



**CRUISING**  
*Future*  
**FATHER-IN-LAW**

**CLAY WALKER**

a taboo mm first-time age-gap romance

Book 1 in "My Future Father-in-Law" Series

*cruising future father-in-law*

BOOK 1 IN "MY FUTURE FATHER-IN-LAW"

# CLAY WALKER



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**August:**

Men. I didn't know I was interested until I met Pierce Cloud. Rugged, rich, adventurous, masculine as hell—he's everything I didn't know I craved.

But he's my fiancée's father. Off-limits.

If only we didn't need him to fund the wedding, then I might be able to say no when he asks us to join him for a seven-day Caribbean cruise.

I'm not sure I can handle being on a small ship in the middle of the ocean with Pierce in such close proximity. He's my future father-in-law... so why do I get the feeling he's about to turn my life, and my sexuality, inside out?

**Pierce:**

I don't do settling down. That's why my daughter and I have our arrangement: I fund her life, and we both get to do what we want. I thought she took after me, until I get the news she's getting married.

From the moment I meet August Taylor, I know something isn't right. He looks at me like he wants to see me naked, and hell if I don't feel the same way: His dark beard, the hint of a tattoo under his suit-jacket sleeve...

More than that, though, I get the feeling August is hiding something, and I'm determined to figure out what, before he seals the deal with my daughter. So I invite them both on a seven-day Caribbean cruise, free of charge.

When August and I start cruising *each other* instead of the ocean, it's clear something has sparked between us. But just how far can we take it before the truth comes out?

From New York City to Cozumel, Jamaica and back again, *Cruising Future Father-in-Law* is a contemporary m/m romance that is full of taboo sex, steam, and true love despite crazy—and sometimes, very awkward—odds.

*MM / Taboo / Age Gap / First Time / Straight to Gay*

# PART ONE

*the look*

ONE

*august*

WHEN I FIRST LAID EYES ON my future father-in-law, Chrissy and I were arguing about paint samples. I set the paint tile on the restaurant table and scooted it to her like this was a card game. “Obviously,” I said, “he’s just late.”

The waiter came over, refilled both our glasses with ice-water. She looked between us, silently asking if we needed anything else.

After an awkward pause, I said, “I think we’re good. Thank you.”

She left, flashing us one of those service smiles that didn’t reach her eyes.

“He just usually texts this sort of thing,” Chrissy said, checking her phone.

I had to laugh.

“What?” she asked, scowling.

“Do you think it’s changed in the last thirty seconds?”

“No,” she said, “I just...”

“You’re worried. But—look...” I reached across the paint tiles and took both her hands in mine. “It’s all going to be *fine*.”

But inside I couldn’t have felt worse.

Nerves were writhing around in my gut. Pierce Cloud, my future father-in-law, had been more or less absent in Chrissy’s life for the last decade—an arrangement they’d both agreed on, even though it still made me uncomfortable.

The man had money, though, and he was in town for once in like a blue moon. So here we were, getting ready to ask if he might be able to help fund some of the wedding.

Chrissy had an excellent job, one that paid enough that we could get a decent condo in New York City—a metric that would be laudable for anyone in their mid-twenties. And I had a steady stream of translation clients coming into my inbox. But neither of us had the savings sufficient for the kind of wedding Chrissy wanted.

*And shouldn't that mean we should be discussing cake flavors and wedding dresses instead of paint tiles?* I thought. But, no, if there was one thing Chrissy had wanted to talk about non-stop, it was the new condo we'd just moved into.

“Okay, though, seriously,” she said, taking another tile out of her purse; how quickly my girl could pivot. “Eggshell, ivory, or porcelain?”

I looked between the three, knowing that there had to be some difference between them. Even in the dim, warm light from the restaurant, there *was* a difference. Just not one that mattered much.

Of course, I could give her my opinion, but that wouldn't matter because after she'd had the living room painted, we would go shopping for furniture, and the furniture suddenly wouldn't match what we'd chosen—because the sofa would be a cream color and the walls were now *ivory*, and it would just be the end of the fucking world, wouldn't it?

Something cold began constricting over my heart, like a vice.

“August,” Chrissy said. “Are you listening to me?”

I blinked. “Sorry.”

*I love Chrissy, I told myself. That's why I'm doing this. This is what she wants.*

So we would renovate the condo. With the ivory or the cream or the porcelain walls, and we would get furniture that did or did not match, and I would do it all because I loved her.

I picked up one of the breadsticks from the basket in the middle of the table and nibbled on the end.

“I thought you were cutting out carbs,” Chrissy said, shuffling the paint tiles.

I watched each shuffle, wondering where it would land. Eenie, Meenie, Miney—*eggshell*.

“Let me eat my feelings,” I mumbled.

She smiled. And just like that, the tension blew away for just a moment.

But then she bit her bottom lip and checked her phone again. “Where is he?”

Nervously, Christy pulled out a hair band from her purse, took her curled red hair and pulled it up on top of her head, twisting it until it was in a messy bun. It made me smile, even blush a little as I put down the breadstick, opened my menu and pretended to scan for the Fettuccine Alfredo.

She’d never looked cuter, I thought—in that elegant green dress on with the drooping neckline. It matched my formal attire, something I wasn’t accustomed to wearing as I worked at home most days. But tonight I had on a sleek black suit with a thin, emerald tie. I scratched my dark beard as I continued to pretend looking at the menu.

Then Chrissy’s voice lit up. “Oh, thank God—he’s *here!*”

Stomach churning, I turned my head toward the entrance. The maître-d’ was pointing toward our table, and suddenly, I’d never felt more overdressed—and intimidated—in my life.

Pierce cloud must have been six-foot four, with curly auburn hair that made him look younger than his early forties. His shoulders and arms entirely filled out the jean-jacket and Burberry-hoodie combo. Somehow, even though he wasn’t in black tie, he seemed to fit right in, filling the room with a masculine swagger that immediately took my breath away.

How was I supposed to talk to this man, much less ask him for money?

“August, sweetie,” Chrissy was poking me. “Stand up.”



I did, the chair scraping against the floor with a horrible screech. I couldn't look away from the scruff on Pierce's cheeks, accentuating that wide jaw. I could see Chrissy in him, but it was completely different. A raw, Scottish sort of masculinity. A flip side of the gold coin.

This was a man who travelled the world, a man who didn't take shit from anybody, least of all his future son-in-law. A man who asked for what he wanted and got it.

Everything Chrissy *wasn't*.

This man was dangerous. I could feel that much already building in me as he approached. His grip was firm, and he smiled at me. "August," he said. "Nice to meet you. I'm Pierce."

Just like that—though I didn't know it yet—I was completely and totally fucked.

TWO

*pierce*

FIFTEEN MINUTES before meeting my future son-in-law, I caught the eye of my Uber driver in his rearview mirror. He wasn't more than a kid, really, maybe early twenties—and when he saw me looking, he blushed.

“I'm *so* sorry, sir,” the kid said, turning his big blue eyes back on the road.

I took that to mean he was sorry about the traffic.

“Not your fault,” I said. “Don't sweat it.”

All around us in the clogged, New York street, cars honked and brakes squealed.

Up ahead, a yellow taxi nearly ran over a family of tourists crossing the street. How did I know they were tourists? Their wide eyes up at the tall skyscrapers was my first clue. The second was the “I Heart NY” hat one of the dads was wearing. His husband started yelling at the taxi driver... I rolled up my window to keep the noise and exhaust at bay.

I checked my phone. We were still a mile away from the restaurant, and in this perfect stand-still traffic, it didn't look like we were going to get there very fast.

*I could walk.*

One look at the sidewalk confirmed *that* wouldn't work, either. Whatever had caused the holdup ahead had also kept the pedestrian traffic grid-locked.

Chris was a big girl. She could handle her dad being a few minutes late.

“You from around here?” the kid driving the Uber asked, clearing his throat as his voice quavered. He gripped the steering wheel tightly enough his knuckles were beginning to whiten.

By this point in my life, a bisexual forty-one-year-old, I was used to the response I elicited from queer guys, especially the younger ones. Maybe if it were under different circumstances, I might ask this blonde twunk (probably trying to make it on Broadway) out for a drink later tonight.

But this was practically a business trip. No time for side ass, no matter how cute he was.

“Originally,” I said, trying to keep it conversational as possible.

“What, uh, brings you back, I guess?” the kid asked.

“My daughter’s getting married.”

I saw the kid’s expression harden a little as all the assumptions that came with the word *daughter* ran through his mind.

“I’m meeting her fiancé today,” I said.

“She’s engaged and you haven’t met him yet?”

I sighed inwardly. This was the reaction a lot of people gave me when they realized just how much Chris and I didn’t talk. It was a mutual agreement, however, one that had worked well for both of us.

“So you’re *originally* from New York...” the kid said; all the flirt had gone out of his voice like a popped balloon. “Where do you live now?”

“Kind of all over the place,” I said.

Outside the window, I saw one of the dads flip the taxi driver off then join his husband and kids on the other side of the street; the husband had his hands on his knees he was laughing so hard.

“For business?” the kid said.

“Some of it,” I said.

I had enough money I didn't need to do the business anymore; I kept it because I enjoyed having something to ground me. "Mostly I just like the travel."

"Where do you go?"

"Anywhere and everywhere... Greece, France. I have a townhouse in Paris I bought with a friend, try to spend a few weeks there every year."

"*Paris?* Man... I'd give anything to see Paris."

I shrugged. "It's not all it's cracked up to be. Smells like piss most of the time."

"Yeah, well, so does New York." The kid smiled.

Finally the traffic started inching forward. Even through the closed window, I could now hear the sirens wailing, only a block or two off. Sounded like some sort of accident.

The kid focused again on the road—on the Cadillac SUV that swerved out from the right to cut him off. The kid honked, but too late. Looking shaken up, he eased us forward.

A tense silence followed, one I didn't want to break so he could keep his concentration, maneuvering the small Honda through the uphill grid-maze that was downtown Manhattan.

Rolling past the crosswalk, I turned my head to see the two married guys with their kids. The one husband, with the "I Heart NY" hat, couldn't stop laughing... He playfully gave his wife a kiss, took her hand. Together with their kids, they disappeared into the crowd, necks still straining to see where the buildings scraped the blood-orange sky overhead.

I smiled. But the sight stirred something in me I wasn't quite sure I understood yet, something almost... was *sad* the right word? Yearning, maybe. Unsettled.

"Paris, huh..." In the rearview mirror, the kid shook his head, as though he still couldn't wrap his mind around a guy who casually *had a townhouse* in Paris.

And maybe he had a point.

Had I become blasé?

I had everything I'd ever wanted—at least everything I *thought* I'd wanted... All the money in the world, a speaking relationship with my daughter. Autonomy. Sex. A different country every few months, and nothing to tie me down. So I found myself surprised. Maybe I *had* become complacent.

Oh my God—was my life *boring*?

All I could think of, as the kid meticulously pulled his little Honda over (to furious honks from behind) and dropped me off, was of the two married guys and their kids.

But I shook my head and smiled as the Uber kid caught my eye, blushing again.

“This it?” I asked, pointing to the broad, glass windows looking in on a highly formal, dimly-lit restaurant.

“Yes, sir.” His eyes flicked away.

I looked down at my Burberry hoody and jeans, realizing I probably could have, *should have*, dressed better, but I decided to work with what I had.

I took my wallet out of my back pocket and tipped the kid a fifty. “Get yourself to a bar when you’re done taking strange men like me all over Manhattan.” I winked. Buy yourself a drink, on me.”

He bit his lip, took the bill. “Thanks.”

Inside the restaurant—dark woods, soft yellow lampshades—I asked the maître d’ where Chrissy Cloud was sitting.

She needn’t have pointed.

I saw them, both of them, almost immediately.

Chris looked just as beautiful as she always did, a fact that made me smile with pride. Her deep red hair was a younger version of my own faded auburn, and it looked even more striking with the green dress she had on. And next to her...

That’s when I saw August Taylor, Chris’s fiancé, and my future son-in-law. I tried to remember what it was he did for work (translating?), but I was too struck. Now I saw what

Chris did—the square jaw and neatly-trimmed black beard, the tattoos flashing under the starched white of his cuffs.

He was absolutely gorgeous. Clearly Chris had inherited more than just my Scottish hair, but my taste in men as well.

As I reached the table, both of them stood up to greet me. August's eyes flicked toward mine and then down at the floor.

*Nerves?*

Of course. This was his first time meeting me.

Oddly enough, I felt a little nervous, too. Felt, somehow, like the kid in the Uber when he met my eyes in the rearview mirror... Hot blood rushed through me, and a warm, fuzzy halo seemed to take root at the base of my spine.

*Get it together, Pierce.*

I decided to do my best to put him—and myself—at ease, reaching out a hand. “August,” I said. “Nice to meet you. I’m Pierce.”

THREE



*august*

I FELT OFF-BALANCE, which was why I was the first to sit back down, even before Pierce had—which I *knew* was why Chrissy was eyeing me.

Suddenly I felt out of breath.

Fuck, where were all these nerves coming from? Was it really just because it was Chrissy's dad? Because we still had a shit-ton of money to ask about? Somehow, I knew that wasn't it, not all of it, anyway. Because I couldn't look Pierce in the eye, something I'd never had a problem with in my life. I couldn't keep my gaze *off* him, either—roving over the broad chest, his scruffy, square chin.

*What am I feeling, exactly?*

“Daddy,” Chrissy said. “This is August. The love of my life.”

*The love of my life.*

Just that, hearing Chrissy's voice—even though it wasn't a part of Chrissy I'd ever heard before, the Daddy's Girl who got her way by being pretty and asking nicely, which I found startling—was enough to ground me.

I reached under the table, grasping around at air for a moment until my hand found hers. I held it tightly, like it was a lifeline. My breath began to even out.

Then I forced myself to meet Pierce's eyes.

“What do you do with yourself, August?” Pierce asked. His voice was a deep baritone that had a smooth quality to it.

Hearing it was like swallowing a shot of cognac.

*Do with myself?*

I swallowed down the worms writhing in my gut. “I—I’m a translator, Spanish and English. Mostly freelance stuff, but..”

“Sweetie—” Chrissy squeezed my hand— “tell him what you really want to do!”

What I *meant* to do was smile, but instead I grimaced.

When I didn’t say anything, Chrissy stepped in to fill in the blanks. “August wants to be a travel writer. Online journals, that sort of thing. Translate his own work so he can reach a wider audience.” She laughed. “Good thing, honestly, don’t you think? All Daddy does is travel.”

“So I’ve heard,” I said.

The waiter with her typical service smile came back around now that they were a full party, and we each ordered quickly.

“Can I also have a margarita?” I said, having ordered last.

The waitress smirked. “Maybe you wanna try the Tex-Mex down the road?”

“Right. Uh...” Chrissy’s looking at me now, clearly trying to read me, to understand what was going on. If I only knew. “A Manhattan, then,” I said. “Double.”

Chrissy raised her eyebrows. She wasn’t wrong.

I normally wasn’t this impulsive.

“Can’t go wrong with that,” Pierce said. He took a swig out of his water glass as the waitress went away with our orders.

I watched his throat work and suddenly felt *very* thirsty.

I blinked, hard, like trying to clear dust out of my eyes. I focused on Chrissy.

*You’re sweating*, she mouthed to me.

*I am?*

I squeezed her hand, tried to tell her through the motion that everything was fine.

And everything *was* fine, because just then an arm appeared in front of me, dropping a wide-brimmed Manhattan next to my appetizer plate. Immediately I took a sip, felt the alcohol burn its way down. Within moments I felt a little bit of confidence returning.

Pierce had leaned back in his chair, crossed his thick arms over his chest. He stared at me, his expression eerily similar to the one Chrissy had just given me. Like he was trying to understand something but couldn't get the information from my body language alone.

It was simple.

I was nervous because I was meeting one of Chrissy's parents for the first time. Because this particular parent happened to be a rich, good-looking world-traveler. That was something that would intimidate *anyone*, especially when they were about to ask for the sum of money that was going to have to come out of my mouth in a minute.

With the alcohol buzzing around in me, though, I sat up straight and cleared my throat. I wasn't going to let that intimidation ruin my future with Chrissy.

One more sip of the Manhattan.

A salty olive to wash it all down.

"Look," I said. "Let's just get down to it, all right? We need about fifty-thousand dollars for the wedding. I know it's a lot, but it's what Chrissy wants, you know, so..."

Pierce gave me an expression almost like pity.

Had I said something off?

Then I saw Chrissy. Her face had turned bright red, matching her hair, some of her freckles popping out under her makeup. She shook her head, rolled her eyes as though that would get rid of the tears.

Okay, so maybe not the right thing to have said.

With a loud *lurch*, Chrissy stood up, mumbled, “I can’t believe you just *said it* like that,” and marched off.

FOUR

“ARE you going to go after her?” I asked.

But August didn't seem to hear me. He stared ahead with an expression on his face that worried me. It wasn't that he seemed to be ignoring my daughter's need for support; it was that he'd gone completely inward. The expression on that angular, dark-featured face read: *blank*.

“August?” I said.

“Hmm?” Finally the reverie broke, and he looked up at me.

My eyes flickered up to see Chris disappearing into the women's restroom near the back of the restaurant, the scarlet door swinging wide.

“I guess I should,” August said. “Go after her, I mean.”

*Yeah—that'd be the grown-up thing to do, wouldn't it?*

“A little too late for that,” I said. “Maybe you could've gotten to her a second ago, but she's just gone where you *can't*.”

August nodded, then grabbed a breadstick from the basket in the middle of the table and nibbled on it, washing it down with the last of his Manhattan.

I couldn't help the feeling that August was hiding something. Not just from me, either, but from Chris, too. Something that had shown up behind his eyes when he didn't pop up immediately to try to apologize and get Chris back.

“That was pretty ballsy of you,” I said. “Asking for the money straight-up like that.”

August nodded. “That’s what *I* thought.”

I noticed the cute way the corner of his lip lifted up when he was embarrassed.

“Chris,” I said, “likes things done a certain way.”

“You should have seen the paint samples she had us going through,” he said. “Before you got here, I mean... Never thought there’d be so many ways to say ‘white.’”

There was a hesitancy in August’s tone that made the protective father in me emerge out of its den, long dormant, but ready for duty at a moment’s notice.

“Which is why,” I said, carefully, “if you’re going to go through with this...”

“Are you saying I don’t know what I’m doing?”

“Chris knows what she wants,” I countered. “And right now—that’s you. Just want to make sure that’s reciprocated is all.”

I picked up my water glass and took a long swig.

“I know what I want,” August said.

“Of course you do,” I said.

And no sooner had the words left my mouth than I saw August’s dark eyes rove over my torso in a way I only saw from someone who wanted to sleep with me. Then he cleared his throat, as though only just noticing what he was doing.

God, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say August had some things about himself he’d never explored. Maybe he was having second thoughts about the whole wedding. Whatever secret lay behind his eyes seemed to at least say “second thoughts.”

“So,” I said. “Chris said you want to be a travel writer?”

August was nibbling on his breadstick again, as though trying to decide if *that* was something he wanted to eat—

couldn't this guy make up his mind on anything?

"Is there a reason," I said, "that you're a translator instead?"

August choked on a chunk of bread, loud and long enough that it drew attention from a nearby table. After guzzling down water, August looked at me with red, watery eyes and shrugged. "Chrissy wants to stay in the city," he said.

"You don't want to be away from her all the time," I said. "Okay... I get it."

"Look—translating's a perfectly legitimate job. It might not earn a million bucks a year but it's good money. New York's one of the highest Spanish-speaking populations in the U.S., and if that's not job security, then—"

"All right," I said, "cool your jets."

Well, that had hit a nerve.

Good to know that underneath that questioning exterior there was an actual human being with some sort of feeling and passion, even if it seemed to be misdirected... Clearly August wanted to be a travel writer. His outburst had just been a rationalization. Which made me wonder if the "secret" he was hiding was that he didn't want to be married to Chris at all, and he couldn't even admit it to himself.

I smiled at him sympathetically.

I'd been in that situation before, with Chris's mom. And what an emotional rollercoaster it could be to unpack my own layered, hidden desires. Sometimes people could become experts at burying the things that were most important to them.

Was that what August was doing?

Chris returned, plopping her YSL clutch on the table before throwing her red hair over a shoulder and sitting.

Any doubts I might have had about August's authenticity toward my daughter started to disappear when I saw how he looked at Chris: The genuine apology as he tentatively took her hand and mouthed something to her.



A curt nod from Chris, and the situation seemed to have been resolved. I suddenly felt guilty for having misjudged August—and for the way that my body was reacting to him, namely the way seeing his smile summersaulted me, the way my cock...

Maybe I'd invented everything about August's inauthenticity because of how *I* felt around him, to assuage my own insecurity.

"Daddy," Chris was saying.

I pulled myself from my thoughts so I could be fully present for the conversation, though even while she talked, I found I couldn't quite take my eyes off of August, still trying to understand exactly what was going on inside that unbearably handsome head of his.

"Look," Chris said, "it's not like what he was saying was wrong. That *is* how much we need, fifty grand, and I know it's a lot to ask, but you *have* to see the venue. Oh my God..."



*august*

“... but you *have* to see the venue,” Chrissy was saying.

Her voice slowly tuned out of my mind as I realized that Pierce wasn't looking at his daughter. He was looking at me.

Suddenly—I didn't know if it was the carbs that I hadn't had for weeks, or the alcohol, or maybe all of it—I felt like throwing up.

It wasn't just the amount of money, even though fifty-thousand dollars sure *felt* like the entire world. It was that I sensed Pierce knew something about me, something secret. I felt seen-through, and more vulnerable than I'd been since middle school when I'd been bullied for what Mom so generously christened my “pudgy phase.”

The waiter dropped off another Manhattan, and I downed the entire thing in under twenty seconds. That got Chrissy to stop talking.

*What the fuck has gotten into me?*

Normally I was so put-together, the complete opposite of impulsive. I'd spent years through high school and college disciplining myself to strict study schedules. I worked overtime to make sure I didn't have to be in credit-card debt. Alcohol at a party usually meant one glass, carefully sipped over the course of an hour.

So what was I doing this for? So I could get Pierce Cloud off my mind? So I could have the courage to stand up to him and ask for the money? No... it went deeper than that. I didn't

know *how* deep then—though somehow I got the feeling that Pierce did.

“Sweetie,” Chrissy was saying, in a sickly-sweet voice. Then she hissed “What the *fuck*?”

Yeah, she had that part right.

*What the fuck...*

The room was beginning to spin, and whatever nausea I thought the alcohol might take away only increased.

“Sorry—” was all I managed to mumble before I stumbled to a standing position, wavered for second to get my balance, then rushed toward the men’s room.

I nearly ran into a waiter halfway there, and I heard a clatter as something that sounded like silverware tumbled all over the tile floor.

But then I was in the bathroom, which muffled the commotion I’d caused, turning to a blanket of white-noise.

I clambered into the nearest stall, barely got it locked, before I fell to my knees and felt the hot whiskey and vermouth spill out of my mouth and nose. I closed my eyes, face dangerously close to the toilet seat, and clutched my gut, waiting for the feeling to pass.

Paint samples, the condo, the money.

Pierce Cloud.

Yeah, Chrissy had said it right. *What the fuck?*

What especially confused me—doubled over the toilet, smelling the half-digested alcohol, and almost retching again—were the feeling surrounding Pierce.

Intimidation, danger. There was a strength about him that drew me to him instantly; I hadn’t been able to keep my eyes off him. Why was that? I couldn’t get that rough, Scottish stubble out of my mind, those eyes that could slice through metal. Superman eyes.

Eyes that had seen me.

I cleaned up my face best I could with the thin toilet paper, then flushed it all away. There was nothing left in my stomach, but at least that meant a lot of the nausea had subsided. Now I found my mind wandering through scenarios of how to delay going back out. How did I explain my behavior to Chrissy and Pierce when I didn't have the answer?

I'd only just stood up when I heard the door to the men's room open. Another man walked in. I froze when I saw the flash of a Burberry-patterned hood in the crack of the stall.

Pierce.

*Shit.*

He had to know I was in here—the view to the restrooms was clear from our table. But I wasn't about to have that awkward “two guys in a bathroom” interaction with Pierce Cloud.

Deciding I wouldn't leave until Pierce had, I stayed put.

