



MAN OF  
THE MONTH

*April*

*Flirt Like*

**A FOOL**

CANDY  CANE KEY

ELLEN BROOKS

# **Flirt Like a Fool**

Ellen Brooks



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**Flirt** /flɜrt/ (*verb*): To engage in playful or suggestive behavior with someone, indicating romantic or sexual interest, often through teasing, flattering, or otherwise expressing attraction in a lighthearted or indirect way. *“It amused her to flirt with him.”*

**Fool** /fōol/ (*noun*): A person who lacks good judgment or sense, often engaging in silly or impractical behavior, or making foolish or reckless decisions. *“What a fool I was to do that.”*

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# Chapter 1



**OLIVIA**

Damn. I could have sworn it was in here.

I dig deeper in my oversized, overstuffed bag, close my eyes and feel around for the scrap of paper I distinctly remember tossing in last Sunday. Well, maybe, not *distinctly*, but I must have had it before I boarded the flight.

To venture across the country alone, without the address of where you're staying, would be crazy. Not that this entire trip isn't a little insane, but it's more than justified after the last



three months which featured a cheating fiancé, a broken engagement, and a canceled honeymoon.

The miniscule Candy Cane Key airport with only two gates bustles with travelers rushing to make their Friday departures or, in my case, dragging from early flights and searching out freshly brewed coffee even though it's the middle of the afternoon.

I didn't sleep more than an hour on the first plane, and the second from Miami was a puddle jumper, so turbulent I'm still jittery. Right about now, I'd kill for a double espresso with steamed milk, but I have to find that slip of paper first. It's the only way to get to my brother's best friend's houseboat here on this candy-cane-shaped island.

Okay, maybe, not the *only* way, but I'd rather not have to call my brother, Ethan, back home in Seattle and deal with one of his lectures. That would be a last resort. Plus, I swear that address is here somewhere.

With one eye on the suitcases being wheeled in on a cart, I shuffle to a nearby pod of chairs and dump the contents of my bag onto an empty seat. Three color swatches from when I was finalizing the shade of my bridesmaids' dresses, a rogue wad of tissues, an empty container of mints, a compact mirror, a crumpled up ten-dollar bill, and a long forgotten flash drive land with a clatter. And finally, the folded scrap.

"Yes!" I hold up the paper as if it's a winning lottery ticket and flash a broad smile to the nearby observers sporting kitschy short-sleeve button-downs splashed with cats in Santa hats,

who eye me suspiciously. The observers, not the cats; although I feel their side-eyes too as I sweep the hodgepodge of items back into my bag, peel open the paper, and scan Ethan's scribble, which includes the address of AJ Patterson's houseboat.

I've heard plenty of stories about AJ and his military valor but haven't ever met the hero, not that I will now. The Navy vet turned boat mechanic is away for the week on a special contract job with the Coast Guard, or some such madness. Which is why, when my brother suggested AJ's houseboat as the perfect escape, I jumped on it and used the first class airline credit from my canceled honeymoon to book the last minute flight.

I carefully fold the scrap and tuck it into the back pocket of my jeans then spin back to the suitcases and scan the three still waiting on the cart. My bright pink roller bag with the polka dot ribbon tied to the handle is nowhere in sight.

*Crap.*

I barely made the flight this morning, dashing through Seattle-Tacoma International and arriving breathless at the gate just as the ticket agent made the last call for boarding. It would be just my luck if my suitcase didn't make it.

Spoiler: it didn't. Ten minutes later, I've located the line for reporting lost luggage, a handful of travelers ahead of me. I pull out my phone, and my stomach drops. A calendar notification for tomorrow on the home screen makes me want to throw up. It reads *Wedding Day!!!*

I wallow in my despair for two-point-five seconds before I shake it off and remember my mantra for this trip: *flirt like a fool*. No better time to start than right now. After all, I've basically arrived at my destination.

I should delete the event and the *Honeymoon!!!* one, too, but I don't bother, instead dropping my phone back into my bag and ignoring the other twenty-seven messages that have come through since this morning. This trip is my chance to escape and put the past behind me, and I'm determined to do just that.

I survey the folks in line, eavesdropping like an inconspicuous private eye. Two older couples are debating whether to schedule their booze cruise around the island for Saturday or Sunday while the mom in a family of five is passing out snacks and bribing her kids with a trip to the Candy Cane Creamery for good behavior.

The short, stocky man at the counter, who appears to be just north of forty, is my best option at the moment, so when I finally reach the front of the line, I sling a warm smile in his direction. In my best flirty voice, I say hello.

"Good morning, sir. I'm hoping you can help me. You see, my flight from Seattle just landed. Well, it originated in Seattle, but then I had to change planes in Miami because, you know, no direct flights to Candy Cane Key, right? But anyway—"

"Name and flight number." His monotone voice interrupts me with barely a glance in my direction.

He didn't seem to catch my dazzling smile. I lean forward, wishing I'd worn a lower cut-top, and give him the details he

needs. Again, oblivious to any of my cues, he types the information into a dusty, ancient desktop and, with a small shake of his head, wordlessly slides a form across the counter. Large bold font across the top reads *LOST LUGGAGE FORM*.

Giving up isn't my style. Just ask my best friend, who had to hold an intervention when, for a hot second, I actually considered staying engaged to my fiancé—*after* I walked in on him with another woman.

So I shrug off the fact Mr. Lost Luggage Form hasn't caught on, or even met my eyes and undeterred, cheerfully continue the one-sided conversation as I complete the form. "Any suggestions for a visitor only in town for a week? What's something unique to Candy Cane Key I shouldn't miss?"

Rather than respond, he reaches for an empty mug of coffee and lifts it to his lips so slowly a sloth would have beaten him. Hopefully, the employees responsible for finding and delivering my lost bag move at a faster clip.

Finally, after droning on about the beautiful weather I'm hoping for here compared to back home, I reach the last section of the form which requires the address for delivery of the lost luggage. With a satisfied grin, I pull the scrap out of my back pocket like a secret weapon and carefully transcribe the address.

"*If* we can find your bag, it will be delivered within forty-eight hours of arrival," Mr. Monotone says as he takes the form.

"Forty-eight hours? If you can find it?"

Without bothering to respond, he hunts and pecks at the keyboard to transcribe the information into the computer.

I square my shoulders and resist the urge to encourage him to talk to management about bringing the process into the twenty-first century. After managing a polite, “Thank you,” I head out the double doors to the curb.

I shrug off the lackluster results of my attempt at flirting. After all, I’ve just arrived and have an entire week ahead of me to relax and enjoy the surf, sand, and some fun in the sun.

And, speaking of sun, it’s peeking through the fluffy clouds on this last day of March. I tug off my jean jacket and raise my face to the sky, taking a deep breath of the humid, salty air.

Despite my fatigue, my missing luggage, and the fact I’m on a Christmas themed island alone rather than getting ready for what should have been my wedding rehearsal, the tension in my shoulders starts to melt away for the first time in three months.

# Chapter 2



AJ

**I** TURN THE WRENCH and tighten the last bolt on the yacht's outboard engine that needed a propeller replacement just as my sister, Andie, pops out from our marine repair shop onto the covered dock where I'm working.

"Heads up, big brother," she says with a wide grin. Her sunglasses are pushed up atop her head, so the amused twinkle in her eyes is visible. "Old man McMurty is bringing by his motorboat. Something about the engine overheating at idle."

I press my lips together and wipe the grease off my hands with a clean rag. “Have him pull into the holding bay. This one’s about done.”

She nods and spins on her heels, her ponytail swinging as she heads back into the shop. I glance at my watch. It’s late, but I can take care of Mr. McMurty first thing in the morning. He’s been a customer here since my dad opened the place half a century ago, and he might be crotchety, but he’s a local and as loyal as they come, the type of customer Sweet Sail Marine Repair was built on and the type I value most. After all, we wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for folks like him.

Half an hour later, Mr. McMurty is squared away and we’re closing up for the night. “I printed out the travel arrangements for the Coast Guard job in Ft Lauderdale. Don’t forget you’ll be gone from Monday through Thursday next week.”

Andie seems to think I can’t take care of myself, despite the fact I spent six years in the Navy and survived a tour that saw combat in the Middle East. But I appreciate the way she holds this place together and deals with the customers and the books which frees me up to focus on repairs.

I look up from jotting sparkplugs on the *Supplies To Order* list she keeps posted on a clipboard by the register and nod. “I remember.”

“I pushed all the regular maintenance appointments to the following week to accommodate your absence, so it’s going to be a busy one.”

What's a few more hours a day for a week or two? Hard work never hurt anyone. "Sounds good, thanks."

"At least, it's the beginning of the month and not the end," she adds as she flips off the light switch and follows me out through the back.

"You need money?" I ask, frowning. We might not be rich, but our family business makes enough to cover our costs, pay the two of us a living wage, and still have a little leftover to save for a rainy day each month.

"No, I'm doing okay. But you could buy me a drink at *Nicko's* tonight."

So that's where this is going. I roll my eyes as I doublecheck the locks on the exterior storage shed. "I've got a six-pack at home calling my name."

"But you never come out, and it's Friday! Everyone would love to see you."

"Karaoke's not my thing."

"Nothing is *your thing*. You won't meet a woman hanging out on your houseboat alone."

I'm not looking to meet anyone, despite Andie's failed attempts to set me up a half dozen times since I was honorably discharged from the Navy two years ago. "Look, have fun and be safe."

"We live on Candy Cane Key. I don't think there's anywhere in the world safer than this little beach island."



She's right, but still, we both know there's a good chance I'll head out later to check on her. "Better safe than sorry."

She rolls her eyes and hops on her bicycle. I watch until she straps on her helmet with an exaggerated smile in my direction. "You don't have to come check on me, you know? I'm a big girl."

"I know."

"See you in the morning," she says with a wave. "And don't worry. I'll be safe."

Andie takes off toward her apartment in town while I head down the marina to the end where my houseboat is docked amid two dozen others. The spring sun is low in the sky, and the thump of my steel-toed boots against the marina's old wooden boardwalk is drowned out by the ocean waves lapping against the shore. A handful of boat engines roar to life as folks head out to enjoy a Friday sunset on the water.

Since I live at the marina, a beer or two on my rooftop patio does the trick, and because I avoided social plans this evening, I've got nothing to do but relax and order some dinner. Hell, maybe, I'll even start watching that series about the rogue spy who's hellbent on taking down the shadowy government agency everyone's been recommending.

At the end of the dock, I freeze, and my senses escalate to high alert. I scan my surroundings, taking careful stock of everything within my sightline, even though it's been two years since I was active duty and I know this marina and its inhabitants like the back of my hand. Something's amiss,

starting with the fact the light on the lock on my front door is green.

I silently approach my houseboat as it sways in the water. I take a deep breath and slow my heartrate before I peer in the window next to the front door. The house is dark and quiet. Everything seems in order, but the premonition of something awry remains. Only a thorough sweep of the premises will set me at ease. Then I can have that beer.

I clasp the door handle and turn the knob, waiting for the latch to clear before I press the door open. Every muscle in my body is primed for action, but instead of an intruder, a large, bright pink shoulder bag sits on the couch as if it were dropped haphazardly then forgotten.

I move through the rest of the house cautiously, aware that, while my place isn't big enough to have too many hiding spots, a solo sweep still leaves me vulnerable from behind. Not that I doubt I could take on an intruder and win.

After clearing every other room, I eye the half-closed bedroom door at the back of the boat. My hand goes to my waist, though I haven't carried a weapon since I was discharged. I flex my fists and slowly push open the door. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust, but it's long enough to spy the intruder—a woman splayed across my bed, limbs askew, sound asleep and snoring.

