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HOT SHOT

A LAST SHOT NOVEL

KELLY JAMIESON

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CARRIE

“Why did you make me come to the bar at the ass crack of dawn on a Saturday morning?”

Marco scowls at me, sitting on a tall stool at the bar at Conquistadors Tequila Bar. The bar he owns, which is closed and empty at this hour. He’s wearing a pair of well-worn jeans that sit low on his hips and a blue plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a cup of coffee sits near his elbow. “It’s a secret. We need to do this when Beck’s not around.”

This is about Beck?

I frown at the mention of Marco’s friend and business partner, who is now engaged to my best friend, Hayden. Hayden and Beck met here at Conquistadors the night Hayden and I came to a tequila-tasting event. That was also the night I met Marco. Unfortunately. The man is so annoying. He’s just so ... stodgy. Unless he’s talking about tequila. Then he gets a little more fun. Also, he’s rude. He’s always mocking me.

“Secret.” I purse my lips. “Do you plan to enlighten me?”

He pauses, his eyes moving over my face.

What? Do I have something gross hanging out of my nose? I resist the urge to lift a hand and check.

“Of course,” he finally says, gesturing to the stool next to him. “Have a seat.”

“How long is this going to take?”

His jaw tightens.

I climb onto the stool with a huff and set my purse on the bar. “You know, there’s this thing called email. Or a phone, which you can use to text or call. If you wanted to tell me about something, all of those communication methods are quick and private, and I could have gotten another hour of sleep.”

Marco sighs. “Would you stop being such a pain in the ass? We’re trying to do something nice here.”

I grit my teeth. “Pain in the ass? Really? Well, you can just *kiss* my ass.”

“It would be my pleasure, *belleza*, as you have a very fine ass.” He gives me a brief wink along with that smile that pops cute dimples into his cheeks. Ugh.

“You’ve never seen my ass. And you never will.”

“I’ve never seen your *naked* ass,” he corrects. “I *have* seen you wearing tight jeans, however. And I did see a *picture* of your ass—in a tiny bikini bottom—and I maintain my claim that it is sweet.”

Oh yeah. That would be one of the ads I did for OC Swimsuits. I repress a growl of frustration. “Oh my God. I can’t believe we’re talking about my ass.”

“You’re the one who invited me to kiss it, Supermodel.”

“I’m not a supermodel,” I mutter.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

I’d kill for caffeine. My teeth grind even more. “Sure. Thanks,” I say grudgingly.

He slides off the stool and strolls around behind the bar, his stride long legged and confident, his shoulders broad, hips narrow. I can’t stop my gaze from dropping to *his* ass, which is ... I close my eyes. No. I’m not checking out his ass.

He reaches for a mug under the bar, and the muscles and tendons in his lean forearm flex as he pours from the pot of coffee. He pushes it across the bar toward me. “Cream? Milk? Sugar?”

“A little milk, please.”

He surprises me by opening a fridge and removing a carton, rather than giving me a little plastic container. He does a quick pour. “White enough?”

“Yes.” It’s perfect. I pick up the spoon he lays beside the mug and give it a stir. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He returns to the stool next to me, sitting with one foot on a rung, knee bent, the other foot on the floor in a relaxed, masculine pose. “Now ... the reason I asked you to come here is to see if you’ll help plan an engagement party for Hayden and Beck.”

I blink at him. “An engagement party?”

“Yes.” He reaches out and swivels a laptop computer on the polished wood bar. “I found this site called The Knot. They tell you everything about weddings and engagements.”

“That’s where you got the idea to host an engagement party for Hayden and Beck?”

“Yeah. See, it says here usually engagement parties are hosted by the bride’s parents. But Hayden’s parents are gone, and I don’t think her Aunt Gina and Uncle Colin are up to it, since Gina had her fall. Apparently she still isn’t as mobile as she used to be.”

My heart thaws minutely. “True.”

“The groom’s parents could also do it, but ... well, Beck and his folks aren’t exactly close.”

I nod, sadly aware of that fact, too.

“So I thought their closest friends should do it. Namely, us.”

I sense the distaste in his tone of voice. *Too bad we hate each other.*

Okay that’s not strictly true. Marco annoys me. He more often than not wears a brooding scowl, although he manages to turn on the charm around customers in the bar. He clearly regards me as an airheaded blond bimbo, flirting with me but

also mansplaining things to me that make me grit my teeth. Lately he seems even moodier than usual.

Plan a party with him? God, I'd rather pose naked for a billboard on the 405.

But Hayden is my best friend. And Beck makes Hayden happy. And dammit, it's kind of cute how Marco looked up this wedding website, and it's actually sort of thoughtful that he wants to plan a party to help our friends celebrate their engagement. Actually, it's something *I* should have thought of. Which annoys me even more.

"We're thinking of Sunday, August 6," he continues. "We can do it here. Close down the bar for the evening."

That does sound like a fun idea.

"We need some help from you to plan the guest list," he says. "Obviously, we'll invite Hayden's aunt and uncle. But who else? Some of her coworkers? Other friends?"

I bite my lip. "Yes, I know who to invite." I pause. "What about invitations?"

"Yeah, we'll need those. And maybe you can handle the decorations? Cade and I will look after the food and drinks."

Cade is his other Navy SEAL buddy and business partner at Conquistadors.

"Decorations?" I peer at the computer screen. "How do you decorate for an engagement party?"

"It says to plan a theme that's different from the wedding."

I shoot him a smirk. "You're really into this, aren't you? Doesn't this go against your man card, or something?"

"My man card is secure," he says, his face impassive. "But I'm willing to prove it to you anytime you want."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, thanks, but no." I read the text on the website. "Okay, well, Hayden and Beck haven't even started planning their wedding yet, so who knows what style it will be. If it's up to Hayden, they'll get married at city hall one day on her lunch break."

“We won’t let that happen. She deserves to be a beautiful bride for one special day.”

I turn my head and give him a long look. Dammit. He cares about Hayden. That makes it harder to hate him. “You sure about that man card, Mr. Romance?”

He gives a tiny movement of his lips and chin, a nod and a smile that are so subtle yet ooze confidence and masculinity. “Keep questioning me and I’ll think you really do want me to prove it to you.”

“Ugh.” I pick up my coffee and sip. “Okay. I’ll do the decorations, the invitations, and the guest list.”

Marco reaches out to touch the track pad, his arm brushing mine. I jerk back, nearly spilling my coffee. “Also, we can play games.”

For a moment, I think he’s talking about us. Me and Marco. My jaw drops.

Then I realize he means party games. This big grouch is planning party games? “No. No games. Hayden would *not* go for that.”

“Hey, Beck’s little professor is loosening up. Sure, she’ll play some games. Plus, since this is a chance to introduce people to each other, friends and family of the bride and groom, games are a good way to get people talking and break the ice.”

I stare at him.

Unconcerned, he clicks to bring up a new window. “I like this one where we get pictures of Beck and Hayden, cut them in half, and give everyone half a picture when they arrive. Then they have to mingle and talk to people to find the other half.”

I bite my lip. That actually sounds really fun.

“It’s better than bingo,” he adds dryly.

“I’ll give you that, Mr. Romance.”

“But I also like the newlywed game. Or in this case, almost wed. We can ask them questions about their sexual proclivities to see how well they know each other.”

I gawk at him. Who is this man? Is he appealing to my fun-loving side, hoping to get me on board by teasing me with embarrassing party games? I press my lips together. I can't quite stop the smile, though, and it breaks free. “I kind of like that.”

“See? We're having fun doing something nice for our friends. It's not so bad.’

I narrow my eyes at him, but my smile lingers.

“Like, one of the questions could be how long after they met did they have, ahem, intimate relations.”

I choke. “We can't ask that! It was, like, five minutes.”

Marco gives me an evil grin. “Heh. I know. Okay, we'll just ask about sexual positions. Or their kinkiest fetish.”

A laugh escapes my lips and I clap a hand over my mouth. Damn. “How about this one ...” I point at the screen. “If your first kiss could be described as a candy, what would it be: Starburst, Milky Way, Snickers, Zero, or Goobers?”

Marco laughs, and the sound is deep and smooth. It makes heat curl low in my belly. I haven't heard Marco laugh very often. “Goobers. Christ, I hope not, for Hayden's sake.”

“I'm pretty sure she'd answer Starburst.”

Our eyes meet, both of us smiling. And damn if I don't feel a tiny little starburst in my chest. Whoa, whoa.

I quickly look back at the computer. “Okay, okay, a couple of games could be fun. Cheesy, but fun.”

What am I getting into? Planning a party with Marco means we'll have to talk to each other. Possibly see each other. No, wait. I reach for my purse. “Give me your cellphone number so we can text each other about the party.” That way we won't have to talk or see each other.

“My pleasure, *belleza*.” He rattles off the number and I enter it into my phone, then send him a text.

“There. Now you have mine too. So no more reasons for dragging me out of bed on a Saturday morning.”

“I’d never drag you out of bed on a Saturday morning.” His gaze drops to my mouth. “I’d rather keep you *in* bed.”

Heat rushes up into my face and I hop off the stool. “And you saying things like that is why we’re going to be texting each other.”

I stride out of the bar, my heart thudding. Why does he say things like that? He’s been making comments like that since the first time we met. It irks me no end that he clearly thinks I’m a piece of meat to be ogled and drooled over just because I use my face and body in my career.

I step out into fresh morning air and glance at my watch. I have a job this afternoon, a location shoot at Oceanside Pier for a local casual clothing shop. Much as I complained about getting dragged out of bed early on a Saturday, I need to get ready for that.

I stroll to where I’d parked my car, inhaling the briny ocean scent, turning my face to the sun. Another gorgeous day in Southern California. Perfect day to lower the top on my Mustang convertible and enjoy the wind in my hair. I’ll have to wash it before I leave for the shoot anyway.

On the short drive back to my place on Taos Drive I try to let the summer breeze blow away my irritation at Marco.

I’m really not sure why he bugs me so much. I’m used to being treated like an object. But that’s starting to get to me, too.

Hell. I gust out a sigh. Marco’s not the only one grouchy lately. My job, my best friend’s preoccupation with her new fiancé, and his friends are all annoying me. Not to mention my family. Jeez, they’re stressing me out lately, too. My mom, who’s having a hard time adapting to retirement and making me crazy. My oldest sibling, Lauren, who recently shocked the family with the news that she and her husband of sixteen years

were splitting up. Lauren's fourteen-year-old daughter who's now acting out. And Grandma Garner, who created a stir in the assisted-living facility for having an overnight guest in her apartment. Male guest.

I love my family, but what happened to the days when *I* was the oddball nobody else understood? They've always been the perfect overachievers who made me feel invisible.

Feeling invisible might be the worst feeling in the world. And it's ironic, considering I earn my living being extremely visible. But that's not me. That's just the external me, the makeup and hair and clothes I display for the world to see. The real me is inside. The real me is the one people don't see.

Except for Hayden. Best friends since middle school, we bonded as misfits, rejected by the other girls for not conforming to their standards of dress, makeup, and boy craziness. We were never good at sports, preferring to hang out in the library or local bookstore, or the animal shelter where we volunteered. Despite our differences—Hayden is extremely logical and sensible, whereas I'm emotional and impulsive; Hayden is quiet and introverted, while I'm extroverted and talkative—we understand each other. Hayden keeps me focused, and I keep Hayden from becoming a hermit.

And Grandma Garner. Grandma is the other oddball in the family, the one who understands me better than anyone else. As Grandma says, we're "kindred spirits."

I turn into the parking lot behind my condo complex, park, and enter my little place. It's big enough for me. I like the wall of windows leading onto a balcony that overlooks the center courtyard full of palm trees and flowers, and the location is great. But it's not the kind of place I see myself living in forever. I've been keeping an eye out for a property I could move up to, now my money situation is pretty comfortable. Of course, since I impulsively applied for that scholarship to study photography in Spain and shockingly got accepted, I'll have to put that on hold.

I'd like a house, something with character that I can make my own. Not that I haven't made this condo my own, but there

are limits to what I can do with it.

I drop my big purse on the granite counter separating my tiny kitchen from the living/dining area and head to my bedroom. I didn't even shower after rolling out of bed to answer Marco's summons to Conquistadors.

I like "kindred spirits," the people you relate to without any effort. Too bad Marco isn't a little more kindred.

Except ... there's something about him that I do feel a sense of connection with. His typical look is a broody scowl, though he smiles and flirts with customers. But the smiles never really dispel the faint shadows in those dark eyes, hints of pain and sadness that tug at something inside me. I know what it's like to be hurt, but I have a feeling Marco's wounds are much darker and deeper than the ones I've experienced.

And that is all in my past. I've moved on from all that. Now I'm a successful model many people admire. If I felt a teensy bit dissatisfied with that, well, I've been at this a while and it's bound to get old. Unfortunately, *I'm* also getting old, and the jobs I'm being offered are getting fewer and further between. Less glamorous. There are hundreds of young girls people would rather hire.

I can't complain about this stuff to anyone, because people look at me and think I can't possibly have problems. Bitching about my modeling career? Oh, too bad, so sad. And I *am* grateful for the success I've had, truly. But sometimes I feel like my life doesn't mean anything. Like I'll never do anything that makes a real difference in the world.

My best friend is trying to find a cure for cancer. My entire family is successful in the business world. And I... I get my picture taken for advertisements.

I quickly shower and wash my hair. I had my regular waxing appointment the other day so I'm good to go. I leave my hair damp, knowing it'll air dry on the way to the pier.

I drove up the coast, grateful for no traffic snarls on a summer Saturday, and find the trailer where hair and makeup are waiting for me. I've worked with Olympia and Chantal

before and we chat easily as Olympia turns my hair into a perfectly tousled style and Chantal does my face. I also know the photographer, Chance. We dated a few times years ago, but it had never gone anywhere and now we're friends. He's been helpful to me with my own photography, giving me advice when I bought a new camera and suggestions on how to improve my shots.

Another model arrives as Chantal finishes glossing my lips.

"Hey, Carrie." Ralph greets me with a wide smile. "Good to see you."

"You too." Eh, not really. Ralph is stunningly gorgeous, with cut muscles and abs you could scrub clothes on, tanned and white toothed with a killer smile. But he's incredibly shallow. He has to spend most of his time in the gym, and all he likes to talk about is protein shakes, tanning beds, and whether his calves are too skinny.

The first outfit I don is a cute little romper in a bright tropical print. The front has a plunging cowl neckline and Chantal adds shimmer to my chest and cleavage.

I'm so used to this, but damn, it gets harder and harder to stand there and let people fuss over my hair and makeup and the outfit I'm wearing, pinning it at the back so it fits my narrow torso better, tweaking the neckline. I have to look over everyone's heads and force myself to breathe normally because I feel all twitchy.

Then Ralph and I are out on the pier with people swarming around us—the stylist, the photographer, his assistant, the marketing rep from the store, and a bunch of other people. I smile and shake my hair back in the ocean breeze and move from pose to pose with Ralph against the wooden railing of the pier. Tourists and people out for the day pause to watch the shoot.

I change into a bikini and a floaty skirt that sits low on my hips. Ralph and I return to the beach, this time on the sand beneath the pier, the crisscross supports of the structure behind us. The breeze tosses the skirt around my legs, and once again

I move from pose to pose, smiling into Ralph's eyes, adjusting the tilt of my head, the width of my smile, the turn of my foot in the sand.

“Yeah, turn your head the other way,” Chance calls to me.
“You look like you have a double chin.”

I resist an eye roll. I do not have a double chin. Fuck him.

MARCO

I watch Carrie stride out of Conquistadors with a sigh.

The shit that comes out of my mouth when she's around is never what it's supposed to be.

I have no idea why she hates my guts, but she clearly does. From the first time I met her at one of our tequila-tasting evenings when she came in with her friend Hayden, I've been dumbstruck by how gorgeous she is. There's something about her that ... shines. The luminous smile, her laugh, the way she seems to enjoy life so much. So I flirted a little. Isn't that how you show a woman you're interested in her?

Except *she's* not interested in *me*.

Okay, so I'm aiming too high with her. A blond, blue-eyed model with several sexy swimsuit shoots in her portfolio is probably, no *definitely* out of my league. Of course she dislikes me. I'm the guy nobody wants.

Okay, okay, that's melodramatic and pathetic.

I slide off the stool at the bar and move around behind it to place stemmed glasses into the overhead rack. It's early in the day but I can still be productive.

After my parents were deported when I was fourteen, my sister and I were shuttled into the foster care system. Unfortunately for me, nobody wanted a fourteen-year-old Mexican kid with dark hair and brown skin who was big for his age and had an attitude. They did, however, want my ten-year-old sister, Alejandra. She was small and cute ... and a girl. She disappeared with her new family amid tears and

heartbreak, and I've only seen her once since then. After her family adopted her and changed her name, I completely lost track of her. To this day I have no idea where she is.

I wasn't adopted, but was shuttled from one foster home to another. It was clear that none of them really wanted me there. At first, I'd have a deeply buried molecule of hope every time a new family took me in. Maybe they would be the ones who loved me. Who wanted me. Maybe I'd fit in there and feel safe. But I soon learned not to get my hopes up. Not to care. I became resentful, edgy. Difficult. Who could blame them for not wanting me?

So hey, it's no surprise that someone like Carrie doesn't want me either. Maybe that's why her dismissal of me bugs me so much ... it brings back those memories of rejection and being found lacking.

I got over that. At least, I thought I had. I found my place in the world when I became a Navy SEAL. I found my brothers, the men who understand me like nobody else I've ever met. I proved myself worthy by succeeding at the most demanding training the US military has to offer. I finally felt at home—accepted. Like I was making a contribution and that contribution was valued.

I wipe a glass and set it on a shelf. It's one of the special tequila glasses we used for our finest añejo tequilas, and for the tasting evenings we started having in an attempt to improve business.

Our first couple of tasting evenings went well. We made some money and interest has grown, and we're seeing the payoff in return customers. We have another one planned in a few weeks, and we also have a bachelor party scheduled next month. A groom and his friends are coming in to do a private tequila-tasting evening.

My thoughts go back to Carrie again as I move around behind the bar preparing for the day ahead. When she walked in earlier, I had to look twice at her because she looked so different. At first I couldn't figure out what it was, but then I

realized she had no makeup on. I'd never seen her without makeup.

Not that she wears a *lot* of makeup, but what she does wear makes her look really different. She has gorgeous eyes, an unusual gray-blue that she emphasizes with shadow and mascara, and full lips that make me think carnal thoughts. She's usually pretty polished looking, but today she was wearing ripped jeans and an old hoodie, her hair was up in a messy twist on top of her head with pieces falling around her face, her lips a naked pale pink, and her eyes bare and vulnerable looking.

She gave me a genuine smile when we were talking about those stupid party games—I knew she would like them, heh—and there'd been a moment there, a flash of heat that made me think maybe she doesn't *totally* hate me.

Then again, what the hell do I know?

The sound of the back door opening and closing alerts me to the arrival of someone. Likely not Beck, since he and Hayden are no doubt snuggled up in bed together on a Saturday morning. Who knows when we'll see Beck again?

Ugh. I hate the twist I feel in my gut. I'm not jealous of Beck. I'm happy for him. So we see less of him these days. That's fine. And it's not like Beck is shirking his duties at Conquistadors—he's here tending bar like he always has and helping out. In fact, maybe more so after we had a little talk about his busy pre-Hayden social life. But now outside of work we don't see him as much as we used to.

Cade appears from the hallway, scowling. "Hey. Too early for tequila shots?"

I lift an eyebrow. "You know me. It's never too early. What's wrong?"

"Just a huge traffic snarl up on the 405. You know how that makes me nuts."

"What the hell were you doing on the 405?" Cade's place is only a few blocks from Conquistadors. All three of us found

homes near the bar in the Pacific Beach neighborhood of San Diego, near the ocean we all love. “Oh, never mind.”

Cade’s been sleeping his way through the entire female population of Southern California for the last few months.

“You’d think getting laid would put you in a good enough mood to handle a little traffic.”

“You’d think.” Despite his stated need for tequila, Cade makes no move to pour himself a drink. And he probably won’t. “And it was more than a little traffic. It was a fucking parking lot. I could have gotten out of my car and walked here faster.”

“Hey, chill. No big deal. It’s not like you’re gonna get fired for being late.”

Cade rubs his face. “Right. Right.” Of all of us, Cade’s the one who is most tightly wound, although his shaggy, sun-bleached hair and deep tan give the impression of a laid-back surfer dude.

“So, listen. I have to tell you about the party we’re having for Beck and Hayden.”

“Party?”

“Yeah.” I outline the plans for the upcoming engagement soiree.

Cade nods agreeably. “Sure. Sounds good. What can I do?”

“We’re taking care of food and drinks. I asked Carrie to help with the guest list and decorations.”

“Decorations?” Cade’s eyebrows pull together

I shrug. “She’s all artsy and into that shit.”

Cade grins. “She actually agreed to help you?”

“Yeah.” I frown. “It’s for her best friend.”

“Right, right. Okay, August 6. Does the happy couple know about this yet?”

“No. I thought it should be a surprise.”

“Oh. Okay, then good thing I asked. So we don’t say anything to either of them about it.” He squints. “How will we get them here that night?”

Marco grins. “That can be *your* contribution.” I clap a hand on Cade’s shoulder.

“Great.” Cade grimaces. “Guess I can come up with something.”

More sounds from the back of the restaurant announce the arrival of staff showing up for work, since the bar and restaurant open for lunch shortly. Not that things are ever that busy for lunch. It seems most of our customers prefer to come in the evening, and if they order food it’s mainly the bar snacks.

“Hey.”

We both turn to see Beck stroll into the bar.

“Hey. You dragged yourself out of your girlfriend’s bed to join us?” I lift an eyebrow.

Beck frowns. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? I work here, remember?”

I sigh and resume wiping glasses. “Yeah, yeah. We need to have another talk with Sid about fixing our menu. We need to be busier at lunchtime. That would solve some of our problems.”

We’ve been talking to Sid, our cook, about trying to improve the food menu, and he’s made some changes, but it hasn’t helped a whole lot. We’re feeling pressure to increase our food sales because of city requirements to sell at least fifty percent food and fifty percent alcohol. The laws are not in our favor, though, because we sell top-shelf drinks at premium prices, making it hard to meet that ratio of food to alcohol.

The last thing the three of us want is to be shut down because we’re not selling enough food. Their manager, Danny, doesn’t think that’ll happen, but you never know. We also just want to be better; it’s in our nature to strive to be the best at whatever we do.

This business is everything to me now. We three became family when we met in the Navy SEALs. Now Beck, and Cade, and I are living a civilian life, and they're still the only family I have. I'd do anything to make sure we don't lose this. We *have* to succeed. For Navy SEALs, failure is not an option. The SEAL maxim is: the person who will not be defeated cannot be defeated.

We're all determined and hardworking, but none of us are experienced at running a restaurant. Sure, we know tequila. We drank enough of it. That was the joke when we were trying to figure out what to do with our lives when we were no longer SEALs—the one thing we know a lot about is tequila. *Let's open a tequila bar*, I said. *It'll be fun*.

But running a business requires a lot more than knowledge about reposado, añejo, and extra añejo. We rely heavily on Danny. We trust him and his advice. When it comes to the kitchen, Sid's our man, but we've all been having doubts about his ability to get us through this. Using frozen burgers, jugs of mass-produced salsa, and generic packaged chips isn't cutting it.

"He made a few changes," Beck says. "They seem to be working."

"It's not enough," Cade says. "Marco's right."

I gasp. "What did you just say?"

Cade grins. "Don't get used to hearing that. But in this case you are. Improving our lunch business would help. People don't come to drink tequila at lunchtime."

"Well, some people do." Beck grimaces.

Cade laughs. "True.

"And there was more vandalism last night," I add with a frown. This is the other issue that's chapping my ass lately—the acts of vandalism that are occurring in the neighborhood, one of which was graffiti spray-painted over our back wall. We were all pissed about that, although happy at least it wasn't on the front of the bar. We spent hundreds of dollars to hire someone to paint over it to get rid of the colorful image.

“More graffiti?” Beck grabs a glass out of my hand and heads to the refrigerator.

“Yeah. At the coffee shop down the street. Fuck, that pisses me off.”

“Relax, man.” Beck pours orange juice into the glass.

“Easy for you to say, the guy who’s getting laid on the reg.”

Beck grins. He’s definitely a happier guy lately.

“Come on,” Beck says. “Dealing with issues like our food menu and a little graffiti should be a piece of cake after dealing with everything we went through.”

“Hell week,” Cade says. “Combat deployments.”

“Helicopters nearly crashing,” I add. “Shrapnel wounds.”

“Nearly getting raped by a whale,” Cade says.

I laugh. “Right.”

“Pink glitter bombs in the gear,” Cade adds.

Beck grins. SEALs do like their pranks. “Yeah. My point is, this isn’t life and death.”

Beck’s point has merit. But it’s in my nature to want justice. Those bastard graffiti artists can’t get away with shit like that. I want to find them and punish them.

As for the restaurant and our menu problems, what does success look like anyway? We have customers coming in who enjoy themselves here, regulars who like to hang out here, we have enough money to pay the bills and a lifestyle we’re making the most of. Sunny Southern California offers plenty of opportunities for us to enjoy the physical kinds of pastimes we all enjoy: mountain biking, rock climbing, hang gliding, go-kart racing, paintball ... even skydiving like Beck does to raise money for the Trident Foundation, which he started to provide financial help to Navy SEALs in times of need. And I have my welding art. It’s a weird kind of hobby I’ve been playing around with using the welding skills I learned in the

Navy, not for salvaging sunken vessels or repairing ships below the waterline, but for having some fun with.

“Yeah,” I finally admit. “You’re right.”

Cade snorts. “Jeez. What’s happening here today? We’re not gonna argue about green versus red salsa or which kinds of tequila we’re going to serve at the next tasting event?”

“We’re not gonna argue about that because I’ve already decided,” I say.

“Whatever.” Cade shrugs. “In other news, we need to hire more serving staff.”

“What?” I scowl. “We just hired three new waiters.”

Cade nods. “And then Betsy decided to move back to L.A. and Julio gave his notice because he got a full-time job as a bank teller.”

“Well, shit.” Beck frowns too. “It never ends.”

Staffing is a pain in the ass sometimes.

“Nope.” Cade shakes his head.

“Why do we have so much turnover? This is a great place to work,” I say.

“And we’re the shit,” Beck adds. “Who could ask for better bosses?”

Cade and I both grin. “Right? Something else we’re all in agreement on.”

“It’s just the nature of the business,” Cade says. “We’re doing fine. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it.” He’s the businessman of the three of us, the guy who does the books and counts the nickels. He does the hiring and all the paperwork that goes with that, but Beck and I usually take on training new staff.

“So who was last night’s hookup?” I ask Cade.

Cade squints. “I think her name was Leslie.”

I hoist an eyebrow. “You think? Jesus, man.”

“Yeah, yeah, it was Leslie. She was fun.”

“But you’re not seeing her again.”

“Yeah, probably not. But I never say never.”

“He’s not seeing her again,” I say to Beck.

“We worry about you, dude.” Beck gives Cade a look.

Cade lifts his middle finger at us.

“What kind of communication is that?” Beck says. “I’m serious.”

“You’re not serious. Nobody worries about a guy who’s having a lot of no-strings-attached sex.”

I’m about to agree with that, but Beck says, “Sure they do. Because when you find the right woman, all that meaningless sex seems kinda ... empty.”

Cade and I groaned. “Here we go,” I say. “Now he’s married off he thinks we should *all* be.”

Beck just laughs, which again says much about his state of mind. “I’m not saying you should get married. But, man ... even though you’re having sex with a different woman every night—”

“Not every night,” Cade protests. “Come on. I do have other things in my life.”

Beck shrugs. “Whatever. My point was that despite all the hot sex, you don’t actually seem that happy.”

“I’m happy.” Cade’s eyebrows fly up. He points at me. “Him. He’s the one who’s not happy. Walking around scowling all the time. You’re scaring customers away.”

“I am not.” My forehead tightens into that scowl. I force myself to relax my facial features, because once a-fucking-gain Cade is right.

“Maybe *you* need to get laid,” Beck says mildly, then drains the juice in the glass.

Yeah, I need to get laid. And the person who immediately comes to mind is Carrie.

Goddamn, I wanted to sink my cock into her so deep, feel how wet and tight her pussy is and taste her gorgeous, lickable mouth. I want to make her come so hard she sees not just stars but galaxies and begs me for more. Yeah. I want her begging me for it, not insulting me and snubbing me.

Damn. I let my mind go there and that's bad, as I feel a stirring in my southern region.

"I'm fine," I snap.

Beck and Cade exchange a look that irritates me even more.

"What?" I demand.

"You *are* a little crusty lately," Beck says. "Everything okay?"

"No, everything's not okay. Were we not just talking about how we need more food business, need to fix our menu, need to hire more staff *again*, and need to stop the fucking criminals who are defacing property in the neighborhood?"

"And I said, chill, none of that is life and death, and you agreed with me, remember?"

I suck in a breath. "Right." I grit my teeth, unwilling to share that I'm worried that Beck being in a relationship with a woman might mean he's pulling away from us and our brotherhood, and that a certain gorgeous model is making me nuts. "Right. Okay. I'm fine. Just a little ... yeah, maybe getting laid would be a good thing."

"There ya go. You're off tonight. It's Saturday. Why don't you go to some pickup bar down on Fifth Avenue and see if you can get lucky. I still find it hard to believe, but apparently some chicks think you're not bad looking."

I have to laugh and shake my head. The idea of going to some meat-market bar alone appeals about as much as having my back, crack, and sack waxed. But hey, maybe that really is what I need. Maybe getting away from this place for a while and forgetting about staffing and our menu and Beck's preoccupation with his fiancée would be a good idea.

“Hey, wait. You’re telling *me* meaningless sex is empty and lonely, but you’re encouraging *him* to do it?” Cade glares at Beck.

Beck laughs.

CARRIE

I'm not sure how I've been convinced to tag along with Chance, Chantal, and Olympia tonight. After the photo shoot, they invited me to come with them for dinner and then dancing at a new club Chance wants to check out.

Sitting at home alone on a Saturday night isn't all that appealing, so I agreed to go with them. I could go hang out with Hayden at Conquistadors, since Beck is working there tonight, but then I'd be forced to hang out with Marco too, and I've already seen him once today, which is one time too many.

So here I am entering Delirium on Fourth Avenue, dressed in a tight little black dress and spiky heels, my hair still in messy waves from this afternoon. Some DJ I've never heard of is appearing tonight, and apparently he's popular because the place is packed. Music pounds around us as we make our way through a crowd toward the bar glowing with purple lights. Above us, blue and purple rays crisscross the black ceiling, changing colors and pulsing to the beat of the music.

Chase orders us all surprise drinks. We watch the bartender in a tiny black sequined bra mix them, shimmying her shoulders to the music as she does so.

I accept the glass and take a sip. "Yum. What is it?"

"California Legspreader."

My eyebrows shoot up. Chase grins, and Olympia and Chantal laugh.

We stand at a railing to watch the dancing for a while. On a catwalk, two girls wearing outfits similar to the bartender's

swing their long hair and shake their asses in little black shorts.

“Damn,” Chase mutters, eyes on one of the dancing girls. “She is hot.”

“Mmmm.” I can’t argue with that. Both girls are stunning, and the way they move to the music is mesmerizing. The beat infects me, making me shift my body in time to it. I love music, but I’m not the best dancer. I’ve had a few dance lessons and can now move a little and not make a complete fool of myself, but as a tall, gangly teenager I always felt awkward on the dance floor, like I was all wild arms and legs. I’ve never really gotten over that.

With our second drink in hand, we take to the floor as a group. A man near Carrie catches my eye and smiles and I smile back. He dances nearer to me. “Hi. I’m Brent.”

“Carrie.” I keep moving to the music, smiling.

“Was your dad a boxer? ’Cause you’re a knockout.”

I burst out laughing. “Um, thanks.”

Brent grins.

I dance with Brent then return to my friends for a few more songs before leaving the dance floor. I fan my face with my hand, warm from the crowd and the activity.

“Another Legspreader?” Chase asks.

“No, let’s get bottles.” Olympia leans on the bar, her long red hair flowing down her back. She rises onto her tiptoes to shout across the bar, “Four bottles of champagne!”

My eyebrows rise and I shake my head. “Champagne?”

“It’s just cheap stuff.” She grins.

We return to the dance floor, sipping the bubbly wine straight from the bottle. The alcohol is definitely blurring everything for me, the lights and the bodies and the music whirling around me.

Then the DJ starts and things get even more crowded, everyone screaming and cheering as he’s introduced. I thrust

my bottle into the air and cheer along with everyone else. Then I turn around and see ... Marco.

I blink because it's dark in here and the flashing lights make it hard to see at times, but yep, it's him, leaning on the railing only a few feet from me. Watching me.

I lift my bottle to him in a sort of toast. He scowls.

I shrug and resume dancing, taking another swig of champagne. I'm having fun.

Is he here alone?

I risk a glance his way only to encounter his burning stare again. My skin heats even more. He does seem to be alone, but wait ... not for long. One of the female servers, wearing yet another version of their uniform, a tight black halter top and silver sequined short shorts, appears at his side with a flirtatious smile and flutter of eyelashes.

Marco's smile in return is warm. I don't want to watch them talk and flirt, but I have a hard time dragging my gaze away from them. I toss my hair back and focus on the hip-hop music the DJ is spinning.

"I need to sit down," Olympia yells over the music. "My feet are killing me."

"Take off your shoes!" Chantal calls.

"I just want to sit."

"Okay. I'll come with you." I take Olympia's hand and we make our way through the crush, a little unsteady due to three-inch heels and champagne. We find a spot on a long purple banquette and collapse there laughing. Olympia now chooses to slip off her heels.

I sip my champagne again, and as I lower the bottle Marco appears in front of me.

"Hey, Supermodel," he says with a frown. "You look wasted."

My eyes pop open. "What? Wasted?"

“That is *not* a good pickup line,” Olympia chastises him. “You need to be more complimentary. Like that dude on the dance floor.”

“What dude on the dance floor?” Marco demands.

“The one who asked her if her dad was a boxer, because she’s a knockout.” Olympia giggles.

