn't see me cry. He was already going through so many changes in his life.

Seeing Cruz with Gabriella fractured something inside me—some stupid, primal pride, borne from having none whatsoever when it came to my own family, I suspected.

I couldn't bring myself to call him, to text him, to explain why I couldn't simply claim him.

Because no one has ever claimed me, and the fear of rejection, no matter how unlikely, immobilizes me.

My body just wouldn't go to him at The Drunk Clam, no matter how loudly my brain screamed at my feet to move.

Cruz, in return, had finally given up on me. It was the first time since we'd gotten back from the cruise that he hadn't called, texted, or dropped in unannounced.

It wasn't all bad.

Rob came over the day after the rehearsal dinner and played ball with Bear in the backyard for all of ten minutes, during which Bear fell down numerous times, split his lip, and took down part of my fence while trying to intercept, before Rob mewled, “Dang it all to hell. You sure you’re my kid? You ain’t got an athletic bone in your entire body!”

After which Bear had made Rob get on his skateboard and try to skate. Rob fell like a brick five times and was met with Bear’s slow, taunting drawl, “Darn it all to heck, you sure you’re my pops? I’ve seen better balance on a rubber ball!”

I’d begun to suspect these two weren’t going to find their footing, but then Rob took out his secret weapon: root beer and Monopoly.

The three of us enjoyed a two-hour game, complete with takeout burgers Rob had gone out to get, himself, and a chocolate chip pie from the local bakery.

Rob had been a perfect gentleman to me the entire time.

After my half-hearted rejection during the rehearsal dinner, in which I said I belonged to myself (the sentiment remained the same, but in retrospect, I should’ve made it clear I was seeing Cruz), I went on to send Rob a series of texts explaining that my loyalty, gratitude, and panties belonged to his ex-best friend, so he should stop embarrassing himself by trying.

But that was two days ago, and this was today.

And today, I had a bad feeling my wishy-washy approach to Cruz was going to bite me in the butt.

The old-school door chime above the diner’s entrance rang. In walked Mrs. Holland and her daughter Gabriella, both of them wearing matching brown polka-dotted summer dresses, straw hats, and designer purses.

In my opinion, matching parent-and-child clothes were cute only before puberty. Now, they just looked like the twins from *The Shining*.

“Table for two, please!”

There were few things in this world that I wanted to do less than serve Gabriella, including but not limited to drowning in a

Celestine Pool, or becoming Miley Cyrus' stylist. For that reason I hurried toward Trixie, who was flirting up a storm with Coulter.

Good for her.

Coulter may have had limited talents when it came to the kitchen, but he generally seemed like a great guy.

"Trixie, can you take table three? I'll cover one of yours..."

Trixie glanced at Gabriella and Mrs. Holland as they settled into the vinyl booth and flagged me down furiously.

"Sure thang. They look like they tip well."

They were almost certainly not going to leave a tip, but I didn't want to crush her spirit. I'd gone on to serve table five their check and to wipe down table two when Trixie appeared by my side.

"Sorry, doll. They said they want you to serve them, specifically. They were pretty adamant about it."

I bet they were.

As if Gabriella would pass up an opportunity to remind me that I was a lowly peasant and she a semi-celebrity, with hundreds of thousands of followers who fawned over every heavily photoshopped picture she posted.

I slapped a grin on my face, thanked my lucky stars I was wearing leggings under my revealing uniform, and made my way to their table, slapping two extra-sticky menus atop of it.

"Ladies. Welcome to Jerry & Sons. My name is Tennessee and I'll be servin' you today."

If killing someone with kindness were a real thing, these two would be dead any minute.

Mrs. Holland stared at me with hateful eyes. Gabriella, however, played along with my affable charade.

"Oh, Nussy, good afternoon. *Love* your new makeover! You finally look under fifty."

"I do?" I asked with mock surprise. "Dang, a few more layers of makeup and I would've been eligible for social security and the Applebee's senior discount. How's your headache doing?"

“Much better, thank you. I’m excited to be Trinity’s maid of honor.”

And I’m excited to leave this table and attend to my other customers.

“Great. Let me give you some time to look over our menu.”

“There’s no need.” Mrs. Holland jerked her chin up. “We know what we want.”

“We do?” Gabriella turned to her skeptically.

“We’ll have one sundae. No peanuts, please. And I do mean no peanuts. My little angel is allergic.” She squeezed Gabriella’s hand across the table. “So no traces of any peanuts, either, all right?”

“I’ll make sure to pass the message along to Coulter. Anything else?” I collected their menus back.

“Diet Coke for me,” Gabriella murmured.

“And coffee for me.” Mrs. Holland smiled innocently.

Shooting them one last look, I went over to Coulter and recited their order, highlighting the no-peanut rule.

“I know Gabriella.” Coulter wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his forearm, flipping bacon strips on the grill. “Don’t worry. No peanuts.”

Hurrying over to a corner of the diner, I pulled out my phone and started writing Cruz a text message.

This was stupid.

Surely, I wasn’t going to give up the best thing to happen to me since Bear (and Spanx) because of a few snotty people, even if some of them were my family. And I *did* owe him an apology for being difficult and pushing him away.

We needed to clear the air.

Tennessee: Hey. Sorry for what happened at the rehearsal dinner. I’d like to talk. Can you come over at

Coulter banged his fist on the bell, indicating one of the orders was ready.

“Table three.”

My eyes glided back to the text message I was finishing.

“Waitress! Are you going to keep us waiting just so you can mess around on your phone? It’s an ice cream! It melts!” Mrs. Holland hollered loud enough for people in neighboring states to hear.

With a low growl, I shoved my phone into my purse behind the counter, grabbed their order, and stomped my way toward their table.

Mrs. Holland was lounging back on the red vinyl, her daughter nowhere to be seen.

Where’d Gabriella go? To sharpen her fangs before sinking them into my neck?

“There you go.” I set the sundae, coffee, and Diet Coke on their table. “Hope you enjoy.”

“Oh, we will. No peanuts, right?”

“That’s what you asked a trillion times,” I confirmed. “Don’t worry, the only nuts we have around here are you and your daughter.”

“Wouldn’t kill you to be more polite.”

“Wouldn’t kill you to be more gracious,” I deadpanned.

“I cannot wait for Dr. Costello to dump you.” Mrs. Holland’s smile widened.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

“Even if he dumps me, which he very well might, he would never be with your daughter. She is everything you raised her to be—venomous, mean, petty, and perhaps worst of all—boring.”

“I suppose you’re a much better catch?”

She wrinkled her nose.

At least the smile dropped from her lips.

I shrugged. “He chose me, didn’t he?”

With those parting words, I went back to the counter, passing Gabriella on my way. She sneered at me, her shoulder purposely brushing mine as she took her seat.

“They seem like quite the pair.” Trixie untangled herself from her phone to squeeze my forearm. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” I rubbed her arm. “I’m used to it.”

After taking another order, I was about to retrieve my phone and finish the message to Cruz when I heard a loud gasp behind my back, followed by a thud.

Turning around, I found Gabriella on the diner floor, clutching her neck, moaning that she couldn’t breathe.

“My baby! My baby!” Mrs. Holland waved her hands frantically. “Someone call a doctor! I think she is having an allergic reaction! She’s allergic to peanuts!”

People began running around in all directions. Trixie grabbed the phone behind the counter and dialed nine-one-one. Someone said they might have an EpiPen in their purse, flipped their bag over and rummaged through their belongings.

Mrs. Holland was crying and doing the same, going through her daughter’s tote.

And me...I knew I had been set up.

There were no peanuts in that sundae.

I’d made sure of that.

Coulter’d made sure of that.

Mrs. Holland found an EpiPen in her daughter’s tote.

“I got it! I got it! Thank God,” she cried out in relief, running toward her daughter, who was still slithering on the floor, trying to breathe.

She jabbed the syringe into Gabriella’s outer thigh, with an extra flourish of dramatic flare for a parent who was stabbing their child.

“There’s an ambulance on the way.” Jerry rounded the counter, running toward Mrs. Holland. He crouched down on the floor to be eye-level with her, almost knocking me down on his way. “I cannot tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Holland. I’m beside myself. This has never happened to us before. A terrible human error. Terrible. We all know Gabriella is allergic to peanuts.”

“She did it on purpose!” Mrs. Holland ignored him, pointing in my direction. “She’d do anything to win Dr. Costello. She couldn’t handle the fact he took a liking to my precious Gabriella! I want her to pay! She tried to kill my daughter.”

That was the last thing she said before the ambulance pulled up at the curb in front of the diner.

And right behind it, the cops.

Twenty-Six



Tennessee

Despite my dubious reputation, I'd never been arrested before.

This was a first for me, and I sure hoped it would be a last, too. Unless, of course, Mrs. Holland and her daughter managed to put me in the can for attempted murder.

Which, I'd been told by Officer Corrigan (who'd interned under my dad when he was a sheriff) was highly unlikely, considering Coulter—who'd actually *made* the sundae—was crying rivers when he had spoken to the cops at the scene and swore that not only had he made sure that there were no peanuts in the sundae, but he happened to check out my rear as I sauntered to table three to give them the ice cream, so he'd witnessed with his own eyes there was no foul play after he'd made the sundae.

I did not tamper with the dessert.

Who knew squats could save lives?

If I was coming out of this thing in one piece, I was going to sign up at the local gym and work my butt off. All puns intended.

Currently, I was detained in a cell by myself. There were perks to living in a one-traffic-light town. One of them was an obscenely low crime rate. Officer Corrigan told me I was allowed one phone call, preferably to someone who'd bail me out.

"I happen to know your mom and pops." He pulled his belt up over his spilling belly, caught in its attempted escape from his stretched blue uniform. I was standing behind the bars, gulping down each of his words. This was decidedly *not* the time to be spacey. "I can help you make the call if you'd like. Or maybe you wanna call your sister? I can arrange for that, too."

The crazy thing was, I didn't want to call Mom, Dad, *or* Trinity.

I wanted to call Cruz.

I didn't trust any of my family members not to make me feel horrible. I also knew they would absolutely believe whatever Gabriella and her mother had fed them.

Anger washed over me when I thought about how I'd been set up, and how even though I was innocent, my family wouldn't believe me.

What had I done to earn that treatment from them?

"No." I curled my fingers over the cold metal bars, my eyes meeting Officer Corrigan's. "I want to call Cruz Costello."

"The doctor?" His eyes bulged.

No, the Renaissance painter.

"Yes."

"Do you know his number?"

My cheeks heated. "I don't remember it by heart. Could I have the Yellow Pages?"

"Sure, honey. Whatever you need."

Thirty minutes later, I was calling Cruz. He answered on the first ring, which told me that he already knew what was happening. Actually, I was sure *everybody* on planet Earth was aware of my situation.

"Tennessee."

“Hi,” I replied calmly, desperate not to be a wuss on top of being a pushover. “Sorry I’m calling. I know we haven’t spoken in three days—”

“Your bail was set for five-thousand dollars. Your dad pulled some strings, plus that’s your first offense, and frankly, everybody knows it’s bullshit.”

I heard him moving around. His car door slamming shut. He was already on his way here to bail me out. My heart surged with unexpected pleasure and warmth.

“Oh. Okay. So my dad knows.”

“He knows.”

“He’s not here.”

“He said you should sit there for the night and think about what you’ve done.” Cruz delivered the sentence wryly. There was a brief silence as I digested this.

“So not *everyone* knows I’m innocent.”

“Suppose not.”

“And you?” I asked finally.

“I know you didn’t do it,” he said simply.

Thank you.

I mouthed the words, but didn’t say them.

I *couldn’t* say them.

I still couldn’t show weakness to the man who was so outrageously out of my league, no matter how much I wanted to. I choked on them. Tried to get them out. Failed.

“Have you spoken to Bear?”

“Yes. He’s with his father,” Cruz answered shortly.

I heard him driving. The sounds of the summer crowd on the street, of cars honking, and teenagers laughing in the background.

“Is he freaked out?”

“He is upset with the situation, but he knows it’s not going to amount to anything. Your sister will pick him up from Rob’s in a couple hours, and he’ll sleep over at your parents’.”

“So everyone knows I’m in jail, and yet nobody has bothered to show up.” The taste of these words in my mouth made me want to throw up.

“They know it’s only a matter of time until you get released.”

“Still.”

“I’m on my way,” he said.

“But you waited for me to call.”

It dawned on me that he only got into his car *after* I made the call, even though he already knew what my bail bond was.

“Yes.”

“Why?” I gulped.

“I said I’m tired of chasing you. At least now I know what it takes for you to pick up the phone and call.”

I was going to text you, I wanted to cry.

The shame of failing this relationship somehow pained me more than any other failure in my life. I pressed the phone to the bruised side of my face, where my sister’d struck me, and tried to swallow the ball of tears in my throat.

But then Officer Corrigan took the phone and ushered me back to my cell.



It only took me one second to realize Cruz and I were not together anymore. All I needed was to watch him through my cell as he strode over to the booking officer of the police station.

The officer swung her eyes up from her computer screen and took him in. Tall, lean, and perfect. Clad in black slacks, a navy cashmere sweater, and a white dress shirt underneath.

He oozed confidence and elegance.

He was also currently bailing out his *puck* buddy for allegedly trying to murder his ex-girlfriend.

I stood up and walked over to the bars, watching him, mesmerized.

Feeling my gaze on him, he shot me a look, ignored my little pathetic wave, and turned his attention back to the booking officer.