My brows knot as I step to the side of the bed and study the beautiful blonde with skin so pale I can tell me she's not from

around here. She's curled on her side, dressed in slim jeans and a light pink shirt.

*Pink must be her favorite color.*

I dismiss the thought the second it pops unbidden into my mind, but I can't seem to ignore the sudden, inexplicable desire to know everything there is to know about this woman, and not just because I have questions that demand answers. Starting with who she is, what she's doing in my bed, and how she knows the security code to my house.

Only Andie has the code, but that's in case of emergencies and this certainly doesn't qualify.

The touch of a smile plays on the woman's parted lips, and her chest is rising and falling with each slow, deep breath, the soft snoring almost melodic with a delicate, even rhythm.

Even in the dim shadows her beauty is unmistakable and the adrenaline pumping through my veins morphs into arousal. I inspect her, memorizing her features well enough to provide a description of the trespasser.

One of her hands is tucked up under her head while the other rests under her smooth cheek. There's something familiar about her high cheekbones and the butterscotch color of her hair I can't seem to place until suddenly, my stomach drops.

This woman is my best friend Ethan's little sister. I agreed to let her crash at my place next week, when I'm gone because she needed *a place to get away*, or at least, that's what I think

Ethan said when he called. She's not supposed to be here now, not when I'm still here.

I rake a hand through my hair and grit my teeth. Any red-blooded male would when there's a gorgeous woman sleeping in his bed, who couldn't be more off-limits.

And she is off-limits. Ethan and I met the first day of bootcamp and forged our friendship over MREs, ten-mile runs, and sleep deprivation. A tour of duty on a carrier that saw combat only strengthened our bond, and my loyalty to him was carved in stone the day we lost a comrade to enemy fire.

Plus, Ethan mentioned something about her going through a *rough patch*. Not that there's evidence of that on her peaceful features, but the last thing I need is drama.

I clench my fists and ignore the urge to reach out and touch the long blonde waves splayed out across the pillow. My pillow.

I turn to leave since I need a shower—a cold shower now—but she lets out a soft moan and rolls over. She curls into a ball as if she's chilled. I press my lips together, then soundlessly slide open the closet door and grab a blanket. I spread it over her, and as I do, I catch a trace of her scent, like flowers with a touch of honey.

She resettles with a faint sigh, and I straighten but make no move to leave. Instead, I watch her for another long minute and wonder what the hell is going to happen when she wakes up.

# Chapter 3



**OLIVIA**

It must have been the gentle rocking of the boat on the waves or maybe the chirping birds out the window. I only meant to lie down for a minute, but when I wake, it's pitch black and it takes a minute to remember exactly where I am.

Oh yeah, escaping on a houseboat in Candy Cane Key.

I yawn and stretch from head to toe, automatically reaching in the dark for my phone, but don't find it. I sit up and lift the blanket to look underneath but drop it immediately and clasp

my hand over my mouth to stifle my gasp. A navy blue blanket, with the U.S. Navy emblem, is draped over me. A blanket that was most definitely not here earlier.

My heart pounds, and I fish around again, my fingers frantically running over the comforter until I finally feel my phone. I snatch it up, glad to have it in hand, even if it's almost dead. I throw off the blanket and eye the door. It's closed, and now, I wonder if I'm losing my mind, but no, I'm one thousand percent sure the door wasn't closed earlier, either.

Slowly, so as not to make a sound, I slide out of bed, tiptoe to the door, and press my ear up against it. I can't tell if I hear something or if it's just the blood pounding in my ears.

I swallow hard and close my eyes, focusing every fiber of my being on listening. Sure enough, the faint sounds of someone moving around in the kitchen, opening and closing the refrigerator, and maybe a drawer drift down the hallway.

*Who could it be?* Certainly not AJ. He's out of town.

I step back and examine the door, the only barrier between me and the stranger. Even locked, which it doesn't appear to be, it looks flimsy enough to be ripped off its hinges with one swift kick.

I try to picture the floorplan of the houseboat, a spotless and sparsely decorated space that screamed bachelor when I explored earlier. The only other exit, besides climbing out through a window and swimming for it, is the front door on the other side of the boat—past *him*. And it is a him. I can feel it in my bones.

I consider my options and dismiss the mace Ethan tucked into my Christmas stocking last year. Right now, it's lying useless at the bottom of my missing suitcase, and I silently curse the airline. It's ironic; I've never wished I had the pepper spray while walking around downtown Seattle alone at night, but now, on a Christmas-themed Florida Key, I would kill for it. At least, Ethan taught me some basic self-defense moves that might come in handy.

As hard as it is, I stop and take a deep breath, trying to be rational, and consider the situation. If whoever is in the kitchen wanted me dead, I wouldn't be standing here right now. Plus, the stranger covered me with a blanket while I slept. Maybe, it's a friend of AJ's. Maybe, it's even a hottie I can flirt with. Only one way to find out.

I grip my phone and reach for the doorknob. As I do, my stomach growls so loud you'd think I haven't eaten in a week, but I lift my chin and go for it, swinging open the door with as much confidence as I can muster. After all, I have permission to be here.

"Hello?" I call out in what I'm glad is a mostly self-assured tone.

"Hello," the gruff answer comes quickly, in a man's deep voice.

My confidence abandons me quicker than a sandcastle being washed away by high tide, and I freeze, my heart in my throat, and picture myself kneeling this man between the legs—hard.

But an instant later, the owner of the voice steps into view at the end of the hall, and my resolve evaporates.

His sandy blond curls, still damp from a shower, are illuminated from behind like a halo, and he looks like a saint if saints were toned, tan, tempting as hell, and drank beer from a bottle. Hello, Mr. Patron Saint of Sexy Men. There's no shortage of prayers I'd like him to answer, and my mouth goes as dry as a desert during a drought.

Mystery man leans casually against the wall, and although his face is cast in shadow, I can make out the fact he matches my gaze, raking me from head to toe. I know instinctively he's not a threat—at least not one who will physically harm me.

Despite the look, or maybe because of it, I tilt my head to the side as I try to get a read on him. He seems to like what he sees, even though I'm a wrinkled mess and haven't touched up my makeup since I threw on the quickest coat hours ago.

He lifts the bottle and drains the last of his beer. My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and I shoot him a smile. "Hi."

"Hello," he says again. His voice is husky and fits him perfectly.

I take a step toward him and tuck my hair behind my ear. "You scared me."

One eyebrow arches, and I wish I could see the color of his eyes. He remains silent but watches me so closely I feel as if I'm a target in a sniper's sights.

"Are you a friend of AJ's?"



“Why do you ask?” he asks after a moment.

Oh, so it’s like that.

I raise my chin. “Because I have permission to be here—from AJ. I... Wait,” I say, holding up a hand as an unsettling realization skates down my spine. “How long have you been here?”

“I could ask you the same.”

“I landed this afternoon.”

“I got here about twenty minutes ago.”

Okay, so not all afternoon. Not that that makes it any better.

“Were you watching me?”

The hint of a smile touches his lips, but rather than respond, he holds up his empty bottle. “Do you want a beer?”

I choose to ignore the fact he hasn’t answered my question because I’m not foolish enough to turn a blind eye on the man in front of me, and because yes, Sexy Saint, yes, I do want a beer. “Sure.”

Without another word, he turns and disappears into the kitchen. I follow, admiring the view from the back almost more than the front. He’s wearing khaki shorts, and his calves look like they could be sculpted in stone.

He pulls two bottles out of the fridge and with a flick of his wrist, twists the cap off one and hands it to me before repeating the motion for his own.

“Cheers.” I clink my bottle to his and tug my lower lip between my teeth as I meet his eyes, his olive green eyes.

A molten look crosses his face, and that brief glimpse, as if he wants to devour me, reverberates all the way down my core to the juncture between my thighs.

But the look is gone, replaced by a muscle working in his jaw, almost as soon as it appears, and he takes a long swig of beer. A thin horizontal scar half an inch above his left eyebrow is visible in the bright light of the kitchen, and I trace along its length with my eyes as I raise my beer and take a sip. His gaze narrows, and the scar almost disappears.

The cold lager hits the spot, although my stomach rumbles again as loud as a freight train. “This is good, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Time to get to the bottom of this. “You must know AJ well if you have full run of his place and help yourself to his beer. Did he tell you I was coming? To be honest, I wasn’t expecting visitors.”

“I don’t think he was expecting you until next week, when he’s out of town.”

In the full light of the kitchen, a crook in his nose, about halfway down, is visible. It’s been broken at some point and gives his face the barest hint of imperfection, but I pull my attention from it and focus on the conversation.

“What do you mean next week? He’s gone now, and I was glad because the dates matched up with...” I trail off, not

wanting to divulge I'm here because of a canceled honeymoon. "Well, it just worked out. But if he's not gone, then where is he?"

A half-smile plays on his lips, and he lifts his beer to motion to his chest. "I'm right here. AJ Patterson. Nice to meet you."

My eyes bulge, and I shake my head, trying to clear the confusion. "You're AJ, Ethan's best friend?"

"The one and only."

"But you can't be. AJ's away, taking care of some sort of special contract job with the Coast Guard—oh my God," I say, taking a step back. "Your trip didn't get canceled, did it?"

"No."

That's a relief but explains nothing. "Why are you here, then?"

"I could ask the same of you, but I already know the answer."

"Oh, really. And what's that?"

"You needed an island getaway."

*What else did Ethan tell this man about me?*

I shrug off the comment, ignore the bitterness in my mouth at its truth, and refocus the conversation. "But why are you here when you're supposed to be gone?"

He shrugs as if it's obvious. "You got the dates wrong."

"I... I..." I stammer. "I didn't get the dates wrong! Before booking the flight, I double checked with him."

He shoots me a skeptical look. “Either, he got the dates wrong, or he must really hate me.”

“Ethan doesn’t hate you. To him, you’re basically the best thing since sliced bread—except that you never come to visit.”

AJ runs a hand through his hair. “I hate flying. He knows that.”

“But why would you say he hates you then?”

AJ levels me with his olive-green gaze. “Because you being here is enough to try the patience of a saint. And I’m no saint.”

*Oh.*

Me, neither, at least not this week. But rather than relief, disappointment surges through me as I put the pieces together. I can’t flirt with this man. He’s my brother’s best friend, and I’ve learned my lesson the hard way that Ethan’s friends can’t be trusted. I take a long drink.

“Either way,” AJ says, resting a hip against the kitchen counter. “You’re here now, and I’m not leaving until Monday.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” I wave my near-empty bottle around to indicate the house. “You won’t even know I’m here.”

His skeptical look returns. “This,” he says, motioning with his own bottle, “is an eight hundred square foot houseboat.”

*Really? Eight hundred square feet?* Right now, it feels much, much smaller. “Yes, well, I don’t take up much space, and I’ll be out and about most of the time anyway with my...plans.

Just pretend I'm not here." I shoot him a sweet smile and hope he's not thinking about kicking me out.

He doesn't respond but appears to consider something, weighing it in his mind. Finally, he takes a step toward me, and his eyes, flecked with slivers of gold, narrow. "But we have a problem."

I lick my lips. "What's that?"

"My boat only has one bed."

The sentence is a fact, but his low, delicious tone rumbles through me. Ethan's best friend or not, how in the world am I going to last in a houseboat for forty-eight hours with this man without flirting with him? He can't deny the attraction between us any more than I can, but I sure will try. I take a step back. "I'm... I'm happy to take the couch until you leave."

He glances past the dining area toward the couch in the family room where I dropped my bag earlier. His Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he swallows hard, but he nods and turns back to me. "Alright, then, Olivia. Welcome to Candy Cane Key."