Marco rolls his eyes. “I’m not trying to pick her up. We know each other.”

“Oh.” Olympia blinks and turns to me. “You do?”

One corner of my mouth lifts. “We do.”

“Well then.” Olympia wriggles away from me and pats the bench between us. “Have a seat.”

Ugh. I force a tight smile at Marco as he sits, taking up a lot of space with his big shoulders. I try to edge a little farther away from him, but there’s someone else sitting next to me so I can’t go far.

“Marco, this is my friend Olympia. Olympia, Marco.”

They shake hands while I briefly pull my top lip between my teeth, awareness skittering over my nerve endings. Marco’s muscular thigh presses against me, the soft cotton of his dress shirt brushes against my bare arm, and heat radiates off his body along with an enticing, spicy male scent.

“Is there an airport nearby?” Marco asks Olympia.

I blink, clutching my champagne bottle.

“Or is that my heart taking off?” he finishes.

Olympia laughs with delight. “That’s much better.” She gives him a flurry of false eyelashes.

“If being sexy was a crime, you’d be guilty as charged.”

She giggles again.

I frown. Okay, Marco annoys me most of the time, but watching him flirt with my friend is even more aggravating.

“Are you a campfire? ’Cause you’re hot and I want s’more.”

Olympia laughs, but I groan. “Oh please. That is so bad.”

Marco turns to me, his tanned face and dark beard stubble shadowy in the dim club. “Just playin’ around.”

“How unlike you,” I mutter.

He plucks the bottle from my hand and takes a gulp.

“Hey!”

“You’ve had enough.”

“I’m not drunk! And it’s not up to you to decide when I’ve had enough.”

He makes a face as he swallows. “Huh. That stuff’s terrible. Have you been drinking that all night?”

“No.” The corners of my mouth quiver. “Earlier I had a couple of Legspreaders.”

Marco’s eyes narrow. “Jesus.”

“Somehow I knew that would annoy you.” I roll my eyes and wrestle the champagne bottle away from him. In the process, I became pressed even tighter to his side. “Everything about me annoys you.”

I catch Olympia’s wide-eyed stare. “Um, how do you two know each other?”

“Marco is one of the owners of Conquistadors. His partner Beck is my friend Hayden’s fiancé.”

“Oh! Conquistadors. I’ve heard of it but I’ve never been there.”

“Well, you should definitely come.” Marco flashes a wide, white smile that makes my belly do a little flip. Damn those dimples. “We have over sixty premium one hundred percent blue agave tequilas.”

“Uh ... tequila.” Olympia makes a face.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Marco says, turning on the charm. “But tequila isn’t all about lime and salt and shots. A fine añejo tequila is rich and smooth, with complex flavors.”

“Blah-blah-blah,” I say. “Yes, you’re the tequila expert.”

Marco's jaw tightens.

"That's fascinating," Olympia says.

I swallow the word "traitor" along with the last of the champagne. "I need another drink." I bound to my feet, proud that I only wobble a bit on my heels.

Marco grabs my hand and tugs me back down to the banquette.

"Hey!"

He lifts a hand and catches the eye of the server he flirted with earlier. She hurries over, her long legs tanned and toned.

"I'll have a Monterey Pale Ale," he says. "And the ladies will each have a glass of water."

The girl's smile becomes fixed. "Of course." She disappears.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I ask him. "This doesn't seem like your kind of place."

"No? Why not?"

"It's cool. Trendy. Fun." I give him a meaningful look.

"Ha." One corner of his mouth kicks up. "It's my night off. The guys suggested I needed, uh"—he coughs into his hand—"some fun."

I arch an eyebrow. "Shocking."

"I can have fun."

"I need to use the ladies' room." Olympia wiggles her feet into her shoes and stands. "Back in a minute." I'm sure I hear her mutter, "Not that you'll even notice I'm gone," as she walks away.

Marco spares her a glance then turns his glower back on me.

"You're as much fun as a colonoscopy," I add.

To my surprise, he laughs at that. And holy hell, when he laughs, his big white smile lights up the room, his face

creasing into the most amazing, gorgeous laugh lines, crinkling his eyes and making them sparkle.

The waitress arrives with our drinks. I take the glass of ice water and gulp it down. Much as it annoys me that he ordered water for me, I needed it. Marco, however, leaves his beer sitting on the table in front of us, takes the water from me and sets it there too, then grabs my hand.

He shocks me by pulling me up off the bench and stalking toward the dance floor, towing me along.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demand.

I’m six feet tall in my Louboutins, but he still has a few inches on me and outweighs me by probably a hundred pounds. No, not that much. Maybe ... hell, my mind refuses to do math as he spins me onto the dance floor in a smooth move that has my jaw dropping.

“We’re dancing,” he replies.

My feet won’t move for a few seconds as I stare at him. He moves to the music with shocking rhythm.

“Marco Solis, I would never in a million years have guessed you’re such a good dancer.”

He freezes in place, his mouth falling open. “Did you just compliment me?”

“Don’t get used to it,” I mutter. “It’s the only thing you’ve got going for you.”

He grins and resumes dancing. “Right. So are you just going to stand there watching me?” He moves closer and sets his hands on my hips.

His smile transforms his face from its usual broody darkness into an attractive glow that pulls me in. I dance, in my small, circumspect moves, as always conscious of my long legs and arms and how goofy I’d look if I let loose.

He’s a better dancer than I am.

The song slows and he pulls me closer still, maintaining heavy eye contact that makes my skin tingle everywhere and

heat pool down low inside me. Somehow he spins me and pulls me back against his front, doing some hot grinding moves that increase the blood flow to my girl parts. Whoa.

I swallow.

I let the music fill me up and take me over, moving to it instinctively but also moving with Marco's body. The rest of the people dancing around us fade away and become a blur of light and shadow, the music pulsing right to my core. When he turns me to face him again, he keeps our bodies pressed together. I like that our faces are nearly level, nearly eye to eye ... nose to nose ... mouth to mouth.

This is crazy, but I'm ensnared by the smoldering heat in his gaze and the big hands on my waist. I want him to move those hands all over me. Anticipation thrums through me and heat builds between us. I miss a step, nearly tripping over my own foot, and Marco's lips lift into a smile.

His eyes gleam in the dark club and I know he feels it too. How could you miss it—that hum of awareness, the sparks that practically crackle between us.

Shit. This is no good!

"I need a drink," I mutter, pulling away from him. Instead of returning to the banquette where we left Olympia—she's chatting with a guy sitting next to her—I head toward the mauve glow of the bar. I wait for the bartender to notice me, but the gorgeous girl is paying more attention to the male customers lining the bar. The girl's attention lands over my shoulder. I glance back, and sure enough it's Marco. He makes eye contact with the bartender and she nearly breaks an ankle scurrying over to him.

"Oh for Chrissake," I mutter.

"What was that?" Marco murmurs in my ear. "You want tequila?"

"You said I was too drunk." I eye him balefully.

His lips twitch. "Two shots of Casa Mendoza, please."

The girl's eyes widen briefly, but she nods and steps away to get the expensive tequila.

"Are you trying to get me drunk and take advantage of me?" I joke. Then I wish I didn't say that, because I have this weird, disturbing feeling that he doesn't have to ply me with alcohol. There's something so attractive about him tonight that he could probably get me in his bed without too much trouble. All he has to do is smile.

"No," he says. "If that's what I wanted I would have ordered you another Legspreader."

He says it so deadpan I stare at him, then pick up the glint in his eye. A laugh bubbles up from inside me. "You made a joke!"

"You don't need to sound so shocked."

The bartender arrives with our tequila, served in appropriate glasses, I note appreciatively. The tequila-tasting lessons apparently sank in. I have to admit I'm even acquiring a bit of a taste for the spirit, but it has to be good quality. Oh Jesus, I'm becoming a tequila snob.

And I bug *Marco* about that.

Marco holds up his glass and gives it a swirl. He nods approvingly. "Beautiful legs."

His gaze drops from his glass to my literal legs, and heat coils low inside me at the husky timbre of his voice as he says that.

I know what he's talking about, from those tequila tastings we've gone to, the "legs" of the tequila being the way it runs down the sides of the glass, revealing essential oils.

"Lagrimas de la agave," he adds.

Dammit. I close my eyes. Hayden thinks it's sexy when Marco speaks Spanish. *I* find it annoying. Really. "Tears of the agave," I translate.

"Have you been taking those Spanish lessons?" he asks, one eyebrow arching.

When he heard I'm going to Spain to study photography, he offered to teach me Spanish, but I scoffed at that suggestion. Although I want to learn Spanish, I want nothing to do with Marco.

"No," I admit. "Nothing starts until fall, and I leave in October, so there's no point signing up. I started doing this free online course."

"And how is that going?"

I shrug, holding up my tequila glass and swirling it. "Meh."

"See," he says. "Nice long legs."

Once again, his tone of voice sounds sexier than if he was just talking about tequila. I swallow, then open my mouth slightly as I was taught to do when I sniff, searching out aromas and tastes, then sip and swallow. The heat traces down my throat and Marco gives me an expectant look.

"Burned honey," I murmur. "Vanilla. Hints of leather."

He smiles.

Dear God, he smiles. That smile is doing very strange things to my insides.

"Very good," he murmurs. "You've been an excellent student. You know, my offer to teach you Spanish still stands."

This time I don't snort or insult his Spanish. This time I take another slow, thoughtful sip of the añejo. I do want to learn more before I go to Spain, and the online course isn't that great. But ... Marco.

"We could start tonight," he adds.

"Stop flirting with me."

His eyes flicker, almost as if I slapped him. And dammit, I feel a twinge of remorse.

"I know you don't mean it," I say. "I feel like you're making fun of me."

He blinks slowly. Once. Twice. "Making fun of you?"

I bend my head. I've never gotten over those old feelings of insecurity, the way I burned inside hearing kids laugh at me because I walked into a locker door or tripped over my own huge feet. But I sure as hell don't want to share all that with Marco.

"I'm hardly making fun of you." He moves closer so he can speak right into my ear in a low tone of voice. "More like making a fool of myself, thinking someone like you would ever be interested in me."

My head shoots up and I stare into his eyes. For a long moment we don't move. A connection spins between us, twirling strands of understanding and attraction as we search each other's expressions, me looking for any sign of mockery or insincerity and seeing none. But it doesn't make sense that gorgeous, confident, sexy Marco feels ... what? As insecure as I do?

MARCO

“You are *not* interested in me.”

I tip my head to one side at Carrie’s words. We’re so close to each other I can smell her, an ethereal vanilla-musk scent. We have to be that close because of the loud music, otherwise we’d be shouting at each other, and these aren’t things we want to shout. I breathe in the fragrance, my nose touching her hair, and I think her body quivers.

Dancing with her, having my hands on her body, her attention focused on me, made me drunk before I even tasted my beer or tequila.

“You hate me,” she continues, her head bent, her hair falling over face.

“Um, no, *belleza*, *you* hate *me*. I’ve just never been able to figure out why.” Sure, I have my insecurities, but even so, I’ve never done anything to make her hate me. At least I don’t think I have. I assumed her dislike of me was her looking down her cute little nose at me. But she thinks I was making fun of her? How fucked up is that?

She tucks some hair behind her ear and straightens. I can almost see the walls coming up. “I don’t hate you,” she says dismissively. “I tolerate you.”

“Ouch.” It’s a slap in the face, except I know she’s lying. She’s protecting herself. And that make me intensely curious, wanting to know more about her, to know what’s behind those walls ... behind that beautiful face and tight body she shows

the world. Literally. Because I know walls. “Okay, you’re right. I’m not interested in you.”

I register the tiniest flicker of her eyes, but she keeps her face carefully composed.

“I don’t do relationships,” I continue. “And even though there’s some kind of heat between us, it would be a definite mistake for us to hook up, considering our best friends are getting married and we’re going to be forced to see each other. So just put your pretty little head at ease and forget that.”

Her eyes widen and her full lips part. It’s a mistake to look at her mouth, though, because my blood runs south and my dick thickens. I drag my gaze up to meet her glare.

“Pretty little head? You are such a douche.”

I shrug. “Probably, yeah.”

She tosses her hair back, then drains her tequila. “Thanks for the drink. I’m going to find my friends.”

I watch her walk away, back toward the long purple banquette where, yes, her friend Olympia sits, having returned from the ladies’ room, now laughing with a man sitting next to her.

I drop my head and stare at my hard-on regretfully. *Sorry, Mr. Big. Not happening right now.*

I look up to watch other eyes follow Carrie’s progress through the club ... both men and women. She’s sex on wheels, no doubt about it—that short, tight dress hugs her curves and leaves sleek legs bare. Her long hair is a mess, but a hot mess like she just rolled out of bed after a sexathon, hanging down her back in tousled waves.

I lean against the bar and sip my Casa Mendoza. Well, things are back to normal between us now, after a little blistering flirtation on the dance floor. If the sparks between us are that hot in public, what would they be like in bed?

Dammit, I want to find out. But I wasn’t lying when I pointed out that hooking up with her would be a mistake. Even if that’s all it could be. I know no woman is going to stick with

me for the long term. And then it would be all awkward, and Beck's fiancée would hate him.

On the other hand, Carrie is leaving for Spain in less than two months.

I make a face as I watch her join in the conversation with Olympia and the dude. Her smile makes my gut ache.

Yeah, I don't do relationships. But a sexy fling with a hot model is sounding better and better.

No. She's Hayden's best friend.

We hate each other.

Hate sex can be smoking hot, though.

The internal debate bounces back and forth in my mind like a tennis ball at Wimbledon.

The waitress appears in front of Carrie and Olympia with a tray of drinks. Jesus, she ordered more tequila.

I accused her of being wasted, but I was just being an asshole. Now, however, with a few cocktails—Legspreaders, for Chrissake—cheap champagne, and a couple of tequila shots, she might in fact be riding the train to Trashed Town.

I frown when she rises to her feet and follows some dude onto the dance floor, Olympia and another guy tagging along behind. Oh hell no. She's not dancing with anyone but me.

I know how ridiculous that is. But the burn behind my sternum can't be ignored.

I should probably just get the hell out of here so I don't have to watch her flirting and smiling at someone else. Watch someone else put his hands on her sweet curves. Watch her lean in closer and—yeah, I'm done.

But instead of leaving, my feet take me back onto the dance floor. I curve my hand around Carrie's upper arm and turn her away from the dipshit she's dancing with.

Her eyes widen.

“Sorry man,” I say to the guy. “My girl’s not dancing with anyone else.”

The guy steps back, hands in the air. Yeah, the badass SEAL commanding presence comes in handy sometimes. Also, I’m about four inches taller than this guy and a lot of pounds heavier.

Carrie glares at me. “What the hell was that?”

I grin. “Sorry, belleza. You’re dancing with me.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Right, right.” I pull her against me and sway to the slower beat. “We already established that. But admit it ... you want me.”

She gasps in outrage, her eyes sparking. But then her lips part and her gaze drops to my mouth.

“Admit it,” I murmur against her temple.

“No. I hate you.”

“I get that. But you still want me.” I brush my lips over her temple. “And I want you.”

Her body melts into me minutely. Satisfaction sizzles through my veins. “I can’t want you.”

“Listen. It’s okay. You’re leaving soon anyway, right?”

She swallows. “Right.”

“So what’s the risk? We have a hot little romp for a few weeks while I teach you Spanish and we throw an engagement party, and then you leave for Spain and we say goodbye and everyone’s happy.”

I feel her sigh against my throat. “Marco.”

“That’s my name.”

“I’m not sleeping with you tonight.”

“Damn.”

Her lips twitch.

“Okay,” I agree. “Not tonight.” I shift us out of the way of a drunken couple staggering off the dance floor. I sense she’s taken aback by my capitulation. “But you didn’t say not ever.”

“Oh my God.”

I bend my head, nuzzle her hair, and find her mouth with mine.

My feet stop moving. The rest of the club blacks out as her lips cling to mine, so soft, so sweet. Jesus. A fireball slams into my gut and heat spreads through my body. A raw, primal urge to sweep her up and carry her out of here roars through me. I don’t pick her up, but I can’t stop my arms from wrapping around her, one hand sliding up into her hair, the other on her ass pressing her against my swelling dick.

She makes a small noise in her throat that sounds like need and I open my mouth on hers, deepening the kiss. My heart pounds in my ears, drowning out the music. I sweep my tongue inside her mouth, tasting her essence, and it’s like a drug injected straight into my veins. I suck on her tongue, lick over her bottom lip, then kiss her again.

She goes boneless against me, her hands curled over my shoulders, sinking into me, opening her mouth to me. Our tongues slide together as we kiss again and again. Long moments later, I pull back and stare at her, both of us breathing hard. “Christ.”

Her shiny lips part and her heavy-lidded eyes do a slow blink. “Um. Yeah.”

The tight pressure in my balls makes me reluctant to even move. “Goddammit, Carrie, I want to take you out of here and bang the bejesus out of you.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh.”

“Hey. You okay, Carrie?”

I turn to the man who just spoke beside us and frown at him. “Who are you?”

“No, no, dude ... who are *you*?” The man lifts his chin and crosses his arms. A Black woman stands beside him, eyes

moving back and forth between Carrie and me, a slight smile tilting up the corners of her full lips.

“It’s okay, Chase.” Carrie grabs the guy’s biceps and squeezes. “Marco, this is my friend Chase. He’s a photographer. Chase, this is Marco Solis. You remember my friend Hayden?”

“Yeah.” Chase continues to eye me suspiciously.

“Marco is her fiancé’s friend and business partner.”

“Ah.” Chase’s eyebrows stay joined above his nose.

“And this is Chantal,” Carrie continues, smiling at the woman. “She’s a hairstylist. An amazing hairstylist.” She fluffs her tousled waves.

If Chantal is responsible for this sexy bed-head look, I want to kiss her. Okay, on the cheek.

“Nice to meet you,” I say to the woman, smiling.

“Likewise.” Her eyebrows lift and I feel the flirty admiration.

“We were just leaving,” I inform the pair.

“We were?” Carrie purses her lips.

“We were.”

Chase tilts his head. “Carrie doesn’t seem so sure about that. You sober, hon?”

Carrie sighs and let go of Chase’s arm. “No, I’m not sober. But I’m not that drunk.” She faces me. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Triumph swells in my chest. Right fucking on. I grin at Chase and Chantal. “Nice meeting you. And don’t worry. Carrie’s safe with me.” I slide my arm around her waist.

“I’m not so sure of that,” Carrie mutters. “Where’s Olympia?”

Chase gestures across the dance floor.

“Be right back.” She slips out of my grasp and weaves her way between gyrating bodies over to her friend. She’s back in only a few seconds, which is good because Chase is still

giving me stink eye. “Okay. Bye, guys. See you next week for the West Coast Mall shoot.”

“Bye, Carrie. And Marco.”

“How did you get here?” I ask as we leave the club.

“Uber.”

“Perfect. I’ll drive you home.” I feel her shiver beside me and reach for her hand. “Are you cold?”

“No.” It’s a temperate summer evening, with clear skies and barely any cooling breeze.

We walk down the sidewalk and I direct her around the corner onto the side street where I parked my Jeep. I help her in, unable to keep myself from watching as her short skirt rides even higher on toned thighs, nearly giving him a glimpse of panties. Jesus.

Starting the engine, I ask, “Where do you live?”

She gives me her address and brief directions. “Huh.” I pull away from the curb. “Not far from Conquistadors. And not far from my place near the beach.”

“Where do you live?”

“I have a little house in Bay Park. It’s old and ... I guess you’d say quaint. But I like living near the water and there’s a garage where I do my welding.”

“Your what?”

“Welding.” I shrug. “When I joined the Navy I decided to become a welder. I spent a few years learning my trade while learning to dive so I could become an underwater welder. Now I’m out, and I discovered I miss it, so I started creating these metal sculptures.”

She gapes at me. “Sculptures?”

“Yeah.” I slide a glance sideways at her. “They’re just kind of funky shit. I don’t really know what I’m doing, but people seem to like them.”

She shakes her head. “That’s ...”

“What?” I try not to sound defensive. “It’s just something that keeps me busy when I’m not working at the bar.”

“I wasn’t being critical. I think that’s cool.”

Oh yeah ... she’s into photography. That’s why she’s going to Spain. So maybe she gets the creative impulses that led me to my crazy sculptures.

“Would you like to come see my sculptures?” I ask.

She laughs. “Does that line usually work?”

“It wasn’t a line.” I frown. “I’m offended.”

“Really?”

“No.” I grin. “I mean I’m not offended. But it wasn’t a line.”

She bites her lip, then sighs. “Okay, sure. I’d like to see them.”

We fly along the freeway, the lights of speeding traffic and buildings flashing and glittering around us. I turn off I-5 onto Mission Bay Drive and cruise past Sea World and across the bay, then turn into my neighborhood and park in the driveway of my home.

“Cute place.” Carrie unfastens her seatbelt.

“Thanks. It’s a work in progress. I wanted to live near the beach, but that kind of real estate is pricy. This one needed some work, so I’m fixing it up.”

I help her out of the Jeep and lead the way to my front door. Inside, I flick on a light and cross the living room. I watch Carrie’s head turn as she takes in the Craftsman cottage. Yeah, I know it’s kind of sparse, but one day it’ll be restored to its glory. It has the good bones I like—nice hardwood floors, substantial woodwork around the doors and windows, a great fireplace. I’ve already replaced all the windows and upgraded the plumbing and electrical, but that stuff isn’t readily obvious. The cosmetic work will get done eventually.

“We can get into the garage through the kitchen.” I gesture and she preceded me into the kitchen, where I turn on another

light. The kitchen is the best part of the house, since it's the first thing I had redone, with new white cupboards, granite counters, and a terra-cotta tile floor. It, too, is a little sparse in the décor—I'm not much of a cook, but I like to sit at the small island and drink coffee with sunlight pouring in the new window above the sink and the French doors onto the patio.

"I like your house," she says.

"Really? Most people think it's a dump, other than the kitchen."

"No, it has character."

I nod. "It does. It'll just take a while to bring it out."

"That's the fun part, though, right?"

I tip my head. "Yeah. I just get kind of impatient. All these things take so much time. And money," I add with a grimace.

I open the door to the garage and step through it, hitting another light switch. The big space lights up with bright lights you wouldn't normally find in a double-car garage.

My nose twitches at the faint unique scent, a mixture of metallic oxides, silicates, and fluorides from the welding materials that lingers despite the top-notch ventilation system I installed. My equipment is neatly arranged on benches and hanging on the walls. I've spent a lot of money on it and I take care of it.

Carrie heads straight to the piece I'm working on, a half-finished sculpture of a sea horse, about three feet tall. She stops in front of it and her head tilts to one side. For a long moment she says nothing.

I resist the urge to spew out stuff about how it's not done yet, how it'll look different once I've finished it, where I got the metal I used, what exactly I did to it. Instead, I make myself wait to hear her honest reaction.

"This is amazing, Marco." She turns to face me and her eyes shine with admiration. "Seriously. What else have you done?"

“There are some finished pieces over here.” I lead her to the back of the garage. “I’m kind of fascinated by sea creatures, so most of what I’ve done are things like this shark, and this stingray. I started off doing simple fish, like this one.” I gesture to a yellowtail fish. “Then there are my whales. I love whales.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“Thanks. I’ve done a lot of them, but I needed more of a challenge, hence the sea horse.”

She shakes her head as she studies my work. “I’m ... I’m blown away.”

My chest expands. “Really?”

I’m proud of my work and I’ve gotten some attention for it. A gallery in La Jolla actually sold some of my pieces, which honestly blew *my* mind. I started doing it for fun, not really thinking that anyone would pay for the sculptures. But hearing that I’ve actually impressed Carrie makes pride swell inside me.

“Yeah, really. Wow.” She moves back to the sea horse. “This is going to be amazing.”

“Thanks. It’s different for me. I’m having fun with it.”

She lingers longer, taking in the other smaller works lining the shelves at the back, some of them not my best efforts, but I always learn something from every piece I do.

“Well,” she finally says. “Who knew you were such an artist?”

“Hell, I don’t know if I’d call myself an artist.” I shrug. “Like I said, I do it to stay busy.” I pause. “Would you like something to drink?”

Her smile is unusually soft. “I think I’ve had enough to drink tonight. I’d better get home.”

“Sure.” My pride deflates. “I’ll take you. Come on.”

I follow her back through the house, her high heels clicking on the wooden floor, allowing my gaze to wander

from her slender ankles up over the curves of her legs and that perfect little ass swaying in the snug dress. My groin tightens.

With a sigh, I lockup, leaving the lights on.

“Where do you get the metal that you work on?” she asks as I drive through quiet streets.

“From a steel recycler. I buy big sheets of it.”

“I’d love to watch you work on something.”

So, this is the secret to Carrie’s ... er ... not heart. I don’t want her heart. But maybe this will help me get her into my bed. “Sure,” I say casually. “Any time. What are you up to tomorrow?”

“Ugh. Tomorrow’s a busy day. My mom, sister, and I are going to visit my grandma. She lives in an assisted-living home.”

“Ah.”

“And I’m going to work on the guest list for the engagement party. And if I have time, I thought I’d stop by a couple of party stores and check out ideas for decorations.”

“Right. The party.”

I pull up in front of the condominium complex she directs me to in Bay Ho. It’s a nice building, from what I can see in the dark—modern and neat with big palm trees shading grassy areas lined with flowers and shrubs.

“I’ll walk you in.” I turn off the engine.

“That’s okay.” She hops out before I can get there. “This is my place right here.” A light illuminates the front door. “Thanks for the ride. And thanks for showing me your etchings.” She grins.

I don’t want to let her go. I want to get back to that blazing hot kiss we shared on the dance floor at Delirium. My body pulses with need for her. But she said not tonight ... and much as I want to persuade her otherwise, I’ve never in my life pushed a woman into having sex with me. Hell, I’ve never had to.

And especially not a woman who's half drunk.

We pause on the sidewalk. I study her face in the glow of a nearby streetlamp. "You're welcome. So next week maybe we should get together and review party plans." *And fuck each other blind ...*

"Sure." She sounds a little breathless, her lips parted, a pulse fluttering in her throat.

Maybe it wouldn't be that hard to convince her ...

"I'll text you." My casual tone of voice belies the heat flooding my veins. "Good night, Carrie."

I return to my Jeep but sit there watching her. She hesitates, then hurries to her door and lets herself in. After the door closes, I bang my forehead on the steering wheel. Once again I apologize to my aching dick. "Just wait till we get home, buddy. I'll take care of you."

CARRIE

“I’m nobody.”

I swallow a sigh. “You’re not nobody, Mom.”

“I am.”

I put on my blinker and do a shoulder check to change lanes so I can exit onto the street where Grandma Garner lives.

In the passenger seat, my mom continues. “Nobody needs me anymore. At first I felt like I was on vacation, but then it sank in ... I’m never going back to work.”

Mom was CEO of South Bay Community Health, a large network of health centers. She worked her entire life since starting her career as a nurse, other than the time off she took when she had her four children. She went back to school while working to get a degree in management that helped her advance her career. Recently she decided to join Dad in retirement. I’m not sure why, though, since she’s clearly miserable.

“It was so fulfilling, knowing I was having a positive influence on the lives of others,” Mom says. “Contributing to their care. Now I’m not contributing to anything.”

Ugh. She’s reminding me of my own feelings of inadequacy. My fear that I’ll never do anything to have an impact in this world. I get where she’s coming from, so I should have patience for her feelings, but geez, she had a long career of contributing. Nurses are freakin’ angels.

“Yes, you are,” I say. “And you do have a positive influence on the lives of others. Your family. You help Justin and James with their kids, and here we are visiting Grandma Garner.”

“She’s batshit,” Mom says.

“Mom! She is not!” I turn into the parking lot of Años Dorados Retirement Village.

“She is. She always has been. She’s a nut bar.”

“She’s just eccentric.” Also, Grandma Garner doesn’t give a shit what people think of her. Never has, and now even less so as she ages.

“I miss doing important stuff.”

“I know.” I swallow a sigh.

“Going to meetings. Dealing with staffing issues, solving problems. I keep checking my phone for emails and voice messages and there’s nothing there.”

I pull into a spot and put the car in park. “Have you thought about going back to work?”

“Yes. Your father doesn’t want me to.” She jerks off her seatbelt and throws open the door. “But I fail to understand why, when he’s always busy golfing and fishing.”

I bite my lip as I exit the car. Mom’s unhappiness makes my stomach tense. “Do you want me to talk to Dad?”

“No, honey, of course not. I can do that.”

She won’t. My family’s not good at communicating. Sometimes I feel like I’m a go-between for everyone.

I’ll talk to Dad. Sometimes he’s a little clueless. He probably has no idea Mom is miserable.

Lauren pulls into the lot just as we do and joins us. “Hey, Mom, Carrie.” We all hug.

“How are you doing?” I ask my sister. The breakdown of her marriage several months back has to be hard on her, and

she hasn't shared a single morsel about what happened. We're all curious and worried.

"I'm fine!" Lauren beams a tight smile. "How are you?"

"Oh, good. I'm good."

A teensy bit hungover, but a painkiller took care of the headache. I'm not sure what I need to take care of that other ache that lingers low in my belly. Okay, possibly my vibrator would help. That'll have to wait for later, though.

"Where's Julia? She didn't come with you?" Julia is Lauren's fourteen-year-old daughter.

Lauren's lips tighten. "Nope. She's grounded."

"Oh no! Why?"

"Friday night she told me she was going to Rachel's house for a sleepover. I called there because I remembered her hair appointment Saturday morning, and they weren't there. They'd gone to a party at a boy's house."

"Oh." I make a "yikes" face.

"The worst part was, when she got home Saturday, she outright lied to me and said she'd tried to call me and tell me they were going to this party but the line was busy. It wasn't busy." Lauren's eyes flash.

I suck in a breath. I love my niece and enjoy spending time with her. Julia's a good kid, I believe that, but she's definitely been giving her parents a hard time lately. This isn't the first incident like that. I'll have to be sure to take Julia out for burgers or something one evening next week and have a little talk.

We passed beneath palm trees waving gently in the summer sun and enter the retirement complex. On a Sunday afternoon, the lobby area is busy with families visiting loved ones. The facility is lovely, with elegant furnishings and accessories, but still smells faintly like a hospital.

Grandma Garner is just exiting the dining room, moving slower than she used to but still independent, unlike many of the other people who live here who use walkers and

wheelchairs. Her snow-white hair gleams in the light from the big windows, and when she spots us, she beams a bright red smile. Every morning, she does her makeup, still using her trademark crimson lipstick at the age of eighty-six. Dressed in black leggings and a long flowery sheer tunic, she heads toward us across the patterned carpet.

“Carrie, my love!”

I grin and move toward my grandma, arms open for a hug. I wrap my arms around her tiny frame and squeeze her with affection.

“You look beautiful as always,” Grandma says with a fond smile. She then turns to Mom. “Hello, Cheryl.” They exchange hugs too, albeit more restrained ones. Grandma and Mom are very different people, and although Mom and Dad have been married for forty years, the two women have never exactly gotten to be close. Grandma greets Lauren in a similar fashion. It’s fair to say that Lauren is following in Mom’s footsteps with her dedication to her career as a vice president at LBL Insurance, and she and Grandma have never been close either.

Everyone in my family is like that—my two older brothers are both successful in their careers as well. They’re all type As who work hard, focused on the bottom line, with clear goals and the confidence to achieve them. Not like me. Having fallen into modeling completely by accident, I stuck with it because it was there and it paid the bills and gave my confidence a boost. But it’s not my whole life. I’ve never really had any kind of goal that I want to attain more than anything. Instead I drift along, enjoying the moment, playing around with my photography when I’m not working, posting pictures on Instagram. Even this scholarship to study in Spain was an impulsive decision that I’m still not sure I really want to follow through on. Yet how can I change my mind? I’ve finally done something that’s impressed my overachieving family.

No wonder I feel more at ease with my slightly nutty grandmother.

“Let’s go to my suite to visit, away from all these old people,” Grandma says.

I repress my smile as I slow my stride to match Grandma’s. Grandma is friendly to the other residents of the complex, but she views them all as “old people.”

Grandma’s tiny apartment is a little overwhelming. She’s filled the space with as many possessions as she can, all of them colorful and interesting, but it’s a lot. Her furniture is an eclectic mix of funky antiques, a bright orange couch with yellow and gold cushions, a fuchsia armchair, and curtains patterned in pink, orange, and yellow. The walls are covered with framed art, much of it photographs that I took, but also some paintings and other art Grandma collected over the years. It’s family legend that Grandma had many lovers in her younger days, one of them an artist who died but who became quite famous; another a playwright successful on Broadway in New York; and one a wealthy French businessman.

“Would you like Schnapps?” Grandma asks us.

I bite my lip on a smile. “Not for me thanks. I was drinking tequila last night.”

Grandma smiles. “That’s my girl. You’re really getting into the tequila, aren’t you?”

“Well, since Hayden’s fiancé owns a tequila bar and we hang out there a lot, yeah.”

“I still haven’t met this hot Navy SEAL fiancé of hers,” Grandma says. “How about tea instead? I have some nice coco chai rooibos.”

I watched Mom and Lauren gag a little, and say, “That sounds great, Grandma.”

“Cheryl? Lauren?”

“That sounds disgusting, Joyce,” Mom says pleasantly. “Do you have coffee?”

“Of course I have coffee.” She pulls out little packets of instant.

Mom shudders again. “Never mind. I’m good.”

“I’ll try some tea,” Lauren says bravely.

As Grandma prepares the loose leaves, she says, “Well, Lauren, what happened with that husband of yours? Did he cheat on you?”

The air in the room goes very still. My eyes widen and I glance at Mom, then at Lauren. Lauren’s face tightens into a stiff mask. “We’re not here to discuss my marriage,” she says tersely. “We’re here to talk about the trouble you’re in for having a male overnight guest.”

Grandma’s head whips around as she stands in her tiny kitchenette. “Trouble? What trouble? Why is it trouble to have an overnight guest? And why is it anyone’s business but mine?”

“Calm down, Joyce,” Mom says.

“Calm down!” Grandma gapes at her daughter-in-law. “Don’t you speak to me like that! I am not some kind of hysterical, demented old lady.”

“I’m not saying you are.” Mom tries to sound soothing but it comes across as patronizing.

