



BROKEN
forever

A FOREVER SERIES NOVEL

CARY HART

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BROKEN FOREVER

Cary Hart

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Dedication

To all my readers, I heart
you so hard! *kissy face*

Author's Note

The Forever Series is the first set of books I ever wrote, all the way back in 2016! Can you believe that?

This story is so special to me for so many reasons. I'll get into that, but first, let me give you a little backstory. I started reading romance back in 2013 and fell in love with the escape. Long story short, I met an author, read her books, fell in love with a secondary character, reached out when I wanted more, and when I did, she got excited and told me to write the "more." Of course, I laughed it off and tried my best to convince her there was a story there. I created additional characters, built another town, came up with a solid plot, and even explained how it could be a spin-off series.

I mean, I was pretty darn confident I could persuade her to do this. And I was wrong. Her hands were tied, her series was complete, but she mentioned something again about me writing their story.

How? How could I take one of her characters and make it mine? You can't. But Amazon had this place where you could write fan-fiction called Kindle Worlds, and this author just so happened to have a world I could write in.

So, I took her one secondary character, created a world of my own, and LOVED it so much, I decided to write two more books spinning off my very own story published in Kindle World.

In August of 2018, Amazon decided to do away with the program and revert the rights back to all the authors. I'd

planned to re-release them right away, but there's been one thing holding me back: I've grown as a writer.

This doesn't sound like a bad thing, and it isn't, but growing makes it almost impossible to re-write parts of the story to make it match my style back then. I've polished some things up, but for the most part, I decided to leave the story as is.

So, I hope you enjoy this fun, light-hearted, laugh-out-loud romantic comedy! Be sure to keep reading afterward to see my current backlist and new releases for the next year.

XOXO ~ Cary

Chapter One

Lillian

“Lillian, the *only* reason I’m giving you this opportunity is because of Daisy.” Fisher’s voice echoes in my ear, stressing again how much he loves his wife—my sister—and how far he’s willing to go to make her happy. “I almost lost her once due to your stupidity and I’m not about to let that happen again.”

Of course. It’s always about Daisy Daniels-Hamilton, my younger sister by ten years. The carefree wild child, who never planned to have a family, just so happened to land the family I always wanted. Life’s not fair.

“Fisher, please,” I don’t know why I’m begging, but I am. “How many times do I have to explain myself? I didn’t know.”

“Lillian.” Fisher takes a deep breath then sighs. Not just a sigh of irritation but one of pity, and that is the last thing I want people feeling for me right now. “I get it and I’m sorry for being such a dick, but I need to know that you can be professional.”

I’m beyond irritated and this conversation reminds me of why I left in the first place. I’m not going to be treated like this and I don’t want anything from him, not anymore, and I especially don’t want his pity. “Fisher, or should I call you Mr. Hamilton?” I pause, giving him a moment to answer.

“Lillian, aside from being family now, I think you know me well enough to call me Fisher.”

“And that is the problem, isn’t it? How well I know you?” I will myself not to go there. Not to remember the plans I made, the future I had mapped out in my head since we were freshmen in college. “Why don’t you just spit out what it is you want from me because we both know I’m capable of whatever it is you need.”

“There she is.” Fisher’s voice booms through the phone and echoes in my ear. “The Beast is back.”

“I never left. Remember, no rest for the wicked.” I chuckle remembering our inside joke.

“Well good, because this is going to take up the majority of your time. Remember that local joint that Daisy had a fascination with? Loved their burgers?”

“You mean the bar that is actually called The Bar?”

“The one and only.”

“What does this have to do with me?” I question, wondering where he is going with this.

“The owner wants to expand. Open another location, possibly two.” I can hear papers rustle on the other end. Fisher was never one for organization. I was the one who kept him on track.

“Fisher, I’m getting bored. Again, what does this have to do with me?” Honestly, I just want to get off the phone. Talking to him reminds me he was only a dream and is now someone else’s reality. The story of my life.

“Damn, Lilly, a little bitchy are we?” He uses the nickname Daisy has for me, but it doesn’t sound right coming from his mouth. My name is not Lilly and the sooner everyone remembers that the better off I will be.

Sometimes I find myself wanting to scream “I’m Lillian Richards!!” but I have a feeling it would fall upon deaf ears. I’m forgotten, just like my biological father. Lost and confused, I try to be me but now I’m wondering who is “me”? Would I have been different if my father would have been around? Someone I could call my own.

“First off, *you* demanded professionalism, if that is what you want, please call me by my given name, Lillian Richards. It seems my little sister has been rubbing off on you in more ways than one. Second, get on with it. I don’t have time to listen to you ramble on about nothing. Get to the point or this conversation is over.”

I couldn’t help myself. I thought if I gave him an earful he would just hang up and think twice about working with me. I can’t keep doing with this. I thought I was over him—over the idea of him—but I’m not. He has it all, the successful business, loving spouse, and now a baby. Everything I never knew I wanted... until now.

“As I was saying...” Fisher sounds slightly agitated. “The owner wants to expand and I’ve decided to invest as silently as I can. The business is successful, tourists and locals love it. The atmosphere, the food, it’s all perfect. We just need to make sure the next location will have the same vibe. That is where you, *Lillian Richards*, come into play. I need you to meet with the owner first thing tomorrow morning. Get a feel for his ideas and then scout out locations together.”

“Why me?” I’m afraid to find out the answer. The last thing I want is for him to do me any favors. I can find my own way, I’ve been doing it most of my life.

“Actually, this is Daisy’s idea. She thinks this would be good for you. You know, to get back into the swing of things.”

“Fisher, I don’t need a charity job. I’m perfectly capable of
—”

“We both know you are more than qualified to head up this job, but to be a hundred percent honest, Daisy”—his voice softens as it always does when he speaks about his new family —“is afraid you are going to run again. She thinks if you’re busy, you’ll stay.” *Well, hell... what do I say to that?* “Just say you will take the job. For *me*.”

“Fine. I’ll do it.” I regret it the moment the words leave my mouth.

Chapter Two

Lillian

This morning I run on routine. It seems to be the only way I can function anymore. Wake up, coffee, shower, get ready, and then sit around pondering what I am going to do with my day. But today, should be different. After all I have something to do. *Work*. It's what I know, yet this doesn't seem like a right fit either. Why? Why doesn't my normal seem *normal* anymore?

The moment my sister tripped and fell down those steps is when I lost the one constant thing in my life. Gone in just a single moment. You know how people say they see their life flash before their eyes when something tragic happens? Well, that's what happened. In that moment, I realized I was a bad person. Selfish and evil. Only thinking of myself and what I wanted. Who does that? I can tell you... this girl, Lillian Richards.

All ready to go I grab my purse in one hand and coffee cup in the other, pulling the door shut with my foot as I hurry out.

“Shit!” Reaching into my purse, I dig around for my keys. “Why me?” I look up to the corridor ceiling hoping someone, anyone, will answer. Weighing my options: hoofing it the ten blocks to The Bar or calling my creepy perv landlord... not happening. I guess the only option is to walk.

I figured with strutting down a concrete walkway, in three inch high heels, my feet would be killing me by now, but I'm actually hanging in there. Only a couple more blocks to go.

With the breeze picking up I'm thankful I decided for a tighter up-do. Only a few strands of hair of have worked their way down from my perfectly tight bun. Hating the floaters tickling my cheek, I tuck the brown locks behind my ear. A move that I soon regret as the memories flood back.

"Let me get that for you." Bryan slowly brings his hand up, gently caressing my skin until he gets to the hair that fell into my face. Picking it up in his hand he examines it, rubbing it between his fingers. "This is your natural color." It's more of a statement than a question.

"Bryan, what are you doing? This isn't what we agreed on." When I left the beach house I just wanted to forget. Feel anything other than what I was feeling.

He tucks the loose strands behind my ear. "I'm not sure," he whispers. "I never expected you to feel so soft." He brushes his hand back down the path it just took, cupping my face in his palm, running his thumb across my cheek bone.

"Bryan, don't. This isn't what I wanted," I say, frozen in place by his touch.

"You wanted me to make you forget. So, let me do that." He crashes his lips down on mine and slowly I begin to feel something other than the hurricane of emotions that I have felt since the accident.

"Miss? Hello? Are you okay?" I feel a small hand on my arm. Looking around I see a young girl, with deep green eyes and long, chestnut brown hair pulled back in a high ponytail. She opens her mouth but I'm so deep in thought I can barely make out what she is saying. "Do you need help? Are you lost?"

I take in my surroundings. I'm still just a couple blocks away from my destination. "Oh! Umm... yeah. I-I'm fine," I say, trying to convince myself more than her.

"Is something wrong with your face? Did you get stung?" She nods toward my hand, which is still rubbing the side of my face.

I must have been lost in the memory. "There was a spider web. A huge one and I walked right through it and you know where there is a web there are spiders." I shiver, knowing that part of the lie that I'm telling is true. The only thing I hate more than my life right now is spiders. "Big spiders. I must have freaked out."

"Ew, gross. I hate those creepy little things. They have all the power." The young girl looks around as if she is waiting for the made-up spider to pop up somewhere. "So, you're okay then?"

"Yeah, I'm good. I was just on my way to The Bar up the street." I begin to walk and she follows.

"Yeah? Me too." She hurries past me and starts to walk backward. "I'm Misty, a waitress at The Bar. I promised the owner I would come in and help with prep work since he has a meeting this morning." She holds out her hand for me to take. "And you must be his meeting."

Taking her hand I introduce myself, "I'm Lillian Richards."

"Ohhhhhh... *The* Lillian Richards? I read an article online about you and Fisher Hamilton." Here she goes. Misty is going to tell me all about my life and finish with how he married my sister. "If I could be half the businesswoman you are, I would consider myself successful." Oh great. Now I get

to hear how she wants to make herself into a brutal bitch. Lovely. “For my mid-term, I have to turn in a five-year business plan. Would you be able to take a look at it for me?”

“Misty, is it?” I never forget a name or a face, but this is for the best. I don’t have the energy to waste my time with her. She caught me in a weak moment and that time has now passed. Move on, little girl. “I’m extremely busy and my main focus is helping The Bar out. So, if you will excuse me, I have a meeting to attend.” Reaching The Bar, I open the door and catch a glimpse of her reflection in the window. *Damn it!* The poor girl acts like I just told her there was no Santa. “How about I give you my card and you can email me your plan... when it’s done.”

“Really?” She practically bounces up and down.

“Really.” I surrender.

“Ms. Richards, thank you so, so much. I’m totally going to rock this class now.” She gleams with excitement.

“Well, go rock on then.” I can’t believe those words actually came from my mouth. “Hey, do you know where I can find the owner of this joint? Looks like he is late.”

“Sure, just head to the back, turn left and go up the stairs. His apartment is up there. Second door on your left.”

“Thanks, Misty.”

“No problem. It’s the least I can do for *The Lillian Richards*.”

Shaking my head, I follow the directions my new friend gave me. Careful to not get my heel caught, I take the steps one at a time. Reaching the top, I hold my hand up ready to knock, but the door opens to a man in nothing but a towel

wrapped low around his waist and a hand towel drying off his hair.

“Misty?” he hollers while continuing to dry his hair. “I have an appointment in ten minutes. Stall for me.” He starts to close the door.

“Ten minutes is up.” Smirking at the sight in front of me, I lean against the rail, thankful I caught my soon-to-be-partner off guard. Time to intimidate.

“I’ll be damned. Looks like you’re early.” Dropping his hands to his side, he straightens and looks up.

“*You!*” Why is *he* up here? Bryan Andrews, the bartender who consumed my thoughts just moments ago.

“Me.” Bryan stretches his arms above his head, grabbing the door frame, making his towel hang even lower. “Eyes up here, doll.” He smirks.

This can’t be happening. Looking around him, I wonder why he is occupying the apartment above The Bar. “Bryan, if you could please excuse me, I have a meeting with the owner in about five minutes and I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

“Your meeting is with me. Eight o’clock, correct?” He looks down at his watch. It’s one of those waterproof ones that surfers wear. He probably never takes it off.

“Seriously?” I look, wondering if he’s pranking me and the owner will come out any second.

“Yep.” He backs away from the door, holding it open for me.

“Figures,” I mumble to myself.

“What was that?”

Standing my ground, I say, “Figures the owner would let the bartender handle his business for him. This won’t work.” I turn to leave.

“And why won’t it?” He tilts his head to the side.

“This just tells me he is *not* serious about pursuing this partnership.” I turn and walk away, not bothering to look back. “This deal is done.”

“Un-fucking-believable!” I hear his bare feet padding behind me. “I *am* the owner.”

“Come again?” I turn around.

“You heard me.”

“Bryan, I don’t have time for these games.” I don’t know what he thinks he’s doing, but this job is important to me. It’s the only I can show everyone the *new* Lillian Richards.

“I. Am. The. Owner.” He all but spells it out. “Your meeting is with *me* and I’m dead serious about pursuing this partnership.”

“Bryan, this is cute and all, trying to play Monopoly with the big boys, but this...” I point around and speak slowly, and mimic him. Two can play the smart-ass game. “Is. Not. A. Game.”

Take that, smart-ass!

I realize I’m being a bitch, but it’s all I know. I’m ruthless and the Fisher I know would never make a lousy business deal like this.

“How about you lose the attitude, come back in, and we can go over some of the plans I have?” He stands at the door. Pleading with me to give him another chance.

“This won’t work. We need someone who will take this seriously. Not a bartender who is just rolling out of bed a few minutes before a meeting.” I’m done with this conversation. I can’t work with Bryan Andrews. I won’t.

“Listen here. I don’t know who you are right now, but this is not the woman I remember. Well, maybe it’s the woman I remember but not the woman I had in my bed.” He throws my moment of weakness in my face. I needed a break from life and he promised and delivered just that.

“Quiet, someone may hear you,” I whisper loudly, not wanting my newfound friend downstairs to overhear. “Please don’t bring that up again. That was a mistake. It should have never happened.”

“But it did,” Bryan shoots back. “Listen, I’m not trying to give you a hard time. Actually, I’m pretty sure you are the one doing that, but I’m up at four a.m. every single day, making sure everything is set up, beer is chilled. Then I head out to the beach to clear my head and catch a few waves. I’m normally back here by seven, but today, on my way back, I noticed a lady panicking as her child had locked itself in the car and was refusing to get out. I stopped and helped. You know, because that is the right thing to do. Do you even know what the right thing is?” He looks at me waiting for me to say something, but I don’t. “And I was back in plenty of time to take a shower and ready myself before the meeting. It was you who was early and decided to trespass by coming up to my apartment unannounced.”