# Chapter 4



AJ

**H**ER EYES ARE BLUE and dazzling and staring right at me, full of gratitude with a hint of relief. Did she really think for a second I'd kick her to the curb?

Hell, I probably should, because having her here underfoot, even if it's just for the weekend, will be torture, but she has an easy smile and nowhere else to go. I could mention the Sugar Plum Inn, but they're undergoing some renovations, at the moment. Plus, I really don't want her to consider going

anywhere else. Even if it's just so I can stare at those full, lush and kissable lips regardless of the fact I can't actually kiss them.

A million questions remain, and now, I wish I'd listened better to what Ethan said when he called. Not that it matters. His sister has flown across the country to get away. She's here to escape, and I'm leaving Monday morning. Olivia lives on the opposite coast, and there's a strong chance I'll never see her again.

Forty-eight hours. I can make it even if it's going to test my willpower more than boot camp.

"Thank you," she says, drawing my attention back to the present.

"You're welcome," I answer automatically, tossing both of our bottles in the recycle bin.

She glances away, but a flush that matches her light pink shirt creeps up the pale skin of her neck. It's hot in here, stifling, in fact. My boat usually stays cool enough, thanks to the water, but tonight, it's roasting. I pull at the neck of my T-shirt and slide open the window above the kitchen sink to let in some fresh air.

Sounds from a Friday night on the marina filter in, and I could almost laugh at the idea of a quiet evening now. Olivia's stomach growls again, and she presses a hand flat against her belly. "Sorry, I'm starving. I didn't have lunch. When I got here, I was going to run out, but," she waves a hand toward the bedroom, "the jetlag seems to have gotten the best of me."

The best of her? Not by a long shot.

“Do you have a recommendation for dinner around here?” she asks.

“What are you in the mood for?”

I didn’t mean for the question to have any hint of suggestion, but her eyes flick to mine, and it’s a minute before she answers. “Anything, really. A place with a good bar.”

“We could go to—”

“And a fun scene, too. Wait, did you say we?”

“You don’t think I’m going to let you go alone, do you? You don’t know your way around here and—”

She laughs and holds up both hands. “I’m from Seattle, remember? This island is like the size of Pike Place.”

I cross my arms. Her forehead puckers.

“Plus,” she adds with a know-it-all smile that stops me in my tracks. “If I’d come next week, I’d be here alone and going to dinner by myself.”

I refuse to consider the possibility. “This isn’t next week, and I’m right here.”

She matches my crossed arms and raises an arched eyebrow. “I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“I didn’t say you did. Call it being a good host.”

Finally, she gives in. “Okay, fine, we can go to dinner. I’ll have the rest of the week to...” But she doesn’t finish the sentence, instead trailing off, and then she seems to search for



something to say to change the topic. She pulls her phone from the back pocket of her jeans. “I’ll be ready in a minute. I just need to charge my phone. It’s almost dead.”

“Sure.”

She crosses the room to her bag on the couch and bends over to rummage through it. My eyes run up her long legs, clad in tight jeans, to her ass, curved in my direction. Without warning, she stands and spins back to me. “Do you have a charger I could use? I thought I had one in here but can’t find it. I know I threw a spare in my suitcase, but it’s lost—my suitcase, that is, not the charger.”

I show her to the wireless charger on the kitchen counter. Her pink, glittery case seems out of place next to my black OtterBox. “Is the airline going to deliver your luggage?”

“I hope so. I gave them this address, but the man at the airport told me it could be up to forty-eight hours, and that’s *if* they find it.”

No wonder all I’d spotted here was that pink bag. “I’m sure they will.”

Ten minutes later, she’s freshened up and we head out.

“I love the smell of the ocean here.” She turns her face into the breeze coming off the water. “It’s different from back home, more briny and almost sweet.”

“Some people say the sweet smell is the reason Candy Cane Key got its name. That and the fact it’s shaped like a candy cane.”

“You grew up here, right?”

“I did.”

At the end of the marina, we pass *Sweet Sail Marine Repair*. She spies the sign and darts a hand out to my forearm. “Wait, is that your shop? Aren’t you a marine mechanic?”

I glance down to where she’s touching me and try to ignore the ripple of pleasure. “It is, and yes, I am.”

She pulls back her hand and seems almost self-conscious about touching me as we continue on our way. “But that’s not what you did in the Navy, is it? Weren’t you in operations or something like that with Ethan?”

“Ethan and I worked in navigation. What do you do?”

“I’m a freelance graphic designer. I only have a few clients but they keep me plenty busy.”

We turn onto the street to head toward Main Street. She shoots me a sidelong glance. “I wasn’t lying earlier when I said Ethan thinks the world of you.”

“He’s a terrible judge of character, and you can tell him I said that.”

But rather than laughing, her face goes slack, and she scoffs, “Don’t I know it.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She tucks her hair behind her ear and blows out a long breath. I let the silence fall between us, but after another

block, she says, “Tell me about the island. What’s fun to do around here that I shouldn’t miss this week?”

Her voice is brittle and artificially enthusiastic and I’m so distracted by the tone, wondering what she’s hiding, that it takes me a minute to realize she’s waiting for an answer.

“Well, there’s the beach, of course.”

“Yes, I definitely want to hit the beach and get some sun.”

The thought of Olivia in a bikini laid out on a towel on the sand for all to see makes my skin crawl. My voice is a little too gruff when I say, “Dinner’s right this way,” as we turn onto a bustling street.

I was leading us to *Mohagen’s* for pizza, but Olivia spins toward the music coming from *Nicko’s Taverna*. “What about that place? It looks like fun.”

I point in the other direction. “I thought we’d go for pizza.”

She stops, planting her feet. “But that place is a bar.”

“Yes, but it’s karaoke night and—”

Her face lights up like fireworks on the Fourth of July, and her hand darts to my forearm again. “Karaoke?”

Damn. There’s no way I can refuse that look or her touch. And no way in hell I’m going to let her out of my sight. She takes my silence for stalling to come up with an excuse. “You don’t have to come, you know. I told you I can take care of myself.”

“I’m coming.”

She lifts a shoulder as she turns, already heading that way.  
“Suit yourself.”

# Chapter 5



**OLIVIA**

Could Ethan have planned this? When I mentioned how this trip would be a chance to put myself back out there, did he purposely tell me the wrong dates, so AJ would still be here? Is my overprotective older brother trying to safeguard me from afar because he feels responsible for my ex cheating on me—the ex he set me up with? I need to text my brother and get to the bottom of it.

AJ seemed genuinely surprised at my appearance, but maybe he's in on it. Maybe, he's keeping an eye on me because Ethan asked him to. Why else would AJ accompany me to the karaoke place when he was clearly trying to avoid it at all costs?

He's tempting as hell and the type of man I'd pick out of a crowd to flirt with—if he wasn't my brother's best friend—but the last thing I need is to get involved with anyone Ethan considers a friend. Hell, I don't want to *get involved* with anyone this week. I'm here to have fun, and that starts now.

I pass through a Christmas-themed souvenir gift shop on the way into the restaurant and make a mental note to grab an outfit, or at least a bathing suit, on the way out. My mouth waters at the smell of gyros and garlic and freshly baked pita and I almost pass right by the host stand, my sights set on the bar. The woman tucked behind it stops me and calls over the music. “Welcome! Naughty or nice?”

“What?”

“We have two sides of the restaurant.” She points to the words painted above each side and edged with mistletoe. “Naughty or nice?”

“Definitely naughty,” I say at the same time a familiar low voice pipes up inches behind me with, “Nice.”

The woman glances toward AJ, but I shoot her a sweet smile. It's my first night on the town in forever, and it's supposed to be the evening of my rehearsal dinner. I'm not about to let a chaperone get in my way. Even one whose biceps basically

advertise how he could take out any guy in here with a single well-placed punch. “We’ll take naughty.”

She leans in and returns my smile. “Right this way. Plus,” she adds over her shoulder, loud enough for both of us to hear. “Your sister’s on this side, AJ.”

“Of course, she is,” he mutters under his breath.

“AJ! Why am I not surprised?”

There’s no doubt the woman who spins around on her barstool wearing a cropped top and flip-flops is AJ’s sister. She has the same sandy blonde curls, olive-green eyes, and devil-may-care attitude. “And who, pray tell, is this?” She hops down and grabs both of my hands, looking me over with a wide smile.

“This is Olivia. She’s Ethan’s sister—you know, my buddy from the Navy? Anyway, she’s in from Seattle.” AJ steps up against my back, effectively blocking me from the jostling crowd with his warm body. “Olivia, this is my sister, Andie.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” And it is. AJ’s sister is a friendly face, and she immediately puts me at ease.

She leans toward me. “Please tell me your brother is as overprotective as mine.”

I shake my head. “You have no idea.”

She giggles and nods. “What are you doing here in Candy Cane Key? No, wait. Let’s get you a drink first, hmm?”

She’s got some sort of pink cocktail in a tall glass with a few fresh cranberries bobbing around with the ice cubes at her

place on the bar.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

“I like her already,” she says, shooting AJ a look. “One Jingle Juice coming right up, and then I want details—all of them.”

“Be careful. Those are strong,” AJ murmurs in my ear, his warm breath skating across my cheek.

“Perfect,” I reply, sliding onto the barstool next to Andie’s.



**H**ALF A GYRO AND two drinks later, Andie and by default AJ, whose presence next to me has put a serious damper on my flirting, knows my life story—except exactly why I’m here and looking to flirt.

The memory of the night I walked in on my fiancé with another woman and the weeks that followed aren’t as raw as they were, but it’s still not the type of thing I’m about to confess to a stranger, even one as delightful as Andie.

“If you’re looking to *flirt like a fool*,” she says with a conspiratorial smile, “you’ve come to the right place. What about the guy over there? The tall one with the wingman? His name is Joel, and he’s a scuba instructor here on the island.” She nods toward the other end of the long bar, to a man who hasn’t been shy about checking me out for the past half hour despite the menacing look plastered on AJ’s face.

I take a sip from my straw and meet his eyes. “Not bad.”



AJ shifts on his stool, and his hand tightens around his beer.

“What?” I ask, unable to ignore the disdain radiating from him like shockwaves from an earthquake.

“He’s not your type.”

Andie starts to protest, but I stop her and turn back to wink at AJ. “Good thing I don’t have a type tonight.”

I drain the last of my drink and slip off my stool, gripping the edge of the wooden bar for balance amid a cheer of encouragement from Andie, before I make my way down to the guy who’s nudging his friend aside.

“Can I buy you a drink?” the man asks, already flagging down the bartender.

“Only if it’s another one of those.” I tip my head back to my empty jungle juice glass. AJ was right. They are strong, and although I’m in the mood for fun, I’m not stupid. One more and then I’m switching to water. I swear.

Joel is a good time, and before long, we’re laughing at a mutual love of eighties power ballads, thanks to dreadful karaoke attempts that might actually be improving the later it gets.

I’m relieved my flirting is going so much better than it did earlier at the airport and spin on my stool to flash a thumbs up at Andie when Joel steps away to use the restroom, but she’s not where I left her at the other end of the bar.

AJ is gone, too. I scan the restaurant, searching for him, when suddenly he appears out of thin air at my side and lays one

hand on the bar and the other on the back of my stool.

My palm flies to my chest. “Oh, you scared me!”

His green eyes narrow on me. “Seems like I’m making it a habit.”

I can’t help it. I reach up and trail a finger down his soft knit shirt, swallowing at the hard surface beneath. “You really should work on that.”

He glances at my finger and captures my hand in his, pulling it away. “You’re treading perilously close to dangerous waters.”

“What?”