Now that I had time to digest everything that was happening, I was also impressed with his willingness—not to mention ability—to front five-thousand dollars for bail money on someone he wasn't seeing anymore.

Tragically, I tried smoothing my hair into place and slapping my cheeks for some color when two officers I didn't know approached my cell to release me.

Cruz waited for me at the front desk, hands shoved inside the pockets of his slacks.

“Thank you,” I said, refusing eye contact with him.

He smiled tersely. “That’s the first time you’ve ever said that to me.”

I frowned at him. “Surely, that can’t be true.”

He’d bought me an entire wardrobe, took my son under his wing, stood up for me at the rehearsal dinner, and much more. But now that I thought about it, I really didn’t thank him for anything he’d done for me throughout our short but stormy relationship.

My stupid pride really was out of control.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“*Another* first for you,” he pointed out, opening the door to the police station for me. “Aren’t you just a box full of surprises today, Tennessee Turner.”

“Darn it. I suck.” I heaved out a sigh as I dragged my feet out the door.

“That you do, and you could use some guidance in that territory, too.”

Did he just criticize my oral skills?

“Did you drink a truth potion or something?”

I dragged my feet to his car, feeling miserable. He was cold and pragmatic, and suddenly, I realized I shouldn’t have taken for granted all the times he’d been sweet and caring to me.

“I’m in the process of giving up on some things,” he explained, opening the passenger door for me.

“Such as?”

“The fucks I give about what people think about me. Watch and learn.” He slammed the door after me.

I watched as he rounded his car, buckled his seatbelt, and started the car. He didn’t look at me. He didn’t ask how I was.

Instead, he explained in a deadly quiet, calm voice, “Now we’re going to drive out of town, where we are going to have a cup of coffee and discuss our relationship.”

“*Now?*” I spluttered.

Now was a terrible time for me to fall at his feet and explain it wasn’t that I wasn’t into him, it was that I was a complete and utter nut-less idiot (oh, the irony). I’d also just spent four hours in a jail cell.

Sure, every now and then people who used to work with my father stopped at my cell to tell me the allegations were not going to hold water and that at worst I’d be out of there by tomorrow morning, but still...

My reputation in Fairhope had taken yet another blow, and I’d have to start sucking up to my parents if I wanted to salvage my relationship with them.

“Now’s as good a time as ever.” Cruz barely touched the steering wheel when he drove, which I found both sexy and scary. “I have to pay a visit to the Duggars to make sure baby Bella is all right, and that leaves me an entire hour of giving you a piece of my mind.”

“I can’t wait to see her.”

I placed my elbows on my knees, lying unabashedly. I liked the Duggars well enough. They were blue collar, which meant they didn’t judge me as harshly as the rest.

But I certainly had bigger fish to fry than seeing their recent addition.

“She’s very cute. Looks like an alien.”

His face opened up when he talked about the baby, and my womb clenched. It was the first time in thirteen years that thing had given me any indication it was still inside my body.

Huh.

“Do you want kids?” I played with the hem of my uniform.

“Sure,” Cruz said. “A bunch. Do you want more?”

“No,” I said, feeling even more disheartened. “I can’t imagine myself with a new one, now that Bear is a teenager. It’s so much work.”

“He’ll help you out.”

“Kids cost money,” I pointed out.

“Maybe the next one will be with someone who sticks around.”

“Life taught me not to count on that.”

His jaw ticked, but he bit down on his tongue.

Fifteen minutes later, he took a right off of Interstate 74 into a cozy town that could double as Fairhope. Massive old trees, an old church, a charming Main Street, and a small creek welcomed us.

He pulled up by a small, white-bricked coffee shop with overflowing flower pots, opened the car door for me, and helped me out. I knew we must have looked strange as we entered the small shop.

Me, in my tacky pink diner uniform, and him, looking like someone’s respectable hot daddy with a few hidden kinks.

Nonetheless, the waitress who came to take our order—an Americano for him and a cappuccino for me—didn’t bat an eyelash when we sat down.

Cruz cut straight to the chase. “Tell me what happened.”

I told him about Gabriella and Mrs. Holland.

About how they insisted I’d serve them. How much they stressed that she was allergic to peanuts—something I doubted anyone in Fairhope didn’t know at this point, seeing as she advertised it as if she’d won the Nobel Prize—and how I definitely hadn’t added peanuts to the sundae.

“Coulter backed you up on that. So did Trixie.” Cruz dipped his head for a moment to check his bulky watch. “Even Jerry seemed skeptical, and he says the customer’s always right, even when Mrs. Underwood claimed she saw traces of her beloved late dog Brutus in one of your burgers.”

“Sounds like everyone in town is caught up-to-date with my latest scandal.” I rubbed my forehead, thinking about poor Bear and how his mom always managed to make headlines. “How mad are my parents?”

“That’s irrelevant, because you’ve done nothing wrong, and anyone with a working pair of eyes and a vague sense of what’s been happenin’ in town for the past month can tell you that. Now, here’s how it’s going to play out. I’m going to lay down the rules, and you’re going to abide by them and do as I say, because frankly, I’m starting to think you’re ready to let them pin an attempted murder charge on you just to avoid your parents and sister getting mad you.”

I licked my lips, waiting for more. I couldn’t argue a cork-sucking thing he’d just said. I was in danger.

Cruz graciously received his Americano, took a slow sip, and continued.

“We’re going to go back to your parents’ to pick up Bear and then head over to my house. Before we leave, you’re going to tell them we’re together, that you’re moving in with me, and that they are not to meddle in your personal affairs anymore. You will *not* try to explain yourself about Peanut Gate. You will *not* seek their approval or give them any excuses to draw you into discussing it further. You will inform them of these changes and we get the hell out. Then you will wait for them to come apologize to you. Because, sweetheart? If you don’t start demanding some respect ‘round here, no one’s going to give it to you.”

I listlessly ran the pad of my index finger over the rim of my cappuccino mug, mulling this over. On the one hand, there was nothing I wanted to do more than what he’d just offered.

On the other hand, I was scared *sheetless* he was going to wake up tomorrow, or the next day, or next week, or next *year* and realize that I wasn’t good enough for him.

Once the novelty of having the girl he'd crushed on in high school wore off, he'd see that what he had left was a skittish, overly-sarcastic woman with her life in tatters, her career nonexistent, who was still atoning for what she'd done to her parents.

Besides, if I did what he asked me to do—I might not *have* parents.

“Talk me through what’s going on in that head of yours.” Cruz leaned back in his seat, his eyes following my every moment carefully.

“I’m afraid my family may turn their backs on me if I do that.”

“They may, and in the short term, that might mean not talking to them. But in the long run, you’re all going to figure it out, and they’ll know to stop messing with you.”

It was easy for him to say.

He wasn’t a single mother.

He didn’t rely on my mother for babysitting, on my father for teaching Bear everything he needed to know about becoming a man, and on Trinity for taking Bear shopping.

He wasn’t worried sick about where he’d spend his next Christmas if things went south.

Or ripping a family apart, and the kid in it, a kid who’d had a complicated childhood to begin with.

“But what if that doesn’t happen?” I slumped in my chair. “And what if you decide to dump me next week when another dazzling Gabriella storms into town?”

“We’re playing what-ifs now?” Cruz arched a thick eyebrow.

“All I’m saying is that I’m the one with everything to lose.”

He let out a cynical chuckle. “Yeah, Messy Nussy. You’ve made it real easy to date you, goin’ around collecting scandals like stamps over the past several years.”

The worst part was I knew that if he gave me one final nudge toward his plan, I’d have gone for it in a heartbeat. I would throw

caution to the wind and give it a try, even if it meant going against my family.

But as it happened, Cruz was done playing games. He didn't seem as eager to give out reassurances as he had when we first started...whatever it was we had going on. And I couldn't grab hold of his aloofness.

I had no one but myself to blame.

Still, I hung onto my pride with bloody fingernails. With everything I had in me, my feet dangling into the abyss of humiliation. If we did this, if I gave up on everything and went with him, and he dumped me, I would never be able to show my face in this town again.

And I'd lose my family in the process.

"What's it going to be, Tennessee?" Cruz asked, his face impassive, his shoulders tense. He stole another look at his watch. That's right. He still had to pay the Duggars a house call. "You in or are you out?"

"Do I have to tell you right now?" I gave him a little haughty snort, like I was wildly amused by his theatrics.

I didn't like to be cornered. I especially didn't like to be cornered by people who had more power and control over the situation than I did.

"'fraid so, sunshine."

"You realize it's not fair."

"What I'm realizing is that not even a woman I've been pining for over half my life is worth this roller-coaster, tenth-grade dating bullshit. I've been honest, candid, and committed. You blew me off time and time again. I'm done."

"In that case, take me to my parents' house."

"To tell them we are moving in together and to shove their prejudice up their asses?"

For the first time today, I saw the same boyish, eager glint in his eyes, that made people addicted to his presence.

"No, to pick up my son and go home and try to salvage what's left of *his* reputation, if I can manage that."

“Gotcha.” He got up, throwing a wad of cash onto the table between us and shoved his wallet back into his pocket.

“I need to use the bathroom.” I looked away, my words delivered with as much dignity as I could muster.

“I’ll wait for you in the car.”

Twenty-Seven



Cruz

My head was pounding the next morning.

So much so, for the first five minutes, that I thought I was imagining the knock on my door downstairs.

Groaning, I flipped over in my bed, burying my face in one of the pillows. Huge mistake, as Tennessee's shampoo scent—daisies and some kind of dessert—lingered in my nostrils, making me ache all over.

Although maybe that pain was also due to the fact I polished off an entire bottle of whiskey.

Maybe.

After I had dropped Tennessee off at her parents' house the previous night and zipped through her street straight to the Duggars', I cooed at newborn Bella, gave her a quick checkup, and went back home, where I'd promptly tried to drink myself to death.

I regretted the day I'd told Trinity I could give her older sister a ride to the port for our cruise.

And definitely the days that followed, in which I'd thought it would be a good idea to kiss her, taste her, bury myself deep inside her sweet, tantalizing body, and weave plans on how to make her mine.

One thing was for certain—if Rob ended up winning her over, he was going to have an eternity of tantrums and insecurities to deal with, so good luck with that.

“Cruz? Oh, Cruzyyyy?” I heard a shrill voice under my bedroom window.

Gabriella.

Frankly, a visit from the Grim Reaper would have been more welcome, but I had a bone to pick with her. I unpeeled myself from my bed, cursing every aching muscle in my body as I wobbled down the stairs in a white, wrinkled shirt and a pair of unbuttoned jeans.

I tossed the door open offhandedly, knocking back the very little that was left of the whiskey from the previous night.

“Hello, Gabriella.”

She was back to looking like a modern maiden, big curls, perfect makeup, and a demure dress.

My destiny. Yay.

To marry a woman as boring and one-dimensional as this carbon copy of every main character in a cable television show I'd ever not-watched.

“Cruz,” she fussed, dragging her claws across my chest. “I just wanted to say I'm sorry.”

“That so?” I asked flatly. “Care to tell me what for?”

“Well, Nesity told Trinity that you and she broke it off. She's trying to get on her family's right side, I suppose, after what she did to me...”

I almost laughed. Tennessee had used our broken relationship as an excuse to claim martyrdom.

“And what exactly did she do to you?” I drawled.

“Oh, haven't you heard?” She soldiered into my house, uninvited, straight to the kitchen, and flipped the coffee machine

on. “She tried to kill me. Put peanuts in my sundae. Frankly, I knew she had a few loose screws ever since I first met her, but honestly, I didn’t—”

“She didn’t try to kill you, and we both know that.” I grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl and peeled it, shoving the entire thing into my mouth.

“You weren’t there.” Gabriella’s spine stiffened as she went about pouring each of us a cup. “It was horrible. I’m so lucky my mother found my EpiPen...”

“You don’t usually carry your EpiPen with you.” I knew that because I berated her for it when we were together for half a second. “Why’d you have it yesterday?”

She turned around, handing me a cup of coffee and taking a seat at my dining table. I remained standing. She made a show of shyly blowing her coffee.

“I don’t know.” She looked genuinely surprised by my question and her answer.

Since Gabriella was not a good actress, I was pretty sure she wasn’t lying.

“You don’t know how the EpiPen got in your purse?” I raised an eyebrow.

“No.”

“Interesting.”

“Maybe I just put it there, since you kept telling me to.”

“You’d have remembered.”

“What are you insinuating?” Her expression darkened, and she put her coffee cup down.

“What are you *overlooking*?” I retorted.

She swallowed. She looked wrecked by what we both agreed, wordlessly, had happened.

“You need to fix this,” I said gently. “To tell the police.”

“I will.”

I shook my head and took a seat opposite her.

“Look, Gabriella, here’s the thing. You’re a great catch, but the truth is, when we first met, I wasn’t looking for anything serious. We started dating because we knew people expected us to. And it spun out of control. The night before the cruise, when I broke things off, I did so because I wanted to be a free agent once I was on the ship. Sleazy, but true. And you were right—it did have something to do with Tennessee. I always had a thing for her, and deep down, I knew the cruise was the perfect opportunity to catch her attention.”

I didn’t know this to be true until I’d said it, but now that I had, it all made sense.

“And you did.” Gabriella did her best to hide her distaste as the words left her mouth.

I saluted her with my cup, taking a sip.

“Correct. So this whole love triangle that came after the cruise? It was never a triangle. I was always a sucker for that maddening woman. I couldn’t say no to her if I tried. Possibly even if she’d come to me, fully knocked up by my best friend, and asked me to marry her when she was sixteen.”

