



# COAST GUARD

*Next Door*

B.D. ADALINE

## Coast Guard Next Door

---

A friend to lover, second chance at  
love, contemporary romance



B.D. Adaline



Copyright © 2023 by B.D. Adaline

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

# Contents

1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8
9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10
11. Chapter 11
12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13
14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15

## 16. Chapter 16



## Chapter 1

---

### **JIA**

I don't understand why I always let Sarah drag me to these things but I think I knew deep within me that I wanted to be here. I wasn't the kind of person that got swayed easily. Meaning, if I didn't want to do something, you would never catch me doing it. I only always do what I want to do.

And that's how I ended up here with Sarah.

This was basically the club closest to where we lived so when we decided to have a night out, this was our first obvious choice. I rolled my eyes as I watched the ladies and men on the dance floor. The first time I ever walked into a club, I was in shock and it took me a while to even understand why people came to these places.

It was just noise and alcohol... and more alcohol.

The loud music that emanated from the speakers that had been positioned in several strategic places in the club had my

heart beating twice as fast. It always baffled me whenever I thought about her love for clubbing and nights out.

“I’m having so much fun!” Sarah screamed, while drinking her third tequila shot. I rolled my eyes and searched for my phone in my purse. I didn’t know how much longer we had to be there.

The male bartender smiled at me as he placed my first shot in front of me and sighed. Was the universe egging me on to get drunk? Well, what’s the harm in letting loose a little. I reached for the glass cup with my right hand and brought it straight to my mouth and swallowed all the liquid in one gulp.

“There she is,” the bartender smiled at me with a wink. I shook my head and averted my gaze back to my best friend who was now dancing to the metallic music being played in the club. The silver strapless dress she wore didn’t even reach her knees, and both sides of the dress had slits. Her auburn hair was in a tangled mess all over her face as she danced and swayed her body to the music.

After that first shot, there was nothing else in the world that could make me take another. Sarah was the sole advocate of this night out and I was willing to let her have all the fun she wanted, but I didn’t have to go crazy like her.

“Penny for your thoughts?” this time it wasn’t the bartender. It was a different guy, and I eyed him suspiciously as he took the seat next to me. This was Sarah’s seat but since she was dancing, I guess he could borrow it for a while. Sarah definitely wouldn’t mind. He extended his arms to me and I

noticed his muscles flex underneath the white shirt he wore. My throat instantly went dry.

I wasn't a virgin, so I definitely wasn't a saint and ever since what happened to me, I had been closed off from love and relationships, but that didn't mean I didn't get sexually satisfied from time to time.

After my divorce with Ryan, I had gone to the adult store and gotten every kind of sex toy. Those machines are amazing and they do the job perfectly well but sometimes, having the real deal is also equally amazing.

I wasn't opposed to one-night stands. As long as there were no strings attached, I could work with it.

"I'm Parker. What's your name?" he asked me, and I could see the dimples that rested on both his cheeks as he smiled.

"I'm Jia and you're in my friend's seat," I smiled, flipping my dark hair from the left side so it could rest on my right shoulder.

"I don't think your friend would mind," he smirked at me.

I knew guys like this. They only wanted one thing. Whatever was between my legs. And fortunately for him, I also didn't mind at all.

"What's your deal?" I asked him.

I wasn't the kind of person to beat around the bush and there wasn't exactly enough time in the world to play around. I liked to be straight forward in my dealings.

“I find you very attractive,” he eyed me seductively as he spoke.

The thing with being unemotionally available is that your body is the only thing that responds. There is no heart stopping moment or butterfly in your belly anymore. It’s just the ache in your vagina to have sex and the second the goal is achieved, it’s back to normal.

“And I think your dimples are cute,” I responded as he laughed.

“You think I’m cute?” he asked, and I nodded. He chuckled “do you want to dance?” he had that dangerous look in his eyes as he spoke, and I understood that he didn’t mean the kind of dance on the dance floor but something else.

I grabbed my purse and stood up from my stool. He had a questioning look on his face as I stood.

“Oh, you didn’t do anything wrong. I just wanted to inform my friend that I was going dancing and ensure that she gets home safe,” I smiled at him with a wink.

He nodded and sat back down but I didn’t miss the look of fulfillment in his eyes. If only he knew that this was more about me and my needs than it was about him.

I deliberately swayed my hips from side to side as I walked up to Sarah because I knew he would be watching my every move. I held on to Sarah’s waist as she danced and whispered into her ears “Hey babe, I’m getting some action tonight,” I said to her.

Sarah stopped dancing and turned around to face me with a grin.

“And you said you didn’t want to be here but look at you sneaking off to go do bad stuff,” she smiled

“Technically it’s not sneaking off if I’m informing you about it,” I said dryly.

“Whatever smarty pants. You can go and do what you have to do. I’ll get a cab back home,” she responded.

“Are you sure? I was thinking of sending you off myself first.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“But you’re drunk.”

“I’m only tipsy and trust me, I’m fine. I won’t drink anymore until I get home. I promise,” she smiled.

“Leave a message for me when you’re home. I might not get it but still, leave it”, I told her as she nodded.

“Will do! Now go and have fun!” she yelled as she turned me around and pushed me in the direction of where I sat earlier. Parker was already looking at both of us but his eyes were particularly focused on me.

He looked at me like a hunter looked at his prey.

“Shall we leave then?” He smiled at me and I nodded. Parker settled the bartender and we walked out of the club. “I know a place nearby that we could spend the night,” he told me.

He walked me to the corner of the street where he had parked his car. Standing outside the club now, I could feel the chilly air touching my exposed skin. I had made the mistake of coming out tonight without a jacket. I hugged my body and rubbed my arms trying to cause some friction.

“Put this on,” Parker took off his brown leather jacket and handed it to me. I nodded gratefully and wore it. I didn’t want to die from the cold and since he was offering, it would be rude to refuse. He opened the passenger door for me and I helped myself into the seat. He locked the door and walked back around to the driver’s seat before getting in and shutting the door behind him.

“Are you always such a gentleman?” I teased him looking at him with my side eye.

“Yes, I am. As much as you’re finding it hard to believe,” he responded by igniting the car engine and we were off.

It took us less than ten minutes to arrive at the guest house. I always saw this place whenever Sarah and I drove out to the mall and sometimes work too, but I’ve never had any reason to come in till now.

Parker drove into the parking lot and killed the car engine.

“Please stay here while I go and settle the accommodation,” he told me as I smiled. He was out of the car in an instant and as I watched his retreating figure, I figured that he walked really fast. Was he just excited to get laid?

I sighed and reached for my phone, hoping to see a message from Sarah already but there was nothing from her.

*Just got to a guest house with him. Are you home yet? Reply me as soon as possible.*

I hit send and put off my phone just as I saw Parker walking towards the car. He walked straight for my door and opened the door, letting me out.

“That was quick,” I said as I walked out of the car.

“Never underestimate the power of a horny man,” he laughed.

I liked that he was straight forward and we both understood what was going on here. This was just sex.

Walking into the room that Parker had booked for us, it wasn't so bad. There was a bed designed for two, a Tv, a mirror, a wardrobe, and the entire room was painted white with the other appliances being navy blue.

Parker rested on the bed as I stood resting my weight on the off-white desk.

“So, what now?” he asked me as I laughed.

“Don't tell me you don't know what we came here for?” I asked him as he laughed and walked towards me. He stood right in front of me and placed both hands on either side of me. Now that we were completely alone and he was dangerously close to me, I could smell him. He smelled like Lavender and axe.

“I don’t like rushing my meals,” he breathed into my ears.

“Well, this meal wants to be devoured,” I looked into his eyes, not shifting my gaze away from him as I reached for my zipper and pulled it down. I could see the lustful look flash in his eyes as I proceeded to completely take off my dress, leaving me in my black lace Victoria secrets underwear.

“You still think you don’t want to rush?” I asked and in an instant Parker’s lips were on mine. Using both of his hands, he carried me and placed me firmly on the desk. My butt hit the desk as he used his thighs to support himself in between my legs. As he kissed me, I reached for his waist and unbuckled his belt. I could already feel his erection and I wanted to touch it. I hastily took out his penis and stroked it.

“You’re a naughty girl,” Parker poured kisses on my neck before undoing my bra and sucking on my nipple.

“Yes,” I moaned, loving the pleasure that this was giving me. Like I said earlier, toys were good but they couldn’t be compared to the raw pleasure that came from a real man.

Parker tossed my panties aside and slid two fingers inside me at once. The shock that came from this sudden move had my head falling back as Parker slid his fingers in and out of my wet folds.

“Okay fuck me now,” I said.

“As you wish,” Parker slipped out of his trousers while still fingering me. He pulled down his briefs and I held his penis in



my palms, guiding him to my entrance with my legs spread apart. “Don’t scream,” he whispered into my ears.

“As if,” I said, causing him to chuckle. Parker was in, in one swift movement and he didn’t even give me the luxury of time from recovering from his first entry before thrusting into me again. He would slam slowly then hit me faster and faster like he was being chased. My breasts were juggling as he pounded into me. He fumbled my left breast with one of his hands and the other hand never left my clit as he continued to finger me while we fucked.

This was pure bliss and it was a one night stand I wouldn’t forget easily.

My phone’s ringtone woke me up the next morning. I was still in bed with Parker and he had his arms wrapped around me. I sighed and searched the bed for my phone until I finally found it.

“Hello” I sighed into my phone.

“Good morning to you too. Are you home yet?” Sarah asked me.

“No. What time is it?” I rubbed my forehead as I finally opened my eyes. The first thing I saw was the white ceiling then I heard Parker’s breathing as he slept beside me

“It’s six in the morning and just in case the mind-blowing sex you had last night made you forget, we have to get to work in two hours,” she chuckled.

Shit. I needed to get out of here fast.

I pulled myself out of the covers and started searching for my clothes. Parker was still sound asleep as I looked for my underwear and my clothes. I put on my dress as fast as I could, grabbing my bag and my shoes. I would wear my shoes once I got out of the room. I didn't want the heels to make too much noise and wake him up. Another reason for me wanting to leave without making any noise is because it was really just a one-night stand, nothing more, nothing less, and I didn't need any complications.

I gave Parker one last look as he slept on the bed before twisting the doorknob and walking out of the room. As soon as I shut the door and walked out of the hallway that led me to the reception, I put on my shoes and walked out of the building.

Lucky for me, I got a taxi as soon as I stepped out and headed home.

I reached my house in less than thirty minutes. It was already a few minutes to seven when I checked the wall clock in my house as I walked in. I closed my door and tossed my bag on my sofa. Fluffy was asleep in her bed as I walked in. Sometimes I envied my dog because she literally had nothing to worry about except reaching her sleep quota on time.

She was basically living the life. I walked up to her bed and scratched the back of her ears as she yawned. I walked into my room and stripped myself of the clothes from the night before, tossing them into my laundry bag before jumping into the shower.

I was fully dressed and ready for work by 7:30. I breezed out of my house with my car keys in hand. My next-door neighbor who was in his early sixties was already outside watering his plants. He's been doing this more frequently ever since his wife died. May her beautiful soul rest in peace.

"Good morning, Jia," he smiled at me looking up from the plants he was watering.

"Good morning, sir!" I responded. He nodded in approval and I gave him a small smile before starting my car and zooming off to work.

As I drove to work, I reminded myself never to let Sarah talk me into going to the club on a work night.

Never again.

"You look refreshed," Sarah greeted me with a knowing look as I walked into the aquarium we worked.

"You are so annoying"

"What did I do?"

"The only reason I have this stupid migraine is because you talked me into going out with you last night"

"But you enjoyed it didn't you," she winked, and I just rolled my eyes. Sarah was always so dramatic and it was annoying.

"Did you get home safe last night though?" I asked her as she chuckled.

"If I didn't get home safe, I wouldn't even be here talking to

You. The cops would be at your house already”

“Don’t joke with things like that.” I warned her as she nodded.

I was so lucky that I came into work a few seconds before eight. Austin hated it when anyone arrived after him. He usually got cranky and mean.

“Any sign of Austin?” I asked Sarah who shook her head.

“He’s probably somewhere around frustrating the lives of the interns,” she chuckled typing on her phone as a small smile played on her lips. She had been typing on her phone since I walked in.

“Who are you texting?” I asked her.

“Just some guy from last night,” she chuckled and I rolled my eyes. Sarah wasn’t a good judge of character when it came to men and it wasn’t even like I was any better because I had been married once and it didn’t end well

Sarah was my best friend and I didn’t want the same thing that happened to me to happen all over again and that’s why I always did my best in looking out for her.

“He wants us to go out on a date,” she giggled.

“How long have you even known this man?”

“A few hours,”

“Yet you want to go out on a date with him. Isn’t it too soon?”

“What’s too soon about it? I’m a young woman who’s very much in the market and wants to get off” she said as I laughed

“I just want you to take your time on this.”

“I understand where you’re coming from but it’s really just a date Jia, one date won’t get me married”

“I just want you to be fine,”

“And I am fine. I wouldn’t rush into marriage and get divorced,” she said.

Realizing what she had said, she fell quiet for a little while. I was not even offended. Sarah was my best friend; she’s been my best friend for years and I know that sometimes she talked without thinking and this was one of those times.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. You know I didn’t,” she apologized as I nodded. I knew she didn’t mean it negatively but I also needed some fresh air.

“It’s alright Sarah. I will just go and check up on the new sets of tourists and check if they need anything,” I smiled at her. Sarah nodded and gave me a small smile before I walked away to the entrance.

What a morning.

## Chapter 2

---

### **CHANCE**

White sands. Clear blue water.

Yes, I was home and this is exactly how I remembered Clearwater beach.

It was amazing that not much had changed since I left here six years ago. I was nineteen when I left Clearwater with a bag full of dreams. I remember mom being really skeptical about the line of work I wanted to go into.

I could understand her fears. I missed her so much now that I thought about all these things.

Sometimes it felt like I could smell her like she was standing next to me. It hurt so much that she left us so soon because there are still loads of things, I planned to do with her.

I guess life was truly fleeting. It was indeed a short trip. If I had known this would happen in the near future, perhaps I would have listened to my mother and worked somewhere

closer to Clearwater. Maybe if I was closer to her, she wouldn't have fallen ill.

I barely visited Clearwater until I found out she was ill. And now that I lost her to the cruel hands of death, I was finally returning here. I guess I was back here again because I felt like I owed it to my mother.

It had to take my mother dying of cancer for me to realize that truly, I needed to be close to her. I knew that my mother lived a sweet life and I had Mark to thank for that. Even on my mother's death bed, he never left her side once, he was so strong and he took absolute care of her even until the very end.

I always said I wanted a love like theirs. They simply adored each other and it was so beautiful. I knew for sure that this would be the most difficult for Mark because they spent virtually every minute, second and moment together. They always went out together.

I was also here for uncle Mark. I wanted to help him get through this and give him as much support as he needed. I was the only family he had left and I was going to support him and help lessen the pain of this hurt.

My step father, Mark, cleared his throat as he took a seat beside me. I had finished unpacking all of my stuff and I just decided to take a moment outside here and just take everything in. Clearwater beach was indeed a very beautiful place and it was no surprise because it was a common tourist destination. It was truly a sight to behold.

I was resting at the back of our house taking in the cool breeze and just staring at the water from afar surrounded by the white sand. I loved to look at the waves and how the water just moved on the white sand, it soothes me and calmed me like medicine. When I was younger, I used to always sit here with my mother while she told me stories. I closed my eyes for a second as I remembered. Just reminiscing on the good old days and the times I spent here with my mother.

I was twenty-five now but those memories seemed so long ago and I would cherish them for as long as I lived. Those memories were the only things I had left of my mother.

“Here,” Mark handed me a bottle of beer and a bottle opener. I smiled, reaching for the bottle and opener then nodded and took both in my arms before opening the beer and taking a swig. This was very refreshing. I sank further into the wooden chair with a small smile on my face

“Not much has changed right?” He asked me, resting his back on the white wooden chair staring straight into the blue water.

He was right. Not much had changed but maybe that’s because they weren’t that significant or of immense importance to us and that’s why we didn’t notice the changes. I was sure for some people who left Clearwater beach and returned back here they would probably notice some changes.

I think the biggest and most noticeable change was being here and not having my mother around.



We buried my mother a week ago and I finally moved back here fully yesterday. It wasn't like I would be here all the time. My job didn't afford me such luxury. I was a coast guard in Mexico so that has me travelling a lot.

I sighed, "it hasn't changed but it has developed."

"I guess that's life, right? We have to develop with the times."

"I guess so," I stared at the beer in my left hand before taking another swig.

Growing up, my mother and my biological father didn't have the best relationship. The only memories I had of my biological parents always involved fights and screams. When I turned seven, my mother filed for a divorce and it was rough. She was able to get custody of me and we moved here to Clearwater. She met Mark when I was twelve and he was, and still is a good guy.

All the things I didn't get to do with my father, I did with him and I was grateful for that. Mark never missed any school events. When I played basketball back in high school, he never missed any of my games. He was always available for every parent teacher conference and most times an outsider would never even know that he wasn't my biological father because he was always present in my life. Sometimes I wondered why he and my mom never ever tried to make babies of their own. I guess that was a question I would never get an answer too

"We wanted to focus on you and live happily," Mark responded with a smile.

Did I really just say that out loud? Mother always said I had a habit of voicing out of thoughts without even knowing.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that out loud. I didn’t even mean to,” I said as he nodded.

“I know but it’s actually a valid question and you should know why,” he said. “So, what are your plans now?” he asked me. This was one thing Mark and my mother had in common. They liked to always have a plan and it wasn’t the same for me.

Yes, I was smart and strongly opinionated when I needed to be, but I was not the kind of guy who planned ahead. I was a go with the flow kind of guy but at the same time I wasn’t the type to shy away from challenges. I like to face my problems head on.

Take for instance, I didn’t even know I would move back to Clearwater beach until my mother died. But here I was. There was a problem before me and I solved it by later packing up my bags and taking the next available flight to Clearwater beach; I liked to think on my feet and so far, it has not failed me.

“Since the Coast Guard doesn’t need me yet, I’ll be here. But once they send word, I’ll be out again”

“How long does it usually take?”

“Depends. They could send word tomorrow and I would be off that very day or the next,”

“And you’ll be there for how long?” mark asked

“Probably a month if things are good. More, if it’s the opposite.”

The nature of my job and the reality of it dawned on my mother way before her passing and it was the same for Mark too. My job wasn’t an easy one but I loved it regardless and I had a passion for it. Being away on the coast for months; keeping people safe was one of my favorite things to do. I guess that was the reason why I had never considered having a girlfriend not to talk of marriage.

I saw how anxious and worried the wives and girlfriends of my crewmates acted when it was time to work on the coast. Even worse? Anything could happen while we were away and I didn’t have the stomach to put anybody through that, and that’s why I preferred staying alone. I think it was the best decision for me right now. Maybe when I was done with my job and I actually retired, I could settle down with a woman of my own and raise my own family but for now, my job was too risky and I couldn’t put any woman through that much stress.

The soft hum from Mark jerked me back to reality. He was humming one of my mother’s favorite hymns. I smiled at the memory

“She used to really love that hymn,” I smiled. I remember how she also made sure both Mark and I knew all the stanzas by heart so we could all sing it together. My mother was really precious. My throat got tighter as I thought of all these memories. Would we ever be able to get past this huge loss?

How did people even get over the pain of losing someone so close to them?

Mark nodded as he stared into the water. The waves clapped beautifully as they moved on the surface of the earth. Mark closed his eyes and sighed deeply. I didn't need a soothsayer to tell me he was thinking about mom.

This must be so hard for him.

My mother and Mark were perfect for each other and it hurts that she had to leave him this way. I one day hoped that I would also love a woman with as much tenacity as Mark loved my mother. She was perfect in his eyes and he treated her with so much care and respect.

"Do you think it will ever hurt less?" Mark's question hit me from nowhere and it took me some time to understand what he meant. "It's been a week already and I still feel like she would walk through those doors with shopping bags shouting at me for not mowing the grass in the backyard," Mark chuckled softly as he said that last part and I smiled. He and mom always fought over the littlest things

"I don't think so. But I think it becomes bearable," I took another swig of my beer and looked at the bottle, I had almost drunk it all.

"I miss her so much. Caroline left me too soon I'll tell you that. We had our whole lives ahead of us," Mark was five years older than my mother. He was sixty now and my mother died at the age of fifty-five.

“I’m sure she won’t let you miss her for too long,” I teased.

Mark sent me a sharp look “If she sends for me, who would take care of you when I’m gone?” He asked.

“I’m more than capable of taking care of myself Mark,” I rolled my eyes. I actually was and between the two of us right now, Mark needed someone to lean on way more than I did.

“Yeah right,” he snorted and for the rest of that evening we just enjoyed each other’s company and talked a lot about mom.

It felt like a huge weight was lifted off our shoulders.

## Chapter 3

---

### **JIA**

I liked my coffee black, but this morning I felt like taking it with sugar and a little bit of milk when I got home from my morning jog.

Fluffy was awake and sprawled on her bed. I rolled my eyes as I drank my coffee, which I needed so I could take her for her morning walk. I was unable to take her yesterday because I slept in. I finished my cup of coffee and rinsed my mug cup before placing it on the dish rack. I walked to fluff's bed as she looked up at me with bright eyes, she knew what was coming and she was super excited. I opened the drawers in my living room and took out her customized dog leash then placed it around her neck.

Her beautiful white fur on her neck covered the collar as she wagged her tail.

“Who’s ready for a walk?” I asked her as she walked around me wagging her tail “that’s my girl,” I smiled as I walked her out of the house and shut the door behind me.

It was just 6:30 in the morning so I had enough time to kill. There was enough time for me to walk Fluffy, come back home, get some breakfast, and then head straight for work.

We had just walked down my house a few miles when Fluffy started barking.

“Slow down girl. It’s too early,” I said to her, but she kept barking. I reached down and carried her in my arms trying to calm her down but she just jumped out of my hold and ran into the road.

She has never behaved in this manner before.

“Fluffy!,” I yelled racing after her. Eventually she came to a halt and I saw that there was another dog in front of her. Fluffy barked this time but it wasn’t as loud as the previous barks before we got here. I tried to catch my breath as I walked towards the dog.

“Sandy! Come back here!” I heard a male voice call from the corner of the street and I could tell he was the owner of the dog standing in front of Fluffy. He was panting when he finally stood in front of me

“Is he your dog?” I asked pointing at the hairy brown dog that stood in front of Fluffy

“Yes. I don’t know what came over him. He just started barking and raced over here. I’m new to this whole dog

parenting thing so he just caught me by surprise when he took off,” the man smiled as he looked up at me but he didn’t look familiar. It was not like I knew everyone who lived in my neighborhood but he didn’t look like he was from here and he also looked to be in his early twenties. I grabbed on to Fluffy’s collar just in case she wanted to make a run for it again.

“I’ve had Fluffy for a year now and she has never acted so out of character before” I stated. “Did you just move here? I just don’t recognize your face” I stated. He gave me a lazy smile and I could make out the dimples on his face as he smiled.

“I just moved here a week ago to live with my step father. It’s kind of like a long story,” he said. Fluffy and his dog were circling around each other as we spoke. It kind of looked like Fluffy was in love with this dog. But I still didn’t understand the reason why she just took off like that and apparently his dog also ran off the same time fluffy did.

“Well, it’s really nice to meet you. I’m Jia,” I smiled extending a hand.

“And it’s nice to meet you too. I’m Chance,” he said with a smile once again revealing his dimples as he spoke.

Unconsciously we both stepped into the same line as we walked while fluffy and his dog kept playing around each other.

“So, what’s the name of your dog?” I asked as we walked.

“His name is Sandy.”



“you said you were new to this dog parenting thing. So, when did you get your dog?” I asked him.

“He got delivered to me yesterday evening,”

“Just yesterday? What inspired to get a dog?”

“I guess I just wanted a companion,” he stated simply as we walked. I watched fluffy and Sandy circle around each other making cute noises

“Not to get ahead of myself or anything but I think your dog is attracted to mine,” I laughed.

“It’s definitely the other way around. Your dog barked and raced to meet mine so I think the attraction is coming from Fluffy”

“I beg to differ,” I said as he laughed.

“So how long have you lived in clearwater for?” He asked me as we walked on a narrow path that led straight to my house. I wondered why he was also taking a turn on this route with me. Maybe his house was also in this vicinity.

“About three to four years now,”

“So, you actually haven’t lived here for that long and you think you could know everybody?”

I laughed, “I never said that,”

“You didn’t have to say it but the questioning mode kind of implied that I was trespassing,” he stated as I shook my head.

I don’t think I meant to sound rude when I asked him that question. I just genuinely wanted to know if he lived around

because sue me, the world was not really safe these days and it was too early in the day.

Shoot. I brought my wrist to my face so I could check the time, it was ten minutes past seven

I picked up Fluffy in my arms and she protested but I held her closer to me. I needed to get home and also get ready for work as soon as possible.

“Stay calm fluffy” I said. Chance’s dog was also protesting as I carried fluffy in my arms. “I think our dogs are in love with each other,” I joked.

“We could plan a play date for them later,” he said.