I have nothing. No reply. No excuse.

“What? Not what you expected from the young, incredibly hot, surfing bartender?” The corner of his mouth lifts up into a smirky smile.

“Not exactly,” I reply. “How about I head downstairs, you get dressed, and we can conduct business over breakfast?”

“Perfect. Give me five minutes.” He turns around, slamming the door in my face. I’m not even sure how I ended up on the other side of the door, but I can tell you, the door in the face? That is a first for me and I’m not sure how I feel about it.

Chapter Three

Bryan

“Damn it!” Did I just do that? Slam a door in a woman’s face? The face of the one and only Lillian Richards, the woman who can make or break my future? “What’s gotten into me?”

Great, now I’m talking to myself.

In a hurry, I whip the towel off and head over to the table where I flung my dry cleaning over the chair on my way back from my morning errands. Helping that poor woman threw me a tad behind schedule and I wasn’t about to be late for this meeting. Fisher and I have become friends over the past year, but I didn’t want to be that person. The one who took a handout from a good friend’s loaded husband. I will be successful and I’ll do it my way. No handouts and not at the expense of my happiness.

Lost in my thoughts I didn’t even hear the door open back up. “Hey, Bryan, do you happen to have a car? I had to walk here and...” Lillian opens the door and her mouth before her eyes catch up with her. Shocked that she is there I have nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. The towel is by her feet and the suit is still in the bag. So I do what I do best. Get a little cocky in more ways than one. Because, let’s get real, Lillian is smokin’ in a hot librarian sort of way.

“Well, well, well... it took you longer than I thought.”

Still staring, she blinks a few times before she is capable of speaking. “Huh?”

“I figured if we saw each other again, that you would be all over me, but you held strong.” Looking at my watch to give it a little dramatic effect. “Yep, two minutes after you left.”

That got her attention. “What? Oh my god, no!” I just wanted to see if you had a car since I walked here. If not, I was going to call an Uber.” Her face turns slightly red, but her words don’t match the blush. “Besides, you”—she glances down—“have nothing I want.”

Deciding to take it a little further than I should, I walk over to stand a little too close for her comfort. Me? I’m fucking hard as steel. “Maybe it’s nothing you want right now, but it’s something you needed three months ago and from what I could tell you needed it over and over and over again.”

“Bryan, please.”

“Yes, so you *do* recall? I heard those words moaned a few times that night.”

“Don’t be a dick. Do you have a car or not?” She finally looks away.

“We don’t need a car, breakfast is within walking distance.”

“Okay, good, that’s all I needed to know. Be downstairs in five.” She turns on her heel and heads for the stairs, calling back over her shoulder, “You are now late for this meeting.”

“You are the one who made me late. I’m never late,” I shout to get the last word, but she just throws up her hand and holds out all five digits, giving me a warning.

Not wanting to give her the satisfaction of me being late, I hurry and opt to go commando, throwing on my grey slacks and white button down. I thought about wearing a tie, but it’s summertime in California, so I opt for the rolled-up sleeves

look and grab my wallet and head out the door. I make it downstairs in three minutes.

“Hey, boss, lookin’ good.” Misty nods at me from behind the bar.

“Morning, Misty, how is school coming?”

“It just got better. *The Lillian Richards* agreed to help me with my mid-term project.” She bounces up and down with excitement. “I’ll be sure to ace it now and hopefully land myself an internship while I’m at it.”

“And leave us?” I feign sadness.

“I know, right? What will you ever do?” She gives it right back. Misty is a joy to have around; the regulars love her and the tourists always compliment her. She will be hard to replace, but we both knew this was temporary.

“So speaking of *The Lillian Richards*? Where is she?” I look around, wondering if she bailed on us—again.

“She excused herself. Something about a phone call.” Misty points to the door.

Great. She probably is on the phone to Fisher right now, telling him about our run-in. Hurrying out the door, I find her sitting on a bench just outside the bar talking on her phone. “I know, Mom. Yes, I’ll call Daisy... I miss Ruby too... she is getting big... okay... I know... What? Again?” She pauses, absorbing her mom’s words. “I see... yes, I’ll make sure I’m there this time... okay.” She looks up to the sky and turns her head to wipe a tear so the passersby won’t see and notices me. “Well, listen, it’s been good talking to you, Mom, but I have a meeting I’m late for. I’ll call you later. Love you.” She presses end and looks around for her purse, stands, and straightens herself.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes! I just got informed that Fisher and Daisy are getting married... *again*... next June. You know, so they can have all their family and friends there. Plus Fisher demands to have his child as the flower girl. Who does that? Has a wedding so their child can be in the wedding? People are supposed to get married *before* they have kids.”

“Well, in Daisy’s defense, Fisher did practically demand she marry him a few months after the accident and well... he promised her a party. I’m sure this is just that. A big reception, with the dress and all the fixings.”

“Of course, in Daisy’s defense.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, Lilli—”

“Right, well, let’s go. I’m running low on caffeine and I need coffee stat or I become the biggest bitch.”

“No kidding,” I say with a forced smile. “Let’s go get you refilled, it’s only a couple blocks down.” I guide her toward the little café overlooking the waves. This should be fun.

Chapter Four

Lillian

I know Bryan was just trying to be logical, but I wasn't in the mood for a Dr. Phil moment. My problems are just that, mine. Plus, he's close with Daisy and his loyalties lie with her. He would never understand what it feels like to be me. No one does.

"You hungry?" Bryan looks out of the corner of his eye, gauging my reaction.

On cue, my stomach growls. "Just a little," I place my hand over my stomach and let out a little laugh.

"Perfect. I'm taking you to this little diner down the road. This place has the best breakfast food ever."

"Oh really?"

"Yep. Everything from stuffed french toast to made-to-order omelets to the best biscuits and gravy you have ever tasted." He rubs his own stomach.

"You're making me hungry." And he really is. I didn't realize how starved I was. I'm usually a coffee and bagel type of girl, but missing dinner last night has me thinking about all-you-can-eat pancakes.

"You won't be for long. We're here." He steps in front of me to hold the door open. "Ladies first."

"Thank you," I politely whisper as I pass.

“You’re welcome.” He smiles. “Hey, Diane. Is my booth open?” Bryan hollers over to the waitress refilling drinks behind the counter.

“Sure, sweetheart. Just give me a minute and I’ll be right over.” The middle-aged woman, who looks a little older than my mom, motions for us to sit down.

Bryan grabs a couple menus as we walk over to the booth, waiting to sit until I’ve taken a seat. He has some manners, I’ll give him that.

I don’t want to sit in silence and I don’t want to give him the opportunity to speak first. The guy makes me feel insecure and uncomfortable and the last thing I need for him to do is bring up that one night.

“So, what made you want to expand? Why now?” I throw a loaded question out there to see if he will respond his rehearsed answer or one of honesty and passion. Something that will shed light on why he wants to pursue this dream.

“Well, do you want the rehearsed answer or the truth?”

Smiling inside, I sit back and wait for which one he is going to give me. I should just say the rehearsed, but something in me wants to know what makes him tick. “Truth.”

“I prefer dare.” He smirks, but it quickly fades as a confused look takes its place. “Do you care if we get something else out of the way first?”

Oh god, here we go. This can’t happen. “Listen, I know what you are going to say,” I respond quickly, trying to put out the fire before it spreads. “What happened between us was a mistake. I was in a bad place and needed an escape. You offered me an out and I took it. I would prefer if we could leave that one moment in time in the past.” I examine Bryan

from across the table to gauge his reaction. He doesn't look satisfied.

“Actually, I was just going to ask if you were ready to order.”

“What?”

“Order first, business second.” He points to the menu then waves the waitress to come over.

“Sorry, Bryan, it's a little hectic today.” Diane pulls a pencil from behind her ear and grabs a pad from her apron. “What can I getcha today? The usual?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Sure thing, sweetie.” She gives Bryan a sweet smile, then turns to look at me. “What about you, darlin'?”

“I-I'm not sure. I... I'll just take whatever he is having.” I try to regain my composure after my little outburst.

“Minus the add-ons,” Bryan adds.

“Well, all righty then.” She turns to leave, giving Bryan a little wink before she gives the order to the cook.

“Bryan, I'm sorry. I just assumed—” I start to give him a quick excuse but he cuts me off.

“You assumed right. I just didn't want to sit and listen to excuses from you.” He leans back in his seat, grabs his coffee and takes a long sip before he speaks again. “We are both adults who did very adult things. Sexy adult things. I was there, remember?”

“Oh, I do.”

“Yeah you do.” He gives me a shit eating grin before he continues, “I knew you needed an out and believe it or not, I

needed one as well, but don't for one-minute play down what happened because something *did* happen that night and it was more than we both expected." This time he watches me from across the table, searching for a reaction.

"Bryan, I—"

"Don't. Don't do that." He leans forward, anger crossing his face. "No excuses. I'd rather you not speak another word about that night than to hear whatever excuse you *think* is the truth."

"Okay." The truth? I don't even know what that is anymore.

"Good. The answer to your original question..." He pauses, looking out the window before resting his eyes back on mine. "I need this to secure a future for me and my sister."

"The Bar is already successful. Why gamble with what you have?" Curiosity gets the best of me.

"In my family, there are expectations and I refuse to live up to them."

"Bryan, that's called adulting."

"No, what I am doing is living my own life, by my own standards." He searches my face. I'm not sure what for. Maybe approval?

"I'm happy, Lil, and that within itself is worth any amount of inheritance we would have received."

"We?" I question.

"My sister and me." He nods as if I should know the answer. "My father, Edward Andrews, wanted me to take over his empire and expected my sister to go to school to educate

herself, but then settle in a modern-day arranged marriage. Basically a merger between two families.”

“So, you and your sister up and left everything for a pipe dream? That’s a little irresponsible, don’t you think?” Everything he tells me seems absurd. Seriously, the man could be a millionaire. Hell, a billionaire. So, why on earth would he abandon the security? For what? A bar? Who dreams of owning a bar? I’m getting ready to ask that very question when the waitress appears with two trays of food. Looking around I try to see who the other tray is for, but we are secluded in the corner.

“Here you go, sweetie. Your usual: two eggs over easy, hash browns and sourdough toast, with a side of biscuits and gravy.” Still unloading the tray. “Then we have our famous blueberry stuffed french toast and a double order of bacon.”

“Wow! Hungry much?” I go to grab my fork and take a bite of the hash browns.

“Those are mine.” He knocks my hand away and points his fork toward Diane. “Yours is on the other tray.”

“Come again?”

“I knew you would beg for it.” He takes his toast, breaks open his eggs and sops up the yolk. “I just figured I would have to try harder. Food gets to you, huh?” He goes in for another bite, not taking his eyes off me.

“Real funny.” I narrow my eyes.

“And this here is for you.” Diane puts the exact same order down in front of me, minus the french toast and bacon.

Covering his mouth while he speaks, Bryan thanks Diane and pushes the bacon over to me. “I figured we could just split the french toast and bacon.”

“Bryan! Seriously, this is so much food!” I look around, not sure where to start. “There is no way you eat this much food every day.”

He sits back, patting his stomach. Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it a stomach. It’s actually an eight pack of glorious, lean muscle, but leaning back he makes his point. “We have a busy day. Got to keep this figure up somehow.”

“Well, my figure needs a bagel and coffee... this is too much.”

“Lil...” There he goes again calling me *Lil*. Reminding him is on the tip of my tongue, but a part of me kind of likes it. Everyone calls me Lillian except for Daisy. She has always called me Lilly no matter how many times I correct her. “Your body is smoking hot and a little eggs and bacon will just enhance you in all the right places.”

His words make me blush. I’m embarrassed and my body is reacting. It remembers and I don’t want it to. So, I do the only thing I can do. Thank him and dig in. “Can you pass me the french toast?”

Chapter Five

Lillian

After we finish breakfast, Bryan calls a car to pick us up, and we head a couple hours away to Laguna Beach. After talking to Fisher, I had spent most of the night researching hot spots within a three-hour radius, and Laguna seemed like a perfect fit. Running with my plans, I made some calls and was able to get us in to view three locations. All prime real estate and a sure bet of future success.

We measure, examine, and take pictures. Everything and anything Bryan envisions we discuss and jot down in notes. You could say it's going perfectly.

After the last stop, Bryan calls for the car again. After opening the door for me to climb in, he slides in beside me. "So, Lil, what is your honest opinion? What would you do?"

"Well, the first stop was almost perfect. It fit the feel of The Bar back home, but it lacked the beach front."

"I agree. I want something similar to what I have now and that includes the beach front." Bryan seems to register what I'm saying and agrees.

"Second one... location was perfect. Beach front, easy access to tourists and locals. The only problem..." I take my phone out to show him the pictures of the area. "I'm afraid there are too many other well-established restaurants surrounding the strip."

“I was stuck on site two. It seemed to have the vibe that I’m looking for.”

“I know and it could work, but just hear me out.” I place my hand on his knee and give it a squeeze. The day has been draining for both of us and I just want him to know it wasn’t for nothing. “Now, location three, I know it seemed a little far off the beaten path, but—”

“It was almost a ghost town. How in the hell do you think that is the one?” Bryan challenges me. “Did you notice the area? The bad lighting, benches, *and* the undeveloped beach front.”

“Yeah, it had a few abandoned beach shacks. I mean ‘cottages,’” I say, correcting myself. Daisy hates that I called her beach house a shack. I even tried to have it bulldozed down for a new high-rise hotel to take its place, but Fisher put a stop to that—costing himself millions. Truth is, I loved that cottage too. Just in a different way. It was mine until Daisy came along. I never knew what I was truly missing until I saw the way my stepdad looked at her. Like she was his missing piece.

“Why would I want to expand in that little outdated area?”

“Bryan, you have to look at the bigger picture. Those rundown cottages are going to give you a huge advantage. It’s going to knock your purchase price down by half. If you can find the money to purchase your building and a couple of the surrounding sites you will be able to make your money back and pay off your loan in a couple years. You see...” I scroll to the picture of the dark beach. “This here, I already emailed Fisher and Marcus DeMarco about expanding the new chain of hotels they are partnering on. This area is exactly what they are looking for.”