“It’s nobody’s business,” I speak up. “Except that Mr. Wolfe wasn’t in his room when home care arrived in the morning and they freaked out. They were worried about him.”

“He was fine,” Grandma says.

“I’m sure he was,” I murmur, earning a bark of laughter from Grandma.

I share a smile with Grandma, who seems calmer about the topic of discussion.

“There are no rules about it,” Grandma adds. “We did nothing wrong. Just because we’re old doesn’t mean we don’t want to have sex.”

Mom and Lauren both wince. I swallow my amusement. “Really?” I move to the kitchen to help Grandma serve the tea. “There are no rules about it?”

“No, there aren’t.”

I glance at Mom. Is this more about Mom and Dad not wanting to think about Grandma's sexuality? Maybe they're making more of a fuss about this than the facility.

"He's also a friend," Grandma continues. "We get lonely, you know. We enjoy each other's company."

"That's so nice." I hand a cup of tea to Lauren. I meet Mom's eyes, trying to message her to be more supportive.

Grandma sighs. "People get all worked up about sex. The truth is, it's a kiss and a hug. But it makes us feel good."

"I think it's nice you both have someone," I say. "But maybe the solution is just for Mr. Wolfe to let someone know where he is so they don't worry."

"I suppose." Grandma sighs. "But we're adults. We haven't had to tell people where we're going or ask permission to go out since we were teenagers. Which was a very long time ago." She sits on the couch and for a moment she looks sad. My heart squeezes. It's not easy to get to an age where you start to lose the independence you've had for so long.

"You're a good girl." Grandma pats my hand. "So where were you doing tequila shots last night? Conquistadors?"

"No, actually, I went to a dance club with some friends."

"Ah." Grandma sighs, her expression wistful. "I'd love to go to a dance club again."

I picture Grandma on the dance floor rapping with DJ Bones. It probably isn't that crazy. If there was ever a senior citizen who'd enjoy it, it's Grandma, who earned her living as a burlesque dancer back in the fifties and sixties, something that still mortifies her daughter-in-law.

I remember looking through Grandma's photo albums as a child, at the glittery costumes Grandma wore, and how upset Mom was when she found out her mother-in-law showed me those pictures.

Jeebus, the costumes were tame compared to modern-day stripper outfits. And Grandma was a knockout with a killer

body—full breasts, a tiny waist, and curvy hips that the sequin-encrusted corsets emphasized.

It probably isn't realistic to promise Grandma a trip to a dance club. But maybe there's some way to get her dancing again ... I'll think about it.

"It was fun," I say instead, remembering dancing with Marco. Holy smoking hot, I feel myself melting all over again. And then that kiss ... Christ on the cross, who knew Marco could kiss like that?

"Why is your face all red?" Grandma asks with a sly smile. "Who were you dancing with last night?"

"Nobody." I drop my gaze to my rooibos tea.

"Mmm. I doubt a hot chick like you was left alone," Grandma says.

I laugh. "Hot chick? Me?"

"Sweetheart. You always did have a distorted self-image. You have to *look* at those pictures they take of you. You know you're a hot chick."

I grin. "That's not really me, Grandma."

The older woman's smile softens. We've had this conversation before. In my head, I know Grandma's right. But in my heart I always feel like I can separate the real me from the images of me, the image people see and admire, from the me on the inside who feels awkward and out of place. But if anyone helped me to have more self-confidence it was Grandma, who confessed that she, too, felt lacking the first time she put on a corset and feathers and heels and was brave enough to get up on a stage and dance. Grandma understands.

"So did you all come here to lecture me about Mr. Wolfe?" Grandma asks, changing the subject.

"We came to visit you," I say before Mom and Lauren can agree.

Grandma snorts. "Like hell."

I nearly laugh again. And somehow I find myself telling them all about Marco's metal sculptures, knowing Grandma will think that's interesting.

Grandma *is* fascinated by my description of the art. But she's also alert to something else and her eyes are sharp as she asks, "Who is this Marco? Did you meet him at the club?"

"No, we already knew each other." I explain who he is.

"Ah." Grandma nods. "Well, I'd surely be interested in seeing some of his art."

We chat about other things, Mom complaining more about her boredom now that she's retired, Lauren tight-lipped about what's happening with her marriage, although she does tell Grandma about Julia being grounded.

"Are you giving her enough attention?" Grandma asks. "Divorce is hard on kids."

Lauren's face pinches. "Of course I am."

Grandma tips her head to one side. "You spend long hours working, Lauren dear. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Grandma's the only one who can get away with saying those kinds of things to the family. I may think similar thoughts, but I'm not as gutsy as Grandma when it comes to calling out people on their behavior. Maybe I need to be more like my grandmother.

When we're done our visit, I drive Mom home, then head to a strip mall where there's a huge party supply store. I wander the aisles searching for inspiration for a theme for the engagement party. Being held at Conquistadors, the party seems to lend itself to a Mexican fiesta theme, but maybe that's too obvious. We could do something different: champagne and chocolate; wine and cheese; beach theme—hey, that could be kind of cool; burgers and beers ...

I pause for a moment, overwhelmed with the choices. But it needs to be about Hayden and Beck, who they are. And they're different in so many ways, with Hayden's cautious,

analytical approach to life and Beck's adventurous, live-in-the-moment nature. And yet they're similar in their dedication to something bigger than themselves, to giving back. Similar in their willingness to compromise for each other, to be both bold and careful with each other. Similar in their love for friends and family, and the friends who've become their family. And most of all, their love for each other.

I spot a gold "Cheers and Beers" banner and smile. Yeah, something fun and casual that's not tequila themed but still a good bar theme. Beers and burgers it is. I'll talk to Marco about maybe doing a burger bar where guests can fix their own. Big tubs of ice filled with different kinds of beers, some salads ... well, we'll figure that out.

I pick up decorations for that theme, as well as plates and paper napkins and some cute party favors. Oh right, invitations. I select some of those too, although most people will receive email invitations.

As I load my purchases into my car, I'm eager to let Marco know what I've come up with.

Or is that just an excuse to talk to him again? Because dammit, last night was fun. Even when we were insulting each other, there was an undercurrent of excitement. And then there was the kiss on the dance floor that nearly had my clothes falling off.

We have a hot little romp for a few weeks while I teach you Spanish and we throw an engagement party, and then you leave for Spain and we say goodbye and everyone's happy.

I slam down the lid of my trunk and dust off my fingertips.

Ooooooh. Seriously? I am perilously tempted by that idea. Am I losing my mind?

That heat and the way he kisses and that hard muscled body is hard to resist. Not to mention those rare smiles that melt my thong. And then after I went to his place and saw the sculptures he does, well that pretty much did in any last shred of resistance. It took my attraction to him to a whole other level.

How the hell did this happen? He annoys the fuck out of me. That's not attraction!

Or apparently it is.

In my car, I slap it into gear and drive home way too fast.

I can't even talk to Hayden about this, because ... it's Marco.

And I can't show off all the pretty decorations I bought and discuss the ideas for the party with Hayden, because it's a surprise.

I feel a sharp pang of loneliness as I turn into the parking lot at my condo complex.

It's not as if I don't have other friends. I was out with some last night, and I had fun with them. I have lots of acquaintances I hang out with from time to time. But that's not the same as one true friend, the one I can talk to about anything and everything.

Inside my condo, I pile the bags into the closet in my spare bedroom and decide to text Marco. Just to let him know what I got.

He answers quickly, and I sit on my couch smiling at the phone. *Burgers and beers sounds great. Love it. Cade and I will talk to Sid to come up with menu.*

I type in a reply. *Perfect. I have a few other ideas and we just need to finish off the guest list.*

I set down my phone, not sure if he'll answer again. My phone pings seconds later. I lean over to peer at it on the coffee table.

Wednesday night good for Spanish lessons?

I force myself to wait five agonizing minutes before answering. *Sure.*

Your place or mine?

I smile. We both know "Spanish lessons" really means "bang the bejesus" out of each other, as Marco so charmingly put it last night.

My place.

Okay, it doesn't have to mean that. I can absolutely ensure that our meeting is all business— planning the engagement party. Taking him up on his offer of Spanish lessons. Unless he expects to be paid with a little bow chika bow wow. In which case, fine, I'll go to Spain knowing only a handful of words and phrases. I'll survive.

But will I survive meeting with Marco and not having sex?

CARRIE

I open the door to Marco at seven o'clock Wednesday evening. My heart flutters when I see him, looking so badass with his brown skin, dark hair, and stubble shadowing his strong jaw. A T-shirt hugs his chest and biceps, and his faded jeans sit low on lean hips. Even with his brown eyes narrowed and his mouth unsmiling, he makes my girl parts quiver.

“Come in.” I match his expression with a look of boredom.

Thankfully I didn't make any effort to look good. I wear a pair of huge loose sweatpants rolled down on my hips and a Sea World tank top, *so* not sexy. My hair's in a messy knot on top of my head, and I washed off all my makeup. Okay, I reapplied mascara. And a little lip gloss. Without those two products, I look like I've contracted Ebola. I don't want to frighten him.

I lead the way into my living room and gesture at the couch. My laptop sits open on the coffee table in front of it. “Can I get you something to drink? I have skim milk or club soda.”

His eyebrows rise as he sits. “That's quite the choice.”

“Okay, fine, I have beer.”

He shrugs. “I'm good.” He looks around, clearly checking out the place. He moves closer to the bright red accent wall where I've hung a lot of my black-and-white images, a combination of different sizes, some framed in black, others in white. It creates a striking display that I really like.

He studies the images, a varied assortment of portraits and landscapes, many with dramatic low-key lighting, lots of interesting shadows and textures.

“These are amazing.” He turns to my, one brow lifted. “Yours?”

“Of course.”

He turns back and studies them again. “I love this one.” He points at an image of my niece, Julia, taken shortly after her parents separated, a shot of her sitting with her arms around her bent knees in front of a stormy ocean with ominous clouds on the horizon. The wind turned her hair into a tangled mess around her face, and the dark weather reflects the tempest of emotion in her eyes.

“Thanks.”

I sit at one end of the couch and wait for him to join me, but he takes his time, wandering over to a different wall where I have another collection of framed prints, three large ocean scenes.

“These are great too.”

I recently sold a similar set through the gallery I’ve signed on with. They fetched a nice sum, the most I’ve made yet from selling my photographs, which encouraged me to think about going to Spain and trying to further my photography as a career. I know it’s a long shot, but at twenty-nine years old I have to do something other than modeling, as my career is definitely slowing and really, I’ve had enough of it.

Marco finally sits on the couch, closer than I’d like, because he makes my skin tingle everywhere just being near me. Damn him. I can feel pure physical energy pulsating from him, like a force field.

“I see you dressed to impress.” He eyes my sweatpants.

“You got it.” I smirk and his lips twitch. “Okay, here’s the guest list I made. Who else do you want to add?”

He pulls out his phone out and swipes the screen a few times to bring up a list.

“Can you send that to me?”

“Sure.” He swipes and taps a few more times. “There.”

“Okay, great.” A few moments later, I check my spreadsheet. “That makes thirty guests.” I bite my lip. “Should we invite Beck’s parents?”

“Hell. I don’t know. They probably won’t come. And if they did, I doubt Beck would be happy about it.”

I nod. I’m aware that Beck and his parents have a strained relationship. Hayden told me about Beck’s childhood, how he hated the wealthy, privileged life they raised him in, how he always wanted to do different things than they wanted, and how they now want him to come home to Boston to take over running their family business (which apparently makes their family super wealthy). But he’s happier here running the tequila bar with his buddies.

I admire someone who follows their own path.

I wish I had a path.

I *will* have a path. I’m going to Spain and that’s going to take my photography to the next level, and then I’ll stop modeling. I’ll be creating something beautiful instead of just posing.

Like Beck’s family, my parents aren’t happy about the path I’m choosing. Their idea of success is different from mine. But I figured that out a long time ago.

“Well, I’ll invite them just to be polite,” I say. “If they happen to show up, we’ll figure something out.” I pause. “And if they don’t show up, don’t tell Beck we invited them.”

I feel Marco’s gaze on me and turn my head slightly to meet his eyes. One corner of his mouth has lifted. “Got it,” he says quietly. “Thanks.”

I go retrieve the decorations from my closet and show them to him.

He nods as he looks them over.

“You’re not excited about these.”

“That’s why I gave *you* the job of decorating.”

I catch the sparkle in his eye and know he’s teasing. “Riiiiight. Okay. So this should be fun. We’ve already figured out some games and I’ll let you deal with the menu.” I open Pinterest on my computer and show him the pictures I saved. “See, we could do a burger bar, with all kinds of toppings. And the beers in tubs like this ...”

“Sure.”

I sense he’s still watching me and not looking at the computer. Heat rises up my chest and into my face. I turn to him again. “What? Are you really not interested in the party? It was your idea!”

“I’m more interested in you.”

My stomach does a flip-flop. “Oh.” I let out a short breath. “Marco. The other night ... we were drunk—”

“Oh no. *You* were drunk.”

“Oh. Right. Okay, I was drunk ...” Wait. Where was I going with this? I was about to blame our dirty dancing and French kisses on intoxication. Only, *I* was the one slightly inebriated. “Okay, I was drunk. We shouldn’t have danced like that. And we definitely shouldn’t have kissed like that.”

“How should we have kissed?” He tilts his head, dark eyes gleaming. “Like this?”

And he leans in to lay his mouth on mine in a long, soft kiss. He draws back with a barely there touch of his tongue on my bottom lip.

I stare at him. With his lips parted like that and his eyelids half lowered, his beard stubble up close and personal, and his warm scent of lime and cedar teasing my nostrils ... damn, he’s hot. And that kiss ... Delicious warmth unfurls low in my belly.

“Or like this?” He bends his head and claims my mouth again, this time harder, opening me to him. He licks inside my mouth and heat bursts in my core, liquid warmth pooling between my thighs. A moan climbs up my throat.

When he draws back, a small whimper escapes me.

“Or maybe like this ...” He reaches for me.

This time I find the strength to resist, hands on his chest. “No. We can’t do this.”

He goes very still. Our eyes meet in a fiery clash. My heart thumps wildly and I almost can’t breathe. “We can’t do this,” I say again, pushing against his chest to distance myself. I scoot away from him on the couch.

His jaw tightens and his eyes narrow.

“That’s what I was starting to say.” I smooth damp palms over my sweatpants. “I had a few drinks last night, and I guess I was a little drunker than I thought. We don’t even like each other. Let’s just get this party planned and done with and then we won’t have to see each other again.”

For a moment he says nothing, his beautiful lips pressed into a grim line. Then he gives a short nod. “Much as I hate to admit it, you are so right. It *would* be a bad idea.”

My heart pinches, but I nod. “Good. Okay, as I was saying ... we can set up a bar like this for the different kinds of beers. I’ll let you and Cade decide on that. And it would be good to come up with some interesting toppings for the burgers. I found this website ...” I click on my computer, trying to ignore the fact that I feel like crying. “Caramelized onions. Sautéed mushrooms. Different kinds of cheese ... guacamole ... alfalfa sprouts. Oh! Maybe we need a veggie burger just in case some guests don’t eat meat.”

“Jesus.”

I bug my eyes out at him. “Come on. You run a restaurant. You know you have to have a vegetarian choice.”

“Yeah, yeah. I don’t get it, but I know.”

“And we need some other side dishes too, like salads and maybe potato chips. Okay, I’ll shut up now.” I close my eyes briefly. “You get the idea.”

“Yeah, I get the idea.” His words are laden with additional meaning. “Anything else we need to sort out?”

“Let’s just nail down the time and a few other details, and I’ll get working on sending out the invitations.”

Moments later we finish up.

“Okay, gotta go.” Marco stands. Hostility ripples off him in waves. “I have to install a security camera at the back of the bar.”

“Oh.” I blink as I stand, too. “Why?”

“Some little bastard graffiti artists keep defacing our property.”

“Oh. You’re doing that tonight?”

“No. I’m making an excuse to leave.”

My mouth falls open. “Oh. Well. Thanks for being honest.”

“I’m an honest guy.”

Yes. Yes, he is.

“I’ll keep you posted about the guest list.”

“Thanks.”

“I guess the Spanish lessons are off the table,” I say glumly. Why do I feel like this? Disappointment mingled with regret and confusion.

He turns and gives me a look, one eyebrow elevated. “I got the impression you want to spend as little time with me as possible.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to insult you. I’m just being practical here. Let’s not make something that’s already uncomfortable even more painful. We have to hang out because our friends are friends. It’s already weird since we don’t get along—” His hoisted eyebrow makes me pause. Okay, we do get along in some ways. “But ... I wouldn’t mind learning some Spanish.”

The look he’s giving me lengthens, tension stretching out. “Okay.” He sits down again. “What did you say you’d been doing to learn? Some online course?”

“Yes.” I pull the laptop closer again and tap at the keyboard. “Hang on.”

My computer says, “Buenos días.”

Marco grins. “Really? That’s pretty basic. Do you know *any* Spanish?”

“I took a little in school, but that was years ago.”

“Okay, you’ve got some basics. You must know how to say hello, goodbye, please, and thank you.”

“Buenos días. Adiós. Por favor. Grass-eeus.”

“Gracias,” he says, correcting my pronunciation.

I try again, softening the R. “Gracias.”

He nods approvingly. “¿Como esta?”

“Muy bien.”

“Mi nombre es Marco. ¿Como te llamas?”

“Carrie?”

He chuckles at my question. “Sí. Tu nombre es Carrie.” He pauses. “¿Quieres joder?”

I blink at him. “No entiendo.”

“Bueno.”

I frown. “Why is that bueno?”

He shakes his head. “I was being a jerk. I asked if you wanted to fuck.”

My eyes fly open. Then I say, “Say it again.”

“Why?”

“In case I want to say it to someone.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw. “¿Quieres joder?” he says through gritted teeth.

I repeat it with a smile.

“You want to learn Spanish so you can pick up men?” he demands. “Or so you can go to a store and ask how much

something costs?”

I bite back a smile. “Both.”

“¿Cuánto cuesta este?”

I repeat the phrase.

“How high can you count in Spanish?”

“Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco ...” I get to sixteen before I flounder.

“Dieciséis, diecisiete ...” Together we count to a hundred, pausing a few times for him to make me repeat some words, patiently correcting my pronunciation.

Shit. His Spanish accent is turning me on. Saying *numbers*, for the love of ghosts.

We go over some common phrases that I might find helpful in day-to-day situations, but I’m not sure I’ll actually remember them. “Maybe I should get a book.” I tap my bottom lip. “One of those phrase books for travelers.”

“Just get the app on your phone. We can practice your pronunciation. Maybe even a little grammar.” He grimaces. “Although I suck at grammar.”

I tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “How is it that you speak Spanish?”

“One night I drank so much tequila I woke up the next morning speaking Spanish.”

He says it with such a straight face it takes a few seconds for me to burst out laughing. “Oh my God.”

His lips twitch.

“Did your parents speak it when you were growing up?”

“Yeah.” The corners of his mouth and eyes tighten. “They came here from Mexico. My sister and I were born here, but we grew up pretty much bilingual. We spoke English at school and out in the world, but at home we were surrounded by Spanish.”

“Did you grow up here in San Diego?”

“No. Los Angeles. East L.A.”

“Ah. Is your family still there?”

“No.” He shakes his head and drops his gaze to his hands clasped between his knees. “My parents came here without papers. They were deported when I was fourteen.”

“Oh no.” My chest tightens.

“Yeah.” He looks up with a twisted smile. “It happens. My sister and I were born here. My parents tried for years to become legal, wasting money on scammers they thought were lawyers but who were just taking their hard-earned cash. We always lived in fear that they would be deported. And then one day it happened. Alejandra and I got home from school and the house was empty. One of our neighbors told us that immigration officers had taken them away.”

“Oh dear God.” I cover my mouth with my hands. My niece is fourteen. I imagine Julia walking into an empty house, her parents gone forever, leaving her all alone. My stomach knots at the thought of a young Marco going through that. “That’s terrible.”

“Well, there are some who have a different perspective on that. Some who think all undocumented migrants should be sent back.” He shrugs. “But yeah, for us it was the end of our stable family life. My sister and I went into the system, sent to separate foster homes. I ended up losing touch with her.”

“Oh no.” I really am at a loss for words at this heartbreaking story. I swallow, swamped with unusually soft feelings for Marco. But the look on his face—a don’t-fucking-pity-me look—stops me from doing or saying something embarrassing.

“I’m fine,” he says gruffly, apparently reading my expression. “It was years and years ago. My life turned out pretty great, all things considered.”

“Yes,” I whisper. “Yes, it did.” I hesitate. “What about your parents?”

“I tried to keep in touch with them. They were both killed in a shooting when I was about nineteen. Just after I got into

the Navy.”

“I’m sure they were proud of you for that.”

“Yeah.” He gives a curt nod. “They were. Well. I guess that’s enough Spanish for tonight. You have a good ear for it.”

“Thanks.”

I’m filled with a hunger to know more about him, to know what happened after his parents left and how he grew up without them, how he felt about losing touch with his sister, how he’d decided to go into the Navy ... but I clamp down on all those questions as he moves to leave.

MARCO

I'm not sure how our all-balls brotherhood of three has turned into a group of five, and two of the five are women—Hayden and Carrie.

Our adventure outing this week is Thursday night, where we managed to schedule an evening off from the bar for all three of us. But instead of doing something adrenaline-spiking, we're going to a trampoline park.

We're actually going to bounce up and down on trampolines.

Beck wanted to do something fun, but it can't be too crazy because we have to include Hayden, and she insisted Carrie come, so this is the plan. Cade doesn't seem too bothered by it, and I don't want to be the one to harsh the fun, so I'm going along with it too, even though I'm unenthusiastic about a) trampoline jumping and b) seeing Carrie again.

Okay I'm bullshitting myself, because seeing Carrie again makes my blood race like we're planning zip-lining or base jumping. I'm just annoyed, because at her place when I tried to kiss her and pick up where we left off, she rejected me.

Her loss.

We all arrived at Fly Zone in two vehicles, Cade and I in Cade's SUV, and Beck, Hayden, and Carrie in Beck's Jag. After greeting in the parking lot, we walk into the building. I follow Carrie and find myself staring at her ass in a pair of snug black yoga pants that end just below her knees. She does

have a world-class ass, no doubt about it, and those long, shapely legs are damn near perfection.

Fuck. I cannot be looking at her like this.

Much as I told myself it was her loss last week, I felt a sting of rejection that pissed me off. That's where I need to keep my mind ... angry, not staring at her ass.

Inside, I look around at the brightly painted walls, the concession area and seats, the cubbies where we'll leave our shoes. Once we're all checked in with waivers signed, we head to the trampoline area.

It's bigger than I expected and not what I imagined—the space is filled with trampolines all joined with padded areas and places for different activities. I watch two teenage boys jumping off a raised area onto the trampoline, trying to outdo each other with the flips and spins they do in the air. At the far side are basketball nets, and there's also a pit full of foam cubes into which people throw themselves with abandon.

Huh. This actually looks pretty fun.

We're soon bouncing around on the trampolines in special lime-green socks, Carrie and Hayden cautious and a little awkward, Beck, Cade and I are daredevils who compete to see who can go higher and how many flips in a row we can do, bouncing from one black square to another. Then we race each other from one end of the park to the other, running over the black squares. I shout as I get going so fast I lose control and trip and crash. I lie there laughing my ass off as Cade and Beck slam into the angled trampoline wall at the same time, bounce off, and fall down too.

We try out the basketball nets, endeavoring to outshoot each other as we jump higher and higher.

“Not that low net!” Beck calls to Cade. “Only the high one, come on, man!”

The girls follow and start jumping at the lower net while the guys compete at the high one.

“Yeah!” I sink a ball.

Cade goes next and somehow misses his footing on the last bounce and crashes down. “Dude!” I cry. “You couldn’t hit water if you fell out of a boat.”

“Roses are red, violets are blue.” Cade bounces back behind Marco. “I have five fingers, the third one’s for you.”

I watch Carrie collapse in laughter.

“Let’s go jump off those blocks,” Beck says, tossing his ball aside.

As we climb up, Hayden sees us and let’s out a screech. “No! Don’t jump off there!”

“It’s fine, babe,” Beck calls to her, then he leaps into the air and flips, landing on his back. He bounces into the air with a grin.

Beck did it, so I have to try. How hard can it be?

Okay, maybe a little hard. I don’t quite get my feet under me and land on my ass, the springy net propelling me up and forward. I land on my face. It only stings a little.

“Oh my God!” Carrie and Hayden both cry at the same time. They bounce over beside me.

“Are you okay?” Carrie asks, a look of genuine concern forming a notch between her eyebrows.

I pick myself up and rub my nose. “It hurts a little, but it’s not too bad.”

Carrie gets a funny look on her face. Then she blurts, “That’s what she said.”

I stare at her, then burst out laughing. Hayden falls to her knees chortling. “Oh my God, Carrie. I can’t believe you said that.”

“Couldn’t resist.” Her blue eyes sparkle as she looks at me. “You’re crazy, Hot Shot.”

“You need to go higher, man,” Beck instructs me with an evil grin. “Tuck your knees up.”

Now Cade is attempting it as well. The three of us keep jumping higher and higher, the girls watching anxiously as they bounce around tamely. It's kind of cute.

When I nail a flip, I thrust my arms in the air triumphantly. "Booyah!"

I watch Carrie bounce off her fine ass, twist in the air, and land facing the other way. "Nice job, Supermodel."

She rolls her eyes, then smiles. I can't help but notice the way her breasts jiggle with every bounce. I swallow.

"I'm not even going to try that," Hayden says.

"Yeah, probably best that you don't," Beck replies.

Hayden's head whips around and she glares at him. "What are you saying?"

"Uh ..." Beck's eyes widen with alarm, clearly recognizing his error. "I'm just saying, I don't want you to get hurt, sweetheart. You can't walk down the aisle in a cast."

She narrows her eyes at him.

I meet Carrie's eyes and the amusement gleaming there has me fighting a smile. We share two seconds of understanding.

"Be careful," Beck adds, as if Hayden is the most precious thing in the world to him.

Which she actually is.

I have no doubt of that.

Hayden tosses her ponytail and resumes her careful bouncing. "This is fun."

"Let's go to the foam pit," Beck says. "You can try some flips there."

"No way." Hayden shakes her head, her eyes alarmed.

"Come on," Beck coaxes. "Take a chance."

Hayden wavers. "Okay. Come on, Carrie."

We all bounce off the trampolines and head to the pit filled with big chunks of colorful foam.

“I’ll go first,” Beck says. He bounces across the trampoline and then launches himself in a flip into the pit, disappearing. His head pops up seconds later.

“Good job,” Hayden calls to him.

He hauls himself out. “Now your turn.”

“Eeek.” She cautiously bounces to the edge and then jumps, appears to change her mind about trying to do a flip at the last second, and lands on her butt in the foam.

Beck doubles over with mirth, everyone else laughing too. “What was that?”

Hayden fights her way through the foam and tries to climb out, falling back in a couple of times because she’s laughing so hard. Finally Beck, also still guffawing, goes and grabs her hand and hauls her out.

“Go, Supermodel,” I say.

“No, *you* go.”

I shrug, take a run, bounce high, and fling myself into the pit. I emerge grinning.

Carrie makes a scrunched-up face, then bounces to the edge and leaps. Surprisingly, she does a pretty graceful flip and disappears into the foam. She, too, pops up with a big smile on her face.

“That was so good, Carrie!” Hayden cries. “I want to try again.”

On my next turn, I call, “Watch this ... a sidewinder.” I bounce sideways twice and do a sideways flip.

“Show-off,” Carrie calls when I rise out of the pit.

I grin. This is fun.

We’re heading to the dodgeball pit when a little kid comes flying off a trampoline and onto the walkway, landing in a heap. We all freeze, staring at him, then I rush over to the boy, who starts to cry.

“Hey, little man, you were really flying there. You okay?”

The dude cries harder. I quickly check him over, but he's moving okay, so if he's hurt it's not serious. I pick him up and prop him on my hip. Tears run down the child's round, pink cheeks and he grabs onto my shirt. "You're okay," I say soothingly. "You're fine, buddy. Where's your mom or dad?"

A woman rushes up to us. "Oliver, what were you doing?"

"He was trying to fly, weren't you?" I say with a smile.

The little dude nods and swipes at tears. "I did fwy."

I smile. Damn, he's cute.

"Are you okay?" the woman asks Oliver.

"He's okay, no broken bones or blood." I ruffle the kid's hair and hand him over to his mom.

She nods. "Thank you so much."

"No worries."

The mom carries her son away, and our group continues to the dodgeball pit, where we proceed to try to take each other out with the balls. Beck, Cade, and I keep drilling it at each other, managing to avoid each other's shots until finally I nail Cade hard.

"Aaaargh!" Cade yells.

"In it to win it, bro," I shout, and throw the ball at Carrie. Not hard.

She laughingly dodges it, but throws her ball at me hard, and son of a bitch, I'm so distracted watching her gorgeous smile and her tits bounce that she nails me on the side of the head. "Shit!"

"In it to win it!" She pumps her hands in the air.

I have to laugh.

"Where's Cade?" I look around for my friend, who's disappeared, and spot him out on the walkway in an intense conversation with a cute little redhead. "Shut the fuck up. He never stops."

"Stops what?" Carrie asks.

I didn't realize she's right beside me. "Picking up women."

"Ah. Is there something wrong with that?"

"Nope. Not if you're trying for the Man Whore of the Year award."

"I never knew there was such an award."

I catch the faint lift of the corners of her lips. "Really? Can't believe you haven't heard of it."

"I know a few guys who could probably give Cade a run for his money." She wrinkles her nose.

I frown.

I look over at Beck and Hayden, who are holding hands and bouncing lightly, gazing into each other's eyes. Ugh.

"Hey, I'm starving," he calls to them. "We done here?"

"I guess," Beck says. "Where should we go to eat?"

We throw out various ideas as we leave the trampoline area and put our shoes back on, until finally Carrie's suggestion of Cowboy Kitchen gains unanimous approval.

"Is Cade still trying to pick up that chick?" Beck asks.

I sigh. "Apparently. I'll go find him."

I locate him now on the trampoline with the girl, both of them laughing at something.

"Hey, we're leaving," I call to Cade. "You coming?"

Cade spares me a glance. "Nah. Go on without me. See you tomorrow."

"Uh-huh. Fine," I mutter, and rejoin the others. "Okay, guess I need a ride with you all. I've been ditched."

Beck slings his arm around my neck. "Poor you. Don't worry, we got your back. No man left behind."

"Right."

Beck squeezes me and lets me go.

“My legs feel like rubber.” Hayden stands and rubs her thighs. “I might not be able to walk tomorrow.”

“If you can’t, it won’t be from this,” Beck says with a leer, bending down to smooch her lips and bump his hips into hers.

Great. They’re going to go home and do the sex thing, while I’m going to go home and do the hand thing with Mr. Big while thinking about Carrie’s sweetly bouncing breasts.

“Hmm,” Hayden says. “Feeling vigorous tonight, are you?”

“You know it.”

We pile into Beck’s Jag, Carrie and I crowded together in the backseat. In the dark as we drive to the restaurant, I’m hyper aware of her, the air around us humming. I have to stop myself from reaching out to lay a hand on her thigh or leaning over to inhale her scent. Luckily, the Cowboy Kitchen isn’t far and we’re soon seated in a booth in the restaurant. Of course Carrie and I have to sit beside each other, and Beck and Hayden slide onto the bench on the other side.

I checkout the rustic décor, with wood walls that look like we’re in a log cabin and big wrought-iron chandeliers. The scent of charbroiled meat fills the air and makes my mouth water. Damn that smells good. At least it takes my attention off how good Carrie smells.

“Do they have any nonmeat dishes?” Hayden asks, studying the menu.

“They do,” Carrie answers. “Check out the roasted carrots.”

“Roasted carrots?” I ask in a horrified tone. “That’s a meal?”

Carrie grins. “It comes with buckwheat and some other veggies.”

“Good fuck,” I mutter. I, too, inspect the menu. “Okay, I’m having a steak.”

“Me too,” Beck says.

We all order various beers from the extensive menu of craft beer selections. Carrie ends up going with the sea bass, which I admit does sound really good. I love fish and seafood. And yes, Hayden orders roasted carrots. At the last minute, I impulsively order a couple of appetizers to share—roasted mushrooms and steamed mussels in a chardonnay broth.

Once we've been served our beers, I ask, "So, Hayden, what's your favorite sexual position?"

Hayden blinks, Beck frowns, and Carrie turns wide eyes on me.

"What?" I sip my beer, trying to message Carrie with my eyes that I'm gathering information for the games we're going to play at the engagement party, but she doesn't seem to get it.

"Why the hell do you want to know that?" Beck growls.

"Just making conversation."

Hayden laughs. "Um, wow. Okay. I, uh, like the one where he lays half on the bed with his head on the floor and I'm straddling him."

My mouth falls open and I stare at her. "What?"

Carrie falls against the wall, her body shaking with mirth. "What are you talking about, Hayden?"

"Yeah, what *are* you talking about?" Beck grins. "My head on the floor? Jesus. That sounds painful."

Hayden grins. "Okay, I'm not sure what the name of it is. And maybe we haven't actually tried it."

"I'm not picturing it. But I'm definitely up for trying it."

"Apparently your favorite sexual position says a lot about you," Carrie says. "Like if you only enjoy missionary, you're kind of boring."

"Don't knock missionary," Hayden says. "Actually, it's better if he moves up a little higher and kind of rocks against you instead of thrusting."

I scrub a hand over my face, heat rising from beneath the collar of my T-shirt. "Christ."

“You’re the one who started this.” Carrie nudges me with her elbow. “Guys who like having sex standing up, against a wall, are apparently more adventurous, and turned on by the idea of being naughty.”

Beck grins. “I’d say that’s accurate.”

“I also like the pretzel,” Hayden says.

“Okay, this might have been a mistake.” I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“What’s the pretzel?” Carrie asks. “Hayden, you crazy woman, you.”

Hayden laughs. “It’s like doggy style, but face to face. You just kind of twist at the hips. It’s great.”

“Forget this,” I sat, desperation edging my voice. “Let’s talk about ... about ...” I flail around mentally and come up with nothing.