Pierce approached the urinal directly next to my stall. I heard him clear his throat, heard him unzip his pants. I could see his shoes from where I stood—and realized that Pierce could probably see *mine*, too. Me. Just standing here like a complete fucking moron.

The only sound was Pierce's piss hitting the urinal and gurgling down the drain.

My mind still buzzed with a little alcohol, not thinking straight—or at least, that's what I tried to blame my thoughts on.

How else was I supposed to explain the stiffness in my pants and just the *thought* that Pierce was a foot away from me, with his hand on his... I swallowed.

*It's just because you and Chrissy are going through a rough patch*, I told myself. Just extra-horniness manifesting in odd ways.

*Really* odd ways. Because I really had never gone for... well, *men*.

Biting my bottom lip, I reached down a hand to touch the bulge in my slacks, just to relieve some of the pressure.

The movement triggered the self-flush sensor on the toilet, which whooshed behind me.

Whatever cover I thought I'd had just been blown.

“August?” Pierce asked.

*Well, who else?* We were obviously the only two in here.

Stretching my pants to accommodate for my surprise boner, I moved forward to unlock the door, walk out, in all my vulnerability, and face this man who had so quickly become the bane of my existence.

But just as I unlocked the stall, my foot—no traction in these dress shoes—slipped on a thin piece of toilet paper I'd accidentally left on the tile.

I fell face forward at Pierce Cloud's feet.

*At least he can't see your penis now,* I thought.



*pierce*

AUGUST GLANCED up at me from his place on the floor, and I couldn't help how the situation lit up in my mind: Me standing so domineeringly over him, with August's big brown eyes looking up into mine.

But then the moment shattered as August looked down at the floor. He groaned in frustration, and I began to laugh.

I reached down a hand to help him up, but August said, "No, thanks. I'm good."

"You sure?"

August avoided my eyes. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

No sooner had August picked himself off the floor than the red door to the restroom swung open and an incredibly slick Wall Street type young man stepped in. He gave us both a look before heading over to the urinal and unzipping himself, practically straddling the porcelain.

"Look," August whispered. "I'm fine."

"No," I said, calmly. "You're bleeding."

"What?" August lifted a hand to his forehead, which came away with scarlet dribbles.

"You might have a concussion," I said. I gestured to the green marbled strip of sink, the vanity lighting flattering and soft. "Just sit tight for a sec, okay?"

I'd seen enough of my buddies concussed and or drunk to know that he wasn't in a state to go charging back out into the



restaurant, like he wasn't affected at all. Just the halo of the vanity lighting made him squint.

Grudgingly, August leaned against the strip of green marble, closing his eyes while I pulled out a couple paper towels and wetted them in the sink.

Wall Street had finished his business and began washing his hands just a sink over from where August was leaning.

August winced when I put the towel to his forehead, dabbing away the blood as best as I could. The damp paper towel came away stained pink, like I'd dipped it in food coloring.

I noticed Wall Street watching us out of the corner of his eye, taking a little too long to wash his hands. I was about to tell him to fuck off when he said, "You two make a cute couple." And then I froze, every muscle in my body straining in preparation for what I knew was probably coming: A slew of homophobia from some overly-privileged asshole.

August replied immediately. "We're not together."

"Hey—" Wall Street turned off the water, flicked the excess droplets off his fingers— "I don't judge."

His smirk said otherwise.

"Maybe lay off the booze, though," Wall Street said to August directly. "Yeah, buddy? This is a nice place."

I was close enough to August that I could sense his body moving, getting ready to pounce. Without really thinking about what I was doing, I put my towel-free hand on his chest, shaking my head ever so slightly... August was concussed, still a little tipsy from drinking those Manhattans way faster than any sane person should have. The last thing he needed was to lose a fight to this douche bag.

Keeping my eyes locked on August's furious expression, I noticed Wall Street smile wolfishly in the mirror, as though to prove his point, before shoving his own paper towels non-too-gently into the trash and walking out.

What was going on with August? Obviously I'd never met the man until tonight, but from what Chris had told me about him, he was supposed to be well put together. Docile, harmless. A grounded, marry-for-life sort of guy—not this impulsive, almost angry creature writhing under my touch...

*My touch.*

My hand still lay on his chest. I felt his heart throbbing, fast, hard.

August used his hand to pull mine away from his chest, and when I reached up to finish dabbing the blood off the small cut on his forehead, he practically ripped the towel from me and pressed it to his face. "I got it."

I took a step back. "Okay."

August tried to move away from the vanity, but dizziness seemed to overtake him, and he ended up leaning against the marble strip again, closing his eyes.

I watched him carefully, just in case he needed anything... One of us would have to leave soon, tell Chris what had happened. We just might have to call the evening short, pleasure though it had been.

"I'm not, you know," August said. He still hadn't opened his eyes.

"Not what?" I asked.

"Gay."

"I never said you were."

"I'm not bi, either."

"All right."

"It's just, I know *you*... kinda swing both ways, so I just thought I'd..."

*What? Clear things up?* What was there to clear up, exactly?

I narrowed my eyes, trying to understand where he was going with this.

“I’m straight,” August said.

“Well I’d hope so,” I said, chuckling. “You’re marrying my daughter.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Don’t let that douche get to you,” I said. “He didn’t know what he was talking about. People like that are a dime a dozen, trust me.”

Something seemed to soften in August’s expression, a defensive wall coming down, if only briefly.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This isn’t me; I promise—I fucked everything up tonight.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“So you’re not going to give us the money?”

“I haven’t really decided that yet.”

And it was the truth.

“And as far as personal impressions so—” August started.

“Yeah,” I said, “you’re pretty much fucked on that one.”

August nodded, staring down at his shoes.

His phone pinged; he switched hands on the damp towel so he could use his free one to get the iPhone out of his pocket.

“Chrissy wants to know if we’re okay,” he said.

“What are you going to tell her?”

“That we’ll be out in a second...” Then his thumbs flew across the digital keyboard.

I nodded. “We should get you home. You’re going to need a long nap and probably a bottle of ibuprofen.”

SEVEN

*august*

I STEPPED into my dark office, didn't bother turning on the light, then locked the door behind me. The digital clock I'd hung on the wall over my desk told me it was one o'clock in the morning. Far too late to be up, when I knew I had a meeting in five hours.

But my head still throbbed, no matter how much water and ibuprofen I'd chugged after coming home, and Chrissy kept tossing in the bed.

All in all, it had been impossible to fall asleep, and I couldn't stop replaying the entire evening with Pierce, from first seeing him in that Burberry hoodie, to falling at his feet in the bathroom, to being mistaken for his boyfriend.

His boyfriend! The fact that anyone had ever thought that anyone had assumed that both irked me and filled me with... was it curiosity? Unexplainably, for the *briefest* second after that business guy in the bathroom had assumed, my mind had flashed on what *that* would be like.

To be Pierce Cloud's boyfriend.

Then I'd immediately felt sick, dirty. A pervert. This was Chrissy's *dad* I was thinking about, off limits. If the limits were the stratosphere, he was fucking Mars.

Yet there'd been something there with him. An electricity. A force, like gravity, that pulled me toward him. And that "force" was turning... well, sexual.

I sat down at my desk, powered up my iMac and realized just how nervous I was, opening up the browser, typing

naughty words into the search bar. I flicked my head over my shoulder, checking that the door was locked, that I really was alone. It was like I was thirteen again, horny as hell and terrified of being caught by Mom and Dad, who'd been staunchly religious.

Horny. That was one way of describing it. Never in my life had I had thoughts about guys before. I mean, sure, I'd been able to tell if another guy was attractive—but couldn't any guy do that? It's not like I was blind.

This was different, though. I knew the moment Pierce unzipped—only the bathroom stall between us—that I was having real, sexual feelings that I hadn't experienced before.

I found a site that looked promising and began scrolling through the thumbnails. I'd never looked at gay porn before, not in an intentional way. Now I found myself growing stiff in my boxers, looking at the naked, masculine bodies on top of each other. *What the hell am I doing?* I thought, but it was too late.

Already I was shrugging off my boxers, lifting my gray t-shirt off my flat hairy, stomach so I wouldn't make too much of a mess. I clicked on one of the videos, a hot Latino guy with an older DILF and nearly had a heart attack as moans erupted from the speakers.

Frantically I jammed the space bar. The porno paused, unpaused, paused again. I waited for any sound that I'd woken Chrissy up. But when I was still alone in the quiet a minute later, I reached for my gaming headphones, set them loosely over my head, and started over.

My brain had made up the dirty, ridiculous story that the hot dad in the porno was Pierce Cloud, and I was the cute Latino guy, and it was my future father-in-law's cock I was reaching for as I slowly tugged...

I started to jerk on my hard dick, using my other hand to fondle my balls, pulling on them until I had to bite back a moan. *It's Chrissy's dad.*

The pleasure was building.

*Chrissy's dad. You fucking love Chrissy, don't you, so get it out now. Let it all come out.*

I'd found my rhythm finally, didn't even need the porno I was so turned on, but still it was hot, hearing the swallowing and moaning and slapping through my headphones.

Then, from outside the office, the sound of footsteps. It was unmistakable, but the danger of being caught (shit, it really was like I was thirteen all over again) only increased the thrill. I imagined it was Pierce stroking my cock, his hard, masculine hands holding onto me tight.

The sound of water in the kitchen, maybe a glass filling.

The entire office filled with the sound of my own panting, growing hotter with the smell of my own sweat and arousal.

A jiggle on the locked door. A pause.

I kept jerking.

"August?" Chrissy called. She knocked softly. "Sweetie, are you okay?"

"Yeah!" I tried to sound as normal as I could.

I was so close, the burning fire of orgasm mounting in the head of my uncut cock, swirling in my pelvis.

"The door's locked," she said.

"Is it?" I bit my lip, hard.

Fuck that felt good.

"August, do you need to go the hospital? Daddy said you might need to see an Insta Care doctor or something..."

"I'm fine."

Knock, knock. "Sweetie, open the door."

I came in a rush, an avalanche of hot, sticky come dribbling down my right hand. A volcanic release of pressure. My breath shuddered; I did my best to keep it quiet.

"August?"

I closed out the browser, tucked my considerable dick into the waistband of my boxers to keep the boner from showing and pulled up my sweats.

“I’m coming!” I said, quickly wiping my still warm semen on a couple Kleenexes and shoving them in the trash bin under the desk.

When I opened the door, I saw Chrissy’s face and immediately felt the guilt.

She looked so worried for me, her brows furrowed, her fiery hair bed-mussed. I thought about the first time she and I had had sex, after a month or so of once-a-week dates. We’d seen Hamilton together and then came back to my place, a microscopic apartment with one room that I finally moved out of recently. We’d shared a bottle of rosé, then spent all night—and the next day—under the covers of my full-sized bed. Her hair had looked just like this then. *Everything we’ve built.* Every date, every “I love you.” It was real, and I wasn’t about to jeopardize all that.

“You sure you don’t need to see someone?” Chrissy asked, gently touching the tender skin next to the scab that had formed on my forehead.

“No,” I said. “I’m fine.”

*I’m fine. Your dad’s out of my system. I won’t be thinking about Pierce Cloud like that ever again, I promise.*



EIGHT

*pierce*

THE HOTEL COFFEE maker sputtered out jets of scalding water. I barely ducked in time to avoid it giving my face a permanent sunburn... Even in a room as nice as the one I'd gotten for myself, one hotel fixture was doomed never to change: The cheap coffee maker that either made brown water or didn't work at all. Mine, apparently, wanted to kill me.

Muttering "fuck!" under my breath, I swerved to avoid another mini-eruption and reached behind to pull the plug. Still the machine sputtered, and the boiling water hissed. My stomach grumbled, a hangover pulsing behind my eyes—vestiges of too many solo vodka shots at the hotel bar the last night.

I'd been worried over Chris, and over August, too. I kept seeing him stumble out of the bathroom stall, looking up with big, brown, confused eyes.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my pocket to answer it while the coffee machine calmed down.

"Hey, Richard," I said, marching over to the curtains and pulling them shut. That helped, at least. "What's up?"

"Pierce? The fuck—I've been trying to call you for over an hour."

"Had a long night."

"Did you?" Richard chuckled knowingly.

"Not like that," I said. "Get your head out of the shitter."

“I’d like to, but I can’t stop thinking about you getting it on with some hot twink.”

*August isn’t even close to being a twink.* I closed my eyes. Did I really just think that? Maybe I was the one with my head in the shitter.

The coffee machine was finally powering down. Boy did I need a cup of joe.

“I’d like to, Pierce,” Richard said. “But I can’t get our last time out of my head. I’m getting hard just thinking about it... Shelby’s going to Greece with her sister, and I thought maybe you’d want to meet me at our place in Paris.”

I tried to do the math; that was the difficult part about being a paramour. Richard and Shelby were married, and both of them were bisexual. They’d decided on an open marriage, which was fun for them but a little hectic for me—because if I wanted to see either of them, I needed to work on *their* schedule.

“When?” I asked.

“In a week,” Richard said.

“I don’t know, man...”

“Got something more important than a booty call, Mr. C?”

“Chris is getting married.”

A pause. Then, “Oh—wow, congrats, man. I had no idea. What’s he like?”

“I’m not sure yet.” I told him what had happened the night before, my worries that he was hiding something.

“A little late to go all Super-Dad, Pierce. Don’t you think?”

I knew he was right—Richard didn’t exactly shy away from telling me the truth—but the words still stung. Caught off guard, I instead returned to the coffee maker, found out I’d put the sprayer at the wrong angle, and plugged it back in.

I was refilling the tank with fresh water when Richard broke the tense silence.

“Look,” Richard said, “all I’m saying is that I know about your ‘special’ relationship with Chrissy, how you don’t really see each other, but there’s no hard feelings. Blah blah blah. I just think she’s old enough to make her own decisions.”

Snapping the lid back down on the coffee maker, I turned it back on, waited for the water to heat up again. This time, I kept my distance.

“It’s not about me being Super-Dad,” I said.

“Then what *is* it about?”

*August.* The man was an enigma.

But I didn’t say that. Instead, I said, “They want money.”

“What’s new.”

“I just... want them to be *sure*.”

“And it’s going to take you more than a week to figure that out?” Richard asked.

Finally, mediocre black coffee started dripping into the carafe. It was like caffeine laced the steam, lighting me up from the inside out from the smell alone.

An idea was beginning to form.

“No,” Richard said, “I know what’s going on. She’s about to join herself to another man, and you’re starting to realize just how much you’ve been missing. I think you’re scared, Pierce.”

Am I?

Yeah, I realized. *I’m fucking terrified.*

“Listen, Mr. C,” Richard said playfully, “why don’t you hang out in New York for the week, give them however much they’re asking for, and when you get to Paris I’ll give you the best damn back massage you’ve ever had.”

I grabbed the generic white mug from the sparse cupboard. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes, Mr. C. I’ll have you moaning for hours while I stuff your face... with croissants, of course. Loads of carbs.”

I laughed. “All right. Okay—you got a deal.”

“Good. Listen, Shelby’s yelling at me to get off the phone. She sounds angry.”

“What’d you buy now?”

“You know me too well, old man. Don’t stay too long, okay?”

I took my first sip of coffee and practically had an orgasm. “You got it.”

Richard hung up, and finally with my caffeine crutch, my brain began functioning again.

I stretched and walked back over to the window, opening the drapes even though the sunlight glaring off skyscrapers still hurt my eyes. I had one week before I had to leave for Paris.

Something was up with August, and even though it *was* too late for me to Super-Dad, I still wanted to know what that secret was before Chris gave herself away to him. I would give them the money, too, but I’d make them wait for it.

Work for it a little.

So, seven days to figure August Taylor out and go back to normal.

I smiled as I sipped on my coffee.

Behind me, the coffee machine sputtered again. Something sparked, and smoke began filling up the kitchenette. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” I muttered.



*august*

I'D JUST FINISHED A PARTICULARLY difficult translation when the doorbell rang. I looked up from my laptop screen long enough to see it was noon already, though it didn't really feel like it. Clouds had moved in after ten o'clock. The doorbell... *Probably just an Amazon delivery*, I assumed. And if it wasn't, Chrissy would get it.

Sighing, I closed out my current translation, opening up the next project, jotting down who I needed to follow-up with on a sticky note. The bell rang again.

*Not Amazon, then.*

"Chrissy?" I said. "You gonna get that?"

No reply.

I checked my phone, realizing that Chrissy had texted me almost an hour ago that she was heading out for errands.

I made my way to the front of the condo, nearly slamming the door again once I opened it to see Pierce Cloud, in a ridiculously stylish black-and-gold Versace windbreaker, staring at his phone.

"Oh, good," Pierce said, smiling as he looked up. "I was just about to text Chrissy. Is she around?"

My gaze glanced to the stubble at his chin, thicker today, a light red flecked with white.

"She's out running errands." I realized my body was blocking the door, but I didn't do anything to correct it. "What can I do for you, uh, Pierce...?"

“I was hoping I might clear some things up about last night.”

“I’m sure Chrissy will be back soon.”

“Also, I wanted to talk to you, August.”

Why?

“Is this about the money?” I asked.

Pierce shrugged. “Partially.” He gave me an expectant look. “Can I come in?”

I hesitated, maybe too long, but finally opened the door wide. No part of me wanted to be alone in the same room as Pierce Cloud (or rather, I wanted that *too much*), but this was the condo that Chrissy and I owned. This was a safe place, or at least it was supposed to be.

“Kind of dark in here,” Pierce said, squinting at the spare furniture in the living room. “Don’t you think?”

Yes, every light was off, but it helped me focus.

Or—*was* that true? Now he mentioned it, I couldn’t remember ever doing that before I met Chrissy. It was always Chrissy who made sure to close every curtain. The only time we ever really had lights on was when we had company, which, now I thought about it, wasn’t very often.

Pierce was already striding over to the sliding doors at the far end of the living room. They looked like they opened to a patio, but that was pretty deceptive, a fact that Pierce took in a moment later after opening the Venetian blinds. “A fire escape,” he said. “Interesting placement.”

“Well—” I shrugged— “it’s New York, so...”

“Right. Do you wanna get some fresh air?”

Like he owned the place, Pierce opened up the sliding doors and gestured for me to follow him out.

Cool and fresh, a breeze rustled through the condo, which, up until now, I hadn’t realized had felt so stuffy and stale.



I glanced at the front door, directly across from the fire escape and its open blinds. It's not like anything was going to happen—even though my whirring mind wished differently. This was simply my future father-in-law inviting me for a chat before I married his little girl and stole her heart away forever.

Remembering the promise I made to myself the night before, about not thinking about Pierce in any special way, I stepped onto the fire escape with him.

From just eleven stories up, it felt like we were on top of the world—or at least floating through the middle of it. The street swarmed dizzyingly below us, and I had to place both hands firmly on the iron railing to keep my vertigo in check.

I suddenly wondered what it would be like to fall and ended up clutching my stomach.

“You okay there, August?” Pierce held out his hands, as though to steady me.

Even though he kept his distance, I imagined what it would feel like for him to touch me again... my chest practically burned with the memory of his hand on me in the restaurant bathroom.

Being out here with Pierce, even just for the seconds which had passed, somehow something in me unlocked. As though I had breathing room for the first time in a while, and endless possibilities lay in front of me.

Instead of exhilaration, or even guilt, I felt only a breathy sadness move inside me, with the same subtle resignation as the breeze through the stuffy condo.

I was starting to see myself want two different things. Chrissy on the one hand, and... what was on the other? Not Pierce, not exactly. But something he represented: A freedom that had been absent for a long while but which I had never acknowledged.

“I want to talk to you,” Pierce said, “because I know what you're hiding.”

*Hiding...?*

What was Pierce talking about?

TEN

*pierce*

JUST KEEP IT SMOOTH. *Convince him to go with you. Don't scare him off.* But already, with just those words, “I know what you’re hiding,” August looked like he’d rather jump off the jittery fire escape than continue this conversation with me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” August said. And for the first time since meeting him, I knew he was telling the truth. I saw the person Chris must have fallen in love with: not the impulsive, concussed upshot from the night before, but rather the innocent, slightly naïve young man who got sick standing on a fire escape.

The juxtaposition—this toned, Latino man with a beard and tattoos looking like a lost puppy—made me chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” August asked.

“You.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You look like you’re going to hurl.”

“Yeah, well...” August shifted so his back was to the railing, facing the indoors. “Just be glad it’s not on your shoes, *papi*... And what is that supposed to mean anyway—you know what I’m ‘hiding?’”

*I have a hunch, I wanted to say. I can see it when you talk about Chris, the way you were surprised by how dark the space was.* It was only a theory up until about five minutes ago, but now I thought I knew the secret: August didn’t want

to get married, at least not to Chris. All August had to do, though, was call my bluff.

Instead of any of that though, I said, “August. None of this has gone the way any of us planned. You and I both know that. I’m sure Chris is pretty upset.”

“She is.”

*Too quick of a response.*

Knowing what I did of my daughter, it was entirely plausible that none of this bothered her. She always knew she’d get what she wanted in the end. That was largely my fault as a father. Either way, I needed to make it seem like this was for Chris. She was the one thing that August and I concretely had in common, the one person that—supposedly—both of us would give the world for.

“I’m going to Paris in a week,” I said. “Meeting up with a friend.”

“I don’t get it,” August said. “What does that have to do with any of this?”

“Point is—I want to get to know you a bit better before the big day. *And* before I decide whether or not I’m going to drop fifty grand on a venue for a single night. And I’ve only got a week.”

“You’re freelance, right?” I said. “So you make your own schedule?”

August shrugged. “Yeah, sure.”

“Can you afford to take a few days off?”

“I guess.”

“Good—because I’d like to invite you and Chris on a cruise for the week. Just for the week. We wouldn’t be gone too long, but... if it’s still a-go by then—” *and if it’s clear you actually want to marry my daughter*— “then the money’s yours.”

“You’re serious?”

“Of course.”

“And what about my little secret?” August said sarcastically.

I cleared my throat, swallowing down the way his voice turned me on. That was absolutely not the appropriate response to be having.

“That’s just it,” I said, continuing my bluff. “I know you have one. And if I’m wrong? Well... seven days is plenty of time for you to spill the beans, don’t you think?”

I could see the cogs in his brain working and felt oddly proud of the way I’d constructed it. The perfect little scenario. Cruise ships were small things... and there was something about travel that opened people up, made them forget the reasons that they kept their secrets, their little old beliefs, their worries. Travel stripped all of that away, until it was nothing but the human underneath, naked and vulnerable.

“That’s a little twisted,” August said, as it finally clicked. “Don’t you think?”

“What do you mean?” My voice dripped false innocence.

The wind picked up, forcing August to stand fully, closing his eyes. Was he afraid of heights? “August...?” I said, testing to see if he needed anything.

“I’m fine.” August shook his head. “I think I just need to get inside.”

The fire escape was small, enough room for both of us to stand if we were standing still, but—like two people trying to turn around in a one-person glass shower—the manipulations of shoulders and hands so both of us had a clear shot at the door now made August’s already nervous face light up bright red.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “Just—maybe if you...?”

“Turned that way,” I answered. “Of course.”

As I turned, I felt fingers brush across the front of my jeans, just near my groin.

“Fuck,” August said, suddenly putting both hands up and almost losing his balance entirely. “I’m sorry, Pierce. I didn’t

mean to—”

“Kid,” I said. “Would you take a damn breath? It was an accident.”

*Accident or not, though, I thought, he’s far too riled up for a straight guy.*

Yeah, I was beginning to trust my hunch. August had some things about himself he hadn’t looked at yet, and I was going to be damned if he married Chris that way.

I watched August closely, the way the whiskers on his chin rose while he bit his lip. He was watching me, too. Down below us, the traffic hummed and swirled. A single drop of rain fell on August’s cheek—and I resisted the urge to wipe it away. Something told me that, despite what he said, August wouldn’t have minded that at all.

“August,” I said. “You love Chris, right?”

“Yeah,” August said quietly. “I can’t wait to tell her about the cruise. Thanks.”

And he turned around, and disappeared behind the jangling plastic of the Venetian blinds.

ELEVEN



*august*

AS IT TURNED OUT, Chrissy thought it was the greatest fucking idea in the whole wide world.

She got home only a few minutes after Pierce and I stepped off the fire escape from our little “chat.” Part of me was wishing—hoping, really—that she’d say we had too much to do. Our wedding planner needed *this* from us; the condo needed *that* decided about it. “Paint samples,” I almost said. “Remember how we wanted to pick those out by Friday?”

