

BLUE HORIZON



YACHTS

A romantic couple, a man and a woman, are shown in profile, facing each other and about to kiss. The man is shirtless and has a large tattoo of roses on his chest. The woman has long, dark, wavy hair. They are on a beach with the ocean in the background.

**hooked  
on a  
feeling**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# HOOKED ON A FEELING

The Davenport Family

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# All The Things

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## Chapter One

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WHEN WAS *the last time I fucked a woman? No strings attached.* John would love to be doing that right now. Instead...“Dad, it’s easier to deal with if it’s on my phone.”

“Why does everyone want things run off their phone nowadays? I can hardly manage to read my emails from the damn thing without it taking a picture.”

“A screenshot,” John corrected him.

John Davenport III had two problems. First, his father’s dynasty, Blue Horizon Yachts, was no longer the king of yacht building. The second problem was that if John argued his case too much, his father wouldn’t retire and leave his eldest son as CEO. It helped that he knew exactly how his dad operated. That Davenport stubborn streak ran far and wide. Deep.

“We have a solid clientele who comes to Blue Horizon because they trust us. They know what they’ll get. They depend on us to give them the best yacht money can buy.” John Davenport Jr. was a businessman, through and through. He was proud of Blue Horizon, which had been passed down to him when his father, John Davenport Sr., retired back in the eighties. The family had done a great job of keeping the bottom line in the positives, despite not having quite the top-notch touches John would like to see.

“I know we do, Dad. But we can grow our clientele to epic proportions. Advancing our yachts into the modern digital age—and beyond—isn’t a recipe for failure. Especially with the advancement of technology and people making millions off it,

a lot of people buying yachts are younger than ever before.” He would never wish death on anyone, least of all his father, but was that what it would take to get his dad to hand over the CEO role? Would death be the only thing that would allow John Davenport Jr. to hand over the reins to the company? “They live off the digital age.”

“We have a fine list of folks who are happy with our services. You know what’s important to them? Being out on the water. Luxury. Owning a ship unlike their neighbor’s ship. We give them all of that when they purchase a yacht from us. They get attention to detail. They get personalized service from us that they do not get anywhere else.” His dad leaned back in his office chair, and his eyes flitted to where the Blue Horizon’s logo blazed on his computer screen.

Once John took the helm, updating the logo was first on his list. And sex. Lots of sex. Celebratory sex. Yes, it was well-known, but every brand in history had gotten an update at one point or another, and it was damn well time Blue Horizon got theirs. John walked a delicate line. He couldn’t get too brash on all the things he wanted changed.

“Dad, all I’m saying is that our competitors are light-years ahead of us. I’ve put together a course of action based on months of research where improvements could be—”

“We do not need to fix what isn’t broken. Sales last quarter were higher than the past three. That tells us that we are doing what we need to do.” His dad went back to looking through information about their newest customer—a British man who’d just signed a contract for a 120-foot custom motorized yacht. It didn’t help John’s case that this man was a *new* client.

John tapped his pen back and forth, staring out his father’s office window, certain he had time to get a run in.

Nothing would change until his dad retired and John became President/CEO of the company. Then he could start implementing his ideas. In the meantime, he was forced to bite his tongue, keep his head down, and do his job. But it didn’t prevent his blood from boiling. He could legitimately feel the

pulse throbbing in his neck. If he touched it, the beats would far exceed the doctor's recommended beats per minute.

He turned away from the derelict marina and faced the stubborn old goat. "I'm just saying, there are a lot of things we could do to modernize that would put us in the catbird seat without losing our integrity."

John's brother, Jersey, VP of technology, felt the same way. That was one thing John had in his back pocket when their father retired—the family business was run with the lot of them. Seven brothers and sisters—all under the age of forty—with six of them working within Blue.

"Sir?" His father's assistant stood at the door. "Your next appointment is here."

"Thank you, Carol." He glanced at his son. "We can talk more later. I'm curious to hear how your meeting went with the new carpet importers."

John suppressed an eye roll and stood from his chair. Out of all the things his dad could have wanted to hear about, he'd chosen the new carpet imports. It sometimes felt like a lost cause. Maybe John was an idiot for wanting to attract more business, wanting to take their company from great to greater. Maybe it wasn't worth it.

John stalked down the hallway, passing each of his siblings' offices along the way. There was nothing better to clear his mind than running during his lunch hour. He had to figure a way around his father's resistance to change. He reached into his office and grabbed his duffel bag and made his way to the bathroom to change.

He didn't want to disappoint his father. But something had to change. It had to be a gradual process. With the help of his little sister, Reed, they could at least work up a new logo. Reed had won awards for her design skills, and between the two of them, they could cook up an amazing, updated logo that would turn heads. He was sure of it.

He tugged his running clothes on and tied his shoes, tossing the duffel bag on the floor in the corner of the



bathroom. He put in his earbuds, tucked his phone into his armband, and hit his playlist. The welcoming May sun beat down on him, warming his insides, the second he stepped outside. This was the magic of Emerald Port. On the Gulf Coast of Florida, the air smelled like salt and sand. Sun and humidity.

There was no better place to be.

John did a few stretches and took off on his usual running route. He waited for the drawbridge to close, waving at Darlene, who managed the booth. Once the bridge was down, he set off across the road to the other side of the harbor. His phone rang and he almost declined it, but a quick glance at his sleeve showed the call coming from Italy. Intrigued, he stopped running and answered. “This is John.”

“John. I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time. This is Domenico Alessio. Gianni’s cousin.” His accent was strong, but John knew Gianni’s family had lived in America for the last century, not Italy.

“Domenico. Your timing is perfect. You spending time in Italy now?” John hadn’t spoken to Dom for months, and he wouldn’t say they were close friends by any means, but with both of them being in the shipbuilding world, they were acquaintances.

“Only here for the next few months. I don’t have a lot of time now as I’m getting ready to hop on a plane to Como, but I wanted to throw this pebble at you and see what would happen.”

“Shoot.”

“Thinking about opening Benetto in the US along the coast of North Carolina. Looking at purchasing Crystal Lines. I’m sure your family has seen they’re shutting down productions.”

“We did.” John wasn’t sure what that had to do with Blue aside from competition.

“You have enough experience, so what about moving up there and running it? CEO of the US counterpart. Full benefits.

Bonus package. You'd have free reign to do what you wanted."

John stilled at the offer. "This is unexpected. And too good to be true."

"What would be too good to be true would be you leaving the family business and coming to Benetto. You run it the way you guys do Blue, it would put you in a class of your own." He chuckled. "Financially speaking."

"You're serious about this?"

"I wouldn't call it if I wasn't. Think about it. I'll call you in a few days. Wife and I have family to entertain, and then I'll be back in the office. But I could use a guy like you. You're smart. You hustle. You know what this business is about and play the politics well. I'm willing to pay you your value."

"I'll expect your call. Thanks, Dom." John's gaze landed on the Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club. He hung up. Man, the place had really gone downhill. How could those people not care about the family business? Not care about all of the surrounding buildings and how they all do their parts in keeping the harbor looking classy, clean, and up-to-date? It was sad, really. Not to mention the freaking goldmine of an opportunity it was. Why wouldn't they just sell it?

He would love to buy it. The main building—home to the marina office, The Beach House, and the restaurant, The Shipwreck—was shaggy, worn. It had been obvious from his first glance that both the house and office building needed a new roof and a fresh coat of paint. As time went on, the boat slips emptied out and weren't leased.

Just a few boats remained in the slips. John knew for a fact that one of them was the houseboat of Lyle Thinner—groundskeeper, maintenance man, or whatever role someone needed him to fill regarding the property—even though he didn't live on the boat itself.

Had Dom really just called offering him a CEO role? It was crazy. Blue Horizons and Benetto had both been in the shipbuilding industry for over fifty years. They'd shared a

mutual respect but nothing more. Still competitors at heart. But to offer him a job? Such an important role in their company. It was unbelievable. Maybe he'd be enjoying celebratory sex sooner than he thought.

John jogged closer to the marina, the wooden slats vibrating under the soles of his shoes. To his right, the Gulf of Mexico shone like the beautiful diamond she was. Birds chirped along the harbor, and a few ducks waddled across the path in front of him before they went into a full-on frenzy and flapped their wings to get out of his way.

John could feel in his bones that everything in his life was on the right path. Admittedly, Dom's proposal was intriguing. Maybe sending John on the *right* path had nothing to do with Blue but with another company entirely.

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STARR YOUNG FOLLOWED the throng of people out of the airport and into the pickup lane. Lyle had assured her that he would be waiting when her plane landed. Ugh. It was humid in Emerald Port, already adding bounce to her meticulously straightened hair. She liked Emerald Port, but now she was second-guessing her decision to list her grandparents' beloved Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club for sale for her parents. That was all she came to do. Pack up the house, donate their belongings, and make sure the property got sold so her parents could squander their inheritance. All but the five percent they promised her once the property sold.

Her mom and dad refused to spend the money to travel to Florida even though this was their deal. Dangling the money in Starr's face worked in their favor. She needed more money to expand her yoga studio. With the bay next to hers open and her lease coming up for renewal, she had sixty days to commit to renting the additional bay and remodeling it to align with her current space. Shit or get off the pot was where she was at. Five percent of the property in a real estate market like today's would double the size of her studio and allow her to take on more clients.

Plus, she felt bad. She couldn't ignore her grandparents' legacy like her parents could. It was important to her. Coming here was the least she could do, for the money of course, but also for her grandma and grandpa. She hoped they would be proud. Grandpa sure as hell had to be rolling over in his grave because of his son and daughter-in-law.

The Shipwreck, once bustling with locals and tourists looking for fine dining, was shut down. The Seaside Store that kids used to count on to find snacks and boats to fill up on gas was no longer the go-to place because there wasn't anyone to run the marina. With her parents' lack of interest in the marina and cottage, or the very desirable land it was situated on, any human would be questioning what was up her parents' ass.

Money. That was what. That was the only thing they cared about.

“Starr! Over here.”

She turned at the sound of Lyle's voice. Sweet and gruff. Lyle Thinner had been the caretaker of the marina since her grandfather had run the place. His slow gait toward her reminded Starr that as much as she didn't want to be here, it was better that she was. Most people Lyle's age would be retired by now.

“Lyle. It's so good to see you.” She pulled his small body into a big hug. His frail arms were stronger than they looked, practically stealing the air from her lungs when he hugged her back.

“Been too long, kiddo,” he said. It had. Two years ago at her grandfather's funeral, and before that, it had been the previous year when she'd flown down with just her dad and Summer to her grandmother's funeral. “Where are those parents of yours?”

Starr let go of Lyle and looked into his eyes. When a man as old as Lyle—older than her father was—seemed to be getting around just fine, she hated to talk about her dad and his myriad of health problems. Problems she wasn't sure were severe enough that her parents couldn't have come down here themselves and handled the marina. But that was always the

excuse—health and money problems. “Dad’s knees have really been bothering him. Think he’s going to get knee surgery soon. And Mom is Mom. Has to take care of Dad.” And by “take care,” Starr meant making sure the two of them had an ample amount of marijuana for them to smoke and plenty of time to watch TV. Lyle took her suitcase, and she followed him back to his truck, where he hoisted her luggage into the back of his truck bed. She hopped into the passenger seat, and he went around the front and got in.

Lyle was kind enough to just nod when he got into the driver’s seat and slowly pulled away from the curb. “Well, I suppose someone has to help him out. He has back problems, too, doesn’t he? I remember years ago they came down here to visit your grandfather, and Doyle couldn’t help with the bumpers for the dock because of his back.”

“Yeah, he still has back problems. Knees. And then, of course, his COPD and all that.”

“How’s your mother’s health?”

Starr shrugged, thinking of her mother’s latest complaint. “Good. As far as I know she’s doing fine. Still smokes like a chimney.” Cigarettes *and* marijuana. “How have you been? How is the marina?”

“Oh, it’s seen better days.” He looked across the truck before taking the interstate toward Emerald Port.

Starr got the feeling that Lyle wanted to tell her more, but she pressed her mouth shut and stared out at the ocean. The drive from the airport to Emerald Port was twenty minutes, making Emerald Port a hot spot for tourists and locals. In the two years she’d been gone since her grandpa’s funeral, the landscape had already changed so much. Old businesses were no longer present, and new condominiums had been built. But one thing remained the same, and that was the glorious greens and blues of the Gulf Coast.

“I swear the ocean gets prettier every day,” Lyle said, “but maybe it’s just my eyesight diminishing that makes me think so.”

Starr shook her head, loving the way the water made her feel weightless. Happy. Like she had life in the palm of her hands. She wouldn't trade her home in Colorado and her yoga studio for anything, but there was something magical about the water that made her feel content. "No, I think you're right. The ocean gets prettier every time I see her." Waves crashed along the beach, which was filled with quite a few people. It didn't matter what time of year it was, the beaches were always flooded with tourists and locals, only slowing down around August. The kids would soon be out of school, too, making the beaches that much more packed.

"You miss it here?" Lyle asked.

Starr sighed. How did she explain that while she loved and missed her grandfather and cherished the memories of all the amazing vacations she and her sister had had here as kids, she didn't love it enough to want to be here forever? Thank God she and Summer had grandparents willing to fly them out alone and keep them for most summers. "I miss my grandpa, and I miss Nana."

Lyle turned the truck off the interstate and along Gulf Boulevard. People milled up and down the streets, walking hand in hand. The Surf Shack was still there, as were a few other businesses. Blue Horizon Yachts was still the conglomerate, taking up nearly half the harbor. She stuck her tongue out at their obnoxious sign. That family only cared about money. Lyle stopped at the light, waiting for the drawbridge to close as one of Blue Horizon's yachts meandered out into the sea.

"Some things never change, Lyle." When they crossed the bridge, her heart dropped into her belly at her first full-on view of the marina. "Oh my gosh, but some things apparently do. What happened?" Starr's heart squeezed, seeing the property for the first time since her grandfather had passed away. In her mind it was still like it was when her grandparents were alive and running it. The bright-blue buildings where the welcome center, restaurant, and store were located just steps from the harbor were no longer the Hyper Blue color her grandma raved endlessly about—more like a sad blue.

“I’m seventy-nine, Starr. Can’t get around like I used to. Can’t do the upkeep like I used to in my heyday.”

Boats were anchored on just a few slips along the dock, with the majority empty, water sloshing against the sides of the dock slips, making the reality of the situation that much more difficult to bear.

Lyle cleared his throat. “Sorry, kiddo. Funds quit coming in after the first year without Harold.” Lyle pulled to a stop in the large parking lot that once would have been so packed with cars, it would have been difficult to find a spot. He shut the ignition off and turned to her. “Funds meaning from your parents. You know that, right? They just take, take, take.”

Starr blinked back the water in her eyes threatening to spill over. Memories crashed through her of when Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club was the place of all places. When The Shipwreck was full of energy and bustling with waiters and waitresses delivering steak and fresh fish. When little kids ran in and out of the Seaside Store holding candies and slushies while their parents filled up their boats. She closed her eyes, not wanting to look, not wanting the memory of better times to be tarnished by what was in front of her. “Why?” she whispered. “Why do my parents want to ruin every good thing that happens to them?”

“Some people aren’t cut out for running a business, let alone one that’s a thousand miles from their home.” He opened the door. “Come on. I’ll grab your luggage.”

Starr reluctantly got out of the truck and stared at the former masterpiece. It was all the same—the cottage and the marina which housed the welcome center, aptly named The Beach House. The backdrop of the harbor was still stunning. The dock slips were all there and beyond them a small boat ramp and barren land. But her eyes went back to the buildings. So many things were wrong with them, she couldn’t even imagine what was happening internally with the structures.

“I had the house cleaned for your arrival.” Lyle walked past her, rolling her luggage behind him. “There isn’t any food, though, so you’ll have to hit the store.”

She followed Lyle, fear clutching her stomach at what she might find inside the house. The wooden floors gleamed. The room was warm from the blinds being opened, allowing the sun to shine through. It was basically just as she remembered. To her left, the door to her grandfather's office was closed, and she could almost hear him scolding her and her little sister, Summer, over slamming doors and running inside. That had only happened once, and he made sure the door had been locked from then on.

“All the linens are new,” Lyle said. “Lydia picked up some new ones and made up the bed in the guest room down the hall for you.”

“Thanks, Lyle.” She shifted her rolled-up yoga mat and set her water bottle on the kitchen counter. Suddenly, she just wanted a few minutes alone. Some time to think.

“Not a problem.” He turned to face her, hands on his hips. “I’m sorry this burden is falling on you, Starr. But what you see is what you get. Harold was my friend, and I’m not going to let this place sit and rot. As best as I can help it anyway. But when you’re ready, we need to have a long talk.”

Starr wiped away a single tear that squeaked out from her left eye. “I will. Give me some time, and we’ll get this sorted out.”

Lyle’s footsteps echoed across the wood floor as he let himself out. Another tear slipped down her cheek. Then another. Starr held her breath, unable to control the emotions zipping through her system. She gritted her teeth, picked up her water bottle, and chucked it across the living room. It hit the brick fireplace with a loud thud and clanged to the ground, knocking a fire poker from its holder on the way down. She glanced around for something else to throw, not feeling nearly as satisfied as she should have at being a short walk away from the beach.



## Chapter Two

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STARR WASN'T USED to stress. Not by a long shot. The biggest stressor in her life was reiterating to clients that their posture needed to be this way or that to get the most out of their sessions. Occasionally, she had a client who didn't pay their monthly membership, but with automated payments nowadays, that was few and far between.

Aside from work, her parents created the most drama in her life. Katherine Wallace Young and Doyle Pritchard Young. Which was why Starr had as little interaction with them as she could.

The best thing Starr could think of was to meditate. She would do some yoga, hoping like hell it would clear her thoughts and paint a better picture of what needed to happen with the marina. Sure, her parents wanted to sell as is and she had been on board with that idea, but now, she couldn't let it go like that. She grabbed her water bottle from the fireplace hearth and rubbed the metal container where it had been dented from her throw. The framed portrait of her grandparents stared down at her, making her feel like they were watching her every move. "Can you tell me what to do here? It's so much worse than I expected. If you're watching, a little guidance, please."

It was almost too much to deal with. She rolled her suitcase down the quiet hallway and stepped into the guest room Lydia had made up for her. A small bouquet of wildflowers sat on the dresser, making Starr smile. Lydia and

Lyle had been so good to her family. The bed was neatly made, with a new bundle of throw pillows adding comfort to the nautical-themed room. She changed quickly into a sports bra and yoga shorts and put on sunscreen. She debated about putting on her swimsuit, but the overbearing burden of something needing to be done put her in a *rush-rush* state of mind.

She could meditate and do some poses in twenty minutes. Anything less than that wasn't enough to get her body and soul into the proper frame of mind. Beyond twenty minutes made her feel like a superstar. She would take what she could get. She needed to come up with a plan. Her parents obviously wanted nothing to do with the property, and if Emerald Port was anything like Boulder, the marina was a gold mine. Thank God her grandfather had been smart enough to put it into a trust where her father couldn't sell it right away. Otherwise, her parents would have taken any money and run. Well, slow-walked was more their style.

She locked the handle and tied the key to her shoelaces. The docks weren't very far away, but it was better to be cautious than not. She slung her yoga mat over her shoulder and made her way down to the docks. It took approximately five seconds for the sun to heat her skin. She found the perfect spot close to the water and rolled out her mat. She did a few stretches and sat down in the center of her mat, folding her legs into Child's Pose. She closed her eyes.

Damn it, she should have slathered more sunscreen on her face. But the sun felt good. Honestly, with her eyes closed and the sounds of the water and the city bustling alongside her, she could imagine that she was in Boulder, practicing alongside the creek. It was hard to clear her mind. She was angry with her mom and dad. They'd been free spirits their entire lives and had passed the trait on to her, but the difference with Starr was that she was determined. She was a hard worker. She wanted the best things in life. Oh, and she didn't smoke weed like it was going out of style.

She couldn't even remember the last time she had a drink of alcohol. Couple months, maybe? Possibly when her sister

invited her to celebrate the opening of Summer Fun—a plant-only boutique along Pearl Street. Not the marijuana plant but actual greenery and succulents. So far, the boutique was doing surprisingly well, and Summer had mentioned the idea of possibly adding plant-based bath products to the mix.

Starr blinked open her eyes, her gaze taking in the beautiful view. Her grandfather had gotten real lucky snagging this piece of land. The bell to the drawbridge gave off a few chimes, letting everyone know the bridge was about to come up. A few boats were lined up inside the harbor, waiting to pass.

She started off with her basic sun salutations and carried them into Warrior Pose, pausing on each movement for a minute or more. She went into a standing split with ease—the beauty of owning her own yoga studio was the love of the job and the countless hours of practice.

The Firefly Pose was harder for her to hold, but she was definitely getting a better handle on it. With her knees slightly bent, she put her right arm between her legs and placed her right shoulder behind her right knee, did the same with her left leg, and slowly lowered her legs onto her upper arms. She took a deep breath and lifted her feet off the mat, pointing her toes to the sky.

She counted to forty-five and lowered herself to the mat. Lastly, she bent down into her favorite pose. Downward-Facing Dog. The muscles in her thighs stretched taut, and her back expanded enough to stretch out any compressed bones from her flight. She wriggled her neck side to side, taking in a few deep breaths.

The sound of running along the wooden slats of the marina pulled her attention. The slats rattled and shook as the person got closer. Not breaking her pose, she turned to see what was coming toward her. A man.

A very *healthy*-looking man with light brown hair that had obviously been kissed by the sun. He was tall. He hadn't spotted her watching him yet. His gaze was turned toward the ocean, and Starr took in the deep valleys of muscles across his

glistening, tattooed torso. A white shirt was tucked into the back of his shorts, flying behind him as if he'd taken it off midrun and shoved it back there. She swallowed. She'd always appreciated a man who looked like that.

The runner swung his gaze forward, and his eyes landed on hers.

She quickly looked away, not wanting to be caught staring at his glorious physique. The sound of his footfalls stopped, and a large splash broke the silence.

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WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL? John shook his head, making the water rivulets disperse across the water. He couldn't help but laugh at himself. Had he really just fallen into the water because he was distracted by a scantily clad female arranged in a position that made him think of sex? *Serves me right.*

At least the water felt good, giving him a nice cooldown from his eight-mile run. He patted the armband on his shoulder. His phone was still there, which was a good sign. Even though the phone claimed it was waterproof up to so many meters, he'd never tested the theory, so he hoped the claim was true.

“There's a ladder over there.”

He glanced toward the voice—it was her. *Aw, hell.* Nothing like first impressions. “Thanks.” As he swam to the ladder, it occurred to him that maybe she was a local because how else would she know that the obscure ladder was where it was? But why hadn't he ever seen her out there before?

He pulled himself up and out of the water and stood still, giving the water a chance to drip from his body. His discarded shirt was halfway submerged in the water, hanging on the edge of the dock where he'd tripped.

“Nothing like making a big splash for a first impression.” The woman bent down and retrieved his shirt for him, taking it upon herself to wring the water out.

“I wasn’t watching where I was going.” Now that he was able to focus, he definitely didn’t know her. But she made his heart skip a beat with the look she was giving him.

“What were you watching?” Her cheeks pinkened. She was extremely attractive. Her body was what he would expect since she was clearly someone who did yoga more than once a week. Lean and muscular. A brunette. He was six four, and she was only a few inches shorter than he was, so that had to put her at six feet. Maybe five ten or eleven.

“Isn’t that answer obvious?” He smirked. “It’s not every day you find someone doing yoga on the docks.” With her cut muscles, she looked strong, and John found nothing sexier in a woman. Well, maybe her ass, but since she was facing him, he couldn’t get a really good glimpse of that. But he approved of what he had seen of it when it was pointed toward the sky. Each of her arms had dips where her triceps and biceps met. Her stomach was flat and cut, just like her arms.

She looked away as if she couldn’t think of anything else to talk about. She offered him his shirt. “Here you go.” She put her other hand out in greeting. “I’m Starr.”

He gripped her hand and smiled, letting out a chuckle at his bonehead move. His younger brothers would get a kick out of this. “I’m John. It’s nice to meet you. You live around here?” Something about her made him feel different. It was as if they’d known one another in a past life. He was drawn to her. She was so dang cute that it was hard on his chest.

Her gaze went to the cottage house next to The Beach House. “Temporarily. What about you? On vacation?”

John found it slightly annoying that she wasn’t more forthcoming. He knew that if you asked people questions and gave them the time to respond, they would tell you more than they needed to. With this woman, she was keeping things tight to her chest. “Born and raised.”

She gave him another shy smile and gestured to his wet clothing. “At least you’ll dry off quickly with the heat.”

“That, and my job is just across the bridge, so I’m not worried.”

She glanced behind her shoulder. “That explains why you’re jogging here. Do a lot of people jog along this route?”

John’s eyes went to Blue Horizon’s office building. Any one of his siblings could look out their office window and see that he’d fallen in the water. Hopefully, no one had happened to be looking at that precise moment. He sure as fuck hoped Judge wasn’t slacking off, peeping through his telescope. “Sometimes. Some folks don’t like having to wait for the bridge, so they avoid this route and go down to the path along the beach. Plus, the view is better down there. Nothing worth seeing up here.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You mean because this place is clearly no longer open?” She gestured to the marina. Her tune changed in a heartbeat. The defensive tone made John wonder what was up. Did she have good memories of the old Beach House?

“Clearly. No risk of tripping there.” He pointed to the loose board partly responsible for his dip into the bay. “Plus, look over there.” He pointed toward the ocean. “Beautiful waves. Lots of people. Shops. Not to mention some folks like running in the sand.”

It was clear he’d pissed her off, but he wasn’t sure how. He hadn’t said anything that was untrue or rude. She folded her arms over her breasts. “Well, maybe the owners can fix some things, and it wouldn’t be such an eyesore.”

John laughed. “Doubtful. It’s been going downhill for years. The family clearly doesn’t care about it.” Which was exactly why John thought buying it could be a great opportunity. Especially Blue Horizons. He could see the new sign in his mind. Emerald Port Yacht Club: A Blue Horizons Company.

“I care about it.” Her voice rose in an abundance of anger.

“Okay.” John had definitely missed something. “And so do I, but who are we? I’m not even sure who inherited the

property, but they've clearly abandoned it. It's been like this since the old man died. There's nobody to do anything with it except the old caretaker, and he's so old, he can't keep it up by himself. It's a shame." John gestured to the restaurant, where he imagined rodents upon rodents claiming ownership. "The place has so much potential, and they don't give a shit about it."

Starr's back went ramrod straight. "Listen here, you." She pointed a finger at him. "You have no idea what is going on with this property or what the owners think." She pointed to her chest. "I'm the new owner. I'm in charge. This place will look amazing when I'm done with it."

John laughed. A true laugh. "No way. You gonna tear it down and start over?" If there was one thing John did know, it was running a business, and he knew how hard it was to find the right people to get the work done. She may have a fine ass—and damn, that mouth, set like it was in an obstinate pout—but she likely didn't know the first thing about business. New owner? Something didn't add up. "I get you're the new owner and you're happy with your purchase, but this place may take a full year to get fixed up. Look." He pointed to the main building. "It needs new paint. Railings need fixed. Landscaping. The docks are rotting in some areas. If you even think to reopen the restaurant—man, you'll have so much work cut out for you."

"I don't know who you think you are, telling me what I can and can't do, but this is none of your business. My grandfather ran this place like the diamond she is, and the property deserves to look that way yet again."

John stilled. "Wait. You're Harold Young's granddaughter?" No. This was not what he wanted. He sure as fuck didn't want to be attracted to this woman. Christ. Even when she was starting to get fired up, he couldn't help but think how cute she was. But this? He shook his head. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Why did you think we'd never want to do anything with the property? Was that your hope that it would just sit here and

die a slow death? The community around the harbor is small. I would think you would want all businesses to succeed.”

“No. It’s not that. I own one of the most well-known businesses inside this harbor. My company is internationally known. That isn’t what’s bothering me.”

“What is then?” Her tone was still snappy, and he could understand her irritation. The Young family had a long history of fighting with other business owners.

Mainly the Davenports.

“What’s bothering me is that I’ve been raised to think of the Young family as our enemy. My entire life I’ve been stuck between a long-standing feud between my grandfather and your grandfather.” He folded his arms across his bare chest. “It’s like a family heirloom, if you will, that has gotten passed down from generation to generation.”

Her cute pink lips formed an O, letting him know that she, too, was familiar with the decades-old family feud. “You’re a Davenport.” It was a statement.

He nodded. “I am. Soon to be CEO of Blue Horizon Yachts. John Davenport.”

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## Chapter Three

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FOR FIVE MINUTES THERE, Starr thought she had met someone who was a bit promising on the dating front—meaning maybe they could hang out a night or two while she was in town. And then he turned out to be a part of the family from the wrong side of the bay. Just her luck. She did believe in fate, though, so what was the universe telling her by setting up this chance meeting with John?

“There are hundreds of people out here. Literally, at least a hundred.” She gestured toward the beach and shopping district. “And my very first day here, I meet you?” Her mind raced with anything she’d done lately that had put her on the bad road with the universe. She couldn’t think of anything right away, but surely there was something she’d gone and fucked up.

“From where I’m standing, that would mean it was our lucky day,” he said.

“Hmm. I wouldn’t say that meeting you, the grandson of the man who ruined my grandfather’s life, is lucky.” Perhaps this was *his* karma and not hers. Maybe he’d done something bad and the universe put her in his path to teach him a lesson. “Did you do something wrong lately? You know, karma is a bitch, and I’m just wondering what you may have done recently that she sent me on your path.”

John scoffed. “I doubt it. I don’t believe in that crap anyway. But no, to answer your question. I’ve done nothing untoward to the universe or anyone else for that matter.”

“Well, I sure as heck haven’t. In fact, I’m here doing a good deed.” Like her parents cared about her doing it. She was doing a good deed for her grandfather’s memory. He was probably cringing at the sight of his beloved Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club. Even the entrance sign along the highway was getting beat by the sun and feeling the loss of a caretaker’s touch to keep it vibrant and shiny. Welcoming.

“Right. Fixing this up,” he said. “Let me ask you, what are you going to do with this place? Sell it? You know I’d love to buy it.”

She rolled her eyes and turned away from him. “I’d never sell my grandfather’s legacy to the Davenports. Ever.” She had better things to do than stand out here talking to him. Her grandfather and parents had made it clear that the Davenports were not good businesspeople to deal with, and she was sure that carried over into their personal lives too. No matter how handsome this one was. Or the way his chest was practically begging her to reach out and touch it or to trace the lines of his tribal art. She couldn’t risk her heart to another dirtbag. “It was lovely meeting you. I have a lot of work to do.”

John walked behind her, and when she bent over to roll up her yoga mat, she got the distinct impression that he was checking her out. Could she see him? No. But it was in the air. The tension. It was thick and all-encompassing, caressing her skin in all the right places. She swung the mat over her shoulder. Oh no, that was humidity, not sexual tension. Duh. She gave the man a fake smile. “Goodbye, John. Enjoy those multimillion-dollar yachts you put out into the world every year. Have you ever heard of that saying, ‘Think green, keep it clean?’”

He kept up with her, following closely behind. Why wasn’t he just leaving her alone? “For your information, the yachts we produce are in a class of their own, being one of the top five carbon-neutral vessels. You could read all about it in a *Yacht Times* article published two months ago.”

She reached the door to the house and turned toward him. He was too close, and their bodies collided. “Umph,” she said as she stepped back and made contact with the door.

“Oh. Sorry. I was trying to figure out if my phone still worked after my swim to show you the article.” John kept her pinned against the door for a moment, blinking a few times as if he was seeing her for the first time in his life.

Starr sucked her top lip into her mouth, trying to quell the speed of her heartbeat and the unwelcome feelings shooting through her belly. His eyes were blue, like the sky behind him, and she couldn't deny how good his body felt against hers. “Aside from carbon emissions, boats still mess with wildlife and water quality, including sometimes ruining reefs and natural vegetation in the sea,” she whispered. It was her conviction that bad boats ruined the environment, but the whispering made it sound like she didn't care that much at all. “Now, if you'll excuse me.” She put her hands to his naked chest, pushing him back a step.

“Yachts,” he said. “Not boats.”

“Huh?” She blinked the haze of sexual tension from her eyes.

“I build yachts, not boats.”

“You build something that harms the environment.”

“I build something that turns a person into their best self. There's nothing like being on the water. And my clients trust me to give them their very best life.” He raised his eyebrows. “Some might even call me a man of many talents, with all the ways I give them pleasure.”

She didn't have to touch her cheeks or her chest to know that his words had made her blush. Why did he have to make that sound so sexual, and how had she gone this long without caring about having sex to thinking about it three times already? “Goodbye, John.”

She undid the key tied to her shoelace and unlocked the door. She slipped inside the house and quietly shut the door behind her. She had a lot of work to do, and she couldn't afford to be distracted by the enemy, no matter how appealing he'd been on first impression. Starr laughed out loud, thinking of him falling into the water. She wouldn't admit it to him, but

it made her stand up a little prouder that he had found the sight of her on the dock intriguing enough it had caused him to fall into the water.

She wasn't in the house longer than five minutes before there was a knock on her front door. Was it him? She peered through the peephole to see Lyle standing with a Styrofoam container in his hand. Her stomach growled.

She swung open the door. "You brought me food?" She smiled and ushered him inside.

"I did. Figured you'd get here and see everything that needed fixed up, and you wouldn't want to leave."

"I could have easily walked over to one of the restaurants, but you're probably right. This place is nothing like I remembered." She was glad Lyle had come back because they could have a serious conversation about the marina. She could get honest answers that her parents didn't give her. "Did you bring yourself some food?"

Lyle shook his head. "Nah. Miss Darcy fixed me a big breakfast, and I don't eat that much anymore anyhow. What's on your mind? I figured I'd given you enough time to see everything with your own eyes first."

"You sure did." She opened the container and grinned at the sight of the club sandwich, pickle spear, and French fries. "Heaven. Come and sit. Let me grab a pen and paper."

Once she found what she needed, she joined Lyle at the old oak table in the dining room. From there, she could see the towering office building of Blue Horizon and only a partial view of the shipyard. She shook her head and put the tip of her pen to the paper. "There's no money, is there?"

Lyle let out a small sigh. "There's some. With the trust there was only so much in it, and since your parents want the money every month, there hasn't been enough to keep up. I spend it frugally. The few hundred dollars a month that we get from renting the slips just barely covers taxes and whatnot."

"Which means you work around here for free." She met his gaze for confirmation, not liking the defeated look in his

eyes.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Starr sucked in a breath. “I figured as much.” She’d imagined coming down here and getting it into a state for potential buyers to be confident of what they were buying—that the marina, closed restaurant, and store looked appealing enough to have potential. But there weren’t funds to improve it. She’d even imagined if she got it looking appealing enough, it could stay in the family and it could be reopened, having her parents reap the monthly profits. But she knew that it would be hard to change her parents’ minds because they were in love with the idea of the money they would get from the sale.

Even if she could do any of the above, what was stopping her parents from draining the marina for money over and over like they had been doing? Hopes of reopening the marina or even the store would just be prolonging the inevitable. She dropped the pen on the table, watching it roll to the side. She didn’t bother to stop it when it got close to the edge and fell off, clattering when it hit the floor. “Guess I need to spruce this place up and find a Realtor.”

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“COME AGAIN? SHE IS *WHO*?” John’s younger brother Judge stretched back in his office chair, kicking his feet up onto the edge of his desk. He threw a foam basketball into the hoop he’d hung on his office wall. This was always his lunchtime hobby. “She’s gorgeous as hell.”

When the ball rolled to a stop, John picked it up and threw it at his brother so he could shoot again. After running into the beautiful, fit woman who looked like a freaking dream yesterday, John needed to be the one throwing a basketball into some net to let off the steam. The way the sun had sparkled off the blond-brown strands of her hair and her skin shimmered with her fresh application of sunscreen, John had fallen in love at first sight. He cleared his throat. “She’s old

man Harold's granddaughter. She's staying at the cottage on the property."

Judge threw the ball again, and this time he missed. "How have we never known he had a smokin'-hot granddaughter?"

"I'm assuming she isn't the only grandkid. Christ, the bay is going to get invaded by a bunch of Youngs while they come and renovate the marina." John kicked the foam ball up into the air, where it hit the window. Judge caught it on the rebound.

He tossed it in his hands, back and forth. "Is that what they are actually doing? That's what she told you?"

John plunked down into one of Judge's chairs. "Not in so many words. She mentioned it needed work. But she wasn't as forthcoming as I would have liked." He closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them. "Plus, I felt like a kid around his crush. I was off my game."

This made Judge laugh, and not only did he laugh, but he dragged it out longer than necessary. "I can't believe you fell in the water."