I could already see my house as I walked and Chance kept walking in the same direction as well

“Do you live here too?” I asked him as he nodded

“Yes. Right there,” he said pointing to the house next to mine. That was Mr. Mark’s house

“So Mr. Mark is your stepfather?” I asked as I took the steps that led to my front door.

“Yes,”

“Wow. I never knew he had a son. I always saw him and his wife,” I suddenly realized that she was probably his biological mother and she died “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“It’s okay,” he smiled walking his dog to the entrance of his own house.

I inserted my key and twisted the door knob, "I should get ready for work now."

"Sure. Enjoy the rest of your day," he smiled and with that I walked back into my house and shut the door behind me.

I leaned my back on the door for a second just wrapping my head around everything that just happened a few minutes ago. Who knew Old Mark had a step son that hot? Fluffy squirmed in my arms and I gently laid her on the floor.

I walked to my room so I could bathe still in my thoughts. I took off my clothes and walked into the bathroom. As I poured my shower gel on my body, I thought to myself again that Chance was indeed very good looking but he looked like he was younger than her and I didn't need to be swooning over a younger guy.

I walked into the aquarium with a bright smile on my face. Sarah was already at her desk. When I sat at my desk, she looked up at me and her eyes lit up.

"Hey bestie," she greeted me as I chuckled. Why is she all excited this morning? Sarah is usually very lively and energetic but this morning, it was more. I placed my black leather bag on my white desk before turning to face her. She still had a bright smile on her face.

"Okay tell me what's up," I asked her.

"I went out on a date last night and it was absolutely amazing," she said as I rolled my eyes "I'm telling you Jia this one is different."

“You said that for Stefan” I reminded her.

“He was insecure” she defended.

“And what about Zach?” I asked her.

“He was too possessive and wouldn’t let me breathe. Look I get your point Jia but I just feel this might be it” she smiled.

I rubbed my forehead and sighed. I didn’t want Sarah to feel like I wasn’t happy for her but at the same time I was really just scared. She saw firsthand what my divorce did to me and I didn’t want anyone else to have to go through that. Especially not my best friend; I would feel so guilty like this was right in front of me and I did nothing to stop it.

“I need the reports from the last team you toured Jia,” I almost facepalmed myself at the sound of that pitchy female voice. I looked at Sarah and she mirrored the exact expression on my face. I thought she was on maternity leave. What was she doing here?

Rachel Eden was our supervisor and she took it upon herself to always be mean and nasty everywhere she went. I really wondered how her husband coped with her because the few times I had met him at events, he seemed like a really easy-going person.

I smiled at Rachel, “it’s good to have you back Rachel,” I said but Rachel just rolled her eyes and maintained a straight face. I really thought going through the wonderful phenomenon of giving birth to a child could actually change

even the worst people but it looked like Rachel had even stepped it up a notch.

“The reports?” She asked as I have a tight smile. I was so happy in this moment that I didn’t procrastinate and actually worked on the reports yesterday. It would have been hell to have Rachel telling me off in front of everyone. She loved belittling people in public as much as she could.

I reached for the first drawer at my desk and pulled out the file placing it in her hands.

“Let me know if you need clarifications on anything,” I said to her as she nodded and walked off.

As soon as she was out of earshot Sarah resumed talking to me.

“I thought she was on maternity leave?” Sarah asked.

“I thought the exact t same thing too but apparently she’s back,”

“How long has it even been since she went off?”

“Probably a week or two”

“It’s just weird that she’s back. Just like that. She gave birth to a whole baby,” Sarah said

Well, Rachel wasn’t like most women. She likes to control and dominate and I’m sure she was missing the air of dominance at work and that’s why she couldn’t wait to resume and frustrate all of us. I closed my eyes and took out my laptop so I could catch up on any work mails I missed.

“So did you later get in touch with that guy?” Sarah asked typing on her screen.

“What guy?”

“The guy from the other night.”

I knew who she was talking about. Parker. There was nothing to even talk about because it was just a one-night stand and I really didn't feel like making that part clear in a place as public as my workplace.

“Sarah, can I see you for a minute please?” Rachel called from her office as Sarah groaned.

I didn't know if I should be thankful for such a finely intervention or feel pity for my friend but all the same, I was kind of relieved.

“Speak of the devil,” Sarah whispered standing up from her desk as I chuckled softly

“And she shall appear,” I laughed as Sarah walked away. I sighed as I went through my mail inbox and thankfully, I hadn't missed out on anything important. Mostly junk mail. I closed off that tab and shut down my laptop.

The rest of the work day was pretty much uneventful after that.

At the end of work, I was completely exhausted. I had been a tour guide for four different groups today. My feet ached so bad. I packed up my laptop and bag as Sarah walked out of Rachel's office looking absolutely frustrated. I chuckled as she

approached her desk with the files in her hands before placing them on the table.

“How is she even a boss?” Sarah asked me as I shook my head.

“How was it?”

“She kept looking for mistakes where there wasn’t any. I’m really exhausted” she groaned.

“You want to come over to my house so I can make us dinner before you go home?” I asked her and her entire face lit up for the second time that day.

“I would absolutely love that. You’re such a lifesaver,” Sarah smiled as she laughed packed up all her stuff so we could leave.

When we both arrived at my house, it was almost eight, but there was still ample time for us to cook dinner and maybe watch a movie. If push comes to shove, Sarah could just easily spend the night at my house. She had spent the night here so many times and I was sure Sarah even had clothes here. Sarah and I were in the kitchen, talking as I cooked when the doorbell went off.

“Are you expecting anyone?” she asked me as I shook my head dusting my hands on the apron tied in front of my chest.

“No. Let me check it out,” I said but of course Sarah followed me to the door because I was so sure she badly wanted to see who it was.

I opened the door to see a very sexy looking Chance standing in front of me. He was dressed casually in a white shirt and black pants as he stood with a smile.



“Hello Jia, I hope I’m not bothering you,” he said with a smile.

Sarah appeared from behind me and responded, “no, you could never,” with a chuckle I rolled my eyes.

“Hi Chance. No, you’re not. What’s wrong?” I asked him as he sighed.

“I’m really so sorry to bother you but could I leave Sandy with you for a bit? I have to go somewhere with Mark. It won’t be more than an hour tops,” Chance said with a small smile.

“Whose Sandy?” Sarah asked.

“Sandy is my dog,” Chance answered her before I could and of course, Sarah started cooing.

“You’re a dog dad? That’s so cute,” she said.

“It’s no problem, Chance. You can bring him over,” I smiled.

“Thank you so much, I’ll be right back,” Chance smiled before walking back to his house to get Sandy.

“You didn’t tell me you had such a hot neighbor?” Sarah whispered in my ears.

“Maybe you reacting exactly like this was the reason why I didn’t,” I retorted sharply.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sarah asked me but I couldn’t respond because Chance was now approaching us

with Sandy firmly beside him. Chance stood in front of me as he handed the dog's leash to me.

"Thank you so much really. I'll be back to get him before you know it," he said as I nodded.

"It's all good. Say hello to Mr. Mark for me," I said holding the dog leash firmly.

"Sure, I will," he said before walking away.

I waited for Sarah to walk back into my house before I walked in Sandy and just as I thought as soon as I shut the door, Fluffy barked and came running to the entrance because she knew he was here. Okay maybe Chance was right, and our dogs were in love.

Fluffy and Sandy danced around each other as they barked.

"I have never seen Fluffy like this before," Sarah watched in amazement.

"I think she's truly in love," I answered, causing Sarah to laugh.

"That makes two of us. But seriously though who is Chance and where did he come from?"

"He's my neighbor's stepson," I answered walking back into the kitchen. The pasta was cooked already and I took the chicken I was grilling out of the oven.

"That smells heavenly," Sarah sniffed.

"I'm sure it tastes even better,"

“But anyway, who knew old Mark had a son that good looking?” Sarah added as I smiled while setting both our plates on the kitchen counter.

I thought the exact thing when I met Chance for the first time. It was so surreal that we had never even bumped into each other before now. But from the way he talked, it didn't seem like he was always in town.

“My exact thoughts,” I said as I placed Sarah's bowl of pasta and grilled chicken in front of her.

She smiled gratefully and reached for the fork digging into her food. She took the first bite and literally moaned.

“I kid you not Jia George. This meal is heavenly,” she said as I laughed and picked up my own fork and then we began eating.

“No matter how I think about it I just feel like this is the start of something new,” Sarah said later that night as I walked her to her car. It was almost eleven and there wasn't any sign of Chance. I wasn't worried because he could always come for Sandy in the morning but I just hoped that him and Mark were actually safe.

“What do you mean?” I asked her as she smiled.

“I mean this could be the start of a sizzling hot and burning romance between you and Mr. hot guy neighbor next door,” Sarah said.

“I'm not sure you noticed because it was pretty dark outside when he stood in front of my door but he's younger than I

am,” I said.

“So? Age ain’t nothing but a number,” she laughed as her cab pulled up in front of us. I smiled as she pulled open the door. She turned back around and hugged me.

“Thank you so much for tonight but I’m serious Sarah, maybe it’s time to finally open up your heart and let love in,” Sarah said as she hugged me. I smiled weakly and tapped her back before pulling away from the hug.

“Text me when you’re home,” I reminded her.

“Sure, will do, goodnight, Jia.,” She smiled as she got into the car and closed the door.

“Goodnight,” I responded back. I waited till I couldn’t see her cab anymore before I turned back around and walked towards my door.

From where I stood, I could hear the sound of the waves overlapping each other and the cool breeze touched every part of my body. I remembered what Sarah said to me when she hugged me and then I shook my head.

I wasn’t ready to do that, especially not with a guy younger than me. No way in hell would I actually do that. I wrapped my arms around my body tighter as I walked back to my house.

When I got back to the entrance of my house, I was surprised to find Chance standing there about to knock on the door.

“I was just about to knock on your door,” he chuckled.

“I walked my friend to her cab,” I responded with a small smile.

“Oh. I’m not sure I got her name earlier though,”

“It’s Sarah,” I answered him as he nodded.

Sarah was always very quick to blab her mouth when she was around anyone both old and new yet she forgot how to do the proper basic things like introducing yourself.

“Thank you so much for watching over Sandy for me,” he says with a smile.

“I was glad I could plus I think you might actually be on to something,” I told him.

“And what’s that?”

“Our dogs adore each other,” I said as he laughed.

“I thought that was obvious from day one,” he said.

“I think that’s why I’m actually stalling and haven’t gone in yet because I could be interrupting a session or something.” I laughed as he shook his head.

“Oh, my goodness. Don’t say it like that,” he laughed.

The thought of me opening the door and seeing my dog having sex in my living room was definitely something I didn’t need to see in reality.

“How’s your father?” I asked him.

“He’s fine. And he absolutely sends his regards,” Chance said as I smiled. Mr. Mark was a very good man. I mean I didn’t know him up close and I always saw him together with

his wife before she died but from the way Chance respected and talked about him? I could tell they had a very good relationship.

Most step parents never knew how to be good parents, so Chance was super lucky to have a step father who cared about him this much. Mr. Mark was equally lucky to have a step son who respected him as much as Chance did.

“I’m just glad you’re here with him through all of this. I know what happened is not easy for any of you,” I added.

Her I go again. I was acting like a typical oldie sounding like a mother. I think this was another reason I did only one night stands now without the emotions. I was scared that if I got too close with any guy, I would unleash my mother instincts and that would just bring up memories of my baby girl I lost.

I subconsciously placed a hand on my stomach with a sad smile on my face as Chance said, “he’s way stronger than I thought and I’m so proud of him,” he answered as I nodded.

I don’t know why but it was really easy to just talk to Chance. I didn’t talk like this with anyone else other than Sarah, so it was refreshing that I could hold a conversation like this with someone else.

“I’m sure that you being around gives him all the strength he needs,” I said as the cool breeze hit me. “Okay it’s getting colder. I should probably open the door now and see what those two are up to,” I smiled as Chance chuckled. I walked

past him so I could open the door and my nose couldn't help but twitch up at the sweet scent that emanated from Chance.

He smelled really good. In fact, good enough to eat. I shook my head as I twisted the door knob and opened the door. I walked into my house with Chance behind me to find our dogs cuddled beside each other. Fluffy had her eyes closed and Sandy instantly started wagging his tail as soon as he saw Chance. He stood up and walked towards Chance with his tongue out.

Chance smiled and crouched down in front of him scratching the back of his ears.

“Who’s a good boy? You are!,” Chance said to Sandy as the dog kept wagging its tail. Chance took ahold of his leash before standing up and smiling at me. As he smiled at me, I could see the two dimples that rested on each side of his cheeks. Could this guy be anymore oblivious to the kind of beauty he possessed? Sarah hadn’t even seen him in the light and she was already swooning over him. What would she do if she was up close to him like this?

I literally had to mentally remind myself that he was younger than me as he smiled at me in my living room.

“Again, thank you so much for agreeing to watch him,” Chance said with a smile as I nodded. It was not so bad actually. Sandy was so fixated on fluffy the entire night that it made it less chaotic for me

“It’s nothing,” I responded with a smile as Chance nodded and walked towards my door so he and Sandy could go home.

“Goodnight Jia,” he smiled as I reached the door so I could lock it. Looking at him as he stepped out of my light filled living room, I realized that he actually looked so much like his mother. He was her splitting image.

“Goodnight Chance and thank you for talking to me tonight,” I responded with a smile.

“It was nice talking to you too. Have a good night,” he added as I smiled before closing the door.

Fluffy was still sound asleep when I started tidying up the kitchen. She slept really deep for a dog and unless it was an earth quake, fluffy wouldn't get up from her sleep after she had fallen asleep. Fluffy was unlike her owner in that aspect because I was a very light sleeper and the littlest things could wake me up or interrupt my sleep.

When I was done tidying up the kitchen, I walked into my room and took off all my clothes so I could take a cold shower. Coming out of the bathroom thirty minutes later, I applied my body lotion and perfume in just the right places before wearing my navy-blue Cotton two-piece night set. I reached for my laptop bag and pulled out my laptop so I could make reports on the four tour groups I supervised today.

I really didn't want Rachel to have any reason stressing me out at work tomorrow. Now that she was back at work, I knew she would do everything in her power to rattle me but I was not going to let her.

It was almost twelve when I finally finished working on all the reports. I was exhausted. I yawned as I placed my laptop in



its bag and placed it on the floor next to my bed. I remembered that I hadn't switched off the lights in the living room, so I crawled out of bed reluctantly so I could do that. I checked Fluffy and she was still sound asleep.

I suddenly felt thirsty after switching off the light so I switched it back on and walked to the fridge pulling out a jug of cold water. I brought out a glass cup from the shelf and filled it. When I was done drinking my water, I rinsed my cup and placed it on the shelf. Returned the jug back into the fridge before finally switching off the lights and heading to my room.

I yawned as I lay down on my bed and clutched my pillow as I drifted off to a sound sleep.

## Chapter 4

---

### **C**HANCE

I couldn't help but put a smile on my face when I walked back to my house and opened the door. Jia was a really nice person and I genuinely enjoyed talking to her so much.

As I walked Sandy backup, I realized that he had started whining and it was probably the cold.

As soon as I opened the door and walked Sandy in, he barked and rushed to his bed. I chuckled as I shut the door behind me and closed all the locks. It was almost midnight already and even though our neighborhood was one of the safest neighborhoods in Clearwater Beach, I really didn't want to risk it. I wanted to protect Mark as much as I could and it wasn't even like Mark was incapable of protecting himself. I just really needed to make sure everything was okay since I was here and I would do just that.

I didn't peg Jia for the type of person who would be willing to watch my dog so I was very surprised that she agreed to watch over Sandy for me. When I opened the door to our house, Mark was sitting on the black sofa watching the news.

"I just came from Jia's house and I got Sandy," I told him after locking the doors. Sandy immediately walked up to Mark who patted him on the head.

"Thank God she was nice enough to agree to watch Sandy," Mark said as he switched between TV channels. I noticed something with him. Nowadays, when he isn't reading, he is watching TV. I wondered what he would do when I had to leave town for work

I knew he would be fine. Besides other than the usual checkups we had to go for at the hospital. Everything else was fine with him. Yesterday, Mark ran out of his medicine and we had to run to the pharmacy to get the prescribed drugs.

He wasn't sick, they were just drugs for wellness.

"I'll be right back." I said to Mark who just nodded while I went upstairs to my room to change. My hair was a little damp from sweat and my body felt really sticky. I took off my shirt and tossed it into my laundry before walking out of my pants.

I headed straight for the shower.

Contrary to my first impression I had of Jia, she seemed to have let her guard down a bit and her friend being there probably helped to smooth things out too. As I rinsed off the

soap from my body, I chuckled. Her friend appeared to be really energetic and it was funny.

I wouldn't say Jia was stuck up but she appeared to be really serious so seeing her with someone like that, was a sight to behold. I grabbed my white towel from the hanger and dried myself before putting on my navy-blue shorts and sweatshirt. I turned on my laptop to see if I missed any e-mails, but what I was actually doing was checking if I had been dispatched to the coast yet. It's been three weeks already and they haven't sent for me yet, so maybe this was a good sign that everything was well over there. I closed my laptop and walked back downstairs.

Mark was already asleep on the couch and Sandy was curled beside him but he wasn't sleeping. I walked over to Mark and gently tapped him on the shoulders.

"You hound, head in to your room," I told him gently as he rubbed his eyes.

"I must have fallen asleep," he got up from his sitting position and walked towards his room. "Goodnight Chance," he said to me as he walked away.

"Goodnight Mark," I said.

I looked down at Sandy whose eyes were still wide open. "Now what do you want us both to do now?" I asked him as he just whined and gave me his signature puppy dog look.

Since I returned to Clearwater, I hadn't really gone out and Mark informed me that the local aquarium had even been

renovated recently and because of that, they had also expanded the building. When he told me about it, I had made a mental note to check it out but I've been so occupied with different things that I had forgotten about it. Maybe it would be nice to go there tomorrow and just see the changes they had made.

When I was little and my mother and I just moved here, we always used to go to the aquarium with Mark. It was one of my favorite activities to do with them. I smiled and leaned down on the couch as I switched to a documentary channel and yawned.

Who was I kidding? I sighed and just turned off the television before heading off to bed but I made sure that Sandy was behind me as I walked up the stairs. Even though his bed was downstairs, he still liked to sleep with me in my room. I was sure that when he got used to this house, he would prefer sleeping downstairs.

The following morning, I was up and ready for the day. I knew that Mark was up before me because he liked to water the plants that were outside the door. It was around eight in the morning when I walked downstairs, and Mark was just coming back inside from watering the plants.

“Good morning. You didn't take Sandy out for a walk today?” Mark asked me with a small smile on his face as I shook my head. Since I had decided the night before to visit the local aquarium with Sandy, I didn't think there was any need for me to take him on a walk this morning.

I headed straight for the kitchen so I could make my coffee. I wiped my hands on my black pants before getting a cup.

“I decided to visit the local aquarium with Sandy today so I thought we could just skip the morning walk,” I smiled as I added some cream and sugar to my coffee.

Mark walked out from the back of the house with his garden gloves taken out of his hands joining me on the kitchen counter. After making my coffee I proceeded to make Mark and I some breakfast.

“Oh, that sounds great. And they just renovated the place so it would be good to explore it,” Mark smiled.

I nodded, “my exact thought as well. I think it would be really great considering the fact that I haven’t been there since I was a kid.”

“You used to love going there with your mom and I,” Mark smiled.

I chuckled fondly at the memories of three of us going to the aquarium on those Sunday afternoons.

“Well let me know once breakfast is ready. I will be in my room,” Mark smiled as I nodded and watched him go into his room.

Sandy came to join me as I cooked and wagged his tail as he followed me around while I moved. Once I was done cooking, I called Mark back out and we both ate in silence.

“I was thinking about visiting the bookstore for the elderly while you’re out at the aquarium,” Mark said to me after we

finished eating breakfast.

“Okay nice. Where is that? I could drop you there on my way to the aquarium,” I said as Mark smiled.

“That’s great. The bookstore is right before the aquarium so it wouldn’t be a hassle,” he responded as I washed the dishes while he went back into his room to get ready.

Mark walked out a few minutes later with his reading glasses on his face, wearing a red polo shirt and brown pants. He also wore his black shoes which I knew that my mother got for him on one of our last Christmas celebrations together.

I put Sandy on his leash, walked him to the back of the car, and placed him in his dog seat while I waited for Mark to come outside. I had my own key so Mark usually locked up and kept the main bunch of keys when we were going out.

I dropped Mark off at the bookstore and I told him to give me a call if he was done there before I was done at the aquarium but he just shook his head and said “I can always take a cab back home. Just enjoy your day with Sandy. I can take care of myself,” he said as I nodded.

“See you later,” I said before driving off.

I reached the aquarium less than fifteen minutes after I stopped at the bookstore. I parked the truck in the parking lot before walking out of the car so I could take Sandy out. Sandy wasn’t a huge dog but he wasn’t small either. He almost reached my knees in height but I made sure to get the kind of dog that was more friendly and homely when I had gone to the

shelter that day in search of a dog. I locked the doors holding Sandy's leash in my right hand as I stood in front of the Clearwater local aquarium. I inhaled deeply before taking my first step into the aquarium.

They really had made new changes here and it was amazing. I took out my phone and took pictures of the new things and the changes I could recognize.

"Hey! I know you," I heard a female voice say from beside me and I had a puzzled expression on my face. Despite the fact that I grew up here, most of my classmates back in high school had left a long time ago. Most of us didn't stay back here after college. So, when I looked to my side to see that this was a lady, I was shocked at first but then her face began to make sense to me.

She was Jia's friend. I met her at Jia's house that night.

"Remember me?" she asked with a bright smile.

"Yes, I do but I'm not sure I caught your name that night," I answered politely holding Sandy's leash firmer in my grip.

"That's because I didn't throw it. You were too fixated on Jia to even bother with me," she said with a small smile as I chuckled. I was right about her; she was really blunter and more outspoken than Jia

"I'm so sorry pardon my manners. It's nice to meet you here. I'm Chance," I said extending my free hand to her.

She smiled and took it, "I'm Sarah. What are you doing here?" she asked me "wait that wasn't such a bright question.



Most people are always here to get a tour ever since we renovated this place,” she said with a smile standing right beside me now.

“Actually, you’re right. I came here for a tour but what about you?”

“Oh me? I work here. Same as Jia. We both work here,” she answered.

“Wow” I breathed.

“You didn’t know that? Jia and I have worked here for about three years now. It’s one of the busiest places on clearwater beach besides the actual beach,” she laughed.

“It’s great I met you then because I actually came here for a tour and I have no idea how to go about it.,”

“Then you’re in luck. I don’t know who has the record for the tour guides but I’m sure Jia always has them in the mornings.,”

I don’t know why but it made me happy that Jia would be the one to be my tour guide today. It made this much more interesting for me. “I hope there is no rule against bringing pets in here,” I asked remembering that Sandy was with me.

“Oh no. Dogs and cats are allowed in here but no other pets so I guess you’re fortunate,” she said as she started walking and I followed her. “I’ll just get Jia for you. Follow me,” she said as I followed her closely.

So, this was where Jia always rushed off to every morning in her beautiful skirts and heels. I closed my eyes and tried to

caution my own thoughts.

“Jia! Guess who I found?” Sarah called. Jia turned around to respond to Sarah and her eyes turned warm with familiarity when she saw me.

She looked absolutely beautiful today in a green jumpsuit and black heels.

“Chance. It’s so nice to see you here,” she smiled as she approached me. “And you even came with Sandy. It’s a pity I don’t bring Fluffy to work. They would have had such a swell day,” she chuckled reaching down to pet Sandy’s head

“I just decided that we could both use a day outdoors today which didn’t involve walking him early in the morning. And I haven’t been here since this place was renovated so I came for a tour,” I said.

“Plus, I already told him you give the tours in the mornings,” Sarah said to Jia.

“Well then, let’s get right to it,” Jia said with a smile as she walked in the direction towards the left. “We usually give tours in groups but you’re quite early so I guess I could take you alone but Sarah, you have the next group” Jia told her.

Sarah just smiled “of course! Now go give Chance a tour of this beautiful aquarium,” she clapped her hands excitedly as she walked off in the opposite direction.

I chuckled and rubbed my hands behind my neck as Jia and I were alone now.

“She has such a bubbly personality. It’s contagious,” I told Jia obviously referring to Sarah.

“That’s my Sarah,” Jia responded as she led me to the different rooms and locations in the aquarium.

Mark was right, this place was really more beautiful. I took as many pictures as I could.

“How about one picture with the tour guide?” I smirked as she shook her head.

“Oh no. I couldn’t do that,” Jia objected.

“Come on please. Just one picture. Today won’t be incomplete if I didn’t get a picture with you in it,” I said to her.

“Alright then,” she moved closer to me as I placed my phone in front of both of us and turned the face camera to us for a selfie and took a picture. “Thank you so much.”

“So, I’m taking it you enjoyed the tour?” she asked me as I nodded.

“Very well. This place has changed so much,” I said.

“When was the last time you were here?” she asked me.

“When I was twelve, I guess?”