A little shake of his head, and then. “Time to go, sweetheart.”

My brow puckers, trying to make sense of his statement. “Maybe for you.”

“For you, too.”

“But I’m having fun. John is a blast and...” I lean in and lower my voice. “It’s going really well.”

“The flirting?”

“Yes.” I flash him a smile. Finally, he gets it.

“Olivia,” he says, gritting his teeth. “His name is Joel.”

“Oh, right.”

“It’s time to go.”

He’s killing my buzz. “I know when to walk away, thank you very much.”

“Obviously, you don’t.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

He runs a hand through his sandy blond curls just as Joel returns.

“Everything okay?” Joel asks, shooting a cryptic look at AJ.

With a smile, I spin on my stool to face my new scuba friend.

“Yes, everything’s great.”

“Olivia was just getting ready to say goodnight.” AJ’s tone invites no argument, and my jaw drops. Neither man seems to notice, though. They’re too busy engaging in an epic staring contest that ends with Joel looking off with a shrug.

“It was nice to meet you,” he says, meeting my eyes only briefly before they flick back to AJ’s. “If you want that scuba lesson this week, stop by our place anytime.”

And with that, he’s gone.

“Just who do you think you are?” I demand, sliding off my stool with my hands on my hips. The impact of my fury is tempered by the fact I wobble, and AJ reaches out to steady me.

He cocks an eyebrow. “Like I said, time to go, sweetheart.”

“I’m not some sort of asset to protect, you know.”

His brow knots. “What?”

“I know you’re conspiring with Ethan like this is some sort of secret mission, but this isn’t the Navy. This is real life, and people are free to live how they want. Isn’t that what you fought for? Freedom to choose.”

“Right now, either you choose to come with me, or I’ll throw you over my shoulder and carry you.”

My eyes narrow. “You wouldn’t.” But even as the words fall from my lips, I know they’re not true. The set of his sharp jaw and the fact he just scared off my new friend with a single look tells me he means business, even if that business is just protecting me. “Fine, but I’m going to text Ethan and have him call the dogs off my tail.”

“And in this situation, I’m the dog?”

“Yes.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

He steers me toward the exit, one hand on my elbow and the other around my waist. I’m still mad as hell, but I stumble and lean into his rock-solid warmth, despite my best efforts.

We breeze through the shop, and I pull up short. “Ooh, look at that necklace. It’s beautiful, just like your shop’s sign.” The delicate gold necklace on display has a spoked ship’s wheel similar to the one I saw on the way here.

“Yup, sure is,” he says, barely giving it a second glance as he tries to steer me out.

“Wait! I need to get a bathing suit.”

“Right now?”

You’d think I’d asked to stop and smell the roses.

“I have nothing for the beach. My suitcase, remember?”

With a sigh, he glances around and grabs a hanger off the nearest rack. A hanger that has a skimpy red triangle bikini top with white trim and a black buckle on the red thong bottoms. “Here.”

I hold it up in front of me and pose. “Have a thing for Santa girl, do you?”

He rakes me from head to toe, and a muscle in his jaw works. Torturing him is even more fun than flirting. I glance around for the register. “Be right back.”

# Chapter 6



AJ

I roll over and punch the throw pillow, cursing my stiff neck. All night, I tossed and turned on the floor in the living room, trying to find a comfortable position, but it was a losing battle. Now, it's morning, and I've barely slept.

It doesn't help that my cock is at full attention. I fling off the thin blanket and rub a hand down my face as I stare at the ceiling and try not to think about the woman asleep in my bed, right now.

When she wakes up, will she remember stumbling home last night?

Probably not.

She spent the whole walk clinging to my arm and spouting off about how I was *ruining her plans for the week*. Plans that, when pressed, really only include flirting because... Well, she was less forthcoming about the reason but staunchly defended it, that's for sure.

She's a spitfire, fiercely independent, and beautiful, and I like her more than I have any business liking a woman I met less than twelve hours ago.

I should call Ethan, but it's early here and even earlier for him on West Coast time. Plus, I need to get to the shop. In order to do that, though, I have to get dressed, and my clothes are in my room.

The door is ajar, and I tell myself it's no different from yesterday when I found Olivia asleep in my bed, but it is different. Now that I've met her, everything has changed. Except for the fact she's Ethan's little sister and always will be.

I slip silently into the bedroom. I should grab my work clothes from the closet and leave, but I stall. Olivia is fast asleep on her stomach, with one arm flung out across the bed. A long, lean leg with toenails painted cherry red sticks out from under the blanket, and her cheek is pressed into my pillow.

I watch her for a minute, her back rising and falling with each breath that wheezes quietly through her nose. There it is, that sound again, not a snore and not exactly a hiss, but audible.

She's going to wake with a hangover. But the question is, what is she escaping? What's bad enough to fly thousands of miles by yourself to get away from? And why is she so determined to, as she put it, *flirt like a fool*, which oddly enough, is fitting, considering today is April first?

I massage the back of my neck and change my plans. Rather than head into the shop, I need to go for a run to work off all of this excess energy. I grab some athletic shorts and a T-shirt from my dresser then turn to go, but the skinny jeans and pink top Olivia had on yesterday are tossed on the floor. Along with a lacy white bra.

The look she gave me last night when I insisted she sleep in my bed and I handed her a T-shirt and a pair of boxers for her to use as pajamas is burned in my mind. Her head cocked to the side, and she eyed me as if she couldn't quite believe I had honorable intentions. As if she thought I'd climb into bed and do things with her she wasn't opposed to. She bit her bottom lip, and hell, if I didn't think she was considering flirting with me in that moment. I had to turn away, so I didn't do something stupid.

I sweep up her clothes with one hand. Her suitcase hasn't been delivered, so she'll have to wear the outfit again at some point today, even if she plans to head to the beach in that bikini she bought last night that in no way qualifies as swimwear.



Without giving it another thought, I head down the hallway and throw her clothes into the washing machine. By the time I get back from running five miles down the beach, the clothes will be done. I might even have them dry before she wakes.

I pop into the bathroom for aspirin and a glass of water and then head back into my room to deposit them on the nightstand and grab my running shoes tucked under the bed. Olivia is still out like a light. One of the sneakers falls to the floor when I grab them. As she sighs and rolls over, my eyes dart to her sleeping form as I freeze.

I wish she hadn't.

The movement pulls my white T-shirt taut against her chest. Without a bra on, the curve of each full breast is on display and the darker circles of her nipples are visible through the thin fabric.

Damn.

My fingers twitch, and I grit my teeth, trying not to think about the feel of their heavy weight in my hands or pressed skin-to-skin against my chest. Or how, if I flicked a thumb across the sensitive tips, they'd harden and stand out and beg for my tongue.

I look up at the ceiling, take a deep breath, and blow it out. Then, with more effort than it took to finish the Navy Battle Stations at bootcamp, I resist the tempting sight and leave, closing the door behind me.

# Chapter 7



**OLIVIA**

My eyelids flutter open, and I squint at the sunlight and roll over, burying my head under the pillow. I remember where I am and why I'm here, and my head pounds with the type of throbbing that demands a dark room and a bottle of Gatorade, but I'd settle for caffeine.

The thought of getting out of bed is almost too much—especially today, April first, also known as April Fool's day.

Considering it was supposed to be my wedding day, it's fitting now that I have the luxury of three months of hindsight.

I hear a noise and freeze, listening from under the pillow, but when it repeats, I can tell it's far away, not inside the houseboat. And it's definitely not AJ. At least, I don't think so. Just in case, I peek out from under the pillow and look around. The bedroom door is closed—thank God. As much as I appreciate the comfort of the T-shirt and boxers he insisted I change into last night, when all I wanted to do was collapse into bed and close my eyes to keep the room from spinning, they don't exactly fit well and certainly aren't flattering.

Not that I care what he thinks.

Okay, maybe, I care a little, but what's more important is, today's a day to look good and feel good for myself. It's my first full day of vacation and a time to pamper myself. Not a day to wallow.

Sure, it will not be the fairytale I dreamed of since I was a little girl or even the day I believed until three months ago would be one of the happiest days of my life, but I should still be glad. I dodged a bullet. Any last twinge of regret or remorse is replaced by gratefulness, and I close my eyes and thank my lucky stars I'm not walking down the aisle today with a man I thought I loved, a man who I thought loved me. Even though my dress was killer.

If only I had coffee and my suitcase.

I stretch and sit up, looking out the window at the marina where the sun glints off the clear blue water. I'm more

determined than ever to enjoy my first full day in Candy Cane Key. The first day of the rest of my life.

Time to get going.

I glance toward the alarm clock on the nightstand and see a glass of water and two aspirin set out on a plate. AJ must have left it for me. How very Christian Grey of him. But it's so considerate and will help my headache, so I dutifully take the pills and drain the glass of water.

Then I take a deep breath and search for my phone before remembering AJ promised he'd charge it for me last night. I have a fuzzy memory of texting Ethan, but I might be making that up because I can't remember any details. It's probably best not to check my phone this morning, anyway. I'm not in the mood for all the messages from back home, no matter if they're of the *you're better off without him* variety or the more tactful *thinking of you today* type.

What I need is a shower. I scramble to my feet and go to grab the pile of clothes from the floor where I distinctly remember tossing them, only to find they're gone.

"What?" I say aloud, the word coming out more like a croak from my dry mouth than an actual question. A thorough search of the bedroom confirms the clothes I had on last night are nowhere to be found, but that's impossible. They couldn't have just disappeared. Unless *he* had something to do with it. *He* who was holding me tight against his side as we walked home from the bar. *He* who insisted I sleep in his bed when I said I would happily take the couch.

I really need to call Ethan, and I will, later, but for now, I tie AJ's oversized T-shirt into a knot at my belly and explore the empty houseboat on a hunt for my clothes. Five minutes and a thorough search of the houseboat, and I find them—in the washing machine.

I stand and stare at the wet clothes spinning around in the stacked front loading washing machine and feel...taken care of. More pampered by this than any single act during the two years I dated my ex. The timer says three minutes remaining, so I use the restroom and return to transfer my outfit to the dryer with a smile.

The shower is hot and steamy, and even though I only have the bare essentials AJ stocks, it's perfect. The soap smells of evergreen, like AJ. I hold it up to my nose and take a deep breath, enjoying the aromatic scent for a minute with my eyes closed.

I sing an Aretha Franklin tune and take my time, letting the hot water cascade over me and wash away my past. As I dry off, I feel refreshed and grateful I have clean clothes to put on.

With one towel wrapped turban-style around my wet hair and another around my body, I emerge from the bathroom, belting out the chorus and dart to grab my clothes from the dryer down the hall, not expecting to slam directly into AJ's broad frame.

Startled, I slip, and my wet feet slide out from underneath me. I flail one arm out and try to grab the doorjamb but go down, landing unceremoniously on my ass with a loud, "Oomph."

My other hand keeps a deathlike grip on the towel, which fortunately, has prevented it from falling off completely. As it is, the slit gapes wide, and my entire thigh and half of my ass are on display. I squeeze my legs closed and hope he's tall enough that, from his angle, my position doesn't reveal any more than that.

AJ springs forward and reaches down to help me to my feet. With one warm hand on each of my shoulders, he holds me steady. His eyes, wide with concern, meet mine. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I insist, aware of how my breathless answer sounds completely unconvincing, and add a firm nod.

Our bodies are mere inches apart. Close enough the towel brushes him. I secure it tighter around my naked body. The fall jarred the one wrapped around my head, and it's about to slide off, so I reach up and pull it down, shaking out my hair. The wet strands fall past my shoulders. I don't even want to think about how I look right now, not that my thoughts are anywhere close to coherent at the moment. Not with this sexy man so close his body warmth is raising my temperature—fast.