"I lost my earbuds."

"At least your phone didn't get ruined."

John nodded. "The shareholder meeting is next Friday. Once I'm named prez, I can officially walk over there and see what she has planned for the place. Offer to purchase the property."

"Maybe you should concentrate on the shipyard, and I can go over and meet our new neighbor." Judge gave John a devilish grin.

"I saw her first. And no. Just no. I'm not even going there with her." His heart took a weird nosedive into his stomach that he didn't understand. It wasn't like he'd never been with a woman before. Or had a girlfriend. Out of all the women in the harbor, why was it this one who was making his brain get muddled with crazy sexual temptations? Why did the idea of Judge going to meet her make him jealous?

“Exactly. If you won’t, I have no qualms about sleeping with the enemy.”

John knew what Judge was doing—provoking him so that John would do something about his crazy attraction to the woman. “Let it go. Keep your dirty hands away from the marina. If anyone is going to see Starr again, it’s going to be me.”

Judge did his devil laugh again. “Right. Just like I knew it would be. You really need to lighten up, bro. President or not, you gotta chill. Life’s too short.” He threw the ball into the hoop, where it swooshed through and landed on the floor with a soft thud. “If it were me, I’d keep an open mind about her. You never know what life has in store for you, and if she has you this tied up, she must be something.” Judge raised his eyebrows, and the two brothers had a stare-down contest for a minute before John broke it.

His brother was right. Not about sleeping with the enemy but about lightening up. It was just too hard for John to do. Not when he had the future of Blue in the palms of his hands and it would be up to him to keep it afloat. “Keeping an open mind about the marina—and her—is easier said than done. Come on, man, you know how pissed Mom and Dad would be if they heard I was fucking a Young?”

Judge smirked. “Since when have we ever told them who we fuck?”

“Never. But for as big as Emerald Port is, word gets around. I can’t create unnecessary gossip over something as trivial as a romp in the hay.”

Judge scrunched his face up like he’d tasted something sour. “A romp in the hay? How are you only two years older than me?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“You already said fucking. Just leave it at that. You don’t want word to get around that you’re fucking a Young.”

John glared at his brother. “I’m not fucking a Young.” Not yet, he wanted to add but didn’t because he shouldn’t.

“Is that your kitten heading out now?” Judge pointed to his window, and John jumped up from his seat, making a beeline to the glass.

It was her. She wasn’t hard to spot when the property was basically a ghost town. In the past, there wouldn’t have been a chance with boats docking and people eating and visiting with friends. “That’s her.” It took John a second to realize how fast he’d jumped out of his seat to stalk her. He shook his head and put his back to the window, ignoring Judge’s *I gotcha* look. “This is crazy. I have a meeting in twenty minutes with Raven. She has a few things to go over about the yard. Guess there’s a few numbers not adding up.”

“Wow, she must really be stuck if she needs your help.”

John gave him the middle finger. “I’m her oldest, most intelligent brother. Of course she’s going to come to me first.”

“Keep telling yourself that, brother. You say you’re smart but not smart enough to go after the one piece of ass that you actually seem to be enamored with. Tell me, when’s the last time you even went out with someone?”

“I’m busy. I work in my free time. Unlike you who... well, I don’t even think you work when you’re at work, so you don’t count.” John waved his hand in the air. “It was with McKenna, and how long ago was that?”

Judge put his feet down and stood abruptly. “So freaking long ago. We’re going out to the beach and finding you someone. There are at least fifty girls out there”—Judge pointed to the window—“who would be willing to go to bed with you tonight. Let’s go find you one.” Judge shrugged. “Might as well pick me one up, too, while we’re at it.”

John was already shaking his head. “No. No. No. Can’t do it.” John’s mind was already filled with dirty thoughts of Starr. There was no way he could go and find a substitute. Even if he never acted on the initial chemistry with her and potentially never spoke to her again, his libido was in overdrive over her, and it would likely stay that way. At least for another day or two.



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## Chapter Four

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HERE IT WAS two days later on a Tuesday, and John still couldn't stop being a stalker creep staring out his office window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Starr. He'd only seen her once, and that was yesterday morning when she'd unrolled her mat and done yoga on the docks. He would never admit to anyone that he'd watched her entire routine. He would also never admit that he was pretty impressed. Nor the fact that he'd actually gotten wood from watching.

She was strong. She knew what she was doing. She was clearly an expert in yoga. John couldn't do much more than run a shit ton, and sometimes when Jersey and Judge dragged him to the gym, he managed lifting. But otherwise, running was his thing. So watching Starr bend one way and then another, hold her entire body up with her hands, and balance on one leg while her entire body was in the air was extremely impressive.

"Johnny?" His mother, Rose, stood at his door, holding a box of doughnuts in her hands. "I brought you breakfast."

John rubbed his hands against each other and stood from his chair. He took the box and set it on his desk and pulled his mom into a big hug. "What brings you into the office on this lovely morning?" His mother's smell was always so comforting.

"I came to remind you about dinner on Sunday."

Like a savage, John opened the box and took a bite of one of the doughnuts. He let out a groan as the sugar played over

his tongue. “I’ve been coming to family dinner every Sunday for a long time, Ma. I’m not going to forget.” He took another bite and finished the doughnut, reaching for a second one.

Mom smiled. “Well, I know that. But that’s my job. Besides, I can’t risk not reminding one of you and someone using the old ‘I forgot’ excuse.” She winked and glanced around his office. “How is business these days?”

His mother had only worked at Blue after she was done raising her seventh child, and even then, she had stayed at the reception desk and had never delved too much into the inner workings of the company. Not to say she wasn’t familiar with all that was going on—because she was—but now at fifty-five, she wasn’t working at all.

“Business is good. Just landed a new order from New York Water Taxi to build a small fleet of yachts. I have no complaints.” His eyes flashed to the windows. He had one complaint. “When is Dad going to finally retire, Mom?”

She thinned her lips. “Just be patient, Johnny. Your time is coming. Maybe even sooner than you think. It may be nothing, but he told me he has an announcement to make at the next meeting. Don’t get your hopes up, but maybe he’s finally ready.”

Happiness burst across John’s chest, and he let out a whoop of joy. “Yes!” He sobered. “You sure about that?”

His mother laughed. “I’m sure. Anyway, mum’s the word.” She mimed zipping her lips. “I don’t want to be the one that let the cat out of the bag.”

“Gotcha. You hear about the marina?”

“Are you kidding? Judge couldn’t keep his mouth shut about something like that.”

“About what?” John’s little brother Jake popped his head into the room.

John lunged for the box of doughnuts at the same time Jake did and managed to beat him. He held the box away from Jake. “Mom brought these for me.”

“She wouldn’t do that. I’m her favorite son.”

John still kept the box from Jake’s reach. “No, you aren’t.”

Jake pressed his hands to his chest and smoothed his shirt. “I’m the specialest because I’m a twin. So yeah, I’m her favorite. Tell him, Mom.”

Their mom rolled her eyes. “Boys. You know I don’t have a favorite, and ‘specialest’ in that context is not a word. You are a specialist in your field. You are not more special than your siblings.” She put her hands up in that typical mom way that said her job there was done and walked out the door. She turned back and pointed to John and the box of doughnuts. “Johnny, share.” Then she was gone, and John realized they hadn’t gotten the chance to talk about the marina and what she knew about Starr.

“You get *one*.” John opened the box and kept a close eye on Jake taking only a single doughnut.

“Don’t tell me that you’re still grouchy about the marina.”

John scoffed. “Fuck, Judge has a big mouth.”

Jake nodded. “He does.” Jake took a bite of his doughnut and spoke around it. “Did you see the plans I drew up for the Bottwells’ account?”

Jake was the naval architect for Blue, and he was damn good at his job. It wasn’t often that the plans he put together had to be redone. “Yep. They look good. I already sent them to the Bottwells. I’m expecting that we’ll hear back by next week.”

“Sweet. Thanks for the doughnut.” Jake turned his attention to the window. “Oh shit, look!”

John turned his head for a brief second and realized he’d been duped. Jake was already heading out the office door with another doughnut in hand. “Loser,” John called after his little brother. But he couldn’t be too mad because there she was. Starr stood on the docks with a man. Both faced her marina, and the man made notes while Starr pointed this way and that.

“Fuck it.” John had had enough. He was going to go down there and see what she was up to.

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“THANK YOU. I’ll let you know as soon as I can figure something out.” Starr waved goodbye to the contractor and steeled her facial expression so the nice guy wouldn’t know she was a complete fraud. There wasn’t enough money to fix up the marina. There never would be enough. It was going to take a billionaire. That was clear as day. She’d wanted to get a bid on what it would take to fix a few parts of the gutter, paint the building, and start working on the dock. They hadn’t even looked at the restaurant. This guy pointed out that the roof shingles needed to be replaced, and she wasn’t too thrilled to learn that the concrete along part of the dock was starting to crack and sink.

Which explained why the wooden slats along that part of the walkway were uneven. Why John Davenport had tripped and fallen into the water. Her heart skipped at the thought of that man. She’d spent too much time looking at Blue Horizons and not enough time sorting through her grandfather’s things.

She dialed her dad’s cell phone, holding the paper she’d just gotten from the contractor. A bid that was similar to half a year’s worth of mortgage payments.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Dad. How’s it going?” She hated talking to her parents about anything serious. Because they were never serious. And they never took into consideration how problems could be fixed. Their attitude was too lackadaisical for Starr.

“Just fine. How is Emerald Port?”

“Good. I think I’m going to be here longer than I anticipated.” She scribbled down a note to cancel her original flight, already thinking about when she should reschedule it for. Next Friday?

“Oh?” Her dad’s voice perked up, as if she were going to stay because of something good. “Business booming down there?”

Irritation ran through her veins, and she recalled the last time she’d been over at her parents’ house. Unopened ledgers from Lyle had been on their kitchen table along with old newspapers and piles of coupons they’d yet to open or throw away. “Don’t you read any of the papers Lyle sends? The place is falling apart. There is no way anyone would want to buy it when it comes out of the trust. It’s that bad.”

She walked from the docks to the parking lot. Even the parking lot needed to be repaved and the parking slots repainted. Soon the pressure of the stressful situation she was facing was going to bury her. Drown her. Talk about not being able to do anything about a situation.

“It is what it is, Starr. Maybe you could open it up as a community project and ask for volunteers.” Her dad coughed like he was smoking a joint. “That’s it. Help the marina. People love that stuff. That would solve all of your problems. Look, I gotta go. Food delivery is here.”

The call ended, and Starr stared at her phone in shock. Hate was such a strong word, but damn it if she didn’t hate her parents. They didn’t care about Starr. They didn’t care that her yoga studio was running at half capacity while she was in Emerald Port because it was open half the hours it normally was. That she was ultimately losing half her income.

She swallowed down the hurt that threatened to come out of her eyes and nose and mouth. She was stronger than this. She wouldn’t cry. She’d taken her yoga shop from an empty studio with hardly a wall to a full-on training center. The bell rang signaling the drawbridge was going back down, and it snapped Starr out of her mood.

She had to forget her mom and dad. She was here because of her grandparents. She was doing this for them. The small cut in proceeds from the studio was the least she could do for her grandparents. If she needed to repeat this mantra every day

in her head while she was here, then she would. Nothing would stop her from respecting their—

“Hi.”

She jumped and spun around, coming face-to-face with John. She clutched her neck. “Jesus, you scared the crap out of me.”

“John, not Jesus,” he teased. He gave her a warm smile then must have realized she was in a mood because he stepped back. “Are you okay?”

“No. I’m not okay. I have my hands full here, and I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Well, I’ll let you get back to it. Sorry to have bothered you.” John started to walk back toward the bridge, and Starr took a few strides to catch up to him.

She gripped his elbow. “No. Don’t go. Please. I need the...” She swallowed. What did she need exactly? A friend? A lover? An ear to listen to her? All of the above? “I don’t know anyone but you around here, and I’m dying from the solitude. I don’t have time to go out and meet anyone.”

“Ah. You’re pulling the classic ‘keep your friends close but your enemies closer’ tactic on me, aren’t you?”

Her pulse escalated, spreading warmth throughout her entire body. The man was charming. Endearing. Yes, an age-old enemy of the family. But damn. He was also as handsome as hell. “Exactly. What do you say? Coffee?”

He folded his arms across his chest as if he was seriously contemplating what she was asking. “A date?” he finally asked in a low, husky voice.

She laughed. “You’re exasperating. Can it just be a meeting between”—she struggled for the right word—“neighbors?”

John gripped the bottom of his chin with his thumb and forefinger, giving her a flirty smile. “You’re lucky you’re cute. It’s not every day I would go have coffee with a neighbor. But for you, I’ll make an exception.”

*He thinks I'm cute? OMG, he thinks I'm cute.* And he had no problems telling her. He was *flirting* with her. Wait. Was that flirting? “Are you flirting with me?” She stepped closer, and this time she caught a whiff of some masculine cologne—not the ocean water she’d smelled on him the first time they’d met.

“Am I flirting with you?” He leaned forward so their bodies were literally inches apart. “Do you want me to flirt with you, Starr?”

The way he asked her made her toes clench in her flip-flops. But the way the word *Starr* rolled off his tongue like a fine spoon of honey had her clenching other parts of her body. Parts she hadn’t used in a long damn time. What would be the harm in flirting? She did a quick scan of her brain. Found nothing. *Yes, I would love for you to flirt with me.* She rolled her eyes. “You wish.”

“Oh, is that right?” John looked around the marina as if he was hiding some big secret and then met her gaze. “I have a feeling if you were here strictly for pleasure and not business, you and I would have *a lot* of fun together.” The way he looked at her made her body tremble with need. His eyes held the promise that sure, they might be enemies, but he’d like nothing better than to ignore that and explore the fire burning between them. Because it was burning. The two times she’d been around him, her skin heated in places it hadn’t for ages. Her heart rate doubled in speed. Her mouth yearned for what he would taste like. Her fingertips longed to touch the perfect contours of his body and feel the heat of the sun along his torso.

“I’m Starr *Young*, remember?” She put emphasis on her last name. “You’ve been raised to make my life hell.”

John shrugged. “I spoke with your grandfather a time or two before he passed away. There might be a long-standing feud between my grandfather and your grandfather, but I’m a grown man, Starr. No one tells me what to do.”

She swallowed. He was definitely a grown man. Was he actually wanting to do more than make idle chitchat? He was



implying that, but Starr was so far out of the game that she couldn't be sure. Not to mention the fact that her grandfather and his had ended their friendship and made it clear to their families that they should stay away from each other, but John was kind of right. Wasn't he? The two of them were adults. Neither of their grandparents were alive to harp on them about how wrong this was. Which brought her to her next thought: why did a friendship with him have to be wrong when it felt so right?

She lifted her chin. "No one tells me what to do either. Let's go and enjoy that coffee." She clutched her estimates in her hands and pointed to the coffee shop. "I assume that is okay with you?"

He nodded. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what had you so upset when I first walked up?"

She loosened her grip on the papers and stepped aside to let a bicyclist zoom by. She wanted someone to talk to who might understand the burden of the marina, but memories of her grandpa pointing so sternly at Blue Horizon's offices still made her question herself. She glanced up at John. She was walking with him. She was an adult. But damn if she wasn't second-guessing herself. "The marina needs a lot of work."

"I can see that."

Right. Of course. He lived here, so there wasn't a day that went by that he didn't notice the marina, even from the other side of the bridge. "It needs a lot of work, and the income isn't what it used to be. I feel like I got thrown onto a sinking ship."

"I can help you."

Starr stopped walking. How could he offer something like that without even knowing her problems? And not to mention the long-ago feud. Why was he being so nice to her? "Thank you for your offer, but you can't help me. Unless you have a lot of money that you're just willing to give away, you can't do anything for me."

"Crowdfunding." He shrugged and held the door to the coffee shop open for her. "People do it every day. I'm sure

there would be a ton of people in this community who would throw in money to help save the beloved marina.”

They stood in line behind a few people, and she put a hand on her hip. “Are you some kind of angel? Where do you even come from?”

John barked out a laugh. Despite its brashness, it was still a pretty laugh. The guy was all around... handsome. “I come from here. Where else? Look, how about you order, and we can sit and talk it through. It sounds like you have a lot on your mind with no one to bounce ideas off.”

She stared at his profile. Why was he being so nice? What was his ulterior motive? Why was he giving her ideas to make the marina a better place?

He peeked over at her and nodded in the direction of the counter. “Order.”

She stepped up. “I’ll have a cucumber kale smoothie with a shot of protein and alfalfa.”

“And for you?” the barista asked John.

“I will take an iced coffee. Cream. No sugar.”

The barista rattled off the amount while Starr opened her knapsack for her debit card, but John beat her to it. His hand gripped her wrist. “Put it away. I’ve got this.” His hand was large, warm. Welcoming. She opened her mouth to argue then clamped it shut.

Fine. He could buy her a drink today. “Tomorrow, I get to buy your drink.”

He raised a sexy eyebrow at her. “So we’re meeting again tomorrow?”

Heat flushed her cheeks. “Well, no. I mean, we could. I just meant that next time, it would be my turn to buy. Whether that’s tomorrow or next week. Or...” Her voice trailed off. That was really all the time she had. She had to get back to her yoga studio.

The barista handed them their drinks, and they went back outside where there were a few empty tables and chairs. “This

is so nice. I'd forgotten how much I enjoy being here." She plopped into a chair that was facing the marina and the ocean, while John sat opposite her. "She's so beautiful."

"She really is." John's voice was low, seductive. It made her pause. She looked at him, and he wasn't looking at the blue ocean like she thought he might be. No, he was looking at her. "She misses you too. I just know it."

Starr smiled. "The ocean? You don't know that."

He took a sip from his straw, and once again, those deep blue eyes of his seemed to be reading her. "If I were her, I'd definitely miss you."

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## Chapter Five

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WHAT WAS UP WITH HIM? Had his mom put some kind of magical spell on those store-bought doughnuts? John hadn't openly flirted with a woman in so long, he wasn't even sure he was doing it right. Not to mention the fact that he wasn't even concerned that she was a Young.

Not anymore.

He could handle anyone who had a problem with that. If anyone did, it would likely be his father, but his dad could mind his own business.

She gazed out at the ocean. The red in her cheeks was gone, but he enjoyed telling her things that made her blush. Why was she getting under his skin the way she was?

It was like a magnet drew him to her. So intense. So forceful. It made him question how two people could be so drawn to one another. John protected his heart, and there was no future with Starr. Not when she was only here temporarily. But hell if he could stop himself from finding her so attractive. "So, do you like the idea of doing a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds to improve the marina?"

She turned away from the ocean. "It sounds promising. I like the idea. But here's the thing, even if the project raised enough money, who would run this place?"

"Who inherited the property?" *Okay, genius. Way to sound like you're totally fishing for information.* Maybe he should give her a serious offer to buy the property outright.

She took a long pull from her straw. The green mixture moved up slowly. Kale and cucumber? He shivered.

“My parents. Wow. They are a piece of work, let me tell you. They don’t care about the property. Not like I do. They just want money.”

John nodded. Her parents were financially unstable. Got it. “So why don’t you just sell it and be done with it? I’d buy it in a heartbeat.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “I may be crossing the line by becoming your friend, but there is no way I could sell you the marina. My grandfather would roll over in his grave.” She gave him a fake smile. “Nice try.”

“Maybe I’m not the ideal person. But I’m the right person.” He waved a hand, trying to steer the conversation back to her parents. “So, who owns the property? Your parents?”

“Yes. My dad inherited it. Well, not technically. Technically, my grandfather put the property into a trust, and it comes out of the trust soon and will be eligible to be sold.”

“Which would get your parents the money they need.”

“Exactly.” She folded her arms across her chest. “But there is value here. I can’t let this place go to hell like they have. Right now, it’s still in the trust for fourteen more days, and I have access to it because of that.”

John shook his head. “I’m not really sensing a problem.” He put a hand up when she went to open her mouth. “Let me get this straight. It’s in the trust and your parents gave you permission to oversee stuff. You could fix it up—if you had the funds—and turn around and sell it. You could fix it up and keep it for your parents and allow it to flourish, if you hired staff. Or when it comes out of the trust, you could simply sell it as is and wash your hands of it. Get your parents that big check.”

“You make it sound so simple. But it’s not. How much do you want me to dump on you? You don’t even know me, and I

don't know you. I don't want you to run scared once you hear about all of my baggage.”

“I have six brothers and sisters. I'm the oldest. Nothing can scare me at this point.” He leaned back in his seat and straightened his legs so he was stretched out on the little chair. “But I respect your privacy too. So I understand if you'd prefer not to delve further into the dirty details.” He couldn't deny how badly he wanted to hear the dirty details. He wanted to hear everything about Starr Young. He also wanted to touch her again.

The ocean breeze blew a strand of hair into her face, and she puffed it away. “My parents are not very bright when it comes to money. Business. Anything that's worth anything, they manage to find a way to suck all the money out of it—every last penny. The only reason the marina is still here is because of the trust.”

“Thank God for that.”

“Right? Anyway, sure they could sell it—because they aren't ever going to come down here. They want me to list the property. I could sell it as is, but where does that get us? What about my grandfather's legacy? My grandmother's beloved Hyper Blue paint? All of their hard work that they put into this place. This was their life. And I'm sorry, but I can't just let it go.”

“I don't expect that you can. But what about option one? Raising money to fund the project?”

“I like the idea. But the fact of the matter is that even if I could do that, who in the hell is going to run this place? Who is going to treat it the way my grandfather did? Who is going to love this place with all their heart the way he did?”

John stared at Starr because the answer was sitting right across from him in jean shorts with a white tank top and white flip-flops. The answer was loud and clear. But John didn't know what her life was like. What she would be leaving and who. It didn't seem fair to put that burden on her, even though it seemed her parents already had.

By the looks she was casting his way, she knew it too. But she didn't say so. And this was exactly where her issue came in. She had no choice but to let the place go. If she was the kind of woman that she was leading him to believe she was, that was tearing up her heart like nothing else. He stood and tossed their plastic cups into the trash, then held out his hand, which she eyed suspiciously. "Come on. Let's take a walk along the beach. Maybe it'll help clear your head."

John could see the hesitation on her face, but then she stood and gripped his hand. She was slow to trust people, and he could appreciate that. It made him feel like a million bucks that she held onto him with such strength.

"I don't know why you're being so nice to me," she said. "Listening to all my problems and trying to help me come up with a solution."

He kept her hand in his as he led her down the path, away from Blue Horizon, away from the marina and the little shops that lined the street. He took his time answering because he didn't have an answer. She was in a bad situation. It was the least he could do to make her feel better. He took off his shoes and socks while Starr stared at him in awe like she couldn't figure him out. He clutched his work shoes in one hand and took her hand back in his free one. "Maybe I'm just a nice guy who thinks you're a nice girl."

"Well, I haven't come across a lot of nice guys in my life. So pardon me if I am skeptical by nature." She squeezed his hand. "Tell me what it's like growing up with six siblings. How many sisters do you have?"

The sand felt great between his feet as they walked. "I have three brothers: Jersey, Judge, and Jake. And three sisters: Reed—she's Jake's twin—then Raven and Ruby. In that birth order."

"Wow. All *J*s and *R*s, huh?"

"Parents thought that was cute. John Jr. and Rose. What about you? Brothers and sisters?"

"I have one sister. Summer."

“Starr and Summer? I’m sensing a theme.”

She laughed. “If you’re imagining bell-bottoms, lots of Janis Joplin, and Woodstock, then you are imagining correctly.”

“No Hendrix?” he teased.

“Oh, him too. I grew up listening to a lot of the Who, the Beatles, pretty much every band from that time period. My parents are still living in that era.”

“And that makes you upset?” Above them, the boardwalk was getting busier. Bicycles and skates *clunk, clunk, clunked* above them.

She shrugged. “That’s not the half of it. Instead of parents, they act like they’re college kids. Still partying. Drinking. Smoking weed.” She stretched her arm out behind her. “They don’t care about anything. It makes it worse when everything is in their control.” She stopped and let go of his hand.

She bent down and picked up a handful of sand, letting the grains slowly fall through her fingers. She glanced up at him, and he couldn’t quite catch his breath. With the sunshine highlighting the forlorn look on her face, he wanted to do everything in his power to comfort her. To take away the pain in her heart. To tell her how beautiful and strong he thought she was, but instead he kept quiet, hoping she would talk more.

The last pieces of sand fell through her fingers, and she smiled. “Tell me more about your family. I love big families. I’ve always wished I had a big family and lots of brothers and sisters.”

“It’s not everything it’s cracked up to be.” He shrugged. “Actually, it is. Now that I’m an adult. But as kids, teenagers, it sucked having only two bathrooms for nine people. If you wanted something specific at dinner—a roll or something—you had better be first in line because if you were last, you may not get it.”

“But you guys make yachts. How did you not have a five-bathroom house?”



John chuckled. Everyone was under this impression that they had a bunch of money. Not when he was younger. “Well, when I was a kid, my grandfather owned Blue. Not us. My parents worked there and got paid well, but it wasn’t like we had all this cash. The lavish things we did enjoy were all my grandfather’s things. Up until he died anyway.” He stopped talking. The subject of money always made him uncomfortable. He was shocked that he’d spoken this much about it already. “So anyway, we’re all pretty close since we all work together.”

“That’s so nice. And family dinner on Sundays,” she teased.

“Exactly. Every Sunday. Don’t miss it if you don’t want Rose Davenport coming after you with a frying pan.”

“I was joking,” she said with a laugh. She had an amazing laugh.

John nudged her with his shoulder. “I’m not. It’s true. Every Sunday. Why? You want to come?”

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SHE DIDN’T THINK John was serious, already inviting her to his parents’ house for dinner, but he looked serious enough. The thought of being introduced to all his siblings and his parents, who had obviously been closer to the feud with her family than the next generation, had her shaking her head. “No. Thank you, but no thank you. I’m sure they are lovely people, but I’m going to pass on that.”

“Perhaps next time.”

“I won’t be here long, so probably not. I have a yoga studio back in Colorado that needs my attention.”

“Ah. That explains your perfect body.” His eyes perused her arms and down her legs, sending tingles along her spine. His eyes went from happy and bright to sultry. What would he be like in the bedroom?

“It’s far from perfect, but I try. No different than you.” She squeezed his bicep. It was a nice substitute for what she wanted to do, and that was start with both hands on his bare chest and span them down the length of his muscular torso.

He glanced around the beach and leaned toward her. “You know, there are more private places we could go to chat about and look at one another’s bodies,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper, making Starr laugh.

It also made her... want to. But starting anything with John, or any man in Emerald Port, for that matter, would be silly. “I bet there is. But I have work to do. There are some repairs that I can do myself. Thanks for the walk. Thanks for listening to me go on about my burdens.” She glanced toward the nearby steps that led to the boardwalk. They hadn’t walked too far.

John gave her a large, wonderfully charming smile, and a part of her wished that they had met under different circumstances. At the very least, that they lived in the same city and state. Then perhaps the idea of starting something with him relationship-wise wouldn’t be all that bad.

“Hey. Anytime. How about the least I could do is fix the wooden slats where I tripped? Free of charge and one less thing you’ll have to worry about.”

“How long would that take you? I don’t want to take up too much of your time.”

“You buy the wood, and I’ll be in and out in two hours. Probably less. It’s just a few boards.”

That would be an easy thing. “Deal. I would love your help. But only for that. Nothing else. My problems cannot become your problems.”

John shrugged. “Like I said, I’m the oldest in my family, and I’ve listened to a lot of things over the years and have helped in countless ways with my siblings. It’s not a problem.”

She gave him a final glance before she turned and went up the steps. Having a smoothie and taking a walk with him had been cathartic, and it was nice that he wasn’t the big, bad wolf

her grandfather would likely have wanted her to believe. She wasn't planning on mentioning her new friend to her parents though. It was none of their business. They would try to make it their business, and knowing them, they'd probably try to coerce her into blackmail or something else equally nefarious that she was totally not into.

Once she made it back to the cottage, she changed into some old shorts and found an old T-shirt of her grandpa's that she put on. The thing she wanted most to do, that she thought she could do, was clean up the welcome center of the marina. The sales desk. The convenience store. Maybe Lyle would help her in the short term, or maybe she would be lucky enough to find part-time help to start renting the slips back out. If she could show the potential of the marina, perhaps her parents wouldn't sell it, and they could reap the benefits of the place. Have a small retirement income while still keeping the family business alive.

It was a slim chance. But she was optimistic.

She stood in front of her grandfather's office with her heart in her throat. She hesitated, knowing the rest of the keys were in there. She let out a deep breath and turned the knob. The dank smell hit her first. It smelled like old books. Her vision blurred, and no matter how many times she blinked, it didn't stop the tears from falling.

She took her first step into the old office. Everything was still exactly the way it had always been since she'd been a kid. Naval blueprints for ships and yachts lined the wall. The two glass bottles that contained miniature fleets of sailboats sat with a bunch of dust covering them. *Why didn't Lydia clean in here?* Perhaps Lydia felt the same way Starr did about encroaching on a territory that wasn't hers. This was her grandfather's personal space, and he'd made it very clear that no one was allowed in.

"All right. I'm just grabbing the keys, Grandpa." On the wall behind his desk was a small wooden box with a glass front that held numerous keys. She stepped behind his desk, still having a hard time shaking the feeling that it was wrong to be in her grandfather's office without his approval. She

opened the box and perused the identification tabs on each key until she found Shipwreck and Seaside, Front Door. She pocketed both and took one last look around.

Grandpa sure didn't want her and her sister in his office when they were younger, but Starr couldn't help but think that now—especially now, when she was trying to do something with this place—he would be proud of her. He would welcome her inside his office. He would want her to do whatever she needed to get the job done.

By the time she walked out of the house, followed the sidewalk to the welcome center, and unlocked the front door, she realized that she was going to need a miracle to get this job done. With the small amount of funds she had, John's idea of crowdfunding didn't seem like such a bad idea.

She dropped the cleaning supplies to the floor and pulled out her phone. She turned on her favorite music and went to work. If her life had been different, she would love it here. She wouldn't mind being friends with a man like John—maybe even more than friends. She wouldn't mind running the marina, despite her stance on global warming and the effects boating had on the ocean. She would get past it. Besides, money was money, and it wasn't like her studio put her in a high tax bracket.

This place had lots of potential, and *if* she was at a different place in her life, *if* she was looking for something new, *if* she thought she could do it, there wasn't a doubt that she could make Emerald Port her new home.

## Chapter Six

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“JOHNNY, I got it. This is it.” His little sister held up one of Blue’s folders. Everyone around the office was always happy come Friday, and this morning was no different. “A new logo. This is it.” Reed’s excitement radiated from her body. And John couldn’t help but latch on to it. He would be even more excited if his father wasn’t such a grouch sometimes. It would make the idea of presenting anything to him a hell of a lot easier.

“Lay it on me.” He pointed to one of his office chairs. “Sit.”

Reed was four years younger than he was, and she was the younger twin, born three minutes after Jake. She gave him her big bright smile that always seemed to improve anyone’s mood. She was happiness times twenty. “I captured the essence of Blue. The pristine and luxurious lines of our company. The attention to detail we give our clients. Plus, it looks new. Modern. And exactly what we need to move into this time period and out of the fifties.” She was practically bouncing in her seat. She opened the folder and slid the paper across his desk. “What do you think?”

In the center of the paper was a lined drawing of their current logo—a yacht coasting on a wave. An elegant script said Blue Horizon above the yacht, and the bottom said Yachts. Underneath that, there was “Blue Horizon” with an anchor below and “Yachts” beneath the anchor. Simple.

“You hate it,” she said.

John shook his head, staring at the image. “No, I don’t hate it.”

“You don’t love it.”

“It’s neither, honestly. I’m not like you, who can determine that you like something on the spot. I have to think about it. Get a feel for it. Toss it around in my mind for a little while.” *Sure didn’t seem to have to do that with Starr.* He looked up from the drawing where Reed was giving him the stink eye. “For real, Reed. Leave this here, and let me look it over. It’s a helluva lot better than our current logo.”

Reed stood, giving him a resigned look. “It is a lot better than our current logo. This logo screams high-end champagne, while that logo”—she pointed to the folder she’d carried in with her—“screams this-bubbly-is-going-to-leave-me-with-a-headache-tomorrow.”

John laughed at his sister and shook his head. “Good analogy, and I promise I do like it. It’s just that this is a big fucking deal, and we need to make sure we present the board with the perfect logo that they will have no choice but to say yes to.”

“I know.” She grabbed the folder off his desk and left the paper. “Which is why this one is it.” She winked. “If you think of something else, let me know.” She walked out of his office, leaving him to stew about the design she’d created. She wasn’t wrong. What she’d come up with was basic enough that it screamed luxury. It held an unspoken promise that you knew you’d made an exquisite choice.

John leaned back in his chair, hands steeped beneath his chin. Two years ago, he’d brought up the idea of creating a new logo for Blue. He had pretty much been shot down by everyone on the team, including some of his siblings. After he’d gotten over his anger and what had felt like betrayal, he realized that introducing a new logo at that time could have very well hurt their company. It was a time when yacht sales were down, the yearly yacht convention that was a big deal for them had been canceled, and they’d lost two longtime employees in the shipyard. One had passed away, and the

other guy had lost his wife, so he'd packed up his three kids and moved to Kentucky, where his family lived.

But now, Blue was in excellent shape. They'd just held yearly reviews on all of their longtime employees, bonuses were set to go out within the next month, and they'd landed the contract from New York, which had the offices and the yard brimming with anticipation. If only he could get his dad to re-fucking-tire. Even though his mother had told him that his dad was going to announce his retirement, it didn't feel very real. John had heard time and time again of his dad quitting and leaving John at the helm, but he'd heard it so many times that, honestly, he wasn't sure if it was going to happen.

Guess he'd find out on Sunday. One of the best things about having so many siblings was that there was at least one who was nosy as hell. In this case, he had two—Jersey and Reed—and he could count on them to ask about their dad's retirement.

If what his mom said was true, they were going to have to plan a party for the old man. John knew everything there was to know about Blue, so it wasn't like he would need special training. Hell, he would bet that he knew more about Blue than his father did as of late. *Just give it up, Dad.*

“Who put that sad look on your face? Our new neighbor?” Judge strolled into John's office and took a seat across from him. “You've seen her out there with the three Wright brothers, haven't you?”

Jealousy spread across John's chest, and he stood quickly, marching to his window to peer down at the marina. Sure enough, Starr was down there with the three brothers. Their big, obnoxious Wright Construction truck sat in the parking lot.

“Oh, you didn't know?” Judge sneered.

John folded his arms over his chest and glanced back at his brother. “What the hell are you doing?” John knew full well that Judge was trying to make him jealous over other men showing interest in Starr. “I'm not her guy.”

The look on Judge's face seemed to counter John's words. "Is that so? Then why did you jump up like a fucking nutcase when I said she was with the Wright brothers?"

"Let's get this out in the open." John watched one of the brothers touch Starr's arm, and her head tilted up to the guy. John swallowed. "I am attracted to her. But it couldn't possibly go anywhere. She's Harold's granddaughter, for fuck's sake. Not to mention the fact that she lives in Colorado. I'm sure as fuck not going to date anyone who lives in another state, let alone one that far away."

"She fixing the place up?" Judge wouldn't take no for an answer.

"What she can afford to fix. But she has a business in Colorado. She can't stay here for too long."

"What kind of business?"

Irritation flowed through John's blood, and he sucked in a deep breath. Judge might be annoying him about Starr, but he wasn't asking anything that was out of line. "She owns a yoga studio."

The two of them shared a look, and John knew his playboy brother was thinking the same as he was. Flexibility like that was convenient in the bedroom.

"She gonna sell?" Judge asked.

"I don't know. Why are you so curious about her and how I feel about her? You know as well as I do that Dad would hate the idea of any one of us going near that family. He'll be a hard one to please if I bring her around. I'm surprised he hasn't found out yet that I've been talking to her, as nosy as our family is. Not to mention, I want him to retire. This is something I could see him holding over my head and not giving me the position."

Judge was already shaking his head. "The feud is stupid, first of all. It was our grandparents' war, not ours. And your fucking talent speaks volumes. Not the fact that you're the oldest son." Judge shrugged, and his lips curled into a grin.



“Well, maybe that a little bit. But you deserve it based on other merits, and Mom is chomping at the bit to go on a long trip.”

John knew this. Judge knew this. Christ, all his siblings knew this. It was a matter of time. And it was easier said than done. “Well, I appreciate the vote of confidence, but you’re preaching to the choir. I’ve told Dad a million and ten times to retire already. So has Mom. All of you guys have done it at least half a million times. The Davenport stubborn streak doesn’t know when to quit.”