“I didn’t know you liked that so much.” Beck smiles warmly down at Hayden. “We can do that tonight too.”

“Oh, you really *are* feeling vigorous.” She smiles back at him.

Damn. The sexual chemistry between them is scorching. I’m happy for them, I really am, but I can’t stop imagining Carrie twisted beneath me while I enter her, or on her hands and knees while I enter her, or ... Jesus. I swipe my sweaty brow, my dick getting all excited.

Luckily I’m saved by the arrival of the appetizers I ordered.

“I have to gram these,” Carrie says, pulling out her phone.

I frown. “Seriously?”

“She has, like, a billion followers on Instagram,” Hayden says. “Because of all the beautiful pictures she posts.”

“They’re mushrooms,” I say, eyebrows lifted.

“Not a *billion* followers,” Carrie mutters, focusing on the dishes.

“Okay, a few million.”

Carrie swipes at her phone screen, taps, and then tucks it back into her purse. She picks up a mushroom and pops it into her mouth. “Oh wow, these are good.”

Unfortunately, she sounds like they’re orgasmically good, and my mind goes there, wondering how she sounds when she comes, whether she’d make a little moaning noise like she just did or whether it would be louder. My dick swells against my leg inside my jeans and I shift on the padded bench.

“So good,” Hayden agrees. “And the mussels are awesome too.”

“Eat more, honey,” Beck urges her.

She picks up another shell and poises her fork over it. “Why?”

“They’re an aphrodisiac.”

“I think that’s oysters, not mussels. And that’s a myth. People thought oysters were an aphrodisiac because they contain zinc, which is needed to produce testosterone, and also amino acids and serotonin. But there are no randomized control trials that confirm oysters have any effect on sexual desire.” She holds up the mussel. “If there’s an aphrodisiac effect, it’s because this looks like female genitals.”

I choke on my beer.

“She *is* a scientist,” Beck says seriously, but his eyes gleam. He turns back to Hayden. “It gets me all hot when you talk about randomized control trials.”

“Okay, how about those Padres?” I say in a last attempt to change the subject away from sex.

CARRIE

I wince a little at the soreness in my thighs and calves as I leave home to go to the gym the next afternoon. Maybe I don't need to work out today, after all that jumping activity last night. Well, I'll just do an upper-body workout today.

Working out isn't my favorite thing to do, but it's necessary. I've accepted it as part of my career, but I also know it's important for health, so I muster all my self-discipline to make myself do it regularly and now it's a habit.

As I do dumbbell bench presses, triceps dips, and biceps curls, I think about last night's outing to Fly Zone. Hayden dragged me along with them. I'm usually up for some kind of fun, but I found myself a little reluctant to be a fifth wheel—ha, literally—with the gang. Especially after how things ended that night with Marco at my place.

Stopping our make-out session was *soooo* hard. My body definitely wanted to overrule my good sense, but somehow I managed to be smart. Getting involved with Marco, even if just sexually and short term, is not a good idea.

Last night just made that even harder.

I thrust the weights into the air, my teeth gritted.

Damn him. He was so different last night. When he picked up that little kid who'd fallen and looked so at ease holding him, comforting him, looking at him with that warm sympathy ... my heart did a flip. Watching him fool around with his friends on the trampolines, doing crazy things, laughing and trash talking them. Every time he flashed that smile, my knees

went a little weak, and watching muscles ripple on his big body as he slam dunked balls into the net or did flips made my belly flutter. The intense physicality of a man in prime condition with superb control over his body is insanely attractive.

The same could be said of Beck and Cade, but for some reason watching them doesn't make me tingle like watching Marco does. Of course Beck is off-limits, and Cade ... well, I like Cade well enough, but my gaze isn't constantly drawn to him as if I can't get enough of just looking at him, as with Marco.

Shit.

I wipe sweat from my forehead and move to the next station.

Thinking about how he moves that fine male body with perfect coordination and strength makes me think about what it would be like to have that male body naked and moving over me ... inside me ...

“Argh.”

My frustrated noise earns me a curious look from the guy on the bench next to me. I give him a weak smile and continue my exercises.

Dinner was fun too, although why Marco started that conversation was a mystery when he got so uncomfortable with it. It was hilarious, though, even if talking about sexual positions with him sitting beside me had made my mind go there again. Yep, thinking about Marco and all those taut muscles in bed, those big hands on me, controlling me ...

This time my neighbor lifts an eyebrow at the small whimper that escapes my lips.

Jeez. I need to stop thinking about Marco Hot Shot Show-Off Solis.

I need to think about my parents, and my grandma. How am I going to get Grandma dancing? And will Dad be home if I drop by this afternoon for a little chat? Because my attempts to talk to my siblings about how unhappy our mom is met with

uncomfortable denial, assurances of “She’s fine, she just needs to adjust,” and protests of “I don’t have time for that” and “You deal with it.”

I shower and dress in the shorts and T-shirt I wore to the gym, then head out. Next stop is Años Dorados Retirement Village for a meeting I set up with the recreation coordinator. I have an idea and want to get the okay to go ahead with it.

Before starting my car, I pull out my phone to check for emails and messages. My eyes pop open wide and my thumbs still on the small screen as I read the message I just received. And read it again.

“Oh my God,” I say aloud. “This can’t be real.”

Movie star Jessica Farris, who I know follows me on Instagram, wants me to do a fun portrait of her son. The son she has with her husband, Jared Gregoire, former boy band star and now a huge musician and actor.

Holy crapamoly!

With my bottom lip caught between my teeth, I tap in a response. Then I lower my phone and stare out the windshield, shaking my head in disbelief. This is amazing. Maybe it’s not for real. Maybe this is some kind of spam.

Well, I’ll find out.

I drive to my parents’ home in La Jolla, the big two-story house I grew up in. I hear the noise of the lawnmower coming from the backyard as I let myself in the front door with my key. The mouthwatering scent of roast beef greets me as I walk into the foyer. Damn, that smells good.

The house is empty as I expected, since Mom has a regular Friday afternoon spa appointment. I open the oven door to peek in at the roast, but it’s covered in foil. Mom likes to put an eye of round roast into the oven and cook it all day at a low temperature. It’s delicious when it’s done, melt-in-your-mouth tender.

I step out the sliding doors from the kitchen onto the patio. Dad’s just finishing the lawn and waves at me as he cuts the last strip of grass. I wander to the edge of the patio. When Dad

was still working, he paid a company to come and cut the grass, trim the hedges, and weed the flower beds, since neither he nor Mom had any interest in doing yard work, both of them with busy careers and four children. It's still surprising to see him out here doing it himself, but apparently he enjoys it now that he has time.

"Hey, kiddo, what are you doing here?" he asks when he kills the noisy machine. "Your mom is out."

"I know. I came by to see you."

"Well, that's sure nice. Let's get some iced tea. I could use a cold drink."

We go back into the cool kitchen together and I pull glasses from a cupboard while Dad gets a pitcher of tea out of the fridge.

"So what's up?" he asks as he pours.

"I'm concerned about Mom."

He frowns. "Why?"

"She's not adapting well to retirement."

"Huh." He picks up his glass and gulps. "Why do you say that?"

"Haven't you noticed? She complains all the time. She feels useless and ... I think she's lonely."

Dad grimaces. "Really?"

"Yeah. I was thinking ... maybe you could spend a little more time with her."

"We're together all the time!"

"Not when you're out golfing or fishing or hanging out with your friends."

He squints at me. "It's not like I do that every day. Your mom and I are together a lot."

"But what do you do? Do you take her out for lunch? Or ... or go trampolining?"

Dad's head jerks back. "Go what?"

I huff a laugh. “I went to a trampoline park last night. It was fun. Okay, maybe not for you, but do you two go on dates and do fun stuff?”

“Well ...” The corners of Dad’s mouth dip down. “Not so much, I guess. But come on. We’re not teenagers.”

“I know. But you’re both retired now, and it’s a good time in your life to have fun together. She misses her friends from work.”

“She should make new friends.”

“I agree, but sometimes that’s not easy. I was going to give her some information I found about volunteer opportunities. There’s a nonprofit organization looking for someone to manage their office. She could easily do that. Then she’d feel more productive and she’d meet people. But I think she’d like to spend time with you, too.”

“Did she say that?”

“Not directly, but I got the feeling.”

Dad eyes me, his face softening. “You always get ‘feelings’ about things.”

I give him a wry smile. “Yeah.”

“And you’re usually right. The rest of us have no clue what’s going on around us and you’re picking up on all these signals.”

I blink at Dad. What he said is true: my family’s lack of intuition and empathy sometimes astonishes me, but I’ve learned over the years that’s just the way they are. All of them are focused on goals and plans, and I’ve always felt they look down on me because I like to dream and play and take photographs. Dad’s comment surprises me.

“Okay, kiddo, point taken.” He sips more tea. “Tomorrow I’ll take your mom out to the beach or something.”

I smile. “Yes! You two are both still healthy and active. Go for a walk on the beach or even a bike ride. Just make sure you spend some time actually talking to each other. She might want to talk about how she’s feeling.”

“In other words, *you’re* tired of hearing about it.”

I grin. “No. Well maybe a little. But really, I just want her to be happier. That’s what retirement is supposed to be, right?”

“Right.”

“How come *you* didn’t have an issue adapting to retirement?”

Dad shrugs. “Well, there was definitely an adjustment. But maybe it’s different for men.”

“I would’ve thought the opposite, that men would have a harder time, since a lot of their identity is wrapped up in their career. But I guess Mom’s was too.”

“Yeah. And I think she had closer relationships with the people she worked with than I did.” He rubs his chin.

“So not only did she lose her career, and the self-esteem that went with that ... she lost her friends.”

Dad nods thoughtfully. “You’re probably right about that. Smart cookie.”

I smile at Dad and he grins back.

“Are you staying for dinner?”

I glance at my watch. “I could be persuaded, since I smell Mom’s roast beef.”

After dinner with my parents, I go home to change, then head over to Conquistadors to keep Hayden company while Beck works. For some reason I find myself tingling with anticipation as I dress in a sleeveless coral blouse that I tuck into jeans. I buckle a pair of metallic gold flat sandals and inspect my reflection in the long mirror in my bedroom. Not bad.

I add a little eye shadow to the mascara I already wear, eyeing my curling wand sitting on the bathroom vanity. Why am I bothering to get all glammed up just to go see my best friend?

I know why. I just don’t want to admit it.

I slick on a coral lip gloss then smack my lips together as I grab my purse and keys.

Sure, I'm happy to see my friend again. And yes, Conquistadors is a fun place to hang out. Hayden and I are getting to know some of the regulars there. But as I slide onto a stool at the bar next to Hayden, my eyes are roving around searching for ... Marco.

However, none of the three conquistadores, as I've started thinking of them, are evident. "Where is everybody?" I ask Hayden.

"Back looking at some video. Someone vandalized the restaurant again last night."

"Oh no. Is it bad?"

"Just graffiti, but they're pissed. It's happened before, and also to a bunch of other businesses in the area."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. So. Last night was fun."

"It was. I'm glad Beck is still making you do things outside your comfort zone."

Hayden smiles and stirs her cocktail with the straw. "Oh yes, he is."

"Hey, never mind, I heard enough about your sex life last night."

Alex, one of the bartenders, approaches.

"I don't know what to have," I say. "What are you drinking?"

"A Paloma."

"Okay, I'll have one of those. Can you make it with diet soda?" I ask Alex.

"You bet." He flashes a smile and turns away to mix my drink.

"So what were you up to today?" Hayden asks. "Working?"

“No ... oh my God! I have to tell you what happened!” I tell Hayden about the message I received from Jessica Farris and the response I’ve already had. We’ve arranged for me to go to L.A. next week for the photo shoot. “She saw the picture I posted the other day of Savannah. You know the one I took of her with James holding her?”

“Yeah. That’s an awesome picture.”

My brother was shirtless, holding naked baby Savannah. The way I cropped it, the image shows his strong male arms cradling his baby with protective tenderness. I was also pleased with the lighting.

“They really liked it, too,” I say.

“Holy shit!” Hayden stares at me. “That’s freaking awesome!”

“I know, right?” My shoulders lift with excitement. “I still can’t believe it.”

“Will her husband be there? Do you need an assistant?”

I grin. “I don’t know.”

“Let me know. I’d be happy to help.”

Then the conversation moves to wedding plans.

“We want to set a date,” Hayden says. “But you have to be there. I want you to be my maid of honor, of course.”

I smile, my chest going warm and fizzy. “Aw. Thank you.”

“But you’re leaving,” Hayden points out.

I tip my head back. “Yes. I am. In just over two months.”

“We can’t do it before then.”

“But you don’t want to wait until I’m back.”

“When will you be back?”

“The term goes from October to June.”

“Ugh. June’s so far away.”

“I’m sorry.” My forehead tightens. “When do you want to get married?”

Hayden sighs. “Tomorrow?” She makes a face. “Kidding. I don’t want a big fancy wedding, but Beck seems to think we should do that.”

“Really?”

Alex appears with my drink and sets it on a paper coaster on the polished wood bar.

“Thanks, Alex.” I smile at him and reach for the cocktail. I sip the tequila, lime, and grapefruit drink through the straw. “Mmm. So good.” I look back at Hayden. “Are you sure he wants that? He’s not one to want to be all ostentatious about his money.”

“That’s true. And I’d feel weird in a big fancy dress walking down an aisle in front of a bunch of strangers. I’d rather have something small and intimate.”

“Then you should tell him that. You two need to be up front with each other about what you really want. It might actually be the same thing.”

Hayden nods. “You’re right. Okay. Then maybe we *could* do it before you leave.”

“Don’t rush it on my account.” I bite my lip, feeling guilty. “You need to do it when it’s right for both of you.”

“I’d do it at city hall next week.”

I grin. Didn’t I predict that? “No, you’re not allowed to do it at city hall. Nothing wrong with that, mind you, but I want to see you in a beautiful dress walking down the aisle, even if it’s just in front of handful of people. People who love you.”

“You definitely have to come dress shopping with me.”

“I would not miss that.”

“Now I’m kind of excited. I need to talk to Beck about this.”

Our wedding conversation continues over another cocktail, until Hayden frowns and says, “Jeez, where are those guys? They’ve been gone awhile.”

“True.” I haven’t even seen them.

“Come on, let’s go find them.” Hayden hops off her stool and I follow her down the hall to the office from which the three former SEALs run their business.

They’re all behind a desk, scowling at the computer. They look up as Hayden and I enter.

“Hey, baby.” Beck stretches out a hand to Hayden.

Marco’s hot glare lands on me and makes my nipples tingle. He’s so intense.

“What’s taking so long?” Hayden asks.

“We’re looking at the video from the new security camera.”

“What are you seeing?” Hayden leans over to peer at the monitor.

“We got an excellent view of the fucker,” Marco snarls. “Look.” He nudges the monitor.

I move around behind the desk also to watch the grainy video the security camera captured.

A smallish person with a baseball cap, clearly a young teenager, paints with abandon. In a way, it’s kind of beautiful, the way he uses the spray cans of paint to create an image, taking his time to study the wall and the picture he’s creating. I get that the guys are unhappy with this, though.

I tilt my head, frowning faintly as I watch the graffiti artist, realizing it’s a girl, not a boy, and the movements look vaguely familiar. Then the girl takes off her cap, a fall of blond hair cascading down her back as she studies her work, and the camera catches her face clearly.

“Oh sweet baby Jesus!” I gape at the screen, blinking.

Every head swivels to look at me.

“What?” Marco barks.

“Oh no. Oh my God,” Hayden breathes, also recognizing the girl.

I close my eyes. “This can’t be happening.”

“What?” Marco asks again with increased roughness.
“What is happening?”

I set my hand over my mouth and meet Marco’s eyes.
“That’s my niece.”

MARCO

“Your niece?” I scowl at Carrie, trying to ignore how fucking edible she looks.

She lifts a shaky hand to her mouth, eyes wide. She just stares back at me, saying nothing.

“You sure?” I growl.

Carrie glances at Hayden, who grimaces. “It looks like Julia. Of course, I haven’t seen her for a while.”

“How old is she?” Beck asks in a gentler tone than I did.

Carrie swallows. “Fourteen. She’s been going through a rough time lately. Her parents—my sister and her husband—recently separated.”

“I’m calling the cops.” I reach for my cellphone.

“No!” Carrie shakes her head vehemently. “Don’t do that!”

I hesitate, Carrie’s look of distress tugging at me. “I have to. She’s been vandalizing this whole neighborhood, costing the businesses money.”

“You don’t know it was her that did all of it!” Carrie’s eyebrows fly up. “You just know it was this one. And maybe I’m wrong.” She rubs her forehead. “Maybe it’s not her.”

“It’s her,” I grind out. “And she needs to face the consequences of her actions.”

“She can’t go to jail!”

Hayden reaches out and squeezes Carrie's arm. "She won't go to jail, Care. She's only fourteen."

"But ... not the police. Oh my God, my sister will die." Carrie closes her eyes. "Then she'll kill Julia."

I try to harden my heart but thinking about fourteen-year-old Julia with long blond hair like Carrie's makes my resolve to punish the little criminal weaken. "Get her down here," I say roughly.

Carrie's eyes pop open. "Who? My sister?"

"Julia."

"Wh-why?"

"So we can talk to her."

"What are you going to do to her? What are you going to say?"

"Christ, we're not going to water board her." I shove a hand into my hair and tip my head back.

"What are you thinking?" Beck asks me.

"Maybe there's a way she can learn her lesson," I say. "I don't know. She should have to pay to have the wall repainted."

"She's fourteen," Carrie whispers. "How can she pay?"

"Does she babysit? Maybe she should do dishes here for a while."

Carrie's eyes widen again. She turns to Hayden, who shrugs.

Carrie sucks briefly on her plump bottom lip, which further erodes my determination. And yet ... I know I'm not wrong about this. "Kids can't go around doing shit like that and getting away with it."

Carrie nods. "You're right." She inhales a long breath. "If I bring her down here to talk to you, you won't call the police?"

I keep my expression firm. "Not if she agrees to make restitution."

Carrie blinks rapidly. “And you won’t call my sister?”

I lift my chin.

“Okay. I’ll do it.” She winces, as if imagining her sister finding out about this. Curiosity rises inside me about this family. “But I have to be present when you interrogate her.”

My lips twitch. “Interrogate?”

“Whatever.” She waves a hand. “She needs someone to represent her.”

“Jesus. It’s not a court-martial.” My heart feels oddly warm and full. She obviously loves her niece, and cares about her family.

“I’ll go get her right now.” Carrie leaps to her feet.

“No.” I almost want to smile. “Tomorrow’s fine.”

“Okay.” Carrie sinks her teeth into that lip again, and my gaze strays there. “Tomorrow.”

Saturday afternoon, I fling open the back door of Conquistadors after the knock that sounds. There stand Carrie and a young girl whose eyes dart all over the place, despite the sullen, disinterested look she attempts.

“Come in,” I growl, stepping aside.

“Hello to you, too,” Carrie snaps. She slants me a look that clearly says, “*What the fuck, asshole, could you be a little nicer?*”

I set my jaw. I could be nicer, but I’m not going to be a pushover when it comes to Julia’s criminal activity. As far as I’m concerned, there’s right and there’s wrong, and people who have done wrong cannot go unpunished.

I lead the way into the office and shut the door. I motion to the chairs, and Carrie and Julia take a seat.

“I guess you know why you’re here,” I say to Julia as I move behind the desk. Then, for some reason, I change my mind, and instead sit on the desk facing them.

Julia nods and lifts her small chin. Despite her bravado, I can see the fear in her eyes.

“Do you admit to what you did?” Will she try to deny doing it, despite the evidence?

Julia casts her aunt a glance, firms her lips, and then says in a small voice, “Yes.”

“Good. Because this will go a lot better for you if you’re honest. Do you know how much it costs to repaint the outside of a building?”

Julia’s eyes flash. “You covered up my art.”

“Art?” My eyebrows launch upward. “*Art?*”

Her lips set in a slightly mutinous line. “Yes. Art. I spent a lot of time on that painting.”

I blink at her. Is she serious?

“Julia’s very creative,” Carrie says. “It seems this was a bit of an ... outlet for her. For her creativity. And for some of the, uh, emotions she’s been experiencing lately.”

I pull in a slow breath, studying Julia.

I know about outlets. I know about emotions in turmoil, frustration and pain mingled with teenage hormones. It nearly destroyed my life as a teenager. It resulted in me being shipped from home to home, nobody wanting to put up with my shit, and nearly led to an entirely different life. If I hadn’t made the smart decision to join the Navy, I’d probably be in jail right now.

I know about boosting cars and vandalism and petty theft. I know about a nearly retired cop who saw something in me that was worth saving, who led me down a different path, who suggested the Navy as a way to learn a trade, make some honest money, and turn my life around.

I haven’t thought about Bob Cole for quite a while. Still haven’t forgiven the old bugger for dying while I was in Afghanistan. Like everyone else I cared about, Bob abandoned me. But maybe I learned more from Bob than I realized, as I find myself saying, “Graffiti on our walls is vandalism. It

creates a negative impression of the business we're running here. It scares people away from our neighborhood because they think the area is full of crime. People don't want to hang out in crime-ridden areas late at night. We lose business. This is how we earn our living, and to be honest, we don't earn a lot to start with. We have to pay to have it painted over. That costs us even more." I pause and hold her gaze steadily. "Do you think about those things when you're defacing someone's property?"

She pauses, then whispers, "No."

"Well, you should. I know you're just a kid, but part of growing up is thinking about more than just yourself."

Tears glisten in her eyes, but she determinedly blinks them away.

This encourages me. If she was a little psychopath with no remorse, we'd have a tougher job ahead of us. Clearly Julia realizes she's done something wrong.

"I'm good at it," she says, her voice low but with a hint of defiance. "The people I hang out with think I'm the best."

I look to Carrie.

"She started out doing it on her own," Carrie explains in a gentle voice that I feel in my balls. "There's a ... gang ..."

I wince at the word "gang."

"They saw her work and brought her into their group," Carrie continues. She glances at Julia, then reaches out and takes her hand. I note that Julia doesn't pull away, but grasps her aunt's hand. It looks like they have a pretty close relationship.

Something twangs in my chest.

I don't have relationships like this. Yeah, I have Beck and Cade, and that's great. But I can't help but think of my sister and wonder where she is.

I give my head a brief shake and focus back on Carrie.

“It started off as a way to express her feelings,” she continues softly. “Venting her anger on something nonthreatening and safe.”

As opposed to the parents, whose breakup apparently caused all this?

“As she got better, she attracted attention, and then being part of that group became important to her. Somewhere she felt accepted. Somewhere she belonged.”

Fuck. I get that too. I know how shitty it feels not to belong anywhere, to anyone.

“The graffiti is almost a competition,” Carrie says. “Trying to outdo each other.”

“And defacing every building in the neighborhood.”

“Not every building,” Julia mutters.

“So it wasn’t all you?” I ask.

“No.” She shakes her hair back and meets my eyes. “But I’ve done some.” Her bottom lip trembles. “Are you going to call the police?”

I don’t answer right away, letting her stew a bit.

I meet Carrie’s eyes. I already told her I’m not going to call the cops. Julia wouldn’t go to jail; I know that. But she does need to learn a lesson.

Carrie sits there looking so calm and goddamn beautiful it eases some of the tension that turns my muscles to rock and tightens my chest. The way she looks at her niece, holds her hand, speaks in that reassuring tone ... Christ, I want that. But I can never have that.

“Marco.” She holds my gaze. “Julia’s not a criminal.”

Yes, she is. Right or wrong. Black or white.

And yet ... I swallow a sigh. “We’d need to make a deal,” I say finally, my gaze sliding back to Julia.

“Wh-what kind of deal?”

“You have to remove the graffiti.”

Her face crumples and she closes her eyes.

Christ, does it mean that much to her? Confused, I look back at Carrie, who's also gazing at Julia with concern.

But Carrie lifts her head and fixes her gorgeous gray-blue eyes on me again. "How would you feel if someone took one of your sculptures and smashed it to pieces with a sledgehammer?"

My body goes very still, and my heart thuds against my ribs.

"Sculptures?" Julia asks in a small but interested voice.

"Christ," I mutter, swiping a hand over my face. "It can't stay there, Carrie."

"I know." She turns to Julia and squeezes her hand. "I have an idea, honey, but we can talk about that later."

What? What idea?

"What if Marco hires someone to cover up the graffiti, and you pay him back for the cost of that."

"I don't have any money," Julia says. "Other than my allowance and a little bit I saved from baby-sitting."

"You could work here to pay off the debt," I say. "You can't work in the bar, of course, but you could wash dishes."

"Wash dishes?" Julia looks horrified.

I restrain my smile. "It's honest work."

Julia takes in a long, shaky breath that signals tears pending, but once again she manages to keep them at bay. "Okay. I c-can do that."

"Well figure out a schedule for after school and weekends," Carrie says.

"Are you going to tell Mom?"

Carrie's lips tighten and she looks down at the floor, then puffs out her cheeks in a sharp exhale. "I won't," she finally says. "I'll pick you up after school and bring you here, and I'll cover for you ... if you promise you won't do this again."

Now Julia looks conflicted. “Aunt Carrie ...”

Carrie holds her niece’s gaze. “We’ll talk,” she says quietly. “But you can’t do this anymore, Julia. It *is* a crime. If you get caught again, you might not be so lucky.”

Julia gnaws on her bottom lip, looking a lot like Carrie at that moment. Eventually she nods. “Okay. I promise.”

“It’ll be all right,” Carrie says. “Like I said, I have an idea.”

I desperately want to know what that is. “Okay,” I say. “At minimum wage, I’ve figured out how many hours you’ll need to work, based on what it cost us to paint over it last time. Let’s work out a schedule.”

“I can’t come on Tuesday and Thursdays,” Julia says. “I have volleyball. And Saturday mornings I have swimming.”

Jesus, it’s not like she’s a kid who’s hanging out on the streets with nothing better to do. She comes from a good family and is involved in other activities. “You like volleyball?”

“Not really.” She scrunches up her nose. “My parents make me play.”

“What would you rather be doing?”

“Painting.”

“Do you paint things besides other people’s property?” I asked mildly.

Her cheeks flush and her gaze drops. “Yeah. But I like painting *big* things.” The passion in her voice hints at the big feelings inside her.

I meet Carrie’s eyes again and now they’re softer, watching me talk to Julia.

“Could I start now?” Julia asks.

Surprised, I nod. “Sure, kid. How long can you stay?”

Julia looks to her aunt, and Carrie says, “I promised I’d have her home by four. So ... a little over two hours.”

“It’s a start. Come on. I’ll show you around.” I stand and wait for Julia.

Carrie rises too, holding her big purse in both hands. “I can come back around three forty-five to get her.”

“Wait here. I’ll be back.” I watch Carrie’s eyes narrow at my order, but she gives a short nod.

I take Julia and introduce her to everyone in the kitchen—the cook, Sid; the line cook, Paul; the prep cook, Jenn; the servers on duty who are picking up orders; the two bus boys; and the dishwasher, Sam. “Okay everyone, keep your language PG while Julia here is in the kitchen.”

I trust most of them, but I’m not sure Paul can utter a complete sentence without some kind of curse word. Although I’m probably naïve thinking a fourteen-year-old hasn’t heard the F-word.

“I’ll look after her,” Sam says, and I nod. As I leave, I hear Sam ask, “This your first job, kid?”

I return to the office where Carrie is slouched in the chair, long, bare legs stretched out in front of her, Converse-clad feet crossed at the ankle. She’s staring at her phone.

My gaze lingers on her legs ... Christ, they’re perfect, lean, smooth and lightly tanned. I want those legs over my goddamn shoulders.

She looks up at me and lowers her phone. “So?”

“She’s learning how to wash dishes.”

“Huh. That’ll be something new for her.”

“What does that mean?” I lean my ass on the edge of the desk in front of her. “She’s spoiled?”

“Maybe a little. I think her parents try to make up for the lack of time they spend with her by letting her get away with too much.”

“Why don’t they spend time with her?”

“They have busy careers.”

I snort. “Fuck.”

“Yeah. Lauren’s my sister, but we’re really different. I tried to tell her she needs to spend more time with Julia, but she doesn’t take kindly to criticism. So I just spend as much time with Julia as I can.”

My heart bumps in my chest. “That’s nice of you.”

“Eh. I love her. It’s not just nice, it’s fun. Though she has been a little, uh, moody lately. Her parents splitting up sure didn’t help things.”

“That’s fucking sad,” I growl. Why do people have kids if they’re going to ignore them? That doesn’t even make sense and it’s just messed up and pisses me off, since my own parents, who loved their kids so damn much and would have done anything for us despite working multiple low-paying jobs to support the family, were forcibly taken away from their children because of screwed-up laws. Yeah, I’m still a little bitter.

Carrie eyes me, a small notch between her eyebrows. “It is,” she agrees. “But honestly, Julia’s turned out pretty good, all things considered.”

“She’s out vandalizing property!”

Carrie tilts her head. “She’s fourteen. Most kids go through some kind of rebellious phase. Don’t tell me you didn’t.”

I swallow. “Okay, I can’t tell you that.”

Her lips quirk. “I bet you were a little badass.”

“Ha. Not so little. I was six feet tall when I was fifteen.”

Her eyes widen, but she smirks. “You didn’t deny the badass part, though.”

One corner of my mouth lifts. “Nope. I had ... issues.”

Her eyebrows slope downward and her smile fades. “That would be understandable.”

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it that Julia is basically a good kid.” I lift my chin. “Tell me the idea you have.”

“Idea?”

“Yeah. You told Julia you’d talk about it later.”

“Oh.” She nibbles her bottom lip. “Much later. It’s just a vague thing ...”

“What?” I prompt more gently.

“Well ... these kids she’s hanging around with, doing the graffiti ... I expect they’re all kind of like her. Maybe not so well off, but probably shit happening in their lives, not much support, too much time on their hands and nowhere to go. And I guess they all must have some kind of artistic bent.”

“Yeah.”

“It would be good if there was a place they could go, maybe hang out, do some art. There might even be opportunity for them to do some murals, like legit art on walls.”

I purse my lips, nodding. “Yeah.”

“It would have to be funded somehow ...” She taps her index finger against her full bottom lip. “To rent space, buy some art supplies ... they’d need volunteers ...”

“That’s an ambitious project.”

She sighs. “I know. What am I thinking?”

“I like how you think. I can help.”

She blinks her crazy long eyelashes. “Really?”

“Sure. I know someone who could also probably help.”

“Who?”

“Anna Bowes. She owns the Bowes Gallery in La Jolla.”

Carrie’s mouth falls open. “You know that gallery?”

“Yeah. They’ve sold a few of my sculptures.”

“Shut up.”

I huff a laugh. “You don’t believe me?”

“No, I do! Your sculptures are amazing! But she sells some of my photographs there.”

“No shit.” I bend my head to one side. “Why didn’t you say something that night I was looking at your pictures?”

“Why didn’t *you* say something that night I was looking at your sculptures?”

Our eyes meet in a little detonation of heat and sparks. I recognize something in her, the same kind of unassuming attitude about her photographs as I have about my sculptures. I love working on them, but always downplay it to other people. Why didn’t I see that in her before? She’s going all the way to Spain to study photography, for Chrissake, she must have talent to have been given that scholarship. I saw the photographs and thought they were amazing, but what do I know about photography?

“We could go talk to Anna Monday,” I say.

“I have a shoot in L.A. Monday.” She pauses. “Maybe Tuesday?”

I nod. “Sure.”

“It’s a crazy idea.”

“No. It’s not crazy at all. But yeah, it’ll be work.”

“I’m leaving,” she reminds me. “In two months.”

My gut tightens. “I know.”

She sucks in a breath. “Well. We could explore things, I guess.”

My gaze drops once more to those legs. Yeah, I want to explore things all right.

CARRIE

How did I get myself into this?

Okay, maybe I should be blaming Julia for this.

I rushed to Julia's school after my photo shoot Monday afternoon, picked her up, and drove her to Conquistadors. Lauren was confused about why I was taking Julia out again so soon, so I swallowed my guilt and made up a story about taking her shopping. Luckily (or unluckily, maybe) Lauren is sufficiently self-absorbed that she didn't question it much, no doubt relieved that she could stay at work as late as she wanted without worrying about getting home for dinner with her daughter.

Dammit.

When I arrived at Conquistadors, I went in with Julia to make sure everything was still in place, and of course met up with Marco. I watched as he told Julia more about the business and showed her around. The restaurant and bar weren't that busy, but Marco expected around five o'clock things would pick up.

"What time should I come back to pick her up?" I asked Marco.

"You're not staying?"

"I'm not the one working off a debt."

One corner of his mouth lifted. "So hanging out here would be punishment."

He had no idea. Okay, maybe more like torture.

I keep thinking about him. All the goddamn time. I don't know what's wrong with me. I thought about our meeting Saturday, how he was tough with Julia, but not mean. He definitely had Julia's attention, but he didn't terrify her. And once they agreed on the plan, he asked her questions with a genuine interest and softer attitude that made my heart flutter.

I have to admit he was right that Julia needed to face the consequences of her actions, and I *am* worried about this gang that Julia told me about. This strengthens my resolve to make sure I spend more time with Julia, to make sure she isn't getting into deeper and deeper trouble.

I broached the idea of Julia seeing a counselor on our way home Saturday. It wasn't received well, although I tried to reassure Julia that lots of kids had a hard time dealing with their parents' divorce and it's not a bad thing. Julia was adamant she didn't want to, so I didn't push it, but I do want to make sure Julia has opportunities to talk about things.

"I'll come back at eight," I say to Julia. "To take you home."

Julia nods, biting a fingernail, blinking rapidly. Is it okay to leave her on her own with a bunch of strangers? Maybe I should stay. But what the hell would I do for four hours in a bar? Okay, eat, sure, but that wouldn't take long. Maybe I should ask for a waitressing job. Ha. That could be my next career.

God.

"You'll be fine," I say to Julia. "Marco will look after you."

"I'm not her baby-sitter," he growls, but Julia smiles and I realize that I totally trust him with my niece's safety. "She's here to work. Let's get going." He pauses and meets my eyes. "You should stay and have something to eat."