But after the word “cruise” came out of Pierce’s mouth, all she could do was scream, “Oh my *God*, a cruise?! Daddy, you’re the best.”

I didn’t blame her.

I couldn’t.

This was my fault, after all, and we needed the money. I’d been the one to mess up dinner. It wasn’t as though Chrissy knew just how difficult I was finding it to be around her father. She’d never know the sort of thoughts and feelings that came up around Pierce, most of which I didn’t understand myself. So, I would endure. I would treat this like a job, with one objective.

Avoid Pierce Cloud at all costs, even in as cramped a space as a cruise-ship stateroom—nothing but four small walls and then *ocean*... Seven days.

Then fifty grand.

\* \* \*

The JFK airport smelled like it always did—like mechanized rubber and coffee. The smell came at me through the sliding glass doors. It was early, four a.m., and all I could think about was downing a very large Starbucks.

I'd already unloaded all our luggage (three suitcases; Pierce traveled surprisingly light) onto the curb, and was tapping my fingers along the handle of my own suitcase. The rhythm to "We Will Rock You," I think... God, was Pierce *still* talking to the fucking Uber driver?

"August?" Chrissy asked. She'd put on a tropical-green print blouse with a drooping neckline, and she'd tied her hair back into a ponytail. "You okay?"

"Just need coffee."

"Didn't you have two cups at home?"

*Yeah*, I thought. *I did*. But that didn't mean I didn't need more.

Avoid Pierce. Maybe I could offer all of us a coffee run before the plane took off for Miami... I almost shook my head, couldn't quite believe that we were suddenly flying halfway across the country.

Over the next seven days, we'd arrive in Mexico, Belize, Jamaica, then back again. Just the idea of so much in so little time made my head spin. Travel always made me feel like change was coming, this time especially.

"Sweetie, we need to get you a book or something," Chrissy was saying. "You need to, you know... like, mellow out?"

Before I could reply, I felt a hand brush mine. I looked over to see Pierce, my tired, unkempt hair falling lankily over my eyes.

"Thanks for holding it for me," Pierce said.

I looked down.

*Not* my suitcase I'd been tapping "We Will Rock You" on.

"You're welcome," I said, as neutrally as I could manage, then let him grab his suitcase. I turned around to grab *mine*, and Chrissy did the same.

We made it through TSA. Painstakingly. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been standing in front, but instead my gaze kept wondering to Pierce's tight ass—then back up again to the light fixtures.

Avoiding Pierce was already more difficult than I thought.

Once we found our gate, I told them all I'd grab them coffee. Really, it was just an excuse to be alone with my own thoughts, with no distractions.

I took a piss, had a semi the whole time, which nearly doubled my time at the urinal. Then I spent an unnecessarily long time at Starbucks getting everyone's orders. Vanilla latte for me, extra sweetener; matcha latte for Chrissy and... no, that couldn't be right. I checked the text Chrissy sent me again. "Sorry," I said to the barista. Then promptly ordered Pierce a venti pink drink with extra strawberries.

I didn't deliver the goods right away. Instead, I zoomed into the bookstore, left bicep aching from keeping the drink holder aloft.

Pierce came in while I was browsing.

My heartbeat sped up. I pretended not to notice, but being the guy with three Starbucks orders, by himself, in the small airport bookstore didn't exactly make me invisible.

"Mind if I take some of that off your hands?" Pierce asked, gesturing to the drinks.

I didn't take my eyes off the titles I was browsing—mostly this week's New York Times bestsellers.

"Sure," I said. "Whatever."

Pierce took the drink holder in one hand, helped himself to his pink drink in the other. He took a sip.

“That one’s really good,” Pierce said, pointing to a thick literary novel I’d been eyeing for the past couple weeks but hadn’t gotten up the balls to read yet. “Had me in tears by the end of it.”

The thought only made me want to look at him again. The taste in books that we apparently had in common, the surprisingly fruity drink. What else wasn’t I seeing?

And did I want to see?

Without a word, I (rather rudely, if I’m being honest) picked up the literary novel, headed to the counter and checked out. When I turned back though, receipt in hand, Pierce had already left.

Good thing, too, because our flight took off only fifteen minutes later.

We made it to our seats no problem, and now that I had something to distract me from Pierce—a good latte and a good book—I *definitely* kept my head down and paid attention to that first chapter. *Definitely* didn’t notice the way Pierce’s hazel eyes lit up like amber when the orange sunlight slanted through the window at takeoff, or the way he asked Chrissy so many questions about herself. For someone who was absentee, he sure knew how to be present.

Fuck, had I misjudged him the whole time?

Pierce caught me looking at him. And like a stupid teenager caught sneaking out of the house, I quickly pretended to be reading again.

As turbulence and altitude shook the plane, I felt my dick begin to stiffen in my pants. *Focus*. I was chapter three now and actually paying attention.

Chrissy had dozed off, her head on my shoulder.

Suddenly I found myself eyeing the airplane bathroom... I had to piss again. And I wanted to jerk off since this hard-on was overstaying its welcome.

*But you weren’t going to think about Pierce like that again. Remember?*

My phone buzzed.

It was Pierce. Chrissy must have given him my number.

*Meet me in two minutes.*

I swallowed, realizing that Pierce had stood up... I watched him walk into the bathroom. Watched him not lock the door behind him.

My phone pinged again.

He'd sent a smiley face.

TWELVE

*pierce*

I WAITED inside the rattling airplane bathroom, remembering the first time I'd joined the mile high club over two decades ago.

I'd barely been more than a kid, making money like nobody's business, and I'd taken my girlfriend to Italy for the weekend. I thought I was a champ. Thought I was on top of the world... until that girlfriend told me three months later she was pregnant with Chris.

Smiling at the memory, at how life had a way of working itself out, I texted a smiley face to August, really playing up how much I wanted to talk to him.

This would make him uncomfortable. The perfect way to check-in, see if he was willing to admit to himself, and everyone else, just how he felt. I didn't join the mile high club for nothing, after all.

I had a daughter to protect.

A small knock on the plastic door. If I hadn't been waiting for it, the sound could've been mistaken for a rattle. But I smiled at myself in the small mirror: August had taken the bait.

August opened the door a crack, saw that it was me. He took a deep breath, as though deciding if this was something he actually wanted to do, a conversation he wanted to have, before squeezing himself through and locking the door behind him.

I couldn't help notice the way his muscles strained under his Under Armour polo. In the compact space, standing only inches from me, I saw just how thick his chest was. *Holy fuck, how much can this guy bench?*

Unlike on the fire escape, there was no way to turn around each other, no shuffling. We would have to go out the way we came in or not at all.

Looking down at his shoes—his high cheekbones turning an adorable, flushed scarlet—August said, “What’s up?”

*What’s up?*

“Just thought I’d check in on you,” I said.

August rolled his eyes, looking to the side, to the mirror. I caught him staring at me from it, as though checking out my reflection didn’t count as flirting.

I felt my heart beat speed up, the way those big brown eyes were staring at my reflection. For a moment, my thoughts ran wild: How badly I wanted to put my hand on his chest, lay a kiss on the tattoo crawling up the left side of his neck.

But I swallowed down the desires. This was about Chris, first and foremost.

“I need to know how you feel,” I said, “about my daughter.”

“I love her,” August said—almost automatically.

We were close enough, confined enough in this little airplane bathroom, that I could smell the latte on his breath, the tic-tac he must have eaten just before coming in... And if *that* didn’t say how he felt, I didn’t know what would.

So I had to know.

“August,” I said, calmly. A whisper, so no one would hear us. “Look at me.”

He did; uncertainty flickered on his face.

“I need to know,” I continued. “How you *feel*—”

“I love—” he started.



“—about *me*.”

August’s eyes widened. Turbulence rattled the toilet seat. A distinct knock came at the door, even though obviously it was occupied.

“Someone in here!” I yelled.

“So sorry, sir.” The flight attendant. “Pilot’s ordered everyone to their seats because of turbulence.”

I looked up, noticed the sign had pinged on over the mirror, but both of us had missed it.

“Right,” I said in the direction of the door. Then to August, I said, “Looks like you’re running out of time.”

Turbulence shook the floor, knocking us both toward each other. Our chests met, groins and legs brushing for a moment... I had to brace myself against the small sink to keep from falling all over August.

*No time left to fuck around.* We had the cruise, yes, but what good was that if it was going to be *this* all the time—always talking in circles, never getting anywhere.

There had been looks since the moment I walked into the restaurant, undeniable avoidance since I picked them up this morning. I wasn’t crazy, and I wasn’t making it up.

“Would it scare you,” August said quietly, “if I said I... *wanted* you?”

That did scare me, more than even I wanted to admit. “Yes,” I said.

“Well I don’t,” August said. “Don’t *want* you, I mean...”

*Except that you’re licking your lips, looking at me like a sad puppy.* We were breathing each other’s air now, only inches away from each other.

Another knock at the door. “Sir?”

“It’ll just be a minute,” I said to the door. Then to August again: “You sure?” I asked.

Maybe it was the turbulence that pushed us together, or some subconscious force wanting to be manifest in both of us. Or maybe it was all August, being impulsive for the first time in his life... all I knew is that one minute I was asking him if he was sure he didn't have any odd feelings about me.

The next?

His soft lips were on mine.

Full, trembling desire practically sucking the oxygen out of my mouth and into his—like I were a lifeline, strung out over ocean waves to rescue a drowning sailor.

THIRTEEN

*august*

OH MY GOD, *I'm kissing Pierce.*

But I couldn't stop myself now, could only see one road ahead: One where this never stopped. If such things as cosmic timelines and parallel universes existed, then this decision had branched me into a new reality.

All I felt in the moment was the burning in my belly that surged me forward, that kept my lips moving with Pierce's.

Pierce. He kissed me back—something I thought to unpack later, after this had settled.

It was so different from kissing a woman, everything about it elevated in a way that I never even knew that I craved... the soft lips amidst stubble that scratched against my own beard, the light sandalwood musk on his skin.

Selfishly, I didn't think about the flashing sign over the mirror (it could go fuck itself as far as I was concerned), or about the wedding, or even about Chrissy. Kissing Pierce felt like a liberation of some sort.

And just like that, everything had changed.

Slowly, Pierce grabbed both my wrists with his hands and lowered my hands from his cheeks. The look in his eyes said it all, *What are you doing?*

I waited for the guilt to come swooping in, make me puke into the doll-sized sink. But it didn't come. A few seconds later, just Pierce and I staring into each other's eyes... and still it hadn't come.

Something *did* want to come, though; my cock twitched in my jeans. Pierce's eyes flashed to my crotch, those vibrant irises of his alight with devilish curiosity now instead.

Why did I feel... fine? Great, even? Better than I had in years?

Fuck—what if this could *work*? Elation at the thought blotted out every other possibility.

Turbulence hit us again, but instead of avoiding each other, Pierce pulled me closer to him, every seam of our bodies touching. I swallowed my lust as I realized my dick was touching the hardness in Pierce's own designer jeans.

“Sir?” From outside again.

“You're gonna have to calm down there, cowboy,” Pierce growled softly in my ear. “We have to make it back to our seats.”

In one smooth motion, Pierce had unlocked the door behind me and I turned around so we could both walk out.

That was when I realized there was no way for us to be discrete, not anymore. I glanced at Pierce before facing the flight attendant, saw that he wore a very deliberate, sheepish embarrassment. A walk of shame, and he knew it. Pierce seemed to have *done* this before.

The stewardess's jaw dropped when she saw both of us squeeze out of the bathroom.

“Just needed somewhere to talk,” Pierce said. “Private discussion... you know.”

Did he really think she'd buy that—with our flushed necks, the slight bulge still in our pants...? But she seemed to.

With a dismissive, judgmental wave, she said, “Please find your seats,” before rattling off with her cart to the back of the plane.

\* \* \*

“Andy?” I said, finding a spot that had shade and at least a *little* shelter from the humid wind as it rushed through the palm trees that towered over the port. “I need help.”

I pressed the phone closer to my ear, the screen already scalding hot from the Florida heat. We were about to board the cruise liner, not to see land again for at least twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours potentially trapped with Pierce Cloud.

“Oh my God, Auggie, what’d you do?” Andy asked.

He’d been my best friend since high school. We’d grown apart since graduation, but we always called each other at least a couple times a month. His growing following on Instagram as a drag artist in Brooklyn was my only claim to fame.

“*Nothing*,” I said.

“Liar. Also, where are you? I can barely hear you over that goddamn whooshing noise.”

“I’m in Miami.”

“Girl, what?”

“I don’t have time to explain.”

“You better, bitch. Going on vacation without me, the *hell...*”

“When did you know you liked guys?” I blurted.

It was something I’d never actually asked him, had always just let him be who he was. And he was Andy... now, though, I really needed help. He was the only one I knew to ask.

I spied Chrissy and Pierce standing a hundred yards away with our luggage, looking around as though I were a child they’d lost.

Silence on the other end of the line. Then, “Auggie—you okay?”

“Just, *when—?*”

“This is probably more a brunch conversation, don’t you think? Sunday mimosas. You can tell me everything.”

*I don't have time for that.*

"That sounds fun," I said, only half-heartedly.

"All right," Andy said. "Something's up. Spill the tea. You sound like you're gonna hurl. Have you been drinking?"

"I'm having..." I started, keeping my eyes on Chrissy and Pierce... "*thoughts.*"

"Okay... that's very broad, hon."

"About guys."

Silence.

"About *a* guy," I corrected.

"I'm sorry, the wind cut you off. Last thing I heard was 'thought.'"

"I'm having thoughts about a guy!" I blurted.

A tanned couple who looked like they belonged on the cover of Sports Illustrated for "Power Couple of the Year" gave me a funny look as they walked past. The wife put a perfectly-manicured hand up to keep her hat from blowing away.

"Oh," Andy said.

"Yeah," I said. "*Oh.*"

"Who is it?"

I closed my eyes, braced for impact. "Chrissy's dad."

A pause, maybe too long. "Bitch," Andy said, "you're so fucked."

"I know!"

"Do you want it?"

"What?" I asked.

"I mean do you want that dick? Do you wanna fuck him?"

Was there a point in lying? No—but I couldn't let the words come out of my mouth. Somehow *that* was going too far.

“Look,” Andy said. “This is a whole conversation, and not one for this early in the morning.” It was ten a.m., but Andy would have been up will past midnight for a show. “So how about when you get back we talk about your ‘thoughts’ for several hours, okay?”

“And what about right now?”

“Well, it’s Chrissy’s *dad*... that’s kind of a line, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. It’s just—”

“And I mean, cross it if you want to, hon, just know there’s no coming back from it. If this is how you wanna find yourself, by all means. But Chrissy deserves better than that.”

*He’s right*, I realized. That was really the only outcome.

Again, though, it wasn’t *just* Pierce. It was the whole sensation surrounding him. Like there’d been a part of myself that had been unlocked when I met him. And I wasn’t about to let go of what that freedom felt like.

“Girl, that wind sounds terrible,” Andy said.

“I’ll let you go,” I said. “Thanks... We’ll talk later?”

“Absolutely, bitch. Love you.”

I hung up.

Pierce was looking at me; he’d found me. I couldn’t help smiling when he met my eyes, finally starting off toward him.

Chrissy was waiting for both of us on deck. Waiting for me, I realized, though she didn’t know it yet, to make the most important decision of my life.

Man, was I fucked.

“You ready to go?” Pierce asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and boarded the cruise ship with them both.



## PART TWO

*the cruise*

FOURTEEN

*pierce*

## DAY ONE

AUGUST'S KISS lingered on my mouth, a ghost that drew attention to itself every time he turned to eye me up and down. It was a quick brush of young lust that singed my skin. All I wanted to do was ask *what happened* in that bathroom? Finally get the truth, for Chris.

*For Chris? A voice asked in my mind. This is for Chris—really? Or for you, Pierce?*

But I shook away the doubt of that as chlorine-smelling AC blasted from overhead and Chris lead us—both her guys—into the narrow stateroom halls.

Small-plaque numbers flickered past, our not coming up until the end. Chris fumbled with her keycard, and the ghost rose up on my lips again... August was looking at me, not shy about it anymore. Instead, he looked curious, and maybe more than a little confused.

I needed to get August alone as soon as I could. More than being “secretive,” the situation had become exponentially more complicated. Not just because I now knew August wanted me—but because, somehow, inexplicably... even *wrongly*... I wanted him back. A lot.

My gut swirled with it, a warm flutter that I hadn't felt since my early twenties, when I'd been with Chris's mom. A feeling I'd actively avoided ever since, because that warm, fuzzy shit never worked out. My amicable, but obviously lacking, relationship with my own daughter was proof enough of that. So yeah, I needed to get August alone and straighten this out. Now.

Before I could suggest that August and I head to the bar, or something equally innocuous, Chris had thrown her carry-on onto the palm-leaf comforter and proclaimed: “I say we unpack—thoroughly—and then hit the mall. I really need a top that shows some shoulders 'cause it turns out, *this* top is the only one I had that was ready for a cruise.”

Chris was looking between us, and it had never been more apparent that I would *not* be saying “no” to my little girl.

“Right.” August nodded. “That sounds good?”

Was August looking at *me* for approval?

I gestured to the open hall and let myself out as graciously as I could. Back in my own room, identical to August’s and Chris’s—cramped, with small lamps, a porthole window, and a shiplap headboard that looked very rattle-able—I realized just how nervous I was. My breath shook. *God, Pierce, you’re a grown-ass man.*

Slipping a Rolex over my wrist and freshening up with two musky, sandalwood spritzes of YSL, I checked back in with August and Chris. My body practically hummed with how much I wanted to get August alone. But I reminded myself to practice some patience.

I smiled at Chris, who was still unpacking several serums and sprays for her skin-care routine.

August sat on the corner ottoman; he cracked a grin when he saw me at the door. It seemed we both shared in the exasperation that Chris’s *thoroughness* caused. I saw in August’s handsome face just how much he loved this part about his fiancée. That made me ache a little. How much of this was *my* doing, and how much was August’s?

“It’s only for a week, Chris,” I said, keeping my tone light.

August added, “We won’t even spend most of that in these shoeboxes.”

I could think of many things I’d like to do just in these shoeboxes. If a cruise was done right, you’d ideally never have to leave the stateroom.

Chris fake-glared at both of us, and then, ten minutes later, all *three* of us headed out. On the outside, I was grinning; inside, I had to tamp down my frustration.

Chris wanted to go to the bar, which *was* where I’d wanted to go in the first place. Two margaritas each. The blue-and-green domed skylight overhead made it feel like we were

underwater. And just like that, we really *were* in the middle of the Caribbean, thousands of miles from New York.

That familiar, widening feeling travel causes suddenly enveloped me. This was my element, where I belonged. I began to relax a bit.

Slightly tipsy, we made our way to the shops. Chris held August's hand the entire time; I noticed the engagement ring sparkling under the bright, multi-colored lights. Billboard Top 100 played over the loudspeakers. Mostly Taylor Swift, really, which was fine by me.

I tapped my foot to the two-chord chorus while Chris piled several neon tops into her arms and disappeared behind a dressing room door... August stood next to me, our arms just touching. We kept our eyes on the door Chris had just closed.

No one else was around, the space oddly empty as people settled into *La Princesa* and got their bearings.

The ship swayed under us.

"You good?" I asked August, still looking at the door.

"Yeah," he said, quietly. "Fine."

"Is that the alcohol talking?"

"Most definitely."

*God.* Did August know how badly I wanted to cruise *him* right now instead of this ship? To make that corner eye-contact with him, pull him by the hand into one of these dressing rooms and put my mouth on every inch of his—

"How's this?" Chris asked.

The door swinging open brought me from my embarrassing thoughts.

Chris had on a tight, neon-green top. She did look good in it.

"Hot," August told her, smiling slyly.

I tried to suss out just how honest he was being, if he actually felt that way or not. *If he's lying, he's damn good at it.*

“Sweetie,” Chris said, “you don’t have to flatter me. We’re already engaged.”

But she bit her bottom lip anyway and returned to the dressing room to try another top on. Then another. And another... I put my hands in front of my pants, still moving in and out of the fantasy of August and I in the other dressing room... *Fuck it*, I thought.

Checking that no one was around, I took August’s hand and pulled him to one of the empty dressing rooms.

I’d never seen the kid look so panicked. “What are you *doing?*” he hissed.

Putting my finger up to my lips, I closed the door behind us and took in the sight of him. I could smell the fruity tequila on his breath, saw the lust light up in his eyes.

A couple stalls over, I could still hear Chris undressing and redressing...

“We don’t have much time,” I said.

The words had barely left my mouth before August pressed his lips against mine, furious, hungry, hot. His beard scratched against my stubble. I put a hand behind his neck, pulling him even closer against me—until our torsos touched. His dick began to grow hard, pressing against the zipper of my jeans. And I... well, I hadn’t been this hard in a long time. It was immediate, pressing, *electric*.

The force of August’s kiss pushed me up against the wall, which rattled. Chris had come out again, was calling our names. For a moment, August seemed not to hear her. He reached down a hand and palmed my hard cock. *You want it bad*, I realized.

August pulled away as Chris called for us again, shock rewriting the lust. And just like that, the heat of the moment began to leak out, like a car that had just ran out of gas. Slowing... stopping... off.

“You good?” I asked again, whispering it directly into his ear this time, nibbling on his ear lobe.



Shuddering, August nodded.

“I need to do this,” August whispered.

He was looking at me now. Like I had an answer to a question he’d posed.

*Why?* I wondered. Then: *Say it*, I thought. *What you won’t tell Chris. What you won’t admit to yourself.*

Chris had gone back into her dressing room. I heard the hangers jangling; we had only moments left like this.

“Meet me in my room tonight?” I asked. “Alone.”

August was biting his lip, adjusting his crotch. “I will.”

FIFTEEN

*august*

## DAY ONE

I'D DRESSED in my favorite pair of sweats and a plain white tee, so I didn't expect Chrissy's face to light up like it did when I told her I was stepping out to "find some ice."

Yeah, maybe I should have waited until Chrissy was asleep to meet up with Pierce. But I couldn't. The sooner I itched this bug, the sooner I could go back to... what? Normal? I reminded myself that there could be no *normal* if I was really going to go through with this.

"Ice?" Chrissy said. "Sweetie, you never go to get ice. That's what *I* do, remember?"

"Maybe I wanted to shake things up." I shrugged.

Chrissy walked toward me, then took my hand off the door handle to our stateroom, and lead me toward the bed. I swallowed hard, knowing exactly what she wanted.

We were engaged, after all. Finally alone in the bedroom of a Caribbean cruise. Even with the lamps turned on, the lifesaver-shaped sconces over the bed, I could see moonlight, reflected off the shifting waves, keeping most of the darkness at bay. Romantic.

So why was the only place I wanted to be Pierce's stateroom?

I felt guilty about it, maybe even a little self-hating, but what felt most liberating was that *that* was the truth.

Because with Chrissy leading me to sit on the duvet with her, I didn't feel like I once had—Pierce or no Pierce. All I felt was that same suffocating sensation I'd had at the restaurant while we looked over various shades of white: A vice slowly closing over my heart.

Suddenly the stateroom was bringing on claustrophobia, and it made me want to scream.

I wondered what shade of white they'd chosen for this room, and if it would end up being the same one Chrissy painted the condo in. Plain vanilla, I thought. No room for possibility.

"What do you think?" Chrissy was saying.

"Of what?" I asked, feeling nothing but the need to *run*, get out of this place.

"Daddy?"

My heart sped up. Did she know?

No—she couldn't know. How would she?

"Generous," I said.

Chrissy was lying down, but I was still sitting. She stroked the comforter next to her, obviously trying to get me to join her... How the fuck was I supposed to tell my fiancée that, on the first night of a tropical cruise, still a little tipsy from our second round at the bar after shopping, I *didn't* want sex?

Going against my gut, I laid down next to her. I thought of Pierce, lying on his back on an identical bed next door. Waiting—for me.

*That's just the problem, I thought. I do want sex, just not with Chrissy.*

"What'd I tell you?" Chrissy said. "He'll give us the money, this is just his little game. Making sure we 'earn' it or something by spending time with us. Honestly, think he's the most generous guy I know, other than you."