Judge gave him a pointed look, and his eyes flitted to the window. No, John didn’t like any of the Wright brothers, and he sure didn’t like the thought of any of them flirting with Starr. John could only hope Starr wasn’t as enamored with them as she seemed to be with him. But just in case she could be easily swayed, he found himself snatching his phone off his desk and checking his calendar. No one would notice if he stepped out for a short walk.

“I’m coming with you.” Judge stood from his chair. “It’s only fair I get to meet the woman who has sent my oldest, most refined, and most responsible brother into a frenzy.”

“Get real. I’d hate to see what I’d look like if I’d fallen in love. I feel normal right now.”

“Says the one who can’t stop checking out the marina.” The two of them strolled down the hallway together, and truthfully, John was happy to have his brother come along as a sidekick.

“Whoa, two of my boys trying to walk out of the office together at eleven in the morning?” At the sound of their father’s voice, John and Judge stopped dead in their tracks, both looking at one another like *what the fuck*.

John turned around. Their dad didn’t look like he was in his early sixties. He looked as if he was late forties, with barely a hint of gray in his mostly dark hair seeming to sparkle in the light. He was tall and broad shouldered, just like the two of them. “Judge and I were just going to get some fresh air and talk about the upcoming yacht convention.”

The only thing that hinted at his father's age was his gait. He moved slowly, his knees bothering him way more than he wanted to admit. But they all knew how badly their father needed knee surgery, and it was like beating a dead horse to get him to agree.

“What's there to discuss? We have everything in place, don't we, Judge?” John's father looked at Judge for confirmation.

“Sure do. But since the word on the street is that John is going to be taking your position in the next month, I want to cement that fact in the minds of a couple folks who have made it a point that they are clearing their schedules to come to the show. I can't be selling boats to people and ignore the turnover of our head guy. Can I?”

Their dad waved a hand in the air. “Hocus-pocus. I'm in no hurry to leave. I don't have anything to do and nowhere pressing I have to be. I can stay here as long as I need. John's in no hurry to run the place. Are you, son?”

This was a conversation they'd had over and over. John's fingers twitched to pull his own fucking hair out of his head. He clenched his hands and worked on keeping his voice steady. If he gave away too much, his father would use it to his advantage. If he didn't, his father would accuse him of not caring enough. It was always a catch-22.

John patted his pants pocket and pulled out his phone. “I gotta take this. Judge, we'll talk later.” He put the phone up to his ear, pretending to answer the call as he made his way down the hallway. Once he was safely out the front doors, he shoved his phone back into his pocket. “Fuck!”

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STARR BIT the inside of her cheek while she waited for the three brothers to get into their truck. They each had a specialty, and since she'd asked for a bid on various items, the three of them showed up to give her individual estimates. They were

the last estimates she was getting. The oldest brother started the truck, and she waved goodbye.

She'd held on to the small hope that maybe the next bid wouldn't be quite so high, but it was. And now she had one option left, and that was to sell the place. Lyle had given her a few names of some local Realtors, and unfortunately, Starr was going to have to call one of them. She had no other choice.

"Sorry, Grandpa. I don't know what else to do." Everything would be easier if her parents were more responsible and actually cared. That wasn't to say that the marina would still be in physically good condition, but if they'd run it the way a business was supposed to be run, they would at least have the money to do cosmetic upgrades.

The bell dinged on the bridge, and she watched as it went back down. Her eyes went to the imposing Blue Horizon office building, and not for the first time that morning, she thought about John and wondered what he was doing. Why did the stars seem to align them so well together? Especially when the universe knew she didn't belong there. It was a question Starr had asked herself over and over. Nothing was by chance or luck. Everything had a meaning and a reason, and her meeting John went beyond the casual meet and greet.

Her body was extremely attuned to him. Her body was very attracted to him. Her body craved him on a level she hadn't experienced in a long time. She watched a few people cross the bridge, and her eyes landed on *him*. John walked at a brisk pace, and the angry lines on his face suggested he wasn't happy about something, but good lord was he handsome.

She found herself walking toward him. He was headed in her direction, but he hadn't seen her yet. Instead of staying on the path, he veered toward the harbor behind the marina. She quickened her pace to catch up to him. He was just about to stroll down the steps—which led to a small landing pad at the edge of the harbor—when she reached out to touch him. He startled, turned, and met her gaze. His eyes softened momentarily, and she kept her hand on his arm, enjoying the way he felt beneath her fingertips.

What would it be like to kiss him? The question was front and center on her mind, and the next thing she knew, John's heady blue eyes were inching toward her, devouring her on sight. She blinked, not sure what he was going to do, but then he answered her unspoken prayers. He leaned forward, and his mouth landed on hers.

His hand gripped her hip and pulled her into his body. He kissed her like he was a man who hadn't tasted a woman in forever. His lips were hard and demanding. Angry. He let out a low groan when their tongues met. Maybe that was her groaning. She couldn't be sure, but the way their tongues tangled together had Starr wanting more. So much fucking more. She gripped the back of his neck and continued to kiss him. Damn, they needed this, no matter how strange it was to be kissing at the harbor for all the world to see.

He pulled away, and she opened her eyes. His mouth was glistening from her kisses, and his chest heaved in rhythm with hers.

"What was that for?" She wasn't mad about it, but had they crossed into this kind of relationship already? Was she ready for it?

He pushed a hand through his hair. "I probably shouldn't have done that."

*You think?* Heat pooled between her legs. If he apologized for kissing her, she was going to walk away. She opened her mouth to tell him he could go to hell, but his finger came up and touched her lips. Gently but firmly.

"But I don't regret one second of it. In fact, if you gave me permission, I'd do it again."

The heat continued to pool. "You didn't ask permission the first time. Why would you change tactics now?"

A throaty chuckle vibrated against her body, and his lips lifted into a very large smile, eliminating the anger that had been on his face five minutes ago. "Fair enough. If I were to kiss you again, I wouldn't ask."

She sucked in her top lip. “Was that kiss enough to make your anger disappear?”

“Oh yeah. Enough to make it go away and put another kind of feeling in its place.”

If she were staying in Emerald Port, now would have been the perfect time to invite him back to her place. She was long overdue for some fun that involved a man like John. Attractive. Funny. And he used his hands well. She glanced down at where one rested on her hip and the other on her forearm. “This might sound crazy, but do you want to go out with me tonight?” she asked.

“Like a date?”

“Hmm. A date sounds really serious. How about just like a get-together between friends?”

“Is that what we are, Starr? Friends?” His voice went down an octave, and his eyes dropped to her lips.

“Can you stop looking at me like you want to eat me? I can’t think when you do that.” She stepped out of his embrace before his hands could feel the warmth pouring out of her entire body. She was overheated. Everywhere. Especially between her legs... This—John—was too much to handle.

His chuckle was so melodic. So sexy. It brought her a sense of peace. Maybe he was an angel sent by the universe. She wasn’t sure, and she had no time to think when John pulled his phone out. “Put in your number. I’ll text you a time to pick you up.”

She did as he asked and tried not to think of it as a date. It wasn’t like that. They were just friends. She was slightly horrified that she’d even let the question come out of her mouth, but it was hard to feel too regretful when he was looking at her *that* way. “There. If you can’t make it, text me. I’ll understand.”

“I’m not going to cancel on you. I’ll text you to let you know I’m on my way. We can either walk somewhere or drive downtown. Up to you.” He shoved his phone back into his pants pocket. “I’ll see you tonight.” He gave her a wink that

made her heart melt, and then he was off. She was left standing alone, asking herself if that had literally just happened.

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## Chapter Seven

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STARR FRETTEd over what she was going to wear that night a little more than she normally obsessed over things. Who was she kidding? She never worried about what she wore. It had been two years since her last date, so God knew what she had been thinking that long ago. Two years. She trembled at the thought that she hadn't been out with a man in two whole years.

She'd been on a break from men. It had been a break that was long overdue. It had been a real break, too, until she met John.

She'd had plenty of boyfriends. Some quick and fun in relationships that went absolutely nowhere and some that she had hung on to for the wild ride. But none of them had lasted, for various reasons. Corey Chapel had been her last real boyfriend. He'd turned into her fiancé, but that had only lasted two weeks. She glanced at her bare ring finger. It was the one and only time she'd allowed her emotions to get the better of her. She'd fallen in love with Corey hard and fast, and he was nothing like she'd thought he was.

When she'd walked in on him having sex with his ex-girlfriend, Starr had thrown his engagement ring at his eyeball and had never looked back. *Asshole*. The best thing she could do about tonight—and the next week while she stayed in Emerald Port—was remind herself to put herself first. No matter how well she and John got along or how attracted she was to him.

And that was exactly what she did while she spent an hour searching for the best Friday-night outfit with a beach-chic vibe that she could find in her suitcase. She finally found some black shorts that looked sort of business class and paired them with a tie-dye tank top she'd bought at a funky shop back home. Sexy but totally laid back. And who didn't love tie-dye?

Her phone lit up, and the Beatles' "Let it Be" began playing. She practically dove headfirst onto her bed to see if the text was from John.

**John:** My condo is on the other side of the bridge. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes. That work?

**Starr:** Yes. I'll be waiting on the docks.

She ran like hell into the bathroom to double-check her complexion. She spritzed herself with one of her essential oil blends, lavender and lemongrass. She inhaled the calming-but-very-uplifting fragrance. *Stay calm. Smell the lavender, Starr. Relax.* "It's one evening out. No big deal."

Fifteen minutes went by faster than they should have, and despite the large amounts of lavender fragrance she'd smelled, her heart bordered on tachycardia. Every time she lifted her hand, it trembled. The water lapping at the docks helped lessen her anxiety more than her essential oils, and if she blocked out the sound of the traffic, she was able to hear the waves crashing down at the beach.

John pulled into the parking lot, and Starr's feet twitched to take off. *It's one date. Just for fun. Nothing more.* The car rolled to a stop, and John stepped out, looking as dazzling as he always did. Tonight, he was wearing black shorts like she was and a blue-and-white checkered shirt. The button below his collar was open, and she tried not to imagine how his chest hair would feel beneath her fingers.

"Hey there," he said.

Her stomach soared. "Hi. Where are we headed to?"

"I thought you would want to pick. We can walk along the boardwalk and find a place, or you can search up some place on your phone. I'm in no hurry. It's whatever you want to do."



Starr swallowed, not used to so much thoughtfulness from a date. Usually she was fine going anywhere, but since he'd made it a point to have her to pick, she took him up on his offer. "I saw a place on my way from the airport. It didn't look like a chain. El Puerto? You like Mexican? Will that work?" she asked as he walked her around to the passenger side of his car and opened the door. "It wasn't there the last time I was here. If you don't mind."

He gave her a tight smile. "Sure."

She got the impression that he wasn't entirely thrilled with her choice, but surely the food would be phenomenal since the restaurant was on the main highway that ran through Emerald Port. When he parked and they entered the restaurant, it was everything Starr expected. The smell of chips permeated the air, and Spanish music blared through the ceiling speakers. A sign told them that a pitcher of margaritas was on special for tonight. Crowds of people loitered in the waiting area as well as in the bar and dining room. She already felt a million times better, and she hadn't even had a drink yet.

"This is fabulous."

"This is sketchy," he said.

"Let's go to the bar. We might be able to find seats there." She tugged John along, and by luck, there were three seats just being vacated by some younger kids. "Here. Sit. What do you mean by sketchy?"

John looked around the bar, and she followed his gaze. Was he seeing something she wasn't? It was a perfectly normal place. The floors were clean. The bar top was wiped to a shine. The food smelled amazing.

"I don't trust it," he said. "It looks a little..."

When he struggled to find the right words, Starr's brain fast-tracked, and it finally dawned on her that perhaps he was thinking of something more high-end for dinner. "Is this kind of place beneath you, John Davenport?" She took a closer look, and he did look uncomfortable. A little too... stuffy. Out of place. "You don't eat at regular restaurants?"

“No. I mean, yes. I do. Sebastian’s. Brother Scott’s. The Lampshire. And the country club, of course.”

He left Starr momentarily speechless, and the bartender set out paper coasters and asked for their drink orders. She found her voice. “I’ll have a margarita. On the rocks.”

“I’ll just take a beer. That local bottle there is fine,” John said.

She followed his finger to some kind of craft brew with a large alligator on its logo.

“You guys know what you want to eat yet?” the bartender asked while he pried the top off the beer for John and started mixing her margarita.

The music died, and she found her ears and inside voice. “We’ll take chips and salsa to start. And then let you know.” She smiled when the bartender set her drink down. “Thank you.”

“You must think I’m spoiled,” John said when the bartender left to attend to another customer.

“I was thinking you’re higher up on the food chain than you let on. You’ve really never been to any of these normal local restaurants? How do you survive?”

As if on cue, a mariachi trio stood at their end of the bar and started playing a song. Starr clapped along with the tune. John’s face was beet red. He mostly looked everywhere but at the band and her. When the song was over, she clapped and retrieved a few dollars from her wallet and handed it to the guys.

“Wasn’t that great?” she asked John.

“No. That was embarrassing.” John took another drink of his beer, and she was a little sad that he was serious. The two of them had clearly been brought up on different playing fields. Good-but-not-great restaurants were the norm for her, and he apparently wasn’t comfortable unless the wait staff delivered warm bread and real butter to his tablecloth-covered table. “Does that make you like me less?”

“Who said I liked you that much to begin with?” She bit the inside of her cheek, trying not to smile at the memory of him kissing her. What would it feel like to have his hands on her bare skin? She masked the heat brewing in her body by taking another sip of her drink.

“You didn’t have to say anything. Not while your lips and the sounds from your throat when I kissed you earlier were doing all the heavy lifting.”

“Oh, whatever. What was I supposed to do? You know how long it’s been since a man has kissed me?” Why had she said that?

“No matter how long it has been, you haven’t forgotten how to do it.” John brushed away her embarrassment, which she was grateful for.

The bartender stood in front of them. “What’ll it be?”

“We can go somewhere else, if you’d like,” she offered to John.

He gave a single shake of his head. “I’ll take the taco platter. No rice. No beans. Just the tacos, please.”

“And for you?”

“I’ll have the smothered burrito with guacamole and sour cream. No beans or rice either. Thank you.”

The bartender looked at the two of them as if they were from a different planet. She felt like that was the case, considering the way John kept looking at her and the way her body kept getting heated in all the right places.

“Is work off-limits to talk about?” he asked after the bartender turned away to relay their orders. “I saw you with the Wright boys earlier. Another bid?”

“Yes. But it’s the last one. I can’t afford any renovations. I don’t have time to do a crowdfunding campaign the way you suggested. I’ll be calling a Realtor tomorrow.”

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THAT WAS MOSTLY what John wanted to hear. He enjoyed having Starr around, and once she sold the marina, she would be out of his life for good. Even though he didn't like the sad and lost look Starr was giving him. It was now or never. He placed his hands on the bar top and leaned close to her. "Sell it to me."

"The marina?" She furrowed her brow like it was a wild thought that he was interested in her marina.

"Of course the marina. What else would I mean? I mentioned it before."

"Well, I didn't take it that seriously. Sort of thought it was just words." She crunched a chip. "You build yachts. What would you do with the marina?"

"Open it and run it. Well, I wouldn't run it... or I could run it. What if I ran it?" His voice trailed off. He could run it. If his dad never retired and he didn't work for Dom... maybe that was what he could do. Have his own company. Run it the way he saw fit. Not have to leave Emerald Port. Could he leave his family business though? It wouldn't be for a yacht rival, but it would still be a rival, wouldn't it?

"What if?" Starr prodded.

"Well..."

"You listened to me about my problems. You can trust me to listen to yours."

Starr shoved another chip into her mouth, and when she licked a bit of salsa off her thumb, he couldn't help imagining what it would feel like if she did that to his dick. He blinked the thought away, refusing to get hard while sitting inside a bar that may or may not have seen its fair share of secret rendezvous in the bathroom stalls. "It's been assumed in my family practically all my life that I would take over Blue Horizon Yachts from my parents when my dad retired. The problem is that I'm getting older, and he's getting old, and he's not retiring. And I got another offer for a job."

She frowned. "How old are you?"

“Thirty-two. I’m turning into an old man waiting for somebody else to give me permission to start living my life.” He took another sip of his beer. When he’d graduated college, he’d imagined running the company and having a wife and children by now. He hadn’t thought he would be this old and single.

“You’re not old. Well, I’m thirty, and I’m not calling myself old. I still feel young and great, and actually, I think I could do anything a twenty-year-old could do.” She put her hand up to her mouth like she was telling him a secret. “Maybe even better. So, what kind of job did you get offered?”

John laughed. He could think of a few things that she probably could do better than most twenty-year-olds, but he wasn’t going to voice his inappropriate thoughts the first time they were having dinner and drinks together. It was bad enough that he’d jacked off last night to visions of her doing yoga. Naked. Naked yoga should become a thing in Emerald Port. He told her about the call from Dom. “Which is why buying the marina would be the less hated route. I think, anyway.”

“I’m not sure I could do it. My grandfather would roll over in his grave if he knew the property was going to his rivals.”

John lifted a shoulder. “I get it. But I thought we agreed that wasn’t our war?”

“We did. But old habits and all. So, you never answered me about what would possess you to want the marina? You’re already watching it crumble—literally. What would you want to do with it?”

*Why all the tough questions?* “I’d like to see the marina back in its former glory. There is *a lot* of moneymaking potential there, and *I know* I could make it successful.”

“You and me both. If I didn’t have a yoga studio already.”

“Have you considered moving here and opening a yoga studio? Even at the marina there. You could have the best of both worlds.” *Shut up, John. Way to try and get her to sell it to me when I keep giving her ideas.*

“I’ve considered that for five minutes. My life is in Colorado. My friends. Clients that have become close friends.”

“Your parents.”

She shrugged. “We don’t have a lot in common, so I wouldn’t exactly miss them the way I would my sister. But what about you? You would quit Blue?”

“Not sure if I could quit, to be honest.” A strange sense of peace settled over John. Never in his life had he imagined a life without Blue. He wasn’t arrogant enough to assume that he would get the company handed to him one day because he was the oldest. But growing up, his parents drilled that into his head over and over until it became a given. That he would run the company when his dad retired. Could John leave Blue? If it meant allowing him the freedom to change things, he would. He could. “I would hurt a lot of the people I love if I did that.”

“What does your second-oldest sibling do?”

“Jersey? He runs the tech for our company, but he also manages all of the technology inside the yachts. You know there’s an app for everything, right? So each yacht comes with a management system that allows the owner to log into the app and check on everything about the yacht. How it’s running, what it needs, how many nautical miles it has—everything. Jersey is great at what he does. He loves it. There’s no way in hell he would be CEO.”

“What about the next sibling?”

John straight up laughed because Judge would rather work for Starr at her marina than run Blue. That wasn’t his thing. “Judge is the family joker. He sells the yachts. He races yachts, actually. But no, he’d never get caught having to be in the office for too long. And before you ask about the rest of my siblings, they are either too young or they’ve gone to college for something else. Like Reed. She is an amazing artist. Her strength is drawing. Designing. Her and Jake—that’s her twin—work well together. He’s our architect.”

“Wow, it must be so fun to not only have such a big family, but it seems like you actually like them, and you all get

along.”

“Yeah. It’s fine until one of them doesn’t mind their own business, and then everyone gets involved. Otherwise, it’s nice. Tell me about your sister.”

“She’s twenty-three, smart as a whip. She has a business, is raising a kid. She’s amazing. My niece is four. They are so good together. A perfect little team.”

“Married?”

“No. He scooted. She doesn’t need him anyway.”

“What kind of business?”

“Plants, like a nursery.”

“That must make your parents happy.” He mimed toking a joint, and she laughed.

“Not that kind of plant.”

“Is she interested in the marina?”

“No. She’s got a full plate,” Starr said.

“What does she think of you being down here?”

Starr put up a hand. “She is glad it isn’t her. She doesn’t care about this place. Not the way I do. Grandpa was old-fashioned and didn’t show a ton of affection, but I was his favorite. He spoiled me like crazy. So long as I didn’t interfere with business, he had me around. On the rare occasions where I was too noisy or couldn’t sit still, he’d send me with my grandma.”

John had met Starr’s grandmother, Nancy, a few times, and despite the tumultuous relationship she and her husband had with his grandparents, she’d always been polite to John and his siblings. “One time Nancy gave me a basket of candy she’d won at the VFW. I’d run into her walking across the bridge.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She made a comment about how she wasn’t supposed to be there playing cards and had inadvertently won

the basket. She gave it to me so your grandfather wouldn't know."

Starr laughed. "But that doesn't make sense. Grandpa always knew she played cards."

"Don't ask me. That was just what she'd said. It wasn't her card day, and she'd snuck over there anyway. She was very relieved when I took the basket."

"Grandma loved playing cards. That is one of the highlights I remember about her. That, and she loved being on the boat."

"How did your parents end up being so..." John struggled to find a word that wouldn't offend her. *Hippie* was on his tongue, and he couldn't think of anything else.

"Hippies. That's the word you're looking for. Or free spirits, which seems to be the term that's more in vogue these days. Regardless, they are hippies to the core. I don't know how it happened. Dad moved to Colorado because Mom's family was there. They lived out of a van for a while. They were van lifers before it was trendy. They just never really grew up. They are stuck in the party stage."

She pushed back her plate, and John wanted so badly to lean over and kiss her. Even in a sketchy place like this. "My tacos weren't bad. I hope they don't make me sick."

"You're unbelievable. The place is fine."

"Here's your check. No rush." The bartender took their empty plates, and Starr went to grab the check, but John scooped it up first.

"I'll pay." He double-checked the amount. "It's a whole twenty-five dollars? You've got to be kidding me."

"That's great. Two meals and two drinks."

John didn't add that the entire bill came to an amount a normal *entree* would cost him. He left a generous tip and stood. Starr stood at the same time, putting them practically chest to chest. He wanted to kiss her again. He knew he



shouldn't. Her hand went to his forearm, and she gave him a squeeze.

“Thanks for dinner.”

In response, he leaned over in that crowded and dingy bar and placed his lips on hers.

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## Chapter Eight

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THAT KISS.

John had kissed her. *Again.*

And his second kiss was just as yummy as the first. She pressed a finger to her lips, loving the way she could still feel his mouth on hers. Were they going to keep kissing and pretend that she wasn't leaving Emerald Port and wasn't part of the Young family? Even if she stayed, there was no way she could ever show up at his parents' house for Sunday dinner.

She would never be welcomed by his mom and dad.

But his lips were so intoxicating, it was hard to think straight around him. When his car slid into the marina parking lot and came to a stop, she faced him. "Would you like to come in for a drink?" Not for sex. Just a drink.

"I probably shouldn't."

"This is not a sex invite, John. Come on." She got out and slammed the door, knowing that he would follow, based on his laughter.

"I probably shouldn't have kissed you back there." He caught up to her while she found her keys to unlock the door to the cottage. "Twice. Probably shouldn't have done it either time."

"Do you regret it?" she asked.

"Nope."

“Then stop making comments about it.” She pushed the door open, and they went inside. She grabbed two beers. “Here. A cheers to forging new friendships and trying to escape old family feuds.”

She clinked her bottle against his, and John looked around the house. He moved closer to the large portrait of a yacht on the far wall, and Starr couldn’t help but admire his physique. It was a brief moment in which she could appreciate his beauty—gawk—without him noticing. What would he feel like between her legs? The weight of him against her frame?

“This is my grandfather’s old ship.”

“What?” Starr stepped up to the picture. “How do you know?”

He pointed to an emblem on the side of the boat. Starboard Ships was printed above an image of a yacht. “Right here. But also because I remember it.”

“What does that mean? My grandfather bought a boat from Blue?”

John turned to her. “Not exactly. You’ve never heard the story?”

“Tell me. And then I want to show you something.”

“They were in business together. Harold and my grandpa, John.”

“John. Of course. So what are you, like, the third?”

“Yes.”

“Naturally. But go on.”

“They were the ones who started Blue when they were in their twenties. So, what? That would have been in the fifties? But it wasn’t called Blue back then. It was—”

“Starboard Ships,” she finished for him.

“How did you know?”

Starr pointed to her grandfather’s office, thinking about the naval drawings on the wall and how half the things in his

office had the same design. Including the folder she'd seen. "I saw it in his office."

"Anyway, something big happened. Big enough that it ruined their friendship, and they never spoke to one another again. They hired lawyers to split the company up. This land that the marina is on used to be owned by my grandfather—well, Starboard Ships—and when they split the company and the assets, this is what your grandfather got."

Starr wanted to cry. It was sad, really. What had happened so dire that the two of them quit being friends? "Was it a woman that came between them?"

"I really don't know."

"Follow me. I want to show you something."

They walked down the hall, and she reached for the knob to her grandfather's office. Her hand stilled. It was weird to bring his enemy in there. Well, the grandson of his enemy. She drew back her shoulders, gripped the knob, and twisted, pushing the door open. She flipped the lights on and watched while John took in his surroundings. It meant something to her, to be inside her grandpa's office, but she could tell by the look on John's face that it meant more to him. He too was an heir, after all.

"This is magnificent. It's like a secret room that's been hidden from me this whole time, and it's just next door." He walked up to the nearest drawing. The Starboard Ships logo that was on the portrait in the living room was on every drawing tacked to the wall.

She hadn't thought too much about it—actually, she'd glossed over it entirely the few times she'd been in there. But inviting John in tonight was clearly an act of fate. He stood in front of the drawing for the longest time before moving on to the next print. She didn't want to break whatever emotions he was experiencing, so she hung back and watched him take it all in. He brushed his hand along the second print.

"This is a scow bow. Jake taught me about it. Gives more righting movement to the boat." He turned to Starr, a large

smile on his face. “You can carry more sail for a given wind speed.”

“I don’t know much about boats except that they are bad for the environment and bad for me.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “Why? They make you seasick?”

“They do. It’s been a while since the last time I was on one, but I’m assuming the same holds true.”

“How long has it been?” John walked to the next drawing, and again he reached out and touched it. Could he feel the life in that artwork of what once was?

“Three and a half years ago. When my grandpa was still healthy enough to take her out.” She left off the part where she’d ended up puking her guts out.

“Tomorrow. Can I take you on my yacht tomorrow? I don’t plan on going to the office.”

What was happening between them? It was more than friendship. She damn well knew she wasn’t staying in Emerald Port much longer, but that didn’t stop her from nodding.

John moved to the next drawing. “This was my grandfather’s yacht. Right here. Why did your grandfather keep this if they hated each other so much? I wish I knew more about their story. How they went from business partners to enemies in the blink of an eye.”

“Maybe it was a storm brewing between them for a long time. You know how that stuff is. You work with someone, thinking it’ll be fine, but then slowly, bit by bit, day by day, the relationship eats at you, and you wake up one morning and realize you can’t be an active participant in their life.”

John turned to her and raised his eyebrow. “Sounds like you’re all too familiar with that.” He stepped in front of her and took her hands in his. “Who?”

Starr shivered at the way his thumbs smoothed the tops of her hands, moving back and forth. “My parents. Super toxic.”

He kept ahold of her wrists, and her mind drifted to the bedroom. How his large hands would feel on her body. How his lips would feel touching her skin. And especially how it would feel to be the center of his attention. Kind of like she was right now. His eyes shifted to her lips, and instead of waiting and wondering if he might kiss her again, she leaned into him, knowing that if anything was going to send her grandfather rolling over in his grave, kissing a Davenport inside his office would be it.

His mouth was hot against hers, and she probed it with her tongue, opening his lips and reveling in the trembles his kiss cast across her body. He let out a low groan and let go of her wrists. He planted his hands on her hips, tugging her forward into his hard body. He was hard. Everywhere. And it felt so good.

A loud thud sounded, making her jump from his embrace. She searched frantically around the room for the source and saw that a framed portrait of her and Summer had fallen from the bookshelf.

John let out a slow chuckle. “Guess that’s your grandfather’s way of telling me to keep my hands off his granddaughter.”

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JOHN DIDN'T WANT to keep his hands off Starr. In fact, if he was entirely honest with himself, the idea of touching her was a nice distraction from his life. And by life, he meant work. She was gorgeous and so painstakingly sexy in that tie-dye tank top that John could think of nothing else but what her skin beneath said tank top would feel like.

“Hmm. I guess it was.” Starr retrieved the photo from the floor and leaned it against the bookshelf like it had been positioned before.

“Perfect timing.” His cock throbbed despite the picture falling, and even though she said she was only inviting him in

for a drink, he couldn't help but wish that things might change now that he was here. Now that she'd kissed him.

She stood in front of him, one hand resting on his chest as her gaze held his. God, he wanted to kiss her. He wanted a hell of a lot more than to just kiss. She released her breath in a long sigh and let her hand fall away. "If only I weren't going back to Denver so soon. Long-distance relationships are so not my thing."

His heart sank at the reminder. How could someone so amazing come into his life for a couple days, weeks, and then be gone forever? He put his hands against her hips. "They aren't mine either."

And that was all he had to say about it. He pressed his mouth to hers and lifted her into his arms so her legs were wrapped around his body. He carried her out of the office and down the hallway. Not willing to guess, he spoke against her mouth. "Where is your room?"

"Second door on the right," she whimpered.

He hoped like fuck he still had that condom in his wallet. He distinctly recalled seeing it in there a few weeks ago and thinking it was taking up unnecessary space. He better not have taken it out. He sat her on the edge of her bed. He had to taste her. If he didn't have a condom, he could still have that much. He wanted his tongue between her legs.

Her face was flushed as he pulled her tank top off her head. She kicked her sandals off, and John got her out of her shorts and panties. He dropped to his knees in front of her, pressing kisses on the inside of her thighs. "You know I've been imagining doing this since the day I tripped into the water?"

Starr let out a giggle. "I've imagined you doing it since I watched you suck your iced coffee down that day. I was so jealous of that straw. I kept thinking to myself what a lucky straw that was."

He pressed his tongue against her clit, not wanting her to be jealous of that straw any longer. She was everything he

imagined she would be. Sweet. Hot. Tempting. He slid two fingers into her while he worked his tongue against her sweet spot, making her writhe her hips against the bed. He loved the way she moaned and whispered while he did his job.

“Oh, John. Yes. Right there. Don’t stop.”

She clenched around his fingers, clutching his hair tight in her fist while she came all over his tongue. Just the way he wanted.

He stood and took his wallet out of his back pocket, hoping like hell the condom was still there.

“Condom?” she asked breathlessly. John took in the sight of her, propped up on her elbows, her legs dangling from the bed, naked as hell.

“I hope.” He rifled through his wallet and came up empty. “No condom.” He stroked his erection, annoyance bearing down on his chest. Why couldn’t he have been prepared for this? Why hadn’t he thought ahead this morning? Why hadn’t he listened to Judge when Judge was always telling him to be prepared for things like this?

Starr smiled and scooted off the bed, grabbing ahold of him with both of her hands. “I’m creative. There are other things we can do that don’t require a condom.”

He flexed his hips forward into her grip. He enjoyed seeing this naughty side of her come out. Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and he would be a fool not to let her do whatever she had in mind. “Oh yeah? Like what?”

*I hope you’re thinking about blow jobs like I am.*

She continued stroking him in slow movements. She watched his dick like it was the best thing she’d ever seen, and John couldn’t keep the grin off his face.

“I want my mouth on it.” She sucked in her top lip, and John’s knees almost buckled.

He gave her a single nod, unable to speak. How perfect was this woman? It had been so long since a woman had done this to him. Too long. When she licked the tip of him, he



couldn't help the groan that came out of his throat. She continued teasing him like that, stroking him and licking his tip, not quite taking him all the way in. His penance for not having a condom on hand.

She glanced up at him and grinned.

“If you don't put it in, I'm going to,” he threatened.

She rubbed his head against her lips before she took him into her mouth. He sank in deep, his toes curling at the blissful sensation of her around his cock. He'd fucked up by not having a condom, and he didn't deserve this, but damn, did it feel good. Watching her give him this gift was so epic, his heart swelled in his chest. She worked him over, and soon enough he was pulling out of her mouth so he could come.

She didn't stop her hand movements, and John gripped her shoulder to hold himself up. “Oh damn.” His throat was tight, dry. His eyes closed of their own accord, and Starr made sure she squeezed out every last drop from him.

When he blinked his eyes open, she was grinning from ear to ear, sitting on her bed. “It wasn't as good as sex, but I enjoyed it. It's been a *long* time since I've done that.” She put emphasis on the word long, and John couldn't help but laugh.

“You have no idea how amazing that was. Where is the bathroom?”

“Follow me. Let me wash my hands, and then you can have it all to yourself.”

He followed her down the hall and let her go into the bathroom first. She stepped aside, giving him room to pass, but he reached out and locked his arm around her waist. “Kiss me.” He bent down and nibbled her ear.

She giggled. “Whatever you want.”

His heart thundered at those words, and he tried really hard not to put too much stock into what she'd promised. *Whatever he wanted*. When his mouth pressed against hers, he reminded himself not to like her too much because she wouldn't be here for long. Then he repeated the mantra: *Don't get attached. Don't get attached. Don't get attached.*

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## Chapter Nine

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STARR GRABBED her purse and sunglasses and stepped onto the back patio, where her grandparent's personal dock and slips bobbed with the gentle push of waves from the boats entering and exiting the harbor. The water sparkled and begged her to enjoy it. Starr had ample amounts of Dramamine on hand, hoping that she wouldn't get sick on John's yacht. After last night, Starr was anxious to see him and also a tad nervous. If he didn't mind having a short fling for the next week that she would be in town, she should be fine with it too. In fact, she should grab on to this quick-and-easy relationship and enjoy the ride. John was sexy. Nice. He made her laugh. He was ice cream on a stick. Plus, yachting on a Saturday was something she'd only witnessed in romance movies.

A large yacht backed out near the Davenport office buildings. She hadn't yet walked along their side of the harbor, but she assumed their property was made up of docks and one of those extra-large, overwater sheds where they could lift boats into and out of the water. The yacht pushed water aside as it cut slowly through the harbor. Nerves jumped around in her belly. Maybe John would have a condom today.

She wasn't sure what the food situation was on a yacht. John hadn't mentioned anything, so Starr had taken the liberty of packing snacks. Grapes. Crackers. Cheese. Olives. And, of course, she'd brought the rest of the six-pack of beer they'd shared last night. The yacht pulled up to the marina, the gears shifting quietly as it came to a stop. It was big. But it wasn't one of those ultra-lavish boats she'd seen on television or in

the tabloids with famous celebrities on board who were flocking to the Mediterranean for the summer.

She gripped her handbag and picnic basket, hoping that would stop the trembles in her hands. John popped out of the boat wearing a white-collared shirt. His hair was a little windblown, or since it was Saturday, maybe he hadn't taken the time to style it like he normally did. Her heart knocked around in her chest. He was stunning.

“Miss Young, please join me aboard *My Way*.” He extended his hand, and she held her breath as she put her hand in his and stepped off solid land and into his life of luxury.

Safely on two feet, she tilted her head up to John's face, ignoring the mild hurricane in her stomach. He smelled like sunscreen and summer. He looked like heaven. His mouth nipped the side of her neck just below her ear.

“Thank you for joining me today.”

“Thank you for inviting me. I brought snacks.” She held up the picnic basket. *Don't get sick today*. She followed him into the yacht, which was nicer than her condo in Colorado. Everything was polished to a shine. A young woman dressed in a light-blue uniform smiled when they approached. “Mr. Davenport. Miss Young. The captain is ready when you are.”

“Of course,” John said. “Please take this to the galley and let Gianni know we're ready to go. Would you like a tour, Starr?”

“I'd love one. I've never been on something like this before. It's nicer than my condo. How many people do you have working on it right now? I thought you would be driving it.” Starr couldn't help but smile, and she really hoped that her stomach wasn't playing tricks on her. She was nervous, and her stomach dipped and fluttered here and there, but it wasn't to *that* sickness point.

John chuckled at her excitement. “There are just five of us today. If we were going to be out longer, I would have a whole crew on board, but Annaliese is equipped to handle the day. Along with Gianni, the captain, and his first mate, Salvatore,

of course.” He touched her cheek, spreading his thumb over her bottom lip. She licked the tip of his thumb, and he inserted it farther into her mouth, where she licked it again. “You’re going to tease me all day, aren’t you?” he asked.

She pulsed wildly between her legs. He removed his thumb and placed his mouth just a hairbreadth from her lips. “I have big plans for us today, Starr. How many orgasms have you ever had in a row?”

She couldn’t answer him because she couldn’t think. He was invading all of her senses. She vaguely heard the bells from the drawbridge. John let out a growl and pressed his lips to hers. He tasted like a lifetime of happiness she’d been dying to try.

When John broke the kiss, she pressed a hand to her chest. Was she going to be able to survive the next week without falling in love with him? “I... uh.” She blinked. “What was your question?”