“Ahhhh!” The light bulb goes off. “Let Fisher build it up. Open The Bar and then sell the surrounding lots to the highest bidder.” His eyes shine from the soft glow of the phone. “This is exactly what I needed. You found the perfect area.” He picks up my hand and kisses the back of it. “This will give me the freedom we have been looking for. I’ll finally be able to help my sister escape my parents to follow her dreams.”

“Glad I could be a part of it,” I reply, and actually mean it. I close out of my pictures and drop the phone in my bag.

“Me too.” He still has hold of my hand and gives it a tiny squeeze. “I just don’t think you realize how much I needed this today and what this means for me.”

“I know. You’ll now be able to provide for your sister,” I repeat his words from earlier.

“It’s not just that. I want to provide for her until she can make it on her own, but what I really want is to be able to show my father that I can be successful and happy.” He scoots a little closer so we are sitting side to side.

“What makes Bryan Andrews happy?” I ask, nudging his shoulder.

“Well, isn’t that the million-dollar question.” He looks over at me, his blue-green eyes taking on a new color, deeper than normal. I’m not sure what that means or why I even care. “Family makes me happy. I want to be successful, but not at the expense of my family.” He smiles weakly. “Oh and surfing of course. My mind is never as clear as it is when I’m riding a wave.”

“Hmmm.”

“What does that mean?” It’s his turn to nudge me.

“You say family makes you happy, but you are so set on running away from them. Why?” I question, confused by his statement.

“Family doesn’t have to be your blood. It’s what you make of it. For me it’s my sister and friends, but I want to expand that to my very own little family... eventually.”

“I like that.” Something he said clicks.

“Good. I like that you like it.” He wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me in a little more.

“I’m tired. It’s been a long day.”

“Why don’t you take a nap? We have about an hour till we get back to the bar.”

“Bryan?”

“Yes, Lil?”

“Thanks for trusting me and my ideas.” I tilt my head up, trying to gauge his reaction.

A small smile creeps up on his face. “I should be the one thanking you for making a dream my reality. I told you what I want and you found it.” He leans down to give me a quick peck on my temple.

I’m not going to read too much into this.

Just as I’m about to close my eyes I get a text. I feel it before I can hear it. Searching my purse, I finally find the glow at the bottom of the bag.

Daisy: I have an emergency. I need you.

Me: This better be a real emergency.

Daisy: Lilly, before you say no... Just say yes.

Me: Tell me what it is.

Daisy: I need you to babysit.

Me: Forget it.

Daisy: Please. Ruby misses her Aunt Lilly.

Me: Not going to work.

Daisy: Please, Lilly. I never ask you for anything. I promise you, I'll be quick. Well as quick as I can be. I have to fly to Sonoma to get fitted for a dress.

Me: Why do you have to go all the way to Sonoma?

Daisy: Nat is getting married and she hired Mona from Enchanted to make our dresses.

Me: No. You won't be back.

Daisy: Fisher said he hired a jet and we will be back by bed.

Me: Fine. You owe me.

Daisy: Like in favors? Scones? Money? Cause I can do one or all the above.

Me: I'll let you know when I need something, but I will be cashing in.

Daisy: Maybe we should negotiate instead.

Me: See you in the morning.

Daisy: *kissy face*

Tucking my phone back into my purse, I lean back and give the loudest sigh.

“You okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine.” I start to recoil. Scooting over toward my side, I look out the window and watch the lights pass.

“It doesn’t seem fine. Is there anything I can do to help?” He seems genuinely concerned, but the last thing I need is someone to help me through this.

“Bryan, I’m sorry, but this is a working relationship. Prying into my life won’t seal this partnership. If anything, it jeopardizes it.” I get a little snippy, but I can’t help it. The closer people get the easier it is for them to hurt me when they leave—and they will leave.

“Lil... ,” he pleads.

“My name is Lillian, please address me as such.”

“I don’t know what your problem is, but I do know what you are doing. Pushing me away isn’t going to make me disappear. So lose whatever it is that is going on in that pretty little head of yours and relax.”

Turning my head back around, I meet his blue-green eyes so he can see what I’m saying. “Bryan, don’t tell me what to do. You don’t know *me*. You have no clue what I’m going through or what I have been through.”

“You’re right, but what I do know is if you don’t get out of your own head, you are going to self-destruct. Been there, done that.” He reaches out, but I slide both of my hands under my legs. It’s a totally childish move, but his touch may make me forget and I need to *always* remember.

Feeling a buzzing between us, I reach for my purse, hoping it’s Daisy calling to cancel tomorrow. “Sorry, babe, but it’s me.” He pulls his cell out of his pocket, pausing for a moment to see who it is. I can’t help but glance over his shoulder, *Sam*.

“What’s up, Sam?” It seems like it’s a few minutes before he is able to respond. “Can you call Jenny to have her come in and help? I’ll be back”—he glances at his watch—“in about thirty minutes. Can you hold down the fort until she gets there?” He looks over to me with an apologetic smile. “Good and Sam... break a leg.”

“Problem?”

“We’re shorthanded at The Bar and Sam has to leave for a gig in twenty minutes. I planned to drive you home, but I need to have the driver stop there first so I can help cover.”

“It’s okay.” I don’t mean it. One minute I want to push him away, but the moment he goes away I want him near. Sometimes, I confuse the hell out of myself. “I’m only a *few* blocks away. I think I can manage.”

“I know you can manage, but it’s late.” He reaches for my hand again and this time I let him hold it. “I’ll have the driver take you home,” he insists and I don’t argue.

The last twenty minutes of the ride are quiet. Too quiet. Both of us stare out our individual windows watching life pass by us, our hands intertwined. His thumb rubbing lazy circles gives me more comfort than what I deserve.

“Lil.” Bryan tugs on my hand, freeing me from my thoughts. “We’re here. I have to go, but I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. I’ll go over some of the financials tonight and draw something up for you to review.”

“That works too. Thanks again.” Bryan leans forward to tip the driver. “Make sure she gets home safe.” He gets out and makes a run for the door, only turning back for a few seconds for a quick goodbye glance before the car pulls away.

Chapter Six

Lillian

“Stop the car!” I shout a little louder than necessary, surprising myself and I’m sure scaring the driver. He slams on the brakes, sending me crashing into his seat. I must have unbuckled when we stopped. “I need to get out.”

Rushing up to the door I catch a glimpse of myself in the window and I smile. I look different. My hair is disheveled, and makeup is worn off. Far cry from my normal put together self. This is something totally different.

Taking a deep breath, I open the door to a packed venue. Tables are full, bar is three deep, and a line is forming at the door. Squeezing by, I scan the bar for Bryan.

“Miss, the line is back there.” A middle-aged man points to the patrons who are wrapping around the corner.

“Oh, I’m not here to eat—” I try to explain before I’m cut off.

“She’s working the bar, Bill.” Misty grabs me by the arm, stuffing an apron in my hands, then hollers over her shoulder. “I promise, ten more minutes and your table will be ready.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Bill shouts back.

“Thank you so much, Misty. Do you happen to know where I can find Bryan?”

“You’re welcome, but I was serious.” She hollers over the crowd. “We need your help. Sam had to leave.” Misty rushes through the crowd pulling me behind her.

“Misty! I can’t.” I pull back. Me? Behind a bar, taking orders. Never going to happen. “I’ve never made a drink in my life,” I confess.

“I find it hard to believe *The Lillian Richards* has never opened a bottle of wine or popped a top,” Misty says as she swings around. “Come on now...”

“Well, yes, I have, but I wouldn’t even know where to begin here.” I try my hardest to get out of this mess I got myself into. I should have just let the driver take me home.

“Okay, then, this little thing here”—Misty holds up the apron she handed me just a second ago—“is the only thing stopping you from being behind that counter. Now turn around.” Misty twists me around and begins to tie the white fabric around my waist. “There, now let’s go.”

“Wh-what? No! Just no. I can’t do this.” I’m shaking my head frantically, facing the crowd. All wanting a drink from me.

“Can we get some drinks over here?”

“Two more, pretty lady!”

Dollar bills are waved, orders are called out... this is madness. The thought of waiting on all those people freaks me out. I bark orders at people, I don’t take them.

“Please... you will be fine. Rein in those fears and conquer those orders.” Misty gives me a little push behind the bar and walks off.

Standing there looking at the crowd, I become numb, lost as to where I even begin. So many people trying to get my attention.

“Hey, lady! You going to get us drinks or what?”

“We don’t have all night.”

“What’s her problem?”

Closing my eyes, I take a few seconds praying for survival mode to kick in, yet it never comes. I’m out of my element. It doesn’t matter how much I want to help Bryan or prove to everyone I’m different. I’m just me, Lillian Richards, always in control and when I lose it, I give up.

Ready to run, I open my eyes to see Bryan standing there, facing me.

“Lil, what are you doing here? I thought the driver took you home.” He waits patiently for answer even though the crowd is becoming impatient.

“I-I...” I try to gather my words, but seeing Bryan standing in front of me in the bar he owns is too much. I’m beginning to think my idea was an illogical one.

“Yes?” He furrows his brows.

What do I say? “Hey, you surprised me and I actually had fun today.” That sounds bitchy. Then again, I am.

“I guess I just wanted to talk to you for a minute, but looks like I’m helping instead,” I confess. I wait for him to ask me what I wanted to talk about, but instead he smiles and faces the crowd.

Bringing his hands up to his mouth and hollers, “CAN I GET YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE?”

“Oh okay? Like that’s going to help...” I roll my eyes.

“What was that?” Bryan turns around smirking as the crowd begins to quiet waiting for his announcement. “Lil, here—she’s new.” Bryan reaches over and pulls me in front of him. Hands on my shoulders chin on my head as he continues, “You

see, she was on her way home and stopped by because she heard you all were in *need* of some drinks. So how about we introduce ourselves.? What do you say?” Everyone nods and Bryan comes to stand beside me, arms wide. “Lil, this is The Bar, The Bar this is Lil, your beer goddess for the evening... say hi.”

And just like that, the whole bar says, in unison, “Hi Lil!”

Bryan looks my way and gives me the biggest ear to ear grin and winks. “She’s only here for one night. So, make sure you treat this gorgeous lady with the upmost respect so she comes back for a visit. Got it?”

The crowd goes crazy with acceptance, thanks to Bryan. He’s basically giving me a little room for error tonight. Hell, I could probably screw up every order tonight and they wouldn’t give a damn because Bryan told them not to.

“This is crazy,” I whisper.

“Hey.” Bryan’s in front of me, bending at the knee so we are eye to eye. “Lil, you got this. Take the orders. You know how to make simple drinks. Anything that is a little more complicated just shout it out to me. I’ll be right beside you.”

Taking a deep breath, I clear my mind and exhale. “All right.”

“All right?” He seems shocked. “Okay,” he agrees, nodding. “Tonight we will move together as a team.” He searches my eyes to make sure I’m okay. “You got this.”

“I got this,” I repeat his words.

“You do, I believe in you.” He spins me around to face the crowd and smacks me on the ass causing me to squeal. “Now get to work.”

“Hey now!” I give him a playful look.

Approaching the crowd, I throw my insecurities out the window and allow my confidence to come front and center—thanks to Bryan. “Who’s first?”

Chapter Seven

Bryan

Never in a million years did I think Lillian Richards would walk through that door and help out a guy like me, especially by slinging drinks at The Bar. I left her in the car, told the driver to take her home, and even watched him pull off, but here she is an hour after closing helping us clean up.

“Hey, Bryan, have you heard from Sam?” Misty comes around the corner, with a tray of condiments to restock the tables for tomorrow. “Just curious if that producer came to watch.”

“Yeah, Sam was stoked. She said he liked what he saw and scheduled a meeting for early next week to discuss collaborating.” I recall the text I got from her a few minutes ago, which was followed by a crazy-ass GIF. It seems to be the only way she communicates nowadays.

“Do you think this guy is legit?” Misty’s wiping off the tables as she goes.

“Not sure, but I plan to find out.” I finish mopping the floor around the bar area, cleaning up the sticky mess from drinks spilled throughout the night.

“What a good big br—” Misty starts to say, but I hold up a finger.

“Do you hear that?”

“Oh yeah... Lillian is doing the dishes.” Misty says it like this is just a normal activity for Lil.

“You left her alone in there? Doing dishes?” I’m dumbfounded. I rush into the kitchen expecting to see Lillian overwhelmed with the mounds of plates and glasses, confused on how to operate the dishwasher, but what I actually see surprises me.

Lillian, who is usually so put together and uptight, has the music cranked up and is singing and swaying to the beat. Her hair is piled on top of her head, heels kicked off and by the looks of it, is wearing my board shorts I leave in the bar for a grab-and-go emergency. *So fuckin’ hot.*

Leaning against the door frame, I stand and watch. This girl right here, I would love to get to know better. Total opposite of the one I’ve experienced before. Instead of uptight, this chic is relaxed and having fun doing dishes of all things.

She’s formed a routine to the rhythm of the beat. Plate, spray, stack, plate, spray, stack. Hips swaying back and forth, eyes closed for a moment as she sings the melody about touching with slow hands, speeding up, making her sweat—everything I want to do to her at this very moment, seeing her so raw and vulnerable. Opening her eyes, she grabs the hose to spray the next plate, but instead catches sight of me and stands still like a deer caught in headlights.

Instead of speaking she opts for the stare down. I right myself to settle in. This is a game she will not win. Reacting to my actions, she stands up taller, griping the nozzle tighter in her hands.

After a minute or so, I decide to let her win after all and break the silence. “What happened to your clothes?”

“They got wet.” She shrugs like it didn’t even matter. “I found these in the office over there.” She gives a little tug on the waist of the shorts.

“They look good on you, but I’m afraid I need those back. They are my lucky wave shorts.” I hold out my hand, daring her to give them back... now.

“No can do, Bri. You see, I’m afraid they are *my* lucky shorts now.” She winks.

“Nope, pretty sure you wearing them still makes me lucky.”

“You sure about that?” she teases.

I’m loving every minute of our banter. This is a far cry from the uptight businesswoman who ended up on the other side of my door this morning.

“One hundred percent.” I nod.

Gripping the hose a little tighter, she squints her eyes at me as if she is daring me to take another step. “Have it your way,” she says, shrugging her shoulders, and I should know what’s going to happen, but I can’t help but watch the strain of her chest against the heavy weight of her wet tank top.