I looked at her, genuinely surprised. "Other than me?"

"Yeah. You're constantly putting people's needs over your own. I really appreciate it. It's how I know that you actually, you know, *care* about me."

My stomach felt like a trapeze artist, flipping through the air, maybe about to hit the next ring, maybe to splatter to the ground—because there were no safety nets now.

They'd all been taken away.

The suffocating feeling intensified, but before I knew it, Chrissy had closed the gap between us. She was kissing me, putting her hands onto my chest.

I thought I would feel some sort of arousal, like I had when she and I couldn't keep our hands off each other, but instead I felt... sick.

Chrissy was still kissing me, and all I could think was, *I don't want this. This isn't what I want...* How could I go from thinking I loved this woman to every part of it feeling wrong?

It was like I was kissing a stranger; I didn't do much other than sit there and accept whatever she wanted to do, let her guide my hands up to her breasts. Everything about the experience, the femininity of it, felt off.

But I couldn't say no now, could I? Had to keep up appearances, and that meant having sex with your fiancée on the fucking romantic cruise.

She peeled my clothes off, one by one, and with every article I wanted to tell her to stop. I wasn't even hard when she got to the underwear. "Alcohol," was the excuse I used, and when she went down on me, it was Pierce I had to think about to get up.

What was I doing? How had I started the evening wanting sex with Pierce and ending up doing it with Chrissy instead?

What baffled me most was how, already, what should have been *right* felt backwards and twisted. Maybe Pierce was onto something—had really seen something in me that night at the restaurant. Something I hadn't even known about myself.

Because clearly this shit was coming apart, and quickly.

Sex with Chrissy was nothing but mechanical, familiar motions.

I sucked on her nipples, I went down on her, fingered her... knew how to flick my tongue over her clit so that she had to cover her mouth to keep quiet. I closed my eyes and pretended my fingers were touching Pierce instead. And that deep longing sprung my cock so hard the head came all the way out of the foreskin, handsfree.

Then I fucked her until I knew she'd come, and when she did, I pretended to come with her. I thrust deep into her warm pussy—which felt fucking amazing, no matter how *I* felt—and told her how much I loved her.

Sick with myself, I laid with her until she fell asleep, never once able to close my eyes. And when it was clear she wouldn't be moving until the sun came up next morning, I slunk into the bathroom and showered.

It was like I had something to clear off of me, something dirty I needed to wash down the drain. I scrubbed until I felt raw. I thought about Pierce and jerked off until I was on the edge. Then, wondering if Pierce would even let me in now, I toweled myself off, got into those same sweats and tee, and left my stateroom.

I knocked on Pierce's door as softly as I could.

Nothing.

*Fuck.*

*See, you waited too long, and now he's not going to let you in. He's changed his mind. He heard you and Chrissy, and now this feels all wrong.*

The odd thing was, now Chrissy and I had broken our sex-drought, I'd never been more certain that I wanted to do this.

Pierce opened the door. God *damn*, those Auburn curls, messy from sleep... the deep drawl of his voice. Everything about this six-four man had me practically on my knees for him. And that image brought blood flowing into my dick.

"Sorry," I said, hunching my shoulders and shoving my hands in my pockets.

"Thought you'd changed your mind," he said.

I shook my head, letting him know: *This is what I want.*

Pierce saw the twitch in my sweats, clearly visible since I'd gone commando.

Then he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into his stateroom.

I was right, it was identical to mine and Chrissy's. But with Pierce, it felt bigger. The moonlight slanting in through the porthole window was the only illumination, everything a deep sultry blue. Like the ocean, and we were under it.

Excitement expanded my chest like a balloon as Pierce set me on the edge of his bed, the comforter pulled down, the sheets slept in. I imagined him asleep, wrapped in those sheets, and I wanted to be the one next to him.

Pierce pressed his lips to mine, and for the first time that night, I felt like I was where I was supposed to be. I felt along his stubbled jaw with my free hand. My breath hitched as his tongue found mine.

He was just as eager as I was, tugging at my tee, which he threw onto the ground next to us. Pierce stood back. I could see admiration sparking in the blue moonlight.

“My God, August,” Pierce whispered.

Pierce put both hands on my pecs and squeezed the muscles, then moved his thumbs to flick at my erect nipples.

I'd never really thought to play with them, to have a woman touch them. But all of a sudden it was like an electrical current had been wired from my nipples to my cock.

Still playing with my chest, Pierce knelt in front of me, which surprised me. I'd thought this would start off the other way around, but...

He'd pulled back the waist band of my sweats, leaving my thick, uncut dick exposed.

That thought, knowing that Pierce Cloud was looking at my cock and practically salivating, only turned me on further. I needed this to go slow, all night. Get as much of Pierce as possible, because I didn't know when we'd get the chance again.

Pierce grabbed my shaft and shoved my cock into his mouth. Hot, tight. He moved rhythmically on me, knowing exactly what to do. How many times had he done this before?

Enough to know exactly...



*Shit, I'm...*

I didn't have time to say it.

Pierce pulled back just as white-hot come exploded from my cock in sticky ropes. The pent-up energy of the night too much.

Fuck. Me.

I'd come too fast, ruined it—

SIXTEEN

*pierce*

## DAY ONE

AUGUST CAME all over my hand, my cheeks. It drizzled down over my stubble, dripping over August's dark pubes.

Breathing heavy, I looked up at August from where I knelt on the floor. I saw the lusty, defeated look he gave me. I admired his thick, uncut cock, still twitching in my hands. It looked exactly as I'd pictured it, which wasn't often the case. Eight inches, thick enough my fingers barely wrapped around it.

I stroked his still pulsating cock, getting every last drop out of him that I could... As far as I could tell, August had never had sex with another man, so I didn't want to scare him off. But I also couldn't deny the raw hunger he'd stoked in me.

So, keeping my eye on him to gauge his reaction, I slowly licked the remaining semen from the head of his cock, worked my tongue down to eat up the come on his balls and off my own hand.

He watched as though I were doing something miraculous, and even though he'd clearly just had an intense orgasm, his cock staid hard in my hands. Poor guy probably thought he'd ruined the night after coming so quickly.

Now I knew I wasn't scaring him off, it was time to make him certain that he hadn't ruined a damn thing.

I stood up, still keeping one hand on August's cock and tugging at it while August's eyes rolled in the back of his head. Then I stopped, grabbed his bearded chin, and waited until I had his full attention. *There you go*, I thought.

"Take off my shirt," I said to him.

Eager as a kid on Christmas, August sprang off the bed and slowly peeled my t-shirt off, laying it next to his own.

"Now the shorts," I said.

He knelt down, pulling at the waistband of the yoga shorts until they came off my thighs. His hands brushed my ass cheeks, and I could practically see his mouth watering when he took in the bulge in my briefs.

I stared at August, the curve of his biceps, the dark-blue tattoos over his light brown skin. That juicy cock still erect between thunder thighs. I wanted him to crush me between those legs while I choked down his cock again, but that would have to wait for a bit.

Gripping August's hair with my hands, I pressed his mouth up against the bulge of my shaft. I felt his hot breath on my dick through the nylon fabric.

His eyes wandered over my lean body. He ran his fingers down the happy trail in the middle of my abs, sticking his fingers between the spandex of my briefs and my skin.

After a nod from me, August pulled the briefs down, and I stepped out of them.

Both of us were fully naked now.

August put a hesitant hand over my shaft and stroked once, twice. He looked up at me.

"You nervous?" I asked.

He chuckled, already playing with himself again. "Yeah."

"You know what you like," I said. "Why don't you start there."

Keeping his gaze on me, as though for approval, August knelt lower—I saw his bubble ass stick out underneath him—so he could put my balls in his mouth. He juggled them around with his tongue before moving on to lick the base of my cock. My cut dick moved up and down in approval. I had an inch on August, a full nine...

My length seemed to intimidate him for a moment, and he kept himself busy with his tongue, licking every inch of me he could, kissing the head, licking it up.

That kicked up the pressure in me, a torturous, glorious euphoria that I needed released, and I needed it *now*.

With a low growl, I gripped August's head and guided him onto my cock.

It was slow, and I let him take his time. But eventually he took every inch of me. He gagged when his nose hit my pubic hair.

"You okay?" I asked, releasing him for a moment.

In response, he went back to work, faster and more earnestly this time. He swallowed me more easily every time he went down, even knew to start playing with my balls the closer I got to climax.

"My God, August," I whispered.

He kept going, building up the pleasure.

"I'm going to come," I said, moments away, the orgasm building and swirling at the base of my spine.

August popped off, not missing a beat as he jacked me, using his own spit for lube.

He looked up at me with those eyes deep as the Earth itself. For a second, I lost myself in them—and then I came, rope after rope landing on August's face. It stuck in his beard, landing on his eyes, which he closed, looking like he'd been taken to Heaven.

I gasped, the orgasm fading, then knelt next to him and kissed him, grabbing my tee to wipe the come from his eyes...

As August kissed me back, I tried to ignore the fuzzy, warm feeling that had replaced the growing orgasm, just at the base of my spine. But try as I might, I knew it was there, almost fully formed now.

And after tonight, it was going to be a lot harder to ignore.

SEVENTEEN

*august*



## DAY TWO

“SO IT SOUNDED like you had fun last night, Daddy,” Chrissy said.

I choked on my mimosa, felt the burn as it traveled up my nose. Pierce, who didn’t seem bothered by the comment passed me a napkin. I began mopping up my beard.

“What?” Chrissy asked, turning to me with a big smile. “You didn’t hear him? The walls aren’t exactly soundproof.”

I took a gulp of water then stared at my half-eaten omelet. “How about we *don’t* talk about your dad’s sex life?”

“It’s not like it’s anything to be ashamed of!” Chrissy said. “He’s only human. Aren’t you, Daddy. Like, *get it*, you know? Who was it? One of the cute boys from the bar?”

My mushroom-and-steak omelet suddenly didn’t look so appetizing.

Luckily Pierce swooped in with, “Where are we headed first?” Which was nice of him, because he obviously knew where we were headed, which meant the question was just for my sake.

“Cozumel,” I said.

“And thank *God* you’re here, sweetie,” Chrissy said. “I’d probably get lost. Honestly—I mess up *hola*.”

She did; she pronounced the “h” at the beginning.

Pierce didn’t say anything, only eyed me intently.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Good thing.”

The conversation began to take a bit of a lull—until I felt Pierce’s foot sidle up next to my ankle, making its way up my calf. Even that small touch reminded me of what it was like to be *touched* by this man. To have his hands on my chest, on my cock...

I coughed awkwardly; Pierce didn’t remove his foot.

Chrissy started talking about wedding plans, but I couldn't focus. Not on her, not on my unfinished breakfast... my eyes found the blue-and-green dome of stained glass above our heads, and I tried not to get dizzy with the spinning ship underneath us.

What did these feelings mean?

More importantly—what was I going to do about them?

With Pierce this close to me, I felt freer. Being away from New York was part of it. Pierce was part of it. But I got the feeling that both were really smaller pieces of a whole. What would it be like to have traveling as a way of life?

The fucking rub was that whatever the truth was, it was forcing me to choose. Between Chrissy and Pierce. And I hated that, right then, only one of them was the obvious choice.

How the hell had my life turned upside down so abruptly?

It felt like the drop on a rollercoaster, my gut rising into my throat.

Pierce and Chrissy had stood up. I started... *What did I miss?*

Chrissy's comment about last night still had me shaken, though, so I didn't have the balls to ask where we were going and only figured it out when we reached the Mini-Golf course on the top deck.

Blue surrounded us: The deep blue of the ocean, the lighter blue of the sky just above it. I found myself dizzy, like the vertigo I'd experienced on the fire escape. At least the strong smell of sea cleared away some of the alcoholic fuzz from snorting my mimosa.

I stood in line, between Chrissy and Pierce, stuffing my hands as deep into my pockets as they would go without ripping the lining.

The wind made it difficult to hear anything, but I registered a whistle next to my ear, moving just in time to miss

a neon-green golf ball zoom past me and shatter a margarita glass on the counter.

Shards went everywhere. Salty tequila dripped down the faux-bamboo, sticking in the turf around our feet.

“What the *fuck*?” Chrissy whispered. “Sweetie—are you okay?”

I was a bit shaken by the near miss, but I was fine.

“Two inches to the left,” Pierce said, “and you would’ve had a black eye.”

*But it didn’t*, I thought.

Everyone making a fuss over it was stirring up a delicate anger in me; I just wanted to be left alone. One of the concierges who wasn’t cleaning up the spilled alcohol came over to ask if I was all right. As I assured her that I was “fine,” I noticed Pierce out of the corner of my eye, walking in the direction where the ball had shot from.

“Thank you,” I said to the concierge, who got the message and joined her coworker in cleaning up the mess.

I squinted at Pierce, barely seeing him in the sunlight. He approached a small family who was looking our direction with worried looks. It was a young couple, with a little girl who couldn’t have been more than five or six.

*She must’ve underestimated her swing.*

A smile grew on my face, realizing what Pierce was doing. He introduced himself to the parents, then knelt next to the young girl and showed her how to hold her little club and hit it with just enough force to roll it across the turf. The ball made it into the hole, and the girl squealed in delight. Her dad was high fiving her as Pierce walked back in our direction.

The gesture made my heart swell. It didn’t matter how much of it was defending my honor and how much was genuine concern for the little girl.

Suddenly feeling more sure of myself, I pulled out my phone and texted Pierce.

*That was really sweet of you,* I said.

Only after I sent it did I realize the text could have gone a couple ways. I would have been talking about how he helped the girl with her swing, *or* I could have been referring to how he'd made me come all over his face the night before. After all, we hadn't talked alone since.

Before Pierce could reply, however, Chrissy was taking my hand. I noticed the tears in her eyes a little too late.

"Let's go shuffle-boarding," she said, wiping at her eyes so she wouldn't smear the mascara. She couldn't take her eyes off the little girl Pierce had just taught to swing a club. "I don't really feel like golfing anymore."

EIGHTEEN

*pierce*

## DAY TWO

THE WAS REALLY *sweet of you*, August texted.

What was he trying to say? He and I hadn't talked since we'd said goodnight to each other last night. And we hadn't exactly lingered after I came...

*No, Pierce, come on.* He was clearly talking about how I'd helped the girl with her swing so no one else needed to suffer the loss of another margarita. Or worse.

I was forming a response, staring at my phone when I heard Chris say, "Let's go shuffle-boarding."

Something was off in her, something had shifted. The bubbly, teasing Chris that I'd bantered with at the breakfast table was gone. She was almost... cold.

I looked to August, who shrugged, and a few minutes later, we found ourselves on the other side of the top deck, the wind just as heavy, and getting in line behind a group of retirees. It was cliché, but cliché for a reason.

Which meant, I realized that Chris hadn't said she wanted to shuffle-board because she actually enjoyed it. Something had triggered her, and she didn't want to golf anymore. I reminded myself to ask her what that was later.

My phone buzzed. August had sent just a question mark. I met his eyes and shrugged.

Chris came between us holding a plastic basket of pucks and three sticks—one of which looked like it was going to fall if she continued keeping all of them in the same hand.

August helped her out, taking the sticks and handing one to me. Our hands brushed as I took it, and a sudden warmth pinged through me.

"We have that section over there—" Chris was saying, pointing.

I may have been out of her life for the last ten years, but I'd raised her until she was almost thirteen. I could tell when she was masking it, and when she was being genuine. All she'd *done* as a teenager was mask her emotions.

She was doing that now.

Chris explained the rules, but I barely listened. I was thinking about what was going on in her head, thinking about the way August kept pulling his phone out of his pocket, as though checking for something.

My response, maybe?

“We good?” Chris asked.

I nodded; I'd played before, and even if I'd missed some of her instructions, I should be able to bullshit most of the game... I had no penchant for winning, not today.

Chris went first.

While she lined up, August texted me.

August: *We need to talk about this.*

Me: *About what?*

Three dots...

“Here, Daddy!” Chris said cheerily, handing me the stick I'd leaned against a table. “Your turn.”

I smiled at Chris then took my turn. My phone buzzed just as I slid the puck across the board.

August: *Should we be doing this?*

“Sweetie?” Chris said.

I looked up, saw Chris eyeing August and his phone with fiery green eyes.

Me: *Does that matter? What I really want to know is what YOU want, August. Whether you want to keep this up.*

And I hoped he'd understand that by “keep this up” I wasn't really referring to our hooking up last night—but to the charade he seemed to be playing with Chris. The charade he



was playing with himself, even though he hadn't yet admitted it.

While August was taking his turn, I noticed Chris looking to the other side of the top deck, at the small family playing mini-golf.

It clicked.

*Oh God.* She was upset about *me*.

Chris always dismissed my absence, told me she loved me, said it was all fine. But what if that wasn't true? Had I fucked up even more than I'd realized?

*And I'm doing it again.*

August and I both were.

We were risking Chris by just texting each other.

Three dots... August was texting me back. He was so focused on his phone that he didn't seem to notice Chris bending down so close to him; she didn't seem to know that when she pulled back...

I winced, understanding what was about to happen.

The end of Chris's stick slammed into August's crotch, and his phone flew out of his hand. Chris didn't even notice until August called out, "Fucking *Christ*, Chrissy!"

Whatever steely coldness about me that had been building in Chris since the golfing incident shattered. Old Chris was back, shuffleboard forgotten

"Sweetie! Shit, I'm so sorry. Oh my God. Oh my *God*, baby, what do you need—?"

August held up a hand and grimaced through the pain. As much as Chris tried to get closer to him—touch his arm, rub his shoulders—August rejected it all, keeping his distance. The pain in his face didn't look entirely physical, but mental. The grimace twisted into a pained grin.

August picked up his phone, the screen of it now cracked.

"Let me see," Chris said, trying to grab it from him.

A flicker of panic in August's eyes, then the phone was securely in his jeans.

The group of retirees were watching us with blank expressions. Not a single smile, not a single laugh. So serious I felt like we'd interrupted something.

"Sweetie," Chris said. "Do you wanna stop? Do something else?"

"No." August looked me directly in the eye—even though it was Chris who'd asked the question—and nodded. "I don't want to stop. I want to see where this goes."

Chris sighed but picked up the puck and lined it back up.

As far as telling the truth went... well, that was definitely a start.

One thing I couldn't get out of my mind, as we continued turn-taking, Chris smoking us both: No matter how this ended, it would probably end with Chris getting hurt.

And I, perhaps immaturely, convinced myself that wouldn't be my fault.

NINETEEN

*august*

## DAY THREE

I BIT my lip as I pumped my cock up and down, trying not to whimper as my foreskin glided over the head of my penis. Precum glistened in the harsh lighting of the small stateroom bathroom, sticking to my thumb.

In the crack under the door, I saw Chrissy's shadow move back and forth, likely trying on outfits for today's outing in Cozumel. I'd have to hurry if I was going to finish before she needed in the bathroom... I watched the handle, to see if she needed in—and noticed in a panic that I hadn't bothered to lock the door.

Cheeks filling with blood, I mentally cursed and stroked harder. My belt, still attached to the pants I'd hastily pulled down to my ankles, clanked against the tile in rhythm with my movements, sure to give me away. Why had I gotten so horny *after* getting dressed?

Didn't matter now. I was too far in. After shuffle boarding, we'd basically done nothing but lounge, text a little, get drunk at the bar. I hadn't slept all night, I couldn't stop thinking about him. I *needed* to jerk off.

So close to the edge of orgasm, I did something I'd never had the urge to do: I slid my thumb across the slit of my cock, picking up a string of precum, and lifted it to my mouth, sucking eagerly.

Closing my eyes, I pretended it was Pierce's finger I was sucking on, *his* salty precum coating my tongue... I shoved my middle and index fingers into my mouth, almost choked on them. Then when they were wet enough, I reached underneath me and did something else I hadn't done—at least not since I was a hormonal teenager.

I teased my hole.

*Holy fuck.* I needed it so bad. Needed *him* so bad—needed Pierce Cloud's dick to tease open my hole, shove inside. His

auburn pubes up against my light-brown ass.

Something slammed outside the bathroom.

I paused.

Chrissy's shadow moved again, opening another one of the dresser drawers. *It was just a drawer she slammed*, I told myself, relieved.

But time was winding down.

I teased open my hole some more, slipping just the tip of my index finger inside the tight circumference. I felt my hole seize up, clenching around my finger, but I breathed through it. *I need it... I need you to fuck me, Pierce... Please...*

That was it—the mere idea of him being so close to me, inside me, sent a shock up my spine.

The orgasm shuddered through and out of me.

The door swung open.

Gasping, I straightened up, feeling suddenly vulnerable and downright childish jerking off on the toilet.

Chrissy raised an eyebrow at me, licking her glossy lips. “You’re going to be hearing about that from me later, sweetie...” She looked over the creamy semen glazing the tile and my hand. “Might be embarrassing to see Daddy like that, though, don’t you think?”

I gave her a shaky laugh, which I hoped came off as sarcastic, then shakily reached for the toilet paper roll.

*You have no idea*, I thought.

\* \* \*

“*Sweetie...*” Chrissy whined. “I don’t know what he’s saying.”

Something inside me pulled taught as I glanced toward the man in the crafts booth. The man looked a lot like me, I thought, if I were clean-shaven. He began putting the colorful,

hand-carved owl back on the table-spread with the rest of the artisanries.

I suppose what bugged me was that the man had tried to speak to Chrissy in English, but it appeared Chrissy couldn't understand him through the accent, the stumbles, the small vocabulary... I'd never traveled with her before, but I was suddenly remembering every falafel cart we'd visited in New York.

Cringing, I switched to Spanish and saw the relief flash over the man's eyes—that he didn't have to go through my fiancée anymore.

*Fiancée?* I thought, taking the owl, and exchanging the pesos. That sounded... off. Even in my mind.

*Maybe it's always sounded that way... and I've just ignored it up until now.*

After giving the small paper bag with her hand-carved owl to Chrissy, I turned around, the afternoon sun blinding me temporarily, then saw Pierce—pretending to look at a row of hang-dried chilis but clearly taking in the entire interaction interest.

I wondered what *he* thought about what had just happened, if he was just as embarrassed.

Embarrassed. Fuck... was I really embarrassed of Chrissy right now?

Yes, I realized.

I was.

*It's not her fault,* I tried to rationalize, the closer we got to Pierce.

Chrissy didn't get out much, she wouldn't have known better.

But that, I knew, was an excuse.

The sweet spice of dried chilis mixed with the mouthwatering fresh tortillas cooking not far away, bringing my hunger to the forefront. And when we finally caught up

with Pierce, another kind of hunger mixed with it. I wanted Pierce to fucking take me. Right now or back on the ship—that didn't matter. I needed him inside me, and he needed to know that... My dick stirred at the thought, filling up with blood.

“Bus leaves back to the ship in an hour,” Chrissy said. “You boys ready to head out?”

“I want to take another look at the ruins,” Pierce said.

A flash of annoyance crossed Chrissy's face.

“Me, too,” I said.

“Well,” Chrissy said, “you two can go. I think I'm done for the day.” Then she sat on one of the wicker chairs and pulled off her left strap heel.

I didn't blame her; her feet looked like they'd been through hell.

“We don't have to—” Pierce started.

“No, you two have fun.” She smiled as best she could. “I'll just order some tacos and get drunk until you get back. Okay?”

Pierce and I caught each other's eye. Had an opportunity to do something alone together just dropped into our laps?

“You sure?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, groaning as she unstrapped the second shoe. She adjusted her strapless green top and began eyeing the stands around us for, presumably, a margarita. “Have fun.”

I started off, but Chrissy pouted her lips. “Not even a kiss good-bye?”

I hesitated, then did kiss her.

“Love you,” she said.

“Be back in a few,” I said, hating how the words she'd expected had stuck in my throat.

How I hadn't said, *I love you*, too.

Then I headed in the direction of the ruins, the orange-yellow sun in my eyes, finally breathing easy as I walked side-



by-side with Pierce.

TWENTY

*pierce*

## DAY THREE

AS THE MARKET disappeared behind us, scrubby trees taking its place, I fought the desire to reach for August's hand.

I could see something was stirring in him, a conflict, the same one I'd seen the first night I laid eyes on him. Now it was coming to a head. All I wanted to do was comfort him somehow. But to show that in public? With Chris so close behind?

I felt his hand brush mine, and before I knew it, I was lacing my fingers through his. August let out a breath, as though he'd been waiting for this, too.