John laughed at the dazed and confused look on her face. “Come on. Let me show you around.” He pointed to the back of the yacht. “Swimming platform.” Then he pointed to the bridge. “Up there is where the captain is.” He held out his hand. “Let’s check on the berth. I’m going to show you my cabin. But you have to promise me that you won’t jump my bones.” He chuckled. “At least not yet.”

“I’m not sure I can make it for thirty minutes without getting sick, let alone do those kinds of things with you.”

He leaned in conspiratorially. “You see, I have a big plan that I’m going to cure you of this motion sickness thing, and you’ll feel so good about it that you’ll want to thank me. You’ll want to ravish me with gratitude.”

Starr laughed at his teasing. But he wasn’t wrong. If she could go all day without getting sick, she would devour him. As long as she could avoid thinking about the vessel’s contribution to ruining the plant and sea life in the ocean. She would have to check the statistics later about how many sea creatures get injured by boats. “You know, the stubborn part of me would like to say, ‘Dream on, lover boy.’ But I have to

agree with you. If I don't get seasick on this outing, I would love to cover every square inch of your skin with my tongue." She clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth for good measure. "To the bedroom."

"You don't have to ask twice." He winked. "Plus, you can have a little tour on the way."

They descended the stairs—small lights illuminated each step even though lights also shone down on them. Starr was in awe at the opulence surrounding her. The ship looked like a hotel lobby rather than an actual cruising yacht. White upholstered couches and love seats took up the center of a large room. Her feet sank into the rich white carpeting as she followed John across the room.

In the corner was a large open bar with blue lighting illuminating the bar stools and high-top tables and chairs. Lights were everywhere—reflecting off the glossy, marble countertops of the bar and dazzling back at them from the few mirrors that lined the walls. A grand piano took up the opposite corner—complete with a harp and a microphone. For entertaining, obviously. "So, this is a super yacht? I just saw a brochure inside the marina."

"I'm impressed. That's correct. I did a little reading of my own about yoga moves."

Starr laughed. "Is that so?"

"Yes. Turns out there are a few moves that could be used during sexy times."

Starr laughed again, pretty sure that she knew what moves he was referring to.

He opened a door and stepped inside, and Starr followed him. It was gorgeous. The bed was centered in the room on a platform. Three large square windows were above the bed, and the view of the crystal-blue horizon was breathtaking. "Oh, I get it now. Blue Horizon. That's a great name." The floor was covered in white stone tiles, and three square mirrors lined the opposite side of the room—with the ocean view reflected in

them. There was a desk with two small screens on top and a keyboard and larger monitor.

“My grandfather thought so too.” He opened another door. “The head.”

She got close to him and peeked in, seeing the toilet and shower. Her arm brushed against his chest. “This is so nice. It’s surreal. I mean, I expected it to be dapper, but I didn’t think it was going to be so crazy. I feel like I don’t belong here, it’s so nice.”

John wrapped his arm around her stomach, crushing her against his chest. “You belong wherever I belong.”

His lips nibbled her ear and tugged her lobe between his teeth. He absolutely made her feel like she really did belong. She turned in his embrace and gave him a slow kiss. His hand slid up her back, and she was cocooned in his arms. Her stomach dropped then rolled, and alarm bells screamed in her head. She pulled back. She did not want to throw up on John’s boat. She clenched her teeth as saliva pooled behind her teeth. She breathed long and slow out of her nose, trying to settle the rolling in her stomach.

“You okay? You’re looking a little green.”

She blew out a shaky breath. “I think so. Maybe we should go back up and get some fresh air. Are we far away from Emerald Port already?”

John glanced at his watch. “Not terribly far. Let’s get you upstairs.”

John led her to the saloon and guided her to an overly large white-cushioned seating area. She sat down and sucked in fresh air, but when she caught a glimpse of the wide-open ocean with no land in sight, she stood abruptly. That was the wrong thing to do. “I need... I’m going to be sick.”

She began retching inside a bin that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Her stomach twisted and turned, making her vomiting seem never-ending. She was mortified at getting sick in front of John, but he had pulled her hair up and was holding

it away from her face. She didn't want to chance a look at him, but her heart melted anyway at the gesture.

Her stomach seemed to settle momentarily, and he handed her a wet washcloth. She wiped her mouth and took a shaky breath. So much for their plan to enjoy one another today. She really wanted her body to be okay on the water.

She peeked at him. "I'm sorry. This isn't how I wanted today to be."

"Don't apologize. You have no control over how your body is going to react being back on the water. I'm the asshole for thinking you'd be fine, and I got you sick."

---

"YOU THINK you can make it to the bathroom on your own?" John asked, the guilt of making Starr sick settling heavy in his gut. "Gianni is taking us back to Emerald Port."

"I think so. Thank you."

He was such an asshole to take her out knowing it had the potential to make her ill. But he had really believed the yacht was big enough that she wouldn't know the difference—standing on land or being inside the yacht. It was that way for the majority of people. And most people enjoyed being on the turquoise waters and couldn't get enough of the view. "I'm sorry about this. I didn't know. It wasn't my intention to make you sick."

"How could you have known? It's fine."

He opened the door to the head for her, and she paused, resting her arm against his. "I trust you. I don't blame you for this. It was a trial run. I knew there was a possibility I could puke my guts out." She closed her eyes, and her cheeks turned red, getting some color back in them. "Which was so embarrassing. I'm sorry you had to witness that."

John laughed. "Six siblings. You forget I've seen so much snot, vomit, and other bodily fluids and functions in my life



that a beautiful woman throwing up isn't going to freak me out."

She closed the door gently, and he knocked his head softly against the wall. *What a dick.* He should have thought about staying close to land on their first day out. He really hoped she would take him up on his offer to try again. He wanted to share this with her. Being on the yacht gave him a sense of peace he didn't get on land. *My Way* was his pride and joy, and it was nice to have someone to share it with.

If she could overcome her seasickness.

Because could a man like him marry a woman who wasn't cut out for the sea? He scrubbed a hand over his face. Not really the place or time to think about that, but the conscious mind didn't ever stop, did it? He enjoyed the solitude, silently berating himself while also trying to clear his mind as he waited for Starr.

Eventually, the lock clicked, and Starr emerged from the bathroom, hugging him from behind. "Thanks for being so understanding about it. I love being out here. I love the way it smells, the way it looks. I'm enjoying my time with you. It's just that my body seems to have other ideas. I'd like to overcome it. I know you enjoy being out here."

"So you're saying you'd be okay trying this again sometime? We can do a dinner cruise any night this week if you're free. I have Sunday dinner tomorrow. But I would love to work with you in the hopes that you wouldn't get seasick. I'll research it and see what they recommend about overcoming it."

"Not sure about *that* soon. By the way, what's that like? Sunday dinner. Are some of your siblings married? How does your mom have a big enough table for everyone?"

The yacht stopped. While John didn't mind talking about his family, he wanted to make sure she was okay. "I'll tell you all about Sunday dinner when I'm confident I'm not going to get you sick again."

Gianni had docked at the marina, and John helped Starr off *My Way*. “There you go. Solid ground,” he said. Annaliese handed him the basket Starr had brought with her.

“Would you still like to share a picnic with me?” Starr asked him. “We didn’t eat or even have a drink. But the patio is set up nicely. I may only be able to enjoy some grapes or something, but I don’t want our day to end.”

John’s chest tightened because there were a million reasons he didn’t want this day to end either. Or this week. But there wasn’t a thing he could do about the future. Today, he could take what she was offering and cherish it. “The yacht might be done, but you and I have a full day ahead of us.”

That made her smile, and she held out her hand. “Good. Then we can talk about these yoga moves you researched. I’ll teach you proper form.”

“Lucky me. I get to watch you bend over close up? Hmm. What if I can’t keep my hands off you?”

She lifted one shoulder and gave him a sultry grin. “Looks like that might be a personal problem.” She walked down the path that led to the back door of the cottage, and he let out a groan. He hadn’t felt this carefree in a long time. This damn horny. Shit, just imagining Starr bent over in front of him, like she had been the day they’d met, had his dick hard.

“So, tell me about Sunday dinners,” she said. “I’ve never gotten to experience something like that.”

“There isn’t much to tell. Dad has a strict rule that there is no business talk at the table, so that leaves personal. And there isn’t much to ever talk about with me, so I stay quiet and mind my own business and let everyone else do the talking.”

“I don’t believe for one second you have no personal life.”

“Before you came along this week and wooed me, I’d literally been devoting all of my time to Blue. I have so many ideas for that place. I just hope the time comes where I can utilize them.”

“You make it sound like you don’t have the ability to implement changes.” He took the beer she offered him.

“I don’t. My dad is still in charge and apparently has no plans to retire anytime soon. He thinks the company is doing just fine, so he’s not really interested in any of my ideas for improvement.”

““Why fix what isn’t broken’ kind of thing?”

“Exactly.”

He followed her outside. The sun blazed hot above them. She took a seat beneath the umbrella, and he followed suit. There was a different view of the offices from there. Good, but different. “I don’t get to enjoy the waves, but the water view is perfect enough.” She nodded toward Blue Horizon’s offices. “What are all the things you want to change at Blue?”

“We’ve all got ideas; it’s not just me. We need to update our look, starting with a new logo. Then Jersey—he’s the brainy tech guy—has some great ideas about upgrades to the control system we currently install. Judge, he’s the jokester; I think I mentioned him before. Well, he races, and he thinks we should build up our brand outreach by offering sponsorships.” He paused and took a sip of his beer. She was easy to talk to. He could feel the knots unraveling inside his mind just by speaking his thoughts aloud. He knew she wouldn’t judge him. She wouldn’t raise her eyebrows and immediately identify and point out the small dysfunctions within the family. “As for my sisters, for the most part, they don’t really care. They’re still young. They aren’t thinking about business yet, but they’re all smart, and when they turn their attention to Blue, if I’m in charge, I’ll be open to listening and considering their suggestions. You can bet they’ll have fresh ideas when the time comes.”

“I get that. I always imagine that someone with such a successful company has to be able to listen to ideas and make the necessary changes. From a business owner standpoint, if someone came along and told me that yoga was becoming more popular due to one reason or another, I would at least research that and take it into account.”

“I have no doubt you would, but if someone came to you and said you should change your logo, you probably wouldn’t

be as understanding. I get my dad's point of view. He has seven kids who all have an opinion about Blue and over forty employees who also have an opinion. It's not like he can listen to everyone and make rash decisions."

"But you're his son. The future king. He should at least listen to you."

*Exactly.* "Have I told you it's nice talking to you?"

"Have I told you how handsome you look?"

"I don't think you have." John stood and knelt in front of Starr, pushing her legs apart so he could kneel between them. The muscles in her legs made his mouth water. Her perfectly sculpted legs that went on for days. Legs he wanted wrapped around himself. "You have a great body." He trailed a finger along the inside of one of her thighs, creating a path of goose bumps in its wake.

"I'm going to miss your compliments when I go back home."

He slid his finger up higher against her thigh and slipped another finger under her shorts.

"You're moving into dangerous territory," she said.

He glanced around the harbor, knowing full well they couldn't do anything out here. Anyone who sailed by or looked out an office window would see exactly what they were doing. "If your stomach is feeling better, might I interest you in coming to my condo? I'd love to show you the view."

She placed her finger under her chin, pretending like she was thinking about it. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be."

"Good. Because remember when I asked you how many times in a row you've come?"

"Yes."

"We're going to set a new personal best for you this afternoon."

## Chapter Ten

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JOHN'S CONDO was decorated in tones of blue and green, which did a great job of matching his eye color. Floor-to-ceiling windows took up the whole living room wall. The view was stunning, the broad expanse of the sea spread out beyond the window. John wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her against his chest.

"I've been dying to have your legs wrapped around me like this," he whispered against her mouth. He took a few steps and set her on the edge of his kitchen table.

"Here?" she asked.

"Absolutely here. So every morning when I eat breakfast, I'll be reminded of eating you. Of sliding my dick into you. Of how you look when you orgasm."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "The question is whether or not you have a condom this time."

"Oh, baby. I bought the store out."

She giggled, and John nuzzled the side of her neck, biting her and sucking on her skin. He was being tender and sweet, and she hated to think about ever having to leave. When his hands slid up her thighs, he let out a low groan into her mouth. "So soft."

His hands left goose bumps along her skin when they slid down her arms and to her thighs. He popped open the button on her shorts and wiggled them down her legs. When he pressed his nose between her thighs and tickled her, she

laughed. John was definitely a man with experience, and her body was attuned to his every move.

He pulled her to the edge of the table and sat in the chair, looking up at her like he couldn't wait to feast. "All mine, Starr. The rest of this week, it's going to be hard for you to want to leave."

His fingers slipped inside her panties, and her head fell back at the skilled way his fingers teased her clitoris. It was the perfect pace, pulling her to the edge only for him to slow down and pull her back to safety. When she propped herself up to watch him, he was laser focused on the job at hand. His arm muscles were taut, his heavy-lidded gaze was on her, and she was almost jealous of how his teeth got to gnaw on his lips. "Let's get these off you."

He pulled her panties off, sliding them slowly down her legs while he held her gaze. For the next five minutes, she allowed herself the freedom to pretend that John was hers and this was their condo that they shared together. "Is it crazy to feel so, so connected to you?" With his fingers inside her and his tongue lapping against her clit, she pretended that she had access to John whenever she wanted. That this amazing man was a big part of her new life.

A life where she was no longer alone and with a man who supported the woman she was. Where it was okay for her heart to have feelings because she knew she could trust John. When he bit down on her clit, sending vibrations across her pelvis, it had her gripping the edge of the table and crying out her orgasm.

"Not at all. Come on. Put your arms around my neck." John hoisted her noodle-like limbs off the table and carried her down the hallway to his bedroom.

The two of them moved quickly to take off the rest of their clothes, and John sheathed himself with a condom and pressed into her entrance. Her breath caught in her throat when he filled her. He moved with care, and for about the millionth time that day, her heart did a weird little flip-flop.

“You feel amazing,” he whispered against her neck. “This is something to treasure. You could always make a life here.”

She clenched around him, the fire building between her legs before it turned into an explosion that rocked her world more than any orgasm she’d ever had. “John.”

He groaned against her mouth, and then he, too, orgasmed, whispering her name as his movements slowed to a stop. Had he realized what he’d said to her about making a life here? The scary part was why the idea intrigued her so much. He went into his en suite bathroom to dispose of the condom. He came back and lay next to her on the bed again.

“It wasn’t as bad as you thought, sleeping with a Davenport. Was it?”

Starr twirled his chest hair with her fingertips. “Not bad at all. It was exactly what the doctor ordered.” She leaned up on one elbow. “Tell me about these yoga moves you researched.”

When John laughed, his chest vibrated against her hand. “I learned about Downward Dog and Sun Salutations—that’s what you were doing on the docks that day, right?”

“Hmm. Before you fell into the water?” she teased.

“That would be correct.”

“So, are you going to let me teach you some poses?”

“Are you going to let me watch you do them naked?”

Starr bit her lip and moved her hand down his torso, following the path of hair that trailed beyond his V-line. “Only if I get to watch you do them naked. Tit for tat.” She trailed her fingers down his already growing erection and gripped his balls, squeezing them gently. “How does that sound, neighbor?”

“Keep touching me like that, and you’ll get to have whatever your heart desires.”

She opened her hands and gripped his base, slowly stroking him up and down. His erection was thick and solid in her grip. A small amount of liquid came out of his tip, and she used her thumb to smear it around the head of his cock.

“You ready for round two, Miss Young?”

“If we’re going to break records today, we better get a move on.”

---

JOHN’S ERECTION was breaking records for world’s longest one while watching Starr bend over in front of his bedroom windows. She was true to her word and was staying entirely without clothes while she taught him some yoga moves. The problem was that she was a great teacher, and he was a horrible student. He hadn’t been able to focus on a single word she’d said.

“John?”

He blinked, trailing his gaze from her ankles, over the curve of her ass, and then to her face. “What?”

“Are you listening to anything I’m saying?” She dropped to her chest.

“Oh yeah. I’m watching everything you’re saying.”

She laughed, and John moved over to the windows to where she was perched on her chest on top of one of his foam exercise pads. Thank God he hadn’t gotten rid of those. “You’re supposed to be listening so you learn good form.”

He knelt behind her and slid his palm across the curve of her spine, loving the way she was so freaking defined. She had muscles in all the right places a woman should have them, and the idea of having a partner who valued a commitment to health and wellness the same way he did was intriguing. Even if he hated being dragged to the gym, the second he started working out, he was happy to be there.

“Are we quitting so soon? You’ve barely mastered Warrior Pose.”

“Get onto your knees, Starr. All fours.”

She did as she was told while he stroked his erection. How could a man not enjoy this view? He could wake up to



watching her do this every day for the rest of his life.

“What pose is this?” He leaned forward and kissed her left butt cheek. He left a wet trail from that cheek, made the dip in her valley between both cheeks, then bit the right one.

“This is Cow Pose.” She pressed her ass against his mouth, and he couldn’t help the grin because *Cow Pose*? Of course this was Cow Pose.

“Do you think cows do this?” He leaned forward and placed his mouth over her lips, sliding his tongue along her seam. She let out a soft moan, and he licked her again, but instead of stopping, he flicked his tongue up and down against her lips, pressing his tongue into her opening.

He spread her cheeks apart, exposing both of her glorious holes. “What about this?” he murmured against her skin. His tongue traveled from her wet heat up and over the smooth expanse of skin where he twirled his tongue along her puckered spot. She went down onto her elbows, perching her ass in the air for him while he licked her like a thirsty man.

He pressed a finger into her pussy. When she moaned, it was a mix between a growl and a purr. He hooked his finger up against the wall of her pussy while his tongue danced along her sweet rim. He squeezed her perfectly sculpted ass in his hands. He wanted to devour this woman. Make her his. Mark her as his own.

He pulled his finger from her and smiled when she let out a small, disapproving mewl. “Don’t stop.”

He licked his way back down to her clit and sucked the hard bead into his mouth, circling her tight opening above with his finger. His cock pounded mercilessly while she writhed beneath his touch. He flicked his tongue against her skin one last time before he pulled back and inserted two fingers into her. “Rub your clit. Rub it fucking hard. I want to fuck you with my fingers while you make yourself come.”

Her hand slipped between her legs, where she slid them over her clit until she gasped, clenching around his fingers. He slowed his movement and watched her through the waves of

her orgasm. He opened his mouth, and his saliva dripped between the crease of her butt, coating her tight hole, mesmerizing him. He sheathed himself in a condom and began sliding the head of his cock along her still-trembling pussy.

“Oh, John. Again? I don’t think I can take much—”

He thrust into her balls deep, gripping her lush ass with his hands and holding on so tight his fingertips burned. “You can take it.” He groaned. He stayed like that for a second, giving himself time to get used to her tightness before he started moving slowly. He rimmed her puckered skin with his thumb before he slipped it into her tight entrance. She moaned louder.

“Is that okay?” He couldn’t help the smile on his face. Or the fact that his ego was flying high on having both of her holes filled with him. “Lean back toward me. I want my mouth on you.”

She pushed up so her back was almost flush with his front, and he captured her mouth with his, pushing his tongue as far inside as he could.

All holes.

“Keep touching yourself.” He pressed her forward back onto her hands. He thrust hard and fast, still holding her tight.

“You’re proud of yourself, aren’t you? Don’t think I don’t know what you just did there.”

“For touching you everywhere?”

She squeezed around him, making his dick pulse with his impending orgasm.

“Yes.” Her words were clipped, and she buried her face into her arm. She quaked around his dick, and John followed right behind her. His blood thundered in his ears. How had he gone so long without this feeling of utter satisfaction? Of feeling like he was in the right place?

John slid out of her and helped her stand. He could see her chest trembling with each breath she took, and his knees felt like they may have officially gotten into the territory of *I’m too old for this shit*. “Shower?”

“It’s the middle of the day.”

“Lucky me.” John closed his hand around hers and led her into his bathroom. He grabbed three towels and turned the shower on for them. Once it heated, he stepped inside and held out his hand to her.

Neither of them said a word, and John took the liberty of putting shampoo and conditioner in her hair. His insides clenched with the thought of her leaving. He knew her stay in Emerald Port was temporary, but he hadn’t anticipated liking her this much. Meshing with her so well. Once the last suds of conditioner were rinsed from her head, he used his bar of soap and made a lather.

“Oh, I see what you’re doing here.” She pointed to his soapy hands. “Getting a handful.”

“Guilty as fucking charged. I can’t seem to keep them off you.” He paused, hoping she was into this as much as he was.

“I don’t want you to.” She circled his wrists and placed his hands over her shoulders, and he started from there, washing her body all the way to her toes. “I could get used to this.”

“Have you ever thought about water yoga?” he blurted out, his voice echoing against the tiles of the shower.

“What do you mean?”

“Like on a paddleboard. People would kill for something like that here.”

She shook her head. And he stayed silent, because it was almost as if they both knew what he wasn’t saying. *You could stay here. You could be happy. We could be happy together.* He washed his hair and grabbed his bar of soap. Starr’s hand pressed into his wrist, and she held her hand out.

He placed the soap in her hand. “You’re going to wash me, too, huh?”

“With pleasure.” Instead of making a lather in her hands, she pressed the bar against his collarbone and started moving it slowly over his shoulders and arms. She did his chest and

stomach, dipping the bar dangerously close to his fast-growing erection.

She bent down and did each of his legs, and his groan broke the silence while he watched her head move precariously close to his dick. But she apparently had other ideas because she wouldn't look up to meet his gaze. She teased him like that, rubbing the soap across the tops of his feet, her head brushing his dick just a little bit when she moved to the other leg.

He played along, clenching his fists against his thighs so he wouldn't haul her to her feet and finish this game she was playing. Finally, she stood and smiled, her eyes lit with mischief. "Turn around."

He did as he was told and waited while she set the soap down and her palms cascaded across his back and torso. And over his ass, where she gave him two good squeezes before she rested her hands on his hips. Slowly, her hands moved to the front of him, her fingers threading through his pubic hair. She took a step forward, and he could feel her nipples against his back. When her hands edged around his cock, his breath caught in his throat. Her small hand holding him was sexy as hell.

"Is this what you were getting at?" he asked.

Her teeth grazed his back, and her other hand cupped his balls while she continued stroking him. "I want you to come like this."

The water sluiced across John's chest, making rivulets that dropped to her hands and disappeared. He enclosed his larger hand over hers and applied just a bit more pressure. He held on to her like that, and the two of them worked together. Back and forth beneath the spray. Every now and then her tongue and teeth would graze his back. His breathing got shorter, his legs tight with tension.

He appreciated that it wasn't his hand guiding hers. They were working together. She might even be taking the lead. Her hand moved of her own accord under his, pumping his cock in the tempo he'd set, and she kept the right pressure long

enough that his balls tightened beneath her other hand, and the strain nearly crippled him.

As if sensing that he was close to a release, she stroked him faster. He let go, hands bracing against the tile while she pumped him over the edge. His groan was feral, and her teeth grazed his back, her breath hot against his spine. He chuckled, unable to fully uncurl his fingers and toes. Jesus fucking Christ, when was the last time someone had jacked him off like that?

“That was intense,” she said.

He closed his eyes and let the spray beat over his face. Starr’s hands moved to his hips, and he immediately hated the lost sensation of her cupping him, holding him, being pressed against him. “It was,” he managed to reply.

“I’m going to get dressed. I better head back to my place.”

He swallowed. He didn’t want her to go, but what could he say? He’d already said too much by bringing up the yoga on paddleboards. She wasn’t going to stay, and there wasn’t much he could do about it. It wasn’t like they had even dated longer than a few days. Plus, he had so much crap on his plate that adding a girlfriend wouldn’t fit into his plans. He shut the water off and stepped out of the shower after her, still feeling the effects of what she’d done to him.

“I can drive you over,” he said.

“No. It’s fine. I need the fresh air.” She glanced out his bedroom window. “I need to think. I need a Realtor so the property can get all sorted out for when it comes out of the trust.” She got onto her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “That way, I’m not wasting any more time, and we can both get on with our lives.”

## Chapter Eleven

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“WE CAN SELL this in a day. Stat.” Rowan McNeal, the Realtor, snapped his fingers, and Starr jerked in response. He was all too eager to meet on a Sunday, but she had assumed that Realtors were never off the clock. He was shorter than she was with jet-black hair and teeth that were as straight as they were white. She hadn’t liked him from the moment he stepped out of his flashy Mercedes Benz and tapped his watch face reminding her that *time was money*, but she was at the point that she needed to get something done. She needed to get back to her studio and open at full capacity. Let her landlord know that she wanted the second bay.

“You think the condition is okay?” she asked.

“In this market, the condition doesn’t matter as much as the location. It doesn’t look a day over fifty anyway. I have a few friends who own boats. I’ll have them pull the boats into the dock spots, we’ll take a few pictures, and when the official listing hits the market, boom! It’ll make this place look hoppin’.”

Starr’s gut churned at the thought—at the fact that this guy was moving much too quickly for her. According to him, they’d get it under contract within a week, and yes, she wanted her share, but not this fast. It was all just happening a little too quickly. “You know, I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves. I simply wanted an opinion. I’m not signing any contract with anyone today. In fact, I have more Realtors who

will be meeting me this afternoon, and I owe it to them to listen to what they have to say.”

Rowan shook his head. “Trust me, trust me. You won’t want to waste your time worrying about the financial part. Your job is to make it look pretty.”

Starr bit her cheek. Her job was to make the marina look pretty? Who did he think he was talking to? She took a step toward him. She towered over him.

His hand breezed through the air. “You’re a woman. You worry about cleaning the inside here and decorating it. I will worry about selling it. Making you the money it deserves.”

“I actually don’t think that’s necessary.” She put a hand to her hip. “You can leave. I won’t be needing your help after all.”

“Starr, let me be the man you need to make this sale happen. I can provide you with—”

“No. No. No.” She sucked in a breath, hoping that she wouldn’t hit him. “I’m done. Your condescending attitude is way more than I need. Goodbye.”

Well, that had been a disaster. Gravel spewed behind the tires of the Mercedes while Rowan rolled out of the marina. Her stomach clenched awkwardly because she didn’t want this. Did she? She should be worried about being gone from the studio so long. Was Kareen finally nailing down the Eagle Pose that she’d been practicing before Starr left her yoga studio? Was Richard finally feeling assured that no one was checking out his balls while he did Downward Dog? What had happened to the simple life she’d led when she didn’t have to worry about this damn marina? But they hadn’t crossed her mind once. The worst part was, what had happened to her?

Now it felt like her heart belonged here. Like it was a little more involved than it needed to be. She was catching feelings. For the marina and for John. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. The marina had always held a special place in her heart, and she’d been prepared to hand it over as needed. But the truth was, now that she was here, she was reliving her summers

with her grandparents and sister, recalling the many times she'd helped tie up boats to the docks and how Nana would always make homemade lemonade. The way the kitchen still smelled like lemons even after all this time. And how no one but her ever managed to avoid the creaks from the chairs when sitting at the dining room table. The marina was wrapping around her heart like an intrusive vine.

“Ugh. I hate that I care so much.” She kicked a pebble in the parking lot, and a new idea formed in her mind. It was too expensive to hire anyone to bring the marina up-to-date, but she couldn't keep looking at it so sad and unloved.

She had some money of her own she could spend, and if she had to cancel her flight for Friday again, then so be it. She could stay a little longer and do whatever needed to be done. The next Realtor wasn't arriving for another hour, so after a quick call to Lyle asking to borrow his truck and a ladder, Starr made her way to the neighborhood paint store, where she purchased masking tape, a tarp, and the paint she needed to begin painting the welcome center. The man assured her she would need a variety of brushes to scrape away chipping paint as well as a variety of actual paintbrushes and rollers.

She loaded up her paint and supplies in the back of Lyle's truck and made it back to the marina at the same time the second Realtor was pulling into the parking lot. Starr could already tell that this woman was nice. She smiled and gave a short wave before she got out of her car. Her hair swung back and forth across her shoulders, giving her a look that said she meant business but in a nice way. Starr approved.

“You must be Starr Young.” The woman put her hand out. “I'm Deanne Woods. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. Thank you for being able to meet me on short notice, especially on a Sunday.”

“Oh, it's fine. I'm a Realtor. I'm used to meeting at random times of the day. And when you told me the location, I was intrigued. The marina is a huge staple in the area.”

*Oh, brownie points for Deanne.* “Well, it was. Unfortunately, there isn't anyone to run it now, and it's really



been going downhill these past few years. Lyle, the caretaker, is unable to put in the necessary work this place needs.”

“I gathered that when I heard about his diagnosis. I can’t say I blame him.”

“Um, Lyle’s diagnosis? For what?” Had she missed something in her conversations with Lyle because she’d been so focused on getting to the marina and dealing with all the heartache that had come next?

Deanne gave Starr a sympathetic look. “Lung cancer. He’s stage IV, and as far as I know, he is treating it the natural way.” Deanne put air quotes around the word “natural,” and it dawned on Starr that Lyle wasn’t seeking treatment.

“Oh.” Her face heated with the embarrassment of not knowing. “I had no idea.”

“I’m sorry that you found out from me. A stranger. Knowing Lyle’s character, I bet he probably didn’t want to burden you with yet another issue while you are down here trying to go through the property.”

Starr swallowed, unable to quite comprehend what the hell was happening. Lyle having what sounded like terminal cancer. Her grandparents being gone. The property that had a lifelong grip on her heart. And John. She couldn’t form the right words to say what she was feeling.

“I really feel horrible about this. Let’s go sit. You look like you need a drink. I just assumed that you knew, being that everyone else knows.” Deanne guided Starr across the uneven asphalt and under the overhang of the marina. She pushed Starr toward the wrought-iron bench. “Sit.”

“Gosh, for being so tiny and nice, you’re sure bossy,” Starr said.

Next thing she knew, Deanne was pressing a cold bottle of water into her hands. “Drink.”

“Now you’re a Realtor turned therapist.”

Deanne sat down next to Starr on the bench. “Wouldn’t be the first time. I deal with so much crap from people nowadays.

It's why I'm selling my coffee shop. My husband and I are moving to Arizona." Deanne snorted. "I need a break."

"You're a Realtor, and you own a coffee shop?" Starr thought about the distance between Arizona and Florida. "Why move all the way to Arizona? Won't you miss this place?"

"Sure. But I was born and raised in Phoenix. And man, do I miss it. Our family is there. Our daughter is attending ASU. Life will be good."

"I feel horrible that I didn't know about Lyle. I take it since you're interested in listing the marina for me, you're not leaving any time in the next couple of weeks?"

"July. So we still have time."

They talked business, and Starr was happy with what she was being told. "Great." It was settled. "We better get the paperwork signed then. I'm going to paint the outside of the welcome center these next few days. If I need to postpone my trip back to Colorado, I can, but I'd rather not because I need to have a meeting with my landlord. Do you have any suggestions for me?"

Deanne stood. "Let's take a walk around the property. I'll make a few notes. I have a guy who does cheap work. He owes me one. If there is something that I think really needs to be fixed before we list, hopefully he can get it done."

They walked around the property, and Starr showed Deanne the interiors of The Shipwreck, The Beach House, and The Seaside Store. Deanne scribbled on her clipboard and asked questions about who was renting the two slips that had boats docked and how much income that generated. Sadly, it wasn't much, and the money had already been paid up front for a year's lease, which meant her parents had probably spent it.

"Thanks for coming out," Starr said when the tour was over. "It was nice to meet you."

Deanne shoved her clipboard and purse into the front seat of her car. "My pleasure. Come into the coffee shop sometime."

I'm just right over there." Deanne pointed to the coffee shop where Starr had gone with John.

"Oh, I've been there already. Love the cucumber smoothie. I'll definitely see you in there."

"I'm not there all the time, but text me when you do come, and I can meet you for a drink sometime."

"I will do that." Starr glanced back to the marina. Shit, she had a lot of freaking work to do. Who had thought she could paint this place all by herself? Oh, right. She had. "I better get to work. You can bring the papers anytime."

Deanne pulled Starr in for a brief hug. "Again, I'm sorry about the Lyle thing. Let me know if you need anything."

"I will."

Once Deanne was gone, Starr unloaded her supplies from the truck and changed clothes. It was still early, and she was determined to spend the rest of Sunday painting.

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THE SECOND JOHN walked into his parents' house, he smelled lasagna. His mouth watered instantly. His mom stood bent over the oven, with an oven mitt covering her right hand. Reed, Raven, and Ruby stood on the other side of the kitchen island, cackling about something that had happened to them Friday night.

"Can one of you girls get the salad from the fridge?" Mom asked.

"Smells great in here," John said.

"Would you expect anything less?" Ruby sassed.

"No, I wouldn't." He kissed their mom on the cheek. "You made my favorite."

"Favorite food for her favorite child." Reed rolled her eyes.

“I don’t favor any of you over the other. I knew Johnny would enjoy this today.” She gave a pointed look at Reed. “Next week, I’ll make something you like.”

“Yuck.” John gagged. “Bacon-wrapped scallops. I’ll be busy that Sunday.”

Mom hit him with the oven mitt. “You will not. The guys are in the living room. I guess there’s something on the television about racing.”

John hadn’t heard Judge mention anything about a race. If there was a race somewhere, why wasn’t Judge there? “Where’s the race?”

“Not sure.” She pulled a stack of plates from the cupboard and handed them to John. “Set the table with these on your way, please.”

John put his hands up. “Can’t someone else do it?”

Mom pursed her lips. “Now.”

What was it with moms and the way they said the word *now*? It still had the effect of making him feel like an errant child even though he was thirty-two. He took the plates from her hands.

“Mom, where’s another bottle of wine? I brought a white because I was sure you had a red, but I can’t find anything,” Raven said.

“In the pantry. There’s a big box on the floor. I think there’s only one left.”

John took the plates and set them down quickly on the table. He could hear Judge and Jersey arguing about one of the boats failing to make the line. He glanced at the TV when he walked into the living room. Dad and Jake sat on the couch, idly paying attention. Jake was scrolling on his phone, and Jersey and Judge were sitting on the floor in front of the TV. “You guys are arguing about a rerun? This was, what? 2014?”

“That’s all we could find to watch.”

“Dinner’s ready, guys. Come on.” Mom’s voice rang loudly from the other room, and Dad immediately flipped the

TV off, giving his brothers another chance to complain.

Once their dad was out of the room, Judge, Jersey, and Jake crowded John in the hall. “How’s the girl?” Jersey asked.

He didn’t expect to get away today without being asked about Starr, but come on. Did it have to be the first thing out of his brother’s mouth? “She’s fine.” When Judge continued to give him a probing look, John clenched his jaw. “What do you want me to say?”

“*My Way* was gone yesterday,” Judge said. “But not for very long. What happened?”

Jersey pulled out his phone. “I could give you the exact nautical miles and time it went out in just a second.”

John grabbed Jersey’s phone and growled. “Stop. There is no need. She gets—hold your breath ’cause this is crazy—she gets sick from being on the water.”

All three of his brothers stared at him like he was a vampire walking around in daylight. The silence continued. Not a single one of his brothers blinked.

“Boys?” Their mom broke the silence.

“You’re dating someone who gets seasick?” Jake asked.

John shrugged. He pointed to the dining room. “None of you better bring this up in there.”

Judge rolled his eyes and went in first.

“Gosh, are you guys deaf?” Ruby asked, her hands outstretched and ready for prayer. They all ignored her and took their seats at the table.

The last thing John needed was to have a freaking conversation about Starr Young at the dinner table. His heart thundered inside his chest at the thought that one of his brothers might bring her up to their parents. Luckily for him, he was an adult and didn’t have to tell them about her. If only he could will his brothers to keep their mouths shut.

He held hands with Reed on his left and Dad to his right for the blessing. He closed his eyes, and Dad cleared his

throat. “Dear Father, thank you for this meal you have provided for us. Thank you for gracing us with the life you believe we’re destined for and allowing us to share our love and our time with you and one another. Amen.”

John didn’t pray except on Sundays, and he was always surprised at the way the words hit him directly in his solar plexus. “Amen.” Starr was at the center of his mind while everyone went about filling their plates. He grabbed two slices of garlic bread, and when Mom gave him a look, he gave her a smile.

He worried about being named CEO and wanted to bring it up, but no business talk was permitted at Sunday dinner. Which really seemed ludicrous, and he decided then and there to make a motion to change that. Just as he went to open his mouth, Jake beat him to it.

“Are we going to need to start planning a retirement party for you, Dad?”

Mom beamed at the idea. “I would love it if you girls helped plan something, and then your dad and I will be taking a long trip.” She put her arm on Dad’s forearm. “That African safari you’ve always wanted to take is waiting for us.”

The tension was thick. Everyone was waiting for their dad to say something. John knew his first reaction would be to brush off the idea and claim the decision was work related. When that happened, their mother spoke up.