“And you’re how old now?” she asked me with a bright smile on her face. I knew what she was doing. She had been dancing around trying to know my age for a while now.

“I’m twenty-five now so that was thirteen years ago,” I said catching her expression from my side eyes and I was right, she

looked disappointed. She probably had suspected that I was younger but maybe she thought she was just wrong.

“And how old are you?” I asked her.

“Oh, I’m thirty,” she responded as I shrugged.

“It’s only five years,” I responded.

“Excuse me?” She asked as I smiled.

“I figured you would be older than me but five years isn’t a lot,” I said to her as she chuckled.

“It’s enough for you to actually be my younger brother”

“But I’m not,” I said to her.

She shook her head and gave me a small smile. I knew there was more to her than meets the eye and I couldn’t even lie, I was intrigued by Jia in some type of way and I just liked talking to her. I also wanted to be closer to her but I could also feel all the walls that she had put up.

I couldn’t even remember the last time I was this interested in a lady after college because due to the nature of my job, I just got with girls randomly and that was the end. I never followed up on anyone because I knew I wasn’t ready for anything serious.

So, what was it about Jia George that drew me to her?

“Do you have a problem with me being younger than you?” I asked her.

“Not really,” she said.

“That’s not exactly a definite answer,” I said to her. Jia was about to say something else when another lady walked up to both of us.

“Oh, there you are Jia. I need you in my office pronto. Are you finished here?” the lady asked as Jia nodded.

“Yes Rachel. I’ll be with you shortly,” Jia nodded as the lady walked away without even acknowledging me.

“I’m sorry but that was our supervisor. I have to go now. Thank you so much for visiting,” Jia said with a small smile and she walked off in the same direction as the lady before I couldn’t even say any other thing.

I stared at her retreating figure with a small smile on my face, now I was even more interested in Jia, and I would not waver.

## Chapter 5

---

### **JIA**

I couldn't believe how much his questions and earlier statements rattled me earlier. As much as I disliked Rachel, she had a knack for timely interventions because she had just saved me from having an awkward conversation with Chance.

So, I was right about him being younger than me. But I guess I was the only one who saw a problem with that because Chance apparently didn't think it was weird that we had a five years age gap between us.

Why was I Even so fixated on this age gap when it wasn't like I was sexually attracted to him. Ever since my divorce, I had not considered getting into a serious relationship, and even if I did pursue that someday in the future, I didn't think I wanted it to be a younger guy. Considering the fact that my ex-husband and I got a divorce because he was sleeping with a younger girl.

I was not going to do that to myself.

“Who were you talking to earlier?” Rachel asked me as soon as I walked into her office. I was a bit taken aback by her question but it took me a moment to respond to her questions.

“I don’t understand. Who exactly?” I asked her.

“The young man you seemed to be enjoying your conversation with before I called you in my office earlier”

“Oh. He’s my neighbor and he came in for a tour. I was his guide,” I responded.

“I hope you know that this is a professional place, and we expect all our staff to handle situations with strict professionalism,” Rachel narrowed her eyes at me as I sighed. What exactly was she talking about? That I was being unprofessional with Chance?

Could this lady just give me a break.

“I didn’t forget,” I said.

“After you finished giving him the tour the proper thing to do would have been to thank him for coming so he goes back to his house and you get back to work. Surely you don’t want people thinking we are idle here so we spend time conversing with anybody who walks in here,” she added.

“He’s my neighbor”

“People don’t know that. I only know that now because you told me. So please, let’s maintain professionalism,” she said to me and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“Noted. Is there anything else you wanted to say?” I asked her as she shook her head.

Great. She only called me here to scold me.

“Alright then. I would be at my desk,” I said with a smile before walking out of her office.

“What happened? Why did she call you into her office,” Sarah asked me as soon as I returned to my desk.

“Apparently, I was too unprofessional with a visitor earlier today. She was referring to Chance,” I answered as Sarah scoffed.

“That’s just unbelievable. The both of you know each other outside of here. It’s only normal that you both talk”

“She doesn’t feel that way,” I said as I arranged the papers on my desk. It wasn’t like they needed any special arrangement. I was just very, very angry at the moment and I needed to get my hands on something before I let the anger in me burst out. And that wouldn’t do any of us any good. It would most likely get me fired and I hated to admit that I needed money to survive. It was a crucial survival factor for me.

“Can we just talk about something else?” I asked Sarah who nodded.

“But it’s still about Chance. Jia, now that I have seen him in broad daylight, I think he is a fine piece of candy,” she told me as I laughed.



Sarah never knew when to stop and she loved seeing fine men and talking about fine men. She actually wasn't wrong though because Chance was actually very good looking

“Before you get any weird ideas into your head or try to form Cupid, I'll have you know that he's too young,” I smiled passive aggressively.

“What do you mean by he's too young?” she asked me, trying to poke my buttons.

“He's twenty-five,” I said flatly.

“So?” she asked me as I groaned.

“And I'm thirty,” I responded.

Sarah stared at me like I was speaking gibberish. It didn't look like she understood what I was trying to say at this point.

“So, what exactly is your point? Because I truly haven't gotten it yet”

“I'm saying he's too young for me,” as soon as those words came out of my mouth, I instantly regretted it because Sarah burst out into a very loud laughter. It was so loud in fact that I had to hit her in the shoulders in order to get her to quiet down.

“What is so funny?” I asked her as she finally quieted down enough for her to speak.

“Have you ever heard about Priyanka Chopra and Nick Jonas?” she asked me as I rolled my eyes. She was referring to

the Indian actress who got married to Nick. And she is like ten years older than Nick if not more.

“I am not a celebrity,”

“The more reason why you should not let these things bother you. I mean if a celebrity couldn’t care and got married to a man way younger than her. Why should you care?” she asked.

“It’s different”

How is it different? I mean I met Chance today and I didn’t even feel like he was younger than me because he’s such a mature guy and please, Jia, the man hasn’t even proposed to you. Aren’t you two just neighbors?” she asked me with a suggestive look on my face and I rolled my eyes.

“We are just neighbors and friends,” I answered.

“So why exactly are you so concerned about the age difference or are you attracted to him?” she wriggled her eyebrows as she said that and I just rubbed my forehead because having this conversation with Sarah was already giving me a headache and I instantly regretted ever bringing this up to her.

“No Sarah,”

“Exactly. As far as you and Chance are both concerned, you are both next door neighbors getting to know each other with no strings attached,” she paused “Although I wouldn’t blame you if you ever considered attaching strings because that boy is a fine piece of candy,” Sarah finished and I literally wanted

to hit myself in the face based on the turn at which the conversation had taken all of a sudden.

Sarah was the worst person to have conversations like this with. Even though she could be serious and lend her listening ears to me when she wanted to. Most times talking with her was always like this.

“But I think the two of you look really cute together,” she added as I groaned “No offense,” she added holding her hands up in mock surrender.

“You are just impossible to deal with,” I said to her as I got up from my desk and grabbed my purse.

“Where are you going?” she asked me.

“To get lunch,” I replied.

“Oh, that’s right. Just give me a second to send this email and then we can both go”

I waited for her as she typed away on her keyboard, and when she was done she hit the send button and stood up, grabbing her own purse too.

“I’m in the mood for pasta this afternoon,” she said with a smile as she linked her hands with mine. “I wonder why I’m suddenly so in love with pasta,” she said to me as I laughed.

She was in love with pasta because I made it for her the other day and this was her way of sweet talking me into making more for her.

I shook my head as we both walked “it’s not working Sarah,” I said to her as her lips formed a pout which made me laugh.

Sarah and I agreed to eat at a seafood joint that wasn’t too far from the aquarium. True to her words, Sarah had actually ordered pasta while I just went for something lesser. As we waited for our orders, they brought our drinks to the table.

“I just really don’t understand what she derives from being so vile and cruel,” Sarah said as she sipped her water.

“Even I don’t understand. I really thought giving birth would have softened her up, but alas, I was very wrong,” I said.

“We we’re very wrong,” Sarah corrected as I shook my head “uh oh,” Sarah said as I looked at her.

“What’s up?” I asked her noticing that she was looking at someone behind me.

“Don’t turn around but remember that guy you hooked up with at the club?” she asked me as I tried to remember his name

“Parker?” I asked as she nodded.

“He just walked in and apparently, he recognizes me which I find really odd. And he is walking right up to our table,” she said to me with a tight smile as my eyes grew wide.

“What the actual fuck?” I asked her as Sarah giggled under her breath.

“Hey. Sarah, right?” the male voice asked as Parker approached our table. I hadn’t seen him or heard from him the morning after I walked out of the room. What were the odds that we would actually find him here. It was like he didn’t know I was the one here with Sarah because when he turned his head around to greet her companion, the look of shock evident on his face couldn’t even be mistaken.

“Jia,” he breathed as I smiled nervously.

Sarah mouthed to me awkwardly and I resisted the urge to hit her feet from beneath the table.

“Parker, right?” I asked him trying to act as if I had forgotten his name. There was a quick look of hurt that flashed on his face as I gulped down my water. What was this? I thought both of us made it absolutely clear that it was just a random hook up. We both understood that so why was he acting like I was a runaway lover? It just didn’t make any sense to me.

“You forgot my name. How nice. Anyways, I just came to say hi. Enjoy your lunch ladies,” he said with a wink as he walked away from us.

I breathed a sigh of relief when he left.

Sarah looked at me with narrowed eyes as I fanned my face with my hands.

“What?” I asked her placing my glass on the table.

“You literally wouldn’t stop talking about the great sex you both had the next day after work”

“Keep it down Sarah,” I warned her.

“And now you are acting like you forgot his name?” She asked me.

“I had to do it. He was being too friendly,”

“He just came to say hello and all you could say was ‘Parker, right?’ He must have felt so stupid because he actually remembered your name,”

“It was just a one-night stand. We don’t need to talk to each other after that,”

“A one-night stand that had you Cumming close to four times in one night. If I were you, I would get his number before leaving this place and make sure he becomes my fuck buddy,” Sarah said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Oh my God. You are such a... I don’t even know the right word to use right now,” I shook my head.

“I think the right description should be lover of good things like reaching my climax repeatedly in one night,” she said as I rolled my eyes.

I continued to drink my water until I mistakenly locked gazes with Parker. Honestly, I would actually hand it to Parker, he had real skills in the bedroom, and I had actually thought about that night more than once.

It was really just sex. Nothing more. I was sexually attracted to Parker because he was good. I was so sure that the attraction would change when I found someone else. I just wasn't ready to get laid right now.

The waiter finally came with our food and Sarah giggled as the plates of food was placed in front of us.

“Thank you. Could we also get the bill please?” I asked the waiter as he smiled.

“No worries, ma'am. Your bills are already covered,” he responded.

“By who?” I asked as the waiter pointed to Parker. As I looked at Parker, he smiled at me and I sent him a small smile in return.

“Really smooth,” Sarah said as I chuckled.

When we were done eating, I checked my wristwatch to see that we still had about fifteen minutes to kill before arriving back at work.

“Man, I am so full. That pasta was heavenly,” Sarah rubbed her belly as she spoke, and I just laughed. She was such a drama Queen. I shook my head as I watched Parker from the corner of my eyes as he stood up from his seat.

I walked up to him and smiled at him, “thank you for handling the bill but you didn't have to,” I told him gratefully.

“Just like you didn’t have to pretend like you forgot my name,” he told me.

“We both agreed it was a one-night thing,” I said.

“And I’m not disputing that,” he said. He moved closer to my ears as he whispered “but I made you cum multiple times. I was hoping we might try that again,” he told me as I laughed.

“I don’t like to repeat men. Thanks for the food,” I smiled as I took in the expression on his face. No one has ever told him that before. I walked back to meet Sarah who was already waiting for me outside with her purse and my purse in her hand.

“Let’s go,” I told Sarah with a bright smile on my face as we walked back to the aquarium.



## **CHANCE**

I was hoping to catch Jia when I opened the door that chilly morning, but I didn't see her. I held on to Sandy as I locked the doors so I could take him for his usual morning walk. I connected my iPhone to my air pods because I wanted to listen to some music as I walked Sandy. The morning was cold, and I was grateful I wore my hoodie and head warmer to keep warm.

I glanced at the time on my phone and it was almost seven. Jia usually left for work around eight, so I hoped that I would at least meet her on my way.

Sandy was super edgy this morning and I didn't understand why. Maybe he didn't want to be outside because it was too cold, but at the same time he needed to walk because he hadn't walked in days. I ruffled his head and had a small smile on my face. I was just about to change the music on my phone when I saw Jia and Fluffy walking towards Sandy as me.

As always, Fluffy raced towards Sandy just as he charged for her. I didn't bother to chase him like I did the other day as I just watched him go. Jia was stunned for a second that Fluffy moved out of her reach while she walked and pressed her phone but when she looked up and saw me, she just sighed, the realization dawning on her.

“I was hoping to actually catch you on your way out this morning,” I said to her.

“Oh, sorry. I have to be in really early at work today for a group project so I decided to walk Fluffy earlier,” she smiled as I nodded but I could tell that she wasn’t telling the entire truth.

“Are you avoiding me Jia?” I asked her as she scoffed.

“Why would I do that? I mean we are friends right. Friends don’t avoid each other,” she said with a tight smile.

Did she really consider me her friend? Because I didn’t think we were that close yet. Well, it wasn’t like I didn’t want to be friends with her, of course I did. I loved talking to her and I could watch her talk for hours because her eyes always shone with so much excitement when she talked about something that interested her and the fact that she liked to use her hands when she spoke was really interesting for me too.

“So, you’re saying we are friends?” I asked her as she nodded. I looked at her quizzically as I folded both my hands on my chest.

“What?” She asked me.

“I didn’t think you would want to be friends with someone who is five years younger than you,” I said to her as she sighed. I know that was a low blow even for me, but the way she acted when I told her my age at the aquarium just wasn’t right. It felt like she could not be anywhere close to me

anymore. So, I was really surprised that she was using the word friend so loosely.

“Look, I’m sorry about the other day okay. Really, you’re a good person and I might have been too uptight,” she said.

“Honestly. I just really enjoy talking to you and for me, it’s been a while since I effortlessly enjoyed having a conversation with someone outside of my mom, in blessed memory, Mark and my friends at the coast,” I said with a smile.

“Friends at the coast?” she asked. I knew she wouldn’t miss that part.

“Yes. You never asked so I didn’t tell but now that you asked, I work as a coast guard in Mexico,” I told her as she just stared at me. I was used to getting this expression from a lot of people when I spoke about my job. I don’t know maybe it was something about the way I dressed or looked that didn’t look like I was a coast guard.

“You work in Mexico?” she asked me, and I chuckled at her shock. Maybe my choice of work would help her see me as someone more mature. Hopefully.

“Is it that unbelievable?” I asked her as we walked. I don’t know how it happened or when it happened but we had both somehow find ourselves walking back to the direction of our homes with Fluffy and Sandy right ahead of us. If any of us noticed this change in direction, especially for me, we didn’t bother to point it out.

“Yes, I do”. I answered her.

“I’m sorry. It’s not like I think it’s weird or anything but I just. I kind of already profiled you, you know. I didn’t think you even worked let alone being a coast guard in Mexico,” she told me as I laughed.

I was right about her once again. She really knew how to study people. But the thing with her study was that she was too restricted in analyzing people. Or maybe she just didn’t think there were people in the world who liked to do things that weren’t considered normal, like me.

“What’s wrong with being a coast guard in Mexico?” I asked. Jia stared at me like I had gone crazy.

“It is completely dangerous,” she said as I laughed.

I knew that before I decided to work in the coast guard, but it still didn’t matter to me because I loved the thrill and rush the job gave me. I was going to continue until I was maybe forty years old and then I would retire and finally find a woman I love and build a family with her.

“How did you even land a job in Mexico of all places?” She asked me as I just shrugged.

“It was pure luck and expertise I guess,”

“You basically work for the Navy,”

“Just the part that oversees the maritime affairs of the coast,”

“Are you on a break?”

“It’s basically rotated amongst each person. And for now, the superiors don’t need me yet, but when I’m needed, they would send for me and I have to report for duty”

Jia nodded in understanding as I explained everything to her.

“And it’s really dangerous, isn’t it? Like people die a lot? And when you go back to shore how long do you spend there?” she asked me. “Sorry, I guess I’m asking a lot of questions. I just find your job really intriguing and scary at the same time”

“It’s okay. Before my mother passed, she never wanted me to work with the coast guard”

“But you went against her. Why?”

“Because I genuinely liked it. I mean I started off in college with a clear course in mind, but I attended just one marine biology class and it became more than obvious to me that’s what I wanted to do was different. It’s my life, I had to do what’s best for me.”

“And how did your mother react to that?” she asked me.

“At first, she was scared for me but later she understood me and my passion for the marines,”

“How long have you been doing this?” she asked me. It kind of felt like I was being interviewed at this point, but I shook my head and smiled Anyways. I guess this was her way of getting to be my friend.

“About four years now,”

“Wow. Back to my question though,” she asked me as I laughed.

“I think Everything we do in life gets dangerous at some point. And being in the coast guard for four years, I have seen lots of people die. Lost my colleagues in the middle of a storm and all that,” I said as Jia’s smile turned softened. “Basically, when we are on shore, we spend nothing less than two months there. Sometimes if we get lucky, one month,” I told her as she nodded

“So, when you get called, you could be gone for nothing less than a month,” she repeated. We were almost home now. I could see our houses from where we stood. “And who’s going to take care of Mr. Mark when you’re gone?” she asked and my heart tugged at her complete thoughtfulness.

“He always says he is totally capable of taking care of himself and besides I bought Sandy so he would have a companion when I’m gone. He doesn’t know what though,” I told her

“That’s really sweet of you,” she said. We were almost at Jia’s house now so I decided to ask her about herself. It felt like I had been the one doing all the talking and she was just asking me all of these questions like a cop.

“How about you?” I asked her.

“What about me?” she asked, almost mimicking me. We both stopped in front of her house and faced each other as she asked me that question.

“Like what it’s really like working in an aquarium and how long have you been there and stuff” I asked her as she gave a tight smile. Then she checked her wristwatch and her entire mood changed.

“My goodness how is it 7:30 already?! I have to go Chance. I promise to talk to you when I’m back from work,” she didn’t even wait for a response from me before she took Fluffy in her arms in one swift movement and walked straight into her house. She didn’t pause or say anything until she walked in and shut the door behind her.

I stared at her door for a few seconds after Jia had walked in. I wasn’t a fool. I could see plainly what she just did. She had carefully gotten herself out of answering any of the questions I had clearly laid out for her.

I couldn’t even stop her because I knew she had work but at the same time it was very obvious that she was avoiding my questions. I sighed and walked Sandy back to the house.

I thought we were finally getting somewhere this morning, but apparently, she was only interested in knowing about my life but she kept hers on lock mode. I shook my head as I walked into my house and closed the door behind me.

I laughed as I remembered the way she rushed into her house like she was being chased. She could have just told me she didn’t want to talk about it instead of going off like that. I shook my head and placed my iPhone on the kitchen counter so I could pour myself a glass of water.

But all in all, it was really nice talking to her this morning. And I think I was starting to really get used to starting my day with talking to Jia George. She seemed pretty interesting already, and I wanted to rattle her more to see what was beneath all of that unavailability, and I would eventually find out because once I had my mind set on something, it was impossible for me not to achieve it. That was how I joined the Mexican coast guard after all.

I laughed as I drank my water and rinsed the cups before walking upstairs to my room to have my shower.

I drove into the parking lot of the Publix at around twelve in the afternoon. There were a few things I needed to get for myself and the house. Mark had also given me his own list and I needed to get everything today. I didn't bother bringing Sandy with me.

I walked out of my truck and straight in. I needed to get some food products and fruits first so I walked into that section first after retrieving my shopping basket. When I was done picking out the Fruit, which consisted of apples, oranges, lemons and grapes. I proceeded to check the section of dried fruits as well. And when I was done there, I headed over to the deli section. One can't go to Publix and not get one of their famous sub sandwiches.

I picked up a pack of coleslaw just for the fun of it, when I heard a female call my name.

"Chance!" I heard the female voice call me then I turned around to see that it was actually Sarah, Jia's best friend. I



smiled and rolled my shopping basket to her as she also pulled hers closer to mine. “What’s going on?” Sarah asked. I’m here to stock up on the things we’re running low on,” I said to her as she nodded. She looked like she was impressed that I was out here doing grocery shopping.

“That’s really good.” She smiled.

“Sorry to intrude but I know today is a work day so I’m really surprised you’re not at work,” I said to her.

“You’re not intruding. Yes, today is a work day but I’m on my lunch break. Hence, I decided to use it to run a few errands because thanks to the supervisor I have, I’ll be working till really late tonight,” she said that last part with a scowl on her face and I just laughed.

Contrary to when I talked with Jia, Sarah was just a bundle of joy and our discussions always tilted to the funniest topics.

“I just need to get a few things and I’ll be off,” she smiled at me.

I thought after she said that she would move her shopping basket to the other side of the store, but I was wrong because Sarah still stood in front of me with a smile.

“What’s going on?” I asked her because I really didn’t know why she was looking at me like that.

“So, tell me a little about you. I mean, I just moved here a few years ago so I guess that’s why I never met you,” she added.

“I left Clearwater beach after high school. That was six years ago,”

“Wow. That long huh? Anyways, how’s it going for you now. Being back and all,”

“It’s pretty much the same for me just with a few changes here and there. Like the aquarium. I really like the renovations,” I said.

Sarah just gave me a tight smile and said “Rachel would be so happy to hear that,”

“Whose Rachel?” I asked her.

“Oh! Rachel is my supervisor at work. Anyways before I leave you to continue your shopping, I just wanted to say that I’m glad you and Jia are off to a great start,” she said, and I was puzzled that she would say that.

“Thank you but we are actually just friends.”

“I know that but trust me, Jia is the most reserved, unemotionally available and calculating person I know. So, for her to be this civil with you, it says a lot.”

Of everything she said, just one thing stuck out to me. Unemotionally available. Why was that?

“Has she been hurt before? Jia, I mean?” I asked her.

“I don’t think it’s my place to talk about that because it’s not my story” she said with a small smile. “But knowing what Jia has gone through first hand in the hands of that her annoying ex-husband, I understand why she is guarded,” Sarah said.

Wait what? Ex husband?

“Jia was married?” I asked her.

“I take it you two haven’t talked about that yet. Yes, for about three and a half years till that bastard cheated on her,” Sarah added.

“What?”

“He cheated on her?” I Asked Sarah who just nodded because it seemed really foolish to me that a man married to Jia would actually cheat on her. I mean how stupid could you be to cheat on a woman like Jia? Actually, any woman in fact.

“He cheated on her with a nineteen-year-old. It was completely awful, I tell you. Jia moved out of town to this city. And that’s when we met each other,” she told me with a small smile.

I didn’t even know exactly what to say or how to react to this news but I already understood why Jia was so guarded and didn’t want to answer my questions this morning. It was not even totally my fault because I didn’t know. I scratched my dark hair as Sarah stared at me quizzically. I knew she was already chastising herself for talking about her best friend like this.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have talked about her personal life. I don’t know, Jia is just really closed off and I kind of just want her to be happy and stop thinking about that dirtbag,” she said as I managed a small smile.

She was absolutely right. Jia would definitely not like the fact that I knew about this and it wasn't from her but from her best friend. However, I was thankful that I ran into Sarah and she actually told me these things. I would be able to handle situations better with Jia because at least now I knew how to handle any situation that dealt any last love interest.

It was just so shameful and annoying that Jia had to endure all of that suffering. No woman deserved to be treated that way. And I could understand now why she was completely guarded and also why she refused to let her walls down. And she had made it totally impenetrable.

“Thank you so much for telling me,” I said with a smile as Sarah nodded.

“It's no biggie. Although I have to continue shopping if I want to get back to work before the lunch break is over,” she laughed nervously.

“I understand but really Sarah, thank you. I have tried to get to know her a little but she doesn't seem like she wants me to know any important details of her life.”

“I guess she just wants to be sure you're someone she can trust and it's not really easy for her, considering what your species did to her in the past,” she smiled softly as I nodded.

Now that I know a little. I could totally relate, and I didn't even blame Jia for being so closed off. It was a matter of broken trust and it would take a lot of work for her to see men in a good light again.

“Then I guess I would just give her enough time until she feels comfortable enough and understands that not all men are the same.”

“See I knew from the get go that you were way too mature and the whole age thing didn’t make any sense” Sarah said.

“You think the same way too?” I asked her.

“Absolutely, age is just a number. What matters is the heart and the brains to do good” Sarah said and I laughed.

Funny enough, I enjoyed talking to her like this. It was really refreshing, especially since I had gotten a better view of the situation.

“I’m glad you think that way. It’s such a relief. At least one down, Jia to go,” I said as she laughed.

“I knew there was a reason why I liked you, Chance. You’re so sweet,” she smiled at me. “Thank you for having this discussion with me even though I feel like I made you do it for the most part but it was nice talking to you.”

“It was nice talking to you too Sarah. Have fun shopping,” I said to her as she pulled her basket and walked away.