The rush had already passed, so the road through this little section of jungle opened for us, gave me room to simply *be* for the first time in the last three days. Setting sun splayed its fingers through the scrub trees, blinding my eyes in stripes of gold. A small flock of macaws took off through the leaves; their rainbow tails stretched over the sky like ribbons.

Part of me hated what I was doing: Holding hands with my future son-in-law. Even so, a little part of me, the part with the gushy, fuzzy feelings that I knew meant trouble, leapt at the sparks between our fingers.

I gave August's hand a squeeze before letting it go as we made it to El Cedral.

The Mayan ruin sat squat amongst the trees, all rough dark stone, hand-carved. Ancient. The breeze wove in and out of its shadowed doorway—a hollow, alluring whistle.

Angling myself toward August, I gauged his reaction.

We'd been here a few hours before, but that had been with a crowd of tourists, most of whom hadn't spoken a word of Spanish (Chris included).

Now, I got to notice the intimate way his brown eyes grazed the stone, the hunger that lit up in him as he put a hand

against the framed arch, as though he could connect himself to the same hand which had placed it there centuries before.

This was the first time I had seen a light in him that hadn't been fueled by his lust for me. It was an intellectual hunger that brightened everything around him. Under his touch, the stone seemed to come alive.

Where was that fire when August looked at Chris? I had seen nothing but love and admiration toward her, but never such vivacity. And August was going to just settle down, in that little condo in New York, never return to *this*?

As much as Chris said she supported August's dream of being a travel writer, I knew—as well as August did—that it wouldn't bode well if August began leaving most days of the year. His annoyance at Chris's ignorance the second she stepped into Mexico was proof enough.

God. No wonder the man looked trapped and cornered.

August was looking at me now, but I'd barely noticed—caught up as I was in thoughts about him. He took a step toward me, tentatively putting out his arms to grip my waist. August pulled me closer to him... I could feel a growing pressure in his jeans as my own cock stiffened.

I didn't know how much longer I could hold back. I'd been staring at the man all day, practically licking my chops.

Golden sunlight warmed the back of my neck.

“Pierce...” August started. “There's something I've been wanting to ask—”

But I shut him up, pulling him closer and kissing him. His mouth opened wide, and I met him with my tongue, reaching up a hand to run it through that thick beard.

August moaned into my mouth, and this close I even felt his heartbeat quicken.

I broke us apart, glancing around to see if anyone had seen us—it hadn't exactly been a *chaste* kiss, after all. The clearing remained empty, the smell of steaming tamales and sizzling meats not too far off in the jungle.

Anyone could come down that path any minute... But I was going to take my chances.

“Pierce—” August said again.

“Come here...” I took his hand and pulled him into the cool damp of the Cedral ruin. I remembered how his eyes had lit up when he saw it, and that only made me want him more, *now*.

“Pierce,” August said between kisses.

Breathless, I backed him up against the wall, eyes adjusting to the semi-darkness. “Yes?”

“I...” August moaned in pleasure I kissed his jawline, moving down his neck... “Fucking hell, Pierce.”

*My name.* Coming out of August’s lips. This sexy, smart man had somehow pushed all of my buttons. *Say it again, I wanted to say. Say my name again.*

He did.

“I can’t stop wanting you, Pierce,” August said.

“I can’t stop wanting *you*,” I admitted.

I reached a hand up his tee and massaged a pec with my hand, then flicking his nipple until it stood erect between my fingertips.

My mouth was on his again, our tongues meeting and dancing. I grasped his erection through his jeans, pressing him even harder against the wall of the dark ruin. The air smelled of moss and earth, everything old and endless. Time seemed to freeze. There was no marketplace beyond the tree line, no cruise ship, no Chris.

Just August and I.

And I found I hadn’t been this happy in a very, very long time.

“Pierce,” August said.

“Hmm?”

“I want you to fuck me.”

I became even harder in response to those words, thinking about flipping August over, shoving my cock between his hairy cheeks.

But I saw in August's eyes, the pleading, lusty sheen... *You've never been fucked before*, I realized. *Have you?*

Which meant we had to make that special. Couldn't do that here, but maybe...

"I will fuck you, August," I whispered. "I promise."

August opened his mouth in slight shock—as though he'd expected me to say no.

"Just not yet," I said, smiling as his eyebrows scrunched in horny disappointment.

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I unbuttoned his jeans with one hand, pulled the zipper down. I swatted his hand away as he tried to help, and after digging past the elastic strap of his underwear, I finally found his dick and released it into the evening air.

August gasped, leaning against the stone wall.

I guided his hands to my own jeans and let him get my cock out. I felt myself throbbing in his hands... Wordlessly, my heart thumping out of my chest, I began to stroke him off. The base of my hand slapped against August's balls... after a moment, he picked up on what we were doing and eagerly began stroking me off at the same time.

I stared into his eyes, which glimmered with the remains of the sunlight, slanting in at us from outside. His panting echoed off the walls, the rhythm of our combined pleasure seeping into the ground.

"I'm close," August whispered.

I nodded; I was, too.

Moments later, August's body shuddered as he came. The sticky sperm splattered against the dirt floor, and then mine joined his. Pleasure settled through every muscle.

August leaned forward, still grasping my cock, and put our foreheads together. He seemed, oddly, close to tears.

*What are you thinking, August?*

“Come see me again tonight?” I said—thinking about how we would have to return to Chris now, and how I already missed being alone with him.

How could that be, when I’d been so fine on my own for decades?

For once, though, I told my doubt to shut up.

August grinned and kissed me one last time. “Wouldn’t miss it for anything.”



TWENTY-ONE

*august*

## DAY THREE

CHRISSY WAS drunk when Pierce and I returned to the market. Drunk enough that when we boarded the bus, she sang karaoke the entire hour back to the ship. And by karaoke, I mean that she pretended to sing along to the ranchero blasting through the tin speakers, all of which was in Spanish—which meant that Pierce and I laughed our asses off as streams of nonsense and random rolled r's poured from her.

She was drunk enough that when he got back to our stateroom, the first thing she wanted to do was peel off my clothes and have me inside of her. I must have looked pained when she stuck her hands under my shirt, trying to get it over my head, because she paused and slurred, “Wha’ss wrong?”

All I could do was shake my head. *You’re not Pierce*, I thought. A slow realization was dawning on me, one I couldn’t ignore anymore. I thought of how it’d felt, to be so close to him inside that ancient, timeless ruin. To have him in my hands.

I could only see Pierce’s face in my mind as I told her “It’s nothing” and guided her into the bed... She tried one more time to get under my clothes, but I said, “You’re drunk,” to which she giggled.

“I know,” she said. “And my fiancé’s hotttt.”

She *was* drunk, though, and the moment her head hit the pillow, it didn’t take long for sleep to come for her.

I brushed stray red strands of hair from her face. My heart was twisting in my chest, still caught between what I had built with Chrissy and what was rising up with Pierce.

With my chest still aching, I made sure Chrissy was actually asleep before making my way next door. Fuck—I was close to tears.

“August?” Pierce said when he answered. His brow furrowed. “Hey...” Then pulled me into an embrace, cradling

my head against his shoulder in the doorway of his stateroom.

Hearing him say my name was like lifting a weight off of my chest, and the sudden relief was too much. The tears came up, and I let them slide silently down my cheeks.

Pierce must have heard me, because he pulled back, cupped my face in his hands. And right there in the doorway, he kissed the tears, catching them softly with his lips.

I kissed him, tasting the salt of my own indecision—indecision I'd been avoiding, if I was honest, for months.

He took me by my hand and guided me into his dim stateroom, only one wall lamp on by the turned-down bed... He took his clothes off, and I took off mine. Then we climbed under the covers. We were both hard, and I let out a hot breath when I felt his stiff cock press against my ass, Pierce taking the big spoon position.

But there was no fucking, no stroking. Only soft kisses on the back of my neck that gave me chills even under the heat of the covers. Only strong arms around mine as I kept my face turned away so he wouldn't see the tears that came and went.

He held me like that for hours, until the tears finally stopped and I slowly crept away from a sleeping Pierce, to get back to Chrissy before the sun came up.

Pierce looked... *unreal* lying there, asleep, the warm lamplight smooth over his bare skin. He looked younger, his jaw strong but relaxed, long lashes fluttering.

Like I had been held by a god.

I knew—just as well as I'd known I was fucked the first time I saw his face—that this had somehow become more than a seven-day cruise.

Before I crept off, I bent over Pierce's naked body, twisted in white sheets, and kissed the soft lips that had comforted me only hours ago. He shifted, mumbled something, but I was gone before he could wake up and ask me to stay.

Pierce Cloud had turned my sexuality, and my life, inside out in under a week.

And I had no clue what to do about it.

\* \* \*

## DAY FOUR

*Come on, I thought, my knee bouncing on the barstool. Pick up, Andy. Please fucking answer your phone, it's an emergency.*

But Andy didn't pick up. Not the first time I called him, or the second, or the fifth.

"Can I get you a refill, sir?" the barman asked.

We'd docked in Belize this morning, which meant (much to Chrissy's delight) the barman's English was excellent. He had black hair slicked back with pomade and a striped cabana shirt that reminded me of a creamcicle.

"Fuck yes," I said, before realizing I was in public and probably shouldn't swear like that... I gave him a nervous smile. "Thanks."

He smiled back, apparently amused. "Of course."

Bright string lights sparkled in my dizzy vision, and I felt my gut begin to revolt against the onslaught of alcohol that I'd treated it to today. A warm ocean wind blew through the bar, partially outside. Humidity coated every inch of my exposed skin, and the smell of the polished dark wood and coconut was sickly. It was just me here; I'd left Chrissy and Pierce alone on the ship after we docked, made it clear I needed to be alone right now... I was beginning to regret the decision.

I watched Creamcicle Cabana Shirt mix another margarita, squeezing lime into a shaker. He eyed me, a smile twitching his lips. A realization dawned on me. *He thinks I'm flirting.*

And, fuck, maybe I *was*, even if it was a bit on accident.

No, I'd never gone for guys before Pierce, but now I found myself open to the possibility. And this guy was sexy, in a—what was the term? *twink?*—sort of way. But even as I thought it, I discarded the idea. There was no picking this guy up.

He wasn't Pierce.

And that thought just depressed me more. Where was Andy when I needed him? Even my international service plan hadn't been enough to rescue the guy from strutting his heels in a club. Well, I just hoped he was having a good time.

"You need a pick-me-up?" Creamcicle asked as he handed me the salt-rimmed glass.

"Probably," I said.

Creamcicle leaned on the polished bar.

"Anything I can help with?" he asked. "Guy trouble maybe?"

*Not unless you can make me fully straight again, I thought. And then make me fall back in love with the woman I'm supposed to marry...*

I sipped the margarita. The lime was biting, a perfect balance against the tequila. "Not really," I said, getting his meaning. "But thanks."

"Well, I can tell something's on your mind..." Creamcicle was moving away now, putting a towel over his shoulder. He winked, a lusty excitement catching his eye. "Let me know if you change your mind, eh?"

"Sure," I said. I saluted him with my drink, gulped another considerable amount down and almost choked.

*Can tell something's on your mind.*

What?

What was it that I couldn't get off my mind? What Pierce had somehow known from our first meeting...

"I think marrying Chrissy is a mistake," I said to myself, aloud, because it didn't seem real until the words physically left my lips.

"Really?"

I turned around. Pierce stood behind me, hands in his pockets, wearing a tight-fitting Gucci tee and neon-green Versace sandals.

In response, I acted on impulse, slamming my margarita on the counter and feeling the barman's eyes on me as I stood up and took Pierce in a fierce kiss.



TWENTY-TWO

*pierce*

## DAY FOUR

“I NEED SOME TIME,” August said. “Alone. Today.”

I watched August closely. Retirees and bouncy college students alike chatted and clanked utensils at surrounding tables, getting up and down from the buffet.

August hadn't touched the biscuits-and-gravy Chris had gotten for him, and his eyes were puffy, proof of just how poorly I knew he'd slept.

No, I didn't want August to go off by himself, not after it was clear just what a rough time he was going through. Holding him through the night made me realize just how deep his secret went, though I felt he was finally close to rooting it out.

But I needed to be honest, too. August did need space, and maybe so did I.

“You sure?” I asked him.

August nodded.

“I'll spend the day with you guys,” August said, unable to meet either of our gazes. “But when we dock in Belize I'm going to head out for a bit.”

“Okay,” I said.

This would give me the much-needed opportunity to spend some quality time with Chris. I wanted to talk to her about what had happened at the mini-golf course, see if we couldn't find some sort of resolution.

“Have fun,” Chris said flatly.

Chris kept her gaze focused on her phone, which I raised an eyebrow at, but which August looked like he knew he deserved.

And probably he did.

\* \* \*

I walked around the pool deck with Chris next to me, trying to find a spot where we could both plop down on a sun chair and just *be* for a moment. She had the newest Danielle Steel in one hand, and I had a tattered copy of *Ulysses* tucked in the crook of my arm.

“Chris,” I said, using the nickname from when she was a little girl. “I wanted to talk to about what happened at the golf course.”

“Nothing happened.” Blank stare behind those wide, Cheetah-print sunglasses.

“Come on,” I said. “*Something* happened.”

“Yeah, a kid chucked a ball at August’s head. Call the cops.”

I cocked my head, trying to read her tone. I knew she was hungover, but most of that should have cleared by now.

A teenage boy who barely looked old enough to be on this deck snagged one of the free loungers, placing a blow-up beachball on the other.

Chris scoffed.

“I can tell,” I started softly, as we continued our hunt for open loungers. “That I hurt you.”

A cannonball into the side of the pool. Chlorine-smelling water splashed over my Versace sandals, and I stepped out of the way to avoid another deluge. Luckily Chris was on my right and staid mostly dry.

Chris hugged herself. “Yeah. I don’t really wanna, like, talk about it. You know?”

*There*—an open table with a broad umbrella. We snagged it. Not as much sun as we’d hoped for, but it appeared to be the only open spot on the deck.

Bouncing around the topic for now, I said, “We’ll just... sit here until on comes open.”

“Sure.” Chris sat next to me.

“Chris, look at me,” I said.

She did, hesitant.

“I’m sorry.”

Chris waved her hand in the air. “We had a deal, Dad. You go do your traveling and business, and... *whatever*... and I stay in New York. You know I never really liked to leave. I’m a homebody.”

“We did have a deal,” I agreed. “And we made it *together*.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t mean I didn’t miss you.” Then she was in her phone again, texting someone.

“You talking to August?” I asked.

She didn’t respond.

“Look...” I said. “I just wanted to touch base. I saw how upset you were.”

“It’s fine,” Chris said. She set the phone down. “You’re my dad, you know? There’s not a whole lot you could do that would *really* upset me. We’re both adults now—like, sure. It hurt me, but it was my choice, too. I just sometimes wish I hadn’t made it.”

Ooh, that one stung. I’d considered that she maybe had regretted our arrangement before, but I’d never heard her say it. And knowing that there were bigger things to be upset about only made it worse.

Her phone buzzed, and she checked it.

I sensed the conversation was over and tried to get some reading done. But frankly there was too much goddamn noise, and I found myself wondering what the hell we were doing out here to begin with.

Honestly? I missed August. I wondered if Chris felt similarly.

“Do you miss him?” I asked.

Chris was smiling down at her phone. “Hmm?”

“August,” I said.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” she said, though this time I *could* read her tone. And I could tell she was annoyed. “He does this sometimes. Says he needs his ‘space’ or... whatever.”

I didn’t like the way she just dismissed him like that. Maybe August wasn’t the only one who’d kept secrets...

Suddenly I knew I needed to find him, make sure he was all right.

\* \* \*

Find him I did. He was at a bar just inland, the first one on the beach, and he was flirting with a cute, dark barman wearing an orange cabana shirt. Just seeing the interaction made my gut worm with jealousy.

I tried to read his body language from behind, the shift of his shoulders under the sparkling string lights. He almost choked on the new margarita, which made me smile, made me wonder just how drunk he was.

The cute barman winked and walked away, and I stepped closer.

Then I heard the words come out of his mouth, words I knew were true the moment I’d seen him, the secret doubt swimming in his eyes—doubt that ended up latching onto me in the form of lust, begging to be let free.

“I think marrying Chrissy is a mistake,” August said.

*Finally.*

The truth was out.

TWENTY-THREE

*august*



## DAY FOUR

THE BARTENDER WAS STARING, and so was everyone else. But that was the fucking rush—the point—wasn't it? I *wanted* everyone to know that I was so into Pierce Cloud it set my blood on fire.

*I want to talk to you*, Pierce had said on the fire escape. *Because I know what you're hiding*. A secret, I hadn't known until I said it out loud.

The truth, what I'd said about Chrissy, leaked out like a gas, going off into the atmosphere and floating into space.

Pierce pulled away, too quickly. But he kept his hands on my biceps, gripping them like he wanted to rip my shirt off of them and lick my arms up with his tongue. I felt myself blushing like he'd seen the visual I'd conjured for myself.

“So...” Pierce said quietly. Every eye still clung to us, as potent as the Belize humidity. “What are you going to do now?”

Caught up in the lustiness of the moment, it took a moment for his question to register.

What was I going to *do*?

About Chrissy. About the engagement. About the wedding that Pierce was supposed to pay for. It wasn't just me—people were depending on what I would do next. But I didn't want to think about that right now; it constricted my chest, made breathing more difficult. Wasn't one truth enough for a night?

So instead of facing it, I kissed Pierce again. And even though he hadn't received an answer to his question, he kissed me back, let me lean into what I recognized now to be a procrastination tactic.

I leaned back, stared into his hazel eyes, his auburn hair that gleamed under the string lights. I put my cheek against his, felt the scrape of his graying scruff on my cheekbone.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said. “Please?”

\* \* \*

We were leaving the bar on the mainland so we could find privacy. But we couldn’t help it; we were all over each other.

Here a nibble on my ear as we left the open bar behind, someone wolf-whistling at our backs. A squeeze of my ass as we approached the docks. There a nipple tweak, electric pleasure going straight to my dick like Pierce had clamped an amp to my chest.

By the time we boarded the ship, we were holding hands, and when we reached the stateroom hallway, small and quiet, we quickened our pace.

My heart beat out of my chest while Pierce shuffled through his wallet for his keycard.

Nothing was going to get in our way now. I knew he wanted to be naked next to me just as badly as I did, that he craved my cock just as I craved his. I wanted his thick length in my mouth, my nose shoved against his clean pubes. I wanted to juggle his balls in my...

“*Fuck,*” I said, palming my hard-on and cringing as I heard someone approaching from around the corner to the hall. “Hurry!”

The voice sounded like Chrissy, but I couldn’t be sure. The woman was talking on the phone, laughing, giggling—

And Pierce was still shuffling cards around.

Laughing, I took the cards from him (shit, someone needed to help this man organize) and finally palmed the right one out.

I unlocked the door just as a shadow rounded the corner... but I didn’t bother to see who it was. We were both in the room, the door shut behind us.

I groaned in relief, hands already reaching up to pull Pierce toward me.

“My God, August,” Pierce muttered, cupping my face against his.

Bright tropical light from outside the porthole window illuminated us both, the angle on our heads like a spotlight.

“I want you,” Pierce growled.

His low timbre did something to me, broke a dam I realized I’d been holding up for a long fucking while. After last night’s cock block, my body begged to be undone and released by this man before me.

“Then take off your clothes,” I said—with an impulsiveness that only Pierce seemed able to bring out in me.

Where was this more dominant side coming from?

Pierce raised an eyebrow, surprised only for a second, before a smile crept across his face.

“Yes, sir,” Pierce whispered, voice deeper than usual.

Pierce pushed me gently toward the bed, where I sat, and watched as the spotlight of Belize sun covered his tanned body. He slowly peeled off his shirt, letting his taugth muscles go on full display for me. Abs and obliques, lean chest with those erect nipples.

A spray of freckles covered his shoulders. I’d never had such clear view of him before and found myself in awe, sitting before him, palming myself.

Then Pierce ran his hands down his torso, gyrating his hips like a stripper.

Under other circumstances, maybe it would have been comical, but Pierce *sold* it. He actually *was* that sexy, a hot machine of potential fuck energy, and I wanted to drink every drop.

Pierce slid his hands into the front of his palm-leaf print shorts and slowly unbuttoned them, smiling wolfishly at me as he slid the shorts down his legs.

I couldn’t help it. I needed to be naked, too.

Keeping my eyes fixed on him, I shrugged my shirt off. I was so horned up that just the *rustle* of cotton over my nipples was enough to send my eyes rolling into the back of my head. Then I peeled my shorts off me, my skin still slightly sticky from the humidity and the alcohol buzzing through every nerve.

The intoxication—Pierce, the margaritas, the truth—was more potent a drug than anything I'd ever experienced before.

Now naked in front of each other, both of our cocks erect and pulsing, Pierce slowly lowered his face to mine and kissed me so sensually I wondered how I had missed this sort of connection all my life. I'd never felt more connected to anyone, more ravenous, than I was for Pierce Cloud.

Then, with me sitting on the edge of the bed, Pierce knelt down, grasping his own cock with one hand, and gripping the base of mine with the other.

He stroked me for a moment, letting the pleasure mount and build, before finally putting his mouth to my head and swirling his tongue between it and my foreskin.

*Fuck...* no one had ever done that before. Girls usually wanted the foreskin all but gone before they touched my dick, but Pierce...

“Do that again,” I breathed.

And Pierce obliged.

“Oh my fucking God,” I said.

He sucked me until I was to the edge—and then panic stole through me. I didn't want to do what I'd done before, so I put my hands on his head and hissed out, “*Espera...*”

Wait.

I don't know what made me say it in Spanish. Maybe it was the eroticism of the moment, the way it made me feel my most primal, my most authentic. And Spanish was my first language.

“*Como quieras,*” Pierce said.

I gaped at him.

This entire time? And he'd never bothered to tell me he spoke Spanish. Almost like he'd been waiting for an opportunity like this.

Pierce stood up, and I tracked him with my eyes as he knelt onto the bed, tucking his head into his arms, and turning to face me. His ass stuck up in the air, two perfect muscled cheeks.

Pierce Cloud, the most alpha, masculine man I'd ever known, looked at me like I was the only thing in the world.

Like I was his Starbucks pink drink, his sweet weakness.

"August..." Pierce said—voice rasping, animalistic, all control gone. "I want you to fuck me. *Please...*"

TWENTY-FOUR

*pierce*

## DAY FOUR

IF I WAS HONEST, *this* was more what I'd had in mind when August had asked me to fuck him while we made out in the ruins at El Cedral.

It was something only the guys I had sex with knew about me: That when it came to fucking men, I craved domination. In every other aspect of my life, I was the one on top, in control. Now I just wanted to fucking *used*.

As I raised my ass in the air, I made sure to lock eyes with August. My voice was barely recognizable as my own—a deep, fiery lust had taken over.

“August... I want you to fuck me. *Please...*”

He stared at me as though I'd gone batshit crazy, and maybe I had. But there was no pretending anymore.

We were too far into this.

“Do you have—?” August started.

*Goddamn details.*

“They're in the drawer,” I said.

August pulled out the travel bottle of lube and the condom. I heard them land on the bed, but the only movement I made was to reach up to stroke my cock, hard against my stomach.

Silence behind me.

*What is he—?*

But then something hot and wet landed on my hole. August's tongue, and he wasn't holding back. He licked his way down my taint, kissing me, cupping my balls in his hairy hands. His beard scratched against my ass cheeks, so masculine, so *hot*. My gut wound and swirled as I craved him inside me.

“Oh my God,” I said.



“Yeah?” August came up for breath. “You like that?”

I whimpered. “Mm-hmm.”

August had quickly embodied the top role, something in him let loose ever since I heard him say those words at the open bar. He slapped my ass, hard. I felt the swell of his handprint blushing up on my skin.

Hot sunlight fell across both of us: Sticky lemonade.

August bent down again and continued to eat me out, while I stroked off.

“August,” I said, breathless. “Fuck me already...”

I heard August slit open the condom, roll it on himself and lube up. Then a warm pressure against my hole.

He was going too slow.

I backed into him, forcing all of his thick, uncut girth into me. I stretched out, painful at first—it’d been a while—but soon accustomed to it. August entering me was like a revelation.

Behind me, I heard August gasp.