I nod slowly. I have to eat, even if I go home.

"We can talk about the party plans," Marco adds before heading back to the kitchen with Julia.

Julia waves.

I inhale a deep breath and release it, then walk over to the long wooden bar and hop up onto a stool. I still feel uneasy about deceiving my sister. Maybe I should be up front with her about what happened and what the plan is. Or maybe I'll just wait until it's done and Julia has repaid the debt and ... I wince, thinking about Lauren's possible reaction to what Julia was doing.

"Hey, Carrie." Beck faces me across the bar. "Something to drink?"

"Just a glass of water."

"Sure." He scoops ice into a tall glass and fills it from the dispenser, then moves away to look after some customers at the other end of the bar. Some kind of chill indie music plays and I look around. This place is becoming like a second home, with all the time Hayden and I have spent here, and now this. I like the way the late-afternoon sun filtering through the venetian blinds warms up the white walls and dark wood.

A couple enters the bar and take seats on stools near me, greeting me by name.

"Hi, Joe. Hi, Helena." The married couple are regulars at the bar who I've gotten to know. I smile at them. "How are you?"

"Eh." Joe shrugs, "I've had better days."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that." I'm not sure if I should ask ...

"He's pissed at me," Helena offers.

What else is new? These two always seem to be fighting about something. And yet, they're still together ...

"She watched two episodes of *Game of Thrones* without me," Joe says bitterly.

I gasp and press a hand to my chest. "Netflix cheating?"

"Yes!"

Helena shrugs. "I kept asking you when we could watch again, and you ended up working late the last two nights, so I watched it myself."

“You don’t do that!” He scowls. “That’s our thing ... to watch it together.” He looks at me. “Right?”

“It is a thing,” I say carefully.

Helena snorts. “He just wants to be mad.”

Joe frowns. “I feel betrayed.”

I nod. “I get that. If that was your agreement, of course you’d feel betrayed. But she probably felt a little betrayed when you weren’t home the last two nights to watch it together.”

“Right.” Helena lifts her chin. “See?”

“That said, it’s not like she destroyed something you love,” I say. “You can still watch those two episodes and then you’re back to where you were.”

“I don’t want to watch them again,” Helena says. “And I plan to watch another episode tomorrow, so you better be caught up by then.”

“How am I gonna do that? I have to work.”

Helena gives him a tight smile. “You could be watching them right now instead of sitting here in the bar.”

“And leave you all alone here? Not a fuckin’ chance.”

“Why? Don’t you trust me?”

I swallow a sigh. This is stressing me out. If this kind of interaction is fun for them, well, they can have it. It would exhaust me. I’d rather be single than fight with someone every damn day. “You two need drinks!” I wave at Beck, who’s already on his way to take their orders.

Marco slides onto the stool next to me. “I ordered food for us.”

“What? What did you order?”

He grins, and as always that unexpected beauty flash hits me like a fist in the gut. “We’re going to try one of Sid’s new menu items. A burrito pie.”

“Oh. Okay.” Burrito pie? I try not to let my doubt show on my face.

“We’ve been trying to improve our food menu. Sid’s not exactly a Michelin-starred chef, so it’s been a struggle.”

“Why don’t you just hire a better chef?”

He grimaces. “We might have to do that. None of us like firing people.”

“Really? You tough Navy SEALs? I would’ve thought you’d love barking out orders and kicking ass.”

“Ha. We can do it. We have done it. Seemed like a good idea to at least give him a chance.”

“That’s ... nice.”

He frowns.

“Don’t worry, that doesn’t destroy your badass SEAL cred.”

He snorts. “Thanks. Good to know.”

“I didn’t get a chance to say this yesterday, but ... thank you for what you’re doing with Julia.”

He looks away and shrugs.

A man of many words. Not.

“So the party’s on Sunday.” I change the subject to alleviate Marco’s obvious discomfort. “What time should I come to start decorating?”

“Party starts at six, right?”

“Right. I’ll come around five? That should be lots of time.”

“Yeah, sounds good. Have you heard back from most of the people we invited?”

“Yes!” I smile. “Only a couple can’t make it.” My smile fades. “I did hear from Beck’s parents with their ‘regrets.’”

“Damn.”

“Maybe it’s for the best. We want it to be a fun evening. Not tense for Beck and Hayden.”

“They haven’t even met Hayden. I wonder if they’ll come to the wedding.”

He looks so worried about this I tip my head to one side and study him. “Family’s important to you, isn’t it?”

“Phhht. I have no family.”

I pucker my lips thoughtfully. “Cade and Beck are your family.”

“Yeah.” He inclines his head in agreement. “I just think that people who have family are lucky and should try to make the best of it and not make each other miserable.”

I nod. I’ve also seen his concern for Julia and her family situation. “I guess that’s a good point. People can take family for granted, thinking they’ll always be there for them, but that’s not always the case.”

“I don’t blame Beck,” he adds. “Not totally, anyway. I know what his life was like as a kid, and just because he was rich didn’t mean he was happy.” He pauses. “If Julia’s parents are like Beck’s ... well, fuck.”

“They’re good people,” I hasten to assure him. “And they love Julia, I know they do.”

“She’s lucky she has you in her life,” Marco says slowly.

My cheeks heat. “Thanks.”

Julio arrives with our meals, served on brightly colored pottery plates, the wedge-shaped slice of burrito pie accompanied by yellow rice and garnished with shredded iceberg lettuce, chopped tomatoes, and sour cream.

I unwrap cutlery from a cloth napkin, eyeing the food. It doesn’t look bad.

We both dig in at the same time, cutting off a piece of pie and forking it into our mouths.

“It’s good,” I mumble after swallowing.

Marco sighs. “Yeah. It’s okay.” He pokes at a slice of black olive. “This is crap.”

“You don’t like olives?”

“I love olives. But not tasteless ones that come from a can.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“Maybe we expect too much,” Marco says and takes another bite. “There’s nothing wrong with this, but it seems ... ordinary. He’s still using big jugs of taco sauce and canned refried beans.”

I suck briefly on my bottom lip. “I guess it would be more special if it was made with fresher ingredients. And you have a right to your expectations. Whatever they are. It’s your business. If you want to serve great food that gets rave reviews and has people lining up, then that’s what you should have.”

Marco meets my eyes and nods. “You’re right.”

Our gazes hold, and as we sit so close together on the stools at the bar, heat shimmers between us. I curse my weakness where he’s concerned. This physical attraction has to stop. But it’s not stopping, it’s just intensifying, and it isn’t just physical anymore. Every time I see him, I get glimpses of different facets of his personality that surprise me. The fun side of him with his friends. The tender side of him with kids. The empty part of him that I suspect longs for the family he lost and never truly replaced even though he has Beck and Cade. The smart Marco that makes me look inside myself and realize maybe I don’t appreciate my family enough, that even though they kind of make me crazy and make me feel inferior, they’re still my family.

Wow, I’m getting to like this guy. How the hell did that happen?

Because physical attraction is one thing, and so far I’ve managed to mostly resist that. But combine that with actually liking him ... that’s dangerous. And damn near irresistible.

I focus determinedly on eating my burrito pie.

“You really like it that much?” Marco asks, amusement deepening his voice.

I sigh. I’ve barely tasted it. “It’s pretty good.”

“I’ll get Julia a piece of it when she takes her break.”

“She gets a break?”

“Of course she gets a break. I’m not a tyrant. We follow the fair labor standards.”

I grin. “Well, actually you don’t, considering you’re not paying her and she’s actually too young to work legally.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. I do. And thanks, but you don’t have to feed her.”

“She’s here over the dinner hour. Of course we’ll feed her.”

My heart quivers, but I ignore it. “Hey, you know what I forgot about? The games we were going to play at the party.”

“Oh right. The games.”

“Why do you sound so unenthusiastic? You were the one who suggested them.”

“Right. Did we narrow it down to which we want to play?”

“I liked that icebreaker one. We need pictures of Beck and Hayden to cut in half.”

Marco rubs his chin. “Okay. I think I might have some.”

“I can get some off Instagram. But with thirty guests, we’ll need fifteen pictures.”

“Might need to take a few new ones.”

“Without them knowing why.”

“Right.”

“Then there was the newlywed game. No, weren’t we going to call it Nearly Wed?”

Marco grins. “Right. That’s why I was asking Hayden about her favorite sexual positions.”

“Oh for ... *that* was why you asked that?” I slap my forehead. “Shit.”

“Why did you think I asked? Because I really want to know what Hayden likes in bed?”

“Ugh. Please.”

“Don’t worry, babe, I don’t think about *Hayden* in bed.”

The emphasis on *Hayden* and the way his scorching gaze lands on me makes my skin heat and belly flip. I swallow. “Um. Okay. Well, I guess we need to figure out the questions and get the answers from each of them.”

“We know Hayden’s answer on that.”

“Which might also be her kinkiest fetish.”

“Oh no.” He shakes his head. “That’s not even a little kinky, Supermodel. Come on. You can’t be that innocent.”

“I was kidding.”

“So what is her kinkiest fetish?”

I purse my lips. “Well, Hayden’s not super kinky. But she likes to have her hair pulled.”

“Hmmm. Okay. We don’t want things too X-rated.”

“What about Beck? What kind of kink is he into?”

“Jesus. Maybe we should skip that question.”

My eyes widen. “Why?”

“He’s done it all, babe.”

I consider that. “Okay, never mind. What other questions were there?”

“Well, we could embarrass them by asking how long it was after they met before they had ‘intimate relations.’ And wasn’t there one about describing their first kiss as candy?”

“Right. We need that website.”

Marco pulls out his phone and brings up the site. “Oh, this is good. What part of the other’s anatomy is their favorite?”

I grin. “I like it. Pretty sure Hayden likes Beck’s biceps.”

“Are you sure about that? Because he’s pretty proud of his dick.”

I choke on a laugh. “Um, well, now that you mention it, Hayden was fairly impressed also. But I can almost guarantee she would never say that in public.”

“Fair enough. Beck likes Hayden’s ass, and I don’t think he’ll have a problem saying that in public.”

“You didn’t even have to think about that.”

“He’s always been an ass man.” He grins.

“What about you?”

He arches a brow. “Me?”

“What body part do you like best?”

He smiles. “Depends on the woman.”

“Smooth.”

“You want to know what body part I like best on you?”

“No.” But that heat simmering between us grows hotter, making my face burn and my nipples tingle.

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I really don’t.”

“Fine.” He smirks and looks back at his phone. “What’s the weirdest place they’ve engaged in coitus?”

“Engaged in coitus?” I fall against the bar laughing. “Oh my God.”

“Yeah. You prefer a different term? Make whoopee?”

I laugh harder and wave a hand. “No. Please no.”

“Schtupp? Shag? Bury the bone?”

I set a hand to my hurting abs. “God no!”

“Take old one-eye to the optometrist?”

I can't stop laughing now, tears sliding from the corners of my eyes.

Marco grins too, that magical expression that makes my girl parts quiver. "Okay, let's play it safe with 'what's the weirdest place you've gotten lucky?' How's that?"

I nod, swiping at my eyes. "I'm good with that."

"Worst habit?"

I nod. "That should be good."

"Okay, we're set. I'll print these out. You'll get Hayden's answers, I'll get Beck's. Then who will ask the questions at the party?"

"I guess we both should."

"Okay. When?"

"I'd say early ... before we eat. Get people loosened up."

"Sure. Are we set?"

"I think so." I reach for my purse and pull out my wallet to pay for dinner.

"Fuck no." Marco waves a hand. "Put that away. Dinner's on me."

I lower my chin. "Julia's supposed to be repaying a debt. You don't need to feed me. Speaking of money, though ... I want to pay for half the food at the party."

Marco's jaw drops. "Again, I say, no. Cade and I are paying for the food and drinks. You bought the decorations."

"That's not even close to fair."

"Don't worry about it. This was my idea, remember? I'm just grateful for a little help with it."

I sigh and tuck away my wallet. "Okay, fine. I'll be back to pick up Julia a little before eight." I slide off my stool.

"She's safe here, you know." Marco's tone is low but intense.

I meet his eyes and sparks sizzle through my veins. I've seen Marco, as well as Cade and Beck, escort out customers who've had too much to drink or gotten obnoxious, and one memorable time Marco physically ejected a guy who grabbed a female server's ass. "I know."

His eyes crinkle up at the corners. "Good."

An answering smile tugs at my lips and a pulse thrums between my legs. *Danger, danger*. I stiffen my spine and turn to leave.

"Carrie."

"Yeah?" I pause and turn.

"My favorite part of your body ... is all of it."

MARCO

Conquistadors is decorated, tables have been arranged with massive amounts of food and tubs of beer, and the guests have all arrived. I hand half of a photograph to one last guest, one of our SEAL brothers, with a smile and instructions to mingle and find the other half of the picture.

Carrie stands next to me, looking way too fuckable in a sexy little black number. I want to cover her up. The sleeveless dress hugs her curves, with a split up the front high on her thigh and no back whatsoever. My balls ache just from looking at her and I'm worried that every other guy in the place is experiencing the same thing. I want to hide her away from their lascivious looks.

She smiles at John, too. "Thanks for coming," she says. "Beck and Hayden should be here in about five minutes. Right?" She turns to me.

I nod. "Right." It took some doing, but Cade managed to convince them we're having a small party to celebrate the birthday of one of our regular customers. It involved a helluva lot of lies and fabrications, and getting Dussen in on the plans, but he's been great. We're pretty sure Beck and Hayden have no idea.

Carrie's eyes sparkle as she surveys the group of people assembled in the bar, mingling and sipping beers. "This is so awesome." Once more she turns those big blue beauties on me. "Thank you for thinking of this."

I shrug. "Thanks for helping."

Carrie's smile twists a little but her eyes warm. Then her eyes widen and she says, "Oh! I think they're here!" She waves at one of the front windows.

I signal Cade, who flashes the lights off and on to alert the guests to quiet, and the chatter is just subsiding as Beck opens the door for Hayden and she walks in. When Beck steps in behind her, everyone yells, "Surprise!"

Hayden's eyes fly open, Beck's jaw drops, and they both stand statue still as they gape at the crowd.

"What's going on?" Hayden's forehead wrinkles with confusion. "Is Dussen not here yet?"

"I'm here," he calls from over near the bar. He lifts his beer in a toast. "And it's not my birthday."

"I don't understand." Hayden turns to Carrie.

Carrie smiles at her friend. "This is your engagement party."

"What?" Hayden glances at Beck.

He grins and slaps Marco's back. "What the fuck, man? You lied to me?"

"Yeah." I freely admit it. "Come on in. We're celebrating you two tonight."

Tears glint in Hayden's eyes. Oh no. She's not going to cry, is she? I don't do well with crying females.

Carrie and Hayden hug in a long, tight embrace. "I can't believe this," Hayden sniffs.

Carrie draws back, smiling. "Come in. Let's get you a drink and you can greet your guests and have some fun."

Carrie and I lead Beck and Hayden through the crowd, both of them smiling and waving and shaking their heads. Soon they have a beer in their hands and move through the group to greet people, including Hayden's Aunt Gina and Uncle Colin, some of her coworkers and other friends, and some of Beck's SEAL teammates and his former lieutenant commander.

I hold up a hand and Carrie high-fives it. “Nicely done, Supermodel.”

“Same to you.”

We share a look of mutual satisfaction and happiness at seeing our friends surprised and delighted.

We collect the photos that were cut in half and stick them on a magnetic board Carrie found, so that guests can look at all the pictures of Hayden and Beck, the most recent one taken last week at Fly Zone, both of them in the air grinning at each other.

I check in the kitchen to see where they’re at with the burgers, then Carrie and I climb up to sit on the bar to play the Nearly Wed Game. Beck and Hayden stand near us as they take turns answering questions to hoots of laughter and a few dirty comments.

“In a dressing room at Bisou?” Carrie’s mouth falls open, staring at Hayden. “You never told me that!”

I grin and bump fists with Beck.

Soon the guests are loading up plates with burgers and a variety of toppings and side dishes. Carrie and I decorated a table for Beck and Hayden to sit at, while everyone else finds chairs randomly at other tables. We make sure the happy couple has everything they need and then finally fill our own plates.

The atmosphere is lively and enjoyable, Beck and Hayden are beaming, and I set my plate on the bar and pick up my burger. “Things are going well.”

Carrie nods, standing beside me. “Yes. We did good.”

I glance at her and can’t stop my gaze from going to the cleavage revealed in the low scooped neckline of her dress. I stop chewing my burger, completely distracted by the smooth curves.

“Stop staring at my boobs.”

My gaze shoots up to her face.

She lifts her eyebrows.

“I want you,” I say baldly.

Her eyes darken and her lips part. “Well. That’s honest.”

“Fuck.” I close my eyes, still clutching my burger in both hands. “You have to know that. You have to know I’ve always wanted you.”

She blinks. Sinks her teeth briefly into her bottom lip. The lip I want to suck on, lick, and bite. “No,” she whispers. “I thought you were making fun of me.”

“What?” I stare at her. “Why would I do that?”

She drops her gaze to the hamburger she holds and sets it down on her plate. She picks up a paper napkin to wipe her fingers. “Because people always have.”

I scowl. “What? You can’t be serious.”

She does a little eye roll and lifts one shoulder, reaching for her beer. “Okay, not so much anymore. But when I was younger ... yeah. All the time. Ask Hayden. That’s why we’re BFFs. We were the two weirdos at Soledad High School.”

Weirdo? Christ. But she’s serious. People made fun of a beautiful, smart, warm woman like her? She’s a fucking goddess—gorgeous, untouchable, out of my league.

I can see the old hurt in her eyes, though, and recognize it. I’ve felt that way myself. Not that people made fun of me. They just never cared about me. Or they ditched me.

I look over at Beck, a little ashamed of the fact that I’ve felt abandoned by him lately. My friend is in love with a great woman; he’s happy, probably the happiest he’d ever been in his privileged life. And I’m happy for him. Beck deserves it.

I turn back to Carrie. “I was never making fun of you. I flirted with you because I was hot for you.”

“We hated each other.”

“Okay, maybe your rejection stung a little. But I never hated you.”

She regards me for a long moment, a troubled furrow between her eyebrows. Finally she says, “I kind of don’t really hate you either.”

“You tolerate me.”

She scrunches her face up at my reminder of her words. “Gah.”

“Wait.” I lower my voice. “Do you maybe ... like me?”

She smiles. “Maybe.”

A hot, soft feeling explodes in my chest.

Our eyes still locked on each other, awareness of the crowd in the bar fades away, the music and chatter grow faint, and I want to reach out and touch her. Except I’m still holding the goddamn hamburger. I look down at it blankly.

“Eat,” Carrie murmurs.

“This isn’t what I want to eat.”

Her cheeks go scarlet.

“Later,” I say. “Promise me.”

She draws in a long breath, her full breasts lifting as she does so. “Marco ...”

“Later.” I meet her eyes.

She nods. “Okay,” she whispers.

I resist the urge to pump a fist into the air.

Okay, let’s get this goddamn party over with. Would it be rude to start kicking guests out? Everyone is having so much fun they could be here until sunrise, for fuck’s sake.

It does turn into a later evening than I wanted. Some people start leaving around nine, but others linger until nearly eleven, and then the only ones here are Beck and Hayden, Cade, and Carrie and me. And some of the staff who are cleaning up.

“Thank you all,” Hayden says, with hugs for Cade, Carrie and then me. “This was such a surprise and so thoughtful of you.”

“It was Marco’s idea,” Carrie says.

Hayden looks between us, her expression going thoughtful.

Uh-oh. What did she see?

Never mind. It doesn’t matter. We just have to get out of here. Soon.

Hayden yawns and links her arms around Beck’s neck, leaning into him. “Take me home, hon. I have an early meeting tomorrow.”

His hands rub up and down her back. “You should have said something. We could have left earlier.”

“But I was having so much fun. It was great meeting your SEAL buddies. And so nice to see Aunt Gina and Uncle Colin out, even if they didn’t stay too long. Aunt Gina seemed tired, but it was nice they came.”

“I’m outta here too,” Cade says. “Don’t forget tomorrow we’re all meeting with Danny and Sid.”

I grimace. “Right.”

Well, I’ll think about that tomorrow. The ongoing frustration of our lackluster food menu isn’t what I want to contemplate just now. I want to contemplate Carrie naked, with my mouth and hands all over her.

I swipe a hand across my forehead and turn to Carrie. We’re alone in the quiet bar, the music stopped, only faint sounds of staff finishing up in the kitchen to be heard.

“Okay,” I say roughly. “It’s later.”

Her smile makes his chest hurt. “It is.”

“Come on. I’m taking you home.”

Carrie

I’m a mass of nerves and lust. The entire evening was a blur, I’m so distracted by Marco and the things he said to me and the way he looked at me, and how my body responded to him.

It feels inevitable, going home with him, as if everything has been leading up to this all along, no matter how much I tried to resist him. No matter how much I told myself we hated each other, that this is a bad idea, that this couldn't happen.

It is so happening.

The past week I've seen him numerous times. We went and talked to Anna Bowes, the owner of Bowes Gallery. Anna was surprised to see two of her clients together. I enjoyed watching Anna and Marco interact, seeing how Anna clearly respects him and his work, how she teased him about wanting more of it, and how he was so self-effacing. Anna was interested in our idea, although noncommittal, agreeing to give it some thought over the next week or so. She also begged both of us for more of our art to sell.

I also saw Marco the evenings I brought Julia to Conquistadors after school, even more charmed by how he treats my niece, with care yet firmness.

"Marco. I have my car here."

"Shit." He pauses on the sidewalk. "Okay. I'll meet you at your place."

I nod and he walks with me to my car, parked down the street. He gives me a fast, hard kiss on the mouth after I open my door. "See you in a few minutes."

I focus on breathing as I start my car and put it in gear, glad my Bay Ho condo isn't that far away.

Somehow he manages to get there before me, which makes me smile, picturing him racing through dark streets to get there. Is he as keyed up as I am?

Apparently he is, waiting for me at the door, sweeping me into an embrace to lay another hot and heavy kiss on me. My breasts ache as he crushes me to him, his big arms wrapping around me, and it feels so good. Oh my God, so good. This time his tongue plunges into my mouth aggressively, then he bites softly at my lips. Erotic hunger flares to life inside me, heat shimmering out from my core to my fingers and toes, scorching my hairline.

His hands move over me, shaping my hips, sliding up my back, bare in the low-cut dress, to caress the back of my neck. Tingles slide down to the base of my spine where I ache with need. His fingers spear into my hair, more sensation slipping from my scalp down my body.

The kiss is endless, deep and wet. I press into him, open to him, kiss him back. His tongue caresses mine and my body fevers for more. More.

We're both panting by the time our mouths separate, staring at each other with lust-dazed eyes.

"Um, maybe we should go in," I whisper.

His lips quirk. "Great idea."

With shaky hands and blurred vision, I unlock my door and flick on a light as I enter. Marco shuts the door behind us and follows me into the living room.

"Did I tell you how hot you look in that dress?" he growls, reaching for my hips.

"No." Damn, I like hearing that from him.

"I wanted to throw a blanket over you so no one else could see you. That dress should be illegal. Look at you ... showing off those perfect long legs ..." He runs a hand down my thigh in the opening. "And such a sexy back." He turns me and bends to kiss me between my shoulder blades. He traces a finger down my spine. "Never knew a woman's back could be so sexy. My balls were hot and aching all night."

He's stealing my breath, making me just as hot. I let out a soft, "Oh."

His tongue strokes up my back and he nips at the nape of my neck, then turns me to face him again. Cupping my face in both hands, he tilts my head and covers my mouth with his again in another long, hungry kiss. I go boneless against him, a needy sound rising in my throat.

His mouth leaves mine to slide across my cheek, nip at my earlobe, then lay a string of openmouthed kisses down the side of my neck. My head falls back helplessly and I clutch his

shoulders. His breath heats my skin, his tongue traces a line down to the edge of the dress where his fingers tug it aside so he can lick lower. My breast swells as he draws his tongue over the top curve. He makes a low sound of frustration at the clothing between him and my nipple that's hard as a pebble.

Marco. This is Marco worshipping my body, enthralled with my body in a way I've never experienced. I soak up his soft groans and the feel of his tongue on my skin and how the rough tips of his fingers graze over me with careful attention.

"Damn, I want to taste you," he mumbles.

He turns his attention to the hem of the dress, hands on my thighs, easing the dress higher. Higher ... until his hands brush over the string of my thong on my hips. My clit pulses with need. He eases my legs apart with his hands, just a bit, and then, sweet Jesus, he cups my pussy. I throb against his palm, and now he knows how turned on I am because my panties are soaked.

"Fuck, Carrie." He holds me there for a moment, his voice raw. "Feel how wet you are for me."

"I know." I bite my lip. I hate to admit how much he arouses me, how he juices up my girl parts with a few kisses and sucks. Okay, amazing, luscious, erotic kisses and sucks. It's almost embarrassing.

This man keeps surprising me ... he's moody and grim, but also unexpectedly attentive and seductive. It's a dangerous combination.

He seems as worked up as I am as he pauses, his chest rising and falling, his jaw tense. "Carrie," he groans, rubbing my aching pussy. Tremors shake my thighs, sparks twirl inside me in a twist of excitement. I gasp. We haven't even made it to the bedroom and I'm on the verge of an orgasm.

His other hand slides around to cup my butt and give one cheek a firm squeeze as he caresses between my legs and devours my mouth. I'm dizzy and hot, aching with need, drowning in sensation and I just keep thinking, *Marco, Marco*.

I moan when he withdraws his hand, but he's reaching for the zipper at the back of my dress. He lowers it, then he tugs the dress down to reveal my black strapless bra. He tucks his fingers into the cup and pulls that down too, exposing my nipple. For a moment he goes very still, staring down at me, and I wait breathlessly, my nipple tingling into a puckered point.

I love the hot look in his eyes, the fullness of his bottom lip, the flush on his cheekbones.

My lids drop when he closes his lips over the tender tip of my breast and sucks. Heat spirals right to my pussy. I clench my thighs on the sharp ache of need and utter a small cry of delight as he draws my sensitive flesh deeper into his mouth.

My head falls back and my back arches as I offer myself to him. His mouth teases and tortures me, arousing me to a fevered state.

"You like that?" he growls against my skin, his beard rasping there.

"No," I pant. "I hate it."

I feel his smile. "You want me to stop?"

"If you do, I'll have to hurt you."

He lifts his head, lips curved into a smile of wicked intent.

I pivot on one of my spiky high heels and take his hand, leading him down the hall to my bedroom.

"Another great idea," he says, following with his hands on my waist.

My heart thumping wildly, I pause uncertainly once inside the room. I start to turn to face him, but he stops me and instead sweeps my hair aside and kisses the back of my neck. "Turn on the lamp."

I throw him a glance over my shoulder as I move to the nightstand, holding my dress against my chest with one hand. "Bossy."

"I do like to control things."

“Lucky for you I’m in agreement on this issue. But don’t assume I always will be.”

He grins. Once again, I’m struck by the shot of brilliance that smile sends right to my heart.

Should I be ashamed of the fact that I like his bossiness? Nah. I’m just going to enjoy this. Every minute. Every muscle.

I click on the lamp and turn back to him. He’s right there, all big and radiating heat and strength.

“Let’s get rid of this.” He pushes the dress down my arms and it drops to the floor.

I suck in a breath, standing in my black bra and thong, my nipples tight points. Marco reaches behind me for the clasp of my bra and tugs it away. His eyes hot and avid, he studies me, then plucks at my nipples with his thumbs and forefingers, pinching and tugging. My shoulders go back and I bite my lip as sensation races through me, my core clenching tight. I drag my gaze away from his face momentarily to look down at myself, at his big brown fingers tugging at my pale pink nipples—just the very tips of my breasts—the erotic sight exciting me almost unbearably.

“So pretty,” he murmurs. “Look at you.” He takes that moment to cup my breasts in his palms, molding them, squeezing them. Hot pleasure swells inside me.

Sensible thought has been obliterated by lust. My greedy vagina is screaming for attention. “Damn you,” I moan.

His hands still.

“No, not you,” I clarify in a breathless tone.

He looks around the room as if searching for the other person I was talking to.

I huff out a laugh. “I was talking to my girl parts.”

One eyebrow launches up. “Cool.”

“Why is that cool?”

“Because I talk to my dick.”

I roll my lips in on a smile. “Does he have a name?”

“Of course.”

“What is it?” My eyes widen.

“I’m not sure we know each other well enough to share that.”

Another choked laugh escapes me. “Oh. It must be good then.”

“He is good. Very good.” He squeezes my breasts again. “So why were you talking to your pussy?”

“Because she’s a demanding bitch.” Another soft moan escapes me as he caresses my boobs, then pinches my nipples again.

“Ah. I like that.”

My mind goes back to his suggestion... *We have a hot little romp for a few weeks while I teach you Spanish and we throw an engagement party and then you leave for Spain and we say goodbye and everyone’s happy.*

“Marco.”

“Mmm.”

“We need to ... be clear about what’s happening here.”

He opens his mouth on the side of my neck and sucks gently. “I’m pretty clear ...”

“Seriously.”

He pulls back and gives me a hot stare.

“I was starting to say, that night at the club, we shouldn’t have kissed, but then you made that all fly out of my head.”

One eyebrow arches with arrogant satisfaction.

“I know you said we could have a ... a ...”

“Hot romp?”

“Yes.” I take a quick breath in and out. My body is telling me to jump him and go for it, but my head is telling me to slow down because ... because ... why again? He’s right. I’m

leaving. Even if things go south between us, it'll be over and I'll be gone, and by the time I get back it'll all be forgotten.

I study his face—the blaze in his eyes, the sexy carved lines of his mouth, the strong, stubble-roughened jaw. He can kiss me into a coma, and those hands on my breasts have my hormones going wild. How good will it be if he touches me everywhere? “Let’s romp.”

CARRIE

Marco's eyes go nearly black, and his eyelids droop. "Oh, baby. You just made Mr. Big very happy."

I choke on a laugh and fall against him. "Mr. Big?"

"Yeah." His hands sweep up my bare back and twist into my hair. "He's been waiting impatiently. Like your hungry pussy."

I moan at his dirty—and accurate—words, my hungry pussy clenching hard.

"So beautiful," he says in a reverent tone, staring at my breasts again. "Goddamn, Carrie."

I love that. Why it's different from everyone else who compliments my looks, I don't know. But he makes me feel ... special. More than just an object to be admired.

I want to see him too. And touch him. So I reach for the buttons of his shirt. One by one, I open them and part the fabric. My mouth waters at the expanse of smooth, tanned skin, taut muscles, and tattoos I reveal. I know Navy SEALs have to be in top physical shape. Another small moan escapes my lips. "It's too bad you've let yourself go since your SEAL days."

His chuckle turns into a groan as I explore his ridged abs and pecs with my palms, tracing the swirls of black ink over his shoulder and biceps—the stylized Aztec sun and stars. He shrugs out of the shirt and a thrill runs through me right to my core at the sight of his naked torso, and not just the sight of it, but the heat emanating from him, the energy that flows from

his body and ripples the air around us, that warm lime and cedar scent that teases my nostrils and makes me dizzy.

Giving in to the impulse, I lean forward and press my nose to his throat, breathing him in. “Dear God, you smell good.”

“Mmm. Thinking the same about you, babe.” He presses his nose to my hair. “Can’t wait to taste you ... everywhere.”

A shudder ripples through my body as my greedy pussy anticipates his lips and tongue on me ... everywhere ... “I want to taste you, too.”

“This could take a while.”

“We’ve got all night.” I curve my hands over strong shoulders and squeeze as he dips his head to my breasts again and draws a nipple into his mouth. Liquid heat floods between my legs, and a ravenous ache throbs low inside me.

He sucks and scrapes his teeth over sensitive nipples until I’m drowning in sensation and delirious with want. His arms wrap around me, holding me as he leans me back and feasts on me.

“You like this.”

This time I don’t lie. “God yes. I love it.”

“Mmm. Love it, too.”

Shivers cascade down my spine and the backs of my thighs. Wow. He sets me on fire with his touch and his kisses and his words, and I’m losing my damn mind. Every inch of me wants more ... my ass tingles with the need for his touch, my breasts ache, and my pussy quivers. This is crazy and hot and sexy as hell.

“Need to see you. All of you.” He gently turns her and steps back. “That sexy back that made my dick hard all night.” His hands curve around my hips, then smooth down my thighs and back up, brushing over the string of my thong. He lays a line of hot, open-mouthed kisses down my spine, brushing his tongue over me. My skin prickles everywhere, expectation thrumming through me at what he might do next ... where he would touch ...

And he does it ... he kisses the small of my back, rasps his beard stubble over the upper curve of my ass, then kisses me there on one cheek ... then the other ... so soft, so gentle, and yet so arousing. It's so erotic, my bones are melting.

"These little panties are perfect," he growls. "Showing off this perfect ass. I knew it was gorgeous."

Breath burns my lungs as I inhale. "Th-thank you."

"It's even better in real life," he continues, dropping more kisses over it, then stroking his tongue along the under curve. "Your skin is so soft. Beautiful."

Desire gathers fast and dark like a storm, swirling, surging, and a moan climbs up my throat. I cup my breasts to try to assuage the ache there, my clit pulsing. As if he senses what I need, he slips his hand back between my thighs to cup my pussy again, the other sliding around to press against my lower belly while he kisses my cheeks. Every breath I pull into my lungs is laced with expectation, the need for him to touch me even deeper shimmering through my body.

His hand leaves my pussy and he turns me, holding my hips. He's strong but gentle, and that just turns me on even more. Kneeling in front of me, he drags my panties down to join my dress and his shirt in a pile at my feet. I gaze down at him in awe, taking in the position that's almost worshipful, the focused intensity of his gaze on my body, the careful touch of his hands as he bares me entirely to him. He lifts one foot to edge the clothing aside, then the other, then sweeps his hands up my legs. His thumbs brush over the narrow strip of curls at the juncture of my thighs, then press inward to urge my legs apart.

"Look at you," he murmurs, leaning in to kiss my lower belly. "Beautiful."

His thumbs slip into my slit, and he uses his shoulder to nudge my legs wider. With heavy-lidded eyes, he inhales, kissing my bare mons, then lower.