The truth of my statement filled my veins with hot, white anger. I hated that I’d lost her. But that didn’t mean I should lie to Gabriella. Or myself.

I’d loved Tennessee Turner from the minute I laid eyes on her.

From the first moment I’d seen her at the nursery, and she simply shone brighter than everyone else.

And the worst thing, perhaps, was the fact that I knew Tennessee was wrong. Weak. Spineless in front of her family. A complete pushover.

...and I *still* loved her.

Despite her weaknesses.

And, goddammit, because of them, too.

“You really love her.” Gabriella heaved a deep sigh, plopping her chin on her fist.

“Unfortunately.”

“Well, can’t say I haven’t tried.”

“You gave it your best shot, and you came closer than the rest.”

She stood up, looking around her, as if saying goodbye to everything. Knowing it was probably going to be the last time she was going to see the inside of this place.

“Your mother is going to be disappointed.” She smiled tiredly.

“My mother is perpetually disappointed.” I stood up, walking her to the door. “Besides, I’m counting on your best friend to bless her with a grandchild sooner rather than later to keep her off my case for a while.”

After I closed the door behind Gabriella, I covered the door with my frame, closing my eyes, willing the headache to dispel.

Goddammit, Tennessee.

Twenty-Eight



Tennessee

For the next day, I couldn't eat.

I couldn't sleep.

I couldn't drink.

All I did was think about Cruz.

Only this time (*ah-ha!*) I did something about it, too.

I sent him dozens of texts, starting the day after he dropped me off at my parents' house after posting my bail.

Tennessee: I'm really sorry.

Tennessee: Can't we just stay a secret for a few more days? Weeks? Months?

Tennessee: I'm doing you a favor, you know. No one wants to publicly claim me. I'm like...like...an STD! Gonorrhea, if you would.

Tennessee: Remember Mrs. Warren? I miss her, sometimes. But only because she reminds me of you.

Tennessee: Ugh. That sounded so much better in my head.

After the door had closed behind me and I had to face my family on my own, I knew I'd made the wrong decision.

I didn't want to be around any of them. They made me feel horrible—stupid, reckless, and unequipped. I wanted to be around Cruz, who always valued my opinions, my words, and my wishes.

My mother had yelled that she couldn't believe I'd tried to kill someone and wondered aloud how many Hail Marys I should say in church next Sunday—if I could set foot in the place ever again without burning up in flames.

My dad said he'd suffered a great deal of embarrassment from having his daughter arrested, wanted to let me rot in jail, but did mention that the evidence against me was very weak.

And Trinity flat-out refused to look at me. She stayed upstairs the entire time, opting not to come down, probably because she didn't want to hit me again in front of my son.

Bear was the only one who was supportive about it. He gave me a big hug (a *bear hug*, if you would) and told me that he believed me. It was a sad state of affairs that the only person in the household who took my word was the one I also delivered out of my vagina.

As it stood, though, I didn't have much of my family's support—if at all—in addition to losing Cruz.

Which was why I was already in a particularly sour mood when I found out I was put on a temporary leave.

“Just until everything clears up and it all blows over.” Jerry sighed on the other line as I made lunch for Bear.

“But I didn't do anything wrong,” I answered through gritted teeth.

I didn't want to beg for this job, but I didn't want my electricity to be cut off, either.

“I know that, honey pie. Everyone knows it. Which is why I expect to call you back as soon as next week.”

“You expect me to just sit around and wait for you?” I waved my fist in the air, even though he couldn't see it.

“Yes,” Jerry said simply. Unapologetically. “Look, no one else in this town is going to hire you right now.”

Too tired to bargain with him, I hung up and finished making the veggie casserole and salad. When the food was ready, I flopped on the couch and screamed into one of the throws.

Weirdly, I cared more about losing Cruz than my job.

“Mom?” I heard a few minutes later—or maybe hours—and realized I’d fallen asleep.

I rubbed my eyes, swinging my legs from the sofa and standing up. Bear was kicking off his sneakers by the door, looking sweaty and happy.

“Care Bear! Food’s ready. Help me set the table.” I was already on my way to the kitchen, pretending all was well in the world.

“Don’t worry about food. I bumped into Cruz on my way back from school. He was on his lunch break, so he bought me tacos.”

I froze mid-step, turning on my heel to look at him.

“You hung out with Cruz?”

“Yeah.” He scrunched his nose, moving into the kitchen and pouring himself a glass of water. “Sorry. I know you two broke up or whatever. But, like, it’s cool to be friends with him still, right?”

“Of course.” I recovered, plastering a smile over my face.

I wished Cruz being there for Bear was a sign he still wanted me. Unfortunately, knowing Cruz, he was just being his usual, perfect self. A painful notion I couldn’t name stabbed at me.

Cruz and Bear genuinely liked each other.

“Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you all right?”

“Of course, Care Bear! Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Uhm, because you’re crying?”

“I am?” I patted my cheeks quickly, horrified to realize that they were, indeed, wet. It didn’t help my self-pity that not one member of my family had dropped by to check how I was doing. “Well, must be seasonal allergies. Let me go wash my face real quick, honey. I’ll be right back.”

When I came back, Bear was sitting at the kitchen table, clutching his phone, looking guilty.

“What’s up?” I asked breezily. I pulled a sleeve of cookies from the pantry and dumped it between us, getting out a carton of milk and plopping beside him. “Why are you looking at me funny?”

Bear’s face contorted. “Well, I kind of did something behind your back.”

“Please don’t let ‘something’ be a girl. I’m too young to be a grandmother.”

Bear’s eyes widened, and he shook his head frantically. “Jesus, Mom, no. Not even in the same realm.”

“Right. Hit me with it, then.”

“I called Rob.”

“You did? When? And why would I be mad? I am happy you two are connecting.” I pulled two cookies from the sleeve, shoving them into my mouth.

“Well, that’s the thing. I called him so he could come here. Right now.”

I opened my mouth to tell my son he was grounded until the age of nineteen when the doorbell chimed. Bear hurried to answer the door. A second later, Rob was in my kitchen.

“Hi, Nessy.”

“Peasant.”

“I come bearing gifts.”

“Are they the monthly checks for the past thirteen years? Because I’m grateful for the last three, but you have some serious catching up to do.”

He sat next to me, plopping a huge bucket of popcorn to the center of the table. I saw by the red-and-white stripes that it was

from the local arcade.

I was trash for this popcorn. It was the greasiest, most unhealthy thing on planet Earth, and I could not resist it for the life of me.

The fact that he'd remembered my favorite snack from when we were dating made my stomach turn to mush, and a piercing zing of nostalgia ran through me.

"Hmm, popcorn. That's almost as good as the checks." I buried my hand in the carton.

Bear took some, too.

"I called Rob here because I feel like you should talk to a grown-up, and I'm just not... I don't know, good for the job." Bear stood up, looking between us. "So I'm going to go wait in my room, and after you guys are done, Rob, I want you to buy me the new Assassin's Creed."

"Only if your mom's okay with that."

Rob swung his gaze to me. I gave a quick nod. I normally liked to read about a video game online to see just how violent it was before purchasing it (spoiler: they're all violent), but in my current mental state, I would let Bear watch MMA with little to no resistance.

"Great." Bear gathered more popcorn—as much as he could fit into his fists—and evacuated the kitchen, leaving Rob and me alone.

"So..." I drank straight from the milk carton—one of the rarest joys of becoming an adult and paying your own rent. "I guess you know about my little jail stint. You were there to take care of Bear when I was inside."

"I also know it's not you who did it," Rob said curtly, opening his hand in a gesture to ask for the milk.

I passed it to him.

He drank straight from the carton, too.

"Well, my parents and sister don't."

"They've always been...hard on you."

"Oh? What makes you say that?" I nibbled on the popcorn.

“Well, remember when you told them about us, and your mother said no daughter of hers would be underage and pregnant under her roof? Your dad had to convince her not to kick you out.”

Huh.

I’d forgotten about that. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I’d been wronged very deeply and very continuously by my family throughout the years.

“Right,” I said. “I remember.”

“But that’s not why you’re down.” Rob tilted his head. “You’re used to your family, and you’re used to this town treating you as a punching bag. So why don’t you tell me what it is?”

“Cruz and I broke up,” I admitted, dropping the rest of the popcorn back into its bowl.

I couldn’t taste a thing, anyway, I was so depressed.

“You did.” Rob sat back in his seat, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Why?”

“He wanted me to move in with him.”

“The bastard,” Rob drawled.

“It’s not like that. He knew my parents and sister would lose it.”

“And that’d be their problem, not yours,” Rob surprised me by saying.

“It’s still very early. And I don’t know if he is that serious about me.”

“Oh, he is serious about you.” Rob chuckled. “Too damn serious. He still holds a grudge from that time we rock-paper-scissored it for who was going to ask you out, and he won, and I still asked you out.”

“That happened?” My mouth became instantly dry, and I snapped into attention.

Rob nodded slowly. “Yeah. I was a dickbag in my youth.”

“No kidding.”

“Point is, whatever he has for you is not fleeting. When I came back and found out he was still single, not one part of me was surprised to hear it. I always figured he’d take over from where I left things. Things had turned sour between him and me after you and I started dating.”

“He spotted for us the first—and *last* time we had sex,” I reminded him.

“Yeah.” Rob rubbed the stubble on his jaw. “I think that was the final nail in the coffin. After that, we’d just pretended to still be cool with each other. He never recovered from that.”

I felt so overwhelmed with emotions, with nostalgia, with sweet memories and painful love for Cruz, I could hardly breathe.

Rob leaned forward across the table, grabbing my hand in his and squeezing. He kept his eyes on mine the entire time.

“I’m so sorry I left you the way I did. But I’m back now, and you can count on me for anything. If you need money for rent, someone to take over when you’re overwhelmed...anything. I know we won’t be together anymore, but I can still be Bear’s dad. Now, why don’t you go over to Lover Boy and tell him how you feel? I have a video game to buy for my son.”

I pressed the pad of my finger to the table to catch grains of popcorn, flicking them back into the bucket. “I think I need to give him a second to cool down.”

“That, or you’re afraid he is not going to take you back.”

I felt myself blushing. “I’m not good with rejection.”

“Can’t blame you. It sucks. Whenever you’re ready, though, just say the word and I’ll drop in to entertain Bear while you’re trying to win Cruz over.”

Tears prickled my eyes.

“*Sheet*, Rob, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m glad you’re back.”

“Glad to be back, baby.”

Twenty-Nine



Tennessee

The next day, I dropped Bear off at school after kissing him goodbye and drove to Cruz's clinic.

It was still early, so I managed to catch a sight of my sister, who hadn't spoken to me since Peanut Gate, making her way into the clinic and opening up. I didn't even think of talking to her.

I was too scared.

Cruz joined her shortly thereafter. I thought about getting out of the car and trying to talk to him, but then a stream of patients flooded in, and I figured he didn't have time to deal with our mess.

Having no shift to go to today, I decided to drive into the big city and look for some job opportunities. Jerry was right. I wouldn't be able to get a new job in Fairhope, but no one knew me in Winston-Salem.

I made a stop at the local library, tweaked my very short resume, printed out a couple dozen copies, and breathed a silent prayer to the employment gods.

At first, I drove around looking for help-wanted signs and open vacancies outside stores and boutiques. Working at Jerry & Sons was convenient because it was so close to home, but it was also a pain, because I knew every single one of my customers, and they all talked.

Now that Rob was home, I had more freedom to get a job a little farther out from Fairhope. He worked locally, his father's office was down the street from Fairhope High.

If something happened, I could count on him to be there.

I dropped off a few resumes, and was about to drive to another buzzing part of town when something caught my eye: a billboard atop an ancient-looking building.

Do you love makeup?

Do you like dressing up?

How about becoming a STYLIST?

My answers were: yes, yes, and heck yes!

The idea of dressing people up, doing their makeup, telling them what they should do and wear was almost too good to be true. After all, I'd always used my appearance to convey something, even if it was often the wrong message.

I punched the telephone number into my phone and called. The nice lady on the other line said she'd send me a packet full of all the details. It was a six-month course, after which the company promised to help the top ten graduates find placements in the industry.

When I drove back home, my mood had improved significantly. Just for once, I allowed myself to dream about becoming something.

A personal stylist. A lady who talks fashion and garments with others. Who helps women find the best version of themselves to feel confident.

On my way back, I got a call from Rob. I picked it up, and for the first time since he came back to town, there wasn't annoyance and trepidation in me as I answered.

"What's up, Rob?"

“Nothing much. I finished work early and thought I’d take Bear out for dinner and maybe a few arcade games. Wanna join?”

“I have to go home and work on a little somethin’.” Namely, a financial plan for how I was going to pay for the stylist course. I knew Rob wanted to be there for me financially, but there was no way I was going to ask him for a loan for something that didn’t have anything to do with Bear. “But I think that’s a great idea.”

“Thank God, because that was me asking you in a roundabout way if I could spend time with our son for the evening.”

“And that’s me telling you in a direct fashion that you certainly can. Just make sure he is not exposed to alcohol, tobacco, or politics. I’ve done such a good job with him in your absence.”

He chuckled softly. “That, you did. Hey, Trinity and Wyatt dropped by my office today. They’re looking for a place.”

“Is that right?” I asked, finding myself almost unfazed by the way my sister hadn’t told me about it. It helped that I knew I’d done everything I could to keep our friendship tight. “How’s the market?”

“Booming.”

“So you think you can help them?”