“What the hell?” Water sprays me right in the crotch of my pants. Then works its way up my chest. Holding my hands out to the side, I close my eyes and let her have her way with me because after this, I’m going to be doing the same. “You done?” I open one eye, testing my grounds.

“Yep!” She’s now wearing a satisfied, shit-eating grin.

“Good. Now let’s get this cleaned up.” I walk over to her and pry the nozzle out of her hands. “Shouldn’t take too long since you have done the majority of them already.”

“That was the plan.” She picks up a new stack and loads them on the rack to be cleaned.

“It was a good plan, but you didn’t have to do them. You already helped out enough tonight.”

“I wanted to.” Her voice is softer now.

“Can I just ask you a question?” I turn to her, silently daring her to say “yes.”

Turning toward me she folds her arms across her chest and leans against the sink. “One. Just one question.”

“How did *The Lillian Richards* learn to wash dishes?” I laugh.

She doesn’t.

Shit.

Still standing in front of me, she stares at me.

Just standing.

Still looking.

Not moving.

Then like the water ninja she has become, Lillian plunges her hand in the soapy water and splashes some in my direction. Once again, I’m drenched and suds are everywhere.

“You better run, little girl. Paybacks are a bitch.” I grab a pitcher from a nearby shelf and fill it up.

“You are mistaken, little boy. If I recall correctly, I’m a good five years older than you.”

“Four years,” I shout back.

“Bryan, put the pitcher down,” she begs and I love it.

“No can do, Lil.” I close the distance between us. A few more steps and she won’t have anywhere to go.

“Not fair. I already got wet once today and had to change.” She begins to whine.

“Was that when you barged back into my apartment and saw me in all my glory?” I bark out a laugh.

“Hardy-har.” She tilts her head to the side, narrowing her eyes into tiny slits showing me exactly how funny she thinks I am.

“I thought you would like that.”

“I did. Now you tell me, does the sight of me make you wet?” She runs a hand down her pale slick skin from her neck down to the front of her now see through shirt. I’ve tried to get a glimpse, but between the apron and her lace bra, I’m afraid I’m left with nothing but my imagination.

“Lil, didn’t you learn this in fifth grade health? Women get wet, men get hard.” I lift the pitcher of water above my head, ready to drench her from top to bottom.

“I vaguely recall that, but I’m pretty sure you are...” Her eyes suddenly widen with excitement.

“Holy shit! What in the...” The pitcher of water I held above my head is now on me. At first, I think my little water ninja can move at lightning speed, but when I look up at the pitcher I see Misty’s arm snake back around the corner.

“Wet,” Lillian finishes as Misty comes in, doubled over in laughter.

“Girl power!” Misty gives Lil a fist bump.

“You two...,” I growl.

“Nope... your game is over.” Misty decides she is the one who is adulting at the moment. “You guys created this mess, you have to clean it up.” She walks over to the back door,

grabbing her purse along the way. “I’m out of here. I have a final I need to study for.”

“Bye, Misty!” Lil and I holler back in unison.

After she leaves, Lillian scans the kitchen, and a worried look overtakes her once playful smile. “Oh my god! What did I do?” She heads toward the closet. “I’m such an idiot. Where’s a mop?”

Not willing to let her retreat back to the ice queen, I run up behind her, careful not to slip in the mess we created. “Hey now, it’s only water.” I grab her elbow and gently turn her to face me. “This was the most fun I’ve had in a long time. Besides, between the two of us and a couple of mops over there, this mess will be gone in fifteen minutes tops.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what? For helping me out, smiling and letting loose? Because I find all that sexy as hell.”

“Okay,” she says trying to convince herself. “I’m not sorry,” she finally agrees. “But let’s get this done so I can go home.”

“You aren’t going anywhere. You are soaking wet and the clothes you *borrowed* don’t even fit you. There is no way I’m allowing you to go home like that,” I demand. “Upstairs I have a spare bed and dry clothes.”

“You know what? I don’t even have the energy to fight with you. Dry clothes and a bed sound pretty good right about now. Do you think we can up the ante and throw in a hot shower as well?” Her smile is back in place.

“I thought you would never ask. A hot shower sounds great,” I tease her a little more. It seems to be our new thing.

“Alone, Bryan. Let me explain this in a way you will understand... me, hot shower. You, cold shower.”

“You drive a hard bargain, but deal accepted.” I hold out my hand to shake on it.

She reaches out to grab my hand, but I pull her in close enough that she can feel a cold shower is *very* much needed. “Don’t mistake me accepting your deal for not wanting you... everything about you makes me want to strip you down right here, right now and show you exactly what I want.”

As quickly as the words are out, my mouth claims hers. Teasing, tasting, taking what I want and what I know she needs.

“Bryan... ,” she moans.

Pulling back I look down into her baby blues and give her the best smirky smile I have. “But a deal is a deal. Let’s go get cleaned up.” I turn her around and point her toward the door.

Chapter Eight

Lillian

The moment the water hits my body, I close my eyes and allow myself to finally relax, giving my muscles a much-needed break and reflecting on the day's events.

I never expected to see Bryan today. I honest to god thought he was just the bartender that surfed with my sister every now and then. Just goes to show, you can't always judge a book by its cover—which goes against everything I have learned in my line of business. I've closed major deals off judgment calls.

A couple raps on the door is all the warning I get before he lets himself in and pulls me from my train of thought. "I'm afraid I don't have anything girly for you to wear." Bryan's gruff voice echoes through the bathroom, making me all too aware of how close he is. "But I was able to find an older pair of sweatpants and my old high school T-shirt for you to sleep in." Bryan keeps talking as he hops onto the counter and makes himself comfortable.

"Um hello, naked here." I hurry and wash up.

"I'm very aware."

"You can see me?" I open the door and feel around for the towel I left on the toilet.

"Not yet, but the imagination is a wonderful thing."

"Where is my towel?" I stick my head out to see where it went.

“You looking for this?” Bryan stands in front of the shower door, dangling the towel, daring me to get out.

“The towel can stay, but you must go!” I reach out and yank it from his loose grip.

“What and miss you getting all flustered? Never.”

“Bryan, please... I’m tired and now cold.”

Turning around without saying a word, he heads for the door, pausing momentarily to flip a switch and points up. “Heat.” Then closes the door.

Why does he do that? One minute sexy and playful and the next thinking of me. It’s confusing.

“Do you hear yourself?” I step out of the shower and look in the mirror. Asking the woman staring back at me why this is a problem. God forbid I have a man who finds me attractive and is considerate of my needs.

Drying myself off, I reach for the clothes when the door suddenly pops open and Bryan peeks his head in. “Bryan!” I try to cover myself the best I can, arm covering my breasts and hand covering my nether regions. “Get out now!”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” His eyes roam my naked frame, and chills begin to rack my body—not from the cold. Nope, he made sure I was taken care of. This is from pure desire in his stare.

“Hey, eyes are up here.” I start to remove my hand to point to my eyes, but suddenly think better of it.

Clearing his throat, he nods, “Um, yeah... I-I was just going to say... you can have my room. I forgot my sister stacked her boxes all over the spare.”

“Is this your way of getting me to sleep with you?” I quickly grab the clothes and get dressed. My hands weren’t doing the trick and, well, just a few months ago he saw more than just this. And if I’m going to be honest a part of me want him to see me, but just as I drop my hands he turns his head.

“Nope. Cross my heart and hope to die.” He makes the motions with his hands, making me smile.

“You can look now,” I tell him as I pull my shirt down over my chest.

“Uh-hmm.” He stutters over his words. “That shirt looks good on you.” He nods his approval.

I’m not sure what we’re doing. He comes in here knowing I’m going to be naked, tells me the spare room is full, but says he doesn’t want to sleep with me. This guy is all over the place. The best thing for me to do is to ignore his compliment.

“So, if I’m taking your room and I’m not sleeping with you, where will you be?”

Okay, maybe that wasn’t the best way to ignore him. Leading him down a questionable road.

“The couch.” He licks his lips. “But…”

“No buts.”

“I was just going to say”—Bryan narrows his eyes, testing me—“*but* if you need anything don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Mmm.” Not buying it.

“My bedroom is just around the corner on your right.” He backs out of the room, freeing me to go. “I’ll be out here.”

“Thanks.” I follow him out of the bathroom and pad down the hallway.

“On the couch.”

“Okay.” I try to cover my laugh.

“If you need anything,” he reminds me again.

“Got it,” I holler back as I enter his room and scan it for something familiar. A painting, picture, the comforter. Anything to remind me of the night we spent together, but I get nothing. I feel like I should remember. I did spend most of the day and part of the night here forgetting about my mess of a life, but nothing triggers me. Hell, a part of me wonders if we were even here, but if not where?

It had to be here. I walked home when I left him sleeping.

What is wrong with me?

Was I that screwed up over Daisy, Fisher, and the baby that I can't even remember his stupid room?

Curiosity is getting the best of me and there is no way I'll be able to sleep with him in the other room while my head is spinning with questions. Walking back down the hall I head to the living room where I see Bryan lying on the couch watching TV.

“Hey, remember that one night...”

“At band camp.” He looks up at me with a lazy smile.

“Real funny... you know what I'm talking about.” I put my hands on my hips, which make the already loose pants hang a tad bit lower. “Why don't I remember this place? You brought me here, right?”

“Hmmm... are you saying you forgot that night?”

He's trying to get me to admit that was one of the best nights of my life. With everything that was going on, he did

make me forget about Fisher and my sister and made me feel something else completely.

“Not exactly, but I don’t remember coming in through the bar and your bedroom doesn’t seem familiar.”

“Well... we used the apartment entrance in back and as for the bedroom, it’s been three months and my sister decided we should spruce the place up. She redecorated.” He sits up, the blanket pooling at his waist leaving his chest exposed. I’m the one staring now.

“That explains it,” I whisper.

“Let me ask you this.” He leans forward, removes my hands from my hips, and holds them in his own. “Do you remember how good we were together?” He pulls me closer.

“Bryan...”

His touch ignites something within. Being here with him after tonight. It’s all too much.

“Do you remember my hands on your body?” He gives me a little squeeze and tugs, making me fall right into his lap.

“Yes.” I’m not sure he heard me, my voice barely audible as I remember. The memories of that night flood back.

“Do you want to feel it again?”

I want to say no. I really do, but my body, it’s screaming to say, yes. So I do.

“Yes.”

Bryan

“Yes?” I need her to say it again, hopeful I heard her right.

“Yes, Bryan, I want to feel you again,” Lil confirms, bringing her hand up to caress my face as she gives me a soft kiss on the lips. “Tonight.”

“Done.” In one swift motion I have her under me, her gasp telling me I’ve taken her by surprise. Her mouth opens to say something, but I don’t give her the chance. I have been thinking about this moment every day for the past three months.

Taking advantage, I cover her mouth with mine, exploring as our tongues move together. My hands roam her body greedily, the pressure building.

“I need you.” She wraps her body around mine. Arms on my waist and legs securing me into place, and as if we’re not close enough she draws me down, taking all my weight. Careful not to crush her, I prop myself up on my elbows, but she won’t have it. As she pulls me down flush against her, I struggle to keep control as her voice rasps out, “I need this. I need all of you, Bryan.” She hugs me in tighter, squeezing me between her thighs, lifting her hips to gain the friction she desperately seeks.

Giving in, I grind down on her, my own control barely hanging by a thread. Her mouth is on my ear. Every little breath, every gasp, every moan is meant for me, and it rocks me to my core. I don’t know how much more I can hold back.

Reaching behind, I try to loosen her vice grip on me, enough so I can give us both what we want, but her legs tighten around me. Her hips move harder, faster.

“Lil, we need to—”

“More... I need more.” Her mouth is now on mine, hungry and wet, taking what she needs.

The desperation to be inside her gets stronger with every roll of my hips. I kick the coffee table out of the way, wrap my arms around her and flip us off the couch. I take the fall for both of us as we land with a thud.

“Yes!” Lil quickly stands up and has her pants off first, pulling my bottoms down to my knees. “Do you have a condom?”

Shit!

“Fuck!”

“I take that as a no?” She seems not to care, since she’s returned to the floor with me and is rubbing herself against my cock taking it further and further.

“No.” I wait for her to pull back.

“I’m on the pill.”

Thank god!

“I’m clean. Actually, I haven’t been with anyone since you.” I’m not sure why I tell her that. Maybe I need her to know that last time wasn’t forgotten. That she did something to me then.

“Good!” She purrs as she slides down onto me, gripping me, riding me and within seconds she finds her release, mine quickly following.

This wasn’t like the last time. This was raw need and pure emotion. This is a moment that will forever brand me.

Chapter Nine

Lillian

“Make it go away.” I throw the covers over my head to hide from the sun beaming directly into my eyes. “Haven’t you heard of room-darkening blinds?” I pull the blanket back just enough to see his reaction out of one eye.

“My girl isn’t a morning person?” His smile is way too big for the time of day. So, I do what any person with lack of sleep would do: pull the covers back over my head. “Well, we will need to work on that.” The bed shifts and I hear him walking to the bathroom.

“I’m a morning person.” My voice is muffled from the blankets.

“Sure you are.” He sounds closer now, but I’m not sure.

“Why do you have to be so loud?” I quickly pull the covers down to glare at him and pull them back up just as quickly. His laugh vibrates the room it’s *so* loud. Well, maybe I’m exaggerating a tad, but can you blame me? It’s morning, I haven’t slept and I need coffee.

What’s he doing now? Wait? Did he pull the blinds?

“Is it safe to come out?”

Bryan sits down on my side of the bed. “It’s safe to come out.” He chuckles, pulling the blanket back down. “How’s that?” He nods in the direction of the vampire death trap.

“Better, but do you know what would make it even better?”

“This?” He picks up a steaming hot cup of coffee from the nightstand. My mouth salivates at the closeness of the saving grace.

“Bryan Andrews, you are mine. You are never leaving the house and your job will be to save me from the morning and fetch me coffee all hours of the day.”

“Hmm...” He pretends to think about this statement. “One question, will there be sex?”

“For sure! Lots and lots of sex.” I hold his stare as I take a sip of the coffee and then lick the rim where some of the sugar was stuck from the moisture.

His eyes go dark with need. He pulls the cup from my hands and climbs on top of me. “That was so freaking sexy.” He comes in for a kiss.