I heaved a sigh of relief as she walked away and just chuckled.

Sarah was really a wonderful person and I guess the saying was right that indeed, opposite sides actually attracted each other because Sarah and Jia were complete opposites, but I guess that was the beauty of friendship. Balancing each other out.

As I concluded my shopping and walked to the counter to pay for the items I had bought, the only thought on my mind was how to do right by Jia so she would actually understand that we weren't all that different. I still couldn't believe her ex-husband had been shitty enough to do what he did to her.

I walked out of Publix and placed all the bags in the back of the truck before I got into the driver's seat.

I wanted to start off as being a really good friend to Jia and I was going to do just that without making her feel like she was losing herself.

I turned on the car engine and drove back home with a lot of things on my mind.

## **JIA**

Sarah had informed me before she left that she would be working late tonight so she used the lunch break to do some grocery shopping while I finished working on my pending files. I had been in and out of Rachel's office at least four times today because every time I presented her with a file, she always had one problem or two problems with it. Honestly, I didn't think I would act this way if I was ever made to be the supervisor one day and that's because I didn't like to make people look like they were stupid just because they didn't do something the exact way I wanted.

Another reason that made it almost impossible to work with Rachel was the fact that she was a perfectionist. Forgetting that most human beings weren't like that and we could only do our best. I groaned as I typed away on my system making

corrections to the document on my computer screen for the fifth time in one hour.

“Man, you do not look happy,” Sarah teased as she sat down at her desk.

“I envy you. You got your lunch break,” I said to her pouting.

“It’s just the calm before the storm. I’m working late tonight so I think I’m faced with a much worse predicament than yours,” she said as I looked at her.

“How was shopping?” I asked her with a small smile as she laughed.

“If you must know, it’s just shopping which you and I both do. So it’s the same old, however I ran into someone at Publix.” She wriggled her eyebrows and I knew for sure that she wanted me to guess who she had seen.

“I’m not guessing Sarah. Who did you see?” I asked her as she smiled.

“I met Chance and we talked. Turns out he’s actually really interesting and he’s way more mature than you pegged him for,” she finished and I just rolled my eyes. Ever since she met Chance that day at my house, she seemed to think there was some sort of spark between Chance and I but that was a big fat lie. I was not interested in men and definitely not in a man who’s five years younger than I am.

Chance and I were just friends and I loved our platonic friendship. The less complicated it was, the better for all of us.

“I never said he wasn’t mature.”

“You just implied he wasn’t mature simply because you’re five years older than he is,”

“Chance and I already spoke about it this morning actually and we are both cool with it. As long as we are friends” I said as Sarah nodded with a small smile but I knew there was more to that smile and she definitely wanted me to know what it was. “What is it, Sarah?” I asked her as she smiled.

“The thing is I’m torn. I have been thinking about it since I walked out of Publix. One party says I did nothing wrong and the other part of me is nagging and yelling at me for going against my best friend,” she said as I chuckled but I stopped chuckling as soon as I noticed the serious glare on her face.

“What is it, Sarah? You know you can tell me anything. Like seriously,” I told her as she nodded.

“It’s not like I meant to do it. One thing just led to One thing and I don’t know when I said it. I told Chance you used to be married.”

At first when she said those words, I wanted her to laugh at me and say she was pulling a prank and I had just fallen for it. Unfortunately, the expression on her face didn’t make it look like this was just a prank. Sarah was dead serious about what she just said.

“You did what?!,” I asked her then I noticed that everybody around us looked at Sarah and I, I lowered my voice before saying “tell me this is a joke, Sarah.”



“I wish it was,” she said as I groaned.

Was she freaking kidding me? This was completely unbelievable and uncalled for. She had no right! Absolutely no right at all to tell anyone about my life and not even Chance. Everything that happened between my ex-husband and I, I told everything to Sarah in confidentiality.

And anyone who would eventually find out my story, was supposed to learn it from me and only me! I couldn't believe she could do me dirty like this. What the heck? I just met Chance like two weeks ago and he already knew I used to be married.

“What else did you tell him?” I asked her.

“Jia...”

“What else Sarah?” I asked her through gritted teeth.

“I also kind of told him the reason why,” she said.

God! I really wished the ground could open up and swallow me. I held my head in my hands with my face hung low. I didn't even know what to say or feel.

When I dressed for work this morning and arrived at the aquarium, I didn't think this was how my day would go. I didn't even understand the meaning of all of this. Why would Sarah divulge information that isn't hers like that? I would never do that to her. Never!

“You told Chance everything I told you confidentiality,” I said to her as she nodded.

“I really didn’t think it would be such a big deal. I was honestly just looking out for you”

“You didn’t think?” I chuckled “that’s the thing Sarah. You are almost thirty but you never think! You think life is a game? You act like you’re still fucking sixteen and you don’t even want to be mature. What gives you the right to tell important parts about my life to someone I barely even know,” I said.

“I was just trying to help.”

“And for what? I never mentioned to you that I needed your help so what exactly pushed you to make such a stupid decision“ I asked her.

I knew I was being too harsh on her but at this point I didn’t care. She had gone ahead and done this without thinking about how I would feel. Chance might be my friend right now but it was a friendship that was barely just starting. He is not supposed to know this much about me and not even this early. Sarah just ruined everything for me by blabbing and it was very annoying.

“I seriously can’t even stand the sight of you right now. You annoy me,” I told her. I grabbed my purse and my computer so I could work somewhere else, because the mere fact that she was stored beside me was making me angry by the minute. At this point, people close to where we were already had known that Sarah and I had an argument and as I walked to another part of the aquarium so I could work, they all stared at me but I just ignored them because I didn’t want to use the anger, I was feeling right now to lash out at any them. Lashing out on

anybody now could get me suspended or worse, even fired because I didn't know how to bite my tongue when I was upset or angry and I really said the meanest things to people when I was angry.

As soon as I arrived at a quiet corner, I wiped the angry tears that had fallen down my face with the sleeve of my purple cotton dress. I really couldn't believe that Sarah could just spill confidential things about me so easily. I knew she couldn't do that with just anyone and she only did it because she felt there was something between Chance and I. Still, it made no sense that she would do that.

She had broken the trust I had in our friendship and I just didn't want to be around her right now. I was hurt by what she did and I just needed to calm my nerves far away from her. Then I breathed in and out a few times before continuing with my work.

By the time I drove into my neighborhood it was almost eight P.M., I parked my car right in front of my house and unlocked my front door with my house keys before walking in. I turned on the light to see that Fluffy was wide awake and she was whining. I had made sure to place extra food for her in the bowl but when I looked at the bowl, it was empty, even her water bowl was half empty. I sighed and bent down to retrieve her customized pink food plate before walking to my kitchen so I could pour her food for her.

I poured her food from the bag into the plate and went back to place it in front of her so that she could eat. As she was

eating, I grabbed my purse and walked up to my room so I could at least have my bath and change into something more comfortable.

I was still finding it really hard to understand what Sarah had done but I just decided to shut it out of my head completely. It was no use crying over spilled milk. I knew she felt bad enough as it was.

I walked into the bathroom to take a hot bath. Getting out of the bathroom, I searched for my lounge wear and felt cramps in my lower stomach. I walked straight to my bed and opened my purse so I could take out my phone and check my period calendar. Shit! I had completely forgotten about my period this month and it was supposed to arrive any moment now.

Realizing what was coming, I opened my drawer and pulled out one of my cotton panties just because I didn't want to stain my white sheets, I attached my pad before wearing it. Once that was settled, I put on my black round neck shirt that I had gotten from my father.

I sighed at the memories of my parents. It's been three years since I last spoke to them. It wasn't because that was what I wanted, but it was because they didn't want to understand me. They seemed to think that Ryan cheating on me wasn't enough reason for me to divorce him and my parents sternly warned me not to return to their house but instead stay with my cheating husband.

I was foolish enough to think like them when Ryan first cheated on me. It was his coworker and he told me it was a

mistake when I bumped into their messages on his phone. I remember calling my mother that day completely heartbroken. As I put on my father's shirt, the conversation that day came rushing back to me.

I had asked for Ryan's phone because I needed to send an urgent email and my phone was dead. Fortunately for me, I had just hit send on his phone when a message from a certain Melissa popped up. He had saved her number with a blushing emoji and I wondered who this she was. Ryan was an only child, and I knew all of his female cousins, but I never heard about a Melissa.

So, I let curiosity get the best of me and I clicked on the pop up and that's when I saw things that I wish I could erase from my memory forever. They had been having sex at work and they even hooked up at random hotels. The one that completely broke me was when he sent her a naked picture of himself in our living room. I couldn't help the tears that gushed from my eyes, and my hands were shaking as I held the phone. I heard his footsteps as he walked towards our matrimonial home. He stopped at the door to talk to me because I was sitting on our bed with my back towards the door

"Honey, are you done now? I would like to make a call," Ryan said to me. I couldn't even bring myself to say anything. I just stood there staring blankly at the screen. Trying to comprehend all of the messages I had just read. "Honey? Are you okay?" he asked as he walked towards me. Then he

inched his head lower and that's when realization dawned on him. I had found out everything. Ryan was cheating on me.

"Jia baby, I promise you, it's not what you think," he tried to defend himself, but I just laughed. It felt like I was laughing and crying at the same time because the pain I felt in my heart at that point was unimaginable.

I had met Ryan, senior year in college and he was my one and only boyfriend and after college we got married. I thought it was love at first sight for both of us.

"It's not what I think? What the hell do you mean it's not what I think?! Who the hell is Melissa?!" I demanded as he tried to touch me but I moved very far away from him. My vision was blurry from all the tears and I held my chest.

"She's my coworker-"

"A coworker you're obviously fucking! How could you do this to me Ryan?" I cried.

"I promise you it was only a mistake,"

"A mistake? You and her exchanged naked photos!" I held as I brought his phone back up to look at it so I could see the day he sent her his naked picture in our bedroom. "This was two fucking days ago! Oh my god" I gasped as realization dawned on me. I checked the time stamp on the message and realized that this was the exact time Ryan and I made love two nights ago. So, while I was asleep, he was sex chatting with her. "You are a piece of shit!" I yelled to him as I threw his phone on the floor and stomped out of our room. I grabbed my

phone on the kitchen counter and raced out of the house with Ryan chasing after me.

“Jia just wait. We can talk about this,” he said to me as I opened my car door and got in. I shut the door just before Ryan could reach me and drove out of the parking lot. I stopped at a park nearby so that I could call my mother and speak to her, hoping that she could at least say something to help me in this situation.

My mother picked up on the third ring, I was crying hysterically as I said “Hello,”

“Jia? What’s wrong with you. Are you crying?” she asked me.

“Mom, he ...he cheated on me. Mom, Ryan cheated on me,” I said as I continued crying. My mother didn’t say anything for a while as she just listened to me cry. When I finally felt like I had no more tears left to cry, I said to her, “I can’t stay with him mom. I am getting a divorce,”

“You will do no such thing Jia George,” my mother warned me. I had to take my phone away from my ear and check the caller ID to be sure I was actually talking to my mother before I placed it back on my ears.

“Mom, what do you mean? He cheated on me.”

“And you certainly won’t be the first or last woman whose husband cheated. It’s what women go through Jia. You have to wipe your tears and hold down your marriage,” my mother

said. I sat in my car completely stunned at her words. “Where are you now?” she asked me as I rubbed my forehead.

“I’m not too far from home. I just came outside to clear my head.”

“Go back home Jia. Hold down your home,” she said to me and ended the call right before I could say anything.

That night, I did what my mother asked and I went back home to Ryan, he apologized severally and swore to me that it would never happen again. I even allowed him to make love to me, but the entire act disgusted me but my mother’s words kept ringing in my head as Ryan plunged deep into me that night, *hold down your home*.

I wiped my face with my white towel as I pulled myself out of those thoughts. My house was completely quiet as I walked back downstairs to check on Fluffy. It would have really been great if Ryan actually didn’t cheat on me after that first time. But he did it again, and this time it was with a nineteen-year-old intern at his work place. I shook my head and poured myself a glass of water before I decided on what to make myself. I wasn’t feeling up to cooking so I just poured myself some cereal and milk as I turned on the TV.

I checked my phone to see that I had a few missed calls from Sarah, but I didn’t bother returning them. I wanted to give her enough time to really reflect on what she had done. You don’t snitch on your best friends like that. Sarah snitched on me.



I rolled my eyes when I heard my phone ringing again and it was Sarah calling. I grabbed my phone and put it on Do not disturb as I switched through TV handle trying to figure out what to watch. That's when I heard the doorbell. I knew who it was. It couldn't be Sarah because I knew for sure that she was stuck at work which left it at one person...

Chance.

After the shocking revelation Sarah gave me today, I really was not up for talking to him. I carefully reduced the volume of the TV before I tip toed to the window so I could see who was at the door and I was right. It was Chance waiting for me to come and get the door. But I wouldn't.

I didn't want to see him or talk to him. He knew my dirty secret now. Everything about my past I wasn't ready to tell him, he already knew it all and it was very annoying already. I watched him as he rang the doorbell again. He waited for a few minutes before ringing again. He sighed and looked around my front door before throwing his hands up in surrender and walking to his house. I closed the window as he walked so, he would not see me.

I leaned back on the white walls in my apartment asking myself if I did the right thing by avoiding him and I told myself yes. He couldn't just walk into my life and try to know everything about me. I wasn't in for that and the sooner he knew that. The better it was for him.

I went back to my seat and continued munching on my cereal and when I was done, I walked to the sink so I could

rinse the bowl before placing it back on my shelf.

I turned off the TV and patted Fluffy goodnight. It was almost nine and I really just wanted to retire to bed early. I was still exhausted from all the events from today and I needed to rest my head.

## Chapter 6

---

### **CHANCE**

It was very obvious Jia was avoiding me because the lights in her house were turned on, indicating that she was cooped up inside. Even the television was turned on when I knocked, but there wasn't any response. It was just very convenient of her that she went AWOL after I ran into Sarah at the mart a few hours ago.

I opened the front door and closed it as I walked into the house. And it was even crazier because I didn't have her phone number, so I couldn't reach Jia. I was relieved that Mark had already gone to bed so I heated up the casserole from earlier and ate it before going straight up to my room.

As I was about to have my shower, my phone began ringing. I reached for it and saw that it was one of my superiors. This was the first time he was calling me since I left Mexico a few weeks ago. I guess playtime was actually over.

I picked up the call “hello sir,” I said in a professional tone.

“Good day to you too Chance. I take it you enjoyed yourself these last weeks?” he asked me as I sighed. I was completely right. Every single time I was about to be called to the shore and he called me, this is what he always told me and this time wasn’t any different. I would be leaving on the first plane out tomorrow and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

“Yes sir,” I tried to smile as I spoke.

“I’ll cut to the chase but I’m guessing you already understand what this call is regarding. We need you back at base. First thing tomorrow morning, be out,” he said to me over the phone as I nodded

“Sure sir,” I responded.

“See you soon and welcome back to work,” he said before ending the call. As soon as the call dropped, I reached out for my travelling bag and began to fill it up with everything I knew that I needed.

I was done packing up all of my clothes and essentials before midnight and that’s when I finally had my shower, because it would be too chaotic for me to even say I was showering the next morning.

## **JIA**

I was very thankful that the next morning was a Sunday, which meant that I had more than enough time to sleep in and not respond to the calls or messages from Sarah. I yawned and stretched on my bed as I opened my eyes. My life used to be

really peaceful and predictable but since Chance moved here, it had actually become really unpredictable and it felt like I was living in my personal romcom. I reached for my phone in my left bed side drawer and realized that Sarah had called me this morning as well but I was still asleep. Even though I had slept over it, and I actually felt better this morning, it still didn't excuse any of Sarah's behaviors. I shook my head as I placed my phone back in the drawer.

I stood up from bed and sighed. Growing up, I always imagined that I would have my own kids before I clicked thirty and my life was going perfectly in that light, until Ryan shocked me.

I walked into my bathroom so I could rinse my face and as I splashed the water from the tap, it felt like I was back there with Ryan, the day I found out he never stopped cheating on me.

That day Ryan had gone to take a shower, and that was about a month after I found out about Melissa, he had actually been true to his words. For the first few weeks, I didn't notice anything off or odd with him. We were both trying to rekindle our marriage at least that's what I thought but I was such a fool to believe that Ryan could change. A leopard never changed its spots, and I painfully learned that the hard way.

While Ryan was in the shower bathing, his phone kept ringing.

"Ryan! There's a call for you," I called for him from the room as he had his shower.

“I’m coming!” he responded.

I didn’t pay much attention to his phone and continued working on my laptop but it rang again. So, I thought it was probably something urgent and considered picking it up and putting it on speaker phone so he could communicate with the person.

As soon I picked up the call, I knew I had made the worst mistake of my life “Ryan baby, why haven’t you been picking my calls?” the female voice asked as soon as I picked up. This was even before I could place the call on speaker phone. I was too stunned to say anything so the lady on the other end of the call just kept on talking. “I understand that you’re trying to keep this a secret from your wife but I miss you babe. I want you to touch me,” the female said again as I dropped the phone on the bed.

I was too stunned to speak and at this point, frankly, there were no more tears. I wasn’t even surprised like I was the first time, I was just really disappointed. Despite everything that Ryan had put me through, I had some little hope left in me that indeed, he was truly sorry and we could make our marriage work but I was wrong.

When Ryan stepped out of the bathroom, he was smiling but when he saw the stone-cold look on my face, he knew immediately that something was wrong.

“Babe? What’s wrong,” he asked.

I chuckled as I looked at him straight in the eye so I could tell him what I should have told him a month ago, “I want a

divorce you son of a bitch,” I said to him.

“Surely you must be joking. What’s gotten into you Jia?”

“I think I should have done this a long time ago but I thought your stupid cheating ass was actually really sorry but it turns out you’re just a worthless piece of cabbage! I want a divorce, Ryan. I am done with this sham of a marriage,” I said to him as he scoffed.

“You are just overreacting,” Ryan said to me.

“Overreacting?” I reached for his phone on the bed and tossed it to him. “Who the hell is she?!” I yelled as he looked at his phone screen.

“She’s an intern at work. She is probably calling to get clarity on some files,” he said to me as I laughed bitterly. Did this man really think I was that dense?

“Clarity on some files or more like clarity on your cheap dick because you can’t keep it in your pants,” I told him as Ryan sighed.

“It’s not like that.”

“It is exactly like that, and I have had enough of you and your stupid lies. How old is she?” I asked him.

Ryan tried to move closer to me but I moved away from him and asked again “how fucking old is she Ryan?!” I asked.

“She is nineteen,” he said with his shoulders sunk low.

“You’re an actual piece of shit and I’m actually done with you,” I grabbed my phone from the dressing table and stomped

to the living room so I could call my mother. I already made up my mind and this time I was not calling her to ask for advice. I was calling her and father to let the both of them know that I was divorcing Ryan and they had only one choice, support me on this. However, if they chose not to support me, I would do this all on my own without looking back.

I locked the door and dialed my mother's number and paced around the room as I waited for her to pick up the call and she did.

"Hello honey," her voice came up and I found myself pretty disgusted at the tone of her voice. How could she encourage her only daughter to endure a cheating man? How could she tell me to hold down a marriage with a man who had disrespected the sacred vows we made before God and our matrimonial home?

"Ryan cheated on me again," I told her

"Did he apologize?" she asked me as I laughed.

Was she really asking me that? My mother was really asking me if he apologized as if an apology would make everything fine.

"I just told you Ryan, my husband cheated on me again," I said to her.

"And I'm asking if he apologized," she said.

"It doesn't matter. I'm getting a divorce,"

"Your father and I both agree that getting a divorce is too rash a decision. You and Ryan can talk this over."



“Mom, are you even listening to yourself? Am I even your daughter? He cheated on me with a nineteen-year-old. The next time could be a minor and I would not be here to take any of that bullshit,” I said to her.

“Don’t raise your voice at me young lady.”

“Oh, be thankful that I still have a shred of respect left for you. I am getting a divorce and that’s final. I need you and my father as my parents to support me on this,” I said.

“Your father and I do not agree with this Jia. Don’t think you can come to our house,” she said to me as I scoffed.

Was she really telling me this? She and my father were not going to support me? They were going to leave me out in the streets?

I wiped the tears that fell out of my eyes and I nodded.

“Well, let me make this absolutely clear to you and your husband. You both have lived your lives and this is my life. I will not keep up with this sham of a marriage just to please you,” I paused “if you don’t want me in your house, it is fine. If you cannot offer me your support, I think it’s only fair that we end all communication here,” I said to my mother Hoping that she would change her stance, but she was stone cold to the very end.

“You’re on your own Jia George,” she told me as she ended the call.

That was the last time I ever heard from my mother or my father. When I moved to Clearwater beach, I changed my cell

numbers so none of them could reach me. Especially not Ryan. And My life has been peaceful ever since with me trying to pick up the pieces of my life.

It definitely wasn't an easy one for me and even up until now, I tried to understand why my own parents did me like that. Were they too blind or archaic in their thinking? Did my mother and father think that it was right for Ryan to cheat on me and it was my duty to forgive him every time I found out? Was that the kind of life they wanted for their only daughter?

I had a lot of questions when Ryan and I were going through the divorce process and it was such a terrible and lonely time for me because I was completely alone. Not once did my parents ever call or reach out. I changed my lines a few months after the divorce was finalized so my parents had time to reach me, but they chose not to. It was as though I never existed in their lives. It was amazing how the people who you thought would be there for you no matter what could actually turn their backs on you at the times when you needed them the most.

That was the story between my parents and I.

I was very thankful when I moved to Clearwater and started my life afresh. I met Sarah and we clicked instantly. She was there for me when I was hurting the most and she totally understood all of my pain. So, it hurt a lot that she was doing this to me. It just felt like my parents all over again.

After washing my face, I checked to see if truly my period was here already, but the pad I had used the night before was

still empty. So, I took it out and placed another one just in case.

I decided to take Fluffy out for a walk. I didn't want her getting too lazy and used to staying at home. It wasn't good for her.

I threw on my athletic clothes which consisted of a grey sweatshirt and joggers, then I packed my hair in a messy bun as I walked downstairs. Fluffy was just waking up and stretching when I reached her. I refilled her water bowl and watched her as she drank before pulling out her leash and clasping it around her neck. It was almost eight in the morning when I checked the time.

I opened the door and carefully walked Fluffy outside. It was already kind of sunny outside this morning and I spared a glance at Mr. Mark's house. I don't know why I did because a part of me was still too ashamed to face Chance knowing what Sarah told him about my past.

I saw Mr. Mark watering his plants outside whistling.

"Good morning Mr. Mark!," I told him with a smile. He looked at me and returned my smile.

"Good morning, Jia. How are you this morning?" he asked me.

I nodded "I'm just fine," I fell quiet for a few minutes as I debated whether or not to ask him about Chance. In the end, I reluctantly asked, "how about Chance?"

"Oh, he left this morning," he answered.

“Then I should see him on my way then because I’m on my way for a walk myself,” I said as Mr. Mark chuckled.

“Chance didn’t go out for a walk. He got called back in the middle of the night by his superiors. I’m guessing you know the nature of his job because you two are close,” he stopped talking for a bit so he could water some particular plants before he continued speaking “he had to leave early this morning,” he said.

Chance left this morning? So, when he came last night and knocked on my door, he really had no idea he was going to get called and I had avoided him. I swallowed the lump in my throat realizing what Mr. Mark had said. Chance had gone to Mexico.

“Can I have his number?” I asked him as he shook his head.

“I’m afraid not. He left his cell here. Told me he would only contact me when he wanted to. I could tell him you sent your regards when he calls,” he told me as I nodded.

“Alright sir. I would really appreciate that. Enjoy the rest of your day,” I smiled as I walked away with Fluffy in front of me.

As I walked on the street, I felt really bad that I hadn’t seen Chance before he left for the base. He could be gone for a month. And there wasn’t any way for me to communicate with him. I kicked the dirt beneath me in annoyance realizing that he was really gone.

Fluffy made a whining sound as we walked and I nodded in agreement “I know right Fluffy? He said he was my friend but he left without even saying goodbye” I said as we walked.

I was so shocked when Mr. Mark had broken the news to me. I never expected that they would call for him so soon but that was his job, and he was expected to show up whenever they needed him. A part of me just felt like it was too soon.

Maybe he didn’t bother because he knocked on my door the night before and I didn’t pay any attention to him. He probably caught on that I was avoiding him.

“That was actually spot on too. But Fluffy, he still didn’t act right. He should have dropped a note at least,” I pouted my lips.

I didn’t understand why this made me so angry but it also made me anticipate his return because then, I would finally talk to him about all of this. I guess it was great that he was over there and I was here, it gave me ample time to access this situation from an unbiased side. I sighed deeply as I walked Fluffy on the road. She kept making whining noises.

“Hush Fluffy. You’re disrupting my flow of thought,” I warned her as she barked at me.

What was up with this dog anyway? Maybe I needed to take her to the vet. But before that as soon as we got home, I would give her a warm bubble bath and paint her nails too. Today would be Fluff’s self-care day.

And a day in for the both of us. I wouldn't worry about my past or any of my problems today. I just wanted to relax and be happy, and that's exactly what I would do.