“Not on their budget.”

“I thought Wyatt had a good job?” I frowned.

As far as I knew, senior engineers in Winston-Salem made bank.

“He does. He also has a crap-ton of debt after his first marriage. His ex bled him dry. And from what I was able to gather when I showed them an old colonial a little outside of Fairhope limits, your darling sister has somehow managed to blow all of her savings on her wedding.”

I winced. “See? There were pros to not getting married, I suppose.”

Rob laughed. “Honey lamb, you were worth the bankruptcy. I was just too stupid to realize it at the time.”

When I pulled up to the bungalow, I felt borderline optimistic. Sure, internally, my heart was still melting down in thermonuclear fashion just thinking about Cruz. But today smelled of possibilities (and too much flowery perfume. Some of the boutiques I applied to really needed to take it down a notch).

It reminded me that things could and would be different. That I had the power to turn my life around. And even though my family was a pain, there was Rob, who seemed really helpful, and Bear, who was slowly coming out of his shell, finding his roots with his dad.

There was almost a spring to my step as I got out of my Honda Odyssey and made my way to the door.

But then a person stood up from the rickety rocking chair on my front porch.

My archnemesis, to be specific.

The woman I hated more than the Antichrist himself.

No, not Catherine Costello.

Not Trinity or Mom, either.

The one who'd claimed I tried to kill her—Gabriella Holland.

Thirty



Tennessee

Gabriella Holland.

What was she doing here?

Without a gun, no less.

I didn't peg her for the kind of girl who could pull off a murder without a firearm. She just didn't have it in her.

Still, I found myself striding at an even pace all the way to my porch, flinging my bag across my shoulder and tossing my keychain around my finger. The picture of nonchalance.

"Nessy." Gabriella twisted her fingers together in her lap. "Can I come in for a sec?"

She looked a little shell-shocked, her curls not quite so puffy and perfect, and she wasn't wearing any makeup.

"I don't know if that's a good idea." I stuck my key into the lock, twisting it in place. "You might claim I tried to kill you again, and I heard lawyers are expensive."

“I think the state provides you with a lawyer if you can’t afford one,” she said kindly. “Anyway, I promise you want to hear what I have to say.”

She fell into step with me.

I pushed the door open and walked in, and she invited herself inside. I clutched my phone close to my chest like a lifeline. I didn’t trust this woman, who’d always been vile to me, but especially so since Cruz had entered the picture.

“Can I offer you anything? Water, coffee, tranquilizer, *peanuts?*” I made my way to the kitchen, and she followed suit.

Maybe it was too soon to make that joke, but I had zero guilt in me. I knew what I did and didn’t do.

And I hadn’t put peanuts in her sundae.

Gabriella giggled behind me. “Water’s fine. I’ll pass on the peanuts.”

“Shocker.” I opened my fridge, pulling out two bottles of water, still securely capped. If this was a ploy to throw me in the can again, she had another thing coming. I handed her one of the bottles. “How’re you feeling, anyway?”

“That’s nice of you to ask.”

She unscrewed the cap and took a sip. We were both still standing up. It was surreal, to have her in my house. A few months ago, I would have felt self-conscious about how small and cozy this place was.

Now, however, I couldn’t find it in me to care.

If there was something I’d found out recently, it was that a person’s wealth was not measured in money or belongings. Rather, it was nestled at the bottom of their soul. It was their wishes, their hopes, their character, and their ability to lift others instead of dragging them down.

“I’m feeling much better. I guess the amount of peanuts I consumed was very small, which helped. And the EpiPen definitely made a difference. By the time I got to the hospital, all they had to do was give me a shot of cortisone straight to my butt cheek and put me on some oxygen for a few hours while they monitored my condition. It was pretty straightforward.”

“I’m glad.”

“Nessy, there is something I want to tell you. To be frank, I’m not even sure *why* I’m telling you this. I just think you should know.”

“Okay.”

I leaned against the counter. The exact same spot where Cruz cornered me not too long ago and gave me a scorching kiss seconds before Bear walked in.

Lord, I was a world-class clown for managing to lose this man.

“I went to see Cruz yesterday—”

Here we go, I thought.

They were getting married. She was probably already pregnant. She won the battle, the fight, the war, and was now rubbing it in my face.

“Good for you,” I said, way too cheerfully.

“I’m not done. I went to him to see if he wanted to get back together.” She paused. “He didn’t.”

“Oh.”

It was crazy, the things my heart did in my chest in that moment. It was some next-level, Cirque-du-Soleil stuff. Apparently, the *Elation* was more than just a cruise ship.

“He brought something to my attention before I went home. The fact that I never take my EpiPen anywhere with me, even when I go to restaurants.”

I watched her carefully, unsure where this was going.

“Okay...”

Gabriella sighed, putting the cool water bottle to her forehead, apparently out of sorts.

“What I’m trying to say is, someone must’ve known I was going to need my EpiPen and made sure I had it in my purse.”

I kept watching her, waiting for more. Her gaze swung up and met mine.

“My mother, Nesy. My mother put it there. I used the power of deduction. It couldn’t have been Coulter, because Coulter knows about my allergy, and because he’s a real sweetheart who’d never hurt a soul, no matter how obscenely untalented he is in the kitchen, which is a culinary assault in itself.”

It was the first time I’d heard Gabriella crack a joke, and I had to admit, as far as wisecracks went, it wasn’t a terrible one.

“And you wouldn’t have done that, either. Why would you? You won Cruz. He was yours. And you’ve put up with so much of our... our... *behavior*,” she seemed to settle on a word, “over the years, it seemed out of character and out of place for you to pull something like that all of a sudden. Not to mention, I told you at least three times I didn’t want peanuts in my sundae, and you knew things could go south. You would never do that to your son.”

Something cracked in me when she said it. The acknowledgement from her that I was a decent mother made my heart go to her. I swallowed hard. She continued.

“That left me with only one suspect. My mother. I knew she’d been upset with me for losing Cruz. She was livid and beside herself when I told her we broke up. And then when the rumor you and he were together hit her ears, she lost it completely. She had the motive, the passion, and the proximity to me to pull it off. So I went to confront her yesterday.”

My stomach rolled all of a sudden. Mrs. Holland was insane. She’d basically poisoned her daughter. Put her life at risk.

And for what?

The town’s hottest bachelor?

As much as I mourned the problematic relationship with my own mother, I was pretty sure she was above trying to kill me to make a point.

Ninety-six percent sure, anyway.

“What’d she say?” I managed.

“She said, and it’s a quote—‘Nothing happened to you, though, did it? Now why don’t you go back to Dr. Costello and try to seduce him the old-fashioned way?’”

“Wow.” And I’d thought Trinity was bad for smacking my head into the... well, no, that was also awful. Just not...this.

“Yeah.” Gabriella plopped on a seat by the dining table, peeling the water’s label.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea your mother was so...” *Insane. Sick. Sociopathic. Marvel-villain-esque.* “Ambitious.”

She snorted out a laugh. “She’s not ambitious, she’s a bitch.”

I made a face. “We don’t curse under this roof. It gives me the hives. Can we just call her a *bleach* or something?”

“Oh, Nesy, you’re so weird. It’s really hard to hate you, do you know that?”

Her eyes were glassy with tears. I didn’t dare move. I didn’t even dare breathe. It was still too surreal for me to handle.

Gabriella Holland.

In my house.

Talking to me about her crazy mother and out-of-control plans to steal Cruz.

“The worst part is, I wasn’t even that into Cruz.” She sniffed.

“Now, I don’t know if I believe—”

“It’s true. I saw him at a dinner party a few months ago and realized who he was. I knew my mother would be delighted if we started dating, so I hooked up with him and kind of bent his arm into going out with me. I think we both did it because we were *supposed* to make sense. I was the town’s *it* girl, and he was Fairhope’s best. But that affair never took off. And when he broke up with me, I mostly wanted to save face. Then when y’all came back and it became clear he was running all over town trying to make you his, that was when I really lost it. I guess my mother’s not the only *bleach* in our family.”

“This is not a new development, Gabriella. You’ve been horrible to me for years.” I pushed off of the counter, sitting next to her. “Why?”

Gabriella rubbed the bridge of her nose, fresh tears filling her eyes again. She finished off her water bottle, then grimaced.

“Are you actually asking me this?”

“Yes.” I pushed my unopened bottle of water across the table for her to drink. “I’ve never done anything to you. In fact, growing up, you used to come over to our house all the time to hang out with Trinity, so you *knew* firsthand that I wasn’t the horrible person everyone made me out to be.”

“I was never going to go against the grain for you,” her voice turned to steel. “You were Messy Nussy, and I was your sister’s best friend. I had to make sure people knew I was not affiliated with you. I couldn’t afford to be clumped in with you in the same category. I didn’t believe the rumors about you, but I did nothing to stop them. And it didn’t help that you always looked like you didn’t care what anyone thought—”

“I *did* care.”

I do care.

“I know that now. But I didn’t before. Your exterior is pretty tough. It took something radical like my mother trying to poison me for me to get my head out of my a—”

“*Glass.*”

“*Glass.*” A contemplative smile played on her lips now. “So are you and Cruz really over?”

“Seems so,” I said miserably.

“Sorry.”

“Thanks. What are you going to do about your mother?”

“Move out as soon as possible, probably back into the city if I can afford it.” She took a sip of my water. “I mean, Fairhope is nice and all, but it’s a real graveyard. Not a lot of male variety to choose from, either.”

“I thought you made a lot of money.”

She always made sure to remind everyone about her juicy contracts. Gabriella snorted.

“I get paid in freebies, not actual money. Think my next landlord would be interested in getting eye creams for rent?”

“Doubtful.”

She stood up and looked around my kitchen, as if finally realizing where she was.

“Anyway, I just wanted to apologize and let you know I intend to head over to the sheriff’s right now and tell him, without getting into the details of it, that I’m dropping the case and that it wasn’t you who did it. I already called Trinity and your mom and told them, so don’t worry about that.”

So my parents and sister knew the truth and still hadn’t reached out. I guess they were going to sweep it under the carpet like everything else in our relationship.

No event was big enough to require them to apologize to me.

“I appreciate it.” I stood up, walking over to open the door for her.

Gabriella stopped on the threshold.

“Nessy?”

“Hmm?”

“You and Cruz...” she trailed off. “It’s different. I’ve never seen him like this. He’s always been so reserved and put together. You make him color outside of the lines, and I’m not sure it’s such a bad thing.” She gave me a quick once-over. I was wearing one of my floaty, hippie dresses and colorful sandals. “Don’t let other people ruin things for you. It’s not worth it.”

Thirty-One



Tennessee

On the day Wyatt and Trinity got married, I woke up feeling like every MMA fighter in the world punched my tit the previous night, amateurs included.

My chest hurt so bad it was a wonder I could breathe.

I all but scraped myself off of my bed, crawling my way into the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee.

Unlike me, Bear looked bright and happy as he strode in with a big smile on his face. He was already wearing his tux, which I'd had to alter three times in three months, since he seemed to be going through a crazy growth spurt.

He looked handsome with his hair slicked back, and the plume above his upper lip was conspicuously missing.

“Did you just *shave*?” I brought the coffee mug to my lips, taking a greedy sip.

He poured himself some orange juice, throwing me an embarrassed smile. “D’you like it?”

“Not if you used my razor!”

I thought about the places that razor had seen in the past few weeks. Especially during my hookup period with Cruz and wanted to keel over and throw up.

“Nope. Dad got me a brand new one. The one you see in TV commercials, with a central trimmer and stainless steel blade.”

“*Dad*, huh?”

I lifted an eyebrow, taking another sip. I tried to look much less excited than I was. I liked that Bear had a dad now.

If I expired tomorrow, Bear was officially Rob’s problem, which meant Bear had one more person to take care of him. And since I hadn’t spoken to anyone in my family for an entire week, that was definitely good news.

“Yeah. And guess what? He and Cruz said they’d take me to get a haircut in Raleigh. There’s this place where all the celebrities go. They get their haircuts there, too.”

So Cruz, Rob, and Bear were a thing now. How lovely. How truly, very lovely.

My traitorous heart did a few flips, and I put my coffee mug down.

“When did that happen?”

“Yesterday, when Dad and I went fishing and Cruz tagged along.”

They went fishing, too?

It was disturbingly wholesome.

I was starting to think they were planning Bear’s bachelor party in Vegas without my consent.

“You’re only thirteen, Bear. You should tell me if you see people who aren’t your father. I didn’t authorize this.”

“We went *fishing*.” Bear opened a cabinet over my head and took out a cereal box, pouring half of its content into a bowl. “Besides, we both know Uncle Cruz is not a bad influence on me. It’s not my fault you didn’t want to move in with him. Which, by the way, technically means *I* should be mad at *you*. I could’ve had a game room, Mom.”

He leaned against the counter and began shoveling cereal into his mouth using a spoon, sans milk. He got it from his dad. Rob never used to put milk in his cereal, which in my humble opinion was definitely grounds for deportation from this planet.

“Cruz told you that?”

“No, Dad did when Cruz wasn’t there.”

“What’d he say, exactly?”

“Only that I shouldn’t tell you that he said anything—*oops*—and that Cruz was kind of bummed about it, I guess.”

“Really?” I asked thirstily. “Did he look broken to you?”

“No.”

“Did he cry?”

Bear stared at me like I was insane.

I *was* insane.

“No.”

“Well, now.” I sniffed, tilting my chin up. “Guess he’ll survive, then. Dr. Costello is a very sought-after man.”