My heart lodges in my throat, making breathing impossible. I watch him, heat pouring over my body, sensation

rippling through me as he gives me a soft, closed-mouth kiss, then licks me in a long, slow stroke.

It feels like a dream, like I'm floating, like this can't really be happening. My legs wobble and I reach for his head, gripping his hair. He grunts as he continues to lick me, his tongue exploring, tasting, circling my straining clit. "Marco ... oh God."

"You taste sweet, baby. Goddamn." He licks deeper. "How'm I ever gonna get enough of this sweet pussy?"

Heat pools low in my core, pleasure twisting up inside me. My eyes drift closed, my head falling back, and I lose myself in the barrage of exquisite sensation as he tongues me, sucks my soft flesh into his mouth, nips at my inner thighs. "Oh my God. So good ... Marco ..." I twist my fingers in his hair.

"Yeah. Good."

My legs shake harder and he seems to realize I'm about to collapse. He surges upward, lifts me, and deposits me on the bed. He lays a palm between my breasts and propels me down to my back on the mattress, then circles my ankles with his hands to bend my legs up and open. As he gazes down at me, his expression hungry, his tongue swipes over his bottom lip in a move that makes my belly flip-flop.

He strokes my pussy lips with his blunt fingertips. "So smooth here."

I give a tiny nod.

"I like it."

"I'm glad," I breathe.

He goes to his knees again beside the bed and kisses the inside of one knee. He murmurs appreciatively as he kisses and licks his way up my thigh, closer and closer to my center.

"You smell delicious, Carrie."

My clit pulses and my vagina aches. I've never been with someone who takes so much pleasure in *me* but who also wants to make me feel good.

Marco parts me with his thumbs and my hips lift off the bed.

“Oh God.” I dig my fingers into the duvet as Marco licks his way through my folds. His tongue stiffens and pushes into my opening, a teasing taste of what I need, only I need more ... so much more. He kisses my folds, little suckling kisses, so gentle.

“Sweet, Carrie. You taste goddamn sweet.” His voice is rough with arousal.

I arch with pleasure. God, he knows how to give oral sex! Slow and luxurious, with satiny licks, tender kisses, and gentle sucking, he pulls my swollen flesh into his mouth, gently releases it, then moves to the other side and does the same. Sensation burns and twists inside me. He nibbles his way up to my throbbing clit, finally taking it into his mouth, tugging and sucking, and I explode against his mouth.

I cry out, body arching and going into a spasm, digging my heels into the mattress, pressing up into Marco’s mouth. My body floods with wetness, hot pleasure sliding through me, radiating from my core to my fingertips and toes.

“Jesus,” Marco mutters against my pussy, still giving me little licks and sucks, drawing out every last quiver of delight until I lay limp.

“Oh my God, oh my God,” I mumble, unable to move enough to even raise my eyelids. My chest heaves, heart racing. “You’re so good at that.”

I feel his smile against my inner thigh. “I could eat you all night, baby.”

“But I need you inside me.”

“Oh hell yeah. I have to fuck you.”

He stands and I drag heavy eyelids open to watch him as he unfastens his pants. Before dropping them, he reaches into a pocket and pulls out several small packets. Condoms. Yay.

He steps out of his pants, leaving him gorgeously naked, all tanned brown skin and sleek muscles, the skin at his hips

and thighs paler. My gaze lingers on a puckered area of skin on his left thigh, a scar of some sort, then moves to follow the motions of his hands, ripping open a condom then rolling it onto his erect cock.

Wow. Just ... wow. "The name is appropriate," I manage to choke out.

He looks up and gives me a slow smile. "You doubted it?"

"I thought maybe you were a little ... overly confident."

He kneels on the mattress and reaches for my waist, picking me up and depositing me in the middle of the bed. His strength makes my heart tilt.

He moves up beside me and slides an arm beneath my shoulders, his other hand cupping my breast while he kisses me, over and over, long kisses with lush licks of his tongue against mine. I melt into the mattress, overwhelmed with the scent of his skin, the taste of his mouth, and the heat of his body pressed against mine.

He squeezes my breast, massaging it, and it feels so good. His big thigh slides between mine and I use him to assuage the ache, rubbing against him, loving the feel of his big muscles and hair-roughened skin.

"Rub that hot pussy against me," Marco rasps. "That feel good, baby?"

"Uh ..." is all I can get out.

We rock together as we kiss more, then Marco shifts to kiss my breast and pulls my nipple into his mouth in a long, decadent tug. He lifts his gaze to mine as he sucks, and fire burns through my veins and traces a path from nipple to pussy. Dazed, I lift my hand to touch his face, brushing over the stubble on his jaw, stroking the soft skin of his neck.

He lifts my leg and presses it up, lining up his cock at my entrance, and then he pushes inside, slowly, stretching me. I gasp at the feel of him invading tender tissues, filling me with a sweet, heavy ecstasy. His mouth claims mine again, swallowing my soft cries as he slides deeper and deeper inside

me. He pulls back, just a breath between us, and holds my gaze as our bodies pulse together.

“Gonna give it to you hard, baby. You want it?”

“Yes. God yes.” My entire body vibrates with need.

My heart races and my skin tingles everywhere at this amazing connection between us, the way we fit so perfectly. I caress his jaw again and he slips a hand between us to rub my clit. A soft whimper slides from my lips and I let myself fall flat on the bed again, his hand fisted in my hair while he stimulates me. Nerve endings jump and pleasure torches my body. I writhe with pleasure, his mouth grazing over my cheek, my jaw, the side of my neck, sensation spiraling inside me with breathtaking sweetness.

Marco rolls me to my side, still inside me, his hand on my lower belly pulling my ass tight to his groin. The crisp hairs there press against my skin. His other arm bands around my upper chest, holding me firmly against him as he thrusts in and out in hard strokes. He kisses my neck, his breath hot, pumping into me. My body burns with pure erotic delight.

I ease myself to my back again, turning my face to his. His hand tightens in my hair as we stare into each other's eyes, the connection intense and intimate as he moves inside my body. I reach for my clit, needing to be touched there, soft cries falling from my lips. He shifts to suck my nipples, flames singeing my body with more pleasure, almost too much to take. Once more he pulls me to my side, this time to face him, my leg over his hip, an arm around my back, his other hand on my ass. I set my fingertips on his cheek as he pumps into me, drawing me down to his muscled chest. The bed bounces as our movements become harder, faster, desperate.

Then I'm flat on my back and Marco is on top, on his knees, pushing my thigh up and back, driving into me. His eyes blaze as he stares down at me. “Touch yourself,” he groans. “I'm close ...”

I whimper and find my clit again, slicking over it in tight circles, the feel of his cock sliding over nerve endings inside me combining with sensation from my own touch. My

stomach contracts and white-hot sparks shimmer through my veins as I soar up and up, higher and higher, sensation cresting with sharp, shocking ecstasy.

“Oh yeah, fuck yeah,” he growls, his hips powering against me, and then he lowers himself to press his mouth to mine in a long kiss as he goes still. My pussy pulses with my own orgasm, contracting around him. “Fuck yeah.”

He moves his mouth to press his rough cheek against mine, his breathing ragged and warm against my skin. His heart thuds against me, and mine races equally fast as my body quivers and my inner walls twitch in tiny aftershocks. I kiss his shoulder and hold on to the big muscles of his back.

“Holy hell,” he finally says, shifting to the side, but remaining firmly lodged inside me. His big hands adjust my position against him. “That was epic.”

I drag air into my lungs and let it out slowly, trying to get my breath back. “Yeah, I guess that was an okay romp.”

His arms squeeze me and I hide my smile against him. I’m shockingly limp and confused by what just happened, the most intense, erotic, intimate experience I’ve ever had. No man has ever talked to me like that, touched me like that, stared into my eyes like that while he fucked me, as if he wanted to make sure I knew who I was with and how much he wanted me. I’ve never felt so fiercely needed, and yet he was so generous and caring, taking everything ... but giving me just as much.

It was stunning. And a little terrifying.

MARCO

“Why would you think I was making fun of you?”

I run my hand idly up and down Carrie’s smooth, sexy back as we lay in her bed much, much later. Two condoms and numerous orgasms later.

“I don’t know.” She sighs. “I’m a little oversensitive sometimes.” She pauses. “My brothers always tell dumb blonde jokes around me.”

“What?” My mouth drops open.

“Yeah. Like, why couldn’t the blonde dial nine-one-one?” She pauses. “She couldn’t find the eleven.”

I choke.

“Yeah, go ahead, laugh. What’s every blonde’s dream in life?” She waits.

“Uh ... “

“To be like Vanna White and actually learn the alphabet.”

“Jesus.”

“Sure, they’re funny, and I always laugh, but ... well, like I said, sometimes I’m oversensitive. I was a bit of a freak in high school—taller than everyone else, including the boys, super skinny, with braces on my teeth. I didn’t fit in with the girls who were boy crazy and into sexy clothes and makeup.”

“Wow. That’s kind of ... ironic.”

“I know, right? I end up earning my living with sexy clothes and makeup.”

“Come on, babe. That had to help your self-confidence ... you have to know you’re gorgeous.”

“Sure, it helped. But inside, I still feel like that kid sometimes and I don’t really think I’m gorgeous ... I think people are good at making me *look* gorgeous with the hair and the makeup and the clothes. And the Photoshopping. I guess I’m photogenic. But when that all comes off, I’m just kind of ordinary looking. Sometimes I still feel all gangly and awkward, although working out and dance lessons have helped.”

“Ordinary looking.” I think about that. I can kind of see what she means ... the day she came into Conquistadors with no makeup on, she did look different. “I guess if by ordinary you mean not a high-maintenance glamazon, then okay, yeah. But even without all that stuff, you’re beautiful, Carrie. You glow. It comes from the inside. You’re beautiful on the outside, but inside is where the real beauty is.”

She lifts her head from my chest and gives me a long, searching look. “I think that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“Jesus. I hope not.”

The corners of her lush mouth lift. “Really. I get lots of compliments. But somehow they never really mean anything. That ...” She pauses. “Well. Thank you.”

I slide my hand into her hair and press her face back down, my arms around her, her soft curves pressed against me, legs entwined. “Nobody ever wanted me.”

Shit. Did I really just say that?

Her head lifts even the weight of my hand on it. “What?”

I swallow. “When I was a teenager. After my parents were deported, I was put into foster care. I was a bit of a handful ... I was angry and bitter about what happened to my parents. Pissed because they took my sister away from me and I didn’t know where she was or how she was doing. Things didn’t go

so well with the first family they placed me with. They were nice people, but I didn't want to be there. I wanted my own parents. Same thing with the second family. The third one ... I started thinking maybe I shouldn't be such a little shithead and maybe they'd keep me longer. I started to ... " I cough. "I sort of hoped maybe they'd want to keep me."

"Oh, Marco." She gazes back at me with warm eyes.

"But nope. I got pissed. Acted out. Every time I got moved, I'd have a little hope that maybe this was the time someone would care about me, and I'd get my shit together and behave myself and maybe I'd have a home again. But it never happened. I pretended I didn't care. And they believed me. Why would they keep me around if they thought I didn't give a shit?"

She makes a soft, hurt sound that I hate. I hate pity.

"So I guess I know something about feeling like you're not good enough ... I knew it was me who was the problem. Nobody wanted me."

"That's not true."

I shrug. "Well, it was. Like I said, now I can see that I was the problem, but at the time I was just all jacked up on anger and resentment and teenage hormones and couldn't see that what I was doing wasn't helping me."

"Or maybe ... hear me out ... they just weren't good enough people for you."

I gaze into her eyes, into the shimmer of sincerity and kindness. Jesus. I never once thought that, but she looks like she actually believes it. Like she believes in *me*. I feel like my heart is bursting and I try to breathe around all the emotion crowding my chest.

"Maybe so," I manage to say. "But that feeling ... of not being wanted. Not being good enough ... I know how it can stick with you."

Her smile is sunshine and moonbeams and starlight. "So you get it."

“Yeah. I get it. I think it’s crazy that someone like you, so gorgeous and sexy and successful, could feel like someone like me would be making fun of you. The truth is ... I couldn’t take my eyes off you. I was the one thinking, why would someone like her want a loser like me.”

“You’re hardly a loser.” Her eyes glow. “Look what you’ve done with your life. Becoming a SEAL. Shit, Marco, that’s a huge accomplishment. You had a successful Navy career—”

“You don’t even know that.”

“Sure I do. I hear you guys talking. You trash talk each other, but I can hear the respect you all have for each other. The respect Cade and Beck have for you. The things you accomplished as part of SEAL Team One.”

“You’ve been paying attention.”

“Well.” She blinks and drops her gaze. “Maybe. Anyway. Now you have this bar, which is awesome—”

“But not without its problems,” I remind her.

“Of course. Any business has problems. You’ll figure them out, I have no doubt. And on top of all that, you make amazing sculptures. And you treated my niece with more compassion than I expected given how angry you were about the vandalism. That says a lot about you.”

My heart is even closer to exploding in my chest.

Whatever this feeling is, it’s amazing. Is this what I’ve been searching for my whole life, after losing my family? This feeling of approval and acceptance? Of being understood and wanted?

I found it with my SEAL brothers. I worked my fucking ass off for it, determined to succeed no matter how much pain I was in, no matter how much I thought I couldn’t take one more step, swim one more stroke, hold my breath one second longer ... I was rewarded for that. Right now, I feel I’m being rewarded, but I don’t know for what. And somehow that makes it all the more special.

I don't know what to say to this beautiful woman. So I say in a gruff voice, "Thank you."

She lays her head back on my chest and I resume stroking her hair.

I wasn't lying when I said that was epic sex. Holy Christ, she damn near set the bed on fire she was so hot, so responsive. I'm pretty sure it was never like that with Liz, although it has been a long time since we actually had sex. I wouldn't forget something like that, though. I *couldn't* forget something like that. I'm pretty sure I'm never going to forget Carrie. Jesus, I'm not even sure I'll ever be able to walk again.

Then talking to her like that, opening up to her about shit I never talk about. And instead of being met with disdain or ridicule, I saw understanding and appreciation. I took a big risk and it turned out okay. More than okay.

Carrie's breathing has slowed and evened out, her body relaxing against mine. I stroke her hair gently, staring into the darkness of her bedroom now that we've turned off the lamp. She's asleep but I'm not letting her go. I'll hold her all goddamn night like this, if she'll let me. Her confession about feeling like a freak made my chest ache. Even though I didn't know who she was that night she walked into Conquistadors with Hayden for their first tequila tasting, I saw a supermodel—tall, gorgeous, with a smile that lit up the entire bar. Out of my league, which made my attempts to flirt with her embarrassingly futile.

And yet she didn't reject me because I wasn't good enough for her. She thought the opposite. My heart contracts at the thought.

Well. Somehow we've gotten past that and ended up here in her bed together, and wow, the sparks that always flared between us were even hotter once we got naked.

Then we talked and that just made everything more intense. More personal.

Where do we go from here? I'm not going to be satisfied with one night. I know our time together is limited because

she's leaving, and anyway, just because we have a shitload of chemistry and a shared connection, it doesn't mean it's anything lasting. I know better than to think those kinds of thoughts. So maybe it's just as well that this "romp" has an expiration date we're both well aware of. That way things won't get messy.

We can do this.

Carrie

A lack of modeling jobs seems like a good thing for a change.

I'm not sure what I've gotten myself into lately, but I'm losing my damn mind. Between my mother's fretful calls about not being a contributing member of society (even though Dad has taken her on a couple of "dates"), taxiing Julia back and forth between Conquistadors and school and home while keeping the reason for this a secret from Lauren, helping Hayden with wedding plans, trying to arrange the dance at Años Dorados Retirement Village, keeping up with my beloved photography and my Instagram account, working on my idea for an art studio for kids, *and* trying to find time to "romp" with Marco, I don't have time to work. Good thing I know my modeling career is winding down.

The job with Jessica Farris was amazing. I did the photos nearly two weeks ago, sent them the images, and they loved them. Jessica has already posted one on social media, giving me credit, yay! And I charged them a fuckton of money for that job, because, hey, I'm worth it.

I've also been working on details for my trip to Spain. I've located a small apartment near the school that's rented by the month, and sent a deposit to have it for October 1, so I have somewhere to live. I already have a passport, but I had to apply for a visa to stay in Spain longer than ninety days. I have to figure out what I need to pack, including photography equipment. And I have to book my flight. I've been watching prices, and they aren't going to get any cheaper.

When Marco arrives at my place one evening and finds me frantically googling the weather in Madrid in October while searching for flights on another tab in my browser, making a packing list. *and* talking on the phone to the DJ I finally found who's agreed to donate his time for the dance at the retirement village, he strides to my fridge, pulls out a bottle of Pinot Grigio, uncorks it, and pours a big glass.

He hands it to me and I flash him a grateful smile. "Thanks," I mouth, then say into the phone, "Okay, we'll see you Thursday night there at seven o'clock. You have the list of songs, right?" I nod. "Perfect. Thank you so much, Eli."

I end the call and drop my phone onto the coffee table beside my laptop with a groan.

"Oh my God. How am I going to survive the next few weeks until I leave for Spain?"

Marco's eyes tighten fractionally at the corners, but he smiles. "Six weeks."

I laugh. "Right. It's still not enough time to get things done. I'm trying to find flights and figure out what to pack, in between wedding stuff, Julia stuff, Grandma stuff, and art studio stuff."

"You sound stressed."

I sigh and sip my wine. "I guess I am a little." I hold up the wineglass. "Thanks for this."

"You're welcome. What can I do to help?"

My heart squeezes. "Thank you. I need to book a flight."

"Of course you do." Despite his light tone, the air around us changes, going flat. "Let's have a look."

I move my laptop and open the browser tab. "This site compares flights. I have the apartment for October 1, but school doesn't start until the fifth, so I can fly October 1 to 4. I'd like to get there a few days before school starts, though, to figure out my way around and settle in."

"Well, it's probably going to take you over a day to get there, so probably better to leave early."

“Over a day?”

“Well, the better part of. See?” He points at the screen. “You leave at seven forty-five in the morning and arrive in Madrid at eight fifteen the next day. With the time difference and flying time, that’s a whole day.”

“Ugh. I hate long flights. I worked in Japan for a while years ago, doing some modeling.”

“Japan? That’s cool.”

“It was interesting. But you’ve traveled a lot too.”

“Sure, although we weren’t exactly sightseeing.”

“You must have had time off.”

He smiles. “Yeah, we did. And I got to see some amazing things. I’d like to travel for fun, once we get things nice and stable with Conquistadors. You like traveling?”

“I do. Most of my traveling has been for work, though, and that gets old. It would be fun to go somewhere just to relax ... and take pictures. Like maybe a tropical beach. Or Paris.”

“You’d look good on a tropical beach. In a little bikini. Better yet, on a French beach where you could go topless.”

I give him a look, chin down, eyebrows raised. “Topless?”

He grins. “Yeah.”

“You’ve been to these beaches?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Hmmm. That might be ... hot.”

He blinks at me, as if surprised by my acceptance of this. “Really?”

I laugh. “Sure. I’d do it if I was on a beach where other people were.”

“We are *so* going to France.”

“Hmm. Might be the same in Spain. Have you been to Spanish beaches?”

“Sadly, no. But I’m pretty sure topless sunbathing is common in most European countries.”

I touch my fingers to my bottom lip. “Well, that means less to pack.”

He barks out a laugh. “Christ.”

I wink at him. “Bikini tops take up so much room in my luggage.”

“How many bikinis are you taking?” He looks like he’s in pain.

“I think I’ll need a few.”

He groans. “Now that I’ve got that image in my mind, I’m so fucked.” He sighs and turns his gaze back to the computer screen. “Well, this one leaving September 30 looks like the best price, and it’s only one stop, in New York. You’ll get there the morning of October 1.”

“You’re right. These are pretty similar prices, just depends where I want my layover.”

“And which airline.”

I nod, narrowing my eyes at the screen. “Okay, I have to just do this.” I square my shoulders and start clicking and typing to enter my information and book the flight.

When I’m finished, Marco picks up my wineglass and drains it.

I look from the empty glass to him. “Um ... maybe you should have poured yourself a glass too?”

“Apparently I should have. I’ll get you more.”

“I have beer if you want one!” I call to him as he moves to the kitchen.

“Great,” he mutters. When he returns with a beer for himself and another glass of wine for me, he asks, “What else do you have to do?”

“Well, right at the moment, not much. Hayden and I are going to look at dresses this weekend.”

“So they’ve booked the wedding date?”

“September 23. It’s fast but we think we can do it, since they want it small.” I pause. “I think you’re invited.”

His lips twitch. “Yeah, pretty sure I am.”

I smile. “Also, I told Anna I would research locations for the kids’ art studio, but I can finish that tomorrow. I found a few possibilities already. And the dance at the retirement home isn’t until Thursday night, so I have time to pick up some decorations and food.”

“You should be a party planner.”

“That would be a super fun job.”

“Why do you want to be a photographer?”

“Because I love it. And I think I’m good at it.” I sigh. “But I know earning a living as a photographer is really unrealistic.”

“Is it?”

“The kind of photographs I like to take aren’t going to earn me a lot of money.”

“I thought you charged that movie star a bunch of money.”

“Well, yeah. But that’s just one job. I sell some images at Anna’s gallery, but I don’t think there’s enough demand for them. I also sell some of my images through a few stock sites ... the kinds of things I take pictures of are sort of whimsical. I post them on Instagram and people like them, but are they going to pay for them? Not likely. So I make a few dollars here and there, but actually earning a living probably isn’t going to happen.”

“After you come back from Spain, what will that get you?”

“I don’t know. I hope I learn some things that will make me a better photographer and then maybe I can charge more.”

“Plus you’ll have accumulated an inventory; you can print and frame a bunch and sell them.”

“M-maybe ...” I roll my head in a circle to ease the tightness in my muscles.

“How about a shoulder massage?”

“Oh Jesus ... that would be amazing.”

“You have to shut down your computer for a few minutes.”

“Ack.”

“You can do it. Sit on the floor in front of me.”

I put my laptop to sleep and close it, then slide onto the floor and shift over between Marco’s legs. My hair’s already pulled up into a messy knot on top of my head and Marco sets his hands on my shoulders. Warmth seeps through the thin cotton of my T-shirt as he digs his fingers into the muscles there.

“Oh God,” I moan. “That’s so good ...”

“Good. Damn, you’re tight.”

“So you’ve said.”

He chokes out a surprised laugh. “Carrie, you dirty girl.”

I smile, my head dropping forward as he massages. My rigid muscles ease at his touch, relaxation slipping through my body. Along with a few tingles.

I have so much to do, but Marco’s here, and he’s touching me ... making my muscles soften, making my breasts feel heavy, making me ache between my legs ... damn him.

“It can wait,” he says, as if reading my mind. “I’m helping you with the art studio.”

“Yes,” I mumble. “You are.”

His hands slide down over my upper arms and back up to my shoulders, then skim down my chest to cup my boobs.

“Marco, you bad boy.”

He chuckles. “We’re a pair—dirty girl and bad boy.”

“Yessss.”

He squeezes my breasts then resumes massaging my shoulders. My nipples tighten into points, pushing out through my thin bra and T-shirt.

His fingers slip under the wide neckline of my shirt and smooth the bare skin over my pecs, fingertips pressing into those muscles, too.

“Damn, that hurts!”

He pauses. “Want me to stop?”

“No, no! It hurts good.”

“Ah.” He resumes kneading. “All these muscles are connected. You’re really tight here too.”

I whimper as his fingertips press in circles into my flesh. “Oh dear God.”

As I hoped, his fingers inch lower and lower, under the edge of my bra to find my nipples and tug them between his fingers and thumbs. A groan climbs my throat.

“I think this is turning into more than a shoulder massage.”

“You’ve deduced my dastardly plan to debauch you.”

“Oh wow. That was a good sentence.”

He chokes. “Glad I impressed you with my words.”

“Oh, you’re impressing me with more than just words. Those hands ... God.”

“You like my hands, baby?” He squeezes my breasts.

The straps of my bra fall down on my arms, the cups loosening. “Yes. I like your hands a lot. Especially right ... there.”

“Feeling more relaxed, babe?”

“Oh yeah. Any more relaxed I’ll be a puddle on the floor.”

“Excellent.” He plucks at my tender nipples again, sending a zing of sensation right to my core.

I draw in a deep breath, pushing my breasts farther into his hands.

“So perfect,” he whispers, his lips near my ear. “You make me so fucking hot.” He tests the weight of my breasts.

“Oh me too.” I lift my head and turn it so our mouths almost meet. “I’m *so* hot.”

“Good.” He touches his lips to mine in a long, clinging kiss that makes my blood sizzle.

“You’re distracting me.”

“Yes.”

I smile against his mouth. “It’s a good distraction.”

MARCO

“So if we opened a place like that, do you think you could get your little gang buddies to come?”

I lean against the counter and watch Julia washing dishes for the last time at Conquistadors. Carrie told Julia about our plan, but this isn't going to work if we don't get kids to come there and paint legit murals instead of defacing property and possibly stealing cars, progressing to drug deals and murder.

“Maybe.” Julia tips her head to one side.

“Have you seen your graffiti friends? Since you got caught?”

“Um, yeah, once or twice.” She looks down. “But I haven't done any more graffiti.” Her shoulders slump.

“You want to, don't you?”

“Yeah.”

“You really love painting?”

She nods, but doesn't look up from the pot she's scrubbing.

“So that would be good, right? A place where there are canvases and paints and you can paint whatever you want?”

“I guess.”

That sullen teenage response is probably as enthusiastic as we'll get. I fight a smile. “Good. Your aunt and I will keep working on it.”

She now lifts her head to give me a long look. “Is she your girlfriend now?”

I blink and run a hand over my hair. “Uh ... why do you ask that?”

“You look at each other funny. You both talk about each other a lot.”

“Oh yeah? Carrie talks about me?”

Julia rolls her eyes. “Oh my God. See what I mean? So have you asked her out?”

Once again, I stumble. “Ah, no ... actually, I haven’t.”

And sadly, this is the truth. We’ve been sneaking around hooking up at her place or mine whenever we can both find time, but I’ve never taken her out on a date.

That’s pathetic. She deserves better than that.

“You’d be okay if I asked her out?”

Julia shrugs. “Whatever.”

I’ll take that as positive, too. “So this is your last night here. Your debt is paid.”

She nods, but doesn’t look overjoyed about that.

“You’re gonna miss us, aren’t you.”

“Phhht.”

But I see the look in her eyes. “Fourteen’s pretty young to be working. And even younger to be hanging out in a bar. But you’ve done a good job, Julia. Someday if you do want a job, we’d be happy to hire you.”

She grimaces, but I see a flash of pleasure light up her face. “Thanks. I guess.”

“Maybe sometime Carrie could bring you to my place to see my sculptures.”

“Oh yeah.” She turns to me, eyes wide, apparently forgetting to keep the attitude in place. “What kind of sculptures are they?”

“I use scrap metal and weld it into different shapes. I do a lot of sea creatures.”

Her eyes round even more. “Cool.”

“How are you dealing with your parents splitting up?”

Her face closes up. “Fine. It’s no big deal.”

“When I was your age—fourteen—my parents got deported back to Mexico.”

Her gaze lands on me, eyes big. “Really?”

“Yeah. Left me and my sister all alone. Not that that’s the same as your parents getting divorced, but it was a shock. I was pretty angry about it.”

She nods. “I think that’s worse,” she says slowly.

“I was scared too ... about the future. Not knowing what was going to happen to us. I was embarrassed at school, and after my sister and I were split up to different foster families, I felt pretty lonely too.” I pause. “You talk to your friends about it?”

She bobs her head slowly. “Some.”

“If you want to talk more, and you need someone to talk to, I’m here.”

To my complete surprise, Julia answers quietly, “Thanks.”

The kitchen door opens and Carrie appears. Her gaze lands immediately on Julia, then flicks to me. I want to think her smile is for me, but it’s probably for both of us.

Jesus, I *am* acting like a fourteen-year-old boy with a crush. Julia’s right.

Carrie crosses the kitchen, skirting around the prep tables where Sid, Paul, and Jenn are still preparing food for the evening crowd. Pots bang and clang and pans sizzle.

“Hey, kiddo,” she says. “You just about done here?”

“Yes.” Julia wipes her hands on a dish towel. This time she can’t hide the sadness that tugs down the corners of her mouth. “Forever.”

Carrie smiles. "I think you had fun working here."

Julia wrinkles her nose, but when Carrie's eyes meet mine, Marco gives a nod and a wink. "I told her you'll bring her by my place sometime to see my sculptures."

"Oh. Sure."

"Are you coming to Grandma's party tomorrow night?"
Julia looks at me.

My gaze slides over to Carrie.

"I'm sure he doesn't want to come to a dance at an assisted living facility," Carrie says. "Not exactly wild times."

Julia snorts. "He hasn't met Grandma Garner. Did you know she used to be a stripper?"

My jaw drops. "What?"

"Truth." Julia nods vigorously.

"A burlesque dancer," Carrie clarifies.

"Jesus."

She grins. "She was quite the sexy dame back in the day."

"She still is," Julia says with a quick grin.

"True." Carrie nods.

"I could help," Marco says. "You're doing this all yourself."

Carrie sighs. "Yes. I could use help. If you want to come, that would be lovely, but seriously, it's going to be a lot of old people and my family. The only one of my family who's fun is Grandma. And Julia."

"And you!" Julia says with an affectionate smile that makes my heart bump against my sternum.

"And me," Carrie agrees. "We're the fun Garners. The rest are all boring businesspeople."

Julia laughs.

This is how I find myself at Años Dorados Retirement Village on Thursday night. I managed to rearrange the

schedule at Conquistadors so I don't have to be at the bar, but I didn't tell Cade and Beck why. They'd piss themselves laughing at the idea of me dancing at an old folks home.

I have to admit I'm pretty curious about Grandma Garner.

Carrie had to get here early to help her grandma get ready for the party, but I offered to come early too, to help put up a few decorations and move furniture around in the Friendship Room.

I sign in and find the room, checking the place out as I walk across the lobby and past the dining room. This place is pretty luxurious. In a sitting area, a few older ladies sit on plush couches in the glow from elegant lamps and a crackling fire in a big stone fireplace. They all watch me with interested eyes as I walk past.

An older gentleman shuffles the opposite direction with a walker.

"Henry!" The female voices call to him. "Over here!"

I grin.

In the Friendship Room, I find a couple of boxes with Carrie's name on them and open them. I pull out a bunch of white feathers. Jesus effing Christ.

They turn out to be table centerpieces, tall black vases with feathers on top. I set about moving the tables to the edges of the room as Carrie requested, covering them with red tablecloths and setting feathers on each table. Then I find the battery-operated lamps with red bulbs and arrange them in the four corners of the room. As I'm setting out bowls of gold-wrapped chocolate coins, a woman pushes in a cart that holds pitchers of a red beverage, plastic cups, and trays of cookies.

"Hi," she says with a smile. "You must be Marco."

"Yep."

"I'm Dianne. I'm the recreation coordinator here at Años Dorados. I've been working with Carrie to organize the party."

"Nice to meet you."

“Likewise.”

“Can I help with that?”

She gestures at a counter along one wall. “I’m going to set these out on the counter. Thanks.”

Carrie breezes in as we’re arranging food and drinks. I blink at her.

She stops, props a hand on her waist, and cocks a hip. “You like my outfit?”

I swallow. A short black slip dress skims her curves and a tiny black hat with a veil perches on the side of her head. Bright red lipstick shines on her lips and black high heels make her already amazing legs look stunning. “Uh, yeah.”

“Wait till you see Grandma.”

“She’s ... not gonna strip, is she?”

Carrie’s laugh is like sweet music. “No. Although she’d probably do it.”

Dianne laughs too. “She brings so much life to this place.”

I watch Carrie flit around the room checking things out. A few women come in and Carrie greets them with that luminous smile that makes everyone feel like they’re a king or a queen or a fucking rock star. Apparently Carrie gets her high spirits and joy of life from her grandmother.

Two more women enter; okay one of them a teenager ... Julia. Her face lights up when she sees me before she tempers her expression into truculent teenager. Too late. I saw it.

She really is a good kid. Carrie was right. I got to know Julia better while she was working at Conquistadors, and she has good values. She works hard, she’s honest, she’s smart. She’s made a few bad decisions, but who hasn’t at that age?

Julia heads my way, the woman trailing behind her presumably her mother. I can see a resemblance to Carrie in their coloring and their eyes, but her sister’s face is sharper with a pinched expression. She’s going through a divorce apparently, and nobody knows the details, but I can guess what

happened just from the way she looks. She's bitter. Betrayed. And angry.

Fuck.

Lauren isn't supposed to know about the work at Conquistadors, so when Julia stops in front of me and says, "Hi, Marco!" I wince.

"Mom, this is Marco. Marco, my mom, Lauren."

I hold out my hand and smile. "Pleased to meet you."

Lauren shakes my hand, eyeing me curiously. She looks at her daughter. "I'm sorry, who's this?"

The look on Julia's face nearly makes me laugh out loud. Christ. She's a smart kid, but she didn't think this through. I'm searching for an answer to that question when Julia blurts, "This is Aunt Carrie's boyfriend."

I freeze.

Fuuuuck.

Lauren's eyebrows shoot up. "Boyfriend? Carrie has a boyfriend?"

Julia nods, her eyes wide with panic. "Yes. Marco. He's her boyfriend."

"Why didn't I know about this?" But Lauren smoothes her expression into a pleasant one. "Well, a surprise, but it's lovely to meet you."

"Yeah, I've been looking forward to meeting Carrie's family." Jesus fucking Christ. That's almost hilarious. I don't know what the hell to do with family.

Relief relaxes Julia's face and we exchange a pointed glance.

The DJ has arrived and is setting up his sound system at one end of the rom, and more seniors are shuffling in. Carrie has disappeared.

I resist the urge to run my hand around the inside of my collar where perspiration has gathered.

“So how did you two meet?” Lauren asks.

Well, that’s easy. “Carrie’s friend Hayden is engaged to my friend Beck. Beck and I own a bar together, along with our other buddy Cade.”

“Right, I heard about Hayden’s hot former SEAL boyfriend. Were you also a SEAL?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you for your service.”