“Ew...” I quickly turn my head and pull the covers back up over my mouth. “Morning breath.”

“I brushed my teeth just a few minutes ago.” He smiles and I’m pretty sure his teeth sparkled. So perfect and white.

“Not you, me.” I keep the shield of blankets on guard and point to my mouth.

“Lil, I don’t care, plus you brushed your teeth before bed and that was only a few hours ago. I’m pretty sure your breath is fine,” he argues his point.

Smacking my lips together for the added dramatics, I say, “Well, I’m not grossed out by my own taste.”

“Good, then let me.” The blankets come off and his mouth is on mine.

I could get used to this.

“Mmmm.” No words, just a moan.

“Mmm-hmm,” Bryan moans back, making me crack a smile.

Rolling off me, he props himself up on a couple pillows and looks down at me. “Let’s talk.”

“About what?” I snicker.

“Let’s get to know each other.”

Lifting the covers up, I look down at my naked form. “Well, by the looks of it, we know each other *very* well.”

“You sure? Let me see.” He takes the covers from me, lifting them higher for his viewing pleasure. “Oh yeah. I remember now.”

“You’re crazy.” Laughing I smack the blankets free from his hands. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Let’s start out easy. What’s your middle name?”

“Rose. My mom loved flowers. Hence, Daisy, Lilly and Rose.”

“That’s cool. So, Ruby is named after you.” He takes his finger, running it up and down my arm while we talk. It’s so soft it’s as if our skin is whispering to each other.

“Yeah, she is.” Guilt washes over me.

“What’s that look for?” He catches the mood shift.

“Come on, Bryan. You’re friends with Daisy.” I turn my face away from him when I confess. “You know what I did.”

“What did you do? ‘Cause I’m not sure if you know what you did.”

“I almost made her lose the baby when she fell down the stairs.”

“That was an accident,” he counters.

“If I wouldn’t have said what I did she wouldn’t have taken off after Fisher.” It pains me to recall the moment.

“You had every right to call her out like that. You are her older sister and you were watching out for her.”

“You know... I thought she was pregnant with your baby.”

“Say what? Why?” He acts shocked, like that is the last thing that could have ever happened.

“You guys were always surfing and hanging out together until she started her job at Hamilton Enterprises.”

“Because she’s cool and she reminded me of my little sister. Plus, during that time, I wasn’t talking to my family and my sister was still living at home. I missed her and Daisy filled that void. There was no attraction there whatsoever.” He stops caressing my arm and when I turn back to face him, he gives me the cutest look. Almost like he has a huge secret to tell. “Do you remember the first time we met?”

“Probably downstairs. We were always in here and when I came in you were always so rude to me. Another reason why I thought you liked Daisy.”

“Nope. Not even close.” His hand is back, but this time it’s under the covers and rubbing just my abdomen. “Do you remember a couple weeks before Daisy’s birthday party? We were catching some waves and you came strolling out of the cottage in the sexiest green bikini, hair up and glasses on. You didn’t acknowledge anyone. Just laid out your towel, sat down, and read a book.”

“Oh yes! I remember because I dropped a contact and didn’t have a spare so I had to wear my nerd glasses.”

“Those glasses... so hot!”

“You’re nuts.” I playfully smack his hand but miss and hit my stomach. “Ouch!”

“Oh... poor baby.” Bryan rolls over and trails feather-like kisses from my lips all the way down to my lower abdomen where I missed my target and marked my skin.

“Stop it.” His soft touch tickles and makes me squirm. He stops once he gets back up to my lips.

“So, anyway. Do you remember what happened next?”

“I feel as if this is a quiz. Are you grading me?”

“You *should* remember. I’m a hot piece of ass,” he jokes. “I was coming in and worked up the courage to talk to you and I just stood there. Looking at you.” Bryan stares at me, remembering. “At the way your hair fell from your bun and framed your face.” He reaches over and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “How these cute as hell freckles sprinkled your nose.” He kisses his fingertip and places it on the tip of my nose. “I looked at the fullness of your lips and wondered what it would be like to capture them with mine.” He leans in, pulling on my top lip with a gentle tug, then moves to the bottom one, repeating the process.

“Oh, I remember now.” Suddenly ashamed. “I told you to move out of my way.”

“Not exactly. I believe your exact words were, ‘The playground is half a mile down the beach. Now move, you’re blocking the sun.’”

“Bryan... I wasn’t a nice person. I’m still not,” I admit.

Even though being here gives me a sense of freedom. I am who I am. There's nothing that can change that.

"Which leads me to the next question. What made you so bitchy?"

"Gee, thanks." I hide my face. Even though I admitted it myself, the fact he said it hurt. Especially, after last night.

"It's true, Lil." He pulls my hands away. "You said it yourself. You weren't a nice person and every time I saw you... you never smiled. Not once. Not like now, since you've been here with me."

It's true. Being with him is easy and even right now, after he called me bitchy, I can't help but smile because of his last comment. He always knows how to take an uncomfortable situation and flip around.

"You're right."

"Talk to me then. What made you so unhappy?" he says as he lays out his arm patting the spot next him. "Come here."

Rolling my head to the side, I lie there and look at this man who opens his arms wide so I can cling on. Time and time again, he offers me an escape and each time I jump, but how many times can I do that until he doesn't catch me?

"Come on. I don't bite."

Lies.

"I have a mark on my inner thigh that says differently." I scoot in closer throwing my leg over his so he can see the evidence.

"I meant bad bite." Bryan gently rubs the spot with the tips of his fingers with a feather like touch. "This one is all good."

“Is that so? I tease back.

“So good.” He leans over to place a tender kiss on my cheek, whispering, “Lil, I’m not going anywhere.”

I’ve never felt more vulnerable. All I’ve ever wanted was for someone to stay... for *me*. Bryan is saying all the right words, but does he mean it? How can he not? He’s had every chance to get rid of me, but each time he pulls me in closer.

“Bryan, you’re asking me a loaded question. One that isn’t easy to explain.” I turn in his arms, so he can see the real me. The me that is trying to open up. To give him a piece of my screwed up world.

“It’s only difficult if you let it be.” He brushes the hair out of my face. Over and over again as it falls back.

“It’s pretty self-explanatory, really. I have *huge* daddy issues.” I give a small smile hoping it doesn’t see through it.

“Every girl has daddy issues. What are *your* issues?”

When most people ask this question, bitch-mode is in high alert, but right now, I want to tell him everything. I want him to know me because this is the first time in forever that I want to share and that is because of *him*.

“Well, where do I begin?” I clear my throat buying some time.

“The beginning is good.” He winks.

“Okay... I never knew my dad. My mom was an artist and my dad was or is a musician. They were crazy in love, but drugs and a tour tore them apart. So, my mom had to go through her pregnancy and five years of my life alone. Well, until she met my stepdad, Daisy’s father.” I pause remembering how I thought he was the greatest. “I loved him.

Calling him Dad was natural. He was so proud of me. I was his world. He would even take me to work when his assistant was out so I could help him.” I smile at the thought. “Then Daisy was born five years later and things changed. I was no longer his focus.” Recalling the memory hurt. “I can still see the look on his face when he saw Daisy for the first time. He never looked at me that way.”

“Lil, he didn’t love Daisy more. It was just a different kind of love. It didn’t change his feelings for you.”

“Bryan, I grew up my whole life always trying to please people to get the affection I was desperately missing. I tried hard to be like them, but I wasn’t. Daisy was carefree and artistic like my mom and looked like my dad. I didn’t fit in. That is, until I met Fisher in college.”

“Daisy told me a little about this.”

“Of course she did.” I roll my eyes, irritated and a little jealous that she met Bryan first.

“Hey there. I didn’t mean it that way,” he reassures me.

“Well, *my* version... Fisher was ruthless at a young age. He knew exactly what he wanted and went after it. I, on the other hand, wanted to fit in. So, I watched and learned. He was a numbers genius and succeeded at everything he did. We signed up for all the same classes and partnered up on all our projects. And, during that time, I began to fall for him. I couldn’t help it. I finally found someone I was like. We shared the same interests and it felt good. I wanted more.”

“You know that isn’t true, right?”

“Are you going to let me tell my story or not?”

“Carry on.”

“The only problem with wanting more is never getting more. I did everything for him and forgot about being myself. After we graduated, I talked Fisher into moving back to California to pursue our business dream, but instead of being his partner, I became more of a sidekick. Someone to bring to the business dinners and events. Don’t get me wrong, I assisted with projects, but it was never the partnership I dreamed of having with him. I knew though if I acted right, changed my look, and became successful myself, that he would notice me and we could merge into one and create an empire.”

“You do know that you more or less created a business plan for your life?”

Taking a moment to think about it all, I realize he’s right. “Holy shit. I did.”

“You also know that you are very much like your mom and dad... right?”

Okay I’ll bite. “How do you figure?”

“Your mom, she is an artist. You saw the potential in the Laguna Beach property. Saw something that no one else noticed. That is an artist. Your dad, a musician. Last night, every move you made was rhythmic and your voice... angelic. Your stepdad, accounting nerd.”

“Hey, he’s not a nerd...,” I start to protest, and Bryan tilts his head to the side and gives me a look that says “Really?” “Well, maybe a little bit of a nerd.”

“You learned from him. Fisher didn’t teach you everything. Your interest in what he did growing up was the root of your knowledge. So, you see, you always belonged.”

“Bryan... I was horrible to Daisy.” Tears begin to fall from my eyes.

“Lil...” His hands frame my face, catching my tears as they slide down my cheeks. “You weren’t horrible. What you did was called being a protective big sister. You felt abandoned and alone since your dad wasn’t around. As for your mom, that was all compassion, baby. You saw her struggle to raise you alone for five years, which just made you want better for Daisy.” He leans in and rests his forehead against mine. “You didn’t want her to end up in the same situation as your mom. That is a loving sister and protective aunt. You didn’t want Ruby Rose to experience the loss you did. That is called being a responsible, loving young woman. A far cry from being horrible.”

I don’t speak and Bryan doesn’t seem to care. He just holds me and for the first time, I don’t feel alone. I feel loved.

Chapter Ten

Lillian

Three months ago, I dreaded this walk. After this morning, I can't get there fast enough. Bryan didn't break me. He broke through to me.

I raise my hand to knock but instead the door flies open and Daisy barrels at me, arms out and ready to attack.

"Lilly! I've missed you so much." She pulls back and looks at me, a smile creeping up on her face and I can't help but smile back. It's been a permanent feature since I left Bryan's this morning.

"Lilly Rose... did you get laid? I believe you did!" She answers herself.

"Daisy!" I feign shock. "What type of girl do you think I am?"

"Well, obviously the kind who gets laid."

"Fine... I got laid," I confess, shocking my sister.

"I knew it! I just knew it! Who was it? Was he good? No wait... don't tell me." She grabs my arm and pulls me inside. Her petite frame is stronger than it looks. "You *will* give me the deets, but first, we coffee."

"I don't think I can coffee anymore today. I've already had four... no, make that five cups." I close my eyes and remember the first cup Bryan brought me in bed. It was exactly how I like it and how he knew that is a mystery to me.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.” She hands me a fresh cup and slides a blueberry scone my way.

“I’m going to pass.” I slide it back to her.

“Nope! Eat up. Now that you are having sex you need to keep up your energy.”

“Daisy. I’m thirty-two. I’ve had sex before.”

“Not in a really, really long time. Right?”

“Why would you even say that?” I take a pull from the coffee she placed in front of me.

“Well, normally you are super-duper crabby and it’s been quite a while since you were this bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. So, was it Bryan?”

Shocked, I spit out coffee and begin to choke. “Why would you say that?”

“Dude, seriously? You didn’t know? Bryan Andrews has been infatuated with you since the day he saw you on the beach.”

“So, I’ve been told... wait a minute. Did you put one of your plans into action? Nothing good ever comes from one of those.”

“I plead the fifth.” Daisy stuffs a scone in her mouth so she doesn’t have to confess her sins.

“Fifth is a good number, but I like to plead sixth and ninth, but that is just my preference.” Gamms, Natalie Russo’s grandmother, comes waltzing into the room, carrying a very clean Ruby Rose who is holding a very drenched stuffed rooster rattle. She must have been eavesdropping around the corner.

“Gamms!” Daisy scolds. “We’ve discussed this. All sex talk needs to be kept to a minimum.”

“Nonsense, there’s nothing wrong with talking about a natural activity.” She shakes her head causing her “blue ball” earrings to bounce from side to side.

“Is someone’s phone ringing?” I look around, wondering if anyone else can hear it.

“Oh shit!” Daisy runs to the family room and back throwing the phone to me.

Catching it, I look at the screen and see that it’s... “No!” I attempt to throw it back, but when I look down I see Nonie and Pops in the background. Damn FaceTime.

“Well, well, well, look who it is.” Nonie takes her phone and turns it around so Pops can see, but instead of having me in his sight, he is looking at himself.

“Non... I don’t see anybody.”

“Pops, don’t be silly. It’s our Lily-pad.” Nonie switches the screen so Pops can finally see.

“Well looky there. I can see you now.”

“Hey, guys. How have you been?” I wave, but they seem to be lost in their own conversation. Something about protein powder with probiotic. I’m staying out of this debate.

“Lilly? Lilly, are you there?” The screen goes black. I told Daisy not to show them how to work it, but she thought it would be a good way for them to see Ruby when they were traveling.

“I’m here, Nonie.” She doesn’t respond.

Knowing they must have hit the wrong button, I pick up the phone and take it to the other room where everyone is now sitting and lay it on the table. Soon enough Nonie will figure it out and want to pick up where she left off.

“Daisy, dear, tell little Miss Ruby goodbye. We have to get going if we want to get there in time. I have Mona, the owner of Enchanted, making a line of designer shorts for Cocksucker.” Gamms hands Ruby over to Daisy and continues, “That poor rooster has been a little depressed lately and I’m hoping that a new wardrobe will bring him out of his funk.”

“Cheese-n-rice, Pop. How many did you take?” Nonie’s voice is heard coming from the phone, but the picture is still black.

“Well, I think I read somewhere that Bob Dole took a couple before he performed.”

“No, no, no! He took one pill a couple hours before he was ready to go.”

“Honey, you need to hurry. This thing is bigger than that one Tuesday,” Pops calls Nonie over.