A sought-after man who stayed true to his word and hadn’t contacted me since he gave me an ultimatum and I blew it.

Bear gave me a pitiful look.

Heartbreak was so miserably horrible.

Now I remembered why I didn’t do relationships.

It felt the same as the last time I’d tried.



Three hours later, I walked into the bridal suite Trinity was occupying ahead of her church ceremony at the Grace Covenant Church downtown.

And when I say “bridal suite,” I mean her childhood room, because Fairhope wasn’t known for its hotels, or for its wedding venues, or really, for anything whatsoever when you thought about it.

It was the first time I'd seen my family since the peanut fiasco when I came to pick up Bear and got a shower of insults.

My family did not contact me after Gabriella had come to inform me she had set the record straight, and frankly, I had been too busy applying for loans to pay for my personal stylist course to talk to them.

Or maybe I just didn't think there was much to be said after the way they'd left things.

"Mooooooom," Trinity whined, sitting in front of her mirror in a bathrobe. "I can't do this. I really can't. I need to call the wedding off."

I slipped into the room, in which Gabriella and Mom were running like headless chickens, the hairstylist pinning Trinity's hair into place, hovering above her head.

Gabriella looked up from shining Trinity's shoes and threw me a smile. "Hi, Nesity."

"Hi, Gabriella." I closed the door behind me.

Trinity welcomed me with a huff and an eye roll, and my mother gestured toward the door.

"Nesity, you're late. Do us a favor and get everyone some refreshments and a little snack for Bethany, the hairstylist. We're having a crisis here."

Hello to you, too, Mother.

What's that? Yes, I'm okay despite the jail stint. Thanks for asking how I've been.

And yes, I'm very relieved that Gabriella told you the truth.

Pettily, I turned to Gabriella with a quizzing look, not wanting to address my mother if she couldn't even apologize for what she'd put me through.

"What's happening?"

"The makeup artist is not coming." Gabriella winced. "She got into a car accident."

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"Oh, who cares?! It's so like Nesity to always ask the wrong question," Trinity huffed.

“Yeah, she’s fine, but the doctors think she might have a concussion, so she will be staying at the hospital through the night,” Gabriella replied mildly.

I nodded and went downstairs to get everyone refreshments. Bear was already at the church with my father and Rob.

Cruz was probably there, too.

I wasn’t ready to see him.

I didn’t think I’d ever be ready to see him.

I didn’t know what to make of Rob and Cruz’s blossoming new friendship. It seemed like I had once again been pushed to the sidelines of a social circle that I was supposed to be a part of.

I got back upstairs with a tray full of sparkling water, apple juice, and cookies, and set it on the edge of the vanity, as far as possible from Trinity, whose hair was almost done. It was coiffed elegantly and dramatically.

“My goodness, what are you doing, Nesy? The juice is *literally* four feet away from me. That’s an accident waiting to happen,” Trinity bit out.

“Nesy, why didn’t you bring the triangle sandwiches I made?” Mom complained, smoothing over the wedding dress hanging on Trinity’s closet door. “I don’t understand, they were *right* there on the counter.”

“And I still don’t have anyone to do my makeup!” Trinity flung her arms in the air.

“I can do your makeup,” I said quietly.

I might’ve chosen to look like a drag queen up until a few weeks ago, but I knew my way around a makeup bag. I had a steady hand and was very good at dramatic eyeliner and contouring.

Plus, my eyeshadow game was a killer.

Trinity gave me a scandalous look. “Hard pass.”

“Don’t upset your sister, Nesy. She is stressed as it is. Just go bring the triangle sandwiches.” Mom waved me off.

“I think you should let Nesy do your makeup, Trinity,” Gabriella said gently, putting her hand on her best friend’s

shoulder. “She’s our best shot. We won’t be able to find anyone semi-professional at such a short notice.”

“She’s only going to ruin it,” Trinity moaned. “That’s her go-to. You know that as well as I do, Gabriella.”

I wanted to get up and leave. Not only the room, but the town. The state. The *country*.

The dislike I felt for and from the women in my life was so intense, so out of control, I could hardly breathe.

“You have to be practical,” Mom cooed at Trinity. “Maybe Gabriella’s right. There’s no other choice.”

“I’m still mad at her,” Trinity pouted.

I smiled cordially, suddenly completely and utterly exhausted from her casual bullying, “Guess what? I’m mad at you, too. So why don’t you shove your spoiled tantrum up your ASS and find someone else to try to make your UGLY beautiful, because lemme tell you, baby sister, this one’s going to be a challenge.”

Everyone in the room stared at me with shock.

Yup. I went there.

I cursed.

Trinity was the first to recover. Her mouth turned into an O-shaped, silent scream.

“See? She just called me ugly on my *wedding day*.”

I turned around, opened the door, and ran out, taking the stairs two at a time. Mom bolted after me like lightning.

“Tennessee Lilybeth Turner! Do you really think it’s the right time to pick a fight with your sister?”

“Yes,” I said calmly, grabbing my purse and heading for the door. “She’s surrounded by all her fans—she’s got nothing but support from you all.”

I was already dressed in my lavender bridesmaid outfit, but was seriously contemplating making a stop back at home and changing into an all-black outfit. After all, this was going to be the funeral for Wyatt Costello’s happiness.

Mom continued following me to the door. “Look, I know she is a little overwhelmed...”

I turned around sharply, raising my palm up to stop her from talking.

“No, she is not. She is a complete and utter bitch to me, and so are you. My entire life, I tried to pacify you. You worked me to the bone to get this wedding to be exactly what she wanted it to be. She didn’t even *invite* me to her bachelorette party and pretty much assaulted me into breaking up with the only man I ever truly cared about.”

“Honey...”

“And not only that,” I raised my voice, hoping Trinity was able to hear, “but when Mrs. Holland accused me of trying to kill her daughter, you simply took her word for it. It took Gabriella to come to you personally and tell you that it wasn’t true, and even then, you didn’t have it in you to pick up the phone and apologize for your behavior. Yet, you knew I would show up here today. Do my part. Support you unconditionally. I’m done. Done with you. Done with Trinity. Done with this entire family. You’re not worth my love, my compassion, my everlasting loyalty. You are not worth all the things I freely give to you, because you don’t return even an ounce of it back.”

“Nessy, wait!” Mom cried.

I didn’t listen.

I got out, making my way to my car. Driving away from the place that made me feel so weak, so inadequate, I felt a weird sense of calm wash over me.

Finally, I was taking charge of my life.

No more Messy Nessy.

No one was going to put me down anymore.

Thirty-Two



Tennessee

It took a lot from me not to go back home and change my outfit, but ultimately, I didn't want to cause an even bigger scene by showing up looking like someone's widow.

Karma'd already got my sister nice and hard by denying her the makeup artist she was counting on.

I showed up at the church early and noticed Bear, Cruz, and Rob standing on the front lawn in their tuxes, laughing about something.

When Bear noticed me, he waved for me to come over. I couldn't exactly turn around and flee, even if that's what I wanted to do, so I marched along toward them.

With each step I took, the knots in my stomach became tighter and more painful. Seeing Cruz so dashing, so gorgeous, made the weight of our breakup press against my sternum.

I stopped a good few feet away from them and smiled. "How's everyone doing?"

"Great," Rob beamed.

“Awesome.” Bear grinned.

“Fine,” Cruz clipped wryly.

“You look beautiful,” Rob offered.

“Thanks.”

“Really, Mom. Like a princess. I love Auntie Trinity, but honestly, it must suck for her to walk down the aisle knowing the woman behind her is ten times more beautiful.”

I squeezed Bear’s arm. “Aww. That’s the sweetest yet rudest thing I’ve ever heard. Thank you.”

Rob looked between the three of us, a mischievous smirk painting his lips.

“Hey, Care Bear, why don’t you come with me to ensure Uncle Wyatt is not drinking himself into a coma?”

Bear laughed. “Okay. But does that mean you’ll let me have a sip of beer like you promised?”

Rob’s face whitened, and he gave me an innocent look. “I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“You watch it, pal. You’re not out of the woods yet.” I wiggled a finger in his direction, and just like that, Cruz and I were alone.

It was painfully awkward. Especially because I’d tried calling him a few times and texted him every day, and he’d ignored every one.

I didn’t know how someone who claimed he liked me was able to disregard me so thoroughly. I didn’t know how his soul didn’t bleed all over his mattress every night before he went to sleep.

I couldn’t bear the pain of not being with him.

He held me with a cold, guarded stare.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hello.”

“How’ve you been?”

“You asked that a few moments ago,” he pointed out.

I was trying to work my way into an apology. No, into asking him to take me back, but he was making it hard .

“Can’t we be friendly?” I asked.

Cruz looked at me through his dark-blue, thickly-lashed eyes that I couldn’t stop dreaming about, rearranging the bow tie in his tux. “Sorry, sweetheart, no.”

“No?” I echoed weakly.

“No. I don’t want to be friendly with you. I’m an all-or-nothing type of guy, and right now, you’re offering me nothing, so I’m not going to give you the perks by pretending I don’t care.”

There was so much I wanted to say, starting with how I was absolutely willing to give him my all, but before I could speak, a hand grabbed me by the shoulder and turned me around.

“Nessy, quick. Trinity’s asking for you.”

It was Gabriella, who wore a replica of my own lavender dress and the face of a woman who was facing death row.

The sight of Gabriella and me together gave Cruz pause. He looked at both of us with open interest before letting the mask of his indifference slip again.

“Gabriella,” he said.

“Cruz.” She smiled weakly. “Save a dance for me.”

“With pleasure.”

Poisoned dagger, meet my heart.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said to Cruz.

He turned around and walked over to Rob, Wyatt, and Bear without even acknowledging me.

I let Gabriella drag me through the lawn into the limo Trinity had rented for the occasion.

“What does she want?” I murmured on my way to the limo. “Is her something blue my face after she strangles me to death?”

“She tried doing her own makeup and failed miserably. She asked for you, but then your mom said you basically bailed and

no longer wanted anything to do with their miserable asses. So Trinity decided to come to you so you could do her makeup.”

A few seconds later, I was sitting in front of Trinity in a spacious limo that smelled like lemons and champagne. Trinity’s entire face was puffy from tears, and she was hiccupping uncontrollably, looking at me like a sick puppy.

“Nessy...” Hiccup. “I...” Hiccup. “Makeup...” Hiccup. “Gone wrong...”

I screwed my mouth into a scowl, looking around us.

“The driver will have to take us to the park or something. Somewhere sunnier where I can have some natural light.”

“I’ll ask him.” Mom nodded, flicking a button to make the partition roll down as she spewed out instructions.

A few moments later, I was doing a bride’s makeup while she sat on an old, rusty swing, in full wedding gown, while ignoring her tearful apologies to me.

“Thank you. Thank you so much. Oh, Nessy, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank your lucky stars we’re genetically sisters, or I’d have left you to walk down the aisle looking like your nephew painted your face while you were asleep.”

Thirty-Three



Tennessee

The ceremony itself was okay.

I couldn't stop staring at Cruz, who completely ignored my existence.

I knew people were paying close attention to the two of us, considering how crazy the rumors had been, and I was also aware that it looked like he had dumped me and now I was pining for him for eternity.

And strangely...I didn't care.

I had put so much emphasis on looking strong and unfazed throughout the years...and it got me absolutely nowhere. Now, I was hurting, and it was okay. I didn't want to conceal it.

It was the truth.

Wyatt and Trinity exchanged vows. There were a lot of tears. Most of them were his. Man, did the man bawl his eyes out. I wasn't sure if he was devastated to tie himself to another crazy woman, or suffered from some sort of a hormonal influx.

Cruz had to hand him a tissue midway through his oath.

Even Father O’Neill rushed through the *if anyone can show just cause why this couple should not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace* part, suspecting Wyatt himself was going to do just that, and we’d have a runaway groom on our hands (which reminded me—why were there no books and movies about runaway grooms? Surely, they existed, too?).

When Father O’Neill instructed Wyatt to kiss Trinity, it looked like they were trying to give each other mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Then Trinity burst out in tears after holding herself together for so long and whacked him with the bouquet, moaning, *what the hell is wrong with you?* followed closely by *look what you made me do. I swore in a church, goddammit!*

On the way to the reception, there was a human-train accident. One of Trinity’s childhood friends stepped over another woman’s dress, and they both toppled over an elderly couple.

Soon, there was a pile of people by the pews, trying to untangle themselves from one another. I was pretty sure Trinity was having a heart attack. She always liked everything to be perfect, especially when her new mother-in-law was in the vicinity.

But when I stole a glance at my sister, she looked a little amused and not at all tearful anymore at the sight of people trying to stumble out of church without slipping over one another.

Her eyes met mine unexpectedly.

“Bet you this is the only thing people are going to remember when they talk about my wedding years from now,” she said to me, her way of handing me an olive branch.

But I wasn’t quite so ready to let our feud go.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The groom cried like a little girl who watched *Bambi* for the first time. Don’t count on it.”



When we got to the venue on the outskirts of Fairhope, things began to look up. The weather was glorious—a little on the hot side, but still beautiful—and the flowers surrounding the open barn were in full bloom.

The tables and seats were rustic and elegant, freshly painted in white, swathed in romantic tablecloths, and a centerpiece flower arrangement on each of them, consisting of fresh daisies, lilies, and roses.

There were sparkling fountains, a floating gazebo, manicured lawns, and a family of swans shyly angling their faces to take in the guests in a nearby pond.