## Chapter 7

---

### **JIA**

It had been almost a week since I last saw Chance and that also means that it's been a few days since my best friend Sarah and I had a conversation and it was completely awkward for not just the both of us but for the other people who worked with us. It was really weird that we were grownups and behaving like this but there was nothing I could do about it. I still hadn't forgiven or forgotten what she did enough for me to actually have a conversation with her. She had tried severally to get me to talk to her but I had also done my best in avoiding her because I was not ready yet.

Right now, I was in the office with Rachel and as usual she was giving me several orders because we had been working on a particular project together.

Although I could see her frustration with this situation between Sarah and I, she had actually maintained her cool to my surprise, and didn't bother saying anything. This was

really commendable on her part because I legit thought she would be one of the first people to get annoyed by this whole thing.

“So how soon can the proposal be ready?” Rachel asked me as I rubbed my forehead.

“Give or take, three days,” I responded as she shook her head.

“That’s too far. The local investors did not exactly give us a luxury of time and they would only be in Clearwater for a few days so three days is a stretch” she said.

“Alright, two days,” I responded.

“Let’s work with one day,” she said to me as I scoffed.

She was being completely unreasonable and there was absolutely no way I could get all of this paperwork done in one day.

“It will be nearly impossible for me to get this much work done in one day and even deliver in record time,” I told her, but she just shook her head.

Did I say I commended her earlier? I take it back because apparently, she seemed to think that she was working with robots who didn’t have other lives than to deliver at her command.

I resisted the urge to face palm myself as I stared at Rachel. I really didn’t know what to say to her at this point. It wasn’t like I wouldn’t be able to actually get it done in one day but it



would take a toll on me mentally and physically. Even intellectually, It wasn't safe and it was really so annoying.

Rachel smirked at me as if she dared me to say no. At times like this, the audacity she had baffled me. She almost acted like she was the one directly in charge of paying my salary and it was so annoying the way she acted.

“I'll get it done,” I finally responded.

“It's really not like you had any other choice in this,” she said to me and I almost glared at her.

God she was so infuriating. The only way I would have all of this paperwork ready by tomorrow was if I actually worked here through the night. I could actually take the work home and get it done there, but I knew for a fact that my warm and soft bed could easily tempt me to procrastinate.

Assuming Sarah and I were on talking terms, I could have easily gotten her to work on this with me but unfortunately for me, I was not talking to her right now. Talk about the worst timing ever.

“And also, what's going on between you and Sarah?” Rachel asked me. For a second, I was taken aback that she had noticed and asked me something so personal.

Well, everyone at the aquarium knew that Sarah and I were not on talking terms. Our desks were right next to each other and when we needed anything from one another we had been speaking to Kurt who had his desk in front of us instead of speaking to one another. I knew that Kurt was really the one at

the receiving end of all this because I could always see the exasperated and frustrated expression on his face whenever Sarah and I talked to him instead of talking to each other.

“Nothing,” I answered awkwardly.

“I’m not stupid Jia,” Rachel said and I laughed before responding with, “I never said you were,” I chuckled trying to find something funny in this situation but apparently, I was grossly mistaken. There was not a single shred of humor living inside Rachel or maybe there was but it was only reserved for her baby and her husband, but if truly she was like this even with him, he was in for a lot.

Rachel looked at me with a straight face and I just sighed, “it’s nothing.”

“I don’t think it’s nothing if it’s stressing Kurt this much. Not to mention the other people in your section of the Aquarium“ she paused. “Look, I don’t know what happened between you two and frankly I don’t what you know,” she said, and I nodded because she was absolutely right. “But whatever is going on with you two has gone on for far too long and it’s starting to affect the work flow. It’s been almost a week and you two are grownups, fix whatever situation you have between the two of you,” she said as my lips formed a small smile.

I wish it was as easy as Rachel painted it to be. I couldn’t just act like every thing was fine between Sarah and me after what she had done. I wouldn’t be this upset if she hadn’t told Chance the reason why my ex-Husband and I divorced but she

did and that was truly the most annoying part of this whole thing.

“I understand what you mean perfectly. On behalf of Sarah and I; we will definitely sort out whatever is wrong with the both of us.”

“As soon as possible please,” she said as I nodded my head.

“Wonderful. That will be all for now and I’ll be expecting the paper work twenty-four hours from now,” Rachel said to me as I nodded and stood up from my seat and walked out of her office.

As I walked out of her office, the first person I actually saw was Sarah. She wore a small smile on her face as she looked at me and I just sent a small nod at her before turning around.

I sat at my desk and sighed. Rachel was impossible to deal with and I didn’t have any choice but to deliver, and deliver well. My reputation was at stake here and I wouldn’t do anything to dent that.

As I worked, I realized that it was getting darker outside, and more people were leaving the aquarium. I would kill to be in their position right now because I really just wanted to go back to my house, have a sweet bath, and sleep. By the time I finished working on everything, it was almost ten P.M.

I stretched my body and smiled because I had accomplished my mission. I looked around me and realized that I was the only person still here.

Just me and the security guards. I shook my head as different thoughts rushed into my brain. I packed my things after I made sure that all of the paperwork was secured and then I walked out of the aquarium.

I reached my house in less than thirty minutes after that, and I was so exhausted as I unlocked my front door and entered. The first thing I did when I was in the comfort of my home was to take off my heels because my legs were killing me. Then I just hit my butt on the couch and rested there for a few minutes.

I don't care what anyone else says, Rachel isn't even a human being and she really doesn't care about the interest of the people that worked with her on her team because if she actually cared about us, she wouldn't over stretch us this much. I shook my head and smiled when Fluffy walked up to me all excited. She barked a little and jumped on me.

"Hey Baby. Did you miss mama?" I asked her tickling her behind her ears. She responded to this by rubbing her face against my body and I just laughed.

At least I had Fluffy to come home too, and that was more than enough for me.

The following morning, I woke up to take Fluffy out for a walk before going to work. As much as I was exhausted the night before from working so much, when I woke up in the morning I felt better, but nothing actually prepared me for the shock on my face when I opened the door that morning and Chance was standing right in front of me.

I felt like I was dreaming, but surely I wasn't making this up. His black hair has gotten a little bit longer and he smiled at me while I just stood there, pinned to one spot like I had just seen a ghost.

I actually didn't know how to respond but on the other hand, Fluffy was so excited as she pounced on Sandy and the two of them barked and raced around each other with excitement.

"Good morning," Chance finally said to me. Okay, I wasn't dreaming because he just spoke to me and he was actually here. Before I responded to him, I checked the time on my wristwatch to see that it was just a few minutes past six in the morning.

"How long have you been standing out here?" I asked him as he smiled. It was kind of cold this morning so I wanted to be sure that he hadn't been standing there for long.

"Not long ago. I actually came out early to walk Sandy then I saw the lights come on and I just thought to say hello," he smiled. The hoodie he wore covered more than half of his body as he moved.

"And when did you return from base?" I asked him.

"Yesterday afternoon," he smiled.

I sighed and held on to Fluffy's leash as I walked her out into the road. Chance and Fluffy followed closely behind me.

"Are you mad at me or something?" Chance asked me as I shook my head.

“No,” I answered him almost immediately.

He chuckled, “I think from the way you answered that you’re actually mad at me,”

“How could you leave for Mexico without saying goodbye,” I asked him.

“I got called in the middle of the night and my flight was the first one in the morning. Plus, I didn’t think you wanted to see me,” he said as I sighed.

“Why would you think I didn’t want to see you? And I thought you said we were friends? Friends don’t do that to each other”

“I knocked on your door the day before and I knew you were home but you didn’t open the door. I knew you didn’t want to see me or talk to me but I didn’t know why. I guess I just felt it was better without trying to talk to you because I thought you would not want to either,” he said as I stomped my feet on the ground.

He wasn’t wrong about anything he just said, but I was still annoyed. The only reason I avoided him that evening in the first instance was because I really didn’t know what to say to him knowing that he knew I was married before and it was such a messy situation.

“Anyway, how was work? You’re back really early,” I said trying to change the subject.

“Yes, apparently I had been called in to do one thing in particular and when I finished, it was easier for me to come

back home,” he said as I nodded.

“Why were you avoiding me Jia?” He asked.

“Because you know the truth,” I said it as it was because that was exactly how I felt. I felt so uncomfortable around him this morning because I knew that he now knows about my past. And I think what made it worse was the fact that he didn’t know this from me but from someone else.

“I want you to know that none of that matters to me” he said.

I scoffed as I walked, “but it does matter to me. I feel like a part of me is out in the open and I can’t even take it back” I said.

That’s exactly how I felt ever since. It felt like I was naked and this was the starting point of getting all the walls I had successfully put up being broken. I was not emotionally available.

I really didn’t want the both of us bonding over past trauma. It wasn’t really like he had any past trauma anyway or maybe he did and I just didn’t know but thanks to Sarah, he knew all about mine already.

“Are you angry that Sarah told me those things?” he asked.

“Yes, she shouldn’t have.”

“I don’t think she meant any harm. Actually, she said it so that it would help me understand you,”

“Understand me?” I asked.

“Yes. That day I told her you were completely guarded and you put up these walls around yourself that were totally impenetrable. She felt bad for me, I guess,” he paused to check something on Sandy’s leash. “But you are right. It wasn’t in her place to say it and she realized that after letting me know because I could see on her face how torn she was,” Chance finished as I sighed.

I was still angry at both Chance and Sarah but maybe I was overreacting.

Sarah could have easily acted like she didn’t tell Chance anything about my past but she came to me knowing what her confession would do to our friendship and she told me anyways. I shut my eyes as I remembered the things, I said to her that day.

In the heat of anger, I had said terrible things to her.

Faster than I could realize, we were already almost at our house. I checked my wristwatch and it was just fifteen minutes to seven.

“Do you want to come into my house for coffee this morning?” I asked Chance who looked taken aback by my question.

This was the first time I was inviting him into my home and I was sure he didn’t know what to make of this.

“It’s absolutely fine Jia. You don’t have to feel obligated to make me anything ,” he said to me as I chuckled.



“I just really want to make you coffee and that’s all,” I said to him with a smile.

“Well, since you asked really nicely, I guess I do have a few minutes to spare,” he said as I nodded.

I opened the door to my house for him and he entered. Sandy and Fluffy were too fixated on each other to even bother with us. I actually was starting to find their friendship cute... or was it a blooming love story? I seriously had no idea.

“Your house is so warm,” Chance said as he sat on the couch with a bright smile on his face

“Thank you. How do you like your coffee though?” I asked him.

“Since I don’t have a job to go to in the mornings,” he laughed. I knew what he was doing right there. He was shading me “I love to have my coffee with cream and sugar,” he answered me as I nodded and walked into my kitchen.

“One cup of coffee with cream and sugar coming right up,” I said as I turned on the coffee maker.

In less than ten minutes, coffee was ready and I handed him a cup. Mine was black because that was how I had my coffee to kickstart my day.

We both drank in silence for a while before Chance finally spoke up “I’m very sorry if I’ve intruded into your personal life,”

I took another sip of my coffee trying to gather the best words to say so this would not be any more awkward than it already was.

“I guess, I just wanted to be the one to tell you about that part of me if ever I was ready to. I didn’t like the fact that she snitched.”

“You know she only did it because it’s me. I doubt she would ever try that with a complete stranger,”

“Technically your kind of still a complete stranger,” I teased.

“A complete stranger you just made coffee for, with cream and sugar. You’re so sweet Jia George,” he told me as I laughed.

“This is me calling a truce and trying my best to actually do this friendship thing with you because I know friendship worked both ways,” I told him.

“Wow, I’m completely honored that you’re starting to consider me as a friend. It means more than you know to me,” he said as I laughed.

“Stop being so sarcastic,” I warned him.

“But I’m actually telling the truth,” he said.

I shook my head, “well now that you know I was once married, and you even know the reason why my ex-husband and I got divorced, What else would you like to know about me?” I asked him as he smiled.

“You don’t have to say anything you do not want to. I totally understand if you want to leave things there,” Chance said.

He was giving me the chance to walk away. But for how long was I going to let my past control me or stop me from being free?

“I met Ryan senior year in college. I always had this thought that whoever I was dating after I graduated College was the same man I would get married to. And I always told myself, I wanted to have a family before thirty,” I smiled.

There was a small smile on Chance’s lips but I just continued talking. I had to finish what I started.

“Anyway, Ryan was perfect and when I took him to meet my parents, they fell in love with him instantly. He was the kind of son in law they had pictured for their only child. He was very focused and professional so they were happy I made a good choice,” I paused to take a sip out of my coffee before I continued, “we got married when I was almost twenty-five after dating for about three years. For the first two years of marriage, I never suspected anything because I mean, I thought my husband was perfect” I sighed.

“But that fateful day, I needed to get something sent out urgently because at the time we were married, I was working from home as a virtual assistant. I decided to use his phone and right after I sent what I needed to, I saw a message pop up and the name wasn’t familiar in any way because like me, my husband was an only child and he always talked to me about

work and his friends. So, I already knew a handful of their names. I was very curious as to who this new person was, so I clicked on the message and that's how I found out my husband was cheating on me with his coworker. Even worse, they had been sharing naked pictures and sex chatting," I said.

I could hear Chance gasp but I just, I didn't want to pause in the middle now that I had started so I held my coffee mug tighter. It had been four years already, we got the divorce and all of this happened. I was so sure that I had moved on and let go of the hurt but this thing wasn't magic. When I did think about it or talk about it, my heart ached a little. Maybe a part of me still wished that things didn't turn out the way it did but I wasn't going to question the plans of the Almighty.

Maybe things didn't work out with me and Ryan because he had better plans and if there weren't any better plans somewhere, I was more than satisfied with how my life was currently.

"I confronted him of course and he admitted he was cheating on me. I was so broken because Ryan was my first, in every single sense. I left the house and called my mother, hoping that you know, as my mother, she would support me, but guess what? She told me to suck it up and hold down my marriage," I laughed.

"What?" Chance asked as I nodded.

Yes, exactly.

"When she told me that I couldn't disobey her because this is my mother and she is supposed to want the best for me

right? So, I wiped my tears and went back to Ryan. He apologized and let me know it would never happen. That was that. For the next few months, he surprised me with date nights and gifts; he was very affectionate, and I thought things had changed for the better but I didn't know there was time bomb lurking somewhere for me," I rubbed my forehead.

"If this is too difficult for you, you really don't have to say anything Jia," Chance said.

He was right but like I said earlier, I think it was actually time for me to talk about this with someone other than Sarah.

"It's not difficult for me to Chance. I'm just trying to gather my words. Anyways, that evening, as I worked in our bedroom and Ryan had his shower, his phone kept ringing and I kept telling him. He said he would get it when he was out. I thought it was work or something important so I just felt I could pick up the phone and put it on loudspeaker close to him. When I reached for the phone, it was a private caller ID, when I picked it up it was a female voice I heard and before I could even say anything she talked about how she missed my husband and he was avoiding her because of his wife," I paused.

"It felt like my entire world had crashed again but this time I was not surprised or shocked, I was just disappointed. I placed the phone on the bed and waited for him to come out. Then I asked him who she was and he said she was an intern at work. She wasn't even twenty. He was cheating on me with a nineteen-year-old. That was what did it for me. It was the last straw and so I told him I wanted a divorce. He thought I was

joking. I called my mother and told him he cheated again, I actually thought she would be angry just like me and demand I get a divorce and push Ryan out of my house but my mother told me expressly that she and my father wouldn't support me if I went through with the divorce."

"What? Their only child?"

"I thought she was bluffing then I told her she could take that as the last time I would ever speak to her or my dad if they chose not to support me and my mother said there was no problem. That was the last time I ever heard from her. My father never even tried to reach out. During the months it took to get the divorce finalized, they never reached out once. When the divorce was over and done, I packed all my things because I needed to start afresh somewhere nobody knew me and then I came to Clearwater. When I got here I destroyed my old lines and got all new ones and my life has been peaceful ever since," I paused "I met Sarah here so my life became chaotic a little," I chuckled as I said that last part because I was absolutely right.

Sarah brought life back into my life. It was like I met her at the time when I needed her the most and she supported me all through those dark times. I sighed, remembering that the both of us still weren't talking.

"I don't even know what to say," Chance started.

"You don't even have to say anything. It just feels really good that I finally got to talk about all of that after all these years."

“I’m sorry you had to go through all of that and I’m most sorry that your parents did you dirty like that.”

Yes, that was the word. They did me dirty. All through the divorce process, I had so many thoughts. I kept expecting my parents to call me and apologize but still to this day they never did, and I just kept asking myself if I was truly their biological daughter or they had adopted me because surely, they wouldn’t just treat me like this if I was their flesh and blood.

“But I do know one thing. You did the right thing in leaving your husband. A leopard never changes his spots. He was cheating on you multiple times. He didn’t even respect your marriage or the vows you two made to each other,” Chance said as I smiled with emotional pain.

He was saying the same things I thought. Ryan completely disrespected all the marriage vows we made to each other when we got married. How was I supposed to live with someone like that? He cheated once, he got caught, I forgave him. He cheated the second time and my parents expected me to forgive him. That would just give him more license to cheat and eventually I would become an unhappy crazy woman with a manipulative husband who knew for sure that whenever he cheated on me, all he has to do was apologize and send me gifts, or plan surprise dates and everything would be okay.

I didn’t want that kind of life for myself. And with the way my parents acted also made me question a lot of things about their own marriage.

Growing up, I thought my parents had the perfect kind of marriage but based on what my mother told me, I kind of began to have different thoughts.

Like did my mother also get cheated on by my father? And did she stay? Because she spoke to me like there wasn't a problem with men if they cheated as long as they fulfilled all their other duties. She made it look like I was overreacting and it was not actually a sin.

"I'm truly sorry you had to go through all of that," Chance told me as I smiled. "Well, as for me as soon as I left college and started working in the coast guard. I signed off women totally," he said as I laughed.

"Why?"

"Because I didn't think it would be nice to be in a relationship or married to anybody when I couldn't give my all go that person," he said and I nodded.

That made a lot of sense and as I watched Chance speak, I realized that Sarah was actually right. He was really intelligent and mature. His sense of reasoning was very commendable.

"The married men on my team with families, their wives always create a scene whenever they are leaving for shore. And I just told myself, I didn't want to do that to any woman until I retired and was sure my life wasn't at stake on the coast," he said.

"Those are very valid reasons," I told him as he nodded.



He took a sip of his coffee and looked at me, “I don’t know exactly where this leaves us but I’m grateful that you found me worthy enough to talk about your past with me,” Chance said.

“Stop talking like that. You’re making it sound like it’s such a big deal,” I told him.

“But it is. I know we have been saying we are friends but talking about all of this with you today just makes me feel like we are indeed friends and I’m super thankful,” he said as I smiled.

He was absolutely right. Now that we both talked about this, I felt like I had someone else on my team besides Sarah and it felt really good.

“Now that we are done with that, how are things with you and Sarah?” he asked me.

“We haven’t spoken for more than a week,” I said as he gasped.

“I can’t believe this,”

“What?”

“You two are totally unbelievable. Grown women acting like high school kids,” he laughed.

“Hey!” I hated the fact that he was actually right about this. The last time I didn’t talk to my friend this long was when I was in high school.

We were mature women, so why was it so difficult for us to talk this out. Well, in Sarah's defense she had tried many times to call me and she also texted but I never even returned any of her calls or replied her messages.

Chance was right. I remembered in that moment that I had Sarah's spare key which she had given me in case I needed to get anything from her house so I wouldn't have to wait for her. I checked the time and it was almost eight but lucky for me this morning, I only needed to be at work before one to deliver the paper work I was working on to Rachel.

So, I could use the spare key to get into Sarah's house and place her favorite flowers so when she got back from work, she could see that. It was a grand idea.

"Chance, can you drive me somewhere?" I asked Chance who nodded.

## Chapter 8

---

### **CHANCE**

Jia George was becoming even more interesting by the minute. I was so surprised when she pulled out a spare key to Sarah's house. We had stopped by the florist to pick up a bunch of white roses, which she said were Sarah's favorite flowers.

I just didn't understand women. They worked at the same place; she could just walk up to her and talk to her. It really was that easy but apparently Jia felt really bad and she wanted to make up for it in a grand way.

"Take a left turn right here," she said as began to turn the car. We drove past a few houses before Jia finally said "it's that house. You can park right there," I nodded and parked my truck right where she wanted me to.

Jia grabbed the bunch of roses and walked out of my truck. I closed the doors and walked right beside her.

“Remind me again why we are breaking and entering when you could just take these roses to the aquarium instead?” I asked her as she shook her head.

“It’s not breaking and entering if you have the keys to the house,” she said wiggling the key to Sarah’s house in front of me. We reached the front door and she quietly opened the door. She only closed it when she was sure that I had entered the house.

Based on the kind of person Sarah was, I wasn’t surprised that she had painted her entire living room yellow. Very weird sense of color but it suited her personality perfectly.

However, as we walked into the house, we were hearing actual human sounds. There was the movement of what seemed like a bed.

“I thought you said she would be at work,” I whispered to Jia.

“She is supposed to be,” Jia whispered back.

“Then who is in that room?” I asked as Jia shook her head. Maybe someone had broken into her house.

I pulled Jia solidly behind me as I walked towards the room where the movement was coming from. As soon as I reached to open the door of the room, the sounds had gotten even louder and it felt like a big object was being moved.

Whoever this burglar was, he was in trouble today.

I pushed open the door to see what was going on inside, but instead of meeting a burglar I met a naked Sarah who had her

hands and legs pinned to either side of her bed and a man with a whip in his hands.

“Holy shit!” I yelled stepping back. It was in that moment that Jia stepped forward and she screamed at the sight in front of her “Jesus,” she squealed.

“Oh my god Jia!” Sarah screamed and the man with her tried his best to cover himself and Sarah up, but it was a complete disaster. On instincts, I turned around and grabbed Jia with me to the living room

While Jia and I waited for Sarah and whoever the man she was with to come out to the living room, I was very uncomfortable and I wished to God that I could absolutely unsee what I had just seen.

I mean it wasn't my business whatever or however Sarah liked to be treated in the bedroom. I blamed Jia for bringing me here anyways.

“You said she would be at work,” I said to Jia who just shrugged her shoulders.

“She is supposed to be at work and I honestly don't even understand what she is doing here at this time,” she responded, and I was just about to say something when Sarah walked out dressed in a t-shirt and shorts.

She had a bright appearance on her face as she walked.

This woman was unbelievable. The man with her came out with her and I didn't miss the fact that they were holding hands.

Jia looked very confused.

“Well, good morning and I’m guessing we all have a lot of explaining to do,” Sarah said looking at Jia with narrowed eyes.

“If you’re insinuating that I broke into your house, that’s wrong. You gave me your spare keys in case of emergencies remember?” Jia said to her.

“And what was the emergency this morning?” Sarah asked her.

“I wanted to drop your favorite flowers here and apologize,” Jia said “and aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“I have the morning off,” Sarah said blankly.

There was complete silence for a while before Sarah said “Anyways, since we are all here. I’ve been meaning to introduce you both to each other,” Sarah said as she held his hands tighter.

“Jia, this is Oregon, my boyfriend. Oregon, meet Jia, my best friend,” Sarah said. “And that’s Chance, her friend and next-door neighbor. Chance this is Oregon.”

Since Jia didn’t say anything, I made a move to respond first,” it’s nice to meet you,” I told Oregon who smiled awkwardly.

“Pleasure to meet you too Chance,” he paused before turning his attention to Jia “It’s nice to finally meet you Jia. I’ve heard good things about you,” Oregon said to Jia.

“And I have heard nothing about you,” Jia said as I shut my eyes. Why did she have to say that?

“You would have if you haven’t been ignoring me for a whole week,” Sarah said.

“That was entirely your fault. You got me angry and you deserved the silent treatment,” Jia defended, “that doesn’t excuse the fact that you got a boyfriend and didn’t seem it fit to let me know.”

“You’re not my mother Jia,” Sarah rolled her eyes. “And you were the one who said I didn’t think, didn’t you? So, I didn’t think it was important to tell you,” Sarah finished.

Jia fell silent at Sarah’s words. I understood that when she found out that Sarah told me those things, she was angry but she shouldn’t have said that to her best friend.

“I’m sorry I said that. And if you noticed, I came here to apologize with your favorite flowers but since you’re so busy with your boyfriend, I’ll just leave,” Jia said as she stood up.

“Jia Elizabeth George,” Sarah called making Jia stop in her tracks.

So, Jia’s middle name was Elizabeth. This was getting really interesting as a small smirk played on my lips and I just leaned into the chair.

I knew Jia was bluffing, and she wasn’t going anywhere. Sarah wouldn’t let her leave either. That was a given and I was not going to stress myself with standing up and later having to sit back down.

I was already stressed enough this morning due to Jia, and right now I just wanted to go back home and rest. This was too much activity for me already.

“What is it?” Jia asked her turning around to look at her. It felt like I was watching the real-life version of the sitcom “Friends” right in front of me.

“I’m sorry too and I love the flowers.”