Then I register his appearance. If someone told me an athletic apparel company was doing a photoshoot on Candy Cane Key and AJ was the model, I wouldn't doubt it. His face is flushed, eyes bright with energy, and the light stubble across his cheeks and jaw beg for my touch.

A sheen of perspiration glows on his skin, and sweat darkens his light blue shirt. He opens his mouth as if he is going to

speak but then snaps it closed without uttering a word. He shakes his head. Not a vigorous movement. In fact, it's barely noticeable. Likely, I would have missed it if he wasn't he's so close. And staring directly at me.

My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and his gaze falls to my mouth. His eyes narrow, and it might be my imagination, but he leans in, and I tilt my head up.

He's going to kiss me. I feel it in my bones. But the boat rocks on a wave and interrupts the moment. As if coming to his senses, he releases my shoulders and steps back. Cool air rushed to fill the gap, and I shiver.

"I... Uh... I didn't mean to startle you." His voice is thick, and he averts his eyes, glancing away.

"Three for three," I quip, trying to play it off, even though my heart is pounding.

He turns back to me, concern etched on his face. "How are you feeling?"

I lift a bare shoulder. "I've been worse."

I look down and catch sight of a smear of moisture at the bottom hem of his shirt. I've seen Ethan and his friends playing basketball and working out enough to recognize the mark. At some point, probably only a few minutes ago, AJ lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow. That move always gets me. The tempting glimpse of abs that move affords. Especially on a man as well-built as this one.

I shake off the image of taut, six-pack abs that comes to mind and point down the hallway. “I, um, was just going to get my clothes from the dryer. I didn’t know you were back.”

“Sure, yeah.” He steps aside, making space for me to slip past him.

But I don’t move, not yet. “Thank you for starting them in the washing machine.”

He shrugs as if it’s not one of the sweetest, most thoughtful things a man has ever done for me.

I make my way down the hallway and have the feeling his eyes are on me as I go.

He hasn’t moved when I return, and he meets my eyes again. “I was just coming to tell you I picked up coffee and a muffin for you at *The Ginger Bread Man* while I was out.”

“*The Ginger Bread Man?*”

“A bakery here in town.”

“You know the way to my heart,” I exclaim, my mouth watering at the thought of a hot cup of coffee.

I think nothing of my response until his face transforms into a sexy smile that would be picture perfect for the athletic apparel ad.

My feet falter, and I stare for a minute, my breath hitching as I drink it in.

“I’m just going to...” I motion toward the bathroom door. I need to get away from this man before I remember he won’t



help me meet my goal for the week. He can't. He's Ethan's best friend.

"Yes, of course," he says, waving me by. But as I close the door, I see he doesn't walk away. And I realize my migraine is gone.

# Chapter 8



AJ

The marina is busy, but I'd expect nothing less on a beautiful Saturday morning in April on Candy Cane Key. The wind is blowing from the east, and the forecast is for sunny skies and seventy-five degrees.

It's perfect weather for a day at the beach. I push away the thought of Olivia in that joke of a bikini, lying out on a towel on the sand and flirting with God knows who. Instead, focus on Mr. McMurty's overheating engine.

Ten minutes later, I've ruled out a clogged water strainer and debris in the intake. I grab a pair of pliers and am about to open the water pump to check the impeller when Andie pops out from the shop.

"Mornin'," she says, her flipflops clacking against the dock.

"Can you hand me that screwdriver?" I point to my workbench.

She knows better than to toss it to me and instead climbs onboard, sinking onto the beige cushioned bench, after she passes it to me.

"Sooo, how's Olivia?"

I ignore the innuendo in her voice and turn back to the engine.

"Fine."

"Fine?"

My hand grips the screwdriver, and though I shouldn't, I can't help but think back to how Olivia looked less than an hour ago. I was never a kid that wished I had a superhero's secret power, but this morning, I would have given anything for the ability to see through walls—or doors.

One glimpse of Olivia in nothing but a towel had almost been enough to make me forget she's Ethan's sister. The sight of her bare ass and the smooth curve of her thigh when she fell nearly put me over the edge.

Then, when I'd helped her up, she'd been so close I had a front-row seat as her beautiful, expressive eyes morphed from baby blue to cobalt to midnight. But, with the last thread of

self-control I had, I'd stepped back instead of leaning in for the kiss I desperately wanted to plant on her full, pouty lips. A kiss I'm half-certain she would have welcomed.

"She's fine," I repeat gruffly and immediately curse my dead giveaway. Especially for someone like Andie, who has always had a talent for reading people.

"Did you sleep with her?"

"What?" I cough out, my gruff tone transforming to disbelief as I spin to face my sister.

Her head tilts to the side. "I asked if you slept with her."

"Of course not. Not that it's any of your business."

"Is it because she was tipsy? You know, sometimes, that's the best kind of sex."

I cannot believe I'm having this conversation, right now—with my sister. I hold up a hand to stop her from uttering another word. "Olivia wasn't *tipsy*. She was drunk as a skunk. And I don't want to know how you know what *the best kind of sex* is."

"Suit yourself, but she's on vacation to have a good time, and I just figured with the sparks flying between you two and the fact she's staying at your place—"

"There were no sparks flying. Not a whisper of smoke. Nothing." I shake my head for emphasis until she cackles and looks at me over her sunglasses.

"You don't really think that, do you?"

“Is this some sort of April Fool’s joke or something? Since when are you an expert on—”

“You can deny it all you want, big brother, but it doesn’t make it less true. Ask anyone at the bar last night, especially Joel.”

Damn, she’s right, and she knows it. I hit the screwdriver against my thigh so hard it will probably leave a mark. “It doesn’t matter if she’s...” *Beautiful, funny, feisty, adventurous...* I could fill in any number of adjectives but don’t. Instead, I shake off my displeasure. “It doesn’t matter what she is. Olivia is Ethan’s sister.”

“So?”

“So she’s off limits.”

Her head cocks to the side. “Did he tell you that?”

“He didn’t have to. It’s an unspoken rule. A line in the sand, if you will.”

Her eyebrows shoot so high I can see them arch over her sunglasses. “So guys never fall for their friend’s sister?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t say that. What I mean is, I respect Ethan and our history, our friendship, enough not to take advantage of the situation.”

She snorts. My sister actually snorts at me. “Believe me, brother. I don’t think Olivia would think you’re *taking advantage* of anything.”

How can she not see it’s even worse, if that’s the case? But before I can argue, she continues.

“Look, she’d be lucky to have a man like you. Plus, I know you’ve never been the kind of guy who has one-night stands but—”

“I’m leaving on Monday.”

She flits her hand, dismissing my correction. “So a two-night stand then.”

I roll my shoulders at this disaster of a conversation and then swallow hard at the realization that even a week with Olivia wouldn’t be enough for me. I’m wrecked by feeling more for Olivia than I should, but before I can sort through my feelings, Andie keeps talking.

“All I’m saying is, rather than assuming anything you should call Ethan and talk to him.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and hold it up to my ear, pretending to call him. “Right, so I’m just supposed to call my friend all the way on another coast, a man who defended our country at my side, and say, *‘Um, hey, Ethan, the dates got mixed up, and I’m still here for the weekend while your little sister is staying at my place, and you don’t mind if I sleep with her, do you? No? Great, thanks.’*”

I hang up the imaginary phone and glare at Andie, glad to have proven my point. But rather than agree, she rises and steps toward me, plucking my phone out of my fingers. She types in my passcode, pulls Ethan’s contact up, and hands the phone back to me with a look that means business—one she rarely gives me. “You need to call him.”

“Did you not just hear the conversation?”

She crosses her arms. “I heard how you think the conversation will go, but I’ve never seen you so protective of a woman as you were last night. You wouldn’t have threatened Joel if you didn’t feel something for Olivia, something more than a two-night stand could satisfy.”

I hate how she knows me so well she can hit the nail on the head in one sentence.

“Fine, I’ll call him, but only to let him know the dates got mixed up, and I’m still here until Monday.”

“Perfect.” Andie bounces away as if she didn’t just rock my world and heads back into the shop, her damn flipflops clacking against the dock again.

I stare at the phone for a long minute. This will go one of two ways. I’ve never put a woman before my friends and don’t want to be in a situation where I’d have to choose because... Well, I don’t want to examine my feelings too deeply at the moment. With a sigh, I press Call. Three rings later, Ethan picks up. “Hey.”

I can’t help it. I cut right to the chase. “I’m not sure if you’ve heard from Olivia or not, but she arrived last night, and I’m not leaving until Monday.”

“I heard, and I’m glad you called.”

“Why’s that?”

“Olivia texted last night.”

I sink onto the beige-cushioned bench. “Last night?”

“Yeah, drunk texted, if I know my sister.”

“She might have had a few.”

Ethan pauses before he continues. “She thinks I lied about the dates, so you’d be there to keep an eye on her for me.”

“She mentioned something like that.”

“Yeah, sorry. She’s had a rough time lately and really just needed to get out of town this week, but it seems like you two hit it off.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was asking about you.”

I have to force myself not to press too quickly, not to appear too eager for any scrap of information, and try for casual nonchalance. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, she said something about enjoying a night out with you.”

“She wasn’t with me, but I was keeping an eye on her. She’s... great.”

“If you say so,” he jokes.

“No, really,” I press. “She’s... Actually, I was wondering if you’d mind if I take her out, show her around town.”

“Why would I mind?”

“She’s your sister and—”



“You have a sister. How would you feel if I started seeing her?”

I scoff and glance toward the shop, catching a flicker of movement in the window I’m pretty sure is Andie trying not to get caught spying on me. “I’d wish you luck.”

“But you wouldn’t stop me?”

“No. After everything we’ve been through, I know the kind of man you are.”

“Same, man. Same.”

# Chapter 9



## OLIVIA

Today has gone from bad to worse to downright dreadful. I thought I'd hit rock bottom months ago, but today might just take the cake, no pun intended.

After all, here I am, on vacation in a Christmas-themed paradise, and instead of flirting like a fool and living my #bestsinglelife, I'm dragging down the dock back to AJ's houseboat with a bottle of merlot under my arm, a double scoop of chocolate peppermint bark ice cream dripping down

the waffle cone and over my fingers, and tears streaming down my face.

I really hope AJ's not home when I get back. There's no way I want him to see me like this—even if he's not an object of my flirting. Maybe, my suitcase will have been delivered, and I can wash off the sand and suntan lotion, throw on some lounge pants and curl up on the couch with my wine and a movie. Not a romcom, though, not today. Maybe an action flick.

I don't realize I'm just past AJ's shop until I hear my name. Andie has popped out from the door under the blue-and-white, hand-painted wooden sign and flags me down.

“Oh, hey.” I wipe my face against my shoulder and sniffle, trying to pull myself together.

“What's wrong?” she asks, rushing over to me.

“Nothing.”

She arches an eyebrow in an imitation of her brother that stops me cold. “We both know that's not true, and look, you don't have to tell me anything, but at least, come inside and sit down.”

I glance at the shop.

“No one's in there, right now, and AJ's away on an errand. It's late enough I can close up for the day.”

“You sure?” I could really use a sympathetic ear, even if she's AJ's sister.

She wraps an arm around my shoulder. “I insist. Plus, I have some cups and a bottle of rum under the counter if the ice cream and wine don’t do the trick.”

I attempt a smile for her benefit. “That sounds perfect.”

Ten minutes later, I’ve tossed the rest of my ice cream cone in the trash and I’m pouring each of us a second glass of wine while admiring the nautically-themed Christmas tree in the corner.