I also heard that the food was delicious, and that Wyatt and Trinity went for the most expensive culinary options, so I was hopeful the unlucky streak of the new Costello couple had come to an end, even if I still desired to *beach-slap* the bride.

The Turners and the Costellos (sounds like a seventies' band full of people with big hair and bell bottom jeans) were seated at a long king's table decorated with pink roses, antique candleholders, and lanterns.

No wonder Trinity blew most of her savings on this wedding. There was no way Dad could've paid for the napkin holders alone from his retired sheriff's pension.

I was seated as far as possible from Cruz and didn't think for one moment that it was by accident. Catherine Costello looked pleased to have me banished from her precious son's sphere.

She even patted Cruz's hand and said, extra loudly, "See the woman with the green turtleneck dress? The one next to Fiona Rouse? I want to make an introduction. She just started her residency at the Johns Hopkins Hospital."

I continued pining for Cruz in dignified silence, occasionally answering my mother, sister, father, and Bear who tried to grab my attention and talk to me. The more I stared at him, the more I realized there was a real possibility I was going to beg him to have me back.

Publicly.

Very publicly.

Happily?

The only way to get him back was to show him he was more important to me than my stupid pride.

When the speeches came, I sat back and sipped some wine. I didn't normally drink in front of my family—I was always so desperate not to embarrass them in any way—but today, something fundamental had changed in me.

I vowed to live my life for myself and my son, not for anyone else.

The speeches were carried by Cruz, who was Wyatt's best man, and Gabriella, the maid of honor.

Cruz went first.

He delivered the perfect speech, starting with Wyatt's description as a chubby, cherubic baby, his embarrassing, wannabe-Jon-Bon-Jovi adolescence years, and even glossed over *that* unfortunate marriage in a highly entertaining manner.

He had the guests in stitches, but also in tears, and served his captive audience with what must've been one of the best speeches to be carried at any wedding, at any time, in the history of the world.

Good luck to you, Gabriella.

When Cruz sat down, I saw Trinity and Gabriella exchanging hushed words. Gabriella smiled in embarrassment, nodded, and walked back over to her side of the table.

I arched an eyebrow.

She didn't bail on that part, too, right?

Because everyone knew wedding speeches were like obituaries. Nobody wanted to do them, but someone had to.

"Nessy?" Trinity turned in my direction, all smiles.

Oh, no.

"Yes?" I replied with coldness that shocked even me.

"Would you care to make a speech for me?"

"I would not, actually. What happened?" I couldn't help but bite back. "Gabriella got cold feet again?"

“Actually,” Trinity tried to muster another smile, but this one was a little wonky, a lot sad, “I told Gabriella I wished for my sister to carry the speech for me. I know it’s very last minute, but I figured...well, I’ve been really horrible to you, haven’t I? I made you feel like you were less-than, and on top of that, didn’t choose you to be the maid of honor, even though you certainly pulled your weight. So I thought...I mean, I was hoping...”

A rush of adrenaline ran through me.

This was her way of apologizing.

But it was too little, too late.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I said tightly, sitting back in my seat. “I don’t have anything written, and I’m Messy Nessy, remember?”

“You’re my sister,” Trinity maintained. “I like your mess. Your mess is great. Perfect. And you know me better than anyone else.”

“I don’t want to embarrass you,” I shot back, a little anxious now.

Everybody was looking at us.

Everybody.

It was becoming clear she was asking me to do it, and that I didn’t want to. Funnily enough, I didn’t mind being the bad guy anymore.

“You’ll never embarrass me.” She handed me the microphone, her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. “Please.”

I snatched the mic from her hand, standing up with a low growl. I was going to make her pay for it. A round of applause came from our audience as everyone took me in.

I put the microphone to my mouth, sighing. “Don’t be so happy, you still haven’t heard what I’m about to say.”

A roll of nervous laughter swept over the open-spaced room. People clapped again. I looked around the room, drawing a breath. I felt Bear’s fist curling around the hem of my dress, tugging.

I looked down.

He smiled and mouthed, “*You’ve got this.*”

I looked at the familiar faces, realizing that they all blurred together in my vision.

“First of all, I was tasked with giving this speech exactly two seconds ago, so my guess as to what’s about to leave my mouth is as good as yours, but knowing me, I suspect it will at the very least be entertaining.”

More laughter.

I stole an anxious look at Cruz. He sat back like he was made out of stone, taking a long sip from his beer, checking his phone.

The *jackgass*.

“Trinity and Wyatt. Wyatt and Trinity.”

I played with one of my earrings, buying time. Saying their names in different variations wasn’t going to do me much good. It wasn’t an essay I was trying to fill with words to hit a word count.

“Who would’ve thought, huh? Not me, that’s for sure. I always thought she had a huge crush on Justin Kent.” I winced. “Sorry, Justin, who is here. And his wife, who is also here...it worked out fine for everyone. Other than Wyatt, obviously.”

This really made people laugh.

Everyone, including Trinity herself and Wyatt, who leaned into her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. As far as I was aware, this was the first time he’d shown her any type of warmth in public since they’d started dating.

My chest swelled with pride.

I held onto the microphone a little tighter.

“I mean it, though. Trinity’s always been the golden one. The one with the straight A’s. She helped me so much when Bear was born. Even gave up all of her savings to help me pay for his ear surgery. She’s the best sister anyone could ask for.” I turned to look at her, my eyes crinkling. “Which is why she became a nurse. I don’t know any other woman in the world who could charm her way into a toddler’s good graces even though they know she’s about to stick a needle in them.”

More laughter.

I wasn't doing badly at all.

"I think that's the trouble with living in the shadow of a hero, though. You don't know just how much you have until you drift apart. I almost lost...I mean, I *did* lose a hero like that, I guess."

I snuck another look at Cruz.

His jaw was stiff, his eyes narrow and darkened, but at least he was no longer focused on his phone.

Now his entire attention was on me.

"I just..." I shook my head. "I'm glad my sister bagged the man she wants. The man of her dreams. Because it's not to be taken for granted. Sometimes the good ones slip between the cracks, and you can't reach and pull them back to you."

By the way my mother placed a hand on the small of my back, I knew I was detouring, fast.

But it was too late.

I had a chance to be heard by Cruz, and I wasn't going to mess it up this time. I didn't even care that I was stealing Trinity's thunder.

This was truly the only time I'd ever done that maliciously—deliberately—and she needed to deal with it.

For the first time in my life, I was selfish.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it. A lot has changed since Trinity got engaged to Wyatt. For one thing, our families went on a cruise together. And that's when I..."

Don't say had wild sex with Dr. Cruz Costello. I repeat don't say had wild sex with Dr. Cruz Costello.

"That's when I fell in love with Dr. Cruz Costello," I finished.

People gasped and choked on their drinks in the audience. I soldiered through, the hysteria bubbling in my throat reminding me that I'd just admitted to a room full of people who despised me, that I was in love with their idol.

"I fell in love with him, and I think maybe, for a moment in time, he fell in love with me, too."

I turned to look at him fully now.

He stared at me with fascination. There was no tenderness or love there. Just the surprise and awe of someone who was witnessing the carnage of a train wreck happening in slow motion.

It was too late to back down from this, though, so I let it all out, even if Catherine Costello looked like she was about to stab me with her steak knife.

“I can’t live without you, Dr. Costello. I mean, I *can*, but I don’t want to. Not in the spoiled way people don’t want to do things, like laundry and the dishes. I know this is the wrong time and certainly the wrong place. But Cruz, I’m going to take my chance and tell you—the ultimatum you gave me the other day? I accept! I accept your offer!”

I thought it was a nice touch. To finally give him what he wanted, move in with him, after being all wishy-washy. I’d seen scenes like that in movies and TV shows all the time.

This was my grand gesture, and as such, he couldn’t deny me.

Cruz’s expression was unreadable, his mouth pressed into a hard line. Not exactly the way a Disney prince looked before whisking his favorite princess away on a magical carpet, but hey, I had to work with what I got.

“Sorry, sweetheart, that offer has expired.”

What.

There were more gasps.

People pulled out their phones and directed them at my face. Catherine clutched her heart, like she was about to have a breakdown. Her husband side-eyed her quietly, undoubtedly not buying into her theatrics.

Trinity surprised me by shooting Cruz a murderous stare and reaching across the table to give my hand a squeeze. I felt the air leave my lungs. The earth shaking under my feet.

He’d said no.

He didn’t want me anymore.

I closed my eyes, letting the humiliation sink in.

Then he continued.

“I’m not an interlude to your ordinary program, Tennessee Turner. Nor am I a life choice like veganism you can slip in and out of, depending on your family’s mood. I love our families, but not enough to let them tamper with the big love of my life. But you don’t seem to feel the same. I don’t want you to move in just so you can move out the first time I piss you off. When things go wrong. When your sister decides to have a fit. When my mother thinks you’re unsuitable for me and things get hard. In short—I don’t want to let you in, when it’s so perfectly obvious you are going to bail on me as soon as things get hard again.”

“I won’t,” I cried out. “I promise.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then what do you suggest?” I blurted out, my infamous, never-yielding pride in tatters. People were gulping in every second of this. This was too good to be true. The town’s screw-up being rejected by the national darling. “I can’t just give you up. I love you.”

“I understand. The way I see it, there is only one solution.” He folded his arms over his chest.

“What is it? I’ll do anything.”

“*Anything?*”

“Okay, not a threesome. And no pee stuff in the bedroom.”

Snorts and laughter came from the audience, but not all of them were amused. Some covered for uncomfortable coughs.

My mother fainted.

Catherine looked like she was about to leave and was waiting for someone—*anyone*—to stop her.

No one did, and so she stayed anyway.

“That narrows ‘anything’ down pretty significantly,” Cruz pointed out.

“Oh, just tell me, Cruz.”

“Marry me.”

“What?”

“Make an honest man out of me, Tennessee Turner, and I’ll have you back. Any other solution just won’t work for me. I already told you it’s all or nothing. You said nothing doesn’t suit you—well, give me your all.”

All eyes clung to me, waiting for my answer.

Bear squeezed my hand under the table, whispering under his breath, “I want a game room, Mom.”

My mother murmured that she was going to disown me if I refused him. Apparently, she’d come to.

Dad grunted that he *really* couldn’t afford another wedding.

Trinity whimpered in Wyatt’s ear that her thunder had been stolen once again.

And Catherine Costello keeled over and emptied her stomach on a nearby patch of lawn.

“Yes,” I heard myself say, a smile spreading over my mouth. “Yes, I will be your wife, Dr. Cruz Costello.”

Thirty-Four



Cruz

I nearly tackled my entire family to the ground on my way to Tennessee, mowing over Wyatt and parts of my mother’s dress.

I picked Tennessee up and kissed her long and hard in front of an audience who’d come to celebrate Wyatt and Trinity’s love and, until moments ago, were pretty sure there was no love lost between their siblings.

I’d feel bad if it wasn’t for the fact that Wyatt and Trinity were in it for the arrangement. Or that I’d been in love with the woman I just got engaged to since before she was out of diapers.

Tennessee clung to me, her lips glued to mine almost childishly, like I could disappear at any moment.

“I missed your mouth so much. The rest of you, too.”

“You’re going to have a lot of one-on-one time with both of us, sweetheart. Starting today.”

“Gross,” I heard Bear grumble behind my fiancée’s back. “I’m still here, you know. And the rest of the county, too, for that

matter, so get your hands off my mom. Dad, can you believe what he's doing to her?"

He can, and he's done much worse, I was tempted to say.

Rob chuckled and clapped his son's shoulder as I put Tennessee back down gently, pushing away strands of her golden hair so I could take a better look at her.

Mine.

I tucked her under one of my arms, so she couldn't run off. She was laughing and crying at the same time. I let her have her moment while people trickled to the table to congratulate us, stunned and amused in equal measures.

No one looked overtly annoyed or disappointed with the announcement, other than Mrs. Holland, who got up and left around the time Tennessee had confessed her love for me.

Wyatt appeared in my periphery, Trinity by his side.

"You sure know how to make a scene." He arched an eyebrow, slapping my back in a bro-hug.

I tilted my head toward Trinity. "Sis-in-law?"

"What?" she spat in annoyance.

"You mad?"

"Mad doesn't even begin to cover it, Dr. Costello." She pinched her lips. "But not at my sister. She couldn't help what left her mouth. I pushed her into a corner with that little speech. She just rambled her way into this confession. You, on the other hand, proposed to someone else on my wedding day."

"I'm sure that happens all the time. You know how many people are dying right now?"

"*At my wedding, too, I should add.*"

"What can I do to make it up to you?" I gave her a genuine smile.

"*Nothing* you can do will ever make it up to me." She stamped her heeled foot on the raised ramp of the table, then scowled. "Aw. Now I think I sprained my ankle."

"Even if I pay for your honeymoon?"

“Even if you...hold on, expenses, too?”

“Promise not to get too wild with my credit card?”

“Never. And you’ve got yourself a deal.” Trinity reached to shake my hand, and I took it, laughing. She turned to Tennessee, scrunching her nose. “I really am sorry about everything, Nussy. I was so wrapped up in making this day the best of my life, I totally forgot that I was making it a miserable few weeks for everyone else, you included. You’ve been there for me, even when I didn’t deserve you, and I will never forget that or take you for granted ever again. I promise to do better.”

“Me, too.” Donna Turner wedged herself between Trinity and Wyatt, giving Tennessee an intense kicked-puppy look. “The wedding stress is no excuse. We were so unfair on you and Cruz. I’m so sorry, honey.”