Oh my god!

Daisy and I both look at each other and shout, “Hang up the phone.”

As we both dive in the phone’s direction, Gamms intercepts. “Don’t you dare! Peter who lives a couple houses down keeps messing with my garden. I need to see how this turns out. I’m thinking this has R. E. V. E. N. G. E. written all over it.”

“Let me grab the camera. Susie from water aerobics will never believe this.” You can hear Nonie fumbling in the phone

in the background.

“Oh... OH... OH MY. Pops, that’s”—Nonie clears her throat—“very impressive.”

Not being able to take anymore, Daisy comes over, grabs the phone, disconnects the call, and shouts, “Do not. I repeat, do not answer another FaceTime from those people. They called me from vacation a couple weeks ago from a nude beach.”

“And?” I ask, not seeing the problem.

“They were *nude* on the nude beach.” We both shiver.

“Children...” Gamms shakes her head. “One day, you should be as lucky to be like us.” She makes eye contact with both of us. “If you believe it, you will achieve it... that goes for orgasms too.” She winks. “Daisy, give Ruby to Lillian. She will be in good hands. We have to get going. We have a wedding to plan and cock-pants to design.”

“You sure you are going to be okay?” Daisy worries her bottom lip and she snuggles her baby close.

“Yes, we will be fine. Plus, you will be back in ten hours. Nothing will go wrong. I promise.”

“Okay. Love you, Lilly.”

“Love you too, Daisy.” I lean over to give her a kiss on the cheek and let Ruby give her mama some lovin’. “Have fun and maybe while you are there you can check out some styles for your wedding next year.”

“Maybe so.” She beams with happiness.

“Now go! You don’t want to keep Nat waiting.”

Bryan

My day is pretty open. Besides a few interviews, the only thing I need to take care of is some paperwork—Fisher called and said he will be back in town tonight and requested that I drop off the financial information he needs to finalize our partnership.

Feeling a little impatient I hurry out of The Bar and soon find myself knocking on the cottage door. Lillian answers. “Stalk much?”

“No stalking here.” I look around. “Bushes and windows seem safe and secure. Free from all creepy stalker guys.”

“My hero!” She feigns a sigh, opening the door wider. “You want to come in?”

“Of course. I would love to see two of my favorite girls.” Ruby turns her head at the sound of my voice. Giving Lillian a quick peck on the cheek, I head over to see my littlest love. “How’s my sweet Ruby-cube? Uncle Bri has missed you.” She takes her tiny hands and feels all over my face, giggling at the way the darkened stubble feels against her skin.

“Ruby-cube?”

“Yeah, it’s our thing.”

“I don’t think she is aware you have a thing.” She doubts our bond.

“Do you hear that, Ruby? Your Aunt Lil doesn’t think you understand our thing,” I pretend to whisper in her ear.

“You’re really good with her.” A questioning look appears on her face and I know she has more to ask. “Do you want kids of your own someday?”

“You know what I just realized. You didn’t get your chance to have a Q and A session with me.” I switch Ruby to my lap once I take a seat on the couch.

“Really?” She acts surprised, but the truth is I would give her everything right here and right now if she would have me.

“Really.” I pat the cushion next to me and motion for her to sit.

“Okay then.” I feel the seat dip as she settles in.

“Okay.” I smile. “So where do you want to begin?”

“What’s your middle name?” Lillian starts off with the same question I asked her.

“Davis.”

“After someone?”

“Yeah, my grandmother’s maiden name.”

“Favorite color?” She blinks her eyes rapidly suggesting it’s her eye color, but I opt for a little play time.

“That’s easy... black.”

“Black?”

“Yep it’s my new favorite color.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the color of the lace panties you have on right now.” I slide my hand over to her leg, giving it a little squeeze.

“Give me Ruby,” she demands.

“I promise she is fine.”

“That’s the problem. She is fine and I can’t concentrate with you holding her. I think my ovaries might burst if you

keep this up.”

“Well, by all means, have her. We don’t want any accidents while you are on the job. And I’m pretty sure we would make beautiful babies.” I throw out the “we” just to see how she reacts.

“We? Umm, we are just to the getting-to-know-you stage.” She fights to contain her smile.

“Not a problem. Questions today, babies tomorrow.”

“No. No, babies tomorrow.”

“Obviously. It takes nine months to harvest one,” I tease, but if I were to be truthful the thought of conceiving a baby with her makes me want to throw Lillian over my shoulder and carry her upstairs.

“You’re silly. Women don’t *harvest* babies.” Her eyes roam over Ruby, her smile spread wide. “Maybe we should curb the baby talk... for now.”

“For now,” I agree.

“So... tell me about Bryan Davis Andrews. What makes you tick?” She sits Ruby down between us, giving me her full attention.

“Well, I’m just a laid-back kind of guy who appreciates life.”

“Tell me about your family.”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“I’ve got the time. So, try me.” Lillian sits back and settles in.

“My dad owns a billion-dollar enterprise. Tons of money. Hell, I’m sure my dad throws it around and rolls in it, but

growing up, we never saw him. Edward Andrews was too busy working around the clock to make his company successful to be a real father to me and my sister. My mom, Kathryn Andrews, cares more about the lifestyle than us.”

“That’s really sad.”

“Is it? Because honestly, I think I turned out A-Okay.” I wink.

“Yeah, I kind of like you.”

“Well good, because I kind of like you too.” I pull Ruby up on my lap and scoot closer to Lillian. “Have I told you lately how beautiful you are?”

Leaning in, only a breath away, she whispers, “Just... all. Night. Long.”

“Andrews, playing house with my kid?” Fisher comes strolling in and sets his briefcase down by the door.

Quickly sitting up, I straighten myself. “We didn’t hear you come in.”

Taking off his suit jacket, he hangs it up before walking over to us. “How’s daddy’s little angel?” He picks her up, forgetting we are even there.

“Fisher, I put the papers on the desk for you to look over when you have time. I believe everything you asked for is in there.”

“Thank you, Bryan. I’ll have my team get the papers in order and over to the bank and then we will finally be able to get the ball rolling. Lillian, have you heard back from the real estate broker?”

“I told them we wanted this done within forty-eight hours or the deal was null and void.” Lillian flipped the switch and

went from carefree sweetheart to ruthless businesswoman. “He guaranteed me the papers will be delivered tomorrow morning for Bryan to sign.”

“Great. Things are just falling into place.” Fisher walks into the kitchen, with Lillian and me following behind. “Well, I believe that is all I need then. If you don’t mind, I would like to spend some quality time with Ruby before she goes to bed. She is the cutest thing when she’s taking a bath.” He takes Ruby’s hand and pats it all over his face. “She likes to take the bubbles and put them on my face. Isn’t that right, baby girl?” He coos at his daughter, pausing for a moment. “Do you mind seeing yourselves out?”

“Not at all,” we say in unison, smiling at each other as we leave the room.

“Thanks for coming to hang out with us tonight.” She grabs hold of my hand and leans into me. “I wasn’t ready to not be with you.”

“Confession?” I free my hand only to wrap my arm around her waist, bringing her in closer. “I called Daisy to see if she cared if I came to visit with you. I only used Fisher as an excuse.”

“I’m glad you did.” She looks up and smiles. “Now kiss me.”

Chapter Eleven

Lillian

Going home alone wasn't exactly how I planned this evening to end, but as we're getting ready to leave, Bryan receives what seems like an urgent call from Sam. I can't tell if it's a personal or bar issue but, either way he needs to go and I'm stuck going home alone.

Hopping in the car, I head toward my apartment and try not to think about all the things Bryan said he was going to do to me tonight before he got the call. If I were telling the truth, I didn't want him to go. I needed him to say that he was with me and find someone else to deal with it. Actually, I'm going to make a note to suggest that next time. If he is going to be successful and have more free time to do the things he wants then he needs to start delegating. Hire management for both locations.

As I pull into the parking garage, my phone rings. *He's changed his mind.* Quickly pulling into my spot, I throw the car in park and reach for my phone. "I just got home. Please tell me you are on your way."

"Well, that is the best hello ever!" Daisy greets me.

Looking at the phone I see it is her. I mean, I know it's her. It's her voice, but it wasn't supposed to be her. *Deep breaths.* "Hi, Daisy, I wasn't expecting you." I hop out of the car, head for the elevators, and grab the next one up.

"Who were you expecting? *Hmmmm?* Maybe a sexy guy with sandy-blond hair, gorgeous blue eyes, full lips—"

“Can you get on with it? I know exactly what he looks like. Thank you.” I cut her off. I know she is happily married, but I didn’t want her to envision Bryan that way. He is *mine*.

“Geez, Lilly, did you not have enough coffee today because if words could kill, I would have died just then.”

I know I shouldn’t have been so snippy. Daisy and I were just beginning to repair our relationship, but something about the way she described him set me off. *Calm down, Lil*. “I’m sorry.” And I truly am. I don’t want to be that person anymore. I love my sister with everything I am. I want us to be close. Have girl’s days with her and Ruby. I just want us to be a family.

“I know.” Daisy takes a deep breath herself. I’m sure she feels the intensity in my words. “I’m actually back in town and Fisher says he has everything under control.” She talks faster than normal. “So... I grabbed a pizza and a six pack. I figured I could come over and tell you about my trip to Sonoma.”

Knowing Daisy she is probably outside, crossing all fingers and toes, waiting for me to give her permission to come on up. Looking down at my phone, I scan my texts to make sure I didn’t miss one from Bryan, changing his mind. *Nothing*. “Sure, I just got in myself. I’m going to put on something comfy. Text me when you get here and I’ll buzz you on up.”

“Actually...”

“You’re here aren’t you?” A knowing smile creeps across my face. She has always been predictable.

“Yup!”

“Well, come on up.” I buzz her in.

While I wait for her to work her way up here, I quickly swap out my outfit for shorts and the old T-shirt Bryan let me wear home this morning. Pulling my hair up, I head to the bathroom to wash my face. If I'm settling in for the night I might as well get my nightly facial routine out of the way.

Splashing my face to get the remainder of the mask off, I feel around for the towel. Finding it, I dry off while looking into the mirror. Pausing, I notice changes in my appearance. My eyes seem a tad brighter, I look less tired even though I haven't had much sleep. I just look...

"Well, well, well... someone looks like they caught the love bug." Daisy is standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

"I wouldn't call it that, but I am *happy*." I say the word that has been on the tip of my tongue since reconnecting with Bryan. Just thinking about him makes me smile.

"Well, I would say it's a tad more than happy since you have one hell of a sexed-up smile on your face." Daisy walks forward, handing me a beer while she takes a swig of her own.

"I'm surprised you didn't bring over a bottle of wine."

"Well, while I was preggers, I craved beer. No clue why. I couldn't have it and I never really even liked it, but one day I pumped enough so I could have a few and discovered I loved it."

Realization hits me. I never got to be the big sister Daisy needed during her pregnancy. I abandoned her after the tragic incident and didn't get to experience this huge milestone in her life. *I'm more like my dad than I thought.*

"Hey now, where did that look come from?" Daisy examines my expression. "Where did you just go?"

“Daisy, I’m so sorry.” A tear escapes down my cheek.

“Don’t you do it. Don’t you dare do it,” she says, pulling me by the arm and into my family room. Pushing me down on the floor by the coffee table, she opens the pizza box and puts a slice on each of our plates. Handing me one, she plops down in front of me and stares for a few minutes. “You didn’t do this,” she finally says.

“Yes, I did. Daisy, I hurt you and I hurt Ruby. If anything would have happened to either one of you...” I set the plate down and burst out crying. Something I have been doing since the day I saw her unconscious in the hospital bed, wires and monitors everywhere.

Leaning over she gives me a hug and cries with me. Moments pass as we stay like this. “Lilly, you didn’t cause any of this. It was an accident,” she says. It’s the same story I have been hearing for months. “I knew you had a thing for Fisher. I watched you as I grew up, talking about him and how he was so perfect. When I met him, I didn’t know it was him, your Fisher. There was just something about that stranger that pulled us together.” A few months ago hearing about this would have shattered me more, but right now, I just want her to finish. “Then you got me that job and I found out I was pregnant.” She shakes her head. “I should have been honest with you the moment I found out. The day of the accident, you didn’t know. You were just trying to protect Fisher.”

“You. Are. My. Sister. I should have put you first and I didn’t. All I cared about was myself and this dream that I thought I wanted.” I lean back against the couch and stretch my legs out before I continue. “Daisy, I love you and I’m sorry for sucking.”

A burst of laughter barrels out of her tiny frame. “Lilly, I’m sorry too, but promise me you won’t go away again. We need you.”

“I promise.”

Chapter Twelve

Bryan

I really don't want to leave Lillian but hearing Sami on the other end in a panic freaks me the hell out.

"Bryan, I need you to come to The Bar now. I need you, please," she says then quickly hangs up. I try to call her back to make sure she's okay, but she doesn't answer. The only choice I have is to leave Lillian and go check on my sister.

Not caring if I get a ticket, I pull into the handicap spot out front and sprint inside. Looking around I see Sami sitting at a table laughing with some guy. *What the hell?*

Running my hands through my hair, I take a deep breath. *She's fine.* Gaining my composure, I walk over to the table. "Sam? I thought something is wrong."

"Wrong?" She stands up quickly, knocking over the chair in the process. "Nothing is wrong. In fact, everything is right." Sam jumps up and down, clapping her hands.

I look over at the guy she's with. He's just watching her; a smile creeps up his face and he relaxes into his chair, leaned back, legs crossed. *Who is he?*

"Bryan? Did you hear me?" She grabs my shoulders, turning me toward her.

"Wh-what?" I look at her beaming face, then back to the guy and back to her, focusing in on her mouth and what she is saying. I'm confused. "Sorry, sis. What's up?"

“Bryan! I know we were going to meet about this next week, but I couldn’t wait that long! I have a producer. J.R. wants to work with me. We are going to Nashville, all expenses paid.”

She seems excited, but something about this situation doesn’t seem right. I’m all for her chasing her dream. Hell, that’s why I wanted to expand, to be able to help her without our ‘parents’ judgment. “Sam, being signed and having a producer are two different things. I would think all expenses paid is some lame attempt to lure you away to god knows where...” The guy is now sitting up, full attention on us. “And who the fuck is this?”