“Oh poo. It’s not work related. What is it, John? You and I have worked hard all our lives. We deserve this. We are not getting any younger.” Mom’s eyes darted around the long table, briefly landing on each of her children. She tugged on Dad’s arm, willing him to look at her. “You have seven more-than-capable children whom you’ve shown the way. Trust them, John. Let’s get away.”

John looked away from their mother. The ache in her eyes shredded his heart. All his siblings were gazing down at their food except Judge. He was staring directly at their dad. The vein in Judge’s neck throbbed.

“Sure, honey,” Dad said. “We can talk about it later.”

“No, Dad. Talk about it now.” Judge’s voice spewed anger. He was apparently just as tired of their dad being non-committal about his potential retirement as John was.

“This is none of your business,” Dad said. “When I’m ready, I will take the trip. I’m not ready.”

“Horseshit.” Judge laughed. “You’ll never be ready.”

Their dad threw his napkin down. “Don’t you use that language at the dinner table. I will decide when I’m ready to leave Blue. No one else.”

“Fine. I’ll go to Africa on my own,” Mom said. “I’m tired, John. I’m tired of waiting for life. Name John CEO so we can get on with it.”

“If you don’t, I’m finding a new job.” John bit his lower lip. Shit. He hadn’t planned on saying that. Everyone stared at him in silence for a moment before starting to talk over one another.

Their dad slammed his fist on the table. “Enough!”

Everyone stopped talking. Their mother looked like she was about to cry, and although it gutted John to see her like that, he was glad this discussion was finally happening. It wasn’t all about him. It was about Mom. His sisters and brothers. Dad. Their family. Dad turned to him. His blue eyes burned fury, but John was over it at this point.

“I’m serious.” Somewhere between the drive here and sitting down at the table, he’d resolved that his heart was at Blue, but he wasn’t going to continue out his days being a second thought. “My heart is with Blue. It will always be with Blue. Everyone stop looking at me like I’m crazy.” Judge was the only one nodding in agreement. “If you want to continue running the company, Dad, God bless you. I respect that. If you aren’t ready to retire and travel with Mom, that’s your prerogative. I’m freaking thirty-two. I have to start doing what’s best for me.”

“I-I—” For the first time in a long time, Dad stammered. “I don’t know what to say. Knowing that you’re so eager to

leave, how could I retire now? How could I trust that you won't get into the position and decide it isn't for you?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Judge growled.

"Judge!" Mom cried.

"No, Mom." Judge turned to their dad. Everyone had stopped eating, and Ruby wouldn't look up from her plate. "Why do you always want to twist what you're being told? Dad, you didn't even answer the initial question. Why aren't you retiring? Spit it out."

Their dad's face was a mixture of concern and anger. "Is this my ultimatum? What if I don't go anywhere? Will the rest of you quit too?"

Their mom sniffed. "You are getting out of control."

Like the twins they were, Reed and Jake backed their chairs from the table and stood at the same time. It was weird telepathy shit, but the family was used to it at this point. "We'll quit," they said in unison, even punctuating the *T* with the same cadence and timing.

John sucked in a deep breath. The admiration on the faces of the twins was enough to make him want to cry.

"Then quit," Dad said. "I'm not going to be edged out of my own damn company."

One by one, all of John's siblings pushed back their chairs and stood in solidarity with him.

"I'll quit," Raven said.

"Me too," Jersey said.

"Why are you making us do this, Pops? Just retire already." Judge folded his arms across his chest.

Even Ruby was standing, but she was so timid, it was hard to hear her when she quietly added, "Me too."

John nodded. "Thanks, guys." He swallowed the lump in his throat. "It's not necessary. I appreciate it—"



Their mom pushed her chair back and stood, once again darting her eyes around the table to her kids. Their dad stared at her, no emotion on his face. “Consider this my final request to you, John,” she said. “It’s time. If not, I will be traveling for the next few months.”

John gave their mom a slight nod. *Go, Mom. You can do this.*

Their mom cleared her throat. “With or without you.”

Judge began chanting. “Do it, do it, do it.” Leave it to Judge to find a way to break the tension. Their mother looked hopeful and their dad... looked miserable. What the fuck was his actual problem?

Some of the girls started clapping and wooing. “Come on, Dad. This is your time to shine. Have fun. Live your life with Mom.”

An unreadable expression crossed their dad’s face before he finally put his hands on the table and hoisted himself up. The entire family started cheering. Even John did a few slow claps. Their father turned to him. “I would hate to have you ever think about leaving Blue. I know you will do it right.”

“Apologize to him,” their mother said to their father.

Dad held out his hand for a shake. “I’m sorry that I put doubt in your mind that I didn’t have enough faith in you to run the business. Please, let’s make it known at the meeting that you’re taking over. We can spend this week getting everything set up.”

John hated the emotions he was experiencing. He was elated, no doubt. He was bursting with excitement at the possibilities of what was to come. But if he was honest, it didn’t entirely seem real. Where was the other shoe that was going to drop? He had to push the thought away. If John Davenport Jr. was anything, he was a man of his word.

Dad squeezed his hand, and John squeezed back in a show of emotion between the two of them. John met Mom’s loving gaze and winked, letting the tension leave his body. “It looks like you can plan a retirement party after all.”

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## Chapter Twelve

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STARR'S HEART was bursting at the seams. She wouldn't be surprised if John could hear it beating from his penthouse condo. She snapped a picture of her handiwork. Even when she'd opened her yoga studio in Boulder and worked on changing the layout, she hadn't felt this euphoric feeling. She'd actually accomplished something. Sure, it'd taken up all of her Sunday, but what else was she going to do?

She'd only managed to get half of the front of the marina painted in the same vivid blue it had been since she was a kid. She had a long-ass way to go, but if she focused, she would be able to do it. She set down the supplies inside the lobby. She would have to work from sunup to sundown, but she was confident that she could get it done.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text. She thought it might be from John but was happy to see it was from Deanne.

Deanne: My handyman will come and work on the docks tomorrow, if you don't mind. I think that's the biggest thing that needs to be addressed.

**Starr:** That's great. I'll be here all day. Thanks.

Had the people of Emerald Port always been so generous? Had she had an awakening since the last time she was here a few years ago? Or had she matured enough to recognize the value of community? Either way, she was grateful that Deanne was sending someone over to look at the docks. It would be nice to advertise that the slips were available for rent. In a

place like Emerald Port where boats were plentiful, it didn't seem like it would be too hard to get the slips leased.

Another selling point, if she'd ever heard one. *Marina for sale with rented slips*. That would be the best thing. It would give her peace of mind when she sold, knowing that the new buyers would still use the property as a marina and not tear it down and put in high-rises. Life would be easier if she could sell the marina to John. She hadn't broached the idea with her parents, but they'd probably refuse to sign off on a sale to a Davenport.

She took a quick shower, and while the hot water warmed her body, annoyance at her parents stewed in her belly. Funny thing was that as much as her grandparents didn't like the Davenport family, it seemed like they would have appreciated the love and respect John had for this area. If John bought the marina, it would be in excellent hands. He'd already told her he wanted to get it up and running. He was passionate about it.

And it wasn't like she would be giving it away.

She shut the water off and hopped out, checking her phone to see if he'd sent her a message.

**John:** You missed a great family dinner.

She laughed out loud.

**Starr:** I did? Do tell.

Her phone rang, and John's name flashed on the screen. "Hey there."

"I didn't catch you at a bad time, did I?" His husky voice sent electric volts through her veins. "You're not in a compromising Downward Dog position, are you?"

She laughed and tucked her towel closer to her chest to keep it from falling. "No Downward Dog for me. I just got out of the shower." He let out a low groan, and she smiled. "I painted all day."

"Is that right? What did you paint?"

"The Beach House. I painted the outside front. I got the first half done and plan to do the other half tomorrow. I figure

if I can devote my days to painting, the financial burden on me will be less, and it will make the property that much more enticing for buyers.”

“That is true. Did you paint all by yourself?” he asked.

“Of course, all by myself. Who else is going to help me?” She lay on her bed and put him on speakerphone. “Besides, I’m not entirely comfortable with the crowdfunding thing, and by doing this, it’s helping buyer, seller, and community all around.”

“I’ll come and help. I can take the day off tomorrow.”

“No. I don’t need your help. That’s kind of you to offer, but I got this.” She was dying to know how his dinner went. “What did your mom make for dinner?”

He growled like he knew she was purposely changing the subject. She was. She didn’t need his help to paint. It would be fine if he showed up just to say hello because she always wanted to see him, but she wasn’t going to let him work.

“Mom made lasagna. Food was great. But everything else was a shit show.”

“Oh no. Why?” She cringed. Had he told his family about her?

“Oh, because my dad was making a big fuss about retiring, and everyone agreed that he needed to commit to retiring. I told him I’d have to move on if he didn’t.”

“And that got his attention, I bet.”

“I don’t know if that got his attention as much as when all of my brothers and sisters stood with me in solidarity.”

“No way!” She gasped. “They did not.”

“Yeah. They all said they were going to quit if my dad didn’t announce his retirement.” There was a little bit of rustling on his end. “My mom was crushed. I’m tired of seeing her that way. She gave him an ultimatum, for sure.”

“Seriously? Wow. Go, Rose!”

“It was tough for her, no question. But I think it will all work out. As long as my dad does what he’s agreed to, then it should all be fine. Part of me worries that he won’t, but I know my dad, and he follows that old-school code of your word is worth more than a signature.”

“Well, you know him best. Congratulations. This is great news for you. See? You didn’t need to buy the marina after all.” Her heart took a nosedive into her stomach.

He gave her a low chuckle. “I’m still interested in the marina. I’m still interested in the pretty little brunette who is staying at the marina too. You still in a towel from your shower, Starr?”

“I think you know the answer to that one.” She shifted slightly, the pulse between her legs increasing at an exponential rate. “What do you have in mind?”

“FaceTime me. I want to watch you get off.”

“You sound so sure of yourself.” She swallowed. “Like, that I would do that for you.”

“Is your pussy humming at the thought?”

“Yeah.”

Laughing, she pressed the button to switch the call to video. His face took up the screen. His jawline was peppered in facial hair, indicating that he hadn’t shaved all weekend. The lighting was dim, almost casting him in shadow, but damn, he looked hot as hell. “Hey there, tough guy.”

“You look lickable.”

“Oh yeah?”

“When’s the last time you let a man watch you play with yourself over video?”

Heat rose in her cheeks. “This is going to be the first time.”

“Lucky me.”

She shifted the phone so that it was pointed at her chest and began to toy with the towel. “This what you wanted to

see?” she teased.

“It’s a start.” He, too, shifted. He was lying in his bed. His shirt was off, showcasing the striking black lines of tribal art that weaved across the top of his chest and went around to his back, where they turned into an anchor.

“A start?” She pulled the towel open, still leaving the video on her chest. “How about now?”

“Are you wet?”

“Why don’t you just walk over here and find out?”

“Oh no. Tonight, it’s video sex. I get to watch you get off. Show me the way you touch yourself.”

His commanding voice, coupled with the way his gaze was fixated on her, was enough to redden her cheeks and cause heat to pool in her lower belly. She clenched her legs together. She was definitely wet. She trailed two fingers across each nipple. “Like this?”

“Pretend I’m not in the room. I want to watch what you do when you’re alone.”

“I left my vibrator in Colorado.”

“That was a stupid mistake.”

“No shit.” She trailed her fingers along her stomach, holding the phone above her so that she could give John a direct line of sight.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. That’s right. Spread those sexy legs apart.”

“Is this doing it for you?” She dipped her fingers into her sex, flicking her clit. “I want to see your cock.”

He did that low, rumbly chuckle that somehow spread across her heart, warming her inside and out. “I’ll show you my dick, but I’m not getting off. This is all about you. Stick ’em in.”

She glided her fingers inside and began grinding against her palm. It was hard to hold the phone above her and touch

herself with the other hand, but she was game for giving it a shot.

“Set the phone down. In front of your spread legs so I can have a full view of you. Your wet pussy. Your tits. Your face.”

She was giddy with nerves and bent forward to put a throw pillow near her feet. She propped the phone against the pillow and leaned back. “That good?”

“Oh, baby, that’s fucking perfect.”

She slid her fingers back inside and began touching herself. John’s dirty words of encouragement were all she needed to push herself over the edge. Sweat coated her chest, and she closed her eyes, letting her orgasm rip through her.

“Damn.” John brought her back to reality. “That was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. Can you come again?”

“Again?” She knew she was red on her cheeks and chest. It wasn’t that she was embarrassed; it was that she was happy. She was thrilled with the attention he was giving her. It felt good to have him call her beautiful. It wasn’t like she needed a man to tell her that, but jeez, after not hearing it for so long, it felt pretty damn good.

“Hell yes, again. Look at that pretty thing glistening in the light. She wants more. Don’t disappoint her.”

Starr laughed and started the journey all over again. A minute or two passed, and this time when her orgasm hit, she kept her eyes focused on John. It was the moment she realized she was falling for this man, and damn it, she was falling hard.

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JOHN’S COCK throbbed watching Starr twist and turn on that damn bed. He was jealous of her fingers. Jealous of those fucking bedsheets. Hell, he was jealous of those pillows that got to hold her up. Lucky bastards.

“Just come over,” she said. “You know you want to.”



“Get some sleep. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He ended the call before she swayed him into going over. He was feeling friendly. Tonight was about her. Not the two of them. He was perfectly content watching her do her thing and reveling in the pleasure.

His mind was all over the place after what had happened at dinner when his dad seemed willing to announce his official retirement. Raven was putting together a company-wide email for their father to approve and send out. According to Judge, he was helping Mom find the best places in Africa to travel.

The small thing that had been bothering John for the past week was Starr. Not in a bad way—fuck no, she was bothering him in all the good ways. But every now and then, if he let his guard down a little bit, it was clear that she was starting to make an impression on his heart. And he couldn’t allow that.

Not when she was going to leave Emerald Port soon. It wasn’t just Starr—it was everything associated with her. The marina. The tumultuous relationship between their grandfathers. John wanted to ask his parents so badly what the hell had happened, but in the past when John had brought it up, his dad had brushed it off and said it was in the past. Maybe his mom could shed some light.

The marina could still be a good investment as well as an asset to Emerald Port. It had everything it needed to succeed. It was a matter of putting it all together and finding the right people to run it.

So come Monday morning, when he was sitting in his office watching the early-morning runners on the boardwalk, he started researching local hiring firms—just to get a perspective on whether there were people around who were qualified to run the marina. Because it was going to take a hell of a lot of love and attention to get that place operating in the black.

“Can I come in?”

John glanced up from his computer at his brother’s voice, noting it was already midmorning. He hadn’t realized until

Jersey was standing at his door that the office had been quiet all morning.

“What’s wrong with you?” John sat back in his chair. “When have you ever asked permission to come into my office?”

“If you’re going to be the president, I decided to give you the benefit of respect and not just barge in like a brother would.”

“Fuck that shit. Get in here.”

Jersey strolled into the office wearing an ugly mustard-colored polo shirt. His arms were covered in tattoos, which always surprised John. For being such a computer nerd and spending practically all his free time playing video games, Jersey wasn’t as easy to pigeonhole as one might think. When Jersey sat down, John could see the red-rimmed scarring along his forearm. “New tattoo?”

“This morning. Look, I’m in the process of creating a compelling-as-fuck presentation on why we need to upgrade the yacht software. I’m here to see where you stand on the matter. I know you support me, but I need to know if it’s worth my efforts to continue to pursue.”

“The current management software is okay,” John said. Clunky, but it got the job done.

“You and I both know that. But Oceans Deep has the leading, cutting-edge technology for yacht management. It’s the best of its breed.”

“Tell me about it. I know you’re well versed.”

“It has a seamless interface and is designed to allow crew members, management companies, and family offices to collaborate and know what is going on with their vessels.”

“I know you know all about it in your head, but I need more details.”

Jersey brushed a hand over his face. “Sure. So, it’s able to fully communicate security measures and technical aspects of the yacht and alert the crew when something is amiss. I’ve

seen it in beta testing, and it's kickass. It's not as messy as what we're currently installing. It has class." Jersey's eyes lit up. "It's the shit, as far as that goes."

John chuckled. He wasn't the sibling who was blessed with computer tech savvy, but he understood its value, and that was all that mattered. He trusted Jersey to know whether upgrading the yacht software was a good decision for Blue. "What are the risks? I feel like there is a 'but' coming."

Jersey nodded. "Oceans Deep is risky because it's new. It came out three years ago and has only been installed in a few hundred yachts around the world. But the numbers don't lie. Oceans Deep is on its way to the top." He snorted and looked like he was embarrassed. "We want to be there when it rises. Trust me, we want Blue to partner with them."

"You've already invested in this company?"

"Full disclosure? Yes, I have. But only because I believe in it. I would invest more if I had the ability. This is exactly what Blue needs, and since we're so well-known, we will help drive this fucker to the top."

"Have you done a cost-benefit analysis?"

"Yeah. It's all on my spreadsheet. But I knew if Dad kept working, this would never see the light of day. Now that we know he's legit leaving, I can answer any questions you have."

"Let's wait until the announcement, but between you and me, I am on board with this. I don't want to say or do anything to make waves. I want me in the captain's chair first. Then we plow ahead. Deal?"

Jersey stuck his hand out. "Deal."

John held on to his brother's hand and turned it so he could fully see the new ink. It was an anchor with a rope tied around it. The rope dropped down to a naked woman who was on her knees—the rope covering her chest and pussy. "That's ballsy of you. But it looks great."

"Yeah, thanks. Belle tried to talk me out of it. She thought it looked too much like her."

John glanced at the woman in the tattoo. He could see the resemblance. “How is Belle doing? Haven’t seen her much lately.”

“She’s been busy. But she’s good.” Jersey started walking off and turned at the last second. “Thanks, bro.”

John nodded. *This I can handle.* He made one vow—that he would never be the closed-minded boss his dad had always been.

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## Chapter Thirteen

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"FROM MY ASSESSMENT, four out of the fifteen dock slips are unusable at this point. You'd need some pylons and concrete under the water to fix the two. The rest are fine except for minor problems. I can fix those right now for you, and they'll be ready tonight." Timmy, the contractor Deanne had sent over, shrugged and waited for Starr's response.

The morning sun was beating down on them, blazing hot as hell, and she knew she'd have to take a swim to cool off before it even hit eleven. She took a long swallow of her water, assessing how much she could afford to pay the man. Deanne had said the contractor owed her a favor, but that didn't mean it was a cashless favor to Starr. "How much?"

He blew a small whistle of air out of his mouth. "You're talking a huge overhaul. For those two docks, all of that size, you're talking over ten thousand, probably. It's weird that it's only happening to your largest ones."

"Why do you think that is? The boats that parked at those docks were too heavy? We rented out the slips without checking weight?"

"Maybe. Do you know who installed those docks? Could be a contractor issue. Know when they were put in?"

Starr had a flash of memory. Her grandfather was standing in the same spot as they were now, watching workmen with cranes extend the marina out so larger boats could park inside the slips of the new docks. "Five years ago? Six, maybe."

He shrugged. “Might be worth having an insurance estimator come out and see what’s what. Could be damage caused by weather or could be they were never built correctly to begin with.”

She squinted. The sun reflecting off the water was dazzling, making it hard to see. “I can manage that.” Her stomach hardened at the thought of her parents letting the insurance lapse. *Shit. No. Please don’t let that have happened.* “Thanks, but I really meant how much for you to start work today?”

Timmy put his hands up. “No charge. Deanne and I go way back, and I owe her a favor. She made it very clear that this was the favor I had to repay.”

“I can’t accept that. I better call Deanne.”

“You could. Or you could let Deanne do what she wants. I don’t know how long you’ve known her, but she doesn’t give up when she wants something. If it makes you feel any better, the repairs I’m going to do for these couple slots aren’t much. I’ll get them done and be on my way.”

“I—”

Timmy put his hands up. “Seriously, it’s not enough to argue about. Once I fix them, you’ll be able to rent them out along with everything else except the slips at the four big docks. Time is money. I’ll go grab my tools.”

Before she could stop him, Timmy was heading back to his work truck, and she was left standing alone, feeling overwhelmed by gratitude. This was such a wonderful community, unlike home where everyone seemed too busy with their own lives to lend a helping hand. Starr watched two stand-up paddleboards make their way across the harbor. How hard would it be to do yoga on one of those? With all the painting she still had to do, she didn’t have time to figure that out now.

She made her way up from the docks and quickly got back to work, imagining what it would be like to live here and make this place her own. The marina could surely be something to

be proud of, just the way she was proud of her yoga studio. And there was a lot to love in Emerald Port. Sun. Sand. Water. Not to mention her friendship with John.

While she moved on to the back of the building, memories continued to flood her. She couldn't get this place out of her system—or the idea that she could make it new again. She started to climb the ladder she'd propped against the building. Once she was done painting the trim around the windows, she was going to find a paddleboard and try water yoga.

*AquaYoga.*

The name already had a nice ring to it.

“Don't freak out. I'm right behind you.”

Her heart leapt into her throat at the words even though they contained fair warning. Thankfully, she was only on the third rung of the ladder. She turned to find John. He was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and she couldn't remember a time she'd seen a man look so beautiful. He killed her with his gloriously strong jawline. The way his hair was just long enough that it could stand every which way and look unkempt but perfect all at the same time. “Hey there, good-looking.”

His forearms were thick and tanned, and his hands were so large that when they gripped her hips, they sent delicious little thrills down her belly and into her toes. “Hey.” He tugged her flush against his body even though her feet were still on the ladder. She turned her head, and he captured her mouth with his. His tongue did wild things that made her think of more permanent things... like living here and being able to see him every day.

She pushed back from him. “Look what I've got done.” She gestured to the side of the marina where she'd finished painting the front and one side. “Impressive, yes?”

“I wouldn't expect anything less. It looks amazing.” His gaze was on her, not the building.

“Are you talking about me or my handiwork?” She laughed.

“Both. You look better though.” He pointed to Timmy. “What’s he doing?”

“Fixing the slips.” She pulled out her phone and saw that it was past lunch. Nearing four in the afternoon. “Wow. So much for a simple fix. He said he’d be here for a few hours, not all dang day.” She stepped off the ladder and held her paintbrush up to John, pretending she was going to paint his face. “What did I do to be graced with your presence? You come to try and help me paint?”

“No, ma’am. I would never get in the way of a woman with a one-track mind.” He folded his arms across his chest. “I brought you some food.”

She glanced at his empty hands. “What did you bring?”

“Hungry?”

“Starved.” She tried to ignore the way her heart swelled from his good gesture.

“I thought you might be.” He gestured to Blue Horizon. “I can see you from my office.”

“Lucky you.” She put her paintbrush in the bucket and turned to him. “Show me what you got. I could eat a village.”

He started walking to the front of the marina, and she followed, finally falling in step next to him. “Well, I didn’t mention that there is a condition to my bringing you food.”

“Such as?”

“You have to kiss me again.” He gave her a sheepish grin. “And then after you eat too.”

“It depends on what you brought me for lunch,” she teased.

“I brought you one of those *choppity chop chop* salads. It has all that healthy stuff I knew you would like. I even had them add slivered almonds.” He opened his car door, took out the salad, and handed it to her.

“You are really going all out here. You definitely earned yourself a before and after kiss,” she said. He handed her some



plasticware, and she led the way to her little bench. “Have a seat.”

When he sat, she leaned over and pressed her mouth against his in a hard kiss. He groaned under her lips, and she pulled back. “This was so nice of you.”

“I can help you paint, you know. Only if you want me to, of course. So you’re not tackling this big thing on your own.”

She swallowed her first bite of salad. “This is so good, and I appreciate the offer to help. But you know, I’m doing well on my own. At the rate I’m going, I’m hoping I’ll have it done sometime on Wednesday.”

“You’re moving along quick. You’re still planning to fly home Friday?”

“So far. Deanne is supposed to have papers for me to look through in the next day or so. Then the property will officially be on the market.”

“I’m going to make an offer. Just so you know.”

Starr nodded and spoke with her mouth full. “You have that right.”

Timmy walked up to their bench. “Sorry to interrupt, but the docks are done. Mind if I show you a few things?” Timmy stood with his hands on his hips, and Starr handed John her salad.

“Please do,” she told Timmy. “I’m sorry it took you longer than you expected.”

“Not a problem.” He led the way to the docks and pointed out the things he’d fixed on the lifts inside the dock slips and said they were good to go. He got to the last two that needed major repairs. “And then these ones. So we’re all square.”

Before Starr could get any words out, Timmy was walking off the docks, and she was left feeling grateful for him and Deanne.

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“YOU ALWAYS THIS INDEPENDENT?” John asked Starr after she returned to sit beside him on the bench and worked on finishing her salad. She had barely taken a ten-minute break and was insisting that she needed to get back to painting.

“Says you. But yeah, I am.”

The air was thick with humidity. “I hope you’ve been drinking a lot of water out here.” He liked when she blushed—it happened every time he mentioned he was worried about her. It was cute.

“I have been. Thanks for the food.” She turned to run off, and John was just about to remind her of the after-food kiss she’d promised when she flew into his arms.

Her arms went around his shoulders, and she pressed one palm against the back of his head, lowering his mouth to hers. The kiss was long and warm. Slow. His dick was growing with every stroke of her tongue across his. She let out a breathy moan and bit his bottom lip before she pushed him away. “You busy tonight? You want to come over when the sun goes down?”

“Forget the sun going down. Let’s fucking go now.” He followed her back around the building to where she’d left off painting. She was already grabbing her brush.

“Can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” He gripped her hips and pulled her against his body. His cock fit nicely between the swells of her butt cheeks.

“Won’t. But also can’t.”

He moved his arms around her tummy and dipped his face to her ear. “You better not be too tired tonight because I’m going to give you a workout.”

He felt something cold and wet on his skin and pulled back. A perfect line of blue paint marked the top of his hand. Brush strokes made clear what she’d done. He met Starr’s gaze—her sassy and proud gaze. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“You left me no choice. A woman’s gotta work.”

“This means war.” John acted fast, moving to her painting supplies, where he grabbed another paintbrush. He barely had a chance to coat the brush with fresh paint before he felt a wet path on the back of his arm.

When he turned, Starr was standing there wide-eyed, holding her paintbrush in front of her like it was a brick wall. “Stay away.”

He lunged at her, his brush connecting with her bare shoulder and leaving a mark that trailed down to her elbow. She let out a squeal and tried to move away, but he managed to grip her wrist. She turned on him, and her brush landed on his jawline. He yanked his head to the left and pulled her against him. “You’re going down, princess.”

“No! John! No!”

She yanked her wrist free and stepped around the ladder, but he brushed paint over the top of her hand. He moved again, getting her bare leg. The ladder tilted, and paint oozed down his head in stringy rivulets from the can balanced on the ladder. The ladder tipped, and the can landed with a thud at his feet.

“Oh my. I’m so sorry.”

“No you’re not.”

He reached for her, catching her off guard. He pushed her down onto her tarp. The paint from his head was already dripping onto Starr’s clothes, and because he was such a nice guy, he warned her. “You better close your eyes.”

She started squealing and tossing and turning beneath him even though he was straddling her and had her wrists pinned. He started shaking his head like a dog, spewing droplets of paint all over her. She closed her mouth but continued to struggle. He pressed his head into her tits, coating as much paint onto her clothes and chest as he could.

Her chest heaved against his, and he met her gaze. She stopped squirming, and the world stopped moving. A few birds chirped in the silence, but all John could hear was the

blood pounding in his ears. Specks of paint covered Starr's face, but fuck it to hell if he'd ever seen anything more beautiful. Her lips were rosy red.

He shifted and pressed his thickness between her legs. Her mouth opened into a breathy little sigh, and John's mouth covered hers. He was lost in all things Starr Young. Even with the smell of paint lingering in his nose and the fact that their clothes were ruined, there was no place else he would rather be.

"You have any electronics on you?" he asked. "That hose still work? Let's rinse off and jump in the water."

"You're serious?" Her eyes were sparkling with lust and desire—no doubt mirroring what was in his.

"Come on." He pulled her up, adjusting his dick in his shorts as he went. "Probably not a good idea to stay covered in paint, inhaling it."

"Oh, it's eco-friendly. It has low levels of VOC, so we should be good."

John stopped at the hose and turned it on. The water came out warm. "You're painting The Beach House with eco-friendly paint. What did that set you back? Can't be cheap."

"It wasn't. But it's good for the environment. That was the only way to go."

He nodded. "You gonna save this planet all on your own?"

She put her hands under the hose and smiled up at him. "Sure going to do my part and try. Give me this. I'll spray your head."

He chuckled. "No way do I trust you to do that." He pointed toward her ladder and tarp. "Not after that episode. Come on. Let's swim and rinse off."

"People are going to think we're crazy swimming in our clothes."

He pulled his shirt off. "I only gotta go in my shorts." He nodded toward her clothes. "Guess you could go in your bra

and panties, but I don't think you have enough guts to do that."

She put a hand to her hip. Damn, she looked cute when she was being stubborn. She glanced around the harbor. The drawbridge was just closing. There weren't many people on the ground who could see the two of them from where they were standing. But anyone inside Blue or any of the other high-rises would definitely be able to see. "You don't think I will, do you?"

He shut the hose off and set it down. "Not sure, but I'm happy to watch." He folded his arms across his chest and waited for her to make the next move.

"Fine." She tugged her tank top off, exposing her white bra.

John glanced around, double-checking that no one was within walking distance. Her bra was sheer, so sheer that John could see every line of her hardened nipple and dusty pink areola. "That is some fucking bra."

"Wait until you see the panties." She flicked open the top button and slid the zipper down slowly while she loosened the shorts. She wasn't teasing about her panties matching her bra.

John swallowed. "You're just gonna strip and get in the water like that?"

"I have nothing to be ashamed of or to hide." She dropped her shorts and stepped out of them. "Come on."

He followed like a well-trained dog. How could he not? Her panties were those cheeky things that cut halfway across her cheeks and see-through. If they were anywhere else, he would be burying his face into those lush swells, inhaling every beautiful scent God blessed her with and making her give him all of her.

"You stare any harder and your eyes might pop out." She smirked at him when she reached the ladder. She stood with her feet in the water and gave him one last chance to ogle her. His dick throbbed. His heart pumped viciously against his

chest, and one single thought came to his mind when she pushed off and went under the water.

“Shit. I’m in love.”

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## Chapter Fourteen

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STARR WAS CRAZY TURNED ON, and watching John cannonball into the water the way a manly man would had her grinning like a fool. He sank into the water and then swam toward her. His large hands grasped her ankles, and she held her breath, knowing she was going under. His hands slid up her legs to her butt, and he pulled her close. She wrapped her limbs around him, and he broke the surface of the water with her. She inhaled some air, wiping water from her eyes.

“How are you going to swim with me attached to you like you’re a koala bear and I’m a joey?”

“You don’t think I’m strong enough? Come on, lady, I’ve been swimming in the harbor since I was three.” His eyes drifted down her face to her chest, and she followed his gaze to her swollen nipples. “Of course, I could get distracted.”

“Where are you going to swim to?”

He maneuvered them with ease to the other side of one of her grandfather’s boat slips. It was a little tucked away, and he pressed her into the side. His arms held on to the planks. “Right here. Put your legs back around me.”

The water wasn’t cold, but delicious shivers went up and down her spine. His cock was solid between her legs, and she gleefully rubbed herself against him. “What kind of plans do you have right now?” She laughed and teased his collarbone with her lips and tongue.

He let go of the dock with one hand and cupped her butt. “I have big plans. Just hold on for the ride.”

“Right here in public, we’re going to do this?”

He let out a growl against her ear that vibrated to her toes. “Sure as fuck are. I haven’t been with someone without a condom for years. I’m clean. You’re on birth control?”

“Yes,” she said. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes. Do you trust me?”

“Yeah,” she breathed into his mouth. His lips claimed hers, and she reached for his cock, freeing it just enough from his briefs.

His fingers slid between her legs, sliding her panties to the side, and in one swift thrust, John was deep inside her. She kept an eye on what she could see of the harbor, not spotting anyone who was actively watching.

“Look at me. Not the harbor.” John bit her lip. “Don’t look away. Feel me. Watch me. Look at me while I fuck you, pretty girl.”

His eyes were bright today. Dark blue lines zinged around his bright blue irises, and she was utterly lost in them. No man had ever touched her this deeply. Water sloshed around them, and she held on tight, trying not to make loud noises. The familiar feeling floated across her legs, up her spine, and to the base of her neck. “Fuck. John.”

“Let go. I’m going to come too.”

It was that confession that sent her over the edge, and she clung tightly to him while he, too, flew off the edge. She swallowed the words she desperately wanted to tell him and tried to convince herself this was just about the sex. *Not because I actually love him.*

“You know it’s a violation of Emerald Port law to fornicate in public?” someone asked.

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JOHN LET OUT an expletive against Starr's neck while they stayed in the water. He didn't dare release her from his grip. No way in hell was he letting Officer Tyson Lowe see her naked. The guy was a prick. "Lowe. What brings you by?"

"Someone called it in. Suspected there was 'funny business' going on at Harold's marina." The officer nodded to Starr. "She okay?"

"I'm fine," she said loudly then buried her head against John's chest and whispered to him, "I can't look at him. How embarrassing."

"She's embarrassed," John said. "Can you have the decency to meet us up by the building where that ladder is? She can put some clothes on. We left them at the hose there."

Lowe's gaze swept back and forth between him and Starr, who still faced the opposite direction. Tyson hitched up his pants by his safety belt. "Hurry up. No funny business."

John shook his head. "I went to high school with you. You really think I'm going to do something against the law?"

"You just did." Lowe raised his eyebrows. "Does she do this a lot?"

John's temper flared, but he ground his teeth together so he wouldn't say something he would regret later. He wasn't justifying that question with any fucking answer. John's gaze didn't waver from the officer, and finally Lowe turned around and stalked off toward the marina building. Typical. Tyson Lowe had been a runt in high school. He wasn't ever one of the cool kids, and now that he was a cop, he liked to use his badge to intimidate people. But John sure as fuck wasn't letting that happen where Starr was concerned. "Come on, you sexy mermaid. Let's get your clothes on before we get a ticket."

Once they'd walked up to the water hose, John shielded Starr as best as he could while she shimmied into her shorts. She took his shirt and threw it on over her head, and damn if that wasn't the sexiest sight he'd ever seen. But the look on her face cleared his mind of any naughty thoughts.

“He won’t ticket us. Maybe he’ll just give us a warning,” John said, trying to reassure her.

“John, he already is.” Starr nodded to Lowe.

Sure enough, he was scribbling out something on his notepad. John and Starr walked up to the place where this whole episode had started.

“Are you really giving me a ticket?” John asked Lowe.

*Dickhead.*

“Sure am. But her too. What kind of lady are you? Having sex in the harbor like that. What’s your name?”

“Starr Young.”

Lowe stopped scribbling and glanced up from his pad. “Come again?”

“I’m Starr Young.”

John swallowed, knowing full well Lowe was already riding high on the gossip train. “She’s here to sell the marina.”

“Is that so? You know, funny thing, I was with my dad having coffee down at the Cable House the other morning, and your dad”—he pointed at John—“was there. Course, when someone brought up the fact that they saw some activity out here, your dad got a little bit of a temper in him.”

John folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t care.”

Lowe raised his eyebrows. “He went on and on about some family feud that had been around since—get this—1949. Anyway, I can tell by the wrinkles on your forehead that you know exactly where I’m going with this.”

“Spit it out, man.”

“Does your dad know you’re sleeping with the enemy?”

“That is none of your business.” Starr took a step toward Lowe, and John took a deep breath in and then let it out of his nose. “Do you always do this?” she asked. “Throw your weight around to the citizens of Emerald Port?”

“He does,” John said.

“Starr Young.” Officer Lowe scribbled on his pad while he blew out a whistle of air through his teeth. “What is it with women dropping their panties for the Davenport brothers? And what’s the Davenport family gonna think when they learn about your relationship?”

“Again, none of your business.” John scowled. “Besides, I don’t give a fuck.”

“It’s not permanent anyway,” Starr chimed in. “No one should have a problem with who we sleep with. It’s our own business, and that fight was between our grandparents. We are paving the way for better relationships.” She folded her arms across her chest, clearly as mad as John was about Tyson’s harassment.

Lowe pulled the two tickets off the pad and handed them to John. “You can show up in court and hope for the best.” Officer Lowe chuckled. “Course if I were you, I’d want the easy way out so I could get back to this fine piece of ass.”

John saw red. In that moment, Lowe wasn’t a man of the law who protected other people; he was the fucking dirtbag John had dealt with in high school. His fist connected with Tyson’s face, a crack echoing in time with Starr’s scream.