“I think I know the answer already, but I’m assuming your day didn’t go as planned,” she says, changing the subject.

“You can say that again.” With a sigh, I sink back into a hammock hanging from the ceiling. “I had good intentions of enjoying myself and maybe even meeting a guy or two at the beach, but...” I trail off, not wanting to disclose every time I started talking to a guy thoughts surfaced of AJ in the hallway this morning when he almost kissed me and I ended up blowing them off one after another.

“But no one floated your boat. I get it, and believe me. I don’t blame you. I’ve lived on Candy Cane Key all my life, and it seems like I know way too much about all the guys here to want to date any of them.”

“This seems like a great place to grow up. You have the best of both worlds, a small-town feel with the beach.”

“It is. Plus, we get a lot of tourists, who enjoy the whole Christmas-year-round thing, and I think it’s fun how everyone around here leans into it.”

“I can tell. I stumbled upon a beach wedding earlier that was going on down by the resort. The bridesmaids were wearing red sundresses and the groomsmen had on white polos and green board shorts. Plus, the bride was carrying a bouquet that I swear had—”

“Let me guess, mistletoe?”

“Yes!”

“That’s Candy Cane Key for you.”

I swirl the wine in my glass and sigh. Andie feels like a friend I’ve known for years, someone with a sympathetic ear.

“Today was supposed to be my wedding day,” I confess quietly, without meeting her eyes as I swallow back another round of waterworks.

“What? Really?”

“Mm-hmm, really.”

She grabs the bottle of wine and drains the last bit into my glass. “I think we’re going to need the rum.”

“I think you’re right.”

A few minutes later, with my feet skimming the ground, I’m swinging back and forth on the hammock and have given Andie the CliffsNotes version of the story.

“Let me get this straight. Three months ago, you walked in on your ex—I’ll call him jerk face because it doesn’t even matter what his name is—a man you’d been seeing for over two years, sleeping with another woman when you were engaged?”

“Yup. I’d been out dress shopping with my mom that afternoon, helping her figure out what she was going to wear to the rehearsal dinner.”

“Ugh, I’m sorry.”

I swallow down my usual, ‘*It’s okay,*’ response that has become so automatic I barely even think about it anymore, but, you know what? It’s not okay. What happened was shitty, and I didn’t deserve it. Instead, I take a deep breath and tell her how I really feel. “It was a blessing in disguise, although I didn’t realize it at the time. The guy—jerk face—didn’t really love me, and I kind of knew it deep down all along, but I didn’t want to admit it.”

“Sounds like you’ve wasted enough time and energy on him.”

“I have. That’s why I’m using this week, during what was supposed to be my honeymoon, to get back out there.”

“To flirt like a fool, right?”

I scrunch my nose and look at her through the hammock’s webbing. “Did I tell you that last night?”

She smiles. “You did, after a Jingle Juice or two.”

“Yes, well, that was my goal, but as I said, it’s not going so well thanks to—” I stop myself before I admit her brother is the reason my plan is failing faster than a leaky boat in a stormy sea, but she reads my mind, regardless.

“Thanks to AJ?”

“How’d you know?”

“Lucky guess.”

“Yes, well,” I say, feeling as if a weight has lifted off my shoulders because I’m admitting it aloud, even if it is to his sister. “AJ is... Well, he’s what I’d look for in a man if I was not just in the mood for a good time. He’s sweet and protective and sexy.”

Andie lifts her head at the sound of a boat cutting through the water close behind the shop. “He’s protective, I’ll give you that. Sweet is another story, and I’ll let you be the judge of sexy.”

I sigh. “It doesn’t matter what I think about him. He’s leaving on Monday, and it’s clear he is not interested.”

Her head snaps toward me. “What gives you that idea?”

“This morning, he almost kissed me but pulled away at the last minute.”

She rises from the chair and tosses her empty cup in the trashcan. “Maybe, you should try flirting with AJ. I have a feeling things might go differently now.”

Something about her voice gives rise to a surge of hope in my chest. “You think?”

“I do.”

“Maybe, I will. Either way, thanks for listening.”

“Anytime.”

A thud from out back cuts through the air, and Andie shoots me a sly smile. I scramble to my feet as panic sets in. “Is that

him now?”

She lifts a shoulder. “See for yourself.”



# Chapter 10



AJ

There's a flicker in the window as I pull back in the dock from taking Mr. McMurty's boat out for a test drive to make sure the operations are back to normal.

I'm surprised Andie's still working, considering how late it is. Could she really want to know what Ethan said so badly to have stayed late? Usually, she's off enjoying her Saturday night as early as possible.

The door opens as I'm tying off to the piling, and Andie's flipflops clack against the dock. I glance up, ready to head off any questions, but it's not Andie. Olivia stands there looking sun-kissed and gorgeous. Thankfully, besides the new flipflops, she's wearing a loose white bathing suit cover up, although the material is so thin the Santa bikini underneath is clearly visible.

"Hi."

I stop short at the catch in her voice and focus on her face. There's a mixture of hesitation and optimism in her eyes, and they're red-rimmed, as if she's been crying.

"What's wrong?" I demand, a little too forcefully.

"Nothing."

I hop up onto the dock, bypassing the stairs, and clench my fists instead of reaching up to shake the truth out of her. "What happened today? Did someone hurt you?"

The edge of her lip curls up into a half-smile. "No one hurt me today, I swear."

"Where's Andie?" I ask, looking past Olivia toward the shop, wanting more answers than I'm getting at the moment.

"She had to go. I was heading back to the houseboat earlier, and she saw me walking by. She flagged me down, and we had a nice chat. She's great, by the way."

My jaw clenches at the thought of what Andie might have said. "What did she say?"

Olivia's shoulder lifts. "She was just giving me some advice."

"She's full of that today," I mutter under my breath.

"What?"

"Nothing." I run a hand through my hair and meet her eyes.

"Look, Olivia, I know you said you could take care of yourself, and I believe it, but if something happened today, I want to know, and not because Ethan asked me to because he didn't. I want to know, so I can take care of it."

She steps closer and lays a hand on my arm. "Nothing happened today, I swear."

Something definitely happened, or she wouldn't have been crying. She can deny it all she wants, but there are streaks down her cheeks that betray the truth.

But I've asked, and she's answered, so I have to trust her. I have to take her word for it. "If you say so."

"And I believe you about Ethan," she adds, as if to reassure me. "Earlier, he apologized for making an honest mistake about the dates."

"Good." It's now or never, and I reach forward to tuck a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. "You probably have plans for tonight, but I was thinking maybe—"

"Yes," she says quickly, cutting me off.

*What?* "Yes?"

"Yes." She nods as if to confirm her agreement.

"But you didn't even hear what I was going to suggest."

“Is it something with you? Something together?”

It might be my imagination, but her voice seemed to drop on that last word as if insinuating something. I meet her eyes.

“Yes.”

Her pupils flare. “Then I’m in.”

“Alright then.”

She looks up at me through thick lashes. “But let me get cleaned up first.”

It could be the memory of Olivia, wet from the shower in my hallway this morning, but I’d bet good money it’s more than that, and not just wishful thinking. There’s definitely an inflection in her voice that wasn’t there earlier. One that speaks straight to my cock.

“Of course, just let me lock up.”

On the way home, through the Saturday evening crowd, I place my hand on the small of Olivia’s back while we make our way down the half-full marina. The heat of her skin warms my palm through the sheer fabric of her cover up. When we get toward the end of the dock and the crowd has thinned, she moves away. I glance down, but without a word, she slips her hand into mine. Our fingers easily intertwine, and she leans in and rests her head on my shoulder.

“I thought, maybe, we could pick up dinner and take it out on the boat to watch the sunset.”

“The houseboat?”

“No. Technically, the houseboat can move, but it’s moored in and hooked up. We’d have to take the speedboat back at the shop.”

“Oh.”

She sounds disappointed, and I squeeze her hand. “Why do you ask?”

She looks up at me through thick lashes. “Because the houseboat is the one with a bed.”

The doubt from earlier, when I wondered if she was flirting with me, evaporates in an instant.

“Do you need a bed?” I murmur.

“I suppose not. There’s always other fun to be had.”

I stop short, a few yards from the front door, regardless of who can see us. “Olivia Larson. You wouldn’t be flirting with me, would you?”

Her baby blue gaze lifts to mine. “Yes, but not because I’m a fool. Because I know exactly what I’m doing and what I want.”

I lift my hand to cup her cheek and run a thumb over the streaks on her cheeks I can barely make out in the glare from the sun low in the sky. “I never thought you were a fool.”

Her breath catches, and she bats her eyelashes. “Is it working then? The flirting?”

I drop my thumb to her lower lip and grip her waist with my other hand, pulling her close enough to feel my rock-hard

erection against her belly. “Too well.”

Her eyes dance with delight, and she presses a kiss to the pad of my thumb as she grips my bicep.

“There’s only one problem, though,” I say with a smile.

“What’s that?”

“One might say you’re no longer flirting.”

“What might *one say* I’m doing then?” Her voice is low and sexy as hell.

“Teasing,” I growl.

And damn, if she doesn’t smirk as her eyes gleam. “Even better.”

# Chapter 11



**OLIVIA**

Something's changed, and not just with me. AJ's different, too. I'm not sure what happened since he left for work this morning to cause him to ask me to dinner, but I don't care. My flirting or, as he says, *teasing* is working, and I'll take it any day. Even if it means only two nights with him.

In the shower, I scrub the sand from between my toes and wash away the day. Rather than replaying the wedding on the beach earlier and sinking into the sorrow that would have

enveloped me even a week ago, I think about AJ a few minutes ago at the shop and how he respected my answer when I said nothing happened today, even if he didn't quite believe it.

A yearning for a relationship built on trust blooms in my chest like the pink azaleas in the planter out front of the *Candy Cane Creamery*.

My body is wound tight, and the bar of soap that smells like AJ slipping against my sudsy skin isn't helping quell the desire concentrated between my legs. When I emerge and wipe away the steam on the mirror, the face looking back at me is the same one I saw this morning, but I'm no longer giving in to the story I've told myself for the past three months.

Andie was right. I've wasted enough time and energy on an ex who doesn't deserve it. Flirting like a fool might be fun, and don't get me wrong, I relish the way AJ's jaw clenches when he is biting back a retort or the way his fingers curl into a fist when he is trying to resist his natural tendencies to be protective, but tonight isn't about moving on or erasing the past. It's about taking charge of my destiny and asking for what I need, what I want.

And tonight, what I want is AJ.

So, instead of putting on my skinny jeans and pink shirt, I brush out my hair, wrap a towel around my body and open the door with a plan. One that, if all goes well, will be fun and leave us both satisfied.



AJ comes around the corner from the kitchen and nearly trips at the sight of me in the hallway. Once more, he's illuminated from behind, and those sandy blond curls make him look like a saint. A saint who's going to answer my every prayer.

"I just need to grab a hair tie from my bag," I say as I scoot past him. He cocks an eyebrow, and with it comes a look of suspicion as he turns to follow me with his gaze. I bite back a smile and bend over at the couch, pretending to dig through my bag that's still sitting where I dropped it yesterday afternoon.

I let the towel slip a little and then tug it back up high enough, if he's looking, it will allow him a glimpse of my bare ass. He sucks in a sharp breath, and I grin. He's watching.

I manage to sound nonplussed and lighthearted when I spin back to face him and adjust the towel, letting my cleavage show. "Darn, I can't seem to find one."

He leans against the wall, crosses his arms, and pins me with his gaze. "I know what you're doing, sweetheart."

My heart thumps, but I do my best to feign confusion. "What do you mean?"

He stalks toward me. "Your little ruse isn't fooling anyone."