“Geez, Bryan. Watch the language.” Sam steps back, crossing her arms. This is her battle stance. When she wants something, she fights for it. This can’t be good. “Are you saying that you don’t think I’m good enough for someone as experienced as J.R. here to want to work with someone like me?” Her eyes water, but not from being sad. Nope this is all part of the fight. She is pissed off. *Shit!*

“Sam, come on now, that is not what I’m saying.” I motion to the chairs and try to regain control of this conversation. “Let’s just sit down and discuss all this. Tell me everything from the beginning.”

Throwing her arms down, she huffs out a breath, reminding me even though she is twenty-one, she is still my baby sister. “Fine.” She picks up the chair she knocked over and drags it to the table, making a screeching sound that echoes through the empty bar.

Misty and a woman I’m assuming is the new waitress, Jamie, who Misty hired last week, turn and look in our

direction. I shrug my shoulders and they go back to whatever they were doing.

“Maybe the best place to start is with introducing me to your friend here.” I nod toward the guy, who looks a little too pleased with himself.

Standing up, he holds out his hand. “I’m J.R., a producer with Thorn Records.”

Taking his hand, squeezing a little harder than normal, I reluctantly follow his lead and say, “Bryan, Sami’s big, bad-ass brother.” I stare him down and wait for him to sit first, but neither of us moves.

Clearing her throat, Sami tries to break the tension. “Umm, so Bri, you want to hear my story or what?”

That does it. She can always get me to cave. I’m supposed to be the big brother, but somehow, some way she always manages to get her way. So, I give in and sit down, but I keep my eyes on him. “Sure, Sam, spill it.”

“Oh my god... it’s the best story EVER!” Sami’s baby blues shine from across the table. Excitement now overtakes the tension. “You know how last night I had to leave to play at GiGi’s Tavern?”

“How could I forget?” I think about Lillian showing up to help out at The Bar and ending up in my bed.

Sam looks at J.R. and smiles. *I’m not liking this.*

He puts a hand on her leg and smiles back, then turns his attention to me. “Bryan, your sister is extremely talented and has a way of capturing her audience. She’s special.”

“I’ve very aware.” *Who the hell does he think he is?*

“Well good. So, you won’t have a problem with your sister coming to Nashville to record in our studio.” J.R. cuts to the chase.

“Excuse me? Why on god’s green earth would I let my baby sister travel to Nashville with some stranger who proclaims to be some famous producer?” I lean forward, hands on the table. “You going to have her ‘audition’? Maybe hole her up in your office and take advantage of her, tell her this is the only way to advance?” I’m pissed now. “Not happening, bro.”

“Brain!” Sami gasps.

“What? Tell me you don’t believe this jerk.” I point my thumb in J.R.’s direction.

“Bryan, I’m one hundred percent serious when I tell you that my intentions are strictly professional—”

“Fuck you, Bryan Andrews!” Sami jumps up from the table, crying, and heads toward the apartment.

Standing up to go after her, dickface grabs my elbow, stopping me. “Bryan, let her go. Give her a minute.”

“Who the hell are you to tell me what to do with *my* sister?” I knock his hand away and head toward the stairs.

“All I’m saying is—”

Swinging around, I jab a finger in the air in front of his face. “I swear to god, if you don’t fucking leave this instant—”

The dickface doesn’t give up. “One, get your fucking finger out of my face. Two, if you were to listen to your sister’s entire story you would have felt a little differently about the situation. Three, here is my fucking card. Check my

references. You will see this is legit.” He stuffs the card in my hand, turns and heads for the door.

“That’s my sister!” I holler after him, wadding up the card and throwing it to the ground.

Before he walks out, he pauses and looks back at me. “That’s right, Bryan, your sister. How about you go up there and hear her out instead of crushing her dreams. From what I hear, she gets that enough from your parents.” The door chimes and J.R. is gone.

Left standing there, I try to process what he said.

Am I like my parents?

Not wanting to give Sam any more time to dwell, I turn to run up to the apartment, but instead of running into the stairway I run into two serious as hell waitresses. Misty and the new girl, Jamie, are standing there, arms crossed.

What is it with these women?

“Boss, I think you owe Sami an apology. You went all big brother on her and didn’t even give her a chance,” Misty says.

“What she said.” Jamie jabs her thumb in Misty’s direction, reaffirming her statement.

“Damn it!” I hang my head. “Everyone is right.”

Jamie walks over to where I threw J.R.’s business card, picks it up and flattens it back out. She comes back over and hands it to me. “Why don’t you take this, make a few phone calls and make sure he is telling the truth?”

“You can fix this, Bryan.” Misty and Jamie part like the Red Sea, and the stairway is now visible. “Go up there, kiss some ass and lend her an ear. Be you, Bryan. Be the supportive

big brother she knows you to be,” Misty says as she pushes me through.

What in the hell just happened?

I stumble forward, putting one foot in front of the other, making my way toward the apartment.

“Bryan, you can fix this,” Misty reassures me.

God, I hope so.

Chapter Thirteen

Lillian

Daisy's little unwelcomed surprise visit ended up being welcomed after all. After we had our little "come to Jesus" moment she filled me in on her trip to Sonoma.

Apparently, Mona, who owns the bridal boutique Enchanted, took one look at Daisy and told her that she had the perfect wedding dress for her "declaration of love" wedding/reception. Daisy, who didn't want to ruin Nat's special day, told her she would call about it later but Nat insisted she take a look.

Mona had a binder full of sketches that a soon-to-be-graduate sent her in hopes of landing a job. She said when Mona flipped to the dress she had in mind, she heard angels sing. Quickly taking a picture of the design, she sent it to Fisher to investigate Camilla Lacey, the talented designer of her dream dress.

After the pizza and beer were gone, Daisy almost convinced herself to stay for a girl's sleepover, but when Fisher called and had her blushing, I knew the party was over. Normally this would have bothered me, but since being with Bryan, I realized Fisher had been a plan of convenience.

Just thinking about Bryan has me smiling. I know it's only been one day, but it feels like a few years. I'm feeling happy for the first time in... *forever*.

Grabbing the contract off the counter, I head out the door, opting for the walk to The Bar. Today seems different and I can't pinpoint exactly why, but it is. The sun is a little brighter, the flowers are more vibrant, the sound of the waves crashing is a little louder.

Lost in thought and the world around me, I almost pass by The Bar entrance. Laughing to myself, I shake my head, realizing I'm one step away from doodling this guy's name in my notebook.

Opening the door, I take a step in and remove my sunglasses, pausing to give my eyes a chance to adjust. Scanning the bar, I find Misty. "Hey, where's Bryan?" I holler, making myself known.

She turns around and waves and I notice she is on the phone.

"Sorry," I whisper, holding up the contract to let her know why I'm here.

Nodding she points over to the corner.

Mouthing a thanks I give her a thumbs up and head that direction. "Bryan, look what I have." I start to hold up the contract, but then I realize what exactly I'm heading toward. Dropping the papers, I stand there frozen.

Please no! This can't be happening. Not again.

Bryan is standing by the stage in the corner of the bar in a loving embrace with a mysterious blonde wrapped in his arms. He whispers in her ear and a slow smile creeps across her face.

A lone tear escapes down my cheek. *He lied.* Turning to leave, I start to pick up the pace. *I'm so stupid.*

"Lil, where are you going?" Bryan calls out.

Don't stop. Keep going.

“Babe, wait up. I want you to meet Sam.” He sounds closer, but I don’t look back. I can’t look back.

Reaching the door, I pull it open, immediately blinded by the morning sun.

“Damn it, Lil. Where are you going?” He’s definitely closer now.

Don't stop. Keep going. Eventually he will leave. They always leave.

“Lil! Stop!” He grabs me by the arm, pulling me backward against his chest. He wraps his strong arms around me. “What’s wrong, Lil?”

For a moment I relax in his arms, letting him comfort me. Hold me.

Turning quickly in his arms, I break free. “I saw you in there.” I point toward the bar and back away.

Taking a step forward he seems confused. “With Sam?” he asks.

“Sam? That’s *Sam*? The one you always leave *me* for?” I shout not sure what to do. I can’t stay here. I can’t be here.

“Yes, that is my—” Bryan tries to say something, but I’m not listening.

I can’t do this. I let my guard down for him and look what it got me. *Broken*. This is why I am the way I am. This has to end.

“You know what? Go to hell, Bryan Andrews. You are no different than the rest of them.” I’m face to face with the man who I thought I knew. “You used me to expand your business.”

I pause for just a second, questioning myself if I want to go there. Once I do there is no going back. “Well guess what? You are nothing. You hear me? *Nothing!* Success ends with your father. You, my *friend*, are nothing but a failure and a disgrace to your family.” I know it’s not true, but the words come out and I can’t take them back. “You say you want to expand to help your sister, but that is an excuse. You just want to show your daddy that he is wrong, but all you’ve done is show him exactly how right he really is.” I stop, take a deep breath and notice the crowd around us. Then I look at Bryan, standing still in shock, just staring at me in disbelief.

I broke him.

I said what needed to be said.

Then why does it hurt?

Holding my head high, I turn to walk away.

“Lil,” Bryan’s voice is barely a whisper.

Keep walking.

“That was my sister, Sami Andrews,” he finishes.

Sister?

I keep walking.

Bryan

She’s gone. I’m standing in the doorway, a crowd in the lot nearby.

“Bri?” Sami is now behind me. “You okay?”

“Nope.” I don’t know what else to say.

“Come back inside. Let’s talk.” She wraps her thin arm around my lower back and even though she is smaller, she holds me up and guides me inside. Misty and Jamie lock the door behind us, closing off the whispers and prying eyes.

“Is he all right? What happened?” Misty sounds concerned.

“Yeah, he will be.” Sami is now tugging me toward the apartment. “Misty, you may need to open the bar by yourself. Have Jamie run your tables,” she hollers down to the girls as we reach the top of the steps.

Dragging me inside, she pushes me down on the couch and sits next to me. “Bryan, what in the hell happened down there?”

“She’s gone.” It’s all I can get out.

“Why? Why is she gone?”

“S-she thought I was cheating on her with you,” I try to explain.

“So did you tell her? Set her straight?” She says it like it is the easiest thing in the world. Well, it could have been if Lillian would have just listened.

“She wouldn’t let me.” I’m lost in thought. “Sis, she said so many mean and hurtful things... I-I just can’t.”

“Bryan, last night you told me this girl was damaged goods—”

That gets my attention, snapping me out of it. “The hell I did. She’s broken, had a rough life, but she isn’t *damaged goods*. We’re good together.”

“Then why are you here? Go to her. Tell her how you feel.”

“What, and forget what she said? She thinks I’m a failure.” Her words “you are nothing” replay over and over again in my mind.

“Are you a failure? Because the Bryan I know and grew up with is far from that.” Sam stands. “Go to her. If you feel the same way you did last night, then don’t give up without a fight. Go to her, tell her how you feel.”

“You know what, you’re right. Thanks, Sam.” I stand, give her a kiss on her forehead, grab my keys, and run down the stairs and out the door. And find my car is blocked in by a delivery truck. I don’t waste my time waiting for it to move—I start running.

Chapter Fourteen

Bryan

Reaching the foyer of Lillian's apartment building, I frantically scan the list of names, desperate to get to her.

Nothing.

Slamming my hand down on all the buttons, I hit them repeatedly, hoping that someone will let me in.

"Son, you okay?" A little old man comes up behind me.

"I will be once I get into this building. The woman I'm crazy about is up there and won't let me in."

"Ahhh, I've been there a time or two. When I proposed to my first wife, god rest her soul..." He does that cross thing over his chest, kisses a ring on his finger and looks up to the sky. I'm getting ready to interrupt him and beg, but he does it for me. "You know what? I won't bore you with that story. Go get her." He smiles and presses that magic little button.

"Thank you!" I shout as I run toward the stairs, by passing the elevator. It may have been faster, but I can't stop now. I have to get to her.

"Edwards, Ben Edwards," he hollers back, and I make a mental note to thank him someday if this works out.

Flight after flight, I take the steps two at a time.

Legs burning.

Chest heaving.

Heart breaking.

The need to see her—to explain everything—overpowers the torture I'm putting my body through.

Finally, I'm at her door, but my lungs struggling to find air stop me from knocking. Hunching over, I place my hands on my knees and take deep breaths. I need words if I'm going to make this work.

The door opens, and she stands before me. Clothes changed, makeup off and bloodshot eyes. "W-what are you doing here? Mr. Edwards said he had something for me."

I can't help it, a smile spreads across my face. Mr. Edwards still working his magic. "Surprise." I hold out my hands and give her my best *please forgive me. I can't live without you* smile.

"Seriously?" She moves to close the door and my smile fades.

I can't let her go. Not like this. Not before we get the chance to discuss what happened.

"I'm totally serious." I catch the door with my palm and push it back open. "Damn it, Lil! Stop running away."

"I'm not running. I said what needed to be said and *left* you." She takes a step back as I let myself in, slamming the door behind me.

"That's right! You had your say, but now I'm going to have mine." My voice comes out harsher than I intend.

"Bryan..."

"No, please, I need you to listen." I stalk toward her, but for every step I take toward her, she takes one back. "You're right. I am nothing," I say using her words.

“No, Bryan, you aren’t *nothing*.”

“Yes, I am. I’m nothing if you aren’t with me. I’ve wanted you since I saw you in that green bikini and needed you since I first touched you.”

“Bryan, I’m not worth it. You may not want to leave now, but eventually you will. Everyone leaves me,” she argues sadly.

“Lil, just shut up and listen.” I stop in front of her a careful distance away, but I need her to pay attention. I need her to look at me when I say this. “You *are* worth it.”

She turns her head.

“Look at me,” I demand and our eyes lock. “You have been running all your life. Stop. Just stop, for a minute. Let someone love you.” I pause, bringing my hand up to my heart and confess. “Let *me* love *you*.”

She gasps.

“I know life has sucked. Your dad left, your mom remarried, you were lost.”

“You found me,” she whispers.

“Let me—” I cut myself off. “Wait? What did you say?” I’m not sure if I heard her right.

“You found me.” Her sad eyes pierce my soul, and she repeats the words I need to hear. “I said, you found me.”

Desperate to feel her, I close the distance. Grabbing the back of her head, I bring her mouth to mine. Her lips are shaky and urgent as they meld with mine. Our tongues tangle, speaking the words we’re unable to say. Backing her up against the wall, I press myself into her, showing her exactly how much I need her.