## Chapter Fifteen

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“DUDE, YOU PUNCHED A FUCKING COP YESTERDAY.” Judge grinned like a wild maniac.

“This is never going to come off your record,” Jersey said. “Dad is never retiring at this point. You fucked us all.”

The officer slid the metal doors of John’s cell open, and John nodded to his cellmate, who the cops had brought in last night on an assault charge. “See ya, man.”

The officer nodded toward the exit. “You can get your belongings from the checkout station down the hall.”

“Lowe was being a dick.” John didn’t have to go to the little window to collect anything.

“Did you commit a felony?” Judge asked, pushing the door to the police station open. John followed them out and blinked hard against the morning light.

“Yep,” John answered.

“Florida takes battery on an officer of the law very seriously. You could get jail time,” Jersey said.

“Oh shit, Judge Johnson will drop it to a misdemeanor. He’ll be fine.” Judge flicked the button on his truck, and they all hopped in, John taking the back seat.

“Does it matter if Lowe was harassing Starr?” John asked.

“What happened?” his brothers asked simultaneously.

“He caught us fucking in the bay,” John said. “Was being a pervert. Finally, I convinced him to walk up to the main building and wait for us. Once we got up there, he was talking shit about Dad going off on that stupid feud and how Lowe had caught me sleeping with a Young. Wondering if Dad knew. Not to mention the shitty sexual bullshit he was saying about Starr. I went ballistic when he insinuated that anyone would be fucking Starr because she is a hot little thing. No, ‘a fine piece of ass,’ I think is what he said.” John clenched his fists. He wasn’t raised this way. Not to hit a cop. Never.

In fact, he was angry with himself. Disappointed. Thirty-two years old, and this might be the first time in John’s life that he was going to make his mother ashamed of him. Not to mention that Jersey and Judge were right. Their dad was not going to give him the position. “This is so fucking bad.”

“It might help your case that you’re well known in the community. A lot of people like you, including Judge Johnson,” Jersey said.

“Building the judge a yacht doesn’t mean I have him in my back pocket. Plus, I sort of deserve whatever I get.” John gripped the back of the passenger seat and let out a growl. “I let him get the best of me. Cocksucker!”

“You went and fell in love. Unbelievable.” Judge let out an annoying laugh.

“I didn’t—”

Jersey held up his hand. “Save it. You did. Belle is always telling me that men who are in love will always do something heroic for the woman they love. You have proved that point. I’m texting Belle right now to tell her.”

John sat back in his seat and let the blur of buildings and houses clear his mind. What was Starr going to think of him? His parents? He closed his eyes, relishing the way the black faded across his brain, making him wish he was ten and hiding in the closet. “Does Dad know?”

Judge shrugged. “I’m assuming he does. Haven’t seen him. But there was a brief snippet about you on Channel 7 this

morning. So yeah, I'm sure they know."

"I hit a cop."

Jersey snorted. "Tyson's a jerk. Always has been. Everyone knows it. What did Starr do?"

"I don't even know. It happened fast. It was one punch, I waved the white flag, and he arrested me. Made his nose bleed."

"You are officially the first Davenport to spend the night in jail," Jersey said.

John met Judge's gaze in his rearview mirror. "I am not."

Judge coughed, and Jersey turned to his brother in the driver's seat. "Really? When?"

"The first night I moved to campus," Judge said. "Got arrested for trespassing and drinking."

"And fighting," John added.

"Oh yeah. And fighting."

"Awesome big brothers I have," Jersey said. "Way to set an example for us younger ones."

"We did. We didn't tell you." Judge pulled into the parking lot of John's condo, and the truck rolled to a stop.

"Thanks, guys," John said.

"Not a problem. See you in a bit, lover boy." Judge then proceeded to howl like a wolf.

John rolled his eyes and took off for his penthouse. He punched in his key code and went inside. He showered and shaved, contemplating if he could call in sick. He needed to grab his phone and wallet from Starr's place before he went to the office.

The guys were right. He was absolutely in love with her. What were the odds that he could get her to move to Emerald Port permanently? He made his way to the back of the main building and saw her perched on the ladder, putting what

looked like the finishing touches on white trim around the last window.

She was wearing the same clothes she had on yesterday, and like she had yesterday, she took his breath away. “Starr?”

“Oh, jeez Louise. Hey, jailbird.” She stepped down from the ladder and put her hands on her hips. “How are you feeling today? Embarrassed by your behavior?”

“Are you mad at me?”

She put her paintbrush into her cup holder and wiped her hands on her wadded-up towel. “I’m feeling a lot of things right now where you’re concerned.”

He closed the space between them and took her hands in his. “Such as?”

“I’m feeling angry that I got a ticket. I’m mad at that police officer for treating me the way he did. I’m upset that you felt you had to protect my honor. You could be in a huge amount of trouble.”

He gripped her chin with his hand. “You’re not ashamed to be near me? A man who hit a cop?”

“What? No one has ever defended my honor in quite that way.” She put her hands on his chest. “But I could have handled him myself. I wouldn’t have hit him.”

“Trust me. He’s a bully. He wouldn’t have let up on you.” He pressed his mouth against hers. “I’m sorry for fighting your battle. But—”

“But it was kind of swoony.”

“Swoony?”

“Yeah, it melted my heart.”

“I’m glad it melted your heart.” John had a difficult time letting the words come out of his mouth. “I can’t imagine my dad giving me the job after that.”

She put a hand to her mouth. “Don’t say that. No. Explain to him what you just explained to me about the cop being a bully. He’ll understand.”

“Fat chance. I gotta roll. You got my wallet and my phone?” He let go of her. “Might as well get this over with.”

“Sure. Be right back.”

John stood outside and squinted up at the Blue Horizon building. He’d made a stupid mistake, and his dad wasn’t going to let him live it down. He could already hear him. *A real CEO doesn’t allow his temper to get the best of him. How can you be trusted to make quick, good decisions? And a cop? Quit thinking with your dick.*

She jingled his car keys. “I took the liberty of retrieving your keys and locking your doors after you brought me that yummy salad yesterday. I was worried about leaving it unlocked in the parking lot,” Starr said. She handed him his phone and wallet. “Good luck. I hate that I’m the reason for this.” Tears pooled in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“No. This is not your fault. I own this. Not you.” He used his thumb to wipe the wet streak below her eye. What was it about a woman crying that gutted him? “Don’t cry. Not for me.” He kissed her cheek. “I’ll be back when I can.”

John left his car parked in the marina lot and took his time crossing the bridge over to Blue. He was a grown fucking man. He owned this. There was nothing more to think about. What happened once he walked inside was on his shoulders. He had no one else to blame.

Raven was at the front desk, and she was decent enough to not say anything to him. She just raised her eyebrows and gave him a sympathetic look.

“Dad’s been sitting in your office all morning,” she warned when he was past her desk.

“Figures.”

John took the stairs, not enjoying feeling as if he was doing either the walk of shame or walking onto the plank. “I guess I am,” he muttered to himself.

True to Raven’s word, their father was sitting in John’s office behind the desk, taking up John’s seat. His eyes were a murderous blue—a shade John had seen on more than one



occasion when the four boys had caused trouble. “You heard,” John said.

“The whole fucking town of Emerald Port has heard.” His dad leaned forward and gripped the edge of John’s desk, his knuckles white. “What in the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t.” He kept standing, unable to take a seat in one of the open chairs. “He was harassing Starr.”

“I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

“I wouldn’t call it proud.”

“Over her? A Young? After what your grandfather went through, you had the nerve to befriend someone from that family.”

“First of all, I’m a grown fucking man. I can date whoever I please. I don’t ask for permission. Second of all, I don’t even know what the hell happened between those guys, and even if I did, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m in love with her.”

His tirade was met with complete silence. He was in love with Starr, and he wasn’t going to let anyone talk to her the way Tyson Lowe had—cop or not. She didn’t deserve it.

“You’re right.” His dad pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can date whoever you want. What you can’t do is go around punching a cop and expect there to be zero consequences. You made your bed, and now you will lie in it.”

John released a deep breath and met his father’s gaze head on. The heaviness in his chest settled in the pit of his stomach as he waited for his dad to say whatever it was he had to say. That he wasn’t going to give John the role of CEO. “Just say it already.”

His dad shook his head. “You’re fired. Get your shit, and get out of this office.”

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STARR SAT on the patio of the cottage, taking a sip of crisp white wine. The sides of the glass had a slight frost, and she

never thought she'd enjoyed a glass of wine so much. She didn't even care that her shoulders were sunburnt. She'd finished painting, and it wasn't even Wednesday yet.

The marina looked amazing.

And she'd done it all on her own.

*Victory.*

Apple and pear flavors floated across her tongue, and the wine was cold and welcoming as it went down her throat. If only she'd heard from John earlier, he could share this with her. She left in a few days. The weird part was that she wasn't anxious to go home. If she was totally honest with herself, she wasn't missing the yoga studio anymore. Not as much as when she'd first shown up in Emerald Port. She took another sip and waited for Deanne to call her back regarding the trust paperwork Starr had sent to her. Deanne mentioned having some concerns, and Starr had zero clue what that could be.

It seemed like forever since her plane had landed and Lyle had picked her up at the airport. In reality, it had been almost two weeks. Was it even possible to fall in love so fast? Her heart fluttered, and her stomach got that butterfly feeling it did every time she thought about John.

She wasn't missing the yoga studio because her thoughts were on the muscular, sun-kissed skin of a man who had her wrapped around his fingers.

"Can I join you?"

She sat up and glanced behind her. John stood on the other side of her patio. Even though he was smiling, she could see the anguish on his face. "Yes. I thought you'd never show up."

"It's been a day. Let me tell you."

He hopped over the fence and pulled her up from her seat. That single move shouldn't make her so giddy, but she grinned like a lovestruck fool. "I could have opened the gate for you." She pressed her lips into his neck.

"And lose the opportunity to show off for my lady? No way."

*His lady.* She tilted her head back and gazed into his eyes. He looked tired. “What happened with your dad?”

He held his hands out. “He fired me. I’m looking for a new job. Are you hiring?”

She laughed and then bit it back when he didn’t smile. “You’re not joking.”

“Nope. He was waiting for me when I got in. He isn’t happy about us, and he sure as fuck isn’t happy that I got arrested. I thought he wasn’t going to name me CEO. I didn’t think he was going to fire me.”

“Can he do that?”

John shrugged. “He can do whatever the hell he wants. He owns the company.”

“Oh, John. I’m so sorry.” Guilt weaved its way through her entire being. “This is bad.”

“It’s not. I actually got a job offer from a guy I know. I wasn’t super interested in making the move and going to Benetto, but I may have to.”

Her phone started ringing, interrupting the moment. “Let me get this real quick.” It was Deanne. “Hello?”

“Hey there. Thanks for the paperwork. Have you read it all?”

Starr pursed her lips, trying to recall what she’d sent Deanne. “No. I mean, I’ve skimmed it. I’ve read the stuff from my parents.”

“Right. That’s what I thought.”

Starr shook her head at John, who was looking at her like he sensed there might be something wrong. It did feel like Deanne was going to give her bad news. “What’s wrong? We can’t sell the property?”

“I’m not a lawyer. But I scheduled a meeting with your grandfather’s attorney. We’ve got an appointment at one tomorrow. Hopefully, he can clear some things up. He’s a smart guy, well-known around here.”

“That urgent?”

“You’re going to want to meet with him.” Deanne paused. “Trust me. He’ll be there at one.”

Deanne ended the call, and Starr was left staring at her phone, sort of pissed off and sort of apprehensive. “That was Deanne. She said it’s important but gave me zero details.”

“Why?”

“My grandfather’s attorney will be here at one tomorrow to talk about the trust. Not sure what that’s all about, but Deanne made it very clear that I need to speak to him.”

“You think there’s something wrong preventing you from selling the property?” John asked.

“What else could it be?” She brushed a hand over her face. She hated her parents, and she sure didn’t like the predicament she was in. “You know what they say. No good deed goes unpunished. I should have never signed up to help my parents. I should have spoken to the heavens and let my grandparents know that this isn’t my battle and I wasn’t going to help.” If only they hadn’t dangled the perfect carrot in front of her.

John cupped her chin. “But that’s not the kind of person you are. It’s very clear you loved your grandparents. We’ll get through this.”

*We’ll?* Her heart flip-flopped inside her chest at his words. God, no wonder she loved this man. He was kind and generous. He wasn’t afraid to make her problems his. If only she could tell him.

“What can I do around here? Since I’m jobless, I can help with whatever you need.”

“This whole situation feels wrong. You working for another yacht-building company seems wrong. Not working at Blue seems wrong. Which is where you really need to be. That’s where your heart is.” When he didn’t deny it, she went on. “How can I fix this?”

John gave her a cheesy grin and winked at her. “You could show me your tits. That would perk me right up.”

“I bet it would.”

Deanne had emailed her regarding the paperwork. Starr was tempted to read through it but figured she would wait to go over things with the attorney. No sense in trying to read it now when John was there to keep her entertained. The night was young.

She stood and wrapped her arms around John, who was staring at the Blue building across the harbor. “Hey you.”

“I thought I would always have my dad’s support. No matter what. Even if he is a grumpy bastard.”

“I know. Our parents are so different. If my parents knew I got a ticket for having sex in public, they’d laugh their asses off and proceed to tell me about a time it happened to them.”

Her doorbell rang, and when she looked through the house to where she’d left the screen door open, a man she didn’t recognize was standing there. Her first thought was that it was the attorney.

“It’s my dad.” John put a hand on her waist. “I’ll get it.”

Starr shook her head. “No. It’s my door.”

She waltzed through the house and swung the door open. She was greeted by an older, spitting image of *her* John. This Davenport had bright-blue eyes just like his son, a straight nose, and broad shoulders. Was that steam coming off his head? If he hadn’t looked like he was about to blow, she would have been happy to see him.

“Can I help you?”

“You should be ashamed of yourself for getting my son arrested.”

“I’m Starr Young.” She put out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Davenport.”

He stared down at her hand, and she left it in midair, waiting. She put a smile on her face. This was a fun little game. Was he going to be petty? Or act like an adult? She silently began to count. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven.

His hand was solid when he put it into hers. His grip was tight.

“For the record, I didn’t get your son arrested,” Starr said. “He’s in charge of his own actions. Not me. You seem like a reasonable man, so I’ll be honest with you. I’ve never been demeaned by a man more than I was by Officer Lowe. What he said to me was verbal harassment. The worst part was that it wasn’t just once—he kept doing it.”

Mr. Davenport stood with his lips pursed, like he was debating whether he should argue with her or if his manners about how to treat a woman were going to win out. She wasn’t backing down, and she wasn’t afraid to have this conversation with him. She folded her arms across her chest.

“No man should ever treat a woman that way,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“I’m here to ask a favor from you.”

She bit her lip, refraining from mentioning she didn’t owe him a favor. Instead, Starr tilted her head and waited for him to go on. *This should be good.*

“Stop seeing my son.”

A low growl came from somewhere behind her, and she clucked her tongue. Of course John was eavesdropping. “Why would I do that?”

“The Youngs and Davenports have a long history of problems. Arguments. Fights. I’ve raised my kids to stay away from this place. You’d be doing my son a favor.”

“John and I have decided that we’re going to be together despite the past.”

Her guest folded his arms over his chest. “We owe it to our parents and grandparents to respect the values they’ve instilled. To respect their hard-work ethics and the decisions they’ve made for their families at a time when family was the most important thing.”

“Listen, I love your son, and therefore, I will respect you because of that. But you know nothing about me. You don’t

know my story and why I'm here. You have no clue what my family's hard-work ethic and decisions they've made for my family mean to me. I don't appreciate you insinuating that I'm breezy enough that I would break up with your son because *you* don't like it." She put a hand to her hip. "Not to mention, family is always important. Speaking of family, maybe you shouldn't have fired him. That was harsh."

"Blue Horizon cannot have a hotheaded CEO who punches cops. I did what any other person in my shoes would do."

"I can respect that you had to make a decision for the company. But he's your *son*. Isn't he more important than what people might think of Blue? I'm sure as hell proud of him. For a whole variety of reasons, including the way he stood up for my honor. Was it a smart choice? No. But he is so much more than that. He is intelligent *and* kind. You know he's been nothing but generous to me since the day we ran into one another? I bet you couldn't say the same for most people you've met."

Mr. Davenport's gaze moved to a point behind Starr, and she knew without looking that John had made an appearance. He stepped forward, next to Starr.

"Dad, you don't get to decide who I date. Maybe getting fired from Blue is the best thing that could have happened to me. At least now I can be in charge of my own destiny."

"You're making a huge mistake. The Youngs and Davenports do not mix. You are throwing your life away for a flash in the pan."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Dad, but I don't even know what that family feud was about, do you? It doesn't matter. I love this woman, and apparently"—he wrapped his arms around her, and his face broke into an exuberant smile—"she loves me too."

"You'll regret this. You're still acting like a child. You could have never run Blue."

"With all due respect, Mr. Davenport, I think you should leave. When you can see who John truly is and can respect the

man you raised him to be, I'll welcome you back on this property with open arms. Until then, you're not welcome here. Goodbye, Mr. Davenport." Starr pushed the door shut. Adrenaline pumped inside her chest, down to her fingertips. She turned at John's loud sigh.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Perfect." She gripped his forearms. "Are *you* okay? Is he always so blunt like that?"

John nodded. "Always. He's been angry at the world for most of my life. But no real reason for it. I mean, financially, he's in awesome shape—I've seen Blue's profit margin. As far as family, for the most part we are all good kids. It isn't like he's stressed about that. Plus, we're all grown up now." John peeked out the window before looking back at Starr. "You know what shocked the hell out of me most just now though?"

Starr couldn't even guess. Not when she was feeling the negative effects of Mr. Davenport. "What's that?"

He stepped closer to her, his lips inches from her mouth. He smelled like sunscreen and some kind of body wash—the combination of the two was heady. "You said you loved me."



## Chapter Sixteen

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"I DID?" Just when she thought she was getting control of her adrenaline, there it went again.

"Did you mean it?" he asked.

Her eyes searched John's. Wide-open honesty. Deep inside, he was the kind of man she'd always wanted in her life. Every time he touched her, it was like a live wire was being put to her skin. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

His face didn't show an expression. His mouth didn't curl into a grin or frown. Maybe she shouldn't have admitted it. "I know that wasn't part of our plan—my plan—and I'm sorry I can't change it. One day we were just friends that shared a mutual attraction, and then all of a sudden, I realized how perfect you are for me. All the things we share in common—"

His mouth claimed hers. His lips were firm and unyielding. She pressed her hands against his chest, trying to capture everything he was giving her. She opened her mouth on a gasp, and his tongue slipped inside, tangling with hers. His groan was deep and vibrated against her palms. She would never tire of hearing it. He picked her up, and she willingly wrapped her legs around his. Like every time they were this close to one another, she was consumed with all that he was. All that he gave her.

He carried her into her grandfather's office. Her butt pressed against the desk, and John was already unbuckling and unzipping his shorts. She undid her own shorts, and he pulled them down along with her panties and tossed them. One

second later, his cock was sliding inside her. Hard. Thick. Hot. She dug her nails into his back, hoping like hell she wasn't the only one experiencing such raw and deep emotions. "John," she muttered against his lips. "Don't stop."

"I could do this for the rest of my life." He lifted her off the edge of the desk, the movement spreading her farther apart. She was literally being held up by him while he was impaled inside her. The friction was too much. Too sensitized. Too erotic.

Her orgasm peaked, and she couldn't do anything but hold on tight as convulsion after convulsion swept through her entire body. She may have even blacked out from all the stars shooting across her eyelids. John's body stilled, and he buried his head into the crook of her neck, letting out a groan that vibrated against her nipples. Her body was slick with sweat, and when John raised his head and met her gaze, she saw it. The undeniable, soul-deep attraction and love that she felt for him. She was drowning in it.

She swallowed.

John caressed her face with the tips of his fingers. "I love you. And I'm gonna be totally fucking honest here—and selfish—I sure as fuck don't want you going back to Colorado."

That was the large elephant in the room, wasn't it? He set her gingerly back onto the desk, and the irony of the situation hit her. Laughter bubbled from her throat. "We just confessed our love and had sex inside my grandfather's office. He must be rolling in his grave."

John tugged his boxer briefs on and helped her off the desk. He sat on the long couch and pulled her into his lap so she was straddling him. "You know, I don't think so. I can feel it in here." John pressed a hand against his chest. "I think this was your grandfather's ultimate plan. To reunite the Davenport and Young families in the hopes of creating a legacy once more. Together, it's a dynasty. His first venture at it failed, and the guy seems witty and wise enough that he would try something like this even in death." John gestured with his

hand around the office. “Look around. The guy had big plans. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that he has set the stage for more plans.”

Her stomach skipped with butterflies. Starr had never thought of it that way. But her grandfather had been cunning. He’d also been a dreamer. “That makes zero sense, though, doesn’t it? I mean, why hold a grudge when you’re alive? Why not just get over it and move on?”

John twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. “That I’m not sure about yet. Maybe it was too much to deal with. You know there are things that can break people’s hearts. Maybe he couldn’t live with it, but he never managed to get rid of his dream.”

“But he can’t mastermind a Young-Davenport hookup from his grave. No one can.”

“Bigger things have happened in this world. Like Mother Teresa curing that woman with the lump in her abdomen. Or —”

“Or the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” they said together. They both laughed.

“Exactly,” John said.

“I don’t know. Anything is possible.”

“Anything sure is.” He put his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. “I never thought there would be a day of my life that I wouldn’t be at Blue.”

“Is it possible that tensions are just high right now between you and your father? He’ll surely come to his senses.”

“I’m not sure I want him to. I don’t know what the world has in store for me, but I’m game to try.” He opened one eye. “Maybe this is a sign I could buy the marina.”

She blew out a breath. “I’m not sure what the attorney is going to say tomorrow. I have an all-around bad feeling about it. But I guess it’s better to hear it now and not when I’m back home and can’t do anything about it.”

“Aside from that meeting, what do you plan to work on next?”

“I listed the boat slips for rent last night. I’m hoping this weekend, I’ll see some folks who would like to rent them. It’s pretty basic and the one thing that’s essentially stress free for me. After that, I can’t really afford much else. The roof on the marina and the asphalt need to be redone, but there’s no way I can afford those things unless I tap into savings.” She let out a long sigh. “I want it to be in the best possible shape. I want to give back, if that makes sense. But anything I do probably won’t matter much in the end when it sells.”

“Did I tell you that my brothers and I replaced the shingles on the roof of our grandmother’s house after my grandfather passed away?”

“No, you never told me that.” Starr had a feeling she knew where this conversation might be headed.

“Do you have enough in the budget to order the shingles?”

Starr could tap into her savings. Her she-never-touched-it-even-when-it-was-a-rainy-day savings. But was she okay using John and his brothers’ help? She’d already gotten a favor from Deanne that was a tremendous gift. “How long does something like that take? How could I ask your brothers to devote a weekend to helping me when they don’t even know me?”

John gave her a boyish, breathtaking grin. “Judge and Jersey pretty much know how I feel about you. Jake is always willing to help out. He wouldn’t care one way or the other. Might take him away from gaming time, but he’ll be fine.”

Starr loved the idea. She really did. She blew out a breath. *I can’t do this alone.* There was no way. She didn’t have experience in fixing things or replacing dock slips or roof shingles or laying asphalt. What she had experience in wouldn’t see the light of day unless she accepted the help.

She brushed her fingertips over his eyebrows, admiring his prominent bone structure, then grazed them across his cheekbones and down his jaw. Her heart swelled. This man

was truly an angel. And the unspoken discussion between them—well, he'd voiced his opinion about not wanting her to leave loud and clear—but she couldn't stay. She had to go back home. Maybe? Definitely—for a little while. Her fingers crossed over his lips. So soft and perfect.

“Stop overthinking things, and say yes.” He kissed the pads of her fingers.

“I would be honored if you could get them all to help. And I promise I'll help too.” She pressed a kiss to his mouth.

“I have a few friends that owe me one. With eight of us helping one another out, I think we can get it done in two days. Three, max. It won't take long to pull the shingles off, and while a few of us pull them off, two of us can start smoothing and laying the new ones.” He blinked open his eyes. The smile that crossed his lips sent tingles down to her toes. “But you better get to the supply company right now and see what they have on hand. Maybe they could still deliver them in time for the weekend.”

“I think you better check with your posse to see when they can help.”

He lifted his arms and put his hands on her bare ass and squeezed tight. “I'll text them after I make you come two more times.” His cock throbbed beneath her. He nodded toward his briefs. “Pull 'em down, wild thing, and climb aboard this ride.”

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“THE SHINGLES WILL BE DELIVERED late Friday afternoon,” John said to his three brothers over breakfast Thursday morning. The local restaurant, Bonnie's Diner, was one of their favorites with its black and white checkered tile floor and red vinyl booths. The jukebox was currently playing “Daydream Believer,” falling in line with the diner's overall theme of framed photographs of Elvis, The Beatles, The Monkees, Buddy Holly, and various other artists from the fifties and sixties. “Tank said it could be evening since we

ordered them last minute, but it doesn't matter. You guys good with helping?"

"I'm in," Jake said.

"I can help," Judge said. "I'll just cancel the two dates I had lined up for Saturday, but whatever."

"Two dates? Shut up." Jersey frowned. "I can help. I just need to let Belle know."

"I have two dates. Same time. They're twins." Judge held up two fingers. "They just turned twenty-five."

John rolled his eyes. Judge was the dog of the family, no doubt. "Thanks, guys. Be there at seven. No later."

With a few groans at the early hour, they all agreed to be at the marina on Saturday morning. John and Starr had gotten everything the men would need to lay the shingles, and she was at the marina checking in with her yoga studio while John had breakfast with his brothers. John watched his brother's drive off and the timing was perfect when his phone rang and the caller ID showed Italy, John couldn't help but think that Dom had heard John had gotten fired from Blue.

"Dom. How was Como?"

"Weather was enjoyable. I have no complaints. I wanted to check in with you and see if you'd thought any more about my offer."

John pinched the bridge of his nose. "I have. It's intriguing, I have to be honest."

"You're declining my offer?"

"I've really put a lot of thought into it, but South Carolina isn't my home. Emerald Port is."

"I figured it would be a long shot," Dom said.

John chuckled. "Not quite that long of a long shot, and if you were anywhere near this area, I'd be hard-pressed not to take the offer. But this is my home. My family is here, and as much as they can be annoying, I can't imagine living anywhere without them. Thanks for thinking of me."

“No problem. If you ever want to do business in the future, give me a call. It’d be a pleasure.”

“Thanks. I will.” John hung up the phone. As much as he wanted to be in charge of his own destiny, he could never go somewhere else. Especially to another state. And with Starr next door... Yeah. He knew what he wanted there, but he wasn’t sure how he was going to get that outcome. It would be a hell of a lot easier if his dad wasn’t so damn stubborn.

He hadn’t spoken to his parents since his dad fired him, and when he and his brothers were through eating, John thought it was as good a time as any to visit his mother. When he got to his childhood home, a pang of longing settled in his chest. His mother would be rightfully disappointed. But did she agree with him being fired?

He went around to the side of the house and opened the kitchen door. His mother was sitting at the table, working on her laptop. She looked up at him. “Did you think I was going to give you a spanking?”

“I would deserve it.”

“Damn right you would. What were you thinking, Johnny? It didn’t cross your mind that you might wind up in prison for assault of an officer of the law?” His mother shook her head, pushed her seat back, and stood. “Get over here right now.”

John stepped up to his mother. He was taller than she was, so when she hugged him to her chest, he practically got bent in half. “Mom.” His throat constricted on the word. “I’m sorry. I hope you aren’t too disappointed in me.”

She pushed him back. Her eyes were shiny with tears, and they began to slide down her cheeks. His gut tightened. “I’m planning a trip alone.” As an afterthought, she added, “Kay might be able to go with me.”

“I didn’t think Dad would fire me. I’m sorry that I ruined your trip plans. But Mom, he infuriates me,” he said, trying to quell his temper. That was the last thing she needed right now. Not when his dad was being such a stubborn ass. “He couldn’t put me on probation? You should have heard the things Tyson

Lowe was saying to Starr. No man—Christ, no human—should ever talk that way to someone. He was harassing her, Ma.” He fell into a chair beside the table. “What has happened to Dad this past year? Why is he being like this? Dad has always had your back, and if he’d heard how Starr was getting a talkin’ to, Dad would have flipped.”

His mom sat back down in her chair. She grabbed a Kleenex and dabbed at her eyes. “I don’t know. I tend to think he might be suffering a midlife crisis.”

“He’s almost sixty, not forty.”

“It can happen any time. But Blue has been his life for so long, I imagine it’s hard for him to let it go. He’ll be lost, John. If only he would trust me, I could show him the other side. We have a life worth living, and we’re wasting it being stuck here when he has capable children to run the company.”

“So, what are we going to do? Is it still considered kidnapping if we force him to go on a trip with you?”

“How would we do that?”

John shrugged. Had his life really come to this? “Trick him.” John closed his eyes, thinking of scenarios. “You know, even if you could trick him onto a plane, I’m still fired, and I have to admit, it’s not all bad.”

“Shame on you, Johnny.”

“I haven’t had a day off since we closed for Christmas, and that hardly counts.”

“Your dad knows you will be amazing at running the company. Maybe you could extend an olive branch?”

John opened his eyes. “By olive branch, you mean what?”

“Apologize to him. Spill your guts that he was right. You belong at Blue.” She gave him puppy eyes. “I can schedule a trip. You get your job back, and then I can persuade him into a trip. With you guys’ help, of course.” She winked.

“You know how this sounds? Have we really stooped to this level?” John was already going to do whatever she wanted. He knew it. She knew it. She deserved a happy life. It



was the least he could do after getting arrested and losing his job.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” He stood. “Under one condition.”

“Name it.”

“You have to personally invite Starr to Sunday dinner.”

“You’re quite serious about this woman?” His mother smiled. He was sure that she was already hearing wedding bells.

“I’d like to be. But the fact is that she lives in Colorado. She has zero plans on moving here.”

“Does she feel the same way about you?”

The soft, breathy sigh of Starr’s voice telling him she loved him was something he was never going to forget. “She does. But she runs a business back there.”

“Oh. What kind of business is that?”

“A yoga studio.”

His mother smiled. “That’s nice. How long has she been in business?”

“A few years. You know she’s a Young, don’t you? You don’t have anything to say about that?”

His mother shook her head and stood up to face him. “Why would I? You can’t tell your heart who to love. Well, you can tell it, but it isn’t going to listen. It loves who it wants to love.”

“Do you know what happened between Grandpa and Starr’s grandfather?”

“It was so long ago. It’s water under the bridge.”

“It really is, but it would still be a nice story to tell our children.” *Did I just say that?*

His mother put a hand on her hip. “Children? Things are moving quickly.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I’m not sure what’s going to happen with us. I’d love

for her to stay. I love her, but it's like I can't let my heart love her any more knowing she's leaving, if that makes any sense.”

“Completely.”

He checked the time on his phone. “I have to go. Starr asked me to meet with her and her grandfather's attorney about the trust the marina is in.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “I want another day off on Monday, and then I'll put my tail between my legs and go to my daddy,” he said sarcastically. “For you.”

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## Chapter Seventeen

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“CALL ME ALBERT, PLEASE.” Albert Velartti was well past retirement age and shorter than Starr, with pure white hair and a white moustache to match.

Starr shook his hand. “Thanks for meeting with us on such short notice.” She nodded to John, who was standing next to Deanne. “This is John Davenport.”

“How are your parents?” Albert asked Starr.

“Good, sir. Thanks for asking.”

It took Albert a few minutes to get his papers organized, and Starr waited patiently even though she was on pins and needles about the contents of the trust. He pulled a pair of glasses out of his breast pocket—the man still wore a suit even though it was a hundred degrees outside, bless his heart.

Albert cleared his throat and handed Starr paper copies of the trust and will. “Even though you already have digital copies, I always like to hold things and be able to point to the important parts of these documents. Is that okay with you?”

Starr and Deanne shared a smile. Could this old man be any cuter?

“Yes, this is perfect. But I have to be honest. I don’t really know what is in either document.” Starr glanced at John. “I’m not going to be able to sell the property, am I?”

“Oh no. It’s nothing like that at all. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. The Harold and Nancy Young Trust specifies exactly

how Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club should be handled.” He handed Starr a highlighter. “I find if you highlight the important parts, it helps to retain the knowledge and it’s easier to find information later.”

Starr took the cap off and bit her lip. Albert was nice but deliberate. She bit her tongue to keep herself from shouting at him to move more quickly. She saw Deanne and John share a look of impatience and figured they felt the same way.

“I’m ready when you are,” Starr said.

“Alrighty then. Page two of the document. This is important because it mentions that the trust expires in one week, and the property automatically reverts to your parents, Katherine and Doyle Young. It was your grandfather’s intention that your parents keep running the property. His hope was that they would realize the value of what they were being given. He didn’t put the property in their names right away because he figured they would just sell it.” He grabbed her hand and helped her highlight that part.

“I’m sorry,” Starr said. “I’m falling down on my job.”

“That’s okay. This here is a copy of the survey showing the boundary lines of the property included in the trust. And here, you really want to pay attention to this part.”

Prickles of panic and fear covered her toes and fingers. “Got it.”

John squeezed her shoulder, and she was grateful that he was behind her. Literally and figuratively. When she made eye contact with Deanne, she was smiling like she knew a big secret.

“Now, if the Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club, including but not limited to the Shipwreck and Seaside Store, is turning a profit leading up to the day the trust ends, the trust says the property will be gifted to said person or persons who are running it as long as they are above the age of eighteen and not a member of the Davenport family.” Albert cut John a look.

Starr gulped in a deep breath. “So, what are you saying? The property could go to anyone? Like, if Lyle had been in better health to keep it running and making a bunch of money, the trust would have granted him ownership?”

Albert nodded. “Exactly.” He pressed her marker down onto her copy of the paper and highlighted what he’d just gone over. Sheesh, he was a stickler about this highlighter thing. “I know you’ve been improving it, and according to Deanne, the dock slips are rentable. You painted. What are the finances like? Are *you* turning a profit on this place?”

“No.” She wished. Her eyes collided with Deanne’s, and then her gaze went to John. He raised his eyebrows, and that was when it hit her. “If I was turning a profit, I could inherit my grandparents’ marina.”

Hope bloomed inside her chest. The idea that *she* could keep the marina wasn’t something she’d considered—not seriously. She’d had daydreams about it, for sure. About what it would be like to stay here with John and raise a family, to run the marina and start an AquaYoga business on the side. About having cute little kids with brownish-blond hair and freckles from the sun, who would learn how to sail and would love being on the water as much as their daddy. Tears pricked her eyes.

“You okay?” John squeezed her forearm.

“Yeah. Yeah.” She blinked.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, and there’s no pressure. You have one week before the trust expires. And if you have no desire for this property, just keep doing what you’re doing.” Albert gave Starr a big smile.

“He’s right.” Deanne nodded. “I only wanted you to understand everything that you are entitled to. I was sure you didn’t know this and wanted you well-informed before it got to be too late.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” She swallowed, her mind racing. She couldn’t look at John because, damn it, this wasn’t in her plans. The love. The property. Emerald Port, in general.

“If you have any questions, please call. I don’t officially do much work anymore outside of a small circle of folks I know, but you being the granddaughter of Harold Young, I’m happy to help.” Albert turned to John. “And I hear you got into a bit of trouble, young man. If you need a lawyer, I would be happy to extend my services to you as well.”

“Thank you, sir. I would love to take you up on that offer.” John put both of his hands up. “As a paying customer, of course.”

“We can work something out.” Albert reached into his breast pocket and handed John a card and then one to Starr. “Here is my card. Call me when you’re ready, and Ms. Young—good luck.”

“Thank you so much.” Starr couldn’t seem to utter any more words. John and Deanne walked Albert to the door and saw him out.

The marina could be hers.

Well, could it?

She had one week, and honestly, she had no clue what would be defined as a profit. Maybe she should have asked. Because right now, aside from the electricity and water bills and the random supplies Lyle bought to keep the place running, there weren’t many expenses. Besides the cost of the paint and shingles, she couldn’t think of much else. There was no loan. No big overhead on the restaurant or convenience store since both were shut down. Just taxes and insurance, so far.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. Why was she thinking about this? John and Deanne’s voices floated from down the hallway, and Starr set the papers down. If anything, she owed Deanne a big thank you for making sure Starr was enlightened about what was in the trust.

“Does that change your mind about listing the property with me?” Deanne asked. “Or would you like to get things signed?”

“I need a day to digest. I wasn’t expecting any of this. Thank you for setting this up,” she said as John meandered out onto the patio, sliding the door shut softly behind him. Who was she kidding? She knew what she wanted if she listened to what her heart was telling her. But her mind... That was different.