“That feel good?” I asked.

“You’re so fucking... *tight*...”

I rode him from my kneeled position at the side of the bed, each thrust inside me massaging my prostate as he moved deeper and deeper, growing rock-hard. My God: August was big—big enough that I had to bite my lip to keep from yelling out in pleasure.

August seemed to grow more confident the longer I rode him, until he finally grabbed me by the hips and began thrusting.

With every pulse, my prostate throbbed, rubbed raw by August’s cock, bringing me close to the edge of orgasm even though I hadn’t touched my own dick in minutes.

I groaned, spread my legs farther apart on the bed so he had more room.

August was young and nothing but muscle and pent-up tension, and I began to lose track of time. There were only full thrusts, pleasure like I hadn't experienced in years. The hot sun brought beads of sweat springing up on my back. My balls dripped with lube.

Then August slapped my ass again, ran both his hands up my sweaty back, gripped my shoulders, squeezing as he delved deeper into me. He ground his cock inside me, churned up my insides.

"I'm getting close," August whispered, falling forward so his torso was on my back. He bit my ear.

"Come for me," I told him.

He slammed into me several more times, bringing my cock close to climax. Then he pulled out, ripped the condom off, and let out a stifled growl as hot come spurted from him, falling in sticky ropes over my back.

As his come dripped down me, over my lubed-up hole, I grasped my own dick and pumped myself over the edge. My prostate still pulsed, and the orgasm came fast, exploding over the comforter.

Stars swam in my vision as I fell forward, ass still arched up, and let out a deep-rooted sigh that went all the way to my toes.

\* \* \*

We'd thrown off the messy comforter, which lay in a heap at the foot of the bed. I held August in my arms, under the sheets. Slowly, the afternoon light from the porthole had gone from gold to soft orange, like amber honey that dripped over us.

My phone had rung several times, and so had August's. We'd both ignored it. Ignored *her*.

Chris.

August's eyes were closed, but I knew he wasn't sleeping.

I put a hand under his chin and brought him closer to me, landing a kiss on his beautiful lips. His beard tickled my nose.

August's eyes flickered open. He smiled. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself."

We stared at each other for a moment, just lost in irises, in thoughts, in post-sex relaxation where nothing was wrong with the world.

"So..." I said, careful of how to broach the topic when it was still so fresh.

But it needed to be talked about; this cruise was almost over, and after that there was a wedding which August clearly didn't want—and that was no good for anyone, least of all for Chris.

I swallowed. "What now?"

It happened in an instant.

Whatever certainty had been there disappeared from August's eyes, like someone had flipped off a light switch.

He swallowed, then moved his gaze away from mine.

"August?" I said.

But he didn't reply.

A few moments later, deep into our mutual silence, August turned away from me completely.

I wanted to yell, to get his attention somehow, to demand—know what was going on in his head. After what had just happened, was he really going to tell me there was still something between him and my daughter?

It wasn't about me, I reminded myself. Not about the fuzzy feelings I got with him, the ones I vowed I'd never pay attention to again... No, I couldn't let Chris be with someone who would feel trapped by her.

*What is it, August? What's going on in your head? And why can't you make up your mind?*

TWENTY-FIVE

*august*

## DAY FIVE

“YOU’VE BEEN AVOIDING ME,” Pierce said.

I’d just returned from a trip to the sauna, and I was still dripping sweat. The last day had been torturous, because Chrissy wouldn’t leave our side. It was the bar, followed by the movies, followed by a late dinner and even more alcohol.

And Pierce was right—because all that time I’d avoided talking directly to him or standing too close to him. I even made sure Chrissy sat between us the entirety of the action movie. But what did he expect me to do?

*Probably talk to him, at the very least.*

Well, I’d love to.

But ever since I’d fucked him, my emotions and loyalties had been all over the place. How to explain that to Pierce, after finally admitting a secret as deep as the one I’d let out?

Pierce stood between me and the stateroom Chrissy and I shared.

“I haven’t been avoiding you,” I said.

A blatant lie, and we both knew it.

“Where’s Chrissy?” Pierce asked.

I shrugged. “Out shopping.”

“Good,” Pierce said, crossing his arms over his chest. “We need to talk.”

I tried not to notice the trail of freckles tracing the muscles in his forearm... Pinching my eyes closed, I pushed sweaty hair away from my forehead and said, “Now?”

“Yeah, fucking now, August.”

He’d never used a tone like that before, so harsh and cutting. Gone was the submissive, begging man I’d taken

yesterday on his bed—back was the dangerous man who always got what he wanted.

“You’re hurting Chris,” Pierce said, “by not telling her.”

I rolled my eyes; I couldn’t help it. *I* was the one hurting Chrissy? As though he hadn’t had any part in it—hadn’t been the one to text me on the plane, or confront me on the fire escape. This was his own fucking daughter we were talking about.

And ever since my realization last night, lying in bed with him, I couldn’t help seeing this for what it was: A sick joke that I wasn’t sure I wanted part of anymore.

“Right,” I said sarcastically. “You’re right. This is all me.”

I pulled the keycard out of my swim-trunk pocket, tried to get into the room, but Pierce wasn’t budging.

“You gonna tell me I’m wrong?” Pierce asked. “I saw it the moment you ordered that Manhattan at the restaurant. You’re terrified of marrying her.”

I shook my head. “That’s not true.”

*Yes it is.*

How did I get from truth to denial so quickly?

*Because you got scared.* Because I was with Pierce—*really* with him—for the first time, and it made me realize just how permanent this could all be.

I was *permanently* altering my life, and for what? Because I had a little bit of a breakdown? Because I had fucking *doubts* about my impending wedding? Who didn’t have doubts, especially right before they were getting married?

For the first time yesterday, lying with him hadn’t felt one-hundred percent right.

There was the possibility that we could go on like that, pursue *this*. And that had felt fucking terrifying.

So what if I had doubts about marrying Chrissy? We’d known each other for well over a year. I’d loved her at some point, or I wouldn’t have proposed. And, so what if I wanted

to travel more, what did that matter? I wanted a life, and that meant growing up. Settling down. Marrying *Chrissy*.

And so long as she never found out about me and Pierce—my fucking future father-in-law—then there was no reason the wedding couldn't continue. Maybe we wouldn't get the funding that we wanted, but we'd figure it out.

The look Pierce was giving me cut through all my excuses.

“Well?” Pierce demanded. “Am I wrong?”

“No.” I shook my head, trying to get in the door again.

Pierce pressed a forearm against the jam and blocking the keypad with his torso.

“Let's not do this out here,” I whispered as a couple passed us. Their judgement burned like a brand over my sauna-hot skin.

“How can I be right *and* wrong?” Pierce said. “Explain it to me, August.”

“This still about Chrissy?”

“Yeah,” Pierce said. “It is.”

“Sure.”

*Or is it what it's actually about?*

I wasn't the only one hiding my motivations. I could see how much he wanted me, even right now.

Dirty old fucker.

“You *were* right,” I admitted. “But that doesn't mean I was wrong, either.”

Pierce narrowed his eyes.

“Look—everyone has fucking doubts, right? Just because I was scared doesn't mean it wasn't right, *you* just thought that's what it meant. But... I—I can't do what you did. I have to be responsible, settle down. Fucking grow up, right? That's what I'm supposed to do.”

*Not impulsively throw everything out the window because I want to have fun. Because I want to explore sides of myself I*



*never knew existed. Because I want to travel more, or live in a condo with sunlight in it, or feel like I can fucking breathe...*

Pierce's eyes softened with the full impact of the blow I'd dealt.

"I..." I said. Fuck, I hated seeing that expression; I wanted to kiss it away. "I didn't mean that."

"Yes you did," Pierce said. "You know—maybe you're right. Maybe I *haven't* grown up, but I know some things, August. I've got a good two decades more experience under me than you do. And if there's one thing that I've figured out it's that you only get one life. *One*. Do you get that? You can give a number to the days you have left."

I'm quiet.

"I saw you at the condo," Pierce said, more quietly. "You looked trapped in there. I saw the way your eyes lit up when we were in Mexico. That, August... *that* was living. You really wanna give that up?"

"For you?" I said, not meaning for it to sound so harsh but fucking succeeding.

"This isn't about me anymore," Pierce said. "It's not even about Chris."

I shook my head. "I have to do this."

"Because it's the responsible thing to do," Pierce said, echoing my argument back to me.

"Yes," I said.

"Because it makes you happy?"

"Yes."

"Because you love Chris?"

I gripped my keycard so hard that it was leaving an imprint in my palm. "Let me in."

Stuffing his hands into his pockets, Pierce gave me a curt nod and finally moved out of the way. Without another word,

he let himself into his own room and slammed the door behind him... I stood there, watching his door.

Then I finally went into my and Chrissy's room.

It was dark... I shuffled around, trying to find the switch on the lamp by the bed. When it lit up, I jumped—hadn't known I wasn't alone...

Chrissy sat on the edge of the bed.

She was crying.

When she saw me, her lips curled.

*Fuck.*

"I can't believe you," she said, standing up, gripping something tightly in her hand. "Both of you—are you fucking kidding me?"

Then she took the something in her hand, her phone I realized, and threw it at my face.

It slammed into my brow, and pain exploded in my skull.

But by the time I recovered from the shock, Chrissy was already gone.

I was left staring at another closed door, with just me in the stateroom.

Alone.

TWENTY-SIX

*august*

## DAY FIVE

I BLINKED AWAY the initial pain, massaging the area around what I was sure would be one hell of a black eye... I picked up Chrissy's phone, noticing that it was vibrating, notifications for her messages popping up on the screen.

What I saw shocked me.

*Nick.* He was Chrissy's boyfriend before me, someone we'd had many a late-night discussion about because he'd really hurt Chrissy when he left. (*As much as you're hurting her now?*) And Nick had texted her.

Nick: *Is he still being aloof and weird?*

I watched in real-time as another text came in: *I wouldn't do that to you, baby. Can you call me? I wanna hear your voice.*

My gut turned sour, and I couldn't help the surge of anger.

Arguably, I'd done the worse thing. But she was fucking cheating, too. My gut soured. Had she been seeing him being my back while we were in New York? Or had she gone to him because I'd been too "aloof" and "weird" the entire trip?

Was this my fault?

I remembered the person I'd heard coming around the corner as Pierce and I had tried to get into his room the night before. The woman who was talking on the phone, laughing, a woman who sounded like Chrissy...

Fuck. She'd been talking to *Nick*, hadn't she?

So we were both guilty.

I heard Pierce's voice in my head, from the night in the restaurant, when Chrissy had stormed off. *"Are you going to go after her?"*

"Yes," I said out loud.

I put Chrissy's phone in one of my pockets and ran out the door.

"Chrissy!" I yelled.

She wasn't in the hall, had already gone out of sight.

Heart racing, I pounded down the stateroom hallway, which smelled like old tobacco and cheap tropical candles and chlorine, and found her about to go out the double-glass doors to the main lobby.

"Chrissy," I said, catching up to her and grabbing her hand. "Hold on!"

"Hold *on*?"

She was on me in less than a second, jerking my hand away.

Yeah, I deserved that.

For what it was worth, though, she didn't move. Didn't leave. I swooped in with my chance— "How much do you know?"

That was the wrong thing to say, and I knew it the second her mouth gaped open.

I was losing her, she was going out the doors—but a family of *ten* swooped in, dragging shopping bags, leftovers, and one crying toddler, and she and I were forced to stand there civilly while they passed... Chrissy's phone vibrated with a call in the interim.

Chrissy examined my forehead, and a brief expression of pity passed over her green eyes. But it was gone in an instant. Adjusting the strap of her top, she pushed through the glass doors.

I followed after her, walking with her underneath that blue-and-green skylight dome. The echo of other cruisers chatting and laughing bounced around us, sounding far away, and making me feel like I was alone with her.

She didn't tell me to leave. But she didn't acknowledge me, either. She just strutted forward, her fire-red hair swishing

behind her like she was in some action movie. Absentmindedly she twisted the engagement ring on her left hand.

“We need to talk about this,” I said.

*Preferably now. Before I explode.*

“Did you know you moan a lot during sex?” Chrissy asked.

I swallowed. “Never really noticed.”

“Well, you do.”

I waited for her to keep talking.

“It’s very particular,” she continued. “This high-pitched sort of... you know what, it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh fuck,” I said. “You heard us.”

Chrissy let out an exasperated scoff. “You think? I thought I heard you the first night, too, but I thought ‘*That* obviously couldn’t have happened.’ But then—”

“You heard our argument,” I said.

“Oh my *Goddd*,” she said, “you say that like you’re an old married couple.”

“I’m sorry, Chrissy.”

She rolled her eyes, still not looking at me directly. “Yeah... whatever.”

We took seats at the bar, and she ordered a tequila shot. I got a Diet Coke this time, wanted my wits with me while I navigated these breakers. I had the sinking-ship feeling that I was about to lose everything.

Chrissy took a shot, and then another. She squeezed a full slice of lime juice into her mouth, wincing and slamming it down on the platter.

“Chrissy?” I asked.

“Just... give me a fucking *second*, okay?” A false kindness dripped from her tone, more menacing than ignoring me ever was.

“Right,” I said.

But we needed to process this *together* if we were going to figure anything out.

So I pulled out the big guns: I turned the tables on her, getting out her phone and setting it in front of her.

“Were you ever going to tell me about Nick?”

“Oh. My *God*. You’re fucking my dad, August!”

An old retiree two barstools down turned his head. The bartender, a slim guy with blond hair, looked up from wiping out a glass.

“Would you keep it down?” I said, feeling the red creep into my cheeks.

Chrissy raised her voice. “Oh—I’m so sorry. Is that embarrassing for you? Is it... I don’t know... awkward that you and I are engaged, and you’re sucking my dad’s c—”

“All-fucking-right,” I said. “Point taken.”

Another shot. “And I *was* going to tell you about Nick,” Chrissy said. “I swear to God. Just... I was going to wait until after the wedding.”

That shocked me.

“What?” I said. “How long has this been going on?”

“I don’t know, sweetie, how long have you and my dad been choking on each other’s—?”

“Just this week,” I said, guessing the best thing I could be right now was honest.

“I get it—” she said, more to herself— “he’s a grown-ass man, and he can do what he wants with his life. I don’t even care that sometimes he fucks guys—it just wasn’t supposed to be my fiancé, you know? Like, this is *so* messed up.”

She reached for another shot, another wedge of lime.

I put my hand on Chrissy’s, making her pause.

Surprisingly, I wasn’t as hurt by the revelation of Nick as I thought I would be. On the contrary, I felt... relieved? Because



now there was something tangible. Something that proved there was something wrong between *us* that wasn't just in my head. And that made me really sorry for her, for the way she looked like she was drowning, looking anywhere for a life raft.

Because fuck if I didn't know exactly how that felt.

I'd been feeling it all week, but I hadn't been able to say the words. And when I'd finally been able to see that I was worried about our marriage, I'd questioned myself.

Over and over.

"I can't believe you two," Chrissy whispered.

She left the shot glass where it was.

"I don't know what to say," I said.

"There's not, like, a lot you could say, August."

The blond bartender took the old plate of limes away, staring between us like we were the fucking Kardashians.

"I can't believe he'd do this to me," she said.

"Your dad knew," I said.

"Knew what?"

"He knew something was wrong, the second he saw us in the restaurant... That's why he wanted us to come on this trip."

"So he could fuck you?" she spat.

I cringed.

"He's taken so much from me, August. You have no idea. Do you think I *wanted* to never see him? That I just *wanted* to take all his money while he went all over the world?"

*Well, I thought, kind of.*

That was what Chrissy had told everyone.

I met her gaze, really looked at her. Really saw her, the way I knew that Pierce had seen *me*. And I saw that we had been softly suffocating each other... Not blatantly. Not enough that we couldn't have made this work, for a few years,

especially in the beginning. But enough that, after a while, something would have torn us apart, something huge. Because there was only so long that I could deal with differentiating between shades of white. Only so long that she could deal with my need for newness, for space.

No, we weren't toxic. We were even quite loving. But now I realized: We weren't compatible as partners. We must have both realized it, in our own ways. Which was why Chrissy had gone to Nick, and why I'd fallen into Pierce's arms. It just happened to be that Pierce was Chrissy's dad... I knew now, however, that it might have been anyone I'd fallen for, because Pierce had been right: I was internally screaming in that restaurant, subtly strangled and unaware of it.

This wasn't about all the things I'd spouted to Pierce's face. Not about growing up, facing "life", and settling down.

This was about one thing, and one thing only.

"I heard you two outside the room," Chrissy said. She was playing with her nails, clearly trying to keep the tears in. "Daddy asked you if you loved me."

I waited, heart beating fast, burdened with what I knew I'd have to say.

And then Chrissy made it so much harder; she looked at me, with those eyes I'd made love to once upon a time.

They sparkled like jade.

"Do you love me, August?" she whispered.

I held my breath... I wasn't doing this for Pierce. I recognized that fully. I was doing it for *me*. At last—I was doing this for myself.

"No," I said.

Chrissy nodded, finally taking that last shot of tequila. She swallowed, and with the alcohol seemed to come the courage to hold back her tears.

She slid off her engagement ring and left it next to the shot glass. "Well, I guess that answers that question," she said.

Then she walked away.

This time, I didn't go after her.

TWENTY-SEVEN

*pierce*

## DAY SIX

I PACED across the top deck, wind practically taking off with my sandals, as we approached the dock at Jamaica. The broad island sprawled out like a blot of green food coloring, the water turning a light, crystalline blue near the white sand.

*I have to end it completely*, I realize. Before anyone else gets hurt, including myself. Need to make it clear this will never happen again.

I'd spent the night alone, and the morning, too. Hadn't seen Chris in almost a day, hadn't seen August since I left our fight. *Wonder what they've been up to...*

The possibility of what they might have been up to makes me nauseous. Not just with jealousy, but with a panging, hair-raising guilt. Because, shit, what if August was right? What if the responsible thing was to stay?

That'd mean I should have stuck it out with Chris's mom, tried to make it work.

Still pacing, I shook my head. No—I knew in my gut that would have been wrong. August simply hadn't lived long enough to know that "responsible" was double-edged.

My only hope was that he would genuinely love Chris, and that this would give him the happy-ever-after ending he so desperately seemed to want.

As the wind picked up, small breakers rose up on the pool, frothing with the movement of the ship carrying us through the ocean. The same toddler who'd almost destroyed August's face at the golf course splashed in a flamingo floatie, her parents laughing next to her. The dad saw me, nodded, and went back to adoring his daughter.

But it wasn't to last. The flamingo floatie grazed against the cement of the pool's edge, and it must have hit a jagged patch, because it popped violently; the toddler burst into tears.

My God... *August's right about one thing*, I thought, seeing how distraught the little girl was, no matter what her mom and dad did to try to console her. This wasn't about Chris. I may have *justified* it in the name of Chris, but truth be told, I'd been smitten by August.

I had acted so selfishly it made me want to hurl.

My phone buzzed, and the wind picked up so strongly—sweeping over the coming island—that I felt like the light smart phone would fly out of my hands like a kite.

The text was hard to see in the glaring sunlight, but I made out Richard's name, and a single question.

Richard: *Hey, sexy... we still on?*

Were we still on?

Was I still willing to pretend like my life had endless years left in it, and that I could hook up with a man who would never love me back? Was I okay continuing to be the hot, daddy sex-toy for half-closeted queer men?

I'd told August that life was finite, that it was worth grasping, worth *living*.

Was that what I was doing? Was this what I *wanted*?

*I don't know, but...*

I shook my head, already imagining Richard's hairy otter body, the lean muscles that he'd let me kiss one by one. "You're better than my wife, Mr. C," Richard would say. And we'd down champagne, and it would all be very comfortable, very normal.

Exactly what I needed right now.

After a deep breath, I texted back: *Meet you in Paris*.

Then I marched past the pool, which had calmed somewhat, ready to find the two people I'd broken and fit them back together with my blessing.

\* \* \*

August panted next to me as we rounded a boulder with a palm tree curving out behind it. I couldn't help it; I thought it looked like a dick, especially the bulbous way its base clung to the soft dirt of the small mountainside. The Jamaican sun, reflecting the pure azure of the ocean, which I could see at every turn with its paper-white beach, was blinding—so I had sunglasses on, and so did August and Chris.

Which meant I had *no goddamn clue* what either of them was thinking. How the hell was I supposed to fix what I'd done if both of them continued acting like robots?

The hike inclined, and I felt the strain take up in my calves. I was fit enough that I was doing fine, and August didn't seem to have many problems with the it either (though God, could he just look at me *once?*).

Chris, on the other hand, clutched her exposed midriff and adjusted her enormous straw hat. My poor baby girl seemed really done with this hike.

After the ship ported in Jamaica, I'd found the two of them in their room. The bed barely looked slept in. Both of them looked hungover... Neither had said much to me when I stepped into their state room—though I couldn't help noticing that Chris had already begun to pack her things, obsessively moving them from drawers to her suitcase.

Something had happened since I'd seen them last. Now there was a weird... I don't know, *vibe*... that had only continued once I convinced them to go hiking.

The trail narrowed. August's feet kicked off several clumps of loose dirt, and he froze.

Chris, expression still unreadable behind those sunglasses, moved around August and continued up the incline without both of us.

What the hell?

My gut twisted... *Oh my God, has she found out?*

But, no, she would have said something about that.

Wouldn't she?



“I didn’t know you were so scared of heights,” I said, reaching out a hand and pulling August away from the edge. I remembered how he’d reacted to being on the fire escape.

August swallowed, continuing on, as though without me. I had to jog a bit to keep up, my calves screaming to slow down. God, I felt old.

“It’s not really the height that scares me,” August said. “Being in the Rainbow Room wouldn’t trigger it... It’s the *falling* that scares the fuck out of me.”

My mind breezed over the association with “Rainbow Room” and “gay”—but I reminded myself I wasn’t here to tease him. After all, unexpected as this turn of events had been, it wasn’t as though they were going to continue.

I kept up with August and noticed Chris getting smaller and smaller as she continued ahead, grasping onto the large-brimmed straw hat so the wind didn’t tear it off of her. It had gotten stronger the higher on the island we climbed.

I looked again to August. Stoic, handsome-as-fuck Latino in a tropical-print tee that gripped his biceps, showed off the tattoos on his wrist and up his forearm. He was so beautiful. So *hot*... Even that bruise on his right brow (which they’d conveniently forgotten to explain to me) made him look rugged. I wanted to take him right now and have him take me.

But that would never happen again, so I needed to get used to that idea.

August saw that I couldn’t keep my eyes off him. He smiled, looking away as a blush crept up his cheeks, just on the exposed skin above his dark beard.

“What?” he said—and it wasn’t serious, it was the half-joking bedroom manner that I’d gotten too accustomed to on this cruise.

We rounded the turn Chris had.

She was walking back down toward us with a shrug in her shoulders.

“Do you know if we have cell service here?” she yelled down.

Immediately, I noticed August’s shoulders tense. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

*God, I’m definitely missing something.*

But did that matter?

“I don’t think there is, Chris!” I yelled up.

Chris turned around and continued on without us again, holding her phone up to find reception that I was fairly certain she’d never come across.

Wanting something you knew win your heart you could never have. Yep, Chrissy Cloud certainly was *my* child.

Chris disappeared entirely again around another bend, her legs swishing against deep, emerald grasses.

“August,” I said, “since we’re alone...?”

“Yeah?” he said.

“You sound a little eager there.”

He shrugged. “I guess... I wanted to talk to you to. About what’s happened.”

“Good. Glad we’re on the same page.”

We walked around several fallen coconuts, a couple of them which had cracked open, the milk baking in the sun. It made the air smell sweet and slightly fermented. And if we’d been walking any faster, there was a definite chance one of us might have tripped over one of them.

Clearly avoiding the conversation, I rolled the fallen coconut off the trail with my feet.

August was watching me. “There’s something you need to know,” he said.

“You, too.”

“Chrissy and I—” August started, taking off his glasses.

“This needs to stop,” I said, realizing I was talking over him, but needing to set the boundary as soon as possible. “This thing that you and I have been doing, it’s...” I paused. Then I found the right words. “It’s not real.”

Shock barreled through August’s deep brown eyes.

“I’m sure I don’t need to argue the point,” I said. “We both know this isn’t real. And it isn’t going to work. You’ve decided already, you told me that—so this is *me* now, telling you, that I respect that decision. I’m backing out.”