I nod just as Carrie reappears, her arm linked with a woman’s. That must be Grandma Garner. The woman’s posture is straight, her steps slow but sure, her hair snow white. Her red lips like Carrie’s curve into a beaming smile.

Carrie leads her grandmother toward us. “Oh hey, you’re here!” She greets her sister and niece. “We should find a table and save seats for Mom and Dad.”

I didn’t think this through. Her whole damn family is going to be here. I give in to that need to swipe my hand over the back of my neck.

“Carrie, why didn’t you tell me you had a boyfriend?” Lauren asks with a smile flashed my way.

Carrie pauses in pulling out a chair. “Uh ...”

I slide my arm around her waist and pull her in for a hug. “It’s still pretty new.”

She turns her face up to me with a confused groove between her brows. I nuzzle her ear. “Go along with it. For Julia.”

Her long eyelashes flutter, but she clears her expression and smiles. “That’s right. I was going to tell you. Uh ... soon. Oh, there’s Mom and Dad.”

Great. The whole family is going to be on in this charade. Awkward.

Carrie makes quick introductions. I take in Grandma’s interested, assessing up-and-down look and shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Garner. I help Grandma to sit at a table.

“Interesting outfit, Joyce,” Mrs. Garner says to her mother-in-law.

Grandma Garner wear a red sequined dress with a black feather boa draped around her shoulders. She gives one end of the boa a toss behind her shoulder and lifts her chin. “Thank you.”

“You look great, Mom,” Carrie’s dad says with a kiss to Grandma’s cheek.

“Mom and Dad, you haven’t met Marco Solis. Marco, my parents, Aaron and Cheryl.”

I shake hands and smile. “Good to meet you.”

“Did you know Carrie had a boyfriend?” Lauren asks her parents.

Mr. Garner’s eyes narrow. “No.”

Mrs. Garner’s eyes light up with interest. “No, we didn’t.” She slants Carrie a questioning glance. Carrie gives her a weak smile.

I end up sitting between Carrie and her dad, who immediately starts grilling me about my life. Well, maybe he’s making conversation, but there’s an intensity to the questions that makes them feel not so casual.

Carrie buzzes around still arranging things as more people enter the big room, and then the music starts. I don’t recognize it, but clearly a lot of the older people in the room do as they head to the dance floor. Grandma bops in her chair.

“Come dance, Grandma!” Carrie holds out a hand and helps her grandmother out of the chair, leading her onto the dance floor with a swing of her hips.

My eyes stay glued to Carrie as she dances. She’s not the best dancer—she didn’t inherit *that* from her grandma—but she’s still sexy as fuck, with her sleek bare arms and legs and that luminous smile.

For a moment, I turn my attention to Grandma Garner, taking in the expression of joy on her face as she dances. Yeah, she was a dancer, all right. Despite her age I can tell she was

quite the performer in her younger days. There's still something about the way she moves that draws attention, a kind of star quality.

The music changes to a slower tune and this time I recognize the voice of Frank Sinatra. An older gentleman approaches Carrie and her grandma and appears to ask Grandma to dance. With a bright smile, she nods and steps into his arms and they begin a slow waltz.

Carrie's smile is so full of tenderness and love as she walks back to the table and slips into the chair next to me it makes my heart turn over in my chest. I slip an arm along the back of her chair—I'm her boyfriend after all, it's perfectly appropriate—and lean closer to her ear. "You're beautiful."

She blinks at me in surprise, then the corners of her mouth lift in a wistful smile. "You know ... I kind of got to hate it when people told me that."

I go still, searching her face.

She shrugs. "It just felt kind of demeaning after a while: 'You're beautiful,' 'you're gorgeous,' 'you have an amazing body.'"

"Those things are all true."

Her smile goes crooked. "Maybe. But those are things I can't help. I was born this way. I've told you how I feel like I'm different on the inside than on the outside, and when people only see the outside and compliment me on it, it doesn't feel like something I've done. I don't know how to explain it." She pauses. "Hayden's finding a cure for cancer."

I nod, not sure where that came from.

"My whole family is a bunch of overachievers with amazing careers and family. And I stand there and look pretty in front of a camera. What have I really accomplished? Nothing."

"Carrie. That's not true."

She shakes her head. "It doesn't matter. What I was trying to say was, I got to hate hearing that. And when we first met,

and you flirted with me, I thought it was the same, that it didn't mean anything. But now, when you say it ... it feels real."

I look at her for a long moment, trying to make sense of what she said. I get it. "Oh it's real, all right. Want to dance?"

"I'd love to."

I rise and take her hand and we join the other couples on the dance floor, the red lights and the sultry music creating a sexy atmosphere. Everyone seems to be loving it.

"Your grandma looks like she's in heaven."

Carrie beams. "She does. This was so worth it." Then her forehead creases. "Um, why does Lauren think you're my boyfriend?"

"Julia told her that. She had to have some reason that she knew me and that's what she came up with on the spot." I smile down at Carrie, her hand curled around mine as we move to the music. "I just went along with it."

"Oh. Damn." She sighs. "I get it, but ..."

"But what?"

"Well, this just complicates things, doesn't it?"

I lift one shoulder, watching her face and the thoughts I can almost see flitting through her head. "Whatever. You're leaving, remember? It won't complicate things for long."

"Right." Her eyes shadow and she stares at the top button of my shirt.

"It's okay, Carrie. Not a big deal."

"You don't know my family," she mutters. "They'll be all over this like stink on a skunk."

I bark out a laugh.

"Seriously."

"I can handle it." I squeeze her waist with the hand resting there. "Your dad was already interrogating me. It's fine." It's actually pretty cool to have family who care enough to be all

up in your business, even though I know Carrie's dad is looking at this Latino dude and wondering if he's good enough for his La Jolla-raised daughter.

She lifts her eyes and meets mine. "I'm sorry."

"Carrie. It's *fine*." I want to kiss her. Hell, why not? Everybody thinks we're a couple. So I bend my head and brush my mouth over hers. Heat shimmers through my veins and my cock thickens eagerly. Now I want more than a kiss. I want to wrap her up in my arms, pick her up, carry her out of here, and sink my cock deep inside her, all the while telling her everything is okay.

Except ... it sort of isn't, because every time I remember she's leaving I get a weird ache in my chest.

"Okay," she whispers, staring back at me with big eyes.

The music changes again, another tune I don't recognize, but it definitely sounds raunchier. Like stripper music. Carrie and I step apart and Carrie murmurs, "Oh my God."

I follow her gaze and see her grandma gyrating—well, as much as you could gyrate with eighty-six-year-old hips—her hands holding both ends of the feather boa and sliding it back and forth behind her as she dances.

I grin. "Your grandma's hot."

She wrinkles her nose. "Eew."

"Come on. You know she is."

"Yeah, she is."

"Don't worry, babe. I only have eyes for you."

She nudges me with an elbow and I laugh.

"Come on," she says. "I want some of that punch."

"It's red." I follow her toward the counter.

"Yes, it is. It's got cranberry juice in it."

"All we need is a flask of tequila."

She laughs. "That would definitely liven up the party."

I pick up a pitcher and fill two plastic cups with punch, then hand her one. “Why do I have a feeling your grandma might enjoy a little shot of tequila?”

Carrie grins. “You’ve already got her pegged. She’s a live wire, all right.”

“She reminds me of you.”

Carrie grimaces. “I wish I could dance like her.”

“It’s not that. It’s the smile ... the love of life. Like you both think life’s too short to worry about bullshit and pretension.”

She tilts her head to one side as she sips her punch. “You’re right about that. Which is why Grandma and I don’t totally fit into the family. And I think Julia’s feeling the same.”

“You all are the black sheep,” I tease. “I like that.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure the rest of my family are exactly white sheep. Okay, maybe. I guess we should go talk to them.”

I grip my cup of punch tighter.

She takes in my expression and bursts out laughing. “Come on. You got this.”

“Wait, we should bring them drinks.”

With a cup in each hand, we return to the table. “You should be dancing,” Carrie says to her parents.

“That’s what I just said.” Mrs. Garner gives her husband a pointed look. “Your father’s not much of a dancer.”

Mr. Garner grimaces and accepts the punch. “What the hell is this?”

“Some kind of fruit punch,” I say. “Unfortunately, I didn’t bring my flask.”

Mr. Garner grins. “Too bad.”

“Marco,” says Mrs. Garner. “Has Carrie invited you to our big family barbecue this weekend?”

I keep my face neutral. “No, she hasn’t mentioned it.”

“You have to join us. It’s Aaron’s birthday. The whole family is coming. It’ll be a great chance for everyone to meet you!”

“Great,” Carrie mumbles.

I repress a smile, although family gatherings are something that terrify me even more than Hell Week. “That sounds like fun. I’d love to come.”

MARCO

“We have to get creative if we’re going to keep up with Beck and Hayden.”

Carrie frowns at me as we walk into my house later that night. “Keep up with what?”

“The weirdest place we’ve had sex. They did it in a store dressing room. All we ever do is the bedroom.”

“Not true.” She pats the granite counter in my kitchen. “We had sex right here. We’ve had sex in the shower. Also, that time we left the curtains open at my place as it was getting dark was a little exhibitionist.”

“Nobody saw us.”

She winks. “You don’t know that for sure.”

I burst out laughing and reach for her hips, pulling her against me.

“Right?” She smiles at me. “Don’t tell me you didn’t get even more turned on knowing that someone could walk through the courtyard and see us.”

My dick stirs. She’s right. We both knew we should get up and close the curtains or move to the bedroom, but we were so fucking hot for each other neither of us could stop, and it did add a little wicked thrill to it all.

“Besides,” she adds, running her hands up under my T-shirt to find skin. “Beds don’t have to be boring. Have you ever had sex on the beach?”

“Uh ... no.” I frown. “Why?”

“It’s totally overrated. The sand gets everywhere and I’ll tell you it’s painful. Beds are nice and soft and comfy.”

“Fuck. Who’d you have sex on the beach with?” I need to do better than that. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. The bed it is.” I hoist her and throw her over my shoulder.

“Marco!”

I stride out of the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom.

“Put me down!” She swats at my back. “I’m too heavy for this.”

I snort. “You’re a fucking feather, Supermodel.”

I toss her onto the center of the bed and her little black dress slides up high on her thighs. My mouth goes dry as I study her long, sleek legs, her feet still wearing those wicked heels. Her eyelids droop and her lips part, her hair spread out all around her on my dark duvet.

“Yeah, buddy.” I rub my hardening dick. “Be patient.”

Carrie’s smile is sultry.

I climb onto the bed and stretch out next to her, pulling her into my arms. We kiss—long, wet, hungry—making out and rolling around on the bed, fully clothed, my hands in her hair, then up under her dress. My rough fingertips drags down her inner thigh as my tongue slides in and out of her mouth.

We roll again, her knee coming up to ride my thigh.

“Hot little thing, aren’t you,” I say roughly, pulling down the bodice of her dress to expose one tit. I groan.

“Yes.” Her fingers go to my belt as I play with her nipple, brushing it with the back of my fingers, watching it stiffen. My dick throbs and I latch my mouth on to her throat, holding her head as her hand slides into my pants to find my cock.

She rolls on top of me, her dress now all scrunched around her waist, her shoes gone. I cup her face with one hand and palm the back of her head to bring her mouth to mine for

another lush kiss. I linger on her plush bottom lip, let my tongue stroke hers, nip at her upper lip. She tastes like fruit punch and sweet Carrie.

I kiss her softly, holding the back of her head enjoying her shivers.

She caresses my head, my jaw, then fingers the top button of my shirt. I slide a hand down to her ass, bringing her tighter against my aching cock. I can't help but groan at the heat that rushes through my body. "You want my shirt off, beautiful?"

"Duh."

My lips curve against hers, then I help her rise onto her knees. "I want you bare, too."

Slowly, she lifts her dress and pulls it off over her head, revealing first her smooth belly, the dip of her navel, and then those gorgeous tits—full and round, tipped with tight, rosy nipples.

"Such pretty tits." Unable to resist, I bend my head and pull a nipple into my mouth. I close my eyes and savor the blissful taste and feel of her in my mouth, the way her body quivers. She makes a small noise that goes straight to my balls. "You're beautiful, Carrie. I know you don't like to hear that, but you are."

"I like to hear it from you." She wraps her arms around my head, holding me to her breast, arching her back, and I feast on the tight peaks. I slip a hand between her legs, inside her panties, finding the slick heat. She leans her cheek on my head and trembles against me.

"So wet," I mumble. "Beauty. Just perfect."

I straighten and unbutton my shirt. She watches me, eyes shadowy, perfect breasts lifting and falling with shallow breaths. Heat punches straight to my dick.

I toss the shirt aside, then roll down to my back. She stretches out next to me, bending to press a kiss to my abs. The muscles contract at her mouth there and my dick leaps in anticipation of her mouth being so close.

“Oh yeah,” I groan as she kisses her way lower, over the sensitive skin of my belly, the hair at my groin. When she pulls my cock out of my pants I make an embarrassing noise of need. I run my hand up and down her back, pulling her hair back behind her shoulders as she grips the base of my cock. She looks at me—at my cock—like it’s the best thing she’s ever seen, and my balls tighten with hope. And then ... Jesus, yes ... she takes me into her mouth.

Hot and wet, she tightens her lips around my shaft and slides them up and down, over and over. Pressure builds, the backs of my thighs tingling. She stops sucking me to lick me from root to tip, cupping her hand around my balls. Another grunt of need escapes me.

“I love your balls,” she whispers, lifting her mouth from me. “They’re so big and full.”

“Fuuuuck. They’re ready to explode, baby.”

“Mmmm.” And she sucks me again.

“Okay, hold up.” I don’t want her to stop, but goddammit I want to taste her then fuck her. I shove my pants and boxer briefs down onto my thighs and together we remove the remainder of my clothing. My bare skin itches to feel hers against me, everywhere, but I long to put my mouth on her pussy.

With my mouth on hers, I roll her to her back and move between her legs, then shift lower. “I want to fuck your little pussy with my tongue.”

She gasps.

“Oh yeah. Fuck you with my tongue until you come in my mouth.”

Now she whimpers.

“Widen those thighs, beautiful. Yeah. Like that. I want to see you. I want to see how wet you are.”

“Oh God.”

She’s plump and gleaming, so beautiful I can’t breathe. Can’t move. But my mouth is literally watering, and I lean

down and open my mouth on her. I kiss, then lick and suck, getting drunk on her taste, breathing in her feminine scent.

“Oh God.” She fists a hand in my hair, her face pressed into her inner arm, her back arched, her body undulating as I eat her. I push a finger inside her and bend it, rubbing, finding that sweet spot I’ve learned so well.

“Carrie. You taste so ... Christ.” I let out a shivery breath.

I can’t wait any longer. I grab a condom from the nightstand, have it on in a flash, and then drive into her. She’s snug, but so goddamn wet it only takes a few thrusts to be balls deep, buried in her pussy.

I’ve lost my fragile patience. I’m desperate for her. Knees spread wide, I lift her hips right off the bed to fuck her. She cups her breasts, small, needy sounds spilling from her lips, sound as wild as I am. I lean over her and rest my nose alongside hers, holding her gaze with a shocking intensity. “Carrie.”

She whimpers again, both of us panting, and slips a hand down to finger her clit as I rock into her. “More.” She pushes up to me. “Harder. Deeper.”

She feels so good. My heart hammers, need pulses through me, and all I can do is fuck. And fuck. Like her, I want more. Harder. Deeper.

Her hand curls around the back of my head, our bodies moving together, quivering, straining. My muscles tighten, sweat dampens my skin, and my hips drive into her, over and over. This sex ... it’s different. It’s bigger. Greater. Everything.

She cries out as her pussy squeezes me, so goddamn tight as she comes.

Fiery sensation rips up my spine, pleasure slamming through my bloodstream as I come, too, so hard I go blind and deaf.

We hold on to each other for long pulsing moments while I try to unscramble my brains and make my body move. When I finally lift my head, Carrie kisses my cheek.

“See?” she says. “Bed’s not boring at all. It’s all in what you *do* in bed.”

“And *who* you do.”

She lets out a breathless chuckle. “Well, yes. And you do it so well.”

“Mmmm. Back atcha, babe.” I take her with me as I roll to my side, unwilling to let go of her. Once again she not only blew me—she blew my mind.

Carrie

“So, I, uh, have to talk to you about something.”

Hayden and I are about to enter a little bridal shop to try on dresses Saturday afternoon.

Hayden tips her head to one side. “Are you going to tell me you’re not going to Spain after all?”

I frown. “No.”

Hayden wrinkles her nose. “Damn.”

I stare at my friend in dismay. “You really don’t want me to go?”

“No, no, I do want you to go! I mean, I don’t. Oh hell. I want you to be happy, and if that’s what you want to do, then of course I want you to go. But selfishly ... I’m going to miss you.”

I drop my head forward briefly. “I’m going to miss you, too. So much.”

“Well, let’s make the most of the next few weeks. I’m getting married, you know.”

I grin. “I heard that.”

“What is it you want to talk to me about?”

“Um.” I pull open the door to the shop and we step inside. “It’s about Marco.”

Hayden’s eyes pop wide. “What about Marco?”

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. “We’re, uh ... hooking up.”

Hayden’s eyes narrow. “What?”

I try for a smile. “We slept together. I mean, we’re sleeping together. Not all the time. Just sometimes.”

“What?” This time the word comes out as a screech.

I glance around the small shop. “You heard me.”

“What does this mean?” Hayden lowers her voice and steps closer. “Carrie!”

“It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just sex. It happened after your engagement party. Well, it started before that. We met up one night at a club and danced and made out a little—”

“Holy fuck!”

“Shhhh!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“I shouldn’t have told you this now. My timing sucks. We need to look at dresses.”

“And now I’m totally distracted.” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe this. Oh my God.”

We stroll into the shop, greeted by a young woman in a black skirt and white shirt who works there.

“She’s getting married,” I tell the sales associate. “In four weeks.”

The woman’s eyes widen. “That’s not far away.”

“I know.” Hayden smiles. “But I’m not looking for something elaborate. Just a white dress.”

“We have a few of those.”

I grin. “She likes simple styles. We’ve looked at a few shops. She wants floor length, no train, not too revealing.”

“Well, let’s have a look. I’m Cynthia. And you are ... ?” She looks at Hayden.

“I’m Hayden. This is my maid of honor, Carrie, and we’re looking for a dress for her, too.”

Cynthia starts across the pale gray carpet. “Color?”

“Blue.”

Cynthia turns and studies me. “Periwinkle? That would look amazing with your eyes.”

Hayden shrugs. “Sure.” Then she looks at me and whispers, “What’s periwinkle?”

I grin. “Sort of mauvish-blue.”

Hayden nods. “Kay. Periwinkle’s a flower, right?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe we could put them in the bouquets?”

“I don’t know. We can ask the florist.”

“The guys will be wearing dress blues, that’s why I wanted blue. Also blue looks good on you.”

Cynthia stops at a rack of dresses and starts rifling through them. “Here’s what we have in stock. You don’t have enough time to order anything custom. Hopefully we can find something you like.”

“Whatever. I’m not picky.” Hayden waves a hand and I shake my head. I have to make sure she gets something nice.

We soon have a few choices and Hayden goes into a fitting room to try them on.

“Oh my God, I look awful in all of these,” she moans a long, frustrated while later. I’m using all my patience as Hayden rules out one after another.

“No, you don’t. You look amazing in all of them.” I twitch the sheer skirt of the one Hayden currently wears. “You’re just not used to wearing such ... glam stuff.”

“That’s for sure.”

As a scientist and a professor, Hayden usually wears a lab coat over basic black pants and a shirt, sometimes a skirt, occasionally a suit when she’s presenting at a conference or

pitching a project to a funding organization. Neither of us has ever been fashionistas; as a teenager, I was into creative thrift shop dressing rather than the latest styles. Since working as a model I've become more aware of fashion trends, which I try to coax my friend into wearing, at least once in a while. But Hayden is not into clothes.

"Let me try one more," she says with a sigh. "Then I'll just pick the one that's the least uncomfortable."

I swallow a sigh. Hayden really did look gorgeous in most of them—okay there were a couple that weren't her—but she was stiff and awkward, and that's not right for her wedding. She has to *feel* good. She has to feel beautiful.

Hayden emerges from the dressing room wide eyed, her hands on the full skirt of the white dress she now wears. "Carrie ... I like this one!"

I sweep my gaze over the dress from hem to neckline. "Yes! It's beautiful. It's you!"

The pure white dress is simple and elegant, a sleeveless fitted bodice with a bateau neckline and a full skirt. The white satin is unadorned with frills, lace, or beads.

"It has pockets!" Hayden thrusts her hands into the pockets. "I love a dress with pockets!"

I grin. "That's awesome! Let me see the back."

Hayden pirouettes and I inspected the row of tiny pearls down the back. "Love it."

Cynthia beams behind Hayden. "It fits perfectly. You could add a belt ... something sparkly ..."

"No. I like it just like this." Hayden turns again in front of the big mirrors, swirling the skirt. "Oh my gosh, I feel so ... pretty."

"You *are* pretty." My eyes get wet. "You're more than pretty. You're beautiful, Hayden." I move in and we exchange an emotional hug.

"This is the one. Now to find something for you."

“I’ve already put a few aside,” Cynthia says. “Again, we’re limited because of your time frame and the color, but I did find some.”

“I’ll change,” Hayden says.

“No, keep the dress on,” Cynthia urges her with a smile. “So you can see both of you together.”

My bottom lip quivers but I turn to the dresses Cynthia found. “Of course you want something simple also,” Cynthia says. “So you don’t overshadow the bride. Are you okay with a knee-length dress?”

I look at Hayden for guidance. It’s her wedding.

“Jeez, *I’m* okay with it! You’re my only bridesmaid, you can wear whatever you want!”

“I’m fine with that,” I say.

“I think you’ll like this one.” Cynthia hands me a dress in a gorgeous shade of blue. “It’s quite complementary to the bridal gown.”

I purse my lips and enter a dressing room to try it. It’s actually a similar style, a modest halter with a fitted bodice and full skirt that ends at my knees, in a shimmery sateen fabric. When I get it on, Cynthia helps with the zipper.

“Oh,” Cynthia says with disappointment. “It’s a little too big.”

“It is. But otherwise it’s perfect.”

“I don’t think we can do alterations in four weeks.”

“That’s okay. I know people.” I grin. I’m pretty sure any one of the seamstresses I’ve worked with can take this in before the wedding date. “I think it will work.”

“Let me clip it.” Cynthia uses big clips to tighten it at the back, and then I step out.

Hayden beams a huge smile. “Oh, Carrie. That’s perfect! I can’t believe the first one you tried on is so great! But I should have known, because, duh, you’re Carrie Garner and you’d look great in a pillowcase with armholes cut in it.”

Carrie laughs. “It needs to be taken in a bit, but I’m sure I can get that done.” I spin to show Hayden the back.

“Oh, are you sure?” Hayden clasps her hands together.

“Sure. You like it?”

“I love it.”

“Awesome! And we’re done!”

We pose together in front of the mirror, heads leaning together. “We look great!” Hayden’s smile glows.

“Let me take a picture.” I reach for my purse.

“You’re not going to put this on Instagram are you?”

“Don’t worry, Beck won’t see the dress.”

I take a photo of us in the mirror. I’ll crop and edit it later.

“What about shoes?” Cynthia asks.

“I need white shoes. Ugh.” Hayden grimaces. “White shoes are for nurses.”

I laugh. “Oh my God, no. And you don’t have to wear white shoes. Wear something fun ... sparkly shoes. Silver shoes. Gold shoes. Oh ... gold shoes! Yes!”

Cynthia magically produces a pair of gold metallic stilettos. Hayden gazes at the heels doubtfully. “Those are high.”

“Try them. Do they come in silver?”

“They do. What size?”

“Eight.”

In a moment we both have the shoes on and admire them.

“Okay,” Hayden says. “But these are probably coming off right after the first dance.”

“Maybe we should find something more comfortable for you.”

The store doesn’t have anything else in gold.

“I don’t know what to do,” Hayden frets. “I love them, but ...”

“We have time,” I soothe her. “I’ll go online and look. Metallic shoes are super popular right now. I’m sure there’s something with a lower heel. Jimmy Choo ...”

“Christ!” Hayden’s mouth drops open. “I’m not spending that kind of money on shoes I’ll only wear for a few hours!”

“You’ll totally wear them again,” I assure her. “Fundraising stuff. Even with a pair of jeans and a pretty top to go to a club.” I wave a hand.

“Yeah, like Beck and I are hitting the clubs all the time.”

“You should be. We should do that some time ... all go out dancing.”

We leave the store with our dresses safely in garment bags and my shoes in a box.

“Okay, it’s time for a glass of wine,” Hayden says. “And I want to hear more about Marco.”

Ooooh yeah ... Marco.

MARCO

“Why are you in such a good mood lately?”

I frown at Beck. “What the hell does that mean? I’m always in a good mood.”

Cade snorts. “Yeah, right.”

Okay, so I can be a bit moody and serious. I’m learning to ease up and take life less seriously, although I do stew over the problems we’re having at Conquistadors more than the other guys. And I’m learning to enjoy the company of our customers, getting to know the regulars, and not be such a loner.

For a while there I *was* feeling kind of grouchy, with Cade off sleeping with every woman he met and Beck all cozied up with Hayden, but lately ... life has been a little more fun.

“What’s going on?” Beck asks suspiciously.

“Nothing.” I shrug and pick up a tray of glasses. I catch the look Beck and Cade exchange as I move the glasses. “Jesus Christ. What?”

Beck holds up his hands. “Never mind. Okay, where’s this new tequila you want us to sample?”

“The Mayahuel is in the office. Come on.”

I grab three glasses and follow my buddies to our office. I’ve heard good things about this extra añejo, and although it isn’t cheap, it’s not super expensive either, which is nice. I’m eager to try it and see if we should add it to the menu.

I pour shots and pass them out. We all hold our glasses up to the light, swirling them.

“Nice legs,” Beck says.

Fucking fantastic legs. No, no, not Carrie. The tequila.

“Good color,” Cade adds. “Rich.”

We tilt the glasses and hold them to our noses to sniff, first at the bottom, then the middle, searching out the different aromas. Then we taste, taking a small sip at first. I rub the tequila over the inside of my mouth with my tongue to warm up my mouth, then take a slightly bigger sip. I breathe in through my nose, swallow, and exhale, closing my eyes, the better to savor the notes.

“Wow,” Beck says. “Very nice.”

“Nice buttery nuttiness,” Cade says.

“Sweet leathery finish,” I add. “Yeah, I like it.”

“A great addition to the menu,” Beck agrees.

“It’s good to offer new things,” I say. “Keeps people coming back.”

“True.” Beck reaches for the bottle and refills our glasses. He leans back in his chair and props his feet on the desk. “Guess we better not get hammered on a Saturday night.”

I take another sip and enjoy the smooth heat. “Where’s Hayden? She’s usually around on Saturdays.”

“She went shopping for a wedding dress. She’s coming by later.”

“Ah.”

“Okay, you guys, I have a problem,” Beck says.

“It’s not too late,” Cade replies. “You can still call off the wedding.”

“No! Fuck off. That’s not my problem. The problem is that Hayden’s having one bridesmaid and I have to pick a best man.” He scowled. “I can’t pick between the two of you, so I’m thinking of asking Dussen.”

Cade and I stare at each other. “Hell no! You can’t ask *him* to be your best man.”

“How am I supposed to choose?”

“Rock, paper, scissors?” I suggest.

“Hmmm.”

Cade frowns. “Who’ve you known longest?”

“Marco. By about five minutes.”

Cade grimaces. “Then pick him.”

I shrug. “I’d be happy to do it. Don’t want any hard feelings, though.”

“Nah, man, no hard feelings.” Cade grins. “I know I’m really the best man.”

“Ha.” Beck looks back and forth between us. “You’re both okay with that?”

Cade claps a hand on Beck’s shoulder and grips it. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll still be there, right?”

“Hell yeah. If I could have two best men ... hey, why can’t I?” He frowns.

“I think someone has to sign the wedding license as a witness,” I offer. “You only need one for each of you.”

“Okay, okay, so you’re the witness, but you both need to be my best men. Because ...” He pauses. “Not to get all wussy, but you guys are.” He clears his throat.

My throat thickens. “Thanks, man.”

“Hayden will be all right with that?” Cade asks quietly.

“Yeah. She’s not all wrapped up in details.”

It occurs to me that Carrie will be Hayden’s bridesmaid. We’ll have to hang out.

“What’s that shit-eating look for?” Cade demands.

“Nothing.”

“You really are in a weird mood lately.”

“It’s the tequila.” I hold up the glass.

“Bullshit. You’ve been occupying Vagistan.”

“What?”

Cade laughs. “Getting laid.”

I choke on the spirits and Beck bursts out laughing. “Occupying Vagistan! Jesus.”

“Come on,” Cade says. “We’ve seen her around here all the time lately with Julia. You think we didn’t notice the way you two kept eye fucking each other? We damn near needed to cover the kid’s eyes it was so X-rated.”

I go very still, running my tongue along the inside of my teeth. “Uh. Well.”

“So? You two are hittin’ the skins?”

Cade laughs and I frown. “Hittin’ the skins? What are we, the Flintstones?”

“You know what I mean.”

I grin. “Yeah. Bumping fuzzies.”

Beck lifts an eyebrow. “That might be telling us more about Carrie’s personal grooming habits than we want to know.”

My grin disappears. “Fuck you. Never mind her personal grooming habits. She’s fucking perfect.”

Beck’s knowing smile makes me want to punch him. “Okay, we have an admission.”

“I’d say so,” Cade agrees. “This is interesting.”

“It’s just sex,” I say.

“Hey, I get it.” Cade lifts his hands. “Nothing wrong with that.”

Beck rubs his mouth. “I have to disagree.”

“With what? Sex?” I smirk.

“The ‘just sex’ part.” Beck’s forehead furrows. “Carrie is Hayden’s best friend. Women don’t do ‘just sex’ very well.”

“That’s completely sexist,” Cade points out. “Women want to be equal. They want to own their sexuality. Lots of ’em have no problem with ‘just sex.’”

“You sure about that?” Beck gives Cade a long look. “How about that chick who showed up here last week crying because you wouldn’t return her call?”

Cade winces. “Yeah, Brynn got a little carried away. Look, I’m honest with them all. I can’t help it if they tell me they’re fine with it and then change their minds.”

Beck shakes his head. “I don’t mean to be sexist, but I think it’s well known that women’s hormones get involved when they have sex and they get attached.” He turns his stern look on me, and I shift in my chair. “If you break Carrie’s heart, *I’m* going to be fucked, and not in a good way.”

“This has nothing to do with you and Hayden.” I lift my chin, although I’ve had the exact same misgivings.

“Keep talking. Maybe eventually you’ll say something intelligent.”

“Hey!”

“Come on, man, you have to see the risks here.”

“She’s leaving in four weeks. We’re both well aware of that and know what the deal is.”

“Four weeks. But who’s counting, right?”

I growl. “Look, I’m telling you we know what we’re doing.” I reach for the bottle and refill all three glasses. I lift mine in a toast. “To stringless sex.”

Cade and Beck both crack up laughing. “Stringless sex? That sounds really ... unpleasant.”

“No-strings sex. That’s what I mean.” I take a mouthful of tequila and let the heat slide down my throat. “Don’t worry, dude. I got this.”

“She *is* hot,” Cade notes.

“Eyes off her.” I glare.

“Another bad sign,” Beck mutters. “Territorial.”

“Just because you’re all kiss-kiss with Hayden doesn’t mean you know everything,” I tell him.

“I know more than you do.”

“I was in love once.” I stare down at my tequila.

Beck sighs. “Yeah. Sorry. I forgot about Liz.”

Ha. The truth is, so have I. I thought my heart was broken when things ended with Liz. It was one more painful reminder why I’m never going to be a guy who has love. Home. Family.

I’ve apparently gotten over it, because I don’t give a single fuck about Liz anymore. But I remember what it felt like to care about someone ... enough to want to spend your life with her, enough to ask her to marry you. Well, I sort of remember.

I squint at the label of the tequila bottle where it says “100% Pure Agave.” Did I feel territorial about Liz? I can’t remember being annoyed because she danced with another guy, or smiled and flirted with someone else. I sure as hell never felt a need to tell my friends to keep their eyes off her. But that was probably because I was secure in our relationship, knowing she was mine and I didn’t need to have those feelings.

The joke’s on me, though, because we weren’t secure in our relationship at all.

“Don’t worry about it,” I finally mumble to Beck. “Just saying. It’ll all be fine.”

A knock on the office vibrates through the room and the door opens. Hayden’s blond head pokes in. “Hey! What are you guys doing back here? Important business meeting?”

“Very important.” Beck moves to open the door wider and pull in his fiancée. He wraps his arms around her. “We’re tasting a new tequila.”

Carrie walks in behind Hayden, looking gorgeous as always in a pair of jeans, a fitted tank top, and a thin flowered scarf draped around her neck. Her eyes sparkle and her cheeks wear a glowy flush. “Oooh. That’s an exciting part of the job.”

“It’s the best part of the job,” I mutter, trying not to devour her with my eyes. My slightly unfocused eyes.

“Do we get to try it?” Hayden asks.

“Sure, babe.” Beck hands her his glass. “You know how to do it.”

She follows the protocol and finally sips. “Very nice.”

I hand my glass to Carrie, raising an eyebrow. I’m not sure if she’ll take it from me, but she does, our eyes meeting in a clash of heat. She too holds up the glass to the light, swirls, sniffs, and sips.

Christ, she’s sexy.

She nods approvingly. “I agree. This is really good. Expensive?”

“Moderately priced,” I say. “Hey, I’ll bring a bottle to the party tomorrow. It can be your dad’s birthday present.”

“Oh wow, he’d love that. But you totally don’t have to bring him anything.”

Too late, I become aware of Beck’s penetrating stare. “Birthday party?”

“My dad’s,” Carrie says, eyes shifting around the room as the atmosphere goes heavy.

I sigh.

CARRIE

I'll admit to being a teensy bit buzzed from a couple of glasses of wine. After the dress shopping, we went to a nearby wine bar. Hayden only had one drink because she was driving, but since we wanted to get food and more drinks, we decided to come to Conquistadors.