“I’m sorry,” Jia said as she hugged Sarah who hugged her back.

Women were really wonderful creatures. Because just look at this awesome display of drama. Assuming this was between me and one of my guy friends, we would have settled this a long time ago. They practically work in the same place and they saw each other every day for the last week, but they didn’t think to settle their arguments since then? I give it to women. They were really wonderful creatures.

After Jia and Sarah were finally done hugging, Sarah pulled back and said “well since all four of us are here and we have got the morning off. How about Jia makes us some of her famous pasta and we watch a movie?” Sarah asked.

Both Oregon and I nodded.

“I think that’s a great idea,” I said.

“Why would you put me on the spot like this?” Jia asked.

“You’re apologizing to me today, so you have to do what I want,” Sarah said to Jia with a bright smile and I just chuckled.



At this moment, the both of them didn't look like they were grownups at all. They were both acting like teenagers.

“Are they always like this?” Oregon whispered to me as I laughed. He was Sarah's boyfriend, and he was asking me this question?

“You're dating Sarah. You should know her bubbly personality more than anyone else,” I said.

“Yes, I do and I'm already used to it but seeing both of them together like this is just a whole new level,” Oregon said as I laughed.

He was absolutely right.

Whenever the two of them were together like this, it was always silent chaos. I couldn't remember the last time my life had been this eventful. Maybe moving back to Clearwater was not such a bad idea if it meant I got to be entertained like this from time to time.

“Wanna play a match on the PS?” Oregon asked me.

“Absolutely,” I said.

## **JIA**

“How could you?” I whispered to Sarah knowing that we were in the kitchen alone now. I really didn't understand how she could keep this from me for so long. “Is this the same guy you went on a date with?” I asked Sarah as she nodded.

Oh my god, this was way more serious than I thought because my best friend was almost blushing at the mention of

this guy.

“It’s been going on for almost a month now but he just asked me out officially the day after we argued. I wanted so much for you to be the first person to know, but you were ignoring me,” she narrowed her eyes at me as she opened the shelf in the kitchen and brought out all the ingredients, I needed to make the pasta.

“I was angry at you. You could have at least tried to talk to me by using gossip,” I said to her and Sarah just scoffed.

“I called you a million times the next morning but you didn’t answer, neither did you return my calls,” Sarah added.

She was right about that one though.

“And how come you got the morning off?” I asked her as Sarah laughed. I wondered what was so funny about my question because I didn’t understand why she was laughing.

“If I tell you how, you would be so surprised,” she said.

“How?” I asked her because now I was really interested in knowing why and how she got the morning off.

“On my way home yesterday, I ran into Rachel in the parking lot and she asked me what was going on with us,”

“She asked me the same thing too when she was barking orders down at me in her office.”

“And apparently she said it was affecting my work, so she told me to find a way to fix the situation between us and take the morning off if I needed, but to make sure that I returned

back to the aquarium talking to you again,” Sarah finished and this time, I was the one laughing.

“You know she told me to just come to work to return the paperwork she assigned to me,” I said.

“Maybe the both of us being there at the same time was giving the others chills and weird vibes so she devised this plan to give us the morning off.”

“Well thanks to her divine move, we finally stopped this silent treatment war between us. Anyways, what I really want to know is, how are things between you and Oregon so far?” I asked Sarah.

“The sex is great,” Sarah wiggled her brows as she said that and I felt like throwing up because she had just brought back the image of this morning when I walking into her room with Chance.

“You didn’t even have to say that because it just brings back graphic memories I would like to forget. I was asking about your relationship generally.”

“Okay this is so weird because the way you’re smiling is totally creeping me out,” I said as she laughed.

“I really can’t help it because I’m just so happy.”

I could see that truly; Sarah was happy and I honestly loved this for her. I really hoped and prayed that this relationship worked out. Of course, every man wasn’t like Ryan, Oregon wouldn’t do the same thing to Sarah that Ryan did to me and I was hoping that Sarah would remain happy like this.

We spent the rest of our time in the kitchen talking and cooking.

Breakfast was finally ready and while I arranged the food on the kitchen counter, Sarah offered to inform Oregon and Chance that food was ready.

As Oregon and Chance walked towards the counter, they kept talking and smiling like they had known each other for years which was very funny because they had only just met each other this morning.

Sarah had told me that Oregon was thirty-one, but seeing him walking side by side Chance, no one could really tell that he was six years older than Chance because Chance was really built. Anybody who saw them for the first time could easily assume that they were the same age.

“This smells so good,” Chance said as I placed his plate in front of him.

“I assure you when you taste it, you’ll be obsessed. Jia can cook pasta in her sleep. That’s how good she is,” Sarah smiled as I placed her plate in front of her and lastly mine was in front of me. Sarah had helped me with placing the juice and water in front of everybody as well as their glass cups.

“Wow, this is really good,” Oregon said as he took his first bite on the plate I had just set in front of him.

“See? I told you she’s the best at cooking pasta,” Sarah laughed as she ate.

“This is really good Jia, thank you,” Oregon added..

“You’re welcome,” I said with a smile and I watched from the corner of my eye as Chance pulled out his fork to have a taste of the pasta I had made. I don’t know why but it was kind of a big deal for me that Chance genuinely liked what I cooked and this morning was the first time in years that I had cooked for any man other than Ryan.

Ryan always praised my cooking and most times I thought that he always did it because I was his wife but now hearing Oregon actually talk good about my cooking, it made me happy.

Sarah was my best friend so it was easy for me to think that she might just have been sugar coating me.

I watched as Chance fed himself, and waited for him. I also tried to gauge his reaction as he ate. Sarah and Oregon were busy talking about something while I ate my own food.

I looked at Chance from the corner of my eye again and he was on his second fork of pasta. I smiled because that only meant one thing, he was actually enjoying it.

“I think good is actually an understatement,” Chance paused as he filled his mouth with another fill. “This is divine,” he said as I laughed.

Yay me! Now I truly believed that Sarah wasn't just gassing me up to get more pasta out of me, but she was actually telling the truth. For the rest of the morning all four of us ate and talked about the funniest things. And even the most general things. As I watched Sarah and Oregon talk to each other, there was some warmth in my chest. I think Oregon was good for my best friend so far so good.

But if he ever tried anything crazy, which I prayed he wouldn't, I would make sure I taught him a lesson. Even when I was in college, I didn't think I ever had gatherings like this. I was really invested in my books and I barely even had any friends.

The only person I conversed with was Ryan and that didn't exactly turn out great. So, this was actually the first time I was doing this and it felt really good.

For the first time since I got my divorce, I really was starting to feel like I finally fit in somewhere and it was a really great feeling. I looked at Chance and at Sarah and lastly Oregon, and hoped that things remained like this for as long as it could. Which was very ironic considering the fact that I had sworn off being close to any one after divorcing Ryan.

I guess this was the beginning of a great friendship.

## Chapter 9

---

### **CHANCE**

By the time we finished breakfast it was almost noon and I was already beat. I couldn't wait to get back home and just do my own thing.

It wasn't like I didn't like being around them and talking like this but there was only so much outdoor activity I could do in one day.

"Chance and I have to leave now. I don't want Rachel having another reason to show herself," Jia said to Sarah, and I was so thankful that she had said that. It was like she was reading my mind.

"You are absolutely right, it's almost twelve already," Sarah smiled "I should get ready too. See you at work?"

"Yes, see you," Jia responded as she stood up and I stood after her.



“It was really nice talking to you, Oregon,” I said to him, he was already standing and he took my hands in a small handshake.

“Likewise, man, one of these days, we should totally hang out and play more games,” he told me and I nodded.

Jia was about to say something when Sarah clapped both of her hands excitedly.

“Oh no,” Jia murmured.

“Is that bad?” I whispered to Jia referring to Sarah clapping her hands.

“She only does that when she has a crazy idea,” Jia said and I almost laughed because I think anybody who actually knew Sarah knew that she was a walking magnet of crazy ideas.

“How about we have a movie night tonight? It would be so nice. Come on guys think about it,” Sarah said as I rolled my eyes.

“I would be tired when I return from work,” Jia said.

“Come on, you said you’re going to work to drop the paperwork for Rachel and you would head out after. So that gives you enough time to get us snacks and set up your living room for movie night,” Sarah said to Jia.

“Wait, my house? Why are we using my house?” Jia asked.

“Cause it’s bigger, duh. And it’s even central. Oregon and I would come together. Chance is your next-door neighbor so it makes it easier for him to be there,” Sarah said as I scratched

the back of my neck and Jia just sighed. “Come on guys, it will be fun. I promise,” she added, holding on to Oregon who just looked confused and didn’t exactly know what to say in this situation.

Jia sighed and said “fine, I guess we could all meet by nine at my place,” she said as Sarah squealed

I knew Jia was only doing this as a way to make it up to Sarah. She was probably still feeling bad about the terrible things she said to Jia which was very understandable in my opinion and I thought it was really sweet that she was doing this. Although I knew after today, it would be completely impossible to get Jia to do anything like this again.

Completely impossible.

“See you all at nine. Oregon and I will bring the drinks,” Sarah offered as Jia smiled.

“You better,” she said directing that to Sarah before looking at Oregon “thank you so much for making my already bubbly and excited best friend much bubblier and more excited,” she told him.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you,” Oregon said to her as Jia nodded and then we said our goodbyes.

Once Jia and I were back in my truck, she sighed before laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I said hooking my seatbelt. I waited for her to hook hers in before starting the car engine.

“It’s just this entire morning has really been so eventful and awkward,” she said.

“Oh, please don’t remind me about that part,” I groaned as she laughed.

“I think all four of us handled the situation pretty well,” she said.

“But I don’t think I would be able to see Oregon or Sarah in a different light after that. Not after seeing both of them in their birthday suits,” I laughed shaking my head.

Jia continued laughing too as I started the car engine and drove us to our own neighborhood. It would take a lot of intentionality to completely blur that scene out of my memory and I also made a mental note to myself never to visit Sarah or anybody else for that matter unannounced. I didn’t think I had it in me to see another naked sight. It was too much for me.

“Thank you for helping me this morning,” Jia said with a smile after I parked my truck between my house and hers. “It was easier for me to finally apologize to Sarah and kind of admit my mistakes and errors because of you. So, thank you,” she finished.

I just smiled and looked at her. I could tell she was uncomfortable by the way I looked at her when she asked “what?”

“It’s just that compared to the first day I ran into you, you are different now,” I said to her as she looked at me like she

was trying to understand what I meant by her being different now.

“I think you’re more relaxed now. I wouldn’t say less guarded because I know how easy and fast it is for you to put your walls back up,” I teased as she laughed.

I was actually right. I liked the fact that Jia was doing her best to be more laid back now, but that didn’t change the fact that she could put back up her walls whenever she wanted to and that kind of scared me. In a way that I couldn’t quite explained, I liked this chill version of her and it would be such a shame to lose it.

“And I meant that in a good way,” I completed as she nodded.

“Since you meant that in a good way that I’ll take it as a compliment. I really should get going now so I can get ready for work,” she said as she unhooked the seatbelt and hopped out of the car. I stepped out of the driver’s seat and opened the door and walked to the other side so I could watch her walk into her house and lock the doors before going to mine.

Jia was already walking towards her door when she turned around, smiled at me and said “I’m glad you’re back,” before opening her door and shutting it behind her.

I didn’t think there was anything on earth that could wipe the wide smile on my face in that moment. How possible was it for just four words to have so much effect on a grown man?

I whistled happily and walked to my own door and opened it so I could get in. When I got in, I met Mark watching the news on the TV and Sandy was nowhere to be found.

Shoot! I had completely forgot that I left Sandy with Fluffy in Jia's house when we decided to go to Sarah's.

"Good morning," I greeted as I placed my car keys on the center table and took a seat beside Mark.

"Good morning. I thought you took Sandy out on a walk? Even though when I woke up, your car had disappeared too" he said.

I couldn't explain to my father just how crazy morning was, so I decided to give him a brief summary.

"I took him out for a walk this morning and then I met Jia. We got talking and she needed my help with something so I left Sandy with her while I drove her to where she needed to be with the truck," I told my father. It wasn't the entire truth and it wasn't a lie either so it was good enough.

"And is Jia, okay? Did anything serious happen?" my father asked worried about her.

I didn't know he had such a soft spot for Jia. Well, they had been neighbors' way before I came into the picture, so I guess that made sense.

"She's fine," I told my father. "I wanted to ask you something though."

"What's that?"

“When Jia first moved here, how was she?” I asked my father who sighed and looked to be in some thought before answering me.

“How would I put this? I don’t know but the first few months even the first year of living here, she seemed pretty confused” my father said as I chuckled.

“I think that happens to everyone when you move into a new place,” I said.

“No, hers was different and I remember your mother and I having that conversation. Your mother said she looked like her soul was lost. And you know your mother, when Jia first moved here, she baked her some cookies to welcome her. And when your mother came home that day, she said something like she was so sure she saw a tear slip out of Jia’s eyes but quickly wiped it away when she thought your mother wasn’t looking,” my father said as I nodded.

Based on what Jia told me about her mother and father, it must have been pretty emotional for her to receive something like that from my mother. Considering the fact that her parents had just freshly severed all ties with her, it makes sense that she would have gotten emotional.

“But when your mother was in the hospital, she said she felt better because the few times she had seen Jia, that she looked genuinely happy,” my father said with a small smile as I nodded

It was in times like this that I truly missed my mother. She was actually an angel in human form and she could see

through anybody when she wanted to. It was like a super power for her and she had the warmest and purest of hearts.

“Why do you ask though?”

“I was just curious,” I said as he nodded.

“You two seem to be getting closer,” my father said as I rolled my eyes. I hope he wasn’t insinuating something that wasn’t there.

“We are just friends, dad,” I told him.

“I know because she seemed to be really offended when I told her you left for work,” my father said as I chuckled.

“I left without telling her,”

“I know and that was terrible of you. I didn’t raise you to behave like that.”

“I apologized to her about it this morning and I only did that because I tried to talk to her the night before and she avoided me,” I told my father.

He just laughed and shook his head, “you kids always behave like you have all the time in the world. You think if I had the opportunity to spend just one more day with your mother, you think I would spend it not talking to her because she was avoiding me?” he said.

And I understood what he meant. We always thought like we had all the time in the world but in the real sense, life was fleeting. When I was still a young boy, I always thought my mother would be with me for a very long time.

I had thought that she would be alive to watch my children grow, to be a great grandmother to my kids, but alas life had other plans. It's foolish of any of us alive now to think that we had all the time in the world because life could come at anybody in an instant.

"Thank you for talking to me father but I'm so tired and I think I need to take a shower first. You had breakfast yet?" I asked him as he nodded.

"Made myself some oatmeal," he smiled.

"That's my man," I answered before walking upstairs so I could freshen up and work on a few things before movie night.

I laughed at the thought of that but somehow, I was thrilled for tonight and I hadn't felt like this in a long time.

This feeling was different and I liked it. It felt like finally being part of something. It was different from how I felt working at the coast. At the coast, I had teammates and we all worked together and protected each other at all costs, but this one was different. I didn't have to be calculative around Jia, Sarah and now Oregon. I mean I even loved how Oregon and I had instantly clicked. We even played video games.

I walked into my room and shut the door behind me as I stripped off my morning clothes and headed straight for the shower. After applying soap on my underarm, my hairs and every other part of my body that I needed to, I rinsed off my body and grabbed my white towel before walking out of my bathroom.



At first, I thought Sarah was crazy for even bringing up this movie night idea and I also thought Jia was crazier for accepting to do it; The more I thought about it, however, the more interested I got.

Since Oregon and Sarah had offered to bring snacks, I guess I could run by Publix and get a few drinks for us. It didn't hurt to have too many snacks and drinks. I smiled as I opened my closet and brought out clothes casual enough for me to wear.

## Chapter 10

---

### **JIA**

I was all smiles when I walked into the aquarium that afternoon. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders and I was so excited. I had my purse in one hand and my work bag in the other. Since I didn't come in today to work, I had opted to wear something more casual so I wore my bootcut blue jeans, a pair of brown sandals, and a black crop top that rested above my navel. I also had my shades on when I walked into the aquarium.

The first person I saw when I walked towards my desk was of course Sarah and she already looked exhausted.

“What happened to you?” I asked her as I took off my shades.

“I just finished being a tour guide and maleficent is already asking for a report,” she said as I laughed. By maleficent, she meant Rachel.

Kyle walked into the room and took in the scene in front of him. He was shocked to see Sarah and I talking to each other but at the same time, I could see the expression of relief that washed all over his face as he walked toward us.

“Oh, thank God. You two are talking away. This last week, I thought I was going to go crazy,” he said as Sarah and I laughed.

“Sorry for putting you through all of that stress,” I said to him.

“As long as you two promise never to do that again. Even if you’re not on speaking terms, leave it outside the office. Oh, my goodness, it was so frustrating,” Kyle said placing his hands on his chest.

“It won’t happen again,” Sarah sighed.

“And why do you look like you just got hit by a train?” Kyle asked her, adjusting his glasses so they could rest properly on his nose.

“A human train actually,” Sarah groaned as she dipped her hands through her hair and yelled “just kill me already!”

“What exactly is wrong with her?” Kyle asked me, but I just shrugged.

“I have to go and see Rachel, I’ll be back soon,” I said to Sarah.

“Goodluck,” she said to me as I nodded and walked away. Kyle was talking to Sarah as I left.

I knocked on the door when I reached Rachel's office.

"Come in," came her cold voice.

I took in deep breaths and walked in with a small smile.

"You're finally here? I told you to show up when you had the paper work done, but you took your sweet time," Rachel said not sparing me a glance as she typed on her computer. I was more than convinced this woman was actually a witch because how did she know it was me? "Hand me the paperwork," she said as I placed the paper work in her hand and waited for her approval.

She flipped through the pages, but even from the expression on her face as she checked it, I didn't know if she liked it or not because Rachel was always expressionless. You could never guess what was going on in her head.

"Based off of the fact that you literally started this twenty-four hours ago, this is really good," she said as I smiled and heaved a sigh of relief. I think this was the first time Rachel actually complimented me, and it felt really good. "I also think that you should be present when the investors come. It would be easier to have you pitch this since you worked on this," she said.

"You want me to pitch this?" I asked her, completely shocked.

"You don't think you can?" she asked me with a straight face.

I knew I could but this was just so surprising. I was genuinely so shocked that Rachel would give me this kind of opportunity. This was such a huge deal and I really didn't want to mess this up, and if I did Rachel would have my head.

"Of course, I can pitch this. I can," I said with a smile.

"The investors will be here forty-five minutes," Rachel added.

"What? Oh my god. I'm not properly dressed to pitch," I said to her as she looked at me from head to toes.

"I think you're fine. The investors understand that this isn't an entirely corporate entity, and staff is free to dress up in the way they are most comfortable, so logically you're dressed the part," she said as I nodded. "I will let you go so you can prepare for your first pitch, and Jia... I expect you to deliver," she said to me as I nodded.

"I will," I said walking out of her office.

This was the first time I actually walked out of Rachel's office happy and everything just felt really surreal to me.

"Oh, my goodness Sarah, Jia walked out of Rachel's office and she is actually smiling," Kyle said to Sarah who immediately looked at me.

"What happened in there?" Sarah asked me, while I was still trying to comprehend what happened.

"I will be pitching to the investors today. Rachel was impressed with the paper work and everything I put together

for the investors and she wants me to present it instead since I worked on it,” I said as Sarah squealed.

“Oh, my goodness! That’s huge. This is huge! Congratulations bestie,” she let out a squeal of joy.

“Congratulations. If anyone could actually get the great Rachel to bend her rules, it can only be you Jia,” Kyle said with a smile as I laughed.

But then, the nervousness was starting to kick in. The investors could be here any moment from now.

“Do any of you have a Xanax?” I asked.

“For what? Forget about those pills’ babe. You will do great. I believe in you,” Sarah said to me.

“And I believe in you too,” Kyle added as I smiled.

I was going to do great.

“You were amazing!” Sarah yelled as I walked out of the board room an hour later. She had lowered her voice down when saw the investors walk out behind me with Rachel in tow.

Rachel had a stern look on her face, as she walked out with a glare directed at Sarah. I just smiled and walked towards Sarah, and gracefully pulled away from there to another corner so we could talk.

“Did you see everything?” I asked Sarah. “God I was so nervous when I first walked in. The investors were so blank and at first it felt like I was defending a project that no one liked, but later they were all smiles. When they asked me all the questions, I answered everything,” As I hugged Sarah who hugged me back.

“I told you would do great and I never doubted you for second. Now we have two things to celebrate tonight. My best friend landed us a huge investment deal at the local aquarium,” Sarah said as she moved her body to no beat at all and I joined her.

The sound of a woman clearing her throat brought us back to reality and I turned around to see that it was Rachel. I took it that she had successfully walked the investors out and was here to talk to me.

“Don’t forget this is actually still a reputable building and you two should learn to behave yourself,” Rachel said to both

Sarah and I,” even though it’s well deserved because, Jia you did amazing in there.”

It took a while for both Sarah and me to process what Rachel had just said. And I was on a high because Rachel had just complimented me twice in a row today.

“I’m very proud of you and I know how hard you worked on this project. Well done,” she said, still maintaining her straight face as she turned around and walked to her office.

As Sarah and I watched Rachel’s retreating figure, the both of us were suddenly at a loss for words.

“Did she...” I started speaking but I couldn’t even complete my sentence as I looked at Sarah.

“Did she just say you did amazing in there?” Sarah completed the sentence for me.

“I guess she did,” I concluded as Sarah laughed.

“Oh, my goodness. Could today get anymore weird! Considering how it started,” she said that last part with her face turning bright red, and I instantly knew what she was referring to. Could Sarah be any more annoying? Why did she have to bring that up right now. Of all times?

“You are completely impossible and unhinged because I see no reason why you would even bring up that...occurrence,” I finished because I didn’t know the best word to use to describe that encounter, I had in her house this morning with Chance.

Sarah laughed “but then again, this is such a huge win and I’m so proud of you,” she said.



“I’m proud of me too,” I smiled.

It might have not looked like much but compared to how confused and lost I was when I moved to Clearwater a few years ago, it finally felt like I actually knew what I was doing, and it felt great.

Being proud of myself at this moment was actually a gross understatement. I was purely ecstatic and I felt like I could take on anything at this moment. That was exactly how fulfilled I felt. It had been a long time since I last felt like this and I was happy.

“Hope you haven’t forgotten you’re getting the snacks for tonight?” I asked Sarah, who rolled her eyes. She was looking at me like I was borderline crazy for even thinking she would forget about that.

“I brought up the idea for movie night and I offered to bring the snacks, so did you really think I would forget to do the one thing I promised?” she asked as I laughed.

“You know I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I was just making sure,” I said with a smile.

“Look who is suddenly excited for movie night. You and Chance looked at me like I had gone crazy this morning for even suggesting it,” she said jokingly.

“At that time, I didn’t know how great and sweet my afternoon would go and now I’m just really happy and I think it would be amazing to finish the day with the same people I started it with.”

“Let me guess; you’re happier to be around Chance right?” Sarah said to me with a knowing grin as I groaned.

“How many times do I have to tell you that Chance and I are just friends,” I reminded her.

“Babe, everybody started off being friends before they became boyfriend and girlfriend,” Sarah told me as I shook my head.

“Not Chance and I. You know that. Plus, I’m five years older than him,” I reminded her again because it seemed like she had forgotten about that.

“Jesus Christ Jia are we still on that? I thought I told you age is nothing but a number. Don’t let your happiness pass you by because you’re bothered about something as useless as the difference in age,” Sarah added.

“You are overthinking this thing, and it’s nothing like that. Chance and I are really just good friends. Nothing less, nothing more,” I said to her.

“Awwwww, you’re so delusional if you think that’s all there is to it,” Sarah teased me as I laughed. She wasn’t actually serious about this and I was already getting tired of explaining to her time after time that Chance and I are just friends.

“And this isn’t just a Chance thing Sarah. I’m not emotionally available to be in any kind of relationship,” I told her.

“Why?” she asked me and I just stared at her.

She knew why and I wasn't going to mention his name and dampen my happy spirits on a day like this.

"It's been almost five years since Ryan, Jia. You deserve to be happy," Sarah told me as I sighed. Did she actually just mention his name? Could Sarah be anymore oblivious to my feelings right now? Couldn't she at least read the room.

"Can we just stop talking about it please?" I said to her as she nodded.

She didn't say anything else about it as we both walked to our desks. I was grateful that she dropped the discussion already because I was actually on the edge of losing my temper, and I was sure Sarah noticed that too and that's the more reason why she didn't push it.

I loved Sarah to death and she meant the world to me but sometimes she really didn't know when to stop or how to read the room. And I didn't want to get angry at her and end up saying something I would regret. Today was a happy day and I needed it to remain like that for as long as possible.

I didn't want any negative energy between us, especially after the fight between us, we had just settled a few hours ago.

"I'm done for the day already. What about you?" I asked Sarah who groaned.

"Well, Rachel only complimented you. As for me, I have to send in this report to her before I go anywhere," Sarah replied.

I checked my wristwatch and it was almost three in the afternoon.