*Leaving, just like always. What I’m best at.*

But August wasn’t speaking. He looked... confused.

“Now,” I prompted. “What were you going to say?”

August opened his mouth, but a scream stopped him short. We locked eyes.

He knew that voice just as well as I did.

*Chris.*

## PART THREE

*the turn away*

TWENTY-EIGHT

*august*

## DAY SEVEN

MY HEART LEAPT into my throat, and I had to swallow it back down with every stride up the incline. Palm trees swayed on either side of me; the shadows they cast, with their long-fingered fronds, should have been relaxing. Instead, they scared me shitless, sent goose-bumps crawling up my bare arms.

“Chrissy!” I yelled.

But the air had gone silent.

Wildly, I looked around—for Chrissy, for help—but it was only Pierce and I on the trail. I couldn’t see anyone for miles, not until the beach below, where vacationers milled like ants.

What had happened to her? Had she been taken? Did she fall?

“Chris!” Pierce said.

I heard the raw, paternal panic shaking his voice.

The trail wound and wound, our feet kicking up clouds of dirt in the palm-shade. We rounded another turn, saw the coconuts, almost hidden where snarling vegetation had overtaken the trail, grown over them. Enough someone might have tripped...

*Oh, fuck.*

We were on the mountain now, the idea of the beach a somehow distant memory behind the vines and ferns.

“Dad?” A strangled voice called. “*August?*”

“Chrissy!” I ran toward the sound of her, wiping humid sweat off my forehead so I could see clearly.

A lip of fallen trail had caved downward, down, down—barely stopping for a small ledge, narrow, barely large enough for a human body to lie on.



Chrissy lay on that ledge, her leg twisted underneath her. Mud from the fall caked her, roots had scraped up her exposed skin. Much, *much* farther down, I saw the specks of her hat and sunglasses. I realized, with a twist in my gut, that if she'd ended up where *they* had, it was likely she'd be dead.

The relief didn't last long, though, because suddenly I realized we had to get her *up* somehow.

Pierce must have had the same idea. "Chris—can you climb?" he said, gesturing to the root-clogged slope.

With a grunt, Chrissy pushed herself up as best she could on the narrow ledge (my nerves summersaulted when I saw how close she was to falling), reaching up for the nearest root poking out of the cliffside.

She pulled with everything she could, but the longer she tried, the more obvious it became: Her left leg was useless, twisted and bleeding, already bruised. And she didn't have enough upper-body strength to get up from there.

My head swimming with vertigo, I looked over the ledge, trying to judge how far down she was... too far. Neither of us would be able to get down to her without falling ourselves.

We needed help. There was no cell service. But I *would* be the one to fix this.

"You two stay here," I said.

"August—" Pierce and Chrissy said simultaneously, which, honestly, unnerved me.

"I'm just going to jog back to town," I said. "Get help."

"I don't really think that's the best idea," Pierce said. "To split up..."

From below, I caught Chrissy's scoff.

All we'd done this trip was "split up."

"Okay, fuck it," I said. "Do you have any other ideas?"

Their silence told me that they didn't.

"*I'll be back,*" I said.

Then I took off down the trail.

Vegetation snagged at my ankles, and I did my best to remain upright.

It felt like a sick sort of karma, a rightness that it had been Chrissy who'd gotten hurt.

I lifted my hand to flick a shooting palm frond out of my face before it could smack me. My bruised eye pulsed with the excess energy I was exerting to get to the bottom of the trail as quickly as possible.

Before I heard her scream, I'd been about to tell Pierce that we'd decided not to go through with the wedding.

I'd been *about* to take back everything I'd said the day before, about wanting to be "responsible." Tell him that I wanted to see where things might go.

But now that I'd seen Chrissy hurt...?

Maybe it didn't matter that Chrissy and I had broken off the engagement.

What Pierce and I had done was wrong, right? And—

I came to the end of the trail quicker than I assumed I would and ran toward the nearest person there. He was a local, with shining ebony skin and a red shirt.

"I need help," I said.

TWENTY-NINE

*pierce*

“WHAT DO you mean you *broke off* the engagement?” I asked, feeling an irrational anger bubble up at the thought.

August paced around Chris’s hospital room.

Chris herself lay in the small bed, her leg still drying in the yellow-white cast. She stared at it, her gaze glassy from painkillers. Nurses had sponged off the mud, but small scratches latticed one of her cheeks. It looked like she’d been attacked by a cat.

“We’re not getting married, Daddy,” Chris said.

“I got that part,” I said, turning my gaze to August, “but *why?*”

Did August tell her about us? Is that what got between them? *Of course, Pierce. That’s the only explanation, isn’t it?* Especially after what August had told me.

“Do you two need a room or something?” Chris asked.

I blinked; she’d noticed us looking at each other.

I cleared my throat. “So you *do* know—?”

“Daddy, of course I fucking know. You two basically woke up the entire ship.”

I glanced at August. “Did *you* know that she knew?”

August crossed his arms. “She told me just after the fight we had,” he said. “Last night.”

Oh—so Chris hadn’t been shopping after all.

“Chris...” I started, but then didn’t know what to say after that. My God, what a mess I’d made of this.

“Is that why you called it off?” I asked.

August and Chris caught each other’s eye.

“No,” August said.

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” Chris said.

Standing there between them, in that little Jamaican hospital room, I wasn’t certain which made me angrier: That I’d been a selfish dick who’d hurt his daughter for the umpteenth time—or that August was so all over the place with what he wanted that he changed his mind every time I turned my back?

No, if I really thought about it, I was most angry because there was an opening—for August and me to see each other without anything coming between us—and now that the biggest obstacle had been removed, I realized just how ridiculous that notion had been to begin with. I remembered that this warm-fuzzy, gut-following shit was just that: bullshit.

Following the warm, fuzzy feeling had only led to disaster, just like it always did. It had led to Chris nearly dying.

A nurse came into the room, her dark hair done up in a neat bun, and began checking Chris’s vitals.

“Excuse me,” she said to me—and I realized she’d been waiting for me to move so she could grab at one of her charts.

I was just in the way.

“Sorry,” I said.

I felt my brow furrow.

Every time I tried to be there for Chris, I only made things worse—because the truth was, I hadn’t been a good parent since I decided to leave her with her mother ten years ago.

I’d had Chris with her mom when I was eighteen.

And when I decided to leave, I’d just turned thirty, felt my life closing in all around me. Chris had seemed to me at the

time to be the biggest miracle and—shamefully—the biggest regret of my life up to that point. I thought letting her develop on her own would be fine, so long as I made sure she was financially taken care of.

I could never undo that mistake, leaving her like I did. Which meant every other interaction, I realized, had just been a reminder of that pain, an opening of the same wound for her that would never close.

I was in the way of her healing.

Well... maybe it was time to close it off once and for all.

Richard was waiting for me in Paris. I'd start there. I didn't know what to do about my feelings for August, but at least I would have Richard to lose myself in.

I turned away from the nurse, who was rattling off pain-killer instructions to Chrissy, and avoided Pierce's eyes as I marched out of the room.

The hospital hallway smelled like burned coffee, the over-conditioned air a big relief on my slightly sunburned face.

Footsteps behind me.

"Where are you going?"

It was August.

I didn't respond, didn't owe this man anything. It pained me to be so cruel, but it needed to happen, even if I didn't know what the future held. If there *was* a future for the two of us. For once, though, I *would* be responsible.

"Pierce? Talk to me." August reached for my arm, but I shrugged him off, finding the stairs by the elevator and taking them down to the first floor.

I heard August's heavy footfalls echo behind me in the concrete stairwell.

"Go back to Chris," I said.

"Is this about the engagement?"

*No.*

“I get it,” August continued, “you took time out of your business to fly out to New York. You took us on a cruise—you were about to fork out fifty grand, and now we’re just calling it off. I’d be upset, too.”

*It’s not about the money, I thought.*

*You forgot about you, August. You forgot how you came into my life and threw everything into chaos.*

It was about the way I’d entangled myself in everything. Been so selfish—ended up with my daughter and a broken leg, which probably wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t stayed behind with August to talk.

On the first floor. I approached the yellowing ATM by the gift shop.

“Pierce...? *Pierce.*”

I used my international card, withdrawing a wad of cash.

Then I thrust the cash into August’s hand. “Here you go.”

“I don’t get it... Can we *talk* about this?”

Maybe. I wanted to. But if there was talking, it wouldn’t happen now. And I had the feeling it probably shouldn’t happen at all that sometime in the near future I needed to end this, full stop, engagement, or no.

“This should be enough,” I said, “for you to pay the bill for Chris after the travel insurance I bought kicks in. Then you can buy tickets back to New York. Looks the ship left half an hour ago. I’ll call and make sure your luggage gets sent back.”

“I don’t want your money, Pierce,” August said. He was trying to put it back into my hands.

His skin brushed mine.

“Don’t you?” I said. “I thought that was the whole reason I was here.”

I saw that I’d hurt him.

The look in his eyes was what I’d seen in Chris’s mom the night of my thirtieth birthday party. She’d thrown it special for

me, and I'd ruined the entire affair by getting high. High, because I couldn't face the mistakes I made—couldn't consolidate them with what I really wanted.

I didn't want to hurt him. But I needed to. Now that I knew there was even a *chance* we could see each other, I needed to make the boundary clear. Otherwise that gap was just going to loom in front of me, terrifying. I knew what lay on the other side of that chasm: Divorce. Children who hated your guts.

“Tell Chrissy I'm sorry,” I said.

Mustering the courage, I turned on my heel and left August standing next to the ATM, the cash falling limply by his thigh.

*Fuck those sexy legs of his*, I thought.

It would take me the entire cab ride to the airport before I got them out of my head.

And even longer before I could close my eyes without seeing his big brown ones, full of longing, and brimming with disappointment.



THIRTY

*august*

“WHAT COLOR DO you think my cast is?” Chrissy asked, clearly trying to insert some humor into the situation.

We were waiting to board the plane from Jamaica to New York, sitting as comfortably as we could in the too-small waiting seats. Chrissy stretched out both legs in front of her in an impressive man-spread, her left one plastered and nearly immobile.

“Eggshell?” I guessed.

She looked over her cast, pursing her lips. “That sounds about right... maybe a little creamier, though? Ivory?”

It had been funny for a moment, but now it wasn't. The association—our condo—was too much.

Only a week ago, we'd been shuffling through those options like poker cards, the winning shade to be the backdrop to our new life—*not*, so far as I could tell, a representation of our now broken relationship.

Boarding started fifteen minutes later than it should have, which meant everyone from the receptionist to the flight attendants did their fucking utmost to *rush* us to our seats.

Chrissy, limping, and on crutches, took a comically long time getting down the aisle. First, she couldn't get onto the ramp without my holding her from the side. Then, the crutches caught on the bolted bottoms of the airline seats, nearly tripping us twice. And by the time we finally settled down, I saw by Chrissy's shiny eyes that she knew everyone was staring. It didn't help that, only thirty seconds before, she'd

nearly missed hitting some grandma's boobs when she swung her crutches up into the bulging carry-on cabinet.

"It's okay," I told her quietly. And even though we were past it, I gripped her hand.

If I couldn't be anything else, I at least wanted to be a friend. For this one last bit. Because right now, she had none. Even her dad had left her, once again.

Pierce. Where was he right now?

As the flight attendant began going through takeoff procedures, her tone clipped and tired, I took out my phone. The attendant had just said for us to toggle them to Airplane Mode, or to turn the off completely. But I had something to say before then, and I wasn't sure if I could hold it inside much longer.

It bugged the shit out of me that Pierce thought this had all been about the money. Maybe it *was*, in the beginning. But it wasn't, and hadn't been, for days now. If I was never going to see this man again, I at least needed to let him know that these last seven days had meant something to me.

"What are you doing?" Chrissy hissed, looking down at the phone in my hands, where I was pulling up Messages. When she saw who I was texting, she breathed, "Oh my God... Of course."

I didn't say anything, was only focused on getting my text together.

How to start?

Pierce. Hey, Pierce! Dear Pierce... Fuck, what was wrong with me?

The flight attendant repeated the instructions about put-away cell phones.

*Not yet.*

I started.

*Hey... Look, I know you were clear about how you want things to go. But do you have a second?*

Three dots loaded up.

Chrissy shifted uncomfortably.

Pierce: *What is it?*

A little cold, I thought.

I breathed through my nerves and continued.

Me: *I don't like how things ended. With Chrissy and all, it was a bit fucked, you know? But I wanted you to know—*

“Sir, I’m going to have to have you put your phone on Airplane Mode.” The flight attendant was standing next to us.

Embarrassed, Chrissy rubbed her tired eyes.

“Oh, I am,” I said.

The flight attendant, a blonde (who maybe I would have found attractive under other circumstances, if I hadn’t been so pent-up about Pierce still) smiled. Too polite. She could see that I was texting, and we both know it.

“Just—give me a second,” I said.

Thank fucking Christ—she heard the coolness in my voice.

And I finished.

Me: *It meant something to me, this weekend. Thank you.*

The plane was already starting to move, turning around in the airport landing strip, making me dizzy. I fastened my seatbelt, my gut churning more with nerves about those fucking *dots* on my screen than the impending takeoff.

Then Pierce texted the words that made my heart start to congeal over, let it sink in just how ridiculous I’d been holding on to any hope at all—that he had felt the same. No “your welcome” for the thanks, no acknowledgement of my words at all. Just—*I think we’re done here, August. Don’t text me again.*

So, I did the only thing I could do after that.

I deleted Pierce’s number, then I put my phone in Airplane Mode.

Chrissy and I didn’t talk the entire flight.

THIRTY-ONE

*pierce*

I ADJUSTED myself in the airplane seat, finally opening the cheap paperback I'd gotten in the bookstore and which I'd been avoiding for hours since takeoff. Nothing like a good detective thriller to get my mind off August. Anything more literary would have made me think too much—maybe even self-examine.

Worse, it would have reminded me of August.

Just like that, with one text to him, it was officially over. No going back from it; that had been the point.

As soon as I'd arrived at the airport in Jamaica, by myself, a sudden clarity had washed over me. I'd been holding out hope that maybe August and I could reconnect some other way, see each other again. But that was fucking ridiculous. I needed to grow up.

So I had.

The only question was—after so much possibility had opened up and closed again, leaving me wanting—what did I do now?

A wrinkled, rockstar of a woman sitting next to me coughed. "Pardon me," she said—before immediately flinging herself headfirst into a coughing fit that had myself, and several people around us, genuinely questioning if she was going to make it out alive.

It was the middle of the night, flying over the Atlantic Ocean, and most people had been asleep. Until now.

“You all right?” I asked, when the cough had subsided, my thriller forgotten for the moment.

“Certainly better than you are, my dear,” she said.

My mouth fell open, a little shocked.

She, a woman who had to be in her seventies, with a pink butch haircut, a tattoo of a cigarette down her middle finger, and a nose ring had nearly stopped breathing and she told *me* I was worse for wear?

“I only mean,” she said, patting my thigh, “that you look like you’ve been through Hell, dear.”

My God. Was I *that* obvious?

“Must be why you’ve resorted to that book,” she continued, gesturing to the thriller. She’d painted her nails deep purple.

“You’ve read it?” I asked.

“Of course!” she said, a little distractedly, trying to get the attention of the night flight attendant. “It was the CIA agent’s wife who did it. Got jealous of his mistress, decided to frame him as a double. Pretty good twist, actually. Ah, yes... can I get a vodka soda with cranberry? Thanks, dear.”

*The CIA agent’s wife*. Right. Well, there was that plot ruined. My God... I closed the paperback and set it on the open pop-up tray in front of me.

Less annoyed than I should have been, I found myself taking in this woman with new eyes, trying to pinpoint her. What kind of person was so frank as to just *say* that?

“Oh don’t stop reading on my account,” she said, while the flight attendant made her drink. She accepted it and stuck the small straw between scarlet lips, winking at the gorgeous attendant. “Oh that’s a good one. My name is Sheila by the way.”

“Pierce,” I said.

Sheila eyed the paperback. “So what’s got you so worked up that you stare at that thing for four hours without cracking

the spine? Hardly high literature but that plot sure has legs. Can't get away from it once you start."

Damn, she was observant.

When I didn't reply, Sheila said, "What's his name?"

I narrowed my eyes in mock suspicion—though I *was* genuinely curious. "How'd you know it was a 'he'?"

Shrugging, Sheila said, "You can usually tell about people... I also snooped and looked at the contact on your phone when you were texting before takeoff."

I chuckled.

"Dear," she said, "you're in *trouble*."

"And why's that?"

"You've got the look of a love-sick puppy-dog."

"Doesn't matter," I said. I couldn't believe how easy it felt to open up to this woman. "It would never work."

"And why's that, dear?"

"He was my daughter's fiancé."

"Was' being the operative word I'm assuming."

"They just broke it off."

"I see why!" she sipped her vodka soda between those pursed, scarlet lips. "That's pretty fucked up, if you ask me."

Shame crept into my cheeks, and I almost said, "I know".

"But there's no going back for him now?" she said.

"Not really..."

"Because...?" Sheila spread her hands wide.

"That's not for me," I said.

"You lost me, dear. *What's* not for you?"

"Relationships."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons."



“Any you want to share with the class?”

I picked up the book again, leafed through the pages, the sharp, glue-smelling edges of the pulp paper. What was it I’d said to Chrissy’s mom?

“I can’t be tied down,” I said. “It makes me claustrophobic, having to be with one person all the time.”

Sheila nodded. “All right. If that’s how you feel... then there’s only one thing for you, dear.”

“What’s that?”

“Move on.”

Those two words—*move on*—hit with a force they shouldn’t have been able to possess.

I stared down at the book, at the man on the cover running toward some dark, urban alley like his life depended on it.

Move on. I’d done that before, just once.

Why did the second time feel, impossibly, harder?

“How do you do that?” I asked quietly. I suddenly didn’t feel like my forty-one years at all.

“When my wife died,” Sheila said, “I spent years being angry at her for leaving me. Angry at the Universe for taking her. But then my best friend took me out for a night on the town—I hadn’t been out of the house for weeks, mind you—and she said, ‘Surprise, surprise, Sheila dear... everybody dies.’”

Her eyes sparkled, and I found my own face burning with the emotionality in her old, frank voice.

“My point is,” Sheila said, “you don’t ‘move on.’ Moving on *happens* to you. Eventually. You just have to have the fucking patience to hurt in the meantime, hmm?”

I was quiet after that, the hum of the aircraft lifting us over miles of ocean, that hum the evidence that we were still here, still kicking.

“I lied about the CIA agent’s wife, by the way,” she said.

“Really?” I said, glad for the change of pace.

“*Really*. It was the president.”

I laughed, realizing that both had probably been lies, even if the rest of what came out of her mouth was nothing but the truth.

She set her head against the seat and stared out the pitch-black window, the vodka soda only half drunk.

Smiling to myself, I cracked the book open again.

*Thank you*, I thought.

That’s what I would do. I’d meet Richard in Paris, go back to my business. Call Chris when the time felt right.

For now, I’d read my book.

I’d move on.

THIRTY-TWO

*august*

FUCKING IRONIC, I thought, that I was moving out of the condo while trying to *move on* from this week. This fucking week... where my life, and my sexuality, had all turned inside-out and backward.

Putting the last box into Andy's crowded loft apartment, which he shared with a dozen other queer New York performers, all I wanted to do was order a pizza, crawl under blanket on the fraying couch, and not wake up for a week.

But with the five gay men throwing shade at one another in the kitchen, that wouldn't be a possibility any time soon.

"Get in here, bitch!" Andy said cheerily when he saw me, holding his arms wide for me to hug him.

I did, surprised by how strong his arms were. Andy looked willowy, but it was all bone and muscle, with a mop of curly black hair cut fashionably with buzzed sides.

"Ooh, someone's been working out," Andy said, turning his flirt all the way up. Maybe he thought it would help me feel better about myself. "That chest..." he made a squeezing motion with his hands. "Grrrr..."

It didn't make me feel better.

It just made me think of Pierce.

"So you and Chrissy," Andy said. "You're really done?"

As if to emphasize the point, Chrissy honked, loud and incessant, from outside.

"I guess I'd better say good-bye," I said.

Andy gave me a sympathetic look. “Oh, hon... You want me to go with you?”

I rolled my eyes, which Andy seemed to take as a “yes.” He followed me out the loft, down the steep cement stairs to the red sports car on the curb.

Chrissy had rolled down the passenger-side window. She looked a little ridiculous all stuffed into the tiny car like that, her seat pushed back farther than usual to accommodate for the cast on her left leg.

We hadn’t wasted any time in packing up my shit the second we landed in New York yesterday; when Andy told me it would be all right to crash at his place, we’d brought out the boxes... it hadn’t been difficult. I’d only just moved *into* the condo after all. A dozen boxes later, most filled with books, and we were done.

The packing had distracted me from having to face this between Chrissy and me: The good-bye.

Now that all the boxes were in Andy’s loft, though, I realized with crashing finality that this was... *it*. She was about to drive away, and we’d be over.

That fast.

“So...” I said awkwardly, bending so I could see her better. “I’ll text you, I guess?”

Tears welled up in Chrissy’s eyes, and she looked away from me. “Sure,” she said. “Or not... whatever.”

I understood; there really wasn’t much to say.

Still, I was glad I’d said it. Made it feel like this wasn’t forever.

Chrissy smiled at me, then drove off. Her wheels peeled against the pavement as she made a right turn too quickly.

“Harsh, babes,” Andy said. “You wanna get brunch?”

I shook my head, staring at the spot where Chrissy’s car had been. “Not really.”

“Too bad.”

“We have to unpack.”

“You have your whole life to unpack, bitch. Starting with how you apparently like men now. Brunch, August. *Now.*”

\* \* \*

Three mimosas later, Andy looked at me over his steaming cup of black coffee, raising his eyebrows.

“So you and Chrissy are broken up now. And you cheated on her with her *dad*... but she was also cheating on you with Nick, for, like, weeks.”

“Tha’ss about it,” I agreed, looking morosely down at my empty mimosa glass.

Andy noticed me watching the dregs of my alcohol. “Bitch, eat something. I ain’t gonna stop you from drinking them, but you better not embarrass me in public.”

I picked at a piece of sourdough toast.

“The whole goddamn thing, August,” Andy said.

He sipped his coffee while I munched. The butter and carbs *did* feel good. They felt like they were waking me up from a dream I’d been having for the last two days, ever since Chrissy’s fall.

“So,” Andy said, “I guess my question is... Why don’t you just go get Pierce back?”

I shook my head. “It’s not that simple.”

“Right—kind of how you suddenly find guys attractive.”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Maybe I always did a bit? There was just never anyone that great to care about, to... *see* that way.”

“Well that’s hurtful.”

“You know what I *mean*, Andy,” I said. “We’re friends.”

“That’s as much as *you* know. I had a crush on you for all of high school, you know that.”

I half-smiled.

“You’re saying if I asked, you would’ve made out with me?”

I laughed.

“So much wasted time.” Andy shook his head in fake disappointment.

“I just *thought*—” I said, back on the topic of Pierce—“that it wouldn’t work. I messed too many things up getting there.”

“I’m confused. You and Chrissy aren’t a thing anymore, girl. Get your head on straight! Or, you know, *not* straight.”

“Relationships make you settle down. They’re... constricting.”

“That’s your trauma talking, bitch.”

“No—I’m *serious*!”

“Because of Chrissy? You know Pierce would never do that. From what you’ve told me, he only let you go because *you* said you wanted to settle down.”

Fuck. *He’s right...*

“But I don’t,” I said.

“Right. Did you tell *him* that?”

I shake my head.

And with a sinking feeling, I realize I probably never would be able to.

Because like an idiot, I’d already deleted his number, and the only person who had it had just driven away.

*Maybe that’s a good thing*, I thought—and asked the waiter for another mimosa.

To which Andy said, “No, actually, he’ll have a coffee. Thanks, hon.”

THIRTY-THREE



*pierce*

I WANTED to lose myself in Richard. Which, theoretically, should have been easy.

I'd done it so many times before.

But from the moment I stepped into our little place in Paris, and he kissed me—hard and passionate—I couldn't help the sinking feeling it all put into my gut.