Behind them, I could see my dad poking my mother to enter the human circle we’d formed. She tried to swat him away, but he only gave her a more solid push.

She stumbled into us, pouting.

“Guess I have my own apology to hand out.” She rolled her eyes like a sulky teenager. “I may or may not have been wrong to tamper with Cruz’s love life. It’s just that he’s always been so perfect and I had his entire fairytale planned for him. So when he went off-script, I got so...so...”

“Mad?” Tennessee finished for her.

“Yes!”

“I know, same here. Half the time we were together, I asked myself what the heck he was doing.”

My mother gave a low, appeased chuckle. “It never occurred to me that he’d have different plans. Does seem a bit controlling, put that way.”

There was a brief silence before Rob shrugged and said, “This may be one of the rare times when I *don’t* have a reason to apologize to anyone, but in the spirit of being the town’s new favorite fuck-up, now that Nussy is showing promising signs of being Dr. Costello’s dutiful and esteemed wife, I’m sorry, too.”

“What for?” Bear asked, frowning.

Rob put a hand on the teenager's shoulder. "Well, son, I can't be sorry for the day you were conceived because that turned out to be the only thing to keep me going during the dark days—these last few weeks changed my life. But, uh, let's see. I guess I'm sorry for not giving Bear my obvious, undisputed athletic gift."

"Your humility, too," Tennessee pointed out.

"I'm glad for you, bro." Rob shook my hand. "And thank you."

"For what?"

"For officially crowning me Fairhope's newest hottest bachelor. Unless you have second thoughts and want to try to make it work again?" Rob winked at Tennessee.

She pushed his chest away, laughing.

"In your dreams, Gussman."

Epilogue



Tennessee

We made baby number two under the same bleachers where I got pregnant with Bear.

It happened after we came back from eloping in Vegas (the thought of having a full-blown wedding made me want to throw up. Plus, I simply couldn't take the chance Dalton and Jocelyn got an accidental invitation. I couldn't stomach any more conversations about vaginal lip-lifts and foot fillers. And, I still had nightmares about that cruise and all the two-penis lies I'd spewed there).

Bear was still at Rob's, my parents were out of town, and Wyatt and Trinity were looking at houses in Knoxville, closer to his new job.

Cruz and I were bored, and he suggested we go catch a Fairhope High football game. Show support for the local team.

"Ah, I don't set foot in that football field," I said. "Not since the day I got knocked up there."

At first, he laughed it off.

Then, when he realized I was serious, he said, “But Bear’s a student there...?”

I winced. “This is why I got him into video games and skateboarding and discouraged any type of field sport.”

“You’re a crazy woman.”

“I’m well aware.”

According to Dr. Cruz Costello, the best way to get rid of a phobia is to face it head-on. The following day, we snuck onto the football field in the middle of the night.

He even wore his varsity jacket, which I found kinkily hot (also, extremely tight for the correct size of his shoulders). He tugged me under the bleachers and did all kinds of things to me, and this time, I *did* come.

Twice.

Okay, three times.

He really knows how to use his tongue.

When he finally pulled a condom out, I knocked it out of his hand.

“I stopped taking the pill.”

His face lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah. I know you want a baby, and—”

“I want you more than I want a baby, so don’t just do it because of me.”

“I’m not,” I protested. “What do you take me for, a ditzy teenager? I’m doing this because I think we’ll make a really good-looking baby, and I want to tie you down to me so I can continue living in your house, which, by the way, has been my dream house since babyhood.”

“That’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Oh, Lord, really?” I asked in surprise.

That was a pretty depressing thing to find romantic.

He nodded.

“Well, how about this? I want to grow old with you and be there for you when you whine about your hip replacement, arthritis, and deep vein thrombosis.”

“Thank you, sweetheart, for planning my early grave before I hit middle age. Now can you shut up so I can put it in?”

And that was that.

He was in.

That was nine months ago.

And now?

Now I’m running the risk of losing him, since my nails are sinking deep into his veiny forearms.

“I’m going to kill you,” I pant. “I am. What’d you do to me?”

I’m in a hospital bed, delivering our baby while Bear and our families wait outside. It’s Christmas, and all I want to do is eat pudding and watch *Mama Mia* and wonder how Amanda Seyfried still manages to stay so skinny.

“The epidural should kick in any minute now.” Cruz taps my hand lovingly, smiling down at me.

“Good, because I’m about to kick *you* out of here if that doesn’t happen. I can’t believe you did this to me.”

“I seem to remember you being a willing participant.”

The doctor walks into the room, flashing Cruz a hey-I’m-a-doctor-too-high-five smile.

Totally ignoring me.

I’m going to sue him later for that.

“Good news is, Nurse Hallie said the head’s popping out, so we’re good to start pushing. Are you ready to meet your baby, Mrs. Costello?”

“No!” I scream, flinging my arms in the air.

“She is,” Cruz amends with an easy smile.

Twenty minutes later, Adriana Sylvia Costello is in my arms.

She looks like a sweet, harmless alien. I’m talking ET-cute, not like the aliens who come to our planet to invade our countries

and rectums. Her eyes dark and blue like her dad's, her head as bald and shiny as Bruce Willis'.

“Look at you,” I coo, holding her in my arms. “And to think you almost didn't happen because of your mother's stupid pride.”

Cruz kisses my forehead and runs a finger over his daughter's cheek.

“I would've made you mine one way or the other. I never would've given up on you.”

Note to self: never let this man go. He's the real deal.

Before you go

Did you know I have a newsletter? And did you know that in this newsletter, I send fresh, ongoing, never-seen-before chapters of a short story every month? Well, now you do! Make sure you sign up and never miss out on any of my new books, sales, and giveaways (that is actually a lie. I always forget to notify my readers about giveaways and sales, but I'm pretty good about letting you know about new releases):

[Sign up here](#)

Acknowledgements

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If you enjoyed *Bad Cruz* (or if you didn't, but still have something to say about it), please consider leaving a review. Even the briefest of reviews can help the next person decide whether or not to give Nussy and Cruz a try.

Thank you so much,

L.J. Shen

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Sparrow
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Midnight Blue
Dirty Headlines
The Kiss Thief
In the Unlikely Event
Playing with Fire
The Devil Wears Black

Before you leave, here's a sample of *Vicious*. Enjoy!

Chapter One

Emilia

My grandmama once told me that love and hate are the same feelings experienced under different circumstances. The passion is the same. The pain is the same. That weird thing that bubbles in your chest? Same. I didn't believe her until I met Baron Spencer and he became my nightmare.

Then my nightmare became my reality.

I thought I'd escaped him. I was even stupid enough to think he'd forgotten I ever existed.

But when he came back, he hit harder than I ever thought possible.

And just like a domino—I fell.

Ten Years Ago

I'd only been inside the mansion once before, when my family first came to Todos Santos. That was two months ago. That day, I stood rooted in place on the same ironwood flooring that never creaked.

That first time, Mama had elbowed my ribs. “You know this is the toughest floor in the world?”

She failed to mention it belonged to the man with the toughest heart in the world.

I couldn't for the life of me understand why people with so much money would spend it on such a depressing house. Ten bedrooms. Thirteen bathrooms. An indoor gym and a dramatic staircase. The best amenities money could buy...and except for the tennis court and sixty-five-foot pool, they were all in black.

Black choked out every pleasant feeling you might possibly have as soon as you walked through the big iron-studded doors. The interior designer must've been a medieval vampire, judging from the cold, lifeless colors and the giant iron chandeliers hanging from the ceilings. Even the floor was so dark that it looked like I was hovering over an abyss, a fraction of a second from falling into nothingness.

A ten-bedroom house, three people living in it—two of them barely ever there—and the Spencers had decided to house my family in the servants' apartment near the garage. It was bigger than our clapboard rental in Richmond, Virginia, but until that moment, it had still rubbed me the wrong way.

Not anymore.

Everything about the Spencer mansion was designed to intimidate. Rich and wealthy, yet poor in so many ways. *These are not happy people*, I thought.

I stared at my shoes—the tattered white Vans I doodled colorful flowers on to hide the fact that they were knock-offs—and swallowed, feeling insignificant even before *he* had belittled me. Before I even knew *him*.

“I wonder where he is?” Mama whispered.

As we stood in the hallway, I shivered at the echo that bounced off the bare walls. She wanted to ask if we could get paid two days early because we needed to buy medicine for my younger sister, Rosie.

“I hear something coming from that room.” She pointed to a door on the opposite side of the vaulted foyer. “You go knock. I'll go back to the kitchen to wait.”

“*Me?* Why me?”

“Because,” she said, pinning me with a stare that stabbed at my conscience, “Rosie’s sick, and his parents are out of town. You’re his age. He’ll listen to you.”

I did as I was told—not for Mama, for Rosie—without understanding the consequences. The next few minutes cost me my whole senior year and were the reason why I was ripped from my family at the age of eighteen.

Vicious thought I knew his secret.

I didn’t.

He thought I’d found out what he was arguing about in that room that day.

I had no clue.

All I remember was trudging toward the threshold of another dark door, my fist hovering inches from it before I heard the deep rasp of an old man.

“You know the drill, Baron.”

A man. A smoker, probably.

“My sister told me you’re giving her trouble again.” The man slurred his words before raising his voice and slapping his palm against a hard surface. “I’ve had enough of you disrespecting her.”

“Fuck you.” I heard the composed voice of a younger man. He sounded...amused? “And fuck her, too. Wait, is that why you’re here, Daryl? You want a piece of your sister too? The good news is that she’s open for business, if you have the buck to pay.”

“Look at the mouth on you, you little cunt.” *Slap.* “Your mother would’ve been proud.”

Silence, and then, “Say another word about my mother, and I’ll give you a real reason to get those dental implants you were talking about with my dad.” The younger man’s voice dripped venom, which made me think he might not be as young as Mama thought.

“Stay away,” the younger voice warned. “I can beat the shit out of you, now. As a matter of fact, I’m pretty tempted to do so. All. The fucking. Time. I’m done with your shit.”

“And what the hell makes you think you have a choice?” The older man chuckled darkly.

I felt his voice in my bones, like poison eating at my skeleton.

“Haven’t you heard?” the younger man gritted out. “I like to fight. I like the pain. Maybe because it makes it so much easier for me to come to terms with the fact that I’m going to kill you one day. And I will, Daryl. One day, I will kill you.”

I gasped, too stunned to move. I heard a loud smack, then someone tumbling down, dragging some items with him as he fell to the floor.

I was about to run—this conversation obviously wasn’t meant for me to hear—but he caught me off guard. Before I knew what was happening, the door swung open and I came face to face with a boy around my age. I say *a boy*, but there was nothing boyish about him.

The older man stood behind him, panting hard, hunched with his hands flat against a desk. Books were scattered around his feet, and his lip was cut and bleeding.

The room was a library. Soaring floor-to-ceiling, walnut shelves full of hardbacks lined the walls. I felt a pang in my chest because I somehow knew there wasn’t any way I’d ever be allowed in there again.

“What the fuck?” the teenage boy seethed. His eyes narrowed. They felt like the sight of a rifle aimed at me.

Seventeen? Eighteen? The fact that we were about the same age somehow made everything about the situation worse. I ducked my head, my cheeks flaming with enough heat to burn down the whole house.

“Have you been listening?” His jaw twitched.

I frantically shook my head *no*, but that was a lie. I’d always been a terrible liar.

“I didn’t hear a thing, I swear.” I choked on my words. “My mama works here. I was looking for her.” Another lie.

I'd never been a scaredy-cat. I was always the brave one. But I didn't feel so brave at that moment. After all, I wasn't supposed to be there, in his house, and I definitely wasn't supposed to be listening to their argument.

The young man took a step closer, and I took a step back. His eyes were dead, but his lips were red, full, and very much alive. *This guy is going to break my heart if I let him.* The voice came from somewhere inside my head, and the thought stunned me because it made no sense at all. I'd never fallen in love before, and I was too anxious to even register his eye color or hairstyle, let alone the notion of ever having any feelings for the guy.

“What’s your name?” he demanded. He smelled delicious—a masculine spice of boy-man, sweet sweat, sour hormones, and the faint trace of clean laundry, one of my mama’s many chores.

“Emilia.” I cleared my throat and extended my arm. “My friends call me Millie. Y’all can, too.”

His expression revealed zero emotion. “You’re fucking done, *Emilia.*” He drawled my name, mocking my Southern accent and not even acknowledging my hand with a glance.

I withdrew it quickly, embarrassment flaming my cheeks again.

“Wrong fucking place and wrong fucking time. Next time I find you anywhere inside my house, bring a body bag because you won’t be leaving alive.” He thundered past me, his muscular arm brushing my shoulder.

I choked on my breath. My gaze bolted to the older man, and our eyes locked. He shook his head and grinned in a way that made me want to fold into myself and disappear. Blood dripped from his lip onto his leather boot—black like his worn MC jacket. What was he doing in a place like this, anyway? He just stared at me, making no move to clean up the blood.

I turned around and ran, feeling the bile burning in my throat, threatening to spill over.

Needless to say, Rosie had to make do without her medicine that week and my parents were paid not a minute earlier than when they were scheduled to.

That was two months ago.

Today, when I walked through the kitchen and climbed the stairs, I had no choice.

I knocked on Vicious's bedroom door. His room was on the second floor at the end of the wide curved hallway, the door facing the floating stone staircase of the cave-like mansion.