“How is the coffee shop?” Starr asked Deanne.

“I sold it.”

“Congratulations.”

“It’ll work well. I sold it to a great girl. In fact, she’s your age. If you decide to stay, you guys could become friends.” She winked. “Don’t think I don’t know you’ve become fond of our kale cucumber smoothie.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“They are pretty amazing. Anyway, I’ll leave you to it.” Deanne’s sandals made clomping noises on the tile as she walked to the front door and let herself out.

Starr closed her eyes, imagining her future life.

Somehow, she wasn’t surprised by what she saw. Little kids running around the cottage and jumping into the harbor off their private docks, just like she and her sister had done growing up. She opened her eyes. John was standing on the patio with his back to her, facing the water. He was in need of a haircut because the ends along his neck were starting to curl up.

As if he knew she was watching him, he turned his head and glanced at her over his shoulder. He winked, and her heart knew exactly what she needed to do. The universe was dropping hints every which way, and she wasn’t stupid enough to ignore them. Especially not after learning about the trust.

She moved toward him, put her hand on the sliding glass door to the patio, and pulled it open. It was time to give up on expanding her studio in Boulder and walk into her future.

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“YOU SURE LOOK HAPPY,” John told Starr when she came out on the patio. Nothing more beautiful than seeing her eyes light up when she smiled. John pulled her into his chest, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“I am happy.” She leaned back and met his gaze. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything. Always. You know that.”

“What if I stayed? What about us?”

Hope lit up in his chest. She was considering staying in Emerald Port. “I’d do everything in my power to make sure you got over your motion sickness on *My Way*.”

She laughed and playfully tapped his chest. “I’m serious.”

“I’m serious too. But aside from that, I’d devote my life to making you happy. I’ve never shared love like this with someone. Where I go to sleep thinking about you and wake up thinking about you and where my entire world revolves around you.” He gripped the back of her neck gently.

“The universe has aligned everything perfectly. From getting me back to Emerald Port to meeting you to Deanne being able to hire Timmy to fix the slips so quickly with zero cost to me. With Albert and the trust. I didn’t plan to fall in love during the short time I was going to be here. But I did. And I don’t want to leave. I love being here. I love the marina. I love you.”

He tilted his head to the sky. “Thank fuck.” He picked her up and spun her around. “I love you. What about your business?”

She shrugged. “I’ll figure something out. Plus, I really like your idea of water yoga on the paddleboards.”

He let out a whoop of joy because his chest was so freaking full that he didn’t know what else to do with all of the



emotions. “My mom is going to invite you to Sunday dinner.” He set her down. “And she’s happy about it.”

“She is?”

“Oh yeah. We have a plan. I’m going to get my job back at Blue, and then we’re going to oust my father.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “How are you going to do that?”

“She’s working on the details as we speak. But she’s going to plan and book that month-long trip to Africa, and once I have my job back, we’re going to trick him and send him on the trip.”

“How are you going to get your job back?”

“That’s the worst part. I have to apologize to my dad. Grovel. Plead. Agree with anything he says.” He choked on the words. “I have to take one for the team.”

“Yeah. Team Mom. Go, Rose.” She smoothed a hand down his chest. “You are the perfect son and the perfect man.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I just got into trouble with the law a few days ago.”

“For being a real man and not allowing another guy to treat a lady like crap.”

“I like how you look at me like I’m a hero for that.”

“I have your back, John. Maybe that was a little bit unorthodox, but either way, I’m here for it. I’m here for you.” She moved her hand down even farther, past his belt. “I’m here for a lot of things when it comes to you.”

“Oh yeah?” he teased. “Why don’t you show me exactly what you’re here for.” He smiled, making sure to bare his teeth, and added, “With your mouth.”

His talk was rough, but the way her eyes lit up suggested she liked it. “Lucky for you, I don’t have to be asked twice.”

She slid open the patio door and dragged him along by his wrist into her bedroom. She made quick work of his jeans and lifted his shirt up his chest, and he finished pulling it off. “This

is me paying you back for that night you put me on video and didn't do anything to relieve yourself."

She dropped to her knees, looped her fingers into his belt buckle, and shimmied his shorts down his hips, where they pooled at his feet. Instead of freeing him from his briefs, Starr gripped his dick through the fabric and squeezed him. She used her fingertips to outline the head. His dick throbbed while he watched her be so enamored with him.

She pulled his briefs down, and his cock bobbed against her cheek, making her laugh. "So ready for me." She glanced up from beneath her eyelashes.

His heart caught in his throat.

*Fuck this.*

He hauled her up off the floor despite her resistance and threw her on the bed. He kicked off his clothes and leaned over her.

"What are you doing?" she squealed. "This is supposed to be about you."

"Making love to you." He locked her head in place with his hands and memorized all the colors swirling in her eyes. Her long lashes. The beauty mark beneath her eye. "This is about us."

He pressed his mouth against her lips and slowly devoured her. He went at an exacting pace, being sure to savor every inch of her sweet skin. He let his guard down—as if he hadn't already, but this time, it was different. She was going to stay, and the two of them could build a life together. Raise a family. She could run her own business, and he could help her when she needed it. "Spread your legs open."

She did as he asked, and he used his thumb to trail down her lips, using her wetness to coat her and make her glisten.

"You wreck my heart. In a good way." He slipped his fingers inside her, loving the way she arched into him like a cat. "You've changed my life." He used his other hand to flick her clit while he moved his fingers in and out of her. "You want kids, Starr?"

She moaned and nodded, pressing her hips against his hands like she couldn't get enough. "Your kids. I want to be pregnant with your son. Two sons. However many you'll let me have."

She tightened around his fingers, and he thrust in and out of her harder. Deeper. Faster. She arched off the mattress and cupped her tits in her hands.

"John." Her voice was between a whine and groan. "I'm coming."

*Fucking sexy.*

He let her ride it out before he pulled his fingers out of her and brought them to his mouth. "I'm going to cherish you forever." He shifted and pressed his cock to her opening. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life making you happy. Giving you everything you want."

He slid inside her, and when she put her hands along his arms and forced him down so that his face was level with hers, his heart wept. She had the keys to his kingdom and had finally turned the lock hard enough to open the doors.

She locked her arms around his shoulders. "Kiss me," she whispered.

When his mouth met hers, his body went to a whole new level. The passion was all-consuming. Intense. Raw. The best he'd ever had. When her nails dug into his back and she started panting against his ear, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer.

"Yes. There. Harder. John. Don't stop. More. More."

Sweat dripped between their bodies. At any second, he was sure the headboard of the bed was going to punch a hole in the wall.

But it didn't matter. When Starr convulsed around his cock, he came, the sensation tilting him off his axis and sending him into the Milky Way. He bit into her neck, letting all the sensations wash over him. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. He cleared his throat. And kept his face buried in her neck.

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## Chapter Eighteen

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MEETING ALL of John's brothers Saturday morning hadn't been as intimidating as Starr had thought it would be. They were all complete gentlemen and respectful of Starr the entire weekend they worked on the roof. John had insisted they didn't need Starr's help since he'd also lined up a few of their friends. With eight men working on the roof, how could she argue? But feeding eight men had sucked the life out of her. The roof looked amazing, though, and she'd do it again in a heartbeat if she had to.

Starr had submitted listings everywhere humanly possible that she had boat slips for rent—had even told all the guys. But nothing was getting results. Of the two slips that had been occupied when she came to Emerald Port, one was rented to Lyle. She had rented one more slip over the weekend. Only three total. Not nearly enough. She'd texted with Lyle back and forth and told him about the will. He was happy, and she set up a time for lunch next week. She knew there would never be a way to repay him, but she owed him a thank-you for everything he'd done for the marina.

It was silly of her for thinking that turning a profit would be quick and easy. It wasn't. Every day she watched boats on the harbor, watched the bridge going up and down to let boats through to the ocean, so plenty of boats were out there. Why wouldn't their owners rent from her?

Frustrated, she ripped up the last ad copy after she found a typo and threw it in the trash. She was going to start posting

the ads around town. She was borderline desperate because it only made sense for her to stay in Emerald Port if she inherited the marina. Otherwise, she had nothing, and she was not going to depend on John for everything.

Her doorbell rang, cutting into her thoughts. “Coming.” She pushed out of her grandfather’s office chair and went to open the door. A woman with light-brown hair stood on the porch, and Starr knew immediately who it was. She opened the door. Their gazes met, and Starr was instantly happier. “Mrs. Davenport.”

“Call me Rose. It’s so lovely to finally meet you in person. John has said so much about you.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” She pushed the door open wider. “Come in. Would you like some iced tea?”

“I’m fine, thank you. I came to invite you to dinner tonight. We would be honored to have you.” Rose put a hand to her chest. “It would be a pleasure to get to know you. John has never had a woman capture his heart the way you have. You are quite a legend.”

Starr’s cheeks heated. “I doubt that. If you don’t think it would cause a ruckus, I would love to come. He mentioned that you were going to get ahold of me.” Starr winced. “I’m not sure your husband will be as welcoming though.”

Rose raised her eyebrows in question. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“John didn’t tell you? Mr. Davenport came over and made no bones about not liking me. I asked him to get off my property.”

Rose’s entire face went beet red, and Starr closed her eyes, hating that she’d unintentionally embarrassed the older woman. “That husband of mine needs to shape up. This is the last line he has crossed.”

“Oh no. Please, I don’t need an apology.” Starr shrugged. “He did what he thought was necessary at the time. Just like any parent would do. No hard feelings. Plus, John mentioned that he can be a bit... stubborn.”

“Stubborn? My husband is the mule of stubborn.” Rose gave Starr a warm smile that reached her eyes. “I expect to see you tonight. We pushed the time back to seven instead of six o’clock. John texted me. They’ll be finished up by then.”

“Can I bring dessert?”

Rose clasped her hands together. “Perfect. Whatever you bring, make sure it’s enough for a crowd. The boys are hogs when it comes to dessert.”

“I would expect nothing less.” Starr put her hand out. “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

Rose brushed her hand away and gave Starr a large, warm hug. “Oh, honey, it’s so nice to meet you. My first son is finally in love, and you’re a doll. I can see how he fell so quickly.” Rose released her, and the warm, welcoming, motherly hug was a reminder of something that Starr didn’t get from her own mother. The loss was ferocious. She hadn’t known what she had been missing until Rose had hugged her.

“You okay?” Rose asked. “Don’t tell me you’re not a hugger.”

“No. Nothing like that. In fact, I liked that very much. My own mother is not a hugger.”

“You aren’t close with your parents?” Rose frowned, like it was impossible.

“No. They lead a different lifestyle than I do.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. “Meaning?”

“Meaning...” Starr shifted focus. Rose was so kind, and Starr wanted to get to know her better. Especially now while she had her all to herself. Starr could only imagine what Sunday dinner was going to sound like with ten people. “If you have the time, I would like for you to come inside and have that glass of iced tea. Now is the perfect time to get to know one another before dinner this evening.”

The lines around Rose’s eyes crinkled when she smiled, and Starr decided that was the most genuine smile she’d seen

from a motherly figure in a long time. She liked it, and it felt good to know that it was directed at her. “I would love to.”

Once she got their drinks, they sat inside at the dining room table overlooking the harbor. “Thank you. I’m glad I came over,” Rose said.

“Me too. You were asking about my parents, and the answer is they are free spirits.”

Rose cocked her head. “Free spirits?”

“They live in the moment. They still party like they are teenagers. No responsibilities, and the ones they do have, they don’t take very seriously.”

“I see.” Rose set her glass of tea down. “Tell me about the marina. You own it now? How did you end up here?”

Starr shrugged. “I don’t own the marina. At least, not yet. If I could get it to turn a profit in the next few days and prove that it’s on an uphill run, I would inherit it.”

“I’m somewhat surprised your parents aren’t the ones inheriting it.”

Starr wiped the condensation off her glass. “It’s a long, complicated story. Goes back to my parents being big spenders and irresponsible with money. My grandfather set up a will where he put the entire property into a trust. My parents got all profits from it. The trust expires on Thursday, and there is a stipulation in the will that says anyone who is running the property and shows a profit gets to inherit it. But it obviously has to be before the trust expires. If the marina comes out of the trust, they will inherit it, and their plan is to sell it.”

“Are you okay moving here and making a life?” Rose reached out and touched her hand. “I know you love my son, but woman to woman, the best thing you can do for yourself is make a decision that is best for *you*. What will help *you* in the future and what will give *you* the life you love.”

Tears pricked at Starr’s eyes. *Why am I crying?* She blinked them back before they could stream down her cheeks. “Thank you. But the truth is I’m not leaving anything in Colorado behind by moving down here permanently. My yoga



studio. But I wouldn't leave it behind. I can just bring it down here with me. Granted, I'll miss my clients. Emerald Port would be a great place for a yoga studio. Being here these past few weeks has reminded me of how much I miss this place. It deserves to shine. I want to put those memories and smiles on other people's faces—the same I've always had from this place having touched me in a special way.”

“It sounds like you know exactly where you need to be then.”

Starr nodded. “I do. I didn't know for a long time, but once the idea was presented to me, it was hard to ignore. This decision feels right in my heart.” Starr's cheeks heated. “As does having a relationship with your son.”

Rose glanced at her watch. “I'm glad we had this little chat. I better get home and make sure I have all the fixings for dinner.”

“Of course.” Starr and Rose stood at the same time. “Thank you for coming here today.”

“If you ever need another woman to talk to—call me.” She picked up a pen and jotted her number down on her napkin. “I'm always around.”

“Except for when you go to Africa.”

Rose clasped a hand to her chest. “I sure hope so. That will be the trip of a lifetime.”

“It would be so beautiful. They say that once you go to Africa, it will always be in your heart.”

The two of them walked together down the hall to the front door. “That is a lovely saying. If I can get my husband on board, I know we will have a wonderful time. I'm sorry—and quite ashamed—he didn't treat you well.”

Starr waved her off. “Don't apologize for his actions. Hopefully he'll come around and realize that not all Youngs are like my grandfather and great-grandfather. However they were.” Starr shook her head in exasperation. “No one seems to really know the history of what happened between our families but your husband.”

Rose looked like she was going to say something and then seemed to think better of it. She smiled and waved. "I'll see you tonight. Don't forget the dessert."

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JOHN'S STOMACH was full of nerves as he led Starr up the walk to his parents' house. What was his father going to say? How would he act when he laid eyes on Starr? He pressed his hand to her lower back. "Would you like me to enter first? Looks like everyone is already here."

"Yes, I would. I would really appreciate it if you would hold the dessert."

John took the stack of pans from her. When he'd picked her up, it was all he could do not to dig into the apple crumb cake. She'd made a peach one and an apple one, but the apple had reminded him of his grandmother's baking. He wasn't a big peach fan. "Can you trust me not to eat it if I hold it?"

Starr laughed, but he could see how nervous she was about walking into the house. "I better be able to trust you with my goodies." She let out a sigh. "Now or never. Let's get this show on the road."

"You going to be okay?"

"Yes. I'm just walking around like a live wire, but it'll be fine. Your mom's visit helped. I just hope your dad doesn't kill me."

"He won't. Come on."

John pushed open the door, and she followed him inside. His mom glanced up from the oven, and the second she saw Starr, she jumped to attention and met Starr in the middle of the kitchen for a hug.

"So glad you came."

What was he? Chopped liver?

"You're never that excited to see me." John set the pans on the counter while Raven and Reed tried to lift the foil edges to

see what Starr had brought.

“Eh. You’re old news.” His mother teased him. “Girls, have you met Starr yet? Johnny, where are your manners?”

“Starr, this is Raven. And this is Reed. This one is Ruby. My little sisters.”

Starr gave them both a big smile. “It’s really nice to meet the three of you. John has spoken very highly about all of you.”

“Don’t let him fool you. He’s never said anything nice about us. He doesn’t even know we’re here unless it’s to pick on us.”

“Hey. That doesn’t mean I’m not proud you’re my sisters.” John put his hands up. “So there’s that.” He shared a glance with Starr. “You ready to go and sit down?”

The second they turned into the dining room, his dad was standing there looking as grumpy as ever. John straightened his back. He did not want to get into it with his father. Not today. Not with Starr present.

“John.”

“Dad.” He squeezed Starr’s hand. “You’ve met Starr Young.”

“I owe you an apology.” His dad shifted so he was standing in front of Starr. “I am sorry for going to the marina unannounced and acting like an entitled know-it-all.”

John peeked at Starr.

“Thank you,” she said. “And I’m sorry I got your son in trouble. I’ll try to be a better influence.” She smiled. “Let’s not hold a grudge.”

His dad tilted his head. “Not hold a grudge? But we’re Davenports and Youngs. Isn’t grudge the word of the day?”

“Don’t you think that should all be a thing of the past? Let’s not let two people who are no longer in our lives dictate our actions. What do you say?” Starr held out her hand to John’s father.

It took his dad a full five seconds, but he finally reached out and shook her hand. Thank God. Judge, Jake, and Jersey started whooping for joy, bringing a new layer of blush to her cheeks.

“Time to eat.” His mother and two sisters came into the dining room, and John led Starr to where he usually sat. Now there was another seat between him and Judge for Starr. He swallowed at the emotions that clogged in his throat.

“You can sit here.”

She smiled up at him, and he was so fucking proud of her. She was brave. Nice. Unafraid to speak her mind. And those were a few of the things he loved about her. He gave her a chaste kiss before they sat.

“None of that at the dinner table,” Judge joked.

“At least I have a woman at the dinner table with me,” John pointed out. That comment got the rest of his siblings talking over one another about how none of them had dates, or if they were dating anybody, none of the people were important enough to bring to dinner.

“Shall we pray?” Dad asked.

They all held hands, and he kept an eye on Starr out of the corner of his eye. She seemed perfectly fine praying and already had her chin tucked to her chest and her eyes closed.

“Thank you, Lord, for blessing us with this amazing meal and giving us the opportunity to fill our lives with new loved ones. Thank you for keeping our family safe and healthy. In your name we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone said in unison.

John watched Starr as she interacted with his family. He wanted her to feel comfortable and at ease and hoped like hell this wasn't too intimidating for her. The fact that she'd already spent the past two days with his brothers really helped. She and Jersey were talking about Belle and how Starr hoped she'd be able to meet her soon.

“Does she ever come to family dinners?” Starr asked Jersey.

“Not really.” Jersey glanced at their mom. “Belle’s been to—what? One or two dinners with us?”

“Probably. Not too many.”

“She’s hard to pin down,” Jersey said. “When she’s free, we’re usually playing video games together.”

John glanced at Dad, who had been quiet all through dinner, but considering the presence of his frown lines, John knew he wasn’t happy. Perhaps John should have apologized before they ate. Maybe that would’ve eased the strain. He had to give his old man props, though, for apologizing to Starr. John knew that had come from a deep place and that it normally wouldn’t have happened.

Once dinner was cleared and the dessert eaten, John turned to Dad. “Can I talk to you in the office?”

“Now?” His dad raised his eyebrows.

John looked around the house. The women were all outside on the patio sharing a bottle of wine, and his brothers were in the kitchen doing cleanup. “Now would be the best time.”

“Let me get us a drink, and I’ll meet you in there.”

John made his way down the hallway, passing all the standard photographs of him and his siblings in school portraits and senior photos as well as family photographs that had been taken every few years since the early nineties on the same chunk of landscape.

John took a seat, and a few seconds later his dad entered carrying two tumblers, each with a single cube of ice. His dad handed him his drink. “Bourbon.”

“Thanks.” His dad lifted his glass to John’s, and that act alone was enough to break the barrier. John considered the gesture to be an apology, and that was a nice starting point, but this silent communication was his father bridging the gap. *Hey, son, I still love you.*

Their glasses clinked in the quiet, and they both took a long swallow. John had always loved the way the whiskey burned traveling down his throat and heated up his stomach. “Dad, there is no place I’d rather be than at Blue. It’s a part of who I am. It’s like a sibling, honestly. Been there my whole life. Sometimes it’s a love-hate relationship, but in the end, it’s where I belong.”

“I always envisioned you taking over. I probably pushed it on you more than you liked.”

“I’ve always envisioned taking over when you retired. But, Dad, come on, when are you going to retire? I deserve the respect you’ve instilled in us to show other people. I deserve it from you.” John took another sip of his drink. “I feel like I’m in limbo. One day I’m good enough to run it, the next I’m not, and you’re showing no signs of leaving.”

“When our clients get wind of you harassing a cop, I’m sure our reputation will take a tumble.”

“I’m working with a lawyer about that. I’ve never acted out the way I did that day in my life. I can assure you that I have control over my actions.”

“What changed that day? That Young woman?”

John gritted his teeth. His dad had apologized to her, but John knew it would take some time for him to accept Starr and their relationship. Starr being invited to dinner was already a step in the right direction. “Yes. Do you remember when I was about nine or ten and we were at that yacht convention in Ireland? It is my first real memory of the business of yachts and how much money is involved in them.”

John’s dad nodded. “I remember. Your mom was worried that I would lose you in the hustle and bustle of things. That you would get kidnapped.” They both laughed, and his dad chuckled. “Which is why I almost died when you stayed behind looking at some booth. I turned for one second, and you were gone. You had simply stopped to look at a ship, and I’d continued walking.”

“*My Way.*” The memory flooded John like it had been yesterday and not more than twenty years ago. “If you remember that, then you probably remember when we came upon that captain talking trash to that young lady. He was abusing her, breaking her down every which way.”

“I do. Not my fondest memory.”

“Dad, you punched that guy right in front of me. I was floored. I couldn’t believe my dad had stuck up for a complete stranger like that. Not to mention how cool I thought it was that I had a dad who would defend a woman’s honor. Especially someone you didn’t even know.”

“I see where you’re going with this.” His father’s frown lines disappeared.

“Yes, I did an unspeakable act. But Tyson is also a chickenshit who hides behind that badge and uses his power to verbally abuse women. I don’t regret what I did to him, but I do regret that I crossed a line with him being a person who serves our community.” John took another sip. “Come on, you know me. I’m not that kind of man. I have the utmost respect for the people who put their lives on the line for us. I wouldn’t have done that if it hadn’t been warranted. Just like I’ve never seen you punch anyone since that day in Ireland.”

His dad closed his eyes for a brief second and gave John a small smile. “I know, son.”

John swallowed. The words needed to be said. He took a quick sip, coating his dry throat. “I’m sorry.”

“For hitting Officer Lowe? Don’t be. I understand.”

“No, Dad. I’m sorry for disappointing you. I’m sorry that I’ve not given you enough conviction to make you feel comfortable enough to quit the job and run off into the sunset with Mom.”

“It’s not that.” His dad raised a hand in the air. “I trust you. Hell, you’ll probably run it better than I ever did.”

“That’s not true.” Tears stung John’s eyes. He was not letting that happen. He blinked rapidly. “You’ve done a great job. I’m scared I won’t be able to fill your shoes.”

John's dad leaned forward, looking toward the floor. "I've kept this from your mom long enough, but the truth is that I'm scared. Who will I be once I quit working? Blue is all I know. It's all I'm good at. What in the hell will I do?"

John swallowed, glancing away. Seeing his dad show this small amount of emotion was almost too much for John to handle. But as weird as that made him feel, he didn't want to make his dad regret the admission. "You'll be able to improve your golf game. That will take a tremendous effort and hours of work on your part."

His dad lifted his head, and they locked eyes. John grinned, and his dad busted up laughing. "You better watch your back on the course, son."

"Well, consider it a challenge then." John took the last drink of his bourbon. "But for what it's worth, Dad, you'll be fine. These kinds of things happen when you retire. Think of it as a new beginning. You're already a good husband, you'll just have more time to devote to doing it well. You and Mom will have the time of your life together. She's already planning trips for you guys for the next year," he joked.

"She wants to go to Africa. Says she's planning a trip, but I've finally managed to get one over on her." His father patted his own chest. "I've already booked the trip."

*Well, shit.*

Surprised didn't cover it. John was shocked that his dad was pulling something like that off. The question was which sibling was helping him? Because he knew his dad wasn't savvy enough to do it on his own. Should John tell him about the plan his mother had concocted? That she had also already secured travel arrangements? At least, he was pretty sure she had.

"You don't think that was a good idea?" His dad's question cut into his thoughts.

"No. It's a great idea. She's going to be shocked as hell." John laughed. They were both going to be in for a surprise.



“Look. Can I have my job back, please? Actually, could I have your job?”

His dad nodded. “I would be honored if you took over my role in the company.” His father stood and put out his hand. “I’ll make the announcement tomorrow.”

“I’ll begin on Tuesday. I haven’t had a Monday off in ages.” John stood and went around the desk. He gripped his dad’s hand and pulled him in for a hug. “Thank you.”

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## Chapter Nineteen

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THE WATER WAS STILL and dazzling in the harbor Monday morning. Starr inhaled the fresh, beachy air, and a warm feeling settled inside her heart. This was going to be her home, and she couldn't be happier about it. The only problem was that now that the new shingles had been laid on the roof, she had officially gone in the hole.

Why wasn't anyone leasing the boat slips? Had word not gone out far and wide enough? What the hell? She was in a major bind at this point, and even closing her yoga studio back home wasn't going to be enough to help the situation.

She was so close to making a new life in Emerald Port a reality. There had to be another way to get the marina earning money. Quickly. In a few days. Max.

Starr went into Warrior Pose and inhaled deeply. She let out the breath slowly, allowing her mind to come up with possibilities to earn additional income at the marina. She needed boats there. Without boats, it wasn't a marina. Without boats, there were no customers. Starr thought it was going to be so easy. Guess the joke was on her.

She should have known better. Her grandfather wouldn't have put stipulations in the trust if it was so easy to make a profit. Ugh. The struggle.

"Hey there. Beautiful morning, isn't it?" Deanne's voice was much too cheery this morning.

Starr broke pose and turned. Deanne was in a pair of jean shorts and a pink tank top. It was the first time Starr had seen her dressed down. “Wow. You must not have work today. You look like you’re ready to go boating.”

“I am. My husband and I have a monthly boat club where we meet up with other boaters. Nothing special. Just a way to hang out and get out on the water. Have some fun.” Deanne glanced around. “How is this coming along?”

“It’s not. I can’t get anyone to rent the slips, and since we put on a new roof, the marina is officially spending more money than it’s making. Which means I won’t be inheriting it unless I can get it turned around. My problem is that there are no get-rich-quick schemes I can think of to help me. Everything takes more money. Convenience store? Money. I can’t even imagine what it would cost to get the gas pumps inspected and up and running. The restaurant is out of the question.” Starr cut back on the anger in her voice. This wasn’t Deanne’s fault. “I’m taking any ideas you might have.”

“I wish you had known the terms of the trust a few months ago, giving you the proper time to get it going.”

“I know. But the stars weren’t aligned then. It’s my own fault for not reading my grandfather’s paperwork. I didn’t know. My parents might not know either. If they do, they wouldn’t have mentioned it because anyone inheriting the property—besides them—is the last thing they would want.”

“It’s too bad your parents aren’t more supportive. Is there any way you could convince them to make a partnership with you and allow you to run the marina and give them a piece of the pie every month once it starts making money?”

“Any kind of business venture with my parents sounds like a nightmare. I wouldn’t wish that upon my worst enemy.”

Deanne laughed. “Well, okay then. I stopped by to check on you. Let me know if you need me for anything. Text me.”

“I will. Thanks for checking in.”

After Deanne was gone, Starr made her way into her grandfather’s office. She wasn’t sure what she was looking for,

but something was drawing her. Maybe she could find the answer in his office. Of course, she wouldn't know what that was even if it bit her on the leg, but she was desperate.

“Come on, Grandpa. What do you have for me?” Starr opened the first drawer of his filing cabinet. It contained lots of folders laden with old receipts and papers that were no longer relevant. What was it with the older generation thinking they needed to keep every receipt they'd ever gotten? Starr side-eyed a receipt for a Hershey's candy bar and a Coca-Cola. She crumpled it up and threw it into the trash bin.

An hour later Starr was no closer to finding anything that could help her than she was when she started. Defeated, she threw herself on the office couch and closed her eyes. Memories of her and John sitting in this same spot flitted through her mind. There was something niggling at her brain though. Not about their hot sex but something about their grandparents.

She couldn't come up with it, and she didn't know if it would help her turn a profit, but it was a fleeting thought that was just beyond her grasp. Something she couldn't quite remember. “Please, God, just give me the answers. What is it?”

She stood and paced, her gaze landing on every single one of the blueprints her grandfather and John's grandfather had created together. The designs had meant enough to her grandfather to keep even though they had the old Starboard Ships logo that both grandfathers had owned together.

*Light bulb.*

That was it. She raced back to his desk and pulled open the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. Inside were papers on limited liability companies, and she specifically remembered seeing one that bore the Starboard Ships name that was on the blueprints that hung on the wall. The file folder was thick. Sure enough, the papers were the same, and after she sorted through some forms, she had confirmation that there had been a joint partnership between John Davenport and Harold Young.

No surprise. Not really.

It made sense that the two of them had a partnership and made even more sense that her grandfather had kept all the documents, detailing everything from the beginning of the partnership to its end. But even after sifting through the papers, something was still bothering her. She just couldn't put her finger on it.

The doorbell rang, causing her to jump. "Calm down, Starr. You still act like you shouldn't be in here."

She could see John's outline on the other side of the door via the side windows, and her heart rate sped up. He was dressed in black shorts and another one of his standard polo shirts with a collar. This one had a little emblem of a golf club on the front. Once she opened the door, he pulled her into his arms.

"Hello to you too," she murmured against his lips.

"Tomorrow is my first day back on the job. As CEO." His tongue danced along the seam of her mouth, prying it apart and then sucking in her bottom lip between his teeth.

"I know. I was there last night, remember?"

He slid his hands down her sides and tugged her closer to him. His erection pressed against her belly. "Yes. Which is why you should know that I need you now. And for all of tonight. For all of forever."

His mouth moved to her neck, and she swallowed the bad news that she wasn't going to be able to hang on to the marina.

"Make love to me." He slid his hands through her hair and tipped her face up, exposing the length of her neck.

She didn't need the marina. All she needed was him. With him, anything was possible. "Always. Come on."

He let go of her leg, and she got as far as the living room before John's arms were around her waist and he was squeezing her from behind. His mouth was hot against her ear, and she welcomed his hand sliding down the front of her shorts. She arched against him the second his fingers came

into contact with her clit. “I can’t wait long enough to get to your room.”

He slid down her backside and pressed his face along her thigh while he expertly undid her shorts and pulled them down along with her panties. She turned in his arms. She was beyond ready for him. His tongue soothed the heat along her seam, and he buried his fingers deep inside her.

“John.” She crumpled to the floor, and his deep chuckle against her legs and thighs made her laugh with him.

“I literally just knocked you off your feet with my tongue.”

“Now that I’m down here, make me see stars.”

“Oh, kitten. It’s gonna be me seeing stars. With the way you’ve managed to upend my world and my soul, I’ll be seeing stars the rest of my life.”

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“NEVER THOUGHT I’d see the day. How does it feel being the big dog?” Jersey plopped down in the seat across from John.

First day on the job at Blue Horizons as president and he was already considering workdays starting on Tuesdays instead of Mondays. “Feels fan-fucking-tastic.” John stretched his arms behind his head. “But that was only because today was the first day. I suspect the rest of the week is going to suck.”

“Yeah, you’re going to have all of us lined up with our proposals.”

“Fine by me. You know I have all of your backs. The proposals just need to make sense for the company. But know that I have an open mind and am happy to hear you out. I think we can take this to the next level.”

“I agree.”

“Johnny.” His mother stood at the door with a large smile on her face. She raised her eyebrows and pointed to Jersey.

“Belle is milling around downstairs. Tell me you did not leave her waiting for you.”

Jersey checked his phone. “Crap. I better go. Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Meeting on Thursday. Nine a.m.,” John yelled after his brother.

Jersey popped his head back into the office. “See, Mom? He’s been here for less than eight hours, and he’s already letting it go to his head.” Jersey winked and took off.

“What can I do for you?” John waved his mother inside and pointed to the chair Jersey had vacated.

“You’re not going to believe this.”

“Oh, I might. Try me.” *Their Africa trip.* “You’re on cloud nine.”

“I sure am. I’m so happy he’s finally done.”

“Done done?”

She shrugged. “Mostly done. He has some things to tidy up and his office to clean out. But he promised me that he isn’t going to be coming in every day all day anymore. That ended today.”

John was relieved to hear that as well. “Excellent to hear.” Nothing worse than having someone look over his shoulder while he worked, and that would be exactly what his dad would do. “But that’s not all?”

“No.” She leaned forward in her seat and steepled her hands together. “We’re going to Africa.” She let out a squeal. “For two months.”

“What? That’s crazy.”

“He booked us a trip for a month—just like I did—with the help of Ruby. It’s always the quiet ones that surprise us. Anyway, it so happens that his trip lines up after the one I booked. There are a few days’ time between, but we decided last night that we’re going to stay and enjoy the time.”

“Africa for two months, huh?” The reality of being in charge of Blue set in. It was exciting, for sure. Perhaps a little terrifying. But he was born for this. “I’m very happy for you, Ma.”

“I can’t wait. We leave in a week. I have to pack.” She stood and went to the door. “Don’t do anything crazy while I’m gone like get married or go to jail. Nothing foolish, Johnny.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll be fine. I haven’t even asked Starr to marry me yet, so you’re good there.” He couldn’t believe his parents would be gone for two whole months. There went Sunday dinner. He would miss it, but he would also have a little more free time to be with Starr.

She raised her brows. “Yet? So there’s a chance?”

“Oh, hell yes, there is a chance.”

“Good. Oh, and John?”

“Yes, Mother?”

“Don’t think just because we won’t be here for two months that Sunday dinner is cancelled. I fully expect all of you to still be there.”

*What was it with mothers?* “I would never think of missing Sundays.”

She winked. “Great. It will be the perfect time for your father and me to check in with everyone. We plan to FaceTime.”

“Wonderful.”

“Talk to you soon.”

John leaned back in his chair and gazed out the window. His life was at a turning point, and it felt damn good. His phone vibrated with an incoming text.

**Starr:** Hey there, Mr. CEO. How was the first day on the job?

**John:** It was pretty damn good.



It took her a second to respond, but when she did, it was with a picture of herself. Lying in her bed wearing frilly lingerie. He zoomed in on the image. See-through lingerie.

**John:** Why are you so naughty?

**Starr:** Because you love it.

**John:** I'm coming over.

**Starr:** About time. It's taken you long enough already.

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## Chapter Twenty

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THE WEEK WAS FLYING BY, and she hadn't packed as much of the cottage as she'd have liked to at this point considering it was already Wednesday and she'd been here for two and a half weeks. Her cell phone rang. Talking to her father right now wasn't something Starr wanted to do, but she answered anyway. "Hello?" Best to get it over with. Since she was packing away a bunch of kitchen items, it was harmless to chat. Briefly.

"How's our property going?" Her dad's indifference to the marina set her on edge.

"It's fine. In a few days, you can do what you want with it." She'd managed to rent two additional boat slips, but the marina was still barely breaking even. Her chest had a physical ache that didn't go away. Even when she was with John—and she was the happiest she'd been since she could remember—the pain of losing something so near and dear had become a permanent part of her.

"Your ma and I talked, and for you being such a big help and staying down there for all this time, you know, helping us, we wanted to do something to thank you."

Starr didn't get her hopes up that it would involve the marina. "Oh yeah? What would that be?"

"Well, we thought we'd take a road trip to Emerald Port to surprise you. Take you out to dinner while we're there."

“You’re coming here? Why?” She stopped wrapping a large glass bowl that had been her grandmother’s favorite dish. “Now?”

“Oh no, not now. We thought we’d give it until the trust was done. That way we’d officially have our hands on the property. How is the stuff going with the real estate agent? Any big bites yet? A bidding war? That would be killer.”

Starr panicked, unsure of how to answer. “Yeah. Okay. Everything is going fine. We’ve had a few showings. No bidding wars yet.”

“What kind of Realtor did you pick? The marina is a prime location. Who in the hell wouldn’t want it?”

“Dad? Are you there? Hello? I think you’re breaking up. I can’t hear you. I’ll call you back when I get more bars.” Starr pressed the end-call button and dropped her phone on the table. No way. But somehow she had to make sure they didn’t drive down here before the week was up.

This called for major sister enforcement.

She dialed Summer.

“Hello?”

“I need your help,” Starr said.

Summer didn’t even ask what she was talking about. “I assume you heard about Mom and Dad’s crazy plan to drive down to Florida? It doesn’t even make sense since you’ll come home once this is over.”

Yes, she should be thinking of heading home. Not staying here... “You cannot let them. Go slash the tires on the VW. Do whatever it takes.”