“You should be done here before six at the latest then,” I said to her.

“I guess so,” she responded.

“Alright. I gotta go. Love you,” I said to her as I grabbed my purse from my desk.

“Love you too and see you at ten,” she said to me.

“See ya,” I said as I walked out of the aquarium with a bright smile on my face that I just couldn’t get rid of.

## Chapter 11

---

### **JIA**

I walked back into my house that evening and found Sandy and Fluffy sleeping beside each other. I closed the door quietly and took off my sandals. I had completely forgotten that Chance left his dog here this morning. He would probably leave with Sandy after movie night, but I wasn't sure how Fluffy would take that because she seemed to have replaced me with Sandy already.

Well, that made the two of us because I also happened to be spending more time with the owner of Sandy these days. I dropped my purse and walked to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of cold water. The events of the day had taken my emotions on a rollercoaster but at the same time, I was thankful that everything played out the way it did.

Except for this morning at Sarah's house when I saw something I wasn't supposed to see. I had just finished my glass when the doorbell rang.

“Coming!” I yelled as I rushed to get it and I saw that it was Chance.

“Hey” he breathed, smiling at me.

I don’t know how I just realized now just how handsome Chance was. Wait what? How did I even get here?

I was completely in over my hand and I was probably going crazy. But then again, it wasn’t wrong of me to think that Chance was actually good looking. He was my friend and I’m sure he also thought I was beautiful too.

But wait, what if he didn’t think like that?

I closed my eyes and forced a smile on my face “Hey, movie night isn’t until ten.”

“I know. I need to get Sandy. I’m not sure he’s had anything to eat all day.” He said as I stepped aside so Chance could come in.

“I’m not sure Sandy is worried about eating right now because he’s all cuddled up and sleeping next to Fluffy,” I said as I shut the door.

“I had the feeling it would be impossible to get him out of here so easily,” Chance said as I laughed.

I was catching myself doing that a lot lately around Chance, laughing freely like I didn’t have a single care in the world.

What was this?

“A penny for your thoughts,” Chance asked me as I shook my head. He really didn’t want to know what I was thinking about because I wasn’t even sure I was supposed to be thinking

I needed to get a grip of myself and fast because what was with all of these thoughts running through my head right now?

This is Chance, Jia! I nagged myself in my head so I could get a grip of myself. This is the same person you found it difficult to even interact with at first because you knew he was too young for you, so where are all these thoughts coming from now?

I still absolutely felt the same way but I didn’t know why my brain and mind was saying one thing but my body was saying another.

I probably just needed to get laid by someone other than Chance and fast. But who?

My mind drifted off to Parker but that was nearly impossible. I didn't even have his cell number and after Sarah and I ran into him that day and I mouthed off about how I didn't hook up with the same men twice, I didn't even think he would be willing to go downtown again.

I resisted the urge to facepalm myself because I didn't understand why I was suddenly having all of these thoughts.

This wasn't good for my health and especially, not when I was around Chance.

Or maybe Sarah's words were finally getting to my head and I was already overthinking things. Or maybe it's because I had spent way too much time around Chance today and that's why I was starting to think nonsense and my body was acting out.

There was definitely a logical explanation for this.

"Anyways, how was work today? Did you finally hand in that paper and did your boss like it?" Chance asked me as I just stared at him for a second. I found it really touching that he asked me all these questions. He was actually concerned about my daily life. I couldn't remember the last time I talked about these things with anybody other than Sarah.

"Would you like some orange juice because a lot went down at work today and I'm about to tell you everything," I told him with a smile as he nodded.

"Yes, to the orange juice and everything," he said as I laughed and poured him some juice.



By the time I was finished with my story. Chance was clapping for me.

“Stop it,” I said suddenly shy that he was doing this. I mean, it was not even that big of a deal and he didn’t have to clap and make me feel so weird about it.

“First of all, congratulations on getting those investors locked in, and second of all I think Maleficent has a soft spot for you,” Chance said as I laughed.

Sarah had given Rachel the name Maleficent and now it actually felt like the name was sticking, and it was so weird because Rachel actually fit the role easily, but at the same time I didn’t want to get used to calling Rachel that and one day make the mistake of saying Maleficent at work. It would be such a complete horror story.

“I cannot believe you just called her that.”

“What? It’s actually really catchy and how does Sarah even come up with these things,” he asked as I shrugged.

I had no idea how Sarah did these things but it just made sense like the way Maleficent fit Rachel perfectly. I laughed as I remembered the stern look Rachel had given Sarah when she was screaming with excitement outside of the board room.

“But like I said, she has a soft spot for you,” Chance stated again.

“And what makes you say that?”

“She complimented you twice in one day. Almost like an hour apart and you just said she hardly ever says nice things to

anybody, so I think that's a pretty huge deal."

"But it still doesn't mean she has a soft spot for me. She might just like my work ethic," I said as Chance nodded.

I don't know why I was finding it so impossible that Rachel could actually have a soft spot for me. But based on the way she acted and related with people at the aquarium, I think the only people she could ever have a soft spot for on this life and the next after that was her new born baby and her husband.

I was extremely sure that even her husband was dealing with a lot from her.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Sandy stretching as he stood up from the floor.

“He’s probably hungry,” Chance stood up with his glass cup and walked to the sink.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I followed him attempting to grab the glass cup from him, but he wouldn’t let me. Instead, he just put on the tap and I already knew instantly what he was trying to do. He was about to rinse the cup.

“Chance, you don’t have to do that. Let me do it,” I said trying to take the cup away from him but he didn’t listen.

I just stomped my feet in frustration and pouted my lips.

“You look really cute when you do that,” Chance said out of nowhere with a grin on his face, and I could have sworn that I felt something move in my belly at his words. This was a feeling that I had even forgotten existed for me.

I was so surprised that Chance had awoken those feelings. All of a sudden, I didn’t know what to say so I just said “Since Sandy is awake already you should take him home so you can feed him. He must be really hungry,” as I said that, I walked far away from Chance because I didn’t like the way I was feeling after he said those words.

Chance rinsed off the cup thoroughly and placed it on the shelf before he walked towards Sandy and crouched down next to him as he ruffled his head.

“There’s my boy. Ready to eat?” Chance asked him as he held on to Sandy’s leash before turning around and looking at me with a smile on his face. “I’ll take him home now. Thank

you for the juice and congratulations once again,” he said to me as I opened the door for him. It was suddenly too hot in here for me and I needed Chance out of the house so I could take a cold shower.

“See you tonight,” he told me as he stepped out the door.

“See you tonight,” I responded as I closed the door behind me and raced upstairs to my room.

I really didn’t understand why or how I was feeling like this.

Immediately, I reached my room, I moved straight into my closet and opened the drawer that contained my lubricant and sex toys. My entire body was on fire and I needed to feel some sort of release.

I pulled out my self-thrusting dildo that I could attach to any surface and one of my bottles of lube. I quickly wiggled myself out of my jeans impatiently and tossed my panties on the floor. I grabbed the dildo and lubricant and walked into the bathroom. Then I placed it on the counter as I took off my shirt and black bra.

I walked into my bath tub and sat in it. There wasn’t any water as I rested on the dry ceramic with my legs spread wide.

I unclasped the bottle of lubricant and applied a little on the tip of the of the machine and placed it at my core before turning it on.

“Oh god!” I moaned. The lubricant that I placed on it made it easier for the dildo to thrust into me as I turned it on. The

machine was on the first mode, and it wasn't enough for me so I switched it to the second mode, and it felt like my entire body was on fire.

I touched my breasts as I remembered Chance's words over and over as the dildo thrust into me.

In a matter of seconds, I reached my climax.

This was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I had tried this a few days after my one-night stand with Parker, but even though I had sex with him and I was pleasuring myself with the image and memories of how the sex was, it had taken me a while to even climax. But I had reached my release in less than three minutes by just replaying Chance's comment in my head.

After my ragged breathing was even, I turned on the water and proceeded to take a bubble bath.

I hadn't felt this relaxed in a long time. What did I just do? Thinking about the way I rushed to my room as soon I closed the door, I just laughed at myself because if anybody had told me that I would end up in my bath tub this afternoon pleasuring myself by remembering an innocent comment that Chance had said to me I would have said it was a complete lie.

Wonders shall never cease because I didn't understand what had just happened here, but I liked it. But if I was doing this, did it mean that I was sexually attracted to Chance? I shook my head as I thought about this. I didn't think so. I couldn't be attracted to Chance and even if there was anything there. I would never act on it because I was fine with us being just

friends. Friendship was the only thing that I had to offer and it would stay that way.

This would just be my own little secret.

As my body was still reeling from the shock of Cumming so heavily in the shortest time, I smiled happily.

Maybe Chance was my remedy to reaching my climax sooner than I expected now, and he didn't even have to touch me. I smiled again because I knew that I was definitely going to try this again just to be sure that it was actually the thought of Chance that rocked me to my climax.

As I washed my body with my lavender body wash, I kind of felt terrible that I was reaching my climax by thinking of someone I viewed as my friend. But in the end, I really wasn't doing anything wrong, this would just be my own little secret. I would not even attempt to ever tell Sarah about this because if I did, she wouldn't allow me hear the last of it and eventually I wouldn't be surprised if it got to Oregon and lastly Chance. I would just die if Chance ever finds out that I pleasure myself by thinking about him.

I would totally lose it and almost die of shame.

## Chapter 12

---

### **CHANCE**

As I got dressed for movie night, I had a bright smile on my face. I had taken my time to take a cold shower with my favorite body wash. Afterwards, I looked through my closet for the right outfit for tonight. I became even more confused. I thought it was girls who had problems with playing dress up, so why was it difficult for me to actually just pick something out and wear it. I had never even been the type of guy to think twice before picking out an outfit so why was tonight different.

I finally settled on my navy-blue and green polo shirt, and my black pants. Since I was just going next door, I put on my black socks and my in-house grey slippers.

I applied my Aqua Gio Cologne and smiled. I guess I was finally ready to go next door for movie night. I also made a last-minute decision to grab my navy-blue beanie because I suspected that it would be cold outside.

When I arrived downstairs, I assumed my father was already asleep because the lights in his room were off. I already informed him that I would be at Jia's for movie night and if it was weird to him, he didn't make any comments.

I opened the fridge and took out the two bottles of red wine I had gotten at Publix earlier in the day. I was even more happy that I got the wine because Jia had something to celebrate tonight so it would be really great to do that over wine.

I grabbed the two bottles of red wine and placed them in a paper bag before I walked out of the front door and closed the door behind me. I made sure that my father had his own key with him before he went to bed tonight so I could lock the door with my own keys when I was going out. Also, just in case something happened and he needed to go outside, he would not be stranded.

I walked to Jia's front door and pressed the doorbell.

Jia opened the door with a bright smile. She looked so breathtaking and exceptionally happy tonight. She seemed to have a glow around her that she didn't have all day.

Interesting.

"You are early," she said with a smile and stepped aside so I could walk in.

"I wanted to be the first to get here so I could give this to you personally," I said to her as I handed her the paper bags that had the wine. "Just a little contribution from me tonight



and also, this is me telling you congratulations on landing the aquarium investment.”

Jia smiled at me and it stunned me just how beautiful she was in that moment. She was purely angelic and she really took my breath away.

“Thank you so much,” she smiled as she placed the bag on the kitchen counter and took out the two bottles of wine. She placed one in the fridge while she left the other on the kitchen counter.

She reached for her drawers and took out two wine glasses.

“You’re not thinking about drinking that right now, are you?” I asked her.

“Yes, I am,” she smiled.

“We are supposed to wait for Sarah and Oregon to get here first before drinking. We are all supposed to make a toast,” I said.

Jia laughed mad proceeded to place both glasses on the counter before uncorking the wine bottle.

“It’s at least forty-five minutes to ten the last time I checked and Sarah never comes early to anything. So, we could get started on just a little and they can join us when they get here,” Jia said as she popped the bottle. She squealed at the sound of the pop and I just laughed.

She poured a little portion of the wine in each glass before placing the bottle on the counter.

She handed me my glass which I took with a smile and we both raised our glasses to make a toast.

“To new beginnings,” Jia said with a smile.

“To friendships,” I added as both glasses hit each other with a clink and Jia and I took the first sip of our wine. Jia downed the whole glass in one gulp.

“Jia, that’s too much,” I said to her but she just rolled her eyes and placed the glass back on the counter.

“I can handle my liquor, Chance. It’s Sarah you should be worried about but then she has Oregon now,” she said chuckling.

Great. She could handle her liquor but here she was giggling like a little kid that just tasted candy for the first time.

“Let’s go sit down and talk while we wait for those two to get here,” I said to her as she nodded, but when she stepped down from the stool in front of the kitchen counter, she missed a step and thank God that I was fast enough to catch her just in time before she fell.

Jia are you good? As I held her waist with my hands and made sure she was okay.

“Chance, I am fine,” she told me and that’s when I realized just how dangerously close, we were right now. This was the first time I had been this up close to Jia. I could see the exact shade of brown her eyes were and her body was so soft under mine.

Her eyes searched mine as if she wanted to say something. She swallowed hard as she looked at my lips. I just needed to lean in a little bit and I could actually kiss her but did she want that? Wouldn't I ruin our friendship if I did that?

The door swung open. Thankfully for us, Jia and I were behind the door when it opened so it was easy for us to quickly pull away from each other and I immediately appeared in front of the door way to meet a very excited Sarah and Oregon.

“Who's ready for movie night?” Sarah squealed as she and Oregon walked in while I locked the door behind them. “What's wrong Jia? You looked flushed,” Sarah said to her friend.

“I'm okay.” Jia said with a smile.

“Oh my God, you two have been drinking wine?” Sarah gasped as she looked at the empty glass and the other half empty glass. “Chance, please don't tell me Jia drank the entire glass?” Sarah asked me as I nodded.

“She said she could hold down her liquor,” I defended.

“Not red wine! She gets really crazy whenever she has red wine,” Sarah said.

“Sarah,” Jia tried to step in.

“Why don't we all just sit in the living room and just unwind before we put on the movie?” Oregon chipped in.

The movie night hadn't even started yet and it was already chaotic. Worst of all, Sarah and Oregon had the worst timing in the world. I thought Jia said Sarah was always late.

Normal Jia would never even look at my lips the way she just did a few minutes ago. For the rest of the night. I did everything I could to avoid being close to Jia because I didn't know what to make out of what just happened between us and I didn't want to make anything awkward.

I valued our friendship too much to lose it over an almost kiss. I couldn't do that.

After the series of debates and fights, we finally decided to watch "Black Adam."

"Since nobody here has seen this movie and it stars my baby Dwayne Johnson, I think it's a good call," Sarah chipped in as I clicked on the movie so we could watch it.

"I thought I was your baby," Oregon said to Sarah who just chuckled and kissed her boyfriend lightly on his lips.

"Jealous much? Of course, you're my baby," she said as Oregon smiled.

"Could you two just please keep your hands away from each other for just two hours? I'm still scarred from this morning," Jia groaned and Sarah just looked at me with accusing eyes.

"What did I even do?" I asked her.

"You gave her wine and now she's starting to talk crazy," Sarah said.

“I’m not talking crazy, and stop talking about me like I’m not here,” Jia whined.

“The movie is starting now,” Oregon said as we all quieted down and faced the screen.

One hour thirty minutes later, and we were done with Black Adam. I think I saw Sarah shedding a tear or two. I really wished Oregon all the best in the world in handling Sarah because she was a handful.

“Before we leave, Jia please come help me out with something in the kitchen,” Sarah said as she pulled Jia up without even waiting for a response from her.

While the ladies were gone, Oregon and I also had small talk.

“How’s it going man?” I asked him as he just nodded.

“Great. And you?” he asked me as I smiled.

“It’s all good. I never got to ask you this morning because of how everything turned out but what do you do?” I really was trying to make small talk with him and I didn’t want this to be awkward in anyway.

“Oh, I’m an IT guy. A data analyst and I basically work from home,” he answered as I smiled. Sarah did good with this one because he was pretty intelligent.

“That’s great. I work for the Coast Guard.” I said with a smile.

“Wait for real? That’s crazy man. Where’s your base?” he asked me. I think he was the first person I was telling about my career who was actually genuinely excited and curious.

“I’m based in Mexico,” I responded.

“Wow. I think you’re the first man I’ve met who works in the Coast Guard. What’s it like?” he asked me, fully intrigued.

“It’s great, I was on base a week ago, I just arrived back here,” I said as Oregon nodded taking it all in.

“And I’m taking it you love what you do?” he asked me.

“Yes of course.”

“That’s great. When I told my father I wanted to become a data analyst a few years ago, he didn’t think it was such a good thing. Back then he wanted me to become a doctor but I knew that wasn’t for me. He also thought that there was no stability or large money inflow working as a data analyst,” he paused as he chuckled “but five years down the line and I’ve been able to buy my father a house. And I have never even stepped my feet in the four walls of an office building. I basically just work from home and I love what I do,” he said to me.

What he was saying was valid and I felt like he really understood me because he had also decided to do something unconventional in his career path so it just made perfect sense.

**JIA**

“Spill,” Jia whispered to me after she had forcefully dragged me into the kitchen. I had no idea what she was

talking about as I looked at her. “Jia, come on,” Sarah whined.

“I don’t understand what you actually want me to tell you and that’s why I haven’t said anything.”

Sarah rolled her eyes “I know something happened between you two and I probably interrupted a magical moment between you two plus have you noticed?” she asked as I sighed.

“Noticed what?” I asked.

“Chance has been looking everywhere else but you tonight. It’s almost like he’s scared to look at you,”

“And how did you notice that with your boyfriend by your side and watching your baby on screen,”

“Stop being so freaking sarcastic Jia and even if you don’t tell me now, you will later.”

“There’s absolutely nothing to tell Sarah. Before you and Oregon rudely interrupted us with your poor timing, I thought he was actually going to kiss me,” I made sure to lower my voice when I said that last part.

Sarah squealed and the boys actually looked at us to see what was going on, but I just smiled apologetically and hit Sarah playfully on her shoulder.

“I knew it! I just knew something would eventually go down between you two. Admit it Jia,” Sarah said to me.

“What?” I asked her.

“You are attracted to him,” she said to me as I rolled my eyes. I knew that was exactly what she was aiming for but I

had promised myself I would rather die than actually admit to Sarah that maybe, just maybe I found Chance attractive. I didn't want Sarah to rub in the whole I told you so thing in my face. I really wasn't ready for that.

"I am not," I answered.

"you're telling lies Jia. I know when you're telling lies,"

"I'm telling the truth and only the truth Sarah. Now the movie is over, could you and your boyfriend leave now? I really need to get some sleep," I said to her as she laughed.

"What a great way to change the topic Jia. Real smooth," she said to me and I couldn't help myself as I laughed. Sarah was really cracking me up this evening and I couldn't even help it.

I knew she was dying to know what really happened between Chance and I but I wasn't going to tell her anything especially when nothing was for sure yet.

I blamed my clumsiness on the wine and that was it.

When Sarah realized that I wasn't going to spill like she wanted me to, she groaned and pushed me aside so she could go back to the living room and I just followed her.

"Oregon baby, we are leaving because movie night is over," Sarah said and I actually chuckled.

Oregon got up from the chair and grabbed his coat with a small smile on his face and walked up to me.



“Thank you so much for letting me into your home. Movie night was amazing,” he said with a smile.

Again, Oregon seemed like a really good person and if he was honestly who he was indeed portraying himself to be then I was more than happy and relieved that my friend was actually in safe hands. I didn't have any reason to worry.

“Thank you so much for accepting my invitation as well,”

Sarah scoffed, “it's not like you wanted us here anyways,” Sarah piped in and I just rolled my eyes.

“Stop being such a kill joy,” I said to her.

“Whatever. Bye Chance. It was amazing as always seeing you,” Sarah said to Chance with a wide smile.

“It was nice seeing you too,” Chance said to Sarah before he and Oregon did their bro hug. I think when they did that both Sarah and I were shocked, and we actually looked at each other to be sure that we both saw the same thing.

“Bro hug?” I asked.

“You two just met each other like this morning,” Sarah added as I nodded. She was actually right and they were already bro hugging? Wow.

“We are men. We don't have problems,” Oregon said.

“Spot on man,” Chance chuckled.

“Unbelievable,” Sarah said as she and Oregon walked out of the house.

I shut the door behind them after they left, and it was once again just Chance and I.

“I’ll help you clear this place before going,” he said to me with a small smile and I nodded.

“Thank you so much,” I responded and for the rest of the night we walked in silent and only talked to each other when we needed to and there was some unspoken tension between us.

Chance’s phone rang and from the way he spoke, he became rigid. I could tell that it was a serious phone call based on how he was nodding and speaking.

“Yes sure, I would fly out first thing tomorrow morning,” he said.

Fly out? Was he being called out to base again? Didn’t he just come back like a week ago. I continued rinsing the cups like I didn’t hear anything until Chance was done with his conversation. He didn’t say anything after he ended the phone call but we just continued working in silence.

“Thank you very much for helping me clear up,” I told him when we finally successfully finished cleaning everywhere.

“It’s my pleasure,” he said and again there was this awkward tension in the air. I was hoping he would give me some clarity on his phone call earlier because I didn’t want to ask, I wanted him to tell me.

“I got a call from my superior while we were cleaning up. They want me at the base tomorrow so I have to take the first

flight out,” he said to me as I nodded.

“And how long is it going to take this time?” I asked him.

“I don’t know. Maybe a month or more, it sounded really serious and urgent,” he said to me.

“And you’re not going with your phone this time too, right?” I asked him and he nodded “Then how am I supposed to talk to you when you’re gone?” I don’t know when I said that but I didn’t regret saying it. I really enjoyed talking to Chance and having him gone for a month and possibly more, was a lot.

“Give me a pen and paper,” he said to me. I opened one of the drawers and took out the sticky notes I used for grocery shopping and the pen beside it and handed it to him.

“It’s for you. Write down your house phone number. I can only do land calls there,” he said to me.

I did as he said I wrote down my home phone number for him then I handed him the paper.

He smiled “your handwriting is beautiful,”

“Thank you,” I said to him with a small smile.

It was kind of annoying that he had go back to base tomorrow but at the same time, I think this distance between us would be good for me to clear my head because I think the lines between Chance and I was starting to blur and I didn’t know if I could handle that.

So, it was probably best that we had this time apart. At least it wouldn't be so crazy because we would be talking to each other unlike the last time he went when I couldn't communicate with him at all, this would be better and different. And right now, our friendship was much more solidified. I just hoped that he went and came back in one piece.

I couldn't even lie to myself; I was going to miss Chance terribly.

## Chapter 13

---

### **THREE WEEKS LATER**

#### **JIA**

“Get yourself out of bed Jia!” Sarah screamed at me as she ran up my stairs. It was a Sunday, and I was actually allowed to sleep in so I didn’t understand why Sarah was in my house.

It’s probably a dream, I’m definitely dreaming, I thought to myself as I placed my bed covers above my head only to have them removed and thrown off the bed to the ground.

I begrudgingly opened my eyes to see Sarah standing in front of me with both hands placed on either side of her hips like she was my mother and I was sleeping in on a school day.

“How did you get into my house?” I asked her.

“We both have spare keys remember?” ‘She said as I groaned.

I really needed to give her spare key back to her and she needed to give mine to me.

“Sarah, leave me alone. I want to sleep,” I said to her as I scooted over to the wall as a sort of cover, but Sarah just hissed and jumped on the bed next to me.

“I’ve been noticing you, Jia, and you can’t even lie to me this time. Since Chance left for base the only thing you have been doing is work and sleep and stay at home glued to your land line all day waiting for his call,” she said.

That was not entirely true. Sarah was the extrovert between the two of us. I only went out because she dragged me to go out, and my life pretty much revolves around going to the aquarium, coming back home and walking Fluffy. So, I didn’t understand what she meant by all the things she just said.

“That’s a lie,” I said to her, “and what are you even doing here? Isn’t it too early for you to be breaking and entering people’s homes?” I asked her.

“It’s not breaking and entering if I have a key. Come on Jia. Get your butt out of bed. It’s Sunday. Let’s go to the beach,” Sarah said to me.

The thing with Sarah that would never change was the fact that once she had an idea stuck in her head she wouldn’t stop until she executed it, and the worst part was, when that idea included me, I didn’t have any other choice but to go along with it even though I didn’t want to. She wasn’t going to stop until she had her way.

“It’s been so long since the two of us had a fun outdoor activity. Get your lazy ass up and let’s go to beach,” Sarah squealed.

And that’s exactly how I ended up dressed in a summer dress and a sky-blue bikini underneath my dress, and a summer hat with sunshades on in the passenger’s seat of Sarah’s car.

She had even played “Starships” by Nicki Minaj as she drove us to the beach because there was a line there that had to do with going to beach and Sarah kept repeating that line over and over again.

As for me, I wasn’t feeling the vibes Sarah was feeling yet, and I really just wanted to be in my bed right now but what could I do? Whatever Sarah wanted; Sarah got. And who knows, maybe getting some sun and seeing the water would actually do me some good because even though Sarah had a crazy way of communicating, she was actually not wrong on some things too.

I really had not done any outdoor activities since Chance left for base.