Breaking the kiss, her breaths come out hard and rapid. Her body shows me she doesn't want to stop, as she pulls me closer. "Bryan, what I said, I didn't mean it."

"I know," I reassure her, but the words still replay in my mind.

"No, you don't. Bryan, you are so brave and strong. You wanted better than your father's corporate world. You left at a young age and made a small, rundown bar into a local hot spot. The atmosphere is amazing, and the food keeps everyone coming back. Bryan, you built that. Not your father—you." She pauses, reaching up, softly placing a hand on each side of my face. Her touch is like feathers caressing my skin. "I tried to hurt you. Please forgive me."

"Lillian Richards, not only do I forgive you, but I love you. Every single broken piece of you." Her eyes go wide, her head shaking back and forth. "Yes, I do. Don't fight it, baby."

"Bri—"

I see her wheels turning so I cut her off before she starts second-guessing this.

"Enough telling, Lil, let me show you." Turning her in my arms, I slowly brush her hair to the side, loving the feel of her skin like satin under my fingertips. Lowering my mouth to her ear I kiss her gently, tasting her for what seems like the first time. It's different than before. I can feel she senses it too as her body writhes against mine, a soft moan escaping her lips.

"Bryan."

"Calling out my name already?" I smile against her skin, licking and nipping my way to that sensitive little spot on the back of her neck.

"You are so beautiful." My voice drips with lust.

“And.” *Nip.*

“Mine.” *Lick.*

“Forever.” *Suck.*

I can't keep this up, my need for her is overwhelming all my senses. My veins are throbbing, my heart crashing against my ribs. Seeing her like this, raw and wanting, has me drowning in emotions I have never felt before. I can't wait another minute. I need her. Now.

Lifting her in my arms, I move us to the couch and gently lie her down. Not wasting any more time, I tug the soft cotton shirt over her head and work on ridding her of her bottoms. Pulling them down, my hands drag along her thighs, teasing as I go. Once she's free of clothing, I move the journey upward, nibbling until I find the very spot I crave.

She stops me to pull my own shirt over my head, nails trailing down my back as she draws me close again.

“Bryan, please.” Her fingers twist in my hair, pulling me closer to her core with a sense of urgency. Desperate for my touch, she bucks her hips higher.

Biting the inside of her thigh, I finally give her what she wants. One lick, then two. I can't contain myself. I devour her. Licking, sucking, as her body responds and finds a rhythm it needs, but still wanting more.

Her hands find mine, pushing them where she wants them. One finger, then two, I slowly pump. Her spine straightens and her nails dig, cutting into my skin in the best kind of pain, showing me the pleasure I'm giving her. I drink from her like a man dying of thirst. Her body trembles under my touch, making me grow harder at the thought of being inside her.

Pulling away only long enough to kick off my jeans and boxer briefs, I settle back between the delicious heat of her legs.

“Bryan, I need you,” she pleads, arms around me, frantically pulling me up. The hunger is not satisfied, not even close. I don’t know if my appetite for her will ever be.

She attacks my mouth, kissing me like I’m her lifeline. And maybe I am; god knows she’s mine. Desperate for each other we become a tangle of naked limbs.

Mouths hungry, lips roaming, teeth scraping. Reaching between us, I slowly rub myself between her folds, teasing us both as I feel the wetness from her pleasure.

Mine.

Rubbing up and then down just once more before sliding in. The feel of her surrounding me, drawing me in, almost undoes me instantly. My eyes clamp shut and I pump slowly before picking up the pace.

She feels perfect. Needing more I lower myself, changing the angle to press deeper. My arms bend, my body falls onto her, the weight pressing her further into the couch. I want her to feel me, all of me. Feel as consumed as I feel with her wrapped around me, milking me.

“Bryan, it feels—”

“Perfect.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She moans, before her head falls back and she screams.

Her cries of pleasure ring in my ear, causing me to fall over the edge and my own orgasm crashes through me like a

rogue wave. **Chapter Fifteen**

Lillian

Why me? The sun pounds in the bedroom window. There are room-darkening blinds that I begged Bryan to get, but by the time we actually made it to the bedroom it was dark out and closing the blinds was the last thing on my mind.

Pulling the sheets over my face, I roll over to snuggle into Bryan, but instead of finding a warm pillow of yummy goodness, I find nothing but an empty bed and cold sheets.

I freak out slightly, wondering if he left. “Bryan?” I call out, praying I’m wrong and he is here somewhere.

Nothing.

Panic starts to set in. Throwing my legs over the side of the bed, I grab the T-shirt he threw on the floor last night and pull it over my head as I walk out of the room. “You in here?” I try to joke but fail.

Nothing. He’s gone.

Pulling out the barstool, I sit down, laying my head on the counter and closing my eyes. I will myself to not feel this way.

I don’t know if seconds or minutes pass, but the one thing I do know is that Bryan is not here. Opening my eyes, one at a time, I decide to stop feeling sorry for myself and grab a cup of coffee.

Coffee! I smell coffee!

Rushing over to the pot. I see an almost full pot and beside it is a note.

Good Morning Lil!

I had to run an errand, be back in a few. Have a cup of coffee and wake up because once I get back you are going to need it.

Love,

B

Pouring myself a cup, I down it not caring that it's black or steaming hot. I sometimes nuke my coffee after it brews because the coffeemaker doesn't get it hot enough for me.

Hurrying to the bathroom I rinse off in the shower and brush my teeth. I'm not having a replay of morning breath kisses.

Wrapping the towel tighter around me, I walk into the bedroom and see Bryan standing there in his board shorts, T-shirt and flip-flops. I drink in the view. The only thing better would be Bryan wet and shirtless. *Hmmm...* I get lost in thought.

"See something you like?" Bryan chuckles, and it's the best sound ever.

"You." I walk over to him, dropping my towel along the way and wrap myself around his body, sprinkling kisses all over his face.

"Someone is glad to see me?" He captures my lips as they pass over his.

"Mmm-hmm."

"Well, good. I hope you still think that after you see your surprise." He sets me down and points over to the bed.

“Ummm. What’s that?”

“That is your sexy-as-hell green bikini and a wet suit.” He walks over to grab the items and tries to hand them to me. “Go put them on. We are going surfing.”

“Say what?” I joke, pulling my hands away and refusing to get dressed “You think you are going to take me, the one who doesn’t have an athletic bone in her body, surfing?”

Truth is, I would go anywhere with him.

“Yep! I ran out to the beach and it’s a perfect day to be out there.” He stuffs them into my hands and turns me toward the bathroom, giving me a little push.

Doing as he says I decide to give my ass a little shake along the way. “You sure you don’t want to stay in?” I try to tempt him.

“That right there?” He points to my backside. “Is *mine*, but first we surf.”

“But first we surf,” I agree and close the door behind me.

“What? The show over?” he shouts across the room.

Opening the door, I peek my head out. “Yep. I don’t want to accidentally tempt you to stay in.” I wink.

After changing into my bikini, I throw on a cover-up, opting to put on the wetsuit when we get to the beach. Putting a bag together with a couple towels and sunscreen, I open the door and see Bryan lying on the bed. “I’m ready.”

“Bout time.” He jumps up and grabs my hand, pulling me behind him. “Let’s go.”

“Wait!” I dig my heels in.

“Nope... not changing my mind. Let’s go. I promise you will love it.” He gives my arm a little tug.

“Bryan.” I drop his hand, getting his attention.

“What is it?” He turns around, a look of worry on his face.

“I’m sorry. I just need to confess something. This morning when you weren’t here, I panicked. I thought you left me.”

“Babe...” He pulls me in close.

“I’m broken and I think a part of me will always be that way. You can try to build me up and put me back together, but something is missing. I’m not sure if it has to do with my dad leaving or if it’s just who I am, but I’m trying. I want to be whole for you.”

Pulling back a little, just enough to be able to look at me, he says, “I want you. *All* of you. Even if that means putting you back together like a five-thousand-piece puzzle, and even if when that puzzle is put together a piece has gone missing. You know the one?” he questions, and I nod. “I’ll search for that sucker. Hell, I’ll even make a piece if I have to.” His smile is warm and full of love.

His words hit home. “You are the piece.”

“Damn straight I am. Now let’s go get some glue. I got a puzzle to solve.”

“I love you, Bryan Andrews.”

“I love you too, Lil.”

Epilogue

Sami

“J.R., can you believe it? We are on our way to Music City. A place where dreams come true.”

I can't help it. The excitement has overtaken me, and I'm bouncing up and down, probably making the other passengers nervous.

“I'm pretty sure dreams come true at Disney World, but I get the gist. You. Are. Excited.” J.R. glances over at me, placing a hand on my knee. Either comforting me or trying to get me to sit still. Either way, it's nice. *He's nice.*

“Nashville is my Disney World and Opry Land is my castle... so what of it?” I giggle and wait for his reaction.

“You don't say?” he says as he pulls out his cell and scans his emails.

Not quite the reaction I thought I was going to get. The one thing I noticed about J.R., besides his total hotness, is his witty charm. Being holed up with him for a couple days writing was ah-mazing! Everything felt natural, the chemistry flowed. So, when one day led to two, I didn't fight it. I was begging for three.

“Hey... what's your deal? Did I do something wrong?” I ask, twisting in my seat to face him. “You seem out of whack.”

“Whack?” he questions without looking at me.

“Yeah, out of whack, out of order. As opposed to being wack. Definition, lame. Used in a sentence, ‘*cause inside out*’

is wiggity, wiggity, wiggity, wack.””

This causes him to look up. “Seriously? Did you just quote Kris Kross?”

“Sometimes epicness comes in the rarest forms.” I smile hoping to catch a glimpse of one from him.

“Epicness? Kriss Kross is not epic.” His mind is too boggled to understand the pure awesomeness behind my comments. I have started a battle. One I hope ends in the same way as the other day: with a fairytale kiss. *Pure epicness!*

“Come on now, anyone who can convince kids and adults of all ages and sizes to wear their clothes backward is pure epicness. Actually, it is so epic, epicness doesn’t even cover it. Hell, it deserves two words. No, a hyphenated word... grandiose-fantasticism!” I pause for effect. “Don’t you think?” I ask, waiting for him to join in, but all I get is a stare.

Then finally, in a slo-mo response, a smile starts to creep up on J.R.’s face. “Kid, you are something else.”

“Kid? I’m not a kid... take that back.”

“Jag, get a hold of your new toy before she drives the rest of our crew nuts.” A short, middle-aged man who I recognize from the other night leans forward to talk to J.R. “The flight attendant said if she doesn’t quiet down she will have to take a commercial flight.”

“She’s not going anywhere. Now sit back down and mind your own fucking business.” J.R. shoots back.

“Jag, I’m just sayin’ the label’s rep is on the line already, we don’t need—” short dude tries to defend himself.

“I said, mind your own business. I got this.”

“My hero!” I clasp my hands over my heart, blinking wildly at him.

This gets me another smile. *Sexy!*

“Hey, why did he call you Jag? Is that some kind of nickname or something?” Curiosity is killing me. Is it because he flies so much? Does he drive a Jag? Enquiring minds need to know.

“That’s my name.”

“Huh? I just figured it was J.R. because your name was like Edward Adams Jr. or something like that.”

“Nope. Nothing of the sort.” The smirky smile is back. “Jagger Michael Richards, named after my dad and his love for all things Rolling Stones.”

“Huh. Who would have thunk it.” I look at him, thinking Jagger fits way better than J.R. “So why J.R. and not Jag?”

“Most of my friends and co-workers call me Jagger, but some of the older people in the industry still call me J.R., for Jagger Richards, Micky Richards’ boy.”

“Wait? You are Micky Richards’ son? The owner of Thorn Records?” I’m sitting closer now, hanging on every word he says.

“He was the owner of Thorn Records. My dad passed away last month.” He looks past me, out the window.

“I’m so sorry, Jag.” I find his hand and grab hold of it, hoping he finds a little bit of comfort in my touch.

“Don’t be, he was an asshole who thought more of his career than his own family.” He jerks his hand away like I have some kind of life-threatening, skin-eating disease.

“Jag—”

“This is your captain speaking. You can call me Jett, or captain or Captain Jett. I’m pretty damn awesome and use all these million little buttons and levers to fly this aircraft. So, given safety really did their job and checked everything, I will have no problem getting you to your destination which is...” The sound of papers rustling comes over the intercom. “Nashville.”

The plane erupts in a bunch of hoots and hollers.

“So, please take your seats and fasten your seatbelts. The flight attendants have something to say. Listen close, it may save your life.”

“Well, looks like we are getting ready to go. Fasten up little one.” Jag reaches over and buckles my belt, making sure it’s on tight.

“Jag?”

“Yes, Sami?”

“I’m scared. I’ve never flown in a private jet before. Actually, I have never flown at all,” I confess.

“It’s okay, kid. I got you... I promise.” He reaches over and squeezes my hand.

That’s what I’m afraid of.

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Thank you for reading Bryan and Lillian’s story. I hope you loved it as much as I loved writing it. If you’re inclined to, I’d love if you left a review on [Amazon](#).

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Misty & Jaime... Congrats on winning the character contests. Thanks for letting me use your names in Broken Forever. PS... I didn't turn you into evil beotchies. YAY!

Let's not forget Spotify... Thanks for having a song for every one of my moods.

To all the bloggers... As a reader, I enjoy you. As a writer, I adore you. Everything you do is for the love of books... thanks!

To my favorite people in the whole world, my husband and kids... I promise, next time, I won't be a procrastinator. Which means I'll be less grouchy, I'll help with the chores and most importantly SHOWER! #coffeesaveslives #ImissAbe

About the Author

Cary Hart is a sassy, coffee-drinking, sometimes-sailor-swearing Spotify addict and lover of all things books!

She writes relatable romance—from swoon-worthy small town second chances to angsty love that'll rip your heart out, to rom-coms that will have you laughing out loud, page after page. Her characters deal with everyday life—the good, the bad...and the crazy! But they always get a happy ending!

Born and raised in the Midwest, she knows a thing or two about small town life. When not talking to the characters in her head, Cary has her hands full as a mom to two amazing teens and two spoiled cats! Thankfully, she has a supportive husband who loves her—and doing the laundry! In addition to working and writing full-time, she enjoys way too much Dateline, Friends reruns, and binge-watching the next big thing on Netflix!

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