I try to hide my smile, but his eyes dart to my lips as they start to curl. "I thought we were going out on the boat, you know, for a sunset dinner cruise and all that. I just didn't want my hair in my face."

"Dinner has been rescheduled."

“And the boat ride?” I ask.

“Raincheck.”

I glance out the window. “But it’s not raining.”

He reaches up and tugs the corner of the towel from where it’s tucked in by my armpit. It falls to the floor, but his eyes don’t stray from my face—yet. “As you said,” he says, his voice low and delicious. “This boat has a bed.”

My breath hitches. “Only one.”

AJ steps back to rake me from head to toe. His green eyes are darker than a Christmas tree when they meet my gaze again. He rubs his hand along his jaw, and I can almost feel the hunger radiating off of him. The burning matches my own.

As if he can read my mind, AJ reaches for me, and I step into his embrace. I press against him, the soft knit of his T-shirt caressing my sensitive skin as his lips descend to capture mine. He holds my head with one hand, threading his fingers through my hair, while his other hand skates south along my side and curves around to cup my ass.

I weave my arms around his neck and pull him tighter, enjoying the hum in his chest and the rough kiss that, as wild as it is, still hints at a measure of self-control, as if AJ’s holding back the full force of his need.

“AJ, please,” I moan against his lips.

He shifts his other hand to my ass and squats down, lifting me easily into his arms. I wrap my legs around his waist as he trails kisses across my collarbone.

“Are you sure, sweetheart?” he murmurs into the curve of my neck, his tongue working magic on the sensitive skin. “Because if we do this, no more flirting with anyone but me.”

I pull back and run my fingers through his hair. “So teasing’s out, too, then, except for you.”

His fingers dig into my flesh. “Damn straight.”

“Deal.”

He presses a quick kiss to my lips and walks me back to the bedroom, depositing me on the Navy blanket on the bed and climbing right on up. I’m nestled between his elbows as the zipper of his pants presses against my core. My nails scratch his back, and I squeeze my heels against his ass, drawing him tighter and squirming against his erection.

My toes curl as he works his way down to my breast, sucking one hard nipple into his warm mouth and nibbling it gently. He leans on one elbow and snakes the opposite hand down between us.

“You’re so wet for me,” he says as his fingers glide through me.

My back arches, and I tug at his shirt, eager to see him, to touch him. “AJ, please. You have too many clothes on.”

“No,” he says, switching to my other nipple and teasing it with his tongue. “I’m not usually one for payback, but in this case, it’s too tempting to resist.”

“Payback?” I squeak as his thumb finds my clit.

“Mm-hmm,” he rumbles, against my breast. “First flirting and then teasing. You are one wicked woman, who’s turned my world upside down in less than a day.”

“But I—”

He cuts me off by slipping a finger inside me just enough to make me writhe and seek more. I want it thick and deep. I want him.

“Like that, do you?” he asks.

“I do, and I promise, I’ll never flirt again. Just... Please... I can’t.” I’m barely coherent as every cell in my brain is concentrated on the sensations, the pleasure he’s in complete control of.

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m barely getting started.”

“No,” I exclaim, gripping his shirt and trying, unsuccessfully, to pull it off him.

He chuckles, and with his finger still circling inside me, he slides down the bed, his intention clear. I gasp as he presses a kiss to the inside of my thigh before his mouth trails over to join his hand. My fingers grip the blanket, and I squeeze my eyes shut as he finds his destination, his warm tongue featherlight when all I want is more. Much more.

“AJ, please,” I repeat, urging him on.

“You don’t like being teased?”

His warm breath caresses my skin, and I almost forget the question. “No! Please, I can’t—”

“Tell me what you want.” He swipes his tongue up my folds.

“Aargh, I want you. Now.”

“Believe me, sweetheart. I want you, too. But first, I want to feel you quiver beneath me, hear my name on your lips as you come—hard.”

“I’m so close.”

He slides another finger in and edges deeper with both. I moan loudly.

“So I should slow down and draw out your pleasure? Is that what I’m hearing?”

“No,” I exclaim, my hands shooting down to weave through his hair and hold his head right where it is.

He chuckles, and the thrum almost pushes me over the edge, but fortunately, he thrusts his fingers deep, filling me while his tongue works me as if he knows me better than I know myself.

“AJ, I’m coming,” I call out just as my legs shake and the wave crashes, sending me over the edge as everything around us melts away.

# Chapter 12



AJ

The hint of a smile graces Olivia's sleeping face when I roll over to find her sprawled out next to me in bed. She's making that noise again, the soft, snoring sound with each breath that wheezes quietly through her nose and is uniquely her.

My chest tightens as I reach over to rub a lock of her light blonde hair between my fingers. I never want to wake without her by my side. Now that I've found this woman, who is

everything I didn't know I needed, I need to figure out how to convince her to stay—forever.

The sheet is drawn across Olivia's naked body, and the valley between her breasts is a tempting sight. I can't help but smile. Even sound asleep, she's a tease. I had way too much fun drawing every last ounce of pleasure from her body last night before making love to her, but I'm still not satisfied. I can't wait to take care of her again today, but for now, I'll let her rest. I have to make plans.

I head into the kitchen and enjoy the sunrise over the water, the pink and purple streaks peeking above the horizon and filling the sky. I down a tall glass of water and grab my phone off the charging pad next to Olivia's glittery pink case. I knock hers, and the movement illuminates her lock screen. A handful of messages have come through for her, but it's the calendar notification at the top that makes my heart stop. It reads *Honeymoon!!!*

I snatch up her phone, certain I made a mistake, but sure enough, the words are there, plain as day. I rock back on my heels. Everything I thought I knew about the fun-loving, adventurous woman asleep down the hall changes in an instant. This week was supposed to be her honeymoon? How the fuck am I so stupid? She's here to flirt—period. The fact I've fallen for her, when I barely know anything about her, is my own fault. I'm such a fool.

I toss her phone back onto the counter as if it's burning and step back, staring at it as it skids and hits the backsplash. Ever

since Olivia appeared in my bed on Friday, there have been questions demanding answers, answers I thought I got. Apparently, I didn't.

I'm tempted to call Ethan right now, give him a piece of my mind, and demand the truth. Hell, it's a good thing he's three thousand miles away because if he were here right now, talking would not be my first course of action. How could he not tell me the truth, only saying she was going through a rough time? Yeah, a rough time thanks to a canceled wedding.

I crack my knuckles, slam my palms down on the counter, then start pacing the kitchen floor. Olivia's already proven she can keep a secret better than a spy. I think back to yesterday, when it was clear she wasn't exactly forthcoming about her day. I never in a million years would have guessed it was because she was supposed to have been saying *I do*. To God knows who.

My next best bet to find out what the hell is going on is my sister, who talked to Olivia yesterday afternoon, gave advice to her just as Andie did with me. She's got to know something. Plus, whatever she said made a difference because, from the minute I got back from the test drive, things were different, and I'm about to get to the bottom of it.

Resolved, I spin to head back into the bedroom to throw on some clothes but stop short. Olivia is standing in the doorway, wearing my T-shirt, her eyes wide. She glances at her phone on the counter and then up at me.



Silence descends as we face off, neither of us wanting to be the first to speak. The high-pitched whistle of an osprey cuts through the quiet as the boat rocks slightly on a wave. Despite the outrage surging through my veins—anger at her, but more so at myself—I can't help but notice how incredible she looks this morning. Rumpled, with her hair mussed, but in a sexy way.

I shake my head to clear it and cut to the chase.

“Were you supposed to be on your honeymoon this week?” I don't temper my tone, and the question sounds like the accusation it is.

She flinches and swallows, but then lifts her chin and nods.

“And when that fell through, Plan B was to crash here, enjoy the beach, and flirt like a fool, instead?”

Her cobalt eyes narrow, and a flush of indignation creeps inch-by-inch up her neck.

“Plan B,” she scoffs. “Yes, AJ, when my wedding fell through, forgive me if I wanted to get away and enjoy myself.”

“So yesterday was supposed to be your wedding day.”

It's not a question, but she confirms it nonetheless.

“Yes, but I was honest about my plan from the moment we met.” Her tone is just as fierce as mine.

“Maybe the plan, but not the why.”

Her brow knots. “Does it matter?”

God, this woman is exasperating. “It does to me.”

Her hands fly to her hips. “So you’re telling me, I should have come clean the moment we met about the circumstances for my trip? Hell, AJ, I didn’t even know you, and you weren’t even supposed to be here.”

“I’m not the one who got the dates mixed up! And yes, maybe, not the moment we met, but you should have told me the truth before...” I trail off, waving my hand around and catching myself before I say, *‘I fell for you.’*

Her jaw drops, and she takes a step back. Then another. Her voice is dangerously low when she finally speaks. “I can’t believe you. How dare you think that, just because we slept together, it entitles you to know all of my secrets?”

“Slept together? What? No, that’s not what I meant,” I protest, holding up my hands, but it’s too late.

“Yeah, right,” she scoffs, spinning on her heels and stomping down the hallway to my room.

She’s yanking on her skinny jeans and muttering to herself about men while I stand in the doorway, trying to figure out how this whole situation got twisted around, when there’s a knock on the front door.

I need to set the record straight, but Olivia’s in no mood to listen to anything more I have to say at the moment. The rap sounds again, more insistent, and I run a hand through my hair.

“Coming,” I call as I storm down the hallway to answer it.

“Delivery for Olivia Larson,” a man with a baseball cap and a blue-and-gray airline work shirt announces when I fling open

the door.

“Is that my suitcase?” Olivia shouts, tugging on her pink shirt as she makes her way toward us. “How ironic? The minute I decide to leave, it shows up. Just my luck.”

“I’ll need you to sign for it, ma’am.” The driver holds out a tablet.

“Sure, of course.” She offers him a smile, but there’s a brittle quality about it, as if she’s barely holding herself together. I know the feeling.

“Oh, and I don’t know if you can hear it,” the man says, his boot edging the side of the suitcase. “But you should know the bag is vibrating.”

My forehead wrinkles as I look down at the huge, bright-pink roller bag with a polka dot ribbon tied to the handle. “Vibrating?”

*What?*

# Chapter 13



**OLIVIA**

Seriously? This is the last thing I need right now. After a night of bliss I won't soon forget, I woke up to an argument with the man who's stealing my heart. The sandy-blond saint who had me believing in love again when I didn't think that was even possible. I should have known it was too good to be true, considering he's a friend of Ethan's.

Plus, I was in the middle of storming out when my suitcase finally arrived—with the battery-operated boyfriend I packed

going off inside.

*Great.*

I roll my bag into the house and drop it in the middle of the floor with a clatter while AJ passes the delivery guy a few bucks and closes the door. I sink down next to the suitcase, and it takes me three tries before I get it all the way unzipped, my fingers wrenching too hard on the tab.

“Do you know what it is?” AJ towers over me as I flip open the top.

“Yeah,” I scoff. “I know exactly what it is.”

I yank out clothes, not bothering to keep everything neat and tidy. Hell, my life is a disaster, so why not my stuff, too? “It’s something that was part of my *plan* for the week. Along with, you know, things like these pajamas—not sexy lingerie, mind you—but a cozy pants set with bunnies on them no man was supposed to see for goodness’ sake.”

I toss the pink knit pajamas aside and dig deeper for the black satin bag I’m looking for. The one that’s vibrating.

AJ’s bare feet are planted only inches away, but he remains quiet and I’m on a roll, so I maintain my scathing monologue, not even trying to curb my temper as I hold up each item in turn.