"I've missed you, Mr. C," Richard said, shrugging off the tie he'd been wearing, taking my Barberry hoodie from off my torso. "*Fuck*, Pierce... you're so sexy."

That normally would have got me going, seeing this lean otter go ravenous for me.

Richard shoved me onto the enormous couch, where I almost disappeared in the decorative pillows. He knew how to throw me around, and usually I would have relished in that. But not now.

Why? Why couldn't I just relax?

I knew why; of course I did. I just didn't want to admit it, because I was... "moving on" as Sheila had put it.

Richard was on top of me in the dim living room, the can lights soft above us. The apartment was late nineteenth-century, the perfect Parisian paradise. I'd never noticed just how intricate the crown molding, almost like—

"Pierce?"

"Yeah?" I met his eyes while he palmed my dick, hard between us and struggling against the constraints of my jeans.

Richard's brows creased, then he came down on my neck, landing subtle kisses along my jawline, licking his way down to my clavicle.

*Just relax*, I told myself. *Just accept it, loose yourself in it.* It should have been east. Like riding a bike. Like swimming... But this wasn't swimming.

This was a man I'd once had feelings for, a man who was married, who would be here for a week or two. And then I wouldn't see him for a year—because he was busy. With his *wife*, and I'd be left to do my own thing.

Which was what I wanted. Wasn't it.

That was... what I wanted... right?

"Okay." Richard was sighing, lifting himself off the cushions. "What's going on, old man?"

"Sorry," I said, clearing my throat.

I didn't realize just how passive I was being. Sure, I made a great bottom with Richard—but that had never meant *passive*.

"God," I said. "I'm no fun right now."

"You can say that again."

I rubbed sand from my eyes, realizing just how tired I was, how much I wanted my sweatshirt back on.

"Can you make us some coffee?" I asked. "I think I'm just a little jet-lagged."

Richard pursed his lips, but he didn't complain. He went to the kitchen, flipped on a switch, and began toggling controls at the almost space-age espresso machine.

A long leap off from cheap, hotel coffeemakers.

While Richard worked, I slid my hoodie back on and opened the French doors to the patio. The air was fragrant, and a temperature that was just-right.

I stepped out onto the marble, past the small, round table just next to the double-wide doors.

The sun had just set over Paris, and the effect was a sort of floral glow that hit the off-white buildings. Cars flew along meandering streets with no sense to them at all. The Eiffel Tower was part of the view, too, lit up on the horizon. It was like I'd stepped into a painting.

August would've loved this place.

My God, I needed to get that boy out of my head. Moving on—letting it pass over me until I forgot, until I was indifferent—turned out to be far more difficult than I remembered it being.

And I couldn't even lose myself in sex this time. In all actuality, thinking about sleeping with Richard made me sick.

From inside, I heard the espresso machine sputter and steam, followed by the steady stream of liquid pouring out into mugs. A pause... Now Richard was steaming the milk.

For just a *moment*, I imagined what it would be like for August to be making us espresso. What it would be like to have someone, a partner, who I could call mine—and I could be theirs, who'd come outside and wrap his arms around me...

I rested my arms against the stone railing of the balcony, remembering the couple I'd seen at the New York crosswalk minutes before meeting August.

I realized now that what I'd been feeling... was *envy*.

Not to settle down, necessarily, but to *have someone*. Be with someone. A level of intimacy and consistency and love that I didn't even know I'd been craving until this.

And as Richard stepped out, handing me an oversized latte mug, I understood just how far *this* was from what I truly wanted. How shallow and childish it was beginning to feel.

*My God, I think I'm going to hurl.*

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay," Richard said. He smiled slyly, "I honestly figured it would happen, sooner or later."

"What?" I asked.

“You found someone. That’s what it is, right? You found someone, and now you don’t want to do... *this*... anymore.”

God, he’d hit that on the head.

“He’s one hell of a lucky guy,” Pierce said.

Again with the assumption. I was bisexual and, I thought, pretty masculine-presenting. I wasn’t offended, but it *did* seem curious.

“How’d you—?” I started.

“Mr. C, you take dick too well to end up with a woman.”

I smiled, then laughed, realizing I was blushing... I took a sip of latte, which really *was* good, and continued looking at the newly-lit Paris.

“I don’t know what to do now,” I said.

“I think you and I both know that’s a lie.”

“You don’t know... I don’t think it is, this time.”

“I know *you*, Pierce. You’re going to go after him.”

I scoffed, somewhat surprised, until I realized he was right. There really had never been any other option.

Richard was looking at me with a twinkle in his eye. “It was good seeing you, Richard. Invite me to the wedding?”

THIRTY-FOUR

“BITCH,” Andy said from the open kitchen, “listen closely.”

I tilted my head toward him from where I lay on the couch, one of Andy’s crocheted blankets wrapped around my muscled body. I was sure I looked ridiculous, but twenty-four hours into living here, boxes still unpacked by the front door, the self-pity was beginning to feel like a close friend.

“What?” I mumbled.

“You’ve gotta do something else. The guys and I have been talking—”

“So I’ve heard.”

“And we all *agree* that this has got to stop.”

“No.”

“Do you hear yourself right now?”

I sat up. My stomach grumbled, and my head hurt.

“You’re beginning to *smell*, August.”

“I am *not*...” But then I sniffed my left armpit and winced.  
“Fuck, you’re right.”

“I am right. And you’re getting off that couch today. You’re gonna walk your sorry ass down to a Starbucks, and you’re going to sober up, get some translation work done—or whatever it is you do. And tonight, you can come with me to the club. If you’re really gay, or bi, or whatever, we need to get you cultured. A bunch of queens in heels should do the trick.”

Setting my jaw, I looked at him from behind the couch. That did sound great... One thing bugged me, though: Was I *out*?

“By the way, are you going to tell your parents?” Andy asked, as though reading my mind. He looked at himself in the hall mirror by the kitchen, fluffing his curly hair into a pouf.

“I haven’t really thought about it,” I said.

“Yeah, maybe that isn’t such a good idea.”

Mom and Dad. The staunchest Mexican-Mormon parents Andy, or anyone else, had had the pleasure of meeting.

I didn’t want to *think* about what they’d have to say if I had that conversation with them. Hispanic culture plus fundamentalism was a fucking potent combo, one which I felt like might explode if I tugged on the wrong wire.

Say, the *sexuality* wire.

Being the chubby kid pre-high school had been difficult enough.

“Doesn’t matter,” Andy said, turning to me. “We can think about that later. Right now, you just need to shower.”

Right... shower, Starbucks, work, drag queens.

On the surface, that sounded about right. Internally, though, I knew that wouldn’t be enough. That wouldn’t *fix* what was wrong inside me right then.

Andy seemed to sense the energy shift. He sighed. “What’s wrong now?”

I lay back down, let my head hit the armrest.

“Is this about Pierce?” Andy asked.

“I can’t get him out of my head.”

“Do you want to?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I just feel like... I don't know, like it might have worked? Everything lined up—like it was meant to be or some shit—but... Pierce left because *I* lied to him about what I wanted, Andy. I lied to him. Again.”

“Then tell him.”

“I don't have his number anymore.”

A pause, pregnant with sarcasm.

“What?” I said, half-sitting up to catch his look.

Andy rolled his eyes, then began listing off on his fingers, “Facebook, Insta, fucking *Myspace*—”

“Myspace?”

“Bitch, he's old enough. Not to mention Chrissy. Why don't you just ask her?”

I cringed. That sounded like the least likely solution.

But Andy was right; “I don't have his number anymore” was just an excuse.

“Better yet,” Andy said, “do you know where he is?”

“Paris.”

“Well, I'd start there.”

“What do you mean, ‘start there?’ I can't just up and leave for fucking Paris.”

“Do you have enough money for a plane ticket?”

“Yeah, but...”

“August. Bitch, listen closely. You are the least impulsive person I know. You don't usually eat a *sandwich* without considering every fucking macro. You were impulsive last week, and it paid off, right? Are you telling me you wish you and Chrissy were still suffocating each other?”

Couldn't argue with that.

“I was gonna have you go to Starbucks to get your ridiculously handsome self out of here for a bit so I could



watch the Kardashians in peace. But let's be honest... you weren't going to get any work done, were you?"

"No," I said finally.

"Then, girl, get your impulsive ass to the JFK and don't you dare send me a text unless it's a pic of the Eiffel Tower."

## PART FOUR

*the hookup*

THIRTY-FIVE

*pierce*

THE STORM CAME on us just as the plane began to cross the English Channel.

It woke me up from the short nap—one I'd fallen into quickly, now that I knew what I needed to do—as thunder jostled the cabin. A little girl a few seats up began to cry, and her mom did everything she could to console her.

I licked my lips, the dream coming back to me. I'd held August in my arms, and it was just us two on a beach in Cozumel. We'd made love inside a Mayan ruin, then watched the sun setting. Of course, in the dream, the sunset never ended—it just extended across the sky in a single, blue-pink ribbon.

Smiling to myself, I nuzzled my head back against the headrest, ready to fall back asleep. It would be hours until we landed in New York, and I wanted to see August's face again before then.

The storm had other ideas, however, and soon the captain's voice crackled over the intercom.

“Due to inclement weather, we'll be landing in Heathrow Airport until further notice... We apologize for the inconvenience.”

Well, shit.

\* \* \*

Heathrow Airport wasn't all bad. I loved London. And under other circumstances (read, *normal* weather) I might have tried to find a pub. Of course, if the weather had been normal, I wouldn't be here in the first place. Because I'd left Paris to get August back, hadn't I?

"Oh my God," I said, seeing the pink butch-cut in the waiting area, "Sheila?"

"Pierce!" Her old, wrinkled face—with mauve lipstick on thin lips—lit up as she smiled.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her.

"On my way home," she said.

"That wasn't a very long trip to France," I said.

"I could say the same about yours..." She eyed me up and down, gave me a look that other people had told me *I* sometimes gave them. It was a look that said she knew more about myself in that moment than I did.

"Fuck," she said. "You're going back for him, aren't you?"

"I am," I said, chuckling.

"Good. Good. I see 'moving on' is working itself out, then."

"That it is."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then I asked, "What cut the France trip short?"

"Nothing, dear," she said. "It was just as long as it was supposed to be. A friend wanted me to give her Eulogy. So I did. Now I'm going home... or, I *would* be if it weren't for this damned storm..."

I don't know what I'd expected her to say, but it wasn't that; it sobered me up.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She waved a hand.

"Surprise, surprise..." she said.

“Everybody dies,” I finished for her.

She winked. “Exactly.”

I wondered, then, if it was the same friend. The one who’d pulled her out of her depression after the death of her wife.

I had a sneaky suspicion that it was.

“I’m glad you’re going after him, dear,” Sheila said. “You only get one life, you know.”

“Wise words,” I said.

“Yes—well... one life, and all that. And still it has a way of making you wait, doesn’t it? *Slow down*, it says. Damn storm.” And she lifted up her middle finger to the unseen sky, the cigarette tattoo waving in front of me.

“Damn storm,” I agreed.

Smiling, I looked at the windows, barraged with sheets of rain. No, I wasn’t where I wanted to be right then, but I was at least moving in the right direction.

And that was enough for now. Something said this would work itself out.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Sheila, realizing from the tapping of my foot how badly I needed to piss.

She smiled at me, said, “Bring me a coffee on your way back, won’t you?”

“From the bar?” I asked. “Or the café?”

“Surprise me.”

THIRTY-SIX



*august*

THERE ISN'T GOING *to be any Eiffel Tower pic now*, I thought as the plane landed joltingly at Heathrow Airport.

Fuck it all.

I'd barely gotten the ticket I had, and it had cost practically an arm and a leg.

*Maybe you should have told him you were coming*, I thought, realizing how stupid it had been not to communicate that to him. I thought it would be... *romantic* to show up unannounced like this, though. Now, though, it just seemed fucking stupid.

Rain slammed with hurricane-level force against the porthole windows of the airplane. The seatbelt dug at my pelvis as the brakes finally *stopped* the whole damn machine.

Who knew if Pierce was even going to still be in Paris by the time I got there?

Shit. I'd really left a lot of this up to chance, hadn't I?

My leg bounced up and down, both with nerves at being delayed, and the sudden urge to piss. Annoyed vacationers—who likely hadn't decided to fly to Paris on a *whim* but with several months' savings—clogged the aisle, and when I finally got out of my seat, it was to get in line to *leave*, not to go to the restroom, which lay in the other direction.

Our luggage, the man on the intercom said, would remain on the plane until we could take off again. In the meantime, a mad rush ensured to get carry-ons and smaller bags...

So close to Paris. Just a single strip of ocean away, and we get stuck in England.

*Just be happy it's not the Atlantic*, I thought, following the crowd mindlessly as we came into the Heathrow terminal.

Jam-packed. Several families. A group of high school students on a school trip. An old woman with shockingly pink hair. A soccer team. The line a mile long at the help desk.

I tried to swallow my groan, but the woman behind me still seemed to hear.

“I know, right?” she said. “Like, I am *not* sleeping on the floor, you know?”

I agreed with her, but truthfully, I didn't care much. I'd slept on the plane, had the hottest dream of Pierce fucking me in a Mayan ruin...

The woman behind me coughed, and I realized I hadn't moved with the line.

Finally, the bottleneck dispersed.

I headed straight for the restroom, my dick pulsing with the effort to keep me from pissing my pants.

Inside, there was just one guy at the urinals, tall, with curly auburn hair.

Seeing him made my heart ache. Fuck—I wanted to be in Paris right now, surprising Pierce.

I went to the urinal two down from the other guy and unzipped, keeping my eyes off him. Men's restroom etiquette one-oh-one: Don't look at the other guys.

They might misunderstand.

The sound of relief I made as I finally pissed was made audible by the echo of the enormous tile bathroom.

And then a voice, two toilets down from me, said, “August?”

THIRTY-SEVEN

*pierce*

EMBARRASSINGLY, I felt my cock grow stiff in my hands. Oh my *God*, it was August. Wasn't it?

How?

Did it matter?

I looked at the man again, just to make sure. I could see the tattoo peeking out under his polo collar. His dark beard was the same, though he wore an earring in his left ear I hadn't seen before.

Did August have pierced ears? I honestly couldn't remember.

Then he gasped, a high-pitched breath of relief. I knew that sound. I'd heard it during sex.

"August?" I said.

The man turned.

It *was* August.

"Pierce?" August's mouth fell open like he couldn't quite believe it.

And then I heard him zipping up. *Don't do that*, I wanted to say—but this was a public restroom.

Something told me that probably wouldn't stop him. August was looking at me like he wanted to devour me whole.

I barely got my own, hard dick stuffed back into my jeans before August's lips landed on mine.

He kissed me like he first had in the airplane to Miami, like I was saving him from drowning. This time, though, I knew better: He was saving *me*. And I was going to let him.

I brought my hands behind him, pulling him closer to me, breathing in his air.

August broke off from me, smiling so wide I almost couldn't stand it. *Oh my God, August... I thought. You're perfect.*

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"What do you mean—what am *I* doing here?" I said.

"I thought you were in Paris."

"I was."

"Then...?"

"I was flying to New York. Storm forced us down."

It took a moment for the realization to hit both of us: We'd both left to find each other.

One life to live. Sometimes it made you wait.

And sometimes it brought together two people who, by all accounts, should have missed each other by misunderstanding.

"I want to try this," August said. "This... *thing*. Is that okay?"

"Thing?" I said, reaching down to grip his hard cock, stifled by his pants. "This *thing* is perfectly fine with me."

"I'm serious," Pierce moaned. "*You're* what I want, Pierce."

"You're what I want, too, August," I said.

Then I met his mouth, tasting all of him as the world dissolved around us.

A *flushhh* broke us apart.

A guy in a suit walked out of the last stall at the end of the bathroom. He saluted us, then set about washing his hands.

“August,” I whispered, interlacing my hand in his. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

*august*

FUCK THE STORM, and fuck the luggage.

We could deal with that later.

Pierce checked us into a nearby hotel, nicer than any I'd stayed in before, and led me into the room.

With the palm-leaf wallpaper and scent of coconut, we might have been somewhere in the Caribbean still instead of in rainy London... Pierce shut the hotel drapes, then dimmed the lights.

It was like I'd landed in paradise.

With thunder rattling the window from outside—the rain a constant, white-noise rhythm behind him—Pierce slowly began to strip, just like he had the first night I'd really been with him.

Every worry disappeared from my mind, replaced instead by how desperately I wanted Pierce. Needed him. Needed him at my side, needed him *inside*.

A rustle of fabric as Pierce slid off his jeans. I could hear every breath, every beat of his heart as he crawled onto the bed toward me. He guided my hands to his hips, and I peeled his briefs off.

“Fuck, Pierce,” I said, as the musky scent of his cock filled my nose.

I gripped his shaft, kissing the head of his cock.

“I want you to fuck me,” I said, meeting his eyes.



Pierce lowered himself over me, so we both lay parallel on the bed, then he kissed me.

“Anything you want,” he said.

Then he began to undress me. He slid my jacket off, then my polo. He kissed my chest, moving over to my nipples, which he sucked with relish, alternating between the two.

His tongue on me like that, swirling against my erect nipples, brought blood rushing into my cock.

I kicked off my jeans, and then, finally, the two of us lay atop the comforter, the sound of the rain pulsing through my blood-rushed ears like a flood.

Pierce kissed his way down my torso, licking down my belly and my happy trail, before putting his mouth over my swollen cock.

My back arched, and Pierce chuckled—the deep vibrations in his throat racking pleasure through my lower body.

“Holy fuck, Pierce,” I moaned.

I needed to be filled by him, complete and whole, and I needed it fucking right now.

Like he’d read my mind, Pierce lifted my legs high into the air and landed his tongue on my twitching hole. I remembered doing this to him on the cruise, but I had no idea that it felt like *this*... Suddenly the noises that had escaped Pierce’s mouth made sense.

He slid his tongue deeper into me, and I clutched his auburn curls, pressing him against my ass.

While he ate me out, he brought a hand up to stroke off my cock, and even though I was enjoying the fuck out of this, I was also impatient. I’d been wanting this for so long.

Pierce slipped a finger into me, working me and stretching me out. I moaned, back arching again.

Then Pierce disappeared for a moment. When he returned, he’d put a condom on from his carry-on bag, and slicked it up with lube.

He looked at me, a question.

I nodded.

*Yes. Yes, fucking God, please...*

Pierce lined himself up, eyes locked on me, and then amidst the patter of the rain and the growl of thunder, he slid himself inside.

It burned at first, but that was *nothing* compared to how it actually made me feel: Like I was finally one piece. Whole.

Complete.

Raw lust rattled through me, connecting me to him. “Harder,” I said. “Fuck me *harder*.”

THIRTY-NINE

*pierce*

HOW LONG HAD it been since I'd topped? Too long, apparently. I'd forgotten just how good it felt.

August's hole twitched as it slowly relaxed, accommodating my girth and length.

I went slowly at first, aware of the potential for hurting him. But he kept his eyes on me, and I knew he'd tell me if it was too much.

"Harder," he said. "Fuck me *harder*."

I raised an eyebrow but did as he asked, thrusting in and out of this gorgeous, perfect ass.

Never had I felt so connected to anyone, so locked-in to their every breath. My dick fit so perfectly inside him I could practically take his pulse.

I lost myself in his deep brown eyes, and, looking down, watching myself disappear in and out of him, I felt like I'd traveled to some alternate universe, one where a warm, fuzzy halo of light lit up at the base of my spine and *didn't* scare me shitless. Instead, it made me realize just how *right* this was.

I picked up speed, slapping against his thick thighs. I gripped his legs hard, grunted as I began to sweat.

"*Fuck, Pierce...*" August said.

"Yeah?" I bent down, pelvis thrusting, and kissed him.

"I'm about to come," he whispered.

"Come for me, baby," I said, loving the endearment as it fell off my tongue.

How long since I'd used it?

About as long as it'd been since I'd topped.

I felt my own orgasm mounting in me, my cock throbbing inside August's tight ass.

August's hole constricted as his muscles forced hot liquid out of his thick cock. It sputtered all over his stomach, landed on one of his nipples. His cheekbones flushed, and he closed his eyes as he lay fully back on the bed and let me take him, let me use him fully.

I came, too, white-hot semen shooting into the condom, tight and sticky.

I pulsed inside August, falling forward to lick up the come at his nipple, before kissing him again.

We lay that way for a moment, panting, a sense of euphoria forming around us like a lavender cloud.

*I think...* I thought, holding August tight. *I think I'm falling in love.*

FORTY

*august and pierce*

## AUGUST

THE CLOUDS PARTED AROUND nine o'clock the next morning.

That was when Pierce and I, who hadn't left the bed for a full twelve hours, decided it was time to get some coffee.

London gleamed from our place on the hotel's rooftop café, a three-sixty display somewhat hidden by sky-scrappers. The Thames rushed several miles away, bulging with new water.

Pierce took the seat next to me, interlocking his fingers with mine. Never had anything felt so right in all my life.

"I can't wait," I said, as the waiter left with our order.

"For what?" Pierce asked.

"To see where this goes."

The cruise had taken us from Miami to Jamaica; I had a feeling whatever *this* was with Pierce would take me much farther than that.

In response, Pierce squeezed my hand.

No labels, not yet.

But in the moment, it felt like forever.

Forever ended when my phone vibrated.

"It's probably Andy," I said, fishing it out of my pocket. "I never texted him when I landed."

My stomach dropped when I saw the caller ID.

"*Hola*," I said, hating that my voice cracked.

Pierce looked at me questioningly.

Hating that I was going to do it, but needing to move around for this, I dropped Pierce's hand and stood up.



\* \* \*

## PIERCE

I watched August pace, my appetite suddenly gone.

Worry had filled his eyes since the second he saw the caller ID.

Not Andy, then.

Chris?

No, the woman—and it did sound like a woman—had a much deeper voice than Chris.

The theory was further confirmed when Spanish began bleeding into Pierce's English, until it had replaced it completely.

Maybe a minute later, August hung up and sat back down.

I waited, patiently as I could.

But August didn't say a word.

Worried, I extended my hand and was relieved when he took it... Still wasn't meeting my eyes, though.

"August?" I said.

"That was my mom," August said.

"Okay...?" I said, sure there was some context missing.

"Chrissy told her about us, about—" August gestured to the air between us, as though that were enough to cover "gay."

I swallowed. I hadn't ever seen August this worked up before, not even about Chrissy. This was a deeper fear, one that went all the way to the core of him.

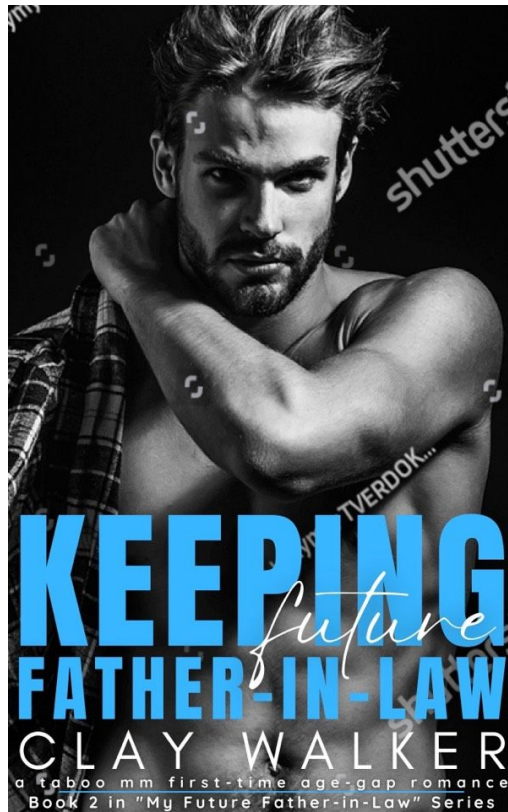
"She wants me to come home," August said. "Right now."

Suddenly the fear in his face scares me, too.

"All right," I said. "What are you going to do?"

END OF BOOK 1  
OF  
“MY FUTURE FATHER-IN-LAW”

*up next...*



Cover not official. Release date: May 1, 2023. Price: \$3.99. Stay tuned for pre-order details!

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*about the author*



Clay Walker is a gay man living Utah, which seems like an oxymoron because it is. After coming out, Clay began exploring his sexuality through queer fiction and discovered M/M romance—where he immediately fell in love. Currently single, he nonetheless considers himself married to his writing. Clay Walker is a pseudonym.