“Relax. You know how they are. Full of talk. Besides, the VW has been having engine trouble. I’ve had to take Mom to the store twice this past week because they can’t get it started. There’s no way they’d make it to Emerald Port. Thank God Grandpa didn’t give them the ability to sell the marina right away.”

Starr let out a sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

“At least not yet, but all he did was prolong the inevitable. Not sure why, but... Wait a minute. What’s the big secret you’re keeping down there?” Her sister laughed. “Or who?”

“Well, there is a who, but that’s not the issue. I haven’t—”

“Whoa, whoa. I don’t care about anything else. Who is the *who*?”

Happiness radiated from her chest. “His name is John. I’m staying down here, Summer.”

“What? What about your studio?”

“I’m going to open up something here. But I don’t have all the details right now. I’ll tell you more about him later.”

“Oh...” Then, “How?” her sister asked.

“Just promise me you’ll keep our parents away. I don’t want them down here while I’m here. That would be awful.”

“I hear ya. But don’t worry. They can hardly get up to open the front door. You really think they have enough ambition to drive that far? I promise. You’re good.”

“Of course. You’re right. I got a little freaked out,” Starr said. “There’s something else I should tell you since I know you don’t care.”

“Wow, sis, you’re just calling with all the goodies. Do tell.”

“Grandpa stipulated that any person who could turn a profit on the marina would inherit it, even if that is simply Mom and Dad. But that had to happen *before* the property comes out of the trust. You following me?”

“Not really. Why not when it comes out of the trust?”

Starr put her hands up in exasperation. “I don’t know. It’s Grandpa. But when the property comes out of the trust, the entire operation goes to Mom and Dad, and then it doesn’t matter because they only want the money. It was his last-ditch effort to see if the marina could stay alive and succeed. He knew our parents weren’t going to do shit with it.”

“Right.”

“But if anyone had come in and really truly run the marina the right way—put it back on the map, so to speak—they would inherit the property.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“No.”

“So Lyle could have done that and had it for himself?” Summer asked.

“Yes. Anyone, really. I tried. But I found out about the stipulation too late, and one week isn’t enough time for me to turn a profit.”

An evil, wicked-witch laugh came through the other side of the line. “Oh man. I would have loved for that to happen. Why didn’t we know this sooner?”

“We had no reason to—and because our parents suck. They got read the entire will by the lawyer. They knew. It probably never occurred to them to tell us. Or hell, I don’t know. All they see are dollar signs.”

“That is awful news. I would love to see the marina reopen and at capacity, the way Grandpa and Grandma always had it going. Remember when we used to run around the Beach House and hide inside the cleaning closets, and Grandma would get so mad cause she could never find us until we popped out of thin air?”

“I remember.” A small chunk of her heart broke off at the memory. It would be amazing to see the marina open again. “I tried.” Her doorbell rang, and Starr glanced down the hallway. “I gotta go. Someone is here. I’ll call you back.”

“You better. I want to hear all about this mysterious John man that you’re moving halfway across the country for.”

“You will.”

“I want all the details too. Like if he has a big di—”

Starr ended the call. The person on the other side of the door was clearly impatient. They thumped on the door, hard and loud. She wasn’t familiar with their outline through the side windows. It definitely wasn’t John.

“I’m coming,” she yelled. She let out a breath and opened the door. Deanne stood on the steps with a man Starr had never seen before.

“Sorry I didn’t call with a heads-up. But this is urgent.” Deanne nodded toward the man. He was pushing mid to late fifties, if she had to guess. Even in this Florida heat, he was wearing denim overalls and a long-sleeved shirt. “This is Starr Young. Starr, this is Dallas Perdue. He’s been interested in the property for years.”

“Really?”

“You interested in selling the storage lot? I can pay cash.”

“That storage lot?” She pointed at the chain-link fence across from her parking lot. “That lot? I don’t own it.” But her mind worked backward to the copy of the survey map Alfred had given her.

Deanne’s phone rang, breaking the silence, and a flash of annoyance crossed her face. “I have to take this. Please don’t wait for me. This is going to take a while.” She walked back to her car, and Starr glanced back at Dallas.

He lifted his papers. “Two acres. County assessor has Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club listed as the owner.”

“Just a minute,” she said. A wave of adrenaline pulsed against her chest, and she let the door shut while she ran to the office and grabbed the stack of papers from Alfred. She thumbed to the survey while she walked back down the hall to the front door. Her eyes darted around the highlighted portion of the map, comparing what was on the paper to what she knew about the small chunk of weeds on the east side of the dock slips. It slowly sunk in. “Holy shit.”

“I take it you didn’t know you owned the property? I’m willing to pay market price. My sister works at the title company, and I can have my attorney draw up papers right away. We could close as soon as possible.” He gave her a sheepish look. “Too forward? If that isn’t ideal, I’m willing to rent it. Perhaps even a rent-to-own option.”

Starr clasped a hand to her chest, squinting at the chain-link fence, trying to make out the metal sign. No Trespassing. And the emblem of Starboard Ships. The Davenport-Young logo before her grandfather and John's grandfather dissolved the partnership and split up the assets. "I... ahh. Yeah. Okay. This is unexpected. Can I get your name and number?" Her hands shook. "You're serious about this?"

"I've been wanting to buy it for years. Harold would never sell it to me. He was going to build storage units on it but never got around to it. Having the boat ramp is a big deal. Not sure why he never used it."

He pulled a business card from his pocket. "Here's my number. Like I said, I'm open to whatever you're comfortable with. If you're not ready to sell"—he shrugged—"no big deal. I'll rent it. Think about your terms, and I can have my attorney prepare a lease."

"Sure. I will have an answer for you by tomorrow."

"Perfect. Thank you for your time. Sorry for dropping in on you like this, but I think this will work for the both of us."

He could say that again. Deanne was still on her phone sitting in her car, and she waved at Starr before driving off. If Starr signed a lease, the marina would officially be making money. Well, depending on how much she leased it for. She watched Dallas hop in his truck, and the minute he was on the highway, she bolted to the chain-link fence. She looked at the lot with a critical eye. It consisted of gravel and dirt but mostly weeds that had sprouted up between the rocks and dirt. Sure enough, the metal sign had the emblem of the yacht—the Starboard Ships emblem—even though the sign itself was beginning to rust. She'd walked past it a few times, but it had never dawned on her to make the connection.

A mixture of emotions flooded through her. Annoyance for not realizing the lot was part of the property when the lawyer had told her to highlight the boundary line when they'd gone over the trust. And relief. Joy. Shock. She wanted to call Alfred and ask why he hadn't mentioned it to her, but it wasn't his job to. And why would he? She was a grown woman. She

could see where the lines had been drawn. Why hadn't *she* put two and two together?

The marina could be hers.

Footsteps crunched behind her, and she turned to see John, smiling and looking so breathtaking that she started to cry.

"Hey, hey. What's the matter? What's going on?" His arms came around her, hugging her to him. His lips pressed against her forehead. "Talk to me."

"I'm overwhelmed with joy."

"Oh, these are happy tears?"

"The marina owns this storage lot. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Look. The Starboard Ships logo." Starr pulled back and pointed to the metal sign.

John took a closer look at the sign, and she could see the wheels turning.

"Dallas—he's a man who wants to buy the lot—showed me the papers he pulled from the assessor. The lot's owner is listed as the Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club. My grandfather got the storage lot when our grandfathers dissolved their partnership and split their assets. I own this." She let out a squeal. "You know what this means? Dallas wants to lease it. Well, he'd like to buy it, but right now if he leased it, the marina would have the income." She was speaking rapidly and probably wasn't making much sense, but she couldn't help it.

"This is great news," John said.

"Excellent fucking news. Come with me. We need to verify everything, and I need to do a bit of research on what rents are for this kind of thing." She held his hand. Squeezed it. And brought it to her mouth. "I love you. I'm so happy you're here with me."

She loved when he smiled. When the lines around his mouth deepened, his eyes were a brilliant blue that matched



the sky. He looked softer, more carefree about the world, and it made her melt.

“I’m happy you chose me. Come on, let’s go and see what we can dig up.”

---

THERE WASN’T MUCH that could make John as happy as seeing Starr so thrilled about the marina and the land next door. After all of her online searching yesterday and a call to Alfred, she had confirmed that the marina did own the storage lot. Now the two of them stood inside Alfred’s office getting paperwork from him for the lease.

Alfred handed Starr a stack of papers. “Here is a standard commercial lease agreement. I checked it over, and it covers everything you’ll need to sign with Dallas. I left the monetary portion blank, obviously. Have him initial each page, you do the same, and then you both sign the last page. Once he gives you the deposit and rent, you should be fine.”

“Thank you, Alfred. I know you are doing this because of your relationship with my grandfather, but please don’t hesitate to send me your bill for this additional work.”

“It didn’t occur to me that we should have gone over all the property lines. But either way”—he winked—“I’ll still send you a bill for this.”

Starr tucked her papers in the folder Alfred had given her, and John squeezed her shoulders. “Dallas will be at the marina at any minute,” John said. “You ready to go?”

She rested her head on his chest and smiled. “Yes.”

His stomach had butterflies on constant flight every time he was around her. He’d come to the conclusion that he was going to have to get used to it. He wasn’t letting her go.

When they got back to the marina, Dallas’s truck was already in the parking lot, and Starr let out a shaky breath. “I can’t believe I’m about to do this.”

“You’re going to be fine. Even though you think the monthly rate is crazy, he’s getting a bargain, and he knows it. It’s nice that you worked out that people can utilize the boat ramp if they need to and pay him the fee. The public ones are always freaking packed, and no one likes the long wait when they get here, so Dallas is really onto something. Pay to play.”

“It’s going to work well. After all this, I just can’t believe it’s finally happening. I’m going to be the owner of this place.”

“Your grandparents would probably be so proud to see it stay in the family. To see that it’s with someone who will take care of it and love it as much as they did.”

Starr grinned. “Yeah. I admit I wasn’t sure about this place at first. But it’s sure grown on me.”

“Oh yeah? You’re not going to miss the mountains?”

“Oh, geesh. I’m really going to miss those. But I’ve found my home here. And you. Where would I be if I hadn’t met you?”

John rubbed his thumb along her bottom lip. “Where would I be if I hadn’t met you?” He nodded toward Dallas’s truck. “You better get out there. Go and make a landlord out of yourself and deposit his money before the bank closes, so you can get all your ducks in a row.”

“You’re not going to come out with me?”

“Nah. I want to get *My Way* ready. I was hoping we could take it for another spin. Since you’re stuck with me, it seems smart to try to get you acclimated to this whole water thing.” John had prayed every damn night that her seasickness would go away. Being on the water calmed him and set him free much more than being on land ever did. He wanted yachting to be a part of their lives—not just his.

“I would love that. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get me over that.” She laughed, but he could hear the nervousness in her voice. He appreciated that she was willing to take the chance of going out on the water with him again.

She leaned over and kissed him. “Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck. You’ve got this.”

The bell from the drawbridge jingled as if to say that it agreed. Her gaze went to the harbor, where the drawbridge was being opened for a large line of boats. John watched for her reaction.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Not sure. Better get down to the marina to check it out.”

“Those boats aren’t coming here.”

John tried not to grin. “How do you know that?”

“Why would they?”

When the first boat turned toward the marina, she glanced at John and shook her head. John got out of the car. “Why wouldn’t they? You do rent boat slips.”

The first boat began pulling into a slot, putting out its fenders for protection. The second boat did the same thing. She started walking quickly toward the marina then paused and turned back to John. “Why would they be doing this? All of these boats. No. This makes zero sense.”

John cleared his throat. “Looks like they are here to rent. You probably better go get those slips leased. Wouldn’t want the marina going into the red.”

Her steps faltered as the fourth boat slid into a slip, its fenders already out as the other boats were being tied to the docks. “You did this? You got the word out about the slips. As insurance. In case Dallas decided not to lease the boat ramp.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” John smiled, giving nothing away. “But if I were you, I wouldn’t keep those people—or Dallas—waiting. Welcome to what it feels like running a business—never enough of you to go around.”

“We’re not done with this conversation. We’re going to talk about this later.”

“Oh yeah? Later in my bed or yours?” he teased.

Her eyes glinted with tears, and her smile melted his heart. “After this little stunt, I’d say anywhere you want.”

John watched Starr walk over to Dallas to talk about the lease. John's life was good. Complete. He had his father's big shoes to fill, but John was happy to be the brother and business leader his siblings needed to help implement their solid ideas.

He was going to take Blue Horizons to new heights. Adrenaline vibrated in his chest, and electricity zipped through his blood. He had the woman he wanted and the job he was born for. As long as Alfred could keep him out of jail for his indiscretion, he was on top of the world.

Starr waved at him, and he realized he must look like a fool, standing there staring into la-la land. Dallas shook Starr's hand, and then he got into his truck and drove off. Starr went down to the docks to tend to her new clients.

John sat in his vehicle for nearly an hour, checking emails, playing stupid games, and downloading music before she wrapped up her business. John enjoyed the sway of her hips as she walked toward him with the biggest smile he'd seen yet. She went to the driver's side of his car, and he rolled his window down.

"The Emerald Port Marina and Yacht Club is officially in the profit zone. Say hello to the new owner."

John let out a whoop of joy and shot his arms out through the open window, pulling her off the ground and halfway inside. "Congratulations, Ms. Young. I knew the moment I met you that you were different. Special. You could almost even say that you had my heart at hello." He nuzzled against her neck, despite her squirming to break free.

He shifted her so that her feet were back on solid ground. She gripped his chin. "You could almost even say that it was fate."

## Epilogue

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IT WASN'T their traditional Sunday dinner, but it was Sunday, and the crew of *My Way* would be serving dinner. John's siblings were on the upper deck enjoying mimosas while Starr and John were alone inside the yacht. The weather was gorgeous, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Starr had taken Dramamine, and with all the breathing exercises she'd done, today was a good day for her on the yacht. Her stomach felt fine. They'd only taken the yacht out a few times before now, and she'd been pretty lucky, for the most part. Slowly but surely, she was getting used to being on the water.

"You know it's a shame that your mom and dad won't talk about what happened with my grandfather and your grandfather," Starr said.

"I know. But I guess what's in the past is staying there. We don't need to know. It set us on the right path to each other. That's all I care about." John's hand rubbed circles against her thighs. "Knowing what happened to sever their friendship isn't going to change our lives one way or another."

Starr stuck out her lower lip in a pout. "I know. But it would be one of those fun legacy stories that could keep living generation after generation."

"Maybe we can ask about it when they get back from their trip. Or who knows, maybe you have all the answers you need inside his office. With all the things he's kept, maybe there's something in there about what went down."

“Not a bad idea. We could start looking and see what we come up with. I have tons of old receipts that I need to go through and throw out. He kept every single receipt he’d ever gotten.”

“My mom is that same way. I don’t get it. Do we need itemized lists of what we purchased?” John scrunched up his face in confusion.

“It’s crazy.”

“Have you spoken to your parents?” he asked.

Starr shook her head. She was still disappointed that they no longer wanted to have a relationship with her. According to them, she’d betrayed them. She was a snake in the grass, waiting for the opportunity to strike. “Nope. And I don’t plan to. Even when we have kids someday, I will not be bringing that kind of negativity into our children’s lives. They’ll always play the victim.”

“I admire how strong you are. Both physically and mentally. Listen, there is something that I wanted to ask you.”

Starr pursed her lips. “What’s that?”

Annaliese appeared in front of Starr with a serving tray. Annaliese’s eyes were bright, and she was trying not to smile. On the serving tray was a small black jeweler’s box.

Starr gasped and turned back to John, who was on his knees next to Starr. “What is this? John, get up. You don’t—”

“Starr, let me do this.”

She fell to her knees. “I want to be on your level. Okay, go ahead.”

He chuckled and took the box Annaliese handed him. She discreetly disappeared, leaving the two of them alone. He popped it open. “You’ve already made me the happiest man in the world. But it would seal the deal if we made it official. Will you marry me?”

The ring shone bright, resembling the way her heart felt. Starr nodded. She kept nodding. She couldn’t stop. Her hand

shook when she held it out and John pushed the ring onto her finger. “It’s perfect.”

“Just like you.” He kissed her lips, pecking her mouth and cheek. Burying her in kisses. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes, John. Yes. Yes. Yes.” Her heart sang with glory, and she squeezed her thighs together as heat flooded her system. “You know it’s always a yes where you’re concerned.”

“I’d like to hope. But you can never be too sure.” He stood and pulled her up with him. “Come on. Let’s go downstairs so I can have my way with you.”

Starr laughed at his play on words. Thank God she hadn’t gotten sick today. What kind of an engagement story would that be to tell their future children? She followed him down the stairs and to his room.

“Make love to me.” She let her swimsuit cover fall to the ground, and she unbuckled her top, enjoying the look on her fiancé’s face. She slid her bottoms off and crawled up on the bed. “Now, John. Stop staring, and make love to me now.”

He stepped forward and placed his hands on her hips. “I want to fuck you first. Hard and fast. Hear you scream the way I like. Then I’ll make slow, sweet love to you. Make you come apart in my hands.”

“Promise?” she teased.

“Oh, I fucking promise. I promise a lot of things where you’re concerned.”

“What about our guests? You don’t think they’ll wonder where we’ve run off to?”

John smirked. “No. They all knew I was going to pop the question. So at the very least, my brothers know full well you and I are down here and that you’re making me the happiest man alive.”

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PREORDER BOOK 2 in the Davenport family series, [Come a Little Bit Closer](#), [by clicking here](#)! Come a Little Bit Closer features Jersey Davenport and his best friend Belle Luna Hawthorne. This is a spicy, friends to lovers contemporary romance that releases February 21, 2023.

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# Temptation Deep

Are you looking for something forbidden? Extra spicy that will keep you up all night?

Temptation Deep is a forbidden, age gap romance with EXXTRA spice!

## CHAPTER ONE

“You’re such a brownnoser.” Elizabeth scoffed at me while I tried to hook my laptop to our living room TV. “A brownnoser in cute shorts. My shorts that you borrowed and never returned.”

“I am not a brownnoser. This is Dad’s birthday. It’s special to him. Mom’s no longer here to spoil him. I try to do something every year for him. I don’t want him to be sad and lonely every birthday without Mom. I want him to know how important he is and how much I appreciate him.”

The thumbnail for the video popped up on the television. *Success*. I ignored her about the shorts because I looked great in them and wasn’t returning them. “Besides, I can’t help it if I’m the good daughter.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “How long did it take you to find all these pictures?”

Between work and my last week of volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, rounding up a hundred or so pictures of my parents and us girls had taken a week longer than I’d wanted. I’d stayed up until three this morning making sure the images were in perfect sync with the music. “It took me about three weeks to comb through everything without him finding out what I was doing. Which was no easy feat since we both work during the day.” I looked around for my dad but didn’t see him. “And mostly, all of the pictures were up here.” I pointed under the TV where my mom had kept all of her photo albums.

“I’ll go find Dad. I have to go soon.”

*Figures.* Elizabeth had never enjoyed hanging out at our dad’s social events. With Elizabeth gone and everyone else in the room in conversation, I pulled out my phone.

“Quinn, so lovely to see you.” Kimber Emery gave me a large smile. “Your father mentioned you take the bar exam soon. Congratulations.” It was weird seeing one of my old professors standing next to me in my own living room. “He’s pretty proud of you,” she said.

“Thank you.” I tucked my phone into the waistband of my shorts. “Yeah, I can take it in July. He’s told anyone who will listen how proud he is.”

We both glanced into the kitchen, where my dad was talking to some of the other partygoers. Elizabeth tapped his shoulder and pointed to my setup. My dad had “business parties” at least once a month. But tonight, he was forty-eight, and apparently, that was still considered “a pup” to some of his friends. But I think my dad was feeling the effects of turning another year older—closer to fifty. His mind felt like he was thirty, but his body didn’t. Those were his words.

“I just hope I’ll pass on the first try so I don’t have to wait until February to take it again.”

Dad moved away from his friends, with Elizabeth trailing behind him. He wrapped his arm around me. “This one is growing up. Catching up to me in age.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dad, I’m twenty-five. Almost twenty-six. I’m not even close to catching up to you.”

He squeezed my nose.

Kimber gave me a dazzling smile that made me feel inadequate in the looks department. She was drop-dead beautiful in her four-inch cream-colored heels and flowered summer dress. Her perfect cherry-painted lips surely made other women envious, including me. “You were always a great student. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

I put on my best polite smile, hoping she would find another person to have a conversation with. It wasn’t like I hated her. I just didn’t want to hang out with one of my old professors on a Friday night at my house. “Thank you.” I nodded to my laptop. “It’s time.”

Elizabeth rounded up his guests, and I started the slideshow. Even though I’d watched it a million times, it still made me weepy. My dad when he was a little boy. Him and my mom at their high school prom. Their graduation. Them baptizing Elizabeth, standing outside of our church with Jason and Holly. The photos floated by, and I glanced at my dad. His eyes were watery, but he had the biggest grin on his face. Just what I’d wanted—to see him truly happy.

The slideshow ended, and he slung his arm over my shoulder. “Thanks, Quinn. How did you do that? Where’d you find all of those pictures?”

I leaned into him. “Around the house. I had to be sneaky so you wouldn’t find out.” I smiled at him. “I wanted to do something special for you. Happy birthday.”

He kissed my forehead. “Happy day, indeed.”

“I wish Mom was here.” I blinked, not wanting tears to fall.

“Me too.”

“I have to go, guys. Dad, love you. Quinn, see you later.” Elizabeth was already on her phone as she walked out the front door.

My dad got lost in the crowd, and I unplugged my laptop and turned off the computer before putting his music back on low. I reached for my laptop and glanced up to find Kimber approaching Jason Richter. I stopped. A big smile graced Jason’s face. The smile was real because his dimples showed.

*Jason and Kimber?* I stood taller, straining to hear their conversation.

Jason didn’t date anyone. Ever. As far as I knew, after Holly divorced him, no woman had been able to steal his attention. I’d seen plenty of women hit on him. In fact, anywhere we went in public, women came up to him, and he was always cordial, but he *never* brought women to events with him. Not like my dad’s other single friends.

He was untouchable in that aspect. At least I’d thought he was, until now. He and Kimber, with their heads together, looked as if they were having a little more than just a friendly chit-chat. I couldn’t hear what they were talking about because of the low rock music filtering out of the sound system.

*Damn it, why did I turn that back on?*

I watched their interaction. His eyes traveled up and down her body. Her hand went out and grazed his arm. Something tugged against my heart. Why was I watching them? Why did I *care*?

Jason had been one of my dad’s best friends for as long as I remembered. Every time I saw him, I was transported back to age seven and our old house with the glitter in the ceiling where Jason twirled me around and around while Joan Jett rocked about how much she loved rock and roll. I laughed, thinking about the time I’d cooked him and Holly and my parents dinner on my parent’s anniversary when I was fourteen. The good times. When my mom was still around. Before Holly divorced Jason. When we were all one big happy family.

I studied Jason a little more closely. He had aged *so* well. His hair was light brown with a neat trim against his neck. A thin white line at the hairline, where his skin hadn't seen the sun quite as much as the rest of his tanned body had, indicated he'd had it cut recently. Jason's dimples were so prominent, like usual. It was weird how he looked the same to me as he had all my life, but viewing him through Kimber's eyes, Jason was one sexy motherfucker. He was a lawyer, so naturally, he was sporting a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His forearms were all muscle, and I knew the rest of him was too.

*Does Kimber? For an older man... why am I thinking about him like this?* I'd never taken much time to appreciate his looks before. And why would I? He was like a comfortable leather chair I saw nearly every day—always reliable and taken for granted.

There must have been some cosmic force in the air because Jason's eyes connected with mine, even as he spoke to Kimber. The look in his eyes was saying, "*Fuck me, beautiful,*" which was undoubtedly meant for Kimber. But it didn't stop the short bursts of desire against my clit—*What the actual hell?*

*Oh my god.* If any man in this group of stuffy doctors, lawyers, and dentists could bring me pleasure, it would be Jason.

He gave me a single nod, eyeing me like he could read my dirty thoughts, and I swallowed. It would absolutely be him.

Embarrassed that I'd been caught watching them, I looked away, and my gaze landed on my neighbor, Dustin. He was also a good friend of my dad's. Dustin had to be almost fifty, as well. The three of them had gone to college together for the first four years and been in the same fraternity. It was purely coincidental that Dustin had moved in next door to us. Like I was holding some magic wand, Dustin met my gaze from across the room.

He tilted his tumbler in my direction, and it warmed me that he'd acknowledged me, which was crazy because he used

to give me piggyback rides when I was younger. His girlfriend glanced over at me and gave me a small smile, but since she was only a two-weeker, she quickly went back to her task at hand—Dustin.

*Don't blame you, Sheila.*

Something must have been in the air. What was it about Dustin and Jason that was attracting my attention for the first time in my life?

My phone vibrated with another text from Jessie. *I just danced with this guy! Eeeee. I think we're going to the bar.*

I rolled my eyes. It was probably because Jessie kept texting me pictures of all these cute guys. I texted back. *Could you stop?!*

What would she think if I sent her a picture of Jason and Dustin? She might think it was gross that I was checking out men who were my dad's age. I darkened my screen, ignoring her for now.

I said hi to a few more partygoers—one was a lawyer who had such a conservative disposition I couldn't help but think I would have to shake stuff up a bit when I got my license to practice. *Couldn't they be a little more free-spirited sometimes?* Thankfully, Jason and Kimber were no longer in the living room, so I didn't have to experience those inappropriate feelings again.

I made my way to the hall to reach the stairs to my room and met my dad coming out of the bathroom. "Bed, Quinn?"

I glanced at my phone. "It's only nine."

"Figured you're bored to death. Not to mention tired from all the canning you did today. The jam looks great. I can't wait to have some in the morning."

"Thanks. The strawberries were perfect. It came out pretty good." I turned back to the kitchen. "I could start drinking with you guys." I generally tried not to have *too* much fun around my dad. Plus, I'd already had a cucumber martini earlier when my dad was opening his couple of gifts, and that had given me a small buzz.

“Ha, ha. Hit the road, kid.”

“I’ll be hanging out in my room. Ready to party when you guys are all ready for bed,” I teased. But really, I was tired, and I rarely stayed up late. Plus, I only had a few pages left of *Dead Man’s Folly*. I could finish reading it and go to bed.

My dad let out a full belly laugh, and I laughed with him. He was having a great time, and I was happy for him. He deserved to be happy after everything he had gone through.

The third step down creaked, and I almost slipped on the last step. *Am I buzzed?* I shook my head. It wasn’t fuzzy in the least. I hadn’t completely packed up my old room, but I’d already moved all my clothes and bedding into the basement. It was a master suite with a large walk-in closet and a bathroom bigger than my old room. It was heaven. The only thing I didn’t care for was that the bathroom had a second door that led to the rec room, so anytime the party moved downstairs, I had to shut my door and share *my* bathroom, where the proper amount of illumination told me that I had left the light above the shower on.

I was surprised the party hadn’t moved down there yet tonight. Although it wasn’t playing any CDs, my dad’s jukebox was lit up, and the light above the pool table cast a bright circle over the purple velvet, enticing anyone to play.

Finally in my own space, I pulled off my tank top as I entered my room, ready for something more comfortable. I reached for the light switch. Unmistakable moans and groans pulled my gaze to the bathroom.

*Shit. Who in the hell is fucking in my bathroom? Why didn’t they at least shut the door all the way?*

I took a few steps closer, holding my crumpled tank top to my bra. The light from the pool table shone through the other side of the doorway. Even though it was partway shut, ample light filled the bathroom.

I held in my gasp. My hand instinctively covered my mouth. My stomach bottomed out like I’d gone over the hill of a roller coaster. Jason—hot Jason with his shirt sleeves rolled



up, exposing his forearms. The same guy who I imagined eye-fucked me less than twenty minutes ago in my living room leaned against my bathroom counter, all sexy swagger. His one hand gripped the ledge of the marble, his strong thighs were spread out a little bit, and his jeans were still mostly on—only exposing his massive cock and the skin along his hips and part of his ass.

*Holy, holy, holy. For the love of all that's holy, am I seeing things right? Am I drunk? Sleeping?* I blinked, hoping it would make things clearer. *Did I fall down the stairs and hit my head? Am I really lying in a hospital bed, hallucinating?*

I blinked again, but the devastatingly beautiful scene in front of me was still there.

*What am I looking at?*

I couldn't tear my gaze away. I sucked in a breath. It was better than any filthy porn I'd ever watched, so painstakingly provocative that my clit was quivering with need.

He was fucking Kimber's mouth. She took him in her mouth so expertly, in and out. Her red lips fit around him magnificently—like they were meant for him. She pulled back on a pop, and a string of saliva caught between the head of his cock and her cherry lips.

*Fuck me.*

It was raw beauty. For a split second, it was me kneeling there, and I grew wetter. He was beautiful down there. Solid and large. Perfection. Even with his cock covered in saliva from another woman's mouth, Jason Richter was irresistible.

*Should I be ashamed of watching my father's best friend get head? No fucking way.*

Jason's hand was on Kimber's head. He watched her lick him like a lollipop. When she took him all the way in her mouth, he let out a groan. Her lips touched his pelvis. *Deep.*

"Fuck yes," he groaned in this husky voice I'd never heard before. Tingles floated from my nipples to my toes. He was beautiful everywhere. The way he stood. His sinful voice. Even the way he moved was beautiful.

I appreciated how he wasn't coming in her mouth right away. Giving my ex-boyfriend a blow job usually lasted for two minutes, if that. But not Jason. Kimber had folded up a towel and was using it to cushion her knees—like she'd known she would be down there for a while. Some women had all the luck.

I'd had no idea they were a couple. *Explains the flirting.* I'd also had no idea watching something like this in person would affect me so deeply. My toe nudged my tank top on the carpet. *When did I drop that?* I was a deer in the headlights, standing there in my bra and shorts, unable to look away.

Jason was in his element. His hips thrust in time to Kimber's mouth as she took him in and out. I was in awe at how they worked together in perfect harmony—he would thrust in, then she would pull back. In and out. His mouth was partway open in bliss.

I couldn't stop myself from putting pressure on my clit with my free hand. I was dying. I was totally fucking my dildo tonight when this episode was over. Maybe even getting out my wand.

Jason bit down on his bottom lip and wrapped her hair around his fist. His thrusts started increasing in speed. My nipples zinged with electricity. *Definitely getting out my wand. Most definitely.* Was he going to come inside her mouth? Pull out? I didn't even care. I wanted to see his beautiful face when he came. The nerves in my clit pulsed wildly—much more wildly than I've ever experienced in my life.

Jason grunted again, low and long, like a lion purring from his throat, making my own chest vibrate. "I'm going to come," he said, in a voice equally low and seductive as fuck.

My phone lit up with a text message, illuminating me in the darkness of my room. *Fuck.* I didn't look at it. I couldn't miss Jason getting off. But there was no question that I was busted. I made no attempt to move. This was the dirtiest moment in my life. Jason's gaze penetrated my soul, and I imagined he was telling me all sorts of filthy things with those

beautiful eyes. His lips went into a smirk before he muttered, “Fuck,” in the sexiest voice I’d ever heard.

His deft hips flexed forward while he held Kimber’s head still, and he filled her mouth with his glorious come, all the while, never taking his eyes off mine.

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# Irresistible Billionaires

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## Chapter One

Kade threaded a hand through his hair, standing alongside the interstate on-ramp. His jaw ached, and he made a point to try to stop grinding his teeth. He was supposed to be in Vegas yesterday for Alex's wedding, but work had prevented him from leaving. Naturally. And now they had not one but two flat tires before they even got on the interstate. His driver paced the edge of the on-ramp back and forth, yakking into his phone. The cold air blew off the mountains, threatening snow. Kade's plane was scheduled to leave in two hours. How in the hell was he going to get to Denver International Airport in time, even if Roger got another vehicle?

Cars whirred past the two of them, and Kade stepped back to protect his suit from the gravel kicked up by other cars. "Why today?" he yelled into the air.

The jarring sound of gravel crunching behind him pulled his attention. A dark-blue sedan that had seen better days slowed to a stop behind their vehicle. Great. It was likely someone thinking they could be of assistance. The tinted windows made it impossible for him to see inside, and unless they gave him their car, they would be zero help. *Nice try.*

Once all the vehicles passed, the car door opened, and a dirty white tennis shoe hit the ground. He came face to face with *her*.

*Eden Wilcox.*

Even though it had been four years, he would recognize her anywhere. He distinctly remembered what she was wearing the last time he saw her. Who would have thought she would be coming to his rescue?

Her brown hair was longer than he remembered, trailing down to the middle of her back, a whisper above her ass, in waves that would make the ocean jealous. She had grown curves in all the right places, sending heat straight to his dick.

Even in baggy sweatpants, she was still very beautiful. Still very annoying. A pair of black sunglasses were propped on top of her head, allowing him the opportunity to really see her. The wide grin she tossed at him stole his breath.

*I don't like this. Like I'm a damsel in distress.*

He held in a groan. *Oh, but aren't I?*

“Fancy seeing you here.” She winked.

Eden stepped over the white line briefly before moving around her car, coming to a stop in front of him. Her feminine, floral smell wafted his way, and he hated that it made him immediately think of her lying spread-eagle on his bed.

“I need a ride.”

She raised a disapproving brow at him, clearly enjoying his situation. “Obviously. Looks like today is your lucky day.”

He grimaced. “Define lucky.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“I see you’re still feisty as hell.”

Alex’s little sister gave him a tight smile. “I see you’re still an asshole. I *thought* I would be nice and offer you a ride. But”—she put a hand on her hip and shrugged—“changed my mind.” She turned back toward her car.

Kade laid a hand on her shoulder, desperation winning out. “I do need a ride. I assume you’re on your way to your brother’s wedding?”

“Wow, genius. How long did it take you to figure that out?”

“Can I go with you?”

Eden pulled her sunglasses off her head, and her gaze hit him square in the gut. Damn it, why was she so beautiful? Why did he have to notice? She pursed her lips like she was holding a secret from him. “Is my car good enough for you? Not worried about your suit getting too dirty, are you?”

Kade looked down at the crisp gray lines of his suit and stark-blue tie. “I can always buy another one if your car ruins this one.”

She scoffed. “Wow. Throwing away money like it’s trash.” Eden tilted her head toward Roger. “Does he need a ride too?”

“No. He’ll wait with the car for a tow truck and a ride. Let me tell him I’m going with you and grab my suitcase.”

Of course it would have to be his best friend’s sister rescuing him. Why, God, why her? Roger covered the mouthpiece with his hand when Kade approached him.

Kade pointed to Eden. “She said she’ll give me a ride to the airport. Text me once you have this figured out.”

“Will do, boss. Sorry about this. Really sorry.”

“Not your fault. Two flat tires seem deliberate.”

“It sure does.”

Kade turned and blew out a deep breath, steeling himself for the forty-minute ride to the airport with Eden. He pulled his suitcase out of his trunk, and the lid of her trunk popped open when he approached her car. If Kade could handle anything, it was a short ride with her. He could deal with her at the wedding. It wasn’t like he would have to see her constantly while in Vegas, and that made the idea of pulling open her passenger-side door and sliding into her car that much more bearable. As did the sweet promise of first class on the plane.

“Buckle up.” She put the car in drive, and he held up his hands in annoyance.

“You don’t have to tell me to ‘buckle up.’ I know how riding in the passenger seat works.”

“Do you?” She pursed her lips as she pulled onto the on-ramp and made her way to the interstate. “I wasn’t sure if you always sat in the back seat being chauffeured around. Didn’t know if the same rules applied.”

Kade snorted. Maybe he couldn’t handle the next forty minutes after all. “I am intelligent. A lot of people would actually tell you I’m one of the smartest people they know.”

“What kind of people would that be? Your parents?” She stepped on the gas and switched lanes. She glanced at him with a raised brow. “Your harem?”

“My harem?”

“Of women. You can’t deny you’ve been in the public spotlight. *Always* with different women.”

“I can’t help that there’s plenty of me to go around.” Something flip-flopped in his chest. Before he could question what that specific feeling was, he tamped it down. “Keeping tabs on me, Eden?”

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# About the Author

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Ashley Bostock was born and raised in Colorado, but her husband moved mountains to get her to Nebraska where they currently reside with their two children and her animals.

She stays busy daydreaming about the hot men she writes about in her novels.

She has traveled all over the world, but still has an extensive list of places she would love to visit. Anywhere near a sky-blue ocean will always be at the top of that list, although going back to South Africa's Kruger National Park to view the wildlife is a close second.

She carries a bachelor's degree in History with a concentration in Elementary Education from Metropolitan State College of Denver.

She has published over 18 books and is a USA Today bestselling author.



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