“And this bubble bath, and my eye mask, and, oh yeah, here’s a book I thought I might want to read this week,” I sneer, tossing it on the growing pile on the floor. “You know, in between flirting like a fool and trying to forget that I was

supposed to get married yesterday, but didn't because my fiancé thought that fucking another woman wasn't a problem."

Tears threaten, and I brush them away with the back of my hand as my throat grows thick. Finally, at the bottom of my suitcase, I unearth the black satin bag and shake out the vibrating wand along with a tube of lube. "So as you can tell," I say as I switch it off, sit back on my heels, and survey the mess with a sharp laugh. "Everything has gone according to plan, including sleeping with my brother's best friend, the first man I met."

AJ sinks to the floor beside me, and I flinch when his hand caresses my back.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"For what?" I retort, hurt still pulsing through me. "It's not like you knew you were ruining my plans."

"I didn't, but I had no right to be angry with you for not telling me the whole truth when we met, or even before we slept together. It's just that..."

He trails off, and I turn to look at him as tears well in my eyes. "Just that what? Would it have changed anything? I didn't sleep with you to get back at Ethan or because of my ex or because it was my wedding day. I slept with you because you're sweet and thoughtful and I've never felt as safe or as taken care of as I have since I got here and met you. You ruined my plans because I fell for you."

Tears stream down my cheeks and drip off my chin. AJ leans over and pulls me into his arms. “No, sweetheart. It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

I settle in his lap as he presses a kiss to my head and hugs me tight. My anger melts away because everything I said was true. I slept with AJ because I’m falling for him, even though it’s the last thing I thought would happen during my escape to Candy Cane Key. And even though he doesn’t feel the same way.

“Olivia,” he says, tipping up my chin to meet my eyes. “I’m sorry for what I said.” His thumb gingerly brushes away my tears. “I jumped to conclusions because I’ve never felt this way about a woman. I’m not used to feeling vulnerable or having my emotions turned up to eleven, but they are because...because I’ve fallen for you.”

It feels like a five-hundred-pound weight is pressing on my chest.

“What?” I stammer, blinking up at him.

“It’s true. You landed in my life like a surprise present, a gift I didn’t know I wanted until I unwrapped it. And it was perfect. Now that you’re here, I can’t imagine a day without you. I can’t imagine waking up without your gorgeous smile by my side, and I don’t want to spend another night without you next to me.”

Disbelief fills my voice. “Really?”

“Really. From the moment I saw you asleep in my bed, I fought my feelings because you’re Ethan’s little sister. I’d never do anything to betray the friendship he and I share. But I couldn’t deny it any longer, and Andie made me call him and talk it out.”

My eyebrows pull together. “What did he say?”

“He said, ‘*Good luck.*’”

This brings a smile to my face, and I think of my brother back home in Seattle. No, not back home, I realize. Seattle is where I grew up, but it’s full of terrible memories, now. Home is here, now, with AJ—if he’ll have me. “I still think he crossed our dates on purpose.”

“So I could keep an eye on you?”

“So he could make it up to me.”

“Make what up?”

I shrug. “My ex was a friend of Ethan’s. A guy from work he set me up with.”

AJ seems to consider this piece of information. “No wonder you wrote me off at first.”

“I did,” I admit. “But Andie helped me to see the truth.”

“Siblings,” he says, with a shake of his head, as if he doesn’t owe the fact we’re sitting here confessing our feelings to them.

An idea pops into my mind, and I smile.

“What?” he says, catching my look.

“Just a thought about how we can get back at them.”



“At Andie and Ethan?”

“Yup.”

“You can tell me later. I’m busy right now.”

The heat in his low tone sends a fissure through me, and my tongue darts out to wet my lips. “Busy doing what?”

His eyes survey the mess but land on the wand, and he dips his chin toward it. “Helping you with your plans.”

# Chapter 14



**OLIVIA**

My lips curl into a half smile. “That’s the second best thing I’ve heard all day.”

AJ’s eyebrow quirks. “Second best?”

I reach up and press a kiss to his lips, his scruff rough under my fingertips as I caress his cheek. “The first being your confession that you have feelings for me too, of course.”

“More feelings than I know what to do with.” AJ reaches for the wand and trails it up my forearm one leisurely inch at a

time. “So how about I show you instead?” His olive green eyes are on me, watching closely, gauging my reaction.

“Show me?” I breathe. It’s not even turned on yet, not even pulsing, and I’m tingling all over. This is hot as hell and sexier than I ever imagined.

Plus, this man is mine. Sure, we’ve got a million things to work out, but there’ll be time for that—and I don’t mean right now.

I watch AJ’s movement, the tantalizingly slow tease. I’ve always reserved my toy for private pleasure and it’s come in handy, especially over the past few months. I never considered suggesting it to my ex, but AJ doesn’t seem intimidated. Quite the opposite, actually. His erection presses against my ass as I wiggle on his lap, seeking friction, searching for anything to ease the ache between my legs.

He continues the slow path up my bicep and then draws it over to my nipple. The tip hardens as my breath hitches. “Yes, Olivia, show you how I’d do anything to satisfy you.” His voice is low and sincere.

“You’re... you’re off to a good start.”

“Good, now help me turn this on and then all you have to do is lay back and relax.”

After a quick tutorial, the wand pulsating in his hand, a slow, seductive smile fills his face. “I can’t wait to see you come from this, sweetheart.”

“You won’t have to wait long, I promise.”

“Good.” His tone is gruff and a muscle in his jaw clenches as if he’s holding on to his own desire by a single thread. “Take off your pants.”

I waste no time slipping off my jeans and panties. He positions us so we’re facing each other, my back leaning up against the couch. He lifts my bare legs, one at a time, and presses a kiss to each ankle before he lays them over his knees, leaving me spread wide open.

“I want to see you,” he growls, looking down at me with a heated gaze.

I want to watch too, but can’t bring myself to tell him so. Instead, I nod and bite my lip. He draws the toy up and over my calf. Every muscle in my body clenches in anticipation. But when he reaches my knee, he curves down to the underside and I gasp at the sensation against my sensitive skin.

“AJ, please,” I beg, my pulse racing even though he’s not even close to my core yet.

“Is this what you want?” He trails it up along the inside of my thigh.

I try to squeeze my legs together, but his grip is like iron as he braces them apart, holding them open. The fact I like the force surprises me so much I forget he’s asked a question.

“Is it?” He insists, halting the forward motion until I nod.

“Yes.”

This is exactly what I want.

He resumes the relaxed, delicious path until he finally reaches his destination, sliding the wand easily up through my folds. My breath comes hard and fast and the impending orgasm threatens to wreck me.

“God, Olivia. You’re so wet, so beautiful.”

He circles my clit once and then again. I cry out, my fists clenching the denim of his jeans, twisting it in my fingers as every fiber of my being is focused on the pulsing sensation that ricochets through me.

My eyes squeeze shut as the pressure builds until, with one final flick of his wrist, I come. The waves crash over me and all coherent thoughts fly from my mind as I cry out and my head falls back onto the couch.

When my eyelids finally flutter open, I’m greeted with AJ’s self-satisfied sexy smile. One I want to see every day for the rest of my life.

“If you love me even half as much as you just showed me, I’m one lucky girl.”

He shakes his head and turns off the toy and sets it aside. “I’m the lucky one.”

I scoot forward until I’m on his lap again, my legs wrapped around him. His erection presses against me through his jeans. I wiggle against it and he growls and wraps his arms around me, drawing me to him until my breasts are pressed against his warm bare chest.

I slip my arms around the nape of his neck and run my hands up into his hair. “We have just one problem, though.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

I shimmy against him. “I’m not quite satisfied yet. I want *you*.”

He leans back, his hands gliding down to grip my waist, and he rolls his hips. “Take what you want, sweetheart. I’m all yours.”

“With pleasure.”

A moment later, he’s lost his jeans and I’m straddling him again, this time on my knees. He leans down to draw one nipple into his warm mouth through my shirt and grips my waist as I slide down onto his thick erection.

The sex was great last night, but this time, with the truth of our feelings hanging in the air, and the realization that I want to flirt with this man forever, it’s unforgettable.

# Epilogue



## AJ | ONE MONTH LATER

“Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.” Olivia tucks under my shoulder, circling my waist with her arms as we stand in line at the airport to check our bags.

“I’m not worried,” I lie, caressing her back through her dress.

She lifts her head and pins me with those baby blues. “I know you’ve said that twenty-seven times since yesterday, but you tossed and turned all night and have been in a sour mood all morning.”

I squeeze her to me as we move forward a foot. “Fine. I might be a little nervous, but I told you, I hate flying.”

“Andie said to slip you a sleeping pill.”

“It’s a good thing you know better than to listen to her, then.”

“I’m not sure I do. After all, if it wasn’t for her, I would have flown home weeks ago.”

I swallow hard at the thought and press a kiss to her forehead.

“You can give her credit. I’ll give her a hard time.”

“That’s what brothers are for,” Olivia mutters under her breath.

The last boarding call for a flight to Atlanta crackles throughout the airport, and I take a deep breath. Give me a boat over a plane any day.

A couple decked out in matching ugly Christmas sweaters walks by, and Olivia dips her chin toward them. “The day I landed, there were some folks in Christmas shirts, and I thought it was so odd, but I’m used to it now.”

“You’re basically a local.” It’s true. Olivia’s made friends with almost everyone in town over the past few weeks and settled in as if she’s lived here her whole life. Plus, her skin is nearly as tan as mine.

“Not officially until next week, when we get back with my stuff.”

“Not soon enough.”



“That morning, right over there, I had to dump out my bag—this one,” she says, lifting her shoulder to indicate the pink bag she’d dropped on my couch that day. “Because I couldn’t find the scrap of paper where Ethan had written your name, address, and the front door code.”

“All you had was a scrap of paper?”

She smiles. “It was all part of the plan.”

I shake my head, although I know her well enough by now I’m not surprised. Once she sets her mind to something, Olivia’s committed and sees it through. “I’m glad you found it.”

We move up in line again, and Olivia gasps.

“What?” I ask, following her line of vision.

“See that man behind the counter? The one loading the checked bags onto the cart.” Her voice is hushed and hasty. I shift to get a better look at him.

“With the high-vis safety vest on?”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Yeah, but what about him?”

“I...” She trails off, and her nose scrunches up.

I’ve never seen the man in my life, although he’s moving as slow as molasses. “Do you know him?”

“No!” she insists too quickly to be believed. I give her a look, and she relents. “Well, not exactly. He was manning the counter where I had to report my lost suitcase.”

“And...” I prompt, knowing full well there’s more to the story than she’s giving me.

She lifts a shoulder. “And I may have tried to flirt with him.”

“Him?” I say, although the question emerges more like a laugh. The guy is short, in his mid-forties, and looks as if he hasn’t smiled in a decade.

“Yes, him,” she insists with a frown. “I’d just landed and figured there was no better time to implement my plan.”

Oh, yes, her plan to flirt like a fool. How could I forget? I look back at the man and cock an eyebrow. “If I’d known your bar was that low...”

She swats my chest. “Just because you’re tan, toned, and tempting doesn’t mean you’re the only guy on Candy Cane Key.”

“I’m the only one for you, though.”

“I’ll give you that.”

“You said *tried*?” I ask, curious how her attempt could have failed.

She brushes off my question and looks away. “It wasn’t my best work. I was a little rusty.”

I scoff, “No way. He’s a fool.”

“Or maybe, you’re just lucky.”

“Oh, I’m lucky, for sure.”

Olivia reaches up with one hand to finger the gold ship’s wheel necklace I gave her a few nights ago, when we were

enjoying a sunset boat ride and dinner, something we've made a habit of ever since I canceled that first time. She looks at me, her baby blue eyes full of love. "Me, too."



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