At least this time, Chance and I were still talking to each other almost every day. But I still missed him terribly and I didn’t want to admit that to Sarah. I would rather die than admit to Sarah that I actually missed Chance. I didn’t want to give her the perfect opportunity to mock me. Even though it was perfectly fine to miss Chance since he was my friend but I

also knew for sure that if I actually told Sarah I missed Chance, she would think it in terms of love and not friendship.

We finally arrived at the beach and Sarah was completely euphoric. This was definitely not the first time we were visiting the beach but this was the first time in a long time since we had actually been to the beach so I could understand her excitement. She parked her car and the both of us walked out.

I made sure that I applied sunscreen on my face before leaving my house and that didn't even stop me from placing it on my back because I was going to apply it on every part of my body the second Sarah and I found a place to sit. That was a given.

After Sarah and I walked in and we found a good spot to sit, she helped apply sunscreen on my back and I helped apply hers too. We had already ordered drinks and they arrived just in time.

Being here was actually great. The salty breeze and the waves from the ocean were everything,

Well... besides the sun.

"So, how's Chance?" Sarah asked me with a wink.

"I seriously don't understand why you winked because you really didn't have to," I said to her as she groaned.

"Why do you always have to rain on my parade? It's been three weeks since he left and you have been sulking because you obviously miss him," Sarah said.



How did she even know that?

“I have not been sulking,” I defended myself.

“But you do miss him,” she countered.

“We have been talking almost every day since he left. I think I’m good,” I said to her as she shook her head.

“When you want to stop living in denial, you know where to find me,” Sarah said.

“Why would you even think I’m living in denial because you keep making up stuff that doesn’t even exist,”

“Have you seen yourself since Chance left? No seriously Jia, all jokes aside right now. Have you seriously looked at yourself since Chance left?”

“What?”

“Every single day you come to work, you want to finish all of your work for the day and head home so you don’t miss talking to Chance when he calls.”

“He’s my friend,” I defended.

“And on the rare occasions when he doesn’t call the entire day, you come to work the next day looking like the world ended the night before.”

“Now you’re just exaggerating,” I scoffed.

“My point is Chance means more to you than you’re admitting, and I totally understand if you don’t want to talk to me about it because I can obviously be a handful sometimes,” she paused setting her hat well on herself before she continued

speaking again,” but I seriously hope that you do not let a past man who never deserved you get in the way of a happy future that could be waiting for you with Chance,” Sarah said.

“Even if I wanted to forget about Ryan and go for Chance, there is still the age factor. It’s an important thing I cannot overlook,” I said.

Sarah laughed, “are you even listening to yourself right now? Not to sound mean but I’m sure what I’m about to say would sound mean, either way, I’m just going to say it. Ryan was your age mate, look at what he did to you?” she said.

“That was such a low blow.”

“No, I’m trying to make you see that you are so desperately trying to get in the way of your own happiness by coming up with ridiculous excuses”

“An age difference is not a ridiculous excuse,”

“In this day and age it is. No matter how you try to deny this, I have seen you around Chance, you laugh and smile effortlessly. It doesn’t even look like there is an age gap between all of us when we talk. When I told Oregon Chance was twenty-five and he was six years older than Chance he said Chance was way more mature for his age.”

“And is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“It’s not but at least it supposed to knock some sense into your head and make you realize that maybe you have genuine romantic feelings for this man but you’re letting ridiculous reasons get in the way” Sarah said.

I sighed, “I’m just so afraid of getting hurt again Sarah,” I finally said. This was my constant fear. How could I open my heart again when I was so uncertain how this would go down? I seriously thought Ryan was the one for me. The perfect match made in heaven and look at how that turned out. I really didn’t have the strength to go through another heartbreak much less from a man younger than me. It would dampen my ego and my pride.

“Like you always tell me, you’re overthinking things. I just think that you’re analyzing things too much. Why don’t you just ease into it? Let yourself fall and see if he actually catches you,” what Sarah said reminded me of movie night. When I missed a step and Chance caught me even before I fell.

“That night, we almost kissed,” I said to Sarah.

“What night? Movie night?” she asked me.

“Yes,”

“I knew Oregon and I interrupted something. Oh, my goodness, I’m so sorry Sarah. I should have actually been late that night just so you could have gotten some action,” she winked as I laughed.

“I think he was scared to do it. Like maybe he thought I wouldn’t want it.”

“Did you want it?”

“At that moment, I think if he had actually kissed me, I wouldn’t have stopped him,”

“So, you’re finally agreeing with me that there is actually a spark there?” Sarah asked me as I nodded “oh my goodness, I really can’t wait for Chance to return and see how all of this finally unfolds,” Sarah said.

“I don’t need you playing matchmaker and I didn’t tell you any of this just so you could run your mouth the next time you see Chance,” I said to Sarah who pouted “I’m serious Sarah,” I warned you. “Fine. My goodness, you make it seem like I cannot even keep one secret,” she said to me as I narrowed my eyes and gave her a look that asked really? She just groaned and said nothing for the rest of the day.

While Sarah and I were sunbathing, we were so lost in our conversation that we didn’t notice when someone walked up to us. We both looked up to see who it was and I was so surprised when I saw Parker.

This dude seriously had a way of appearing before me in the most unpredictable ways.

He was dressed in only beach shorts and his body looked amazing under the sun.

“Hey ladies. Nice to meet you here,” Parker said to Sarah and me but his eyes were mainly on me.

It seemed like he didn’t get the message the last time we met that I didn’t do the same men twice.

“Isn’t it funny how we always meet at the weirdest places?” he said to me with a smile.

“I was actually just thinking the same thing,” I said.

“It’s nice to see you again Parker and I never really got to thank you for clearing the bills the other day,” Sarah said with a smile.

“It’s nothing. I was just walking to the bathroom,” he said that part looking at me and I understood what he meant even if I didn’t want to. He was giving me an invitation. Was I going to take it? “And then I saw you ladies and I decided to just stop by and say hello. I hope you’re enjoying your afternoon?” he asked.

“Yes, we are. Thank you for stopping by,” Sarah said.

“I guess till I bump into you next time again,” he told me as he smirked at me before walking away.

I knew where he was headed to and I was so tempted to follow him. I don’t know maybe I needed to get Chance out of my system and I probably needed a good fuck for that to happen. Parker was more than willing to give that to me and meeting him here was not just a coincidence.

“Damn, I think I’m starting to feel the effect of the coconut milk. I have to use the ladies,” I told Sarah who was already half asleep. She just nodded and I didn’t waste any time in wearing my sandals and walking off in the same direction as Parker.

When I arrived at the toilet entrance, I yelled when I got jerked to the men’s room. Parker looked at me with a grin on his face as he covered my mouth. He held me firmly and placed me behind him before he placed the out of order signpost in front of the bathroom.

What this meant was we had a couple minutes of alone time together.

“I didn’t think you would actually come or even take the hint,” he said to me finally taking his hands away from my lips.

“I guess I just needed to get laid,” I said as he smiled and crashed his lips on mine. I was soaking wet already and I just needed him to fuck me. I ached and I desperately and badly needed him to fuck Chance out of my system. As Parker kissed me, he lifted me off the ground and placed me on the sink as he slid my bathing suit bottoms to the side and dipped one finger into me. I moaned and rested my head on the mirror as he lazily plunged his hands in and out of my pussy.

Would I react this way if Chance was doing this to me? I thought to myself as Parker touched me. Why was I even thinking about Chance in a time like this.

Parker smiled at me before spreading my legs wide before him and I knew what was coming already before he knelt down in front of me and placed his face between my legs. He was going to eat me out as he was fucking me with his hands.

I gripped his ears as his tongue touched my swollen nub and my body immediately jerked in response.

Was Chance also this good with his mouth? I wondered if Chance was even better than Parker when he did this. I was thinking about Chance again.

Damn. This wasn't working like I thought it would. I gripped Parker's Hair so he could suck on me harder and maybe as I drifted into oblivion, I would not think about Chance anymore.

Unfortunately, the harder Parker sucked and finger fucked me, the more I thought about Chance.

I couldn't do this. This was not actually working. Besides from the fact that I was making out with Parker and my thoughts were solely focused on another man, it felt like I was actually cheating on Chance. I don't know why but it just felt like that.

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was an image of Chance smiling at me. Who was I kidding?

"Parker," I called as I tried to close my legs to get him to stop. He must have thought I was moaning his name because he didn't stop what he was doing. "Parker, you have to stop right now," I said and that finally caught his attention. He looked at me with a shocked look like he couldn't believe I had just stopped him.

"What's wrong? Did I do something wrong?" he said and I just shook my head.

This was not about him. It was about me and the fact that I had tried to use him to forget about Chance for a second and it didn't work.

I hated to say this but Sarah was absolutely right and I had feelings for Chance.

## Chapter 14

---

### **CHANCE**

I smiled as I walked out of the airport straight into my cab. Jia has no idea I was coming home today and I was going to surprise her.

Also, I was finally ready to let her know that I loved her. I knew that it was a long shot and she would probably ask me to never to talk to her again but the month we spent apart actually helped me put a lot of things into perspective. I knew the only reason why she didn't want to let anybody into her heart was because she was still scared and hurt from her first marriage. I just really needed her to see that I was for real and I would never cheat on her.

In a way, I had always run away from love because I felt like I could never give my all to a girlfriend, or even a wife. But I realized that for Jia, I was willing to do anything, and that's why my superior was very surprised when I handed him my letter to be exempted.



Damon looked at me with a stunned expression on his face as he read the letter I had placed on his desk. The thing with working as a coast guard was that it was not a lifelong commitment until you retired. I had thought I would be there until I retired because there wasn't much for me out there but after losing my mother and finding Jia, I knew for sure that I just wanted to lead a simple and quiet life in Clearwater with Mark and build my own family with Jia as my wife if she would actually have me.

“Are you sure about this,” Damon asked me as I nodded.

“Yes sir,” I responded.

“Is there anything serious going on? When your mother died, I expected you to hand in this letter but you didn't. And you're now doing it almost three months after she passed,” Damon said as I smiled.

My mother's death was the catharsis. It was the single occurrence that led me to where I was right now. No matter how much I thought about it, and how much I missed my mother, my father was right about her. She was an angel and even in her death she was still making divine moves.

“I think it's time for me to settle down and I have never wanted to get married on the job,” I told him as he nodded.

“Fair enough Chance. You have served and you have served well. It's going to take a while to get used to you not being around here but I'm sure we will manage,” Damon said to me as I smiled.

The cab driver asked me for my location as I got into the cab was what brought back to my present moment. I told him my home address as I held on to my bags. I was completely excited to see Jia. It felt like I hadn't seen her in years.

When the cab driver pulled into my neighborhood, I was completely anxious. This has never happened to me and it was astonishing the kind of power Jia had over me. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before. The driver parked in front of my house and I gave him his money as I walked out.

I knew there was no way Jia would actually be at work and I confirmed it when I saw her car in the drive way. But I wasn't ready to talk to her yet, I needed to head into the house and freshen up before I knocked on her door.

When I opened the door and stepped into the house, Sandy was the first to pounce on me as he licked my face. I laughed as I held him close to me "I missed you too buddy," I said as I heard footsteps. I looked up to see my father.

"Dad," I said as I hugged him. My father patted me on the back.

"You did well my boy. I'm so proud of you," he said to me as I nodded.

He was the only one I had told about my decision to leave the coast guard and start afresh in Clearwater. I had actually saved up enough to start up something of my own but I just wasn't sure what exactly I wanted to do yet but I knew in time, I would figure it out.

“I would like to go to my room and freshen up a bit then when I’m downstairs, there is something I need to talk to you about,” I told my father who just smiled at me.

“Sure, no problem. I’ll be down here,” he said to me.

By the time I finally finished taking my shower and was sure that I was clean enough, I put on my grey sweat pants and black t-shirt and joined my father downstairs.

“That was a quick shower,” he teased me.

He was actually right. I wanted to have this conversation with my father as fast as I could and also get his blessings on this before I finally talked to Jia.

“I’m kind of anxious,” I chuckled.

“That’s a new one. What’s going on my boy?” he asked me.

“I’m going to ask Jia to marry me,” I said in one breath. I didn’t know what I expected Mark to say but I definitely didn’t expect him to laugh at me. Like he full on broke out into laughter.x

“Why are you laughing?” I asked him.

“I knew from the very first day you spoke about her that there was something there. I also had a feeling you were going to talk to me about this when you got home. So, I wasn’t wrong,” my father said as I let out a sigh of relief that I didn’t even know I had been holding.

“So, what do you think?” I asked him.

“Hold on for a second,” he said before getting up from his chair. He walked into his room and I heard him open some drawers before he walked out.

“I knew this day would eventually come and your mother knew that too so she made sure I kept this for you. I couldn’t be happier that you’ve decided to do this with Jia,” he said as he handed me a velvet red jewelry box. I opened the box to see that it was the diamond ring he had given my mother when he proposed to her.

“She said she wanted your wife to have this. It would be her gift to her,” my father said as his eyes got glossy as he spoke.

I held the box close and I instantly thought of my mother and how much she loved this ring.

“You already know I would always support you in whatever you do. And on this one my boy, you have my blessings. Go get your girl,” my father said as I laughed. I glanced at the clock and it was just a few minutes to six.

Today was a Sunday so I was extremely sure that Jia would be home.

“I just hope she doesn’t reject my heart,” I said to my father.

“She would be completely blind to do that to you,” my father chuckled as I stood up from the chair and walked to the door. “Come back in here with my daughter in law” he said to me as I nodded.

**JIA**

When Sarah parked in front of my house and I walked out of her car, I was completely furious.

After my make out session with Parker that went wrong, I had actually confided in her about it in the car on our way back home and she had totally condemned me. Which was very painful and hurtful because I had never condemned her.

“You are only angry because you know I’m telling the truth,” Sarah said to me with my back faced to her. I couldn’t even stand the sight of her right now. “You shouldn’t have done that. It was wrong.”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with what I did considering the fact that I’m not even dating Chance,” I said fishing for my keys in my purse so I could enter my house and shut the door behind me.

“But you said it yourself that it just felt off. You tried to have sex with someone else and all you kept thinking about was Chance. Then why did you even do it?” Sarah asked me as I became more and more agitated because I couldn’t find my keys in this bag. I had placed a lot of things in here so it was difficult for me to get it out.

“Because I wanted to get him out of my system, God damnit! I need to get Chance out of my system alright and that’s why I tried to have sex with Parker today,” I said as I finally found my keys. I had just inserted them in the keyhole when I heard Sarah gasp right before she said “Chance?” like she was asking a question.

“Are you deaf or something Sarah?” I asked her as I turned around and my eyes immediately widened like saucers.

Chance was right there beside her. It wasn't even the fact that he had just heard everything I just said, but the expression on his face that broke me. He had heard everything I just said.

“Chance,” I breathed out as my purse fell to the ground.

“You shouldn't have stopped since you so badly wanted to get me out of your system,” he said and I felt my heart break into two at his words. He turned around and walked away from me before I could say anything else.

“Go after him Jia. I will take care of your things,” Sarah said to me as I raced after Chance.

“Chance! Chance, wait a minute. Chance please just give me a second to explain,” I called after him. He had already reached the front door of his house when he turned around to look at me and I swear I could see tears brimming in his eyes. My heart broke all over again, knowing that I was the cause of the pained expression on his face.

“I was gone for one month! One fucking month Jia and you wanted to have sex with the next available man,” he said.

“That's not it,” I said, shaking my head. He was completely misunderstanding everything.

“Then what is it? Jia, you could have just waited for me to come and we would have talked about everything. You fucking know how I feel about you!,” he yelled.

I couldn't believe we were actually having this conversation like this out in the open and I was at a complete loss for words. I didn't even know what to say as I looked at him. I put my fingers through my hair and asked him, "what exactly do you feel for me?"

Chance scoffed like I was asking him the most ridiculous question ever. I really needed him to break it down for me because the last time I checked we were friends. With no form of strings attached so why was he even angry that I made out with someone else and why was I even chasing after him and trying to get him to understand me.

"Yes, tell me Chance. What exactly do you feel for me because I really don't understand why you are mad at me for making out with another man when it's not like you ever confessed your feelings for me. We are just friends," I said to him.

"Just friends? Jia, the only reason I agreed to be just friends with you was because I didn't want to lose you both ways. You went on and on about how you were five years older than me and it was more than absolutely clear that you didn't even want to be romantically involved with me from the get go. So, I settled for friendship knowing fully well that I wanted more!" He said to me.

"You wanted more? Then why didn't you ever say anything?!"

"You never made me feel like you wanted me to. At the movie night? I felt something and I was sure you felt it too but

then Sarah said when you had wine you always acted crazy. So, I blamed that magical moment between us on the wine.”

“That was not the wine.”

“Oh, what use is all of this information now anyway? You left me all alone here for a month!” I yelled.

“I had to go and work Jia! I did not leave you because I wanted to. Every moment I spent away from you killed me but I never once imagined that you would so desperately want me out of your system that you would hook up with the first random guy you meet,”

“I didn’t even do anything with him!” I yelled again.

“That’s not what Sarah said.”

“Well, who are you going to believe Sarah or me?! Chance, do you know how crazy I have been feeling for the last month? I started feeling things I thought I had buried deep within me. I thought I didn’t have it in me to feel butterflies anymore but every single time we talked on the phone. I felt those butterflies and, on the days, when we couldn’t talk, I sulked for the entire day! Do you know how scared I was to be feeling all of these things again?”

“I am not your ex! And I would never hurt you Jia. The only reason why I stepped back all this time was because I knew you would reject my feelings for you if I ever mentioned it because of your ex but for how long Jia? How long are you going to keep letting the past get in the way of your happiness? When will you realize that I am crazy in love with



you and I'm right here?! I left my job. I left everything because I want to start a new life, fresh with you,"

"You left your job?" I asked him. He couldn't possibly be serious. I resigned. "You resigned?"

"Yes. I resigned because I was finally done playing this game of hide and seek with you and I came here with a mission. To make you mine," he said as I gasped.

"It's not that easy," I said to him.

"That explains why you tried to get me out of your system by hooking up with another man but how exactly did that work out for you?" he asked me.

"Fine! I admit that was a stupid idea and I regretted it instantly. So, what would you have me do?" I asked him as he shook his head.

"I want you to stop running away from your feelings and actually acknowledge it!"

"I don't want to get hurt," I said.

"Jia, I'm also taking a risk in this. I have never ever in my life been in love with a woman. I have never in my life thought that I would meet a woman who would make me quit my job and want to start a family with her. I am fucking scared too Jia," he told me as I broke into tears.

This was all so surreal for me and my feelings for Chance had actually snuck up on me when I least expected it. I had actually fallen in love with Chance. I had been in love with him all this time and I was just too stubborn to admit it. Even

Sarah could see it and every time she tried to bring it up, I always dismissed her because I was actually too scared to admit that I had feelings for him.

I didn't want to get hurt again.

"I'm taking a goddamn risk but I am choosing you in the midst of it all. I am not your ex and I know that I would never hurt you the way that he did. I will beg and pray to God every day to teach me to love you right. I love you so much Jia George, more than you could ever know and the thought of you being with another man drives me completely insane," he chuckled running his hands through his hair," the thought of it alone makes me want to kill that guy," Chance said and before he said anything else. I damned all the consequences and pulled him close to me as I kissed him.

I kissed Chance like my entire life depended on it. And when Chance finally kissed me back, it felt like I could breathe. This was nothing like I had ever felt before and the butterflies that erupted in my belly felt like a thousand. Chance smiled as he kissed me and lifted me up as he twirled me and I laughed as I held him closer.

I felt like I was finally home. I felt complete in his arms. As Chance held me, I knew that indeed he was mine and I was his.

"Promise me you will never ever let another man touch you like this," he said to me.

"Never," I answered him as he laughed.

“God, you drive me crazy Jia George and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said as I laughed “I love you,” he told me.

“I love you too,” I responded as he kissed me again and again.

## Chapter 15

---

### EPILOGUE

#### JIA

Sarah fussed with the hem of her tiara as I tried to keep her in place, but she kept talking and talking. This was the second time I was fixing this tiara on her head, but she kept messing it up every single time.

“I promise you Sarah, if you don’t stay put, I will abandon this tiara on your head and you’ll walk down the aisle looking like a mess,” I warned Sarah as she just scoffed.

“You wouldn’t dare sabotage your best friend’s wedding,” she said to me as I shook my head.

Sometimes Sarah really underrated me.

“Don’t underestimate the power of a pregnant woman,” I said to Sarah who just laughed.

“Look at that,” Sarah teased me as I laughed.

The diamond ring Chance gave me when he asked me to marry him shone on the fourth finger of my left hand as I fixed her tiara. It was still funny that Chance and I had been married for almost two years already.

We were both expecting our first child and I was ten weeks in already. Chance and I had a small court wedding, with just his father, Sarah, and Oregon in attendance. It was the perfect way to seal our love story, and just like that day I was watching Sarah get married to the love of her life, Oregon. I was really proud of Oregon, he had managed her craziness for almost three years now and if he could manage that, then he was equipped to take on anything in the world.

But unlike me, Sarah wanted a really elaborate wedding and lucky for her, Oregon had the money to give her the wedding of her dreams. It was the entire talk of Clearwater, the wedding of the year. My best friend's wedding.

I finally fixed the tiara on her head.

“There. Perfect,” I smiled at her as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

“I can't believe I'm actually getting married today. It still feels like a dream,” she told me.

“Any moment from now you would walk down the aisle Sarah,” I said to her, and I could not help my eyes as they watered. “Oh, damn these pregnancy hormones,” I said as Sarah shook her head.

“You really shouldn’t cry because if you cry then I’ll cry too and I don’t want to cry,” Sarah said as I laughed.

We were such a mess but that was the beauty of our friendship. We balanced each other out and I was truly grateful for this gift of sisterhood.

Sarah was there to give me the push I needed every single time and especially with Chance. She was one of the first cheerleaders of our relationship.

“I want you to know that I’m so proud of you Sarah. You have been an amazing best friend and I have no doubt that you would make an amazing wife and mother to your future kids. I can’t wait to see all the mini-Sarah’s in the nearest future,” I said as she laughed.

“My kids would give you a headache,” she said as I laughed.

There was a knock on the door in that second and the door opened to reveal my husband dressed in a three-piece tuxedo. He looked just as dashing as the first day I had Bumped into him when I took Fluffy out for a morning walk.

In a way, Fluffy and Sandy was also one of the reasons why Chance and I got our love story.

“The bride needs to be out now,” Chance said with a smile as I helped Sarah up from her seat.

“Thank you, Chance,” Sarah said to him as he nodded with a bright smile.

“You look beautiful Sarah,” he said to her  
“Congratulations,” Chance said to her as Sarah smiled.

“Thank you so much,” she said.

As Sarah walked out of the dressing room with me following closely behind her, Chance pulled me back so he could whisper something into my ear.

“I’m supposed to go outside with her you know”. I said to my husband as he laughed.

“I just need to say something to my wife before she leaves.”

“And what’s that?” I said with a smile even though I knew for sure what he was about to say. I could never get tired of hearing Chance say the sweetest words to me. It was like medicine to my soul and it calmed my heart in the most beautiful ways. Even now, I was absolutely and crazy in love with Chance and I adored him.

He was just heaven sent to me. Like a consolation and the greatest prize for all the pain I had to endure in life before him.

“Two years now, and you take my breath away every single moment and you’re still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid my eyes on,” he said to me as I smiled.

I laughed as I looked lovingly into his eyes. Even after all these years, he had never for once made me sad or hurt. He was the best husband I could have ever asked for and I was grateful that God sent him my way. He was the best husband to me, and I was also certain that he would be the very best father to my children.

“I love you so much Chance,” I said to him as he leaned in to place a kiss that sent butterflies erupting in my belly.

“And I love you too Jia George,” he smiled.

“It’s Jia Miller now,” I smiled and before Chance could say anything else, Sarah’s voice filled the air,” Chance! Let go of my best friend this instant,” she said as I laughed.

We don’t want an angry bride now, do we? In the end, everything worked out for the greater good.



## Chapter 16

---

The End.

**Did you like this book?**

**Then you'll LOVE Hot Shot Next Door on Amazon**  
**<https://a.co/d/4vhFNw4>**

## **A Resignation Letter, Wine Shop, and a Hot Shot Second Chance Love. FML.**

I had a plan: Move back to my hometown, open a wine shop. Live a simple life.

I was on track for this until my gorgeous High school sweetheart decided to show up at my wine boutique and my life plan went up in smoke... He's hard to resist. A Hot Shot Crew member with Big muscles that saves lives... Um yes please, but it's complicated.

He wants me back, but I'm guarded, insecure and his closeness gives me anxiety. All I have to do is love him. Easy right? But nobody told me Nathan Boone and I would have to jump through fire to achieve it. Everything starts out wonderful...until I get news from my doctor of a health concern. Then there's his dangerous career.

Cue major hyperventilation.

But it's okay. He's used to putting out our relationship fires. Sparks re-ignite making it possible we could be together, but where there's smoke there's fire. Is a second chance even possible for us or will our flame be extinguished....