I'd never been near Vicious's room, and I wished I could keep it that way. Unfortunately, my calculus book had been stolen. Whoever broke into my locker had wiped it clean of my stuff and left garbage inside. Empty soda cans, cleaning supplies, and condom wrappers spilled out the minute I opened the locker door.

Just another not-so-clever, yet effective, way for the students at All Saints High to remind me that I was nothing but the cheap help around here. By that point, I was so used to it I barely reddened at all. When all eyes in the hallway darted to me, snickers and chuckles rising out of every throat, I tilted my chin up and marched straight to my next class.

All Saints High was a school full of spoiled, over-privileged sinners. A school where if you failed to dress or act a certain way, you didn't belong. Rosie blended in better than I did, thank the Lord. But with a Southern drawl, off-beat style, and one of the most popular guys at school—that being Vicious Spencer—hating my guts, I didn't fit in.

What made it worse was that I didn't *want* to fit in. These kids didn't impress me. They weren't kind or welcoming or even very smart. They didn't possess any of the qualities I looked for in friends.

But I needed my textbook badly if I ever wanted to escape this place.

I knocked three times on the mahogany door of Vicious's bedroom. Rolling my lower lip between my fingers, I tried to suck in as much oxygen as I could, but it did nothing to calm the throbbing pulse in my neck.

Please don't be there...

Please don't be an ass...

Please...

A soft noise seeped from the crack under the door, and my body tensed.

Giggling.

Vicious never giggled. Heck, he hardly ever chuckled. Even his smiles were few and far between. No. The sound was undoubtedly female.

I heard him whisper in his raspy tone something inaudible that made her moan. My ears seared, and I anxiously rubbed my hands on the yellow cut-off denim shorts covering my thighs. Out of all the scenarios I could have imagined, this was by far the worst.

Him.

With another girl.

Who I hated before I even knew her name.

It didn't make any sense, yet I felt ridiculously angry.

But he was clearly there, and I was a girl on a mission.

“Vicious?” I called out, trying to steady my voice. I straightened my spine, even though he couldn't see me. “It's Millie. Sorry to interrupt, y'all. I just wanted to borrow your calc book. Mine's lost, and I really need to get ready for that exam we have tomorrow.” *God forbid you ever study for our exam yourself*, I breathed silently.

He didn't answer, but I heard a sharp intake of breath—*the girl*—and the rustle of fabric and the noise of a zipper rolling. Down, I had no doubt.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my forehead against the cool wood of his door.

Bite the bullet. Swallow your pride. This wouldn't matter in a few years. Vicious and his stupid antics would be a distant memory, the snooty town of Todos Santos just a dust-covered part of my past.

My parents had jumped at the chance when Josephine Spencer offered them a job. They'd dragged us across the country to California because the health care was better and we didn't even need to pay rent. Mama was the Spencers' cook/housekeeper, and Daddy was part gardener and handyman. The previous live-in couple had quit, and it was no wonder. Pretty sure my parents weren't so keen on the job either. But

opportunities like these were rare, and Josephine Spencer's mama was friends with my great-aunt, which is how they'd gotten the job.

I was planning on getting out of here soon. As soon as I got accepted to the first out-of-state college I'd applied to, to be exact. In order to do so, though, I needed a scholarship.

For a scholarship, I needed kick-ass grades.

And for kick-ass grades, I needed this textbook.

"Vicious," I ground out his stupid nickname. I knew he hated his real name, and for reasons beyond my grasp, I didn't want to upset him. "I'll grab the book and copy the formulas I need real quick. I won't borrow it long. Please." I gulped down the ball of frustration twisting in my throat. It was bad enough I'd had my stuff stolen—*again*—without having to ask Vicious for favors.

The giggling escalated. The high, screechy pitch sawed through my ears. My fingers tingled to push the door open and launch at him with my fists.

I heard his groan of pleasure and knew it had nothing to do with the girl he was with. He loved taunting me. Ever since our first encounter outside of his library two months ago, he'd been hell-bent on reminding me that I wasn't good enough.

Not good enough for his mansion.

Not good enough for his school.

Not good enough for *his town*.

Worst part? It wasn't a figure of speech. It really *was* his town. Baron Spencer Jr.—dubbed Vicious for his cold, ruthless behavior—was the heir to one of the biggest family-owned fortunes in California. The Spencers owned a pipeline company, half of downtown Todos Santos—including the mall—and three corporate office parks. Vicious had enough money to take care of the next ten generations of his family.

But I didn't.

My parents were servants. We had to work for every penny. I didn't expect him to understand. Trust-fund kids never did. But I presumed he'd at least pretend, like the rest of them.

Education mattered to me, and at that moment, I felt robbed of it.

Because rich people had stolen my books.

Because this particular rich kid wouldn't even open the door to his room so I could borrow his textbook real quick.

“Vicious!” My frustration got the better of me, and I slammed my palm flat against his door. Ignoring the throb it sent up my wrist, I continued, exasperated. “C'mon!”

I was close to turning around and walking away. Even if it meant I had to take my bike and ride all the way across town to borrow Sydney's books. Sydney was my only friend at All Saints High, and the one person I liked in class.

But then I heard Vicious chuckling, and I knew the joke was on me. “I love to see you crawl. Beg for it, baby, and I'll give it to you,” he said.

Not to the girl in his room.

To me.

I lost it. Even though I knew it was wrong. That he was winning.

I thrust the door open and barged into his room, strangling the handle with my fist, my knuckles white and burning.

My eyes darted to his king-sized bed, barely stopping to take in the gorgeous mural above it—four white horses galloping into the darkness—or the elegant dark furniture. His bed looked like a throne, sitting in the middle of the room, big and high and draped in soft black satin. He was perched on the edge of his mattress, a girl who was in my PE class in his lap. Her name was Georgia and her grandparents owned half the vineyards upstate in Carmel Valley. Georgia's long blonde hair veiled one of his broad shoulders and her Caribbean tan looked perfect and smooth against Vicious's pale complexion.

His dark blue eyes—so dark they were almost black—locked on mine as he continued to kiss her ravenously—his tongue making several appearances—like she was made of cotton candy. I needed to look away, but couldn't. I was trapped in his gaze, completely immobilized from the eyes down, so I arched an eyebrow, showing him that I didn't care.

Only I did. I cared a lot.

I cared so much, in fact, that I continued to stare at them shamelessly. At his hollowed cheeks as he inserted his tongue deep into her mouth, his burning, taunting glare never leaving mine, gauging me for a reaction. I felt my body buzzing in an unfamiliar way, falling under his spell. A sweet, pungent fog. It was sexual, unwelcome, yet completely inescapable. I wanted to break free, but for the life of me, I couldn't.

My grip on the door handle tightened, and I swallowed, my eyes dropping to his hand as he grabbed her waist and squeezed playfully. I squeezed my own waist through the fabric of my yellow-and-white sunflower top.

What the hell was wrong with me? Watching him kiss another girl was unbearable, but also weirdly fascinating.

I wanted to see it.

I didn't want to see it.

Either way, I couldn't *unsee* it.

Admitting defeat, I blinked, shifting my gaze to a black Raiders cap hung over the headrest of his desk chair.

"Your textbook, Vicious. I need it," I repeated. "I'm not leaving your room without it."

"Get the fuck out, Help," he said into Georgia's giggling mouth.

A thorn twisted in my heart, jealousy filling my chest. I couldn't wrap my head around this physical reaction. The pain. The shame. The *lust*. I hated Vicious. He was hard, heartless, and hateful. I'd heard his mother had died when he was nine, but he was eighteen now and had a nice stepmother who let him do whatever he wanted. Josephine seemed sweet and caring.

He had no reason to be so cruel, yet he was to everyone. Especially to me.

"Nope." Inside, rage pounded through me, but outside, I remained unaffected. "*Calc. Textbook.*" I spoke slowly, treating him like the idiot he thought I was. "Just tell me where it is. I'll leave it at your door when I'm done. Easiest way to get rid of me and get back to your...activities."

Georgia, who was fiddling with his zipper, her white sheath dress already unzipped from behind, growled, pushing away from his chest momentarily and rolling her eyes.

She squeezed her lips into a disapproving pout. “Really? Mindy?”—My name was Millie and she knew it—“Can’t you find anything better to do with your time? He’s a little out of your league, don’t you think?”

Vicious took a moment to examine me, a cocky smirk plastered on his face. He was so damn handsome. Unfortunately. Black hair, shiny and trimmed fashionably, buzzed at the sides and longer on top. Indigo eyes, bottomless in their depth, sparkling and hardened. By what, I didn’t know. Skin so pale he looked like a stunning ghost.

As a painter, I often spent time admiring Vicious’s form. The angles of his face and sharp bone structure. All smooth edges. Defined and clear-cut. He was made to be painted. A masterpiece of nature.

Georgia knew it too. I’d heard her not too long ago talking about him in the locker room after PE. Her friend had said, “Beautiful guy.”

“Dude, but *ugly* personality,” Georgia was quick to add. A moment of silence passed before they’d both snorted out a laugh.

“Who cares?” Georgia’s friend had concluded. “I’d still do him.”

The worst part was I couldn’t blame them.

He was both a baller and filthy rich—a popular guy who dressed and talked the right way. A perfect All Saints hero. He drove the right kind of car—Mercedes—and possessed that mystifying aura of a true alpha. He always had the room. Even when he was completely silent.

Feigning boredom, I crossed my arms and leaned one hip on his doorframe. I stared out his window, knowing tears would appear in my eyes if I looked directly at him or Georgia.

“His *league*?” I mocked. “I’m not even playing the same game. I don’t play dirty.”

“You will, once I push you far enough,” Vicious snapped, his tone flat and humorless. It felt like he clawed my guts out and

threw them on his pristine ironwood floor.

I blinked slowly, trying to look blasé. “Textbook?” I asked for the two-hundredth time.

He must’ve concluded he’d tortured me enough for one day. He cocked his head sideways to a backpack sitting under his desk. The window above it overlooked the servants’ apartment where I lived, allowing him a perfect view directly into my room. So far, I’d caught him staring at me twice through the window, and I always wondered why.

Why, why, why?

He hated me so much. The intensity of his glare burned my face every time he looked at me, which wasn’t as often as I’d like him to. But being the sensible girl that I was, I never allowed myself to dwell on it.

I marched to the Givenchy rubber-coated backpack he took to school every day and blew out air as I flipped it open, rummaging noisily through his things. I was glad my back was to them, and I tried to block out the moans and sucking noises.

The second my hand touched the familiar white-and-blue calc book, I stilled. I stared at the cherry blossom I’d doodled on the spine. Rage tingled up my spine, coursing through my veins, making my fists clench and unclench. Blood whooshed in my ears, and my breathing quickened.

He broke into my friggin’ locker.

With shaking fingers, I pulled the book out of Vicious’s backpack. “You stole my textbook?” I turned to face him, every muscle in my face tense.

This was an escalation. Blunt aggression. Vicious always taunted me, but he’d never humiliated me like this before. He’d stolen my things and stuffed my locker full of condoms and used toilet paper, for Christ’s sake.

Our eyes met and tangled. He pushed Georgia off his lap, like she was an eager puppy he was done playing with, and stood up. I took a step forward. We were nose to nose now.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I hissed out, searching his blank, stony face.

“Because I can,” he offered with a smirk to hide all the pain in his eyes.

What’s eating you, Baron Spencer?

“Because it’s fun?” he added, chuckling while throwing Georgia’s jacket at her. Without a glance her way, he motioned for her to leave.

She was clearly nothing more than a prop. A means to an end. He’d wanted to hurt me.

And he succeeded.

I shouldn’t care about why he acted this way. It made no difference at all. The bottom line was I hated him. I hated him so much it made me sick to my stomach that I loved the way he looked, on and off the field. Hated my shallowness, my foolishness, at loving the way his square, hard jaw ticked when he fought a smile. I hated that I loved the smart, witty things that came out of his mouth when he spoke in class. Hated that he was a cynical realist while I was a hopeless idealist, and still, I loved every thought he uttered aloud. And I hated that once a week, every week, my heart did crazy things in my chest because I suspected he might be *him*.

I hated him, and it was clear that he hated me back.

I hated him, but I hated Georgia more because she was the one he’d kissed.

Knowing full well I couldn’t fight him—my parents worked here—I bit my tongue and stormed toward the door. I only made it to the threshold before his callused hand wrapped around my elbow, spinning me in place and throwing my body into his steel chest. I swallowed back a whimper.

“Fight me, Help,” he snarled into my face, his nostrils flaring like a wild beast. His lips were close, so close. Still swollen from kissing another girl, red against his fair skin. “For once in your life, stand your fucking ground.”

I shook out of his touch, clutching my textbook to my chest like it was my shield. I rushed out of his room and didn’t stop to take a breath until I reached the servants’ apartment. Swinging the door open, I bolted to my room and locked the door, plopping down on the bed with a heavy sigh.

I didn't cry. He didn't deserve my tears. But I was angry, upset and yes, a little broken.

In the distance, I heard music blasting from his room, getting louder by the second as he turned the volume up to the max. It took me a few beats to recognize the song. "Stop Crying Your Eyes Out" by Oasis.

A few minutes later, I heard Georgia's red automatic Camaro—the one Vicious constantly made fun of because, *Who the fuck buys an automatic Camaro?*—gun down the tree-lined driveway of the estate. She sounded angry, too.

Vicious was vicious. It was too bad that my hate for him was dipped in a thin shell of something that felt like love. But I promised myself I'd crack it, break it, and unleash pure hatred in its place before he got to me. *He*, I promised myself, *will never break me*.

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