To my amusement, Marco seems a little drunk too. I survey the half-empty bottle of Mayahuel and the three glasses. "Looks like you guys have been enjoying the taste testing."

Cade gives me a loose grin. "We've been talking about wedding stuff."

Hayden's eyes bug out and she turns to Beck. "What wedding stuff?"

"I'm going to have two best men."

"Oh."

"Marco will be my witness. We flipped a coin."

"Really?" Her forehead creases.

"No."

I laugh.

"We decided it on the basis of who I've known longer, even though it was, like, five minutes. But otherwise I can't pick between them, so I'm having two best men."

"Well ... sure." Hayden shrugs. "I guess it doesn't matter. I'm not into all the formalities."

“I didn’t think you’d have a problem with it.”

“Of course not.” She smiles at him, then announces, “I found a dress today.”

“Oh great.” Beck smiles fondly at her. “Can’t wait to see you in it.”

“It’s gorgeous,” I say. “I can’t wait for you to see it, too.” Call me romantic, but a groom seeing his bride in her wedding dress ready to walk down the aisle is a special moment, and I’m truly eager to see Beck’s face when he sees Hayden.

“We found one for Carrie too,” Hayden adds. “Hey, we need food. Can we go order something?”

“Of course.” Beck pats Hayden’s ass as she turns to leave the office. “Let’s all grab a bite.”

We parade out to the bar where happy hour is in full swing.

“Maybe we shouldn’t take up a table.” I survey the full house.

“It’s fine.” Beck leads the way to an empty table in a corner. “I’ll grab some menus.”

“Not like we need them,” Hayden says. “We eat here often enough.”

“Hey, there are a few new things,” Marco says. “Sid’s been trying to come up with new ideas.”

“That burrito pie wasn’t bad,” I say.

“It doesn’t seem to be a big hit,” Marco admits. He pulls out a chair for me and I wink and smile at him as I sit.

“I think people who come here to sample high-end tequilas are looking for more than burgers and tacos,” Hayden says, taking the menu that Beck hands her.

Marco sighs. “Yeah, that’s what we’ve concluded. And it’s becoming more obvious that Sid’s not the guy to handle that.”

I can see how much it dismays him to possibly have to fire their cook. I reach out and lay my hand atop his and squeeze.

Then realize what I'm doing. I just told Hayden what's going on between Marco and me, but we haven't exactly been open with anyone else about sleeping together. I catch Beck's gaze on us, and with my usual good instincts, I know that he knows.

Everyone knows.

Ah well.

Hayden would've told Beck anyway, I have no doubt of that.

When we talked about it over glasses of wine, Hayden was oddly concerned about Marco. "Because you're leaving," she pointed out to me unnecessarily.

"That's why he's good with this," I explained. "Because it won't turn into anything long term. He doesn't want that."

"And what about you?"

Well, that made me think. It's not that I'm opposed to love and marriage and commitment. It's just something I don't think is going to happen for me. Anyone I get close enough to for that would realize I'm a big fake—someone who appears to have it all, but who's really just an empty shell with no real accomplishments and no plan. Which is why I, too, am fine with this arrangement.

I glance at the menu. Since I'm starving, the lack of an adventurous menu doesn't bother me. "Chicken fingers," I decide. "And another glass of wine."

"Oh, come on." Marco taps the bottle of tequila he carried from the office. "You want more of this."

When you own the place, you can carry around your own bottle, apparently. I grin. "I could drink a shot of that."

"We need more glasses. I have to check on things behind the bar anyway. Be right back."

One of the servers comes to take our food orders and then Marco returns holding a bunch of the special tequila-tasting glasses. He pours us all shots, except for Cade, who shakes his head, saying, "Someone needs to stay sober."

“They need any help back there?” Beck asks Marco before picking up his own glass.

“Nope. They’re good.”

Beck leans back in his chair, his arm along the back of Hayden’s chair, looking relaxed and happy. As does Hayden. Then Beck reaches into his back pocket, pulls out his phone and peers at it.

“Put that away,” Marco orders.

Beck frowns. “What?”

“Put your phone away. Don’t you know that’s rude? Obviously you didn’t read that article I sent you yesterday.”

“What article?”

“I sent you a link to an article about how to be a good husband. You’re gonna need all the help you can get. One of the things is to put your cellphone away when you’re having dinner with your wife.”

Beck blinks at Marco. “Obviously I can’t read it right now, then.”

Marco grins. “True.”

“What else did it say?”

“You need to talk about expectations,” Marco says. “Like, do you expect big expensive presents on birthdays and anniversaries? Also, you should keep masturbating.”

I choke on my tequila.

Marco hands me a napkin. “Okay, belleza?”

I nod, dabbing at my lips.

Beck grins. “Okay, then. Best marriage advice I’ve heard so far.”

“That goes for both of you,” Marco clarifies with a nod at Hayden.

She smirks. “Good to know.” She turns to Beck. “That doesn’t bother your ego? Oh wait.” She slaps her forehead. “I forget who I’m talking to here.”

“Ha-ha. It would only bother me if all you wanted to do was fly solo. But I’m pretty confident in my abilities to make you want a copilot.”

I crack up laughing. “How do we always end up talking about sex?”

Marco grins. “Because sex is awesome?”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“Don’t worry, honey.” Hayden pats Beck’s cheek. “While I do enjoy ‘working in the garden’ from time to time, it doesn’t always have to be alone.”

I laugh harder, and Marco’s beautiful smile steals what’s left of my breath.

“Apparently there are lots of benefits to masturbation,” he continues, his eyes gleaming with humor. “Stress relief. It keeps you primed. Keeps you in touch with what you really like.”

Beck’s gaze is fastened on Hayden’s face, and the sexual heat between them makes me shift in my chair.

I’m not jealous. But wow ... the feelings these two have for each other are enviable. I sigh and toss back the last of my tequila.

“Hey now,” Marco says. “You’re supposed to sip and savor that, remember?”

“I need another one.”

When I meet his eyes, I go immobile. Because he’s still smiling, and it’s a heated, hungry smile, his gaze focused intently on me ... almost the way Beck is regarding Hayden.

My heart misses a beat, then lurches in my chest. I can’t look away from Marco.

Our food arrives, breaking the magnetic spell.

I look down at my plate and press my hand to my chest where my heart still races. Was I starving a few minutes ago? Now I have no interest in food.

“Eat,” Marco murmurs, leaning in close.

I swallow and nod, forcing a smile while picking up a chicken finger. I dunk it in the barbecue sauce, then take a bite.

“Okay?” Marco asks.

I nod and take another bite. “Okay.”

“See, I want people to eat our food and not just say ‘okay.’”

I dare to glance at him again, almost afraid of what I’ll see and how my body will react. Like I’ll get sucked into a paralyzing force field or something. I don’t even know what a force field is. Hayden probably does. It’s probably not something that paralyzes you *or* sucks you in. Whatever.

“I know,” I say. “You want to be the best.”

“We’re doing fine,” Beck says. “Don’t worry so much about it.”

I watch Marco’s face. He nods and lets out a breath. “Yeah, yeah, I worry too much about it. I know.”

I don’t like to think of him worrying. He does take a lot of weight on his shoulders. He was all up in arms about the graffiti, and he worried about the food menu, and I’ve seen how he deals with vendors, picks up supplies at the wholesale liquor store and the restaurant supply store, fills in as bartender, server, and even dishwasher. The three of them are partners, and it’s not that Beck and Cade don’t do their share of the work—I know they all contribute—but Marco seems to feel like he’s responsible for everyone.

Is that what he was like as a SEAL? I give him sideways glances as we all eat and talk. Yes, I’m sure he was exactly like that ... looking out for everyone, loyal to his teammates, fighting the good fight not just for his team but for his entire country.

Wow. Once again, I look down at my food, forgetting to eat. My impression of Marco has gradually changed from the night we first met, but at this moment it strikes me like a blinding camera flash that Marco has done amazing, selfless

things. My insides tighten up thinking about the dangers he put himself in, the strength he had to overcome huge challenges to become the man that he is—protective, committed, loyal, driven—even when it comes to something like running a bar.

I blink as the noise in the restaurant swirls around me, meaningless chatter and laughter and clinking glasses.

And once more, I feel that lacking ... that feeling that I'm not enough, that no matter what I do, I can't live up to other people's accomplishments—the kids at school, my driven family, and now this amazing man.

I need to be careful here. This whole “romp” is based on the fact that it's going to end. I can't start having those kinds of feelings for Marco, especially when he's so remarkable.

“What's going on, *belleza*?” he asks in a low voice, bending closer to me. “You're not eating. Are the chicken fingers that bad?”

I smile and shake my head. “No, they're not that bad. I'm just ... distracted.”

He nudges his shoulder against mine. “Me too. That talk about working in the garden got us all hot.”

“Us?”

“Me and my dick.”

I huff out a laugh at his ridiculous humor and drop my head forward. “Oh my God.”

“Don't tell me you haven't been thinking about that.”

I slant him a glance. “Okay, maybe.” That's all I'll admit to.

“Want something else to drink? I'm going to get a beer.”

“Sure. White wine?”

“You got it.”

I make myself pick up another piece of chicken and take a bite, but it's like eating a sponge.

“Holy shit.”

I blink and look over at Cade, who just uttered the expletive. He's staring across the bar.

Beck, Hayden, and Carrie all follow his gaze. He's looking at Marco, leaning against the bar talking to a woman.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Beck says.

Hayden and I turn curious eyes on each other, then look back at Beck.

"What?" Hayden asks. "What's wrong?"

"That's Marco's fiancée."

My world tilts and goes dark and weirdly quiet for a few seconds. "Fiancée?"

"Ex-fiancée," Cade adds. "What the hell is she doing here?"

"No idea," Beck growls.

My stomach churns. I press a hand there. The tension radiating from Beck and Cade thickens the air around us and makes my spine tingle.

I stare at the woman—petite, dark haired, very pretty, with big dark eyes and full lips. She has her hand on Marco's forearm and is smiling at him.

Marco doesn't smile back. I sense the tightness in his body even from way over here. Whatever happened between them, it didn't end happily, at least for him. My heart thuds against my breastbone. Jesus, I'm getting a full cardio workout tonight and haven't even moved. I hope I don't have a damn heart attack.

"I didn't know he was engaged once," Hayden says quietly, also staring.

"Yeah." Beck purses his lips and glances at me. "They broke up."

"Well, duh." Hayden casts a worried look at me.

I spread my lips into a smile as if I'm at a photo shoot and a camera is aimed at me. I've done it a million times. Easy.

“Marco doesn’t look happy.”

“No. He doesn’t.”

Even though my knees are shaky and my heart gallops, I push back my chair and stand. I toss my hair over my shoulder, straighten my shoulders, and stride across the bar, weaving my way through tables and chairs and customers and servers to reach Marco’s side. He glances up and sees me.

I beam at him. “What’s taking so long, Hot Shot?” I slide an arm around his waist and lean into him, smiling into his eyes. “I’m waiting for my wine.”

His eyes flicker and he picks up the glass of wine sitting near him on the bar. “So sorry, *belleza*. I ran into an old friend. Here you go.”

“Oh, an old friend!” I take the glass, do another hair toss, and flash a megawatt smile. “So nice to meet you! I’m Carrie.” I hold out a hand and tilt my head.

“Uh.” The woman’s eyes shift between Marco and me. “I’m Liz.” She takes my hand uncertainly, and I grip it firmly and shake it. My gaze quickly assesses Liz’s left hand. No ring there.

“Liz. Oh, *Liz*.” I turn wide eyes to Marco. “This is the woman you were engaged to?”

Marco’s mouth opens but nothing comes out.

I turn back to Liz. “Of course you are! So what brings you to Conquistadors? Looking to sample a fine extra-añejo tequila?”

Liz blinks more. She has fabulously long eyelashes, which appear to be natural, the bitch. “Tequila. Um, right.”

“Are you here alone?” I peer around, searching for a companion.

“I am.”

“Oh.” I put on a surprised air. “Well, that’s okay, it’s a friendly clientele here at Conquistadors. And totally safe for a woman alone. Which of course it would be, run by three

former SEALs who watch out for all their customers.” I wrinkle my forehead as if a little puzzled, though, why a woman would come to a bar alone.

The reason is obvious. She’s here to see Marco.

Does she want him back?

I’m starting to run out of steam in my little act. Marco needs to get his shit together.

“It’s a great bar,” Liz says. “I can’t believe this is what you’re doing now.”

“It’s going well,” Marco says.

I slide that arm back around him and squeeze his waist. His muscles relax minutely, and he meets my eyes again. I smile and his face eases into a return smile. I brush my lips over his stubbled jaw, lowering my eyelids. Marco turns his lips to my ear and whispers, “You’re amazing.”

“I know.” I pat his chest and keep my hand there, smiling into his eyes. His skin is hot beneath the shirt, his heart pounding.

Am I doing the right thing? What if this woman wants to get back together and Marco wants that too?

Doubt prickles inside me. My intuition is pretty good, but not infallible.

“I can see that.” Liz looks around. “It’s busy here.”

“Yeah. Saturdays are our busiest night.”

“Of course,” Liz murmurs. “So, uh ... you two ... ?”

Marco’s arm slides around my neck and I plaster myself to his side, smiling expectantly at Liz, not letting her off the hook by answering before she finished asking the question.

“Yeah, we’re together,” Marco says, going easier on his ex, whose cheeks are becoming quite scarlet.

“We met when I came to one of the tequila-tasting events here,” I bubble. “It was so fun. I didn’t know anything about

tequila, but Marco knows so much. All three guys make it really fun.”

“Fun,” Liz replies, the corners of her lips drooping.

“Are you coming back to the table?” Carrie asks Marco. “Oh, maybe you want to invite Liz to join us!”

“That’s okay,” Liz says quickly. “I’d better get going. Just thought I’d stop in and see what your bar was like and say hi.”

“Great to see you,” Marco says. “Sorry to hear about you and Rudy.”

My ears perk up, but I’ve already seen the woman isn’t married or engaged.

“Brody,” Liz says.

“Right.”

Liz slings her purse over her shoulder and makes her way out of the bar.

Marco’s body is still taut and vibrating.

“How’d you know?” he asks in a low voice.

“Know what?”

He sighs. “Everything, apparently. I gather Beck and Cade told you who she is.”

“Yeah. But all they said was you were engaged to her. I don’t know what happened.” I eye him curiously.

He nods. “But you knew my ass needed rescuing.”

I laugh softly and rub his chest through the thin cotton shirt. The firm muscles feel so good under my palm. I want to unbutton that shirt and touch his skin, feel the crisp chest hairs. “Rescuing? You? I don’t think so. You can handle pretty much anything, I think.”

His eyes crinkle at the corners as he gazes down at me. “Yeah. I can. But—” He stops.

I lift my eyebrows, but he doesn’t continue.

“Let’s go back to the table,” he says instead, picking up a beer.

CARRIE

“You want it hard?”

“Yes. Yes!” My head drops to the mattress, on my hands and knees. “Give it to me ... just like that. Oh God!”

Marco’s fingers dig into my hips as he slams into me again and again, on his knees behind me. His cock tunneling in and out of me has sensation coiling low inside me. Heat flows through my veins.

“Fucking hell.” He groans, reaching for my hair, twisting his fingers in it. “I love fucking you.”

“Yes.” I almost sob. “I love it, too.”

He leans over my back, his taut abdomen pressing to my ass, his chest rubbing on my back, and opens his mouth just below the nape of my neck. I push up onto straighter arms, turning my head. His mouth moves over the side of my neck and cheek, nips at my earlobe, while his hand glides up to my shoulder then back to my hip.

I’m dizzy, heavy with need, awareness narrowed to this—him. Me. Him inside me.

He sinks his teeth into my shoulder, and I give a soft cry at the sweet sting, then his hand comes to my face, pulling me up and around so he can kiss my mouth. I whimper as his tongue slides inside and finds mine, his cock filling me, stretching me, my body clenching around him.

His hands return to my waist and he resumes driving into me in urgent, demanding strokes. “Yeah,” he growls. “Fuck

yeah. So goddamn tight ... and hot ...” He eases out and his movements become shallower. “Look at you ... that perfect ass ... that sweet, hot pussy taking me ... *Christ.*”

My head lifts and my breath comes in short, choppy pants as sensation builds inside me. He curls his hand around the back of my neck, then trails his fingers down my spine, making me shiver. Soft, breathy noises fall from my lips. Marco’s breath becomes louder, ragged.

I slip my hand between my legs to find my aching clit and rub. So close ... oh yeah, there ... I can’t stop the noises that rise in my throat as my body tightens, sensation cresting, pleasure pouring through me.

“Fuck yeah,” he groans. “Squeeze me like that, baby ... I’m gonna come ...” Then he pulls out. Still gasping for breath, my mind scrambled, I don’t know what he’s doing, but feel him jerking his cock. “Wanna come on you ... mark you ...” Then hot liquid lands on my lower back as Marco utters low, primal sounds of ecstasy.

Holy hell and shit fire, that’s hot.

I collapse onto the bed, breathing heavily, and Marco stretches out over me to lay kisses over my upper back. “Jesus,” I pant. “I may never walk again.”

I feel his smile, then he moves away. “Be right back.”

I open one eye to watch him cross to the bathroom, devouring his gorgeous naked body with my eyes—his muscular thighs, tight ass and wide shoulders, those sexy-assin tattoos scrolling across his back and shoulder. I sigh with pleasure, my body boneless, still pulsing in my core. I let my eyes close and focus on breathing.

He returns with a warm, damp cloth from the bathroom and gently cleans me up, then dries me with a soft towel.

“Thank you,” I mumble.

“My pleasure.” He kisses my shoulder, balls up the towel and cloth and tosses them aside, then yanks the covers back up over both of us.

I snuggle in, rubbing my cheek on his chest. “Mmm.”

“Christ, Carrie. You’re insatiable.”

I smile. “Just with you.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. Maybe things are getting a little too serious here. We’ve been sleeping together for a couple of weeks now and it’s getting to be almost an addiction—I need him. I can’t get enough of him.

“So you were engaged.”

Marco’s body tenses. “Yeah.”

“How long ago was that?”

“It ended about two years ago.”

“Why?”

“She married someone else. I came home from Afghanistan to plan our wedding and get married, and discovered I was too late.”

“Shit. Really?” My stomach drops and I lift my head to look at him. His face is neutral, but the corners of his mouth tighten. “What a bitch.”

He huffs a short laugh. “Yeah, that’s what I thought too.”

“How could someone do that?”

“She said she couldn’t deal with all the time I was away. The separation. The worry. She didn’t like being alone.”

“She had to know that was part of the deal. That was your life.”

“She knew. I guess it was just harder for her than she thought it would be.”

“She didn’t deserve you.” I hesitate. “Did you love her? Gah. Never mind. Of course you did, if you were going to marry her.”

“Yeah, I loved her. When I found out she’d married someone else, I was pissed.”

“Not heartbroken?”

He twitches one big shoulder. “That too, I guess.” He closes his eyes, his mouth grim. “Mostly pissed, though. But then ... I knew it wasn’t meant to be. I had this crazy idea that we’d get married and have kids and a house and ...”

Have the family he lost.

My heart aches for him, an ache that goes right to my marrow. I touch my fingertips to his rough cheek. “Her loss,” I whisper. “She’s not just a bitch, she’s stupid.”

“Ha.”

“She wasn’t wearing a ring tonight.”

“Nope. Apparently they’re done.”

My chest goes cold. “Is that why she came to see you?”

“She didn’t say that, exactly.”

“It is. Now she realizes she screwed up. She wants you back.”

Marco doesn’t answer, still lying with his eyes closed.

“She does, doesn’t she.”

“I think that’s why she came looking for me, yeah.”

“Did I mess things up for you?” My insides twist up as I wait for his response.

“No. Christ no. I’m not interested in getting back with her.”

I swallow, trying to be casual. “Are you sure? She’s pretty. You loved her once.”

“I’m sure.” He opens his eyes and his intense gaze meets mine. “Very sure. I’m not interested in Liz at all. That ended a long time ago.”

I nod slowly. “Okay, then.”

He strokes my back, a slow glide of his palm up, then down to rest on my butt. He lets out a slow breath and I feel his muscles relax. I press my lips to the warm skin of his chest, then rest my cheek there and cuddle into him again.

I hate Liz for hurting him, even though I'm happy things didn't work out for them.

"I was glad you were there tonight." Marco's voice thickens with drowsiness. "You were awesome. And yeah, I can handle pretty much anything ... but sometimes it's nice to know someone has your back."

I squeeze my eyes closed at the sudden stinging there and nod. Yeah. I have his back. Emotion swells in my chest, hot and fierce, along with it a scary knowledge that I would do anything for this man.

Marco

"I bet you look good naked."

I freeze and blink a few times. "Uh ..."

Carrie's grandmother chuckles. "Oh, come on. You were in the navy. You can't be a prude."

We're seated in chairs on the patio behind Carrie's parents' home the next afternoon.

"No, ma'am, I'm not a prude." I manage a smile, sure my face is flaming red. "And I do look good naked."

"Ha!" Mrs. Garner slaps her leg. "I wish I could see. Don't be horrified. I just appreciate the male body. I looked good naked too, in my day." She sighs.

"I bet you did." I wink, loosening up. I was as nervous as a fox in a forest fire about coming to this. Family gatherings are so not my comfort zone. But Mrs. Garner is a firecracker.

"I have pictures," she says. "Someday Carrie will bring you to visit me and I'll show you."

"Pictures of what?" Carrie appears, carrying a bunch of gift bags that have to be presents for her dad.

"Pictures of me, back in my burlesque days."

"Oh." Carrie nods and meets my eyes. I sense she's about to make some excuse not to, then decides to humor her

grandma. “Sure, someday we’ll do that.”

In the weeks left before Carrie goes to Spain, there will no doubt be time to visit her grandma. But the fact that we aren’t really in that kind of a relationship means that probably won’t happen. After the dance at the retirement village when Julia announced I’m Carrie’s boyfriend, we’ve played along with it. Later when we went back to Carrie’s place and had smokin’ hot sex, she was clear it was just an act. A temporary thing so we don’t have to explain how Julia knows me. Yet here I am somehow, at a family party, and honestly, I’m having a blast.

I didn’t want to come.

Families scare the shit out of me. My gut was knotted with dread and I almost bailed.

But I couldn’t do that to Carrie.

And here I am, having fun. Huh.

Carrie’s family may drive her nuts, but they’re all smart, interesting people, and Grandma Garner is a hoot.

Two little boys dash out from the house, across the patio, and onto the grass, each of them carrying Nerf swords. With lots of yelling, they begin to battle.

“I want one of those,” I murmur, watching Carrie’s nephews.

“A boy?” Grandma Garner says immediately. “That’s good to know you want kids. Carrie’s not getting any younger. How old are you, by the way?”

Carrie slaps a hand to her forehead, having arranged the gifts on a long glass patio table. “Grandma!”

“What?” Mrs. Garner frowns at Carrie. “I’m just asking.”

I squint at Mrs. Garner. “Uh, I’m thirty. But I didn’t mean I want a kid. I want one of those swords.”

Carrie shakes her head, biting back a smile. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch her cross the stone patio, admiring as always her sweet ass, today clad in a short, stretchy tank-style dress that

hugs it lovingly and displays her gorgeous legs. Where's she going now? She's been running around since we got here, helping her mom with food and gifts, lavishing affection on her nieces and nephews, and waiting on Grandma Garner.

She returns only a moment later, carrying two more swords.

My eyes widen and I grin. She hands me a sword. "Come on."

I rise out of my chair and follow her onto the grass where the two boys are playing. She brandishes her sword at them and they pause, giving her an opportunity to strike. "Take that!"

I laugh and join the battle. Then Carrie pauses and somehow splits her sword into two, now wielding two weapons.

"Aunt Carrie! No fair!"

"How'd you do that?"

She laughs and stops to show them how the swords work. Then the boys go crazy, spinning and swinging the toys until they both fall down on the grass, laughing.

I fall down too, grinning. I gaze up at the blue sky, panting from the exertion of chasing the boys around. This family shit is ... fun.

"Carrie, you know I don't like them playing with weapons." The female voice that calls to us is sister-in-law Emily, married to Carrie's oldest brother, Justin.

"Chill, hon," Justin says. "It's just a toy."

I lift my head and grin at the guy, holding up a sword and arching an eyebrow.

Justin laughs and strides over to take a weapon, then starts swatting his kids with it.

Carrie drops to the grass beside me and sets a hand on my chest.

"Where'd you get those other swords?" I pant.

“I bought two sets.” She grins. “Because I knew I’d want to play, too.”

She glows out here in the sunshine, her blond hair gleaming and tousled, her eyes bright. I love how she likes to play.

Another woman emerges from the house, carrying a baby—Carrie’s other sister-in-law, Stephanie, with baby Savannah. Carrie jumps to her feet and rushes over. “Diaper changed? Perfect! Come to Auntie Carrie, you little cutie.” She scoops up her baby niece and balances her on her hip. And I can only gape, my chest feeling hot and tight as she plays with the baby, cooing at her and bouncing her.

Lauren and Julia are here too, of course, Julia not too cool to hang out with her little nephews as they play.

I roll to my feet, brush grass off my shorts, and stroll over to the grill where Carrie’s dad is turning burgers and chicken breasts. “Need another beer, Aaron?” I ask.

Carrie’s dad drains the last of the bottle he’s holding. “Yeah, that’d be great, thanks.”

I take the empty and retrieve two more cold ones from the outdoor fridge. This family apparently likes their outdoor eating, with an amazing kitchen built at one end of the patio including an impressive grill, fridge, sink, and granite counters all attractively finished with stone.

I return and lean against the counter as Aaron lowers the lid on the grill. “Those swords were a big hit.”

“Not so much with Emily,” Aaron notes with a wry smile. “Emily and Justin take their parenting pretty seriously.”

“Justin was having fun with them too.”

“Yeah.” Aaron’s gaze drifts to his younger daughter holding the baby. “Carrie’s good for them that way. She loosens us all up.”

I can definitely see that. It’s nice that her dad sees it, too.

Soon we’re all seated around the long table, Savannah in a highchair her dad brings out, the kids excitedly adding ketchup

and mustard to their hamburgers and reaching across everyone, their parents admonishing them to use their manners, everyone talking over each other.

Dinner conversation turns to business, Justin, James, Lauren, and Aaron arguing about the looming employment crisis, with an aging workforce and Millennials who have different expectations from their employers. “Low- and middle-income workers’ perception of unfairness is going to cause a crisis of worker availability and competitiveness for U.S. companies,” Justin says.

“True,” Lauren says. “Employers are going to have to find balance between profitability and compensation to motivate workers. Especially fast food and retail, where wage levels are typically low.”

I nod, thinking about Conquistadors and our never-ending staff turnover and the things we need to do to be an attractive employer.

“The friction between companies and their employees is going to grow,” Aaron agrees. “The government needs to do something.”

“I think it’s a mistake to look to the government,” I offer. “They’re never going to agree on an issue like wages.”

“We have to change the tax system,” Emily says.

“I disagree,” James replies. “Taxing our way to economic equality is unrealistic.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to bridge the gap,” I say. “Companies need to understand what their workers really need.”

Beside me, Carrie nods thoughtfully and opens her mouth as if to comment.

“Hey,” James says, also looking at Carrie. “What’s five hundred feet long and has an IQ of forty?”

I feel Carrie stiffen. I glance around the table as a few others ask, “What?”

“The final walk-through of a fashion show.” James flashes a teasing smile at his sister.

Carrie joins in the laughter, but I sense her hurt. I get that James thought he was trying to include Carrie in the conversation, but in a misguided way. This seems to be typical, though.

“Well, unless it was Carrie in the walk-through,” I say with a grin. “Then it would be a *hundred* and forty. Probably more.”

A dozen pairs of eyes land their gazes on me in surprise, most of all Carrie’s. A smile trembles on her lips as she stares at me.

“You obviously know our girl well,” Grandma Garner says, looking pleased.

I shrug. “Getting to more and more.”

And it’s true. Seeing her with her family just emphasizes how different she is from most of them, which I already knew from Carrie. Justin is awkward and nerdy, obviously super smart, focused on running his tech company. Carrie’s other brother, James, is stuffy and serious, an attorney at a prominent law firm. Lauren, too, is a serious businesswoman, participating in the conversation with terse responses. My impression is that, while they’re all clearly intelligent, they want everyone to know that, and there’s also a lot of talk about money. Money is great, but not super interesting to me. All this drives home how genuine Carrie is. I know she doesn’t care much about money either. She never tries to show off or pretend to be something she isn’t. She’s warm and caring and buoyant. And she’s smart—just as smart as the rest of them, even if she’s not an expert in business.

I can tell her family dismisses her accomplishments. I also see how that stings her.

I reach for her hand under the table and squeeze it, and the smile she sends me makes my heart swell.

When we finish eating, Carrie’s dad opens his gifts. His sons give him expensive tech toys and Lauren gives him a new golf club, at which Carrie’s mom rolls her eyes. Aaron

appreciates my bottle of tequila. When he opens Carrie's present, he pauses, studying it thoughtfully before saying, "Beautiful, honey," and nodding his head.

I watch Carrie bite her lip, clearly anxious.

"Where is this?" Aaron asks Carrie.

"Torrey Pines Reserve."

I stand to peer at the gift. It's a framed photograph, a scenic image of cliffs, rocks, and ocean obviously done near sunset, the colors of the cliffs rich shades of gold and spice against pure blue sky and ocean. "Wow. That's gorgeous, Carrie."

"Thank you."

"It is, honey. It really is. It'll look fantastic in my office," her dad says.

"That's what I thought." Carrie's shoulders lower from their tense position up near her ears.

We're on our way out, saying goodbyes and exchanging hugs, when I overhear Carrie's mom say something about their garage door not working.

"I don't know what's wrong with it," she says to James. "Some piece came off the track or something. Dad looked at it but he said it's broken and needs welding."

"What's that?" I speak up. "Something needs welding?"

Cheryl nods. "Our garage door." She smiles. "That's why both vehicles are parked in the driveway and everyone else had to park on the street. We'll call someone next week to fix it."

"Let me have a look. I'm a welder."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yeah. That was the trade I learned in the Navy. I wanted to do underwater welding, so I started working on swimming and learning to dive, and then I did underwater construction and demolition—repairing ships and submarines."

“Wow.” Her eyes widen and the air in the room shifts.

“I still want to see your sculptures,” Julia pipes up. “Aunt Carrie, will you take me next week?”

“Uh, sure, sweetie.”

I follow Cheryl into the garage and inspect the problem. “Yeah, I could fix this if I had equipment with me. How about I pop back tomorrow morning?”

“You could do that?”

“Of course. Not a big deal at all.”

“That would be fantastic.”

I smile and we arrange a time, then Carrie and I leave.

“I want a picture like that,” I say when we’re in my Jeep.

“Like what? The one I gave my dad?”

“Yeah. Not that exact one. But I want one of your pictures.”

She grins. “You can buy them at Bowes Gallery.”

I snort softly. “Okay then. I’ll do that.”

She tilts her head. “I was kidding. I have tons of pictures I can give you. You can pick one.”

“No, *you* pick one. Before you go. I want something you pick.”

Our eyes meet and hold.

Then I look back at the road and pull out from where I parked.

Before you go.

Jesus. I spent the afternoon having fun with her family, admiring her, defending her even. I’m getting in deep and we both know that’s not what this is supposed to be. Because she’s leaving.

CARRIE

I want to give Marco a photograph.

But what? I look at images on my Mac a couple of weeks later. I know he likes sea creatures, from his sculptures. I did a bunch last year on a snorkeling trip in Cabo San Lucas, and I scroll through images of whales, dolphins, coral reefs, and colorful tropical fish.

I want it to be special and I want it to mean something.

But why?

Hell. Fucking, fucking hell. Because *he* means something to me.

I pause on an image of a humpback whale I took from a catamaran. The creature is big and yet somehow gentle. I know these whales are friendly and interact with other cetacean species, like dolphins, which I also photographed on that trip. And yet humpback whales have a loose-knit social structure, living alone or in transient groups.

Somehow this makes me think of Marco and his transient family life growing up. And yet he found family. Not blood family, but the kind of family you make.

Apparently he found family with Liz too, or thought he had. The idea that Liz came looking for him, possibly wanting to try again, makes me nauseous. Maybe when I'm gone, Marco *will* go back to the girl he loved, the girl he proposed to. Maybe he still has a chance to have that family with her. Now that he's out of the Navy, there's no longer an issue about him being away.

Sadness swells inside me and I close my eyes against the huge feeling of pressure, so powerful I can't sit still. Propelled to my feet, I cross the living room to stand in front of the sliding doors onto the patio and the courtyard outside my condo. Darkness obscures most of the view, other than the exterior lights that illuminate a palm tree here, a flower bed there.

I swallow hard. Dammit, leaving him is not going to be easy. This wasn't supposed to happen.

Is it worth it? Going to Spain? What am I giving up to go there?

Well ... nothing, really. Marco and I have never committed to anything. We both agreed this is a "romp" before I leave. I have to do this. I'm obligated to the school from which I accepted a scholarship. I've booked my flight, at a cost of more than a thousand dollars. I've made a deposit on the apartment in Madrid. I've finally done something that's impressed my parents and my siblings.

Sadly, I turn away from the window.

I have to go. I have to do this to prove to my family that I'm worthy. To prove it to myself.

I impulsively applied for that scholarship after Hayden started seeing Beck, feeling a little abandoned by my friend, and knowing my modeling career was coming to an end. I was more surprised than anyone when I was accepted. Surprised and proud of myself.

I don't really want to go.

Oh God. Realization slams into me.

My throat aches and I drop down onto the couch in front of my computer. I bury my face in my hands. I don't want to go. I'm going to miss my family. My friends. Marco.

But I can't be a quitter. I have to see this through. Getting involved with Marco was such a bad idea. Now I've gone and ... okay, yes, I'll admit it: I've fallen for him. Dammit.

He doesn't feel the same. He knows I'm leaving and knows this is short term. I can't abandon my dream for a man, especially a man I have no future with anyway.

I suck in a long breath and lift my head to focus on the image of the whale breaching. This one. I'll get it printed and framed and give it to him before I leave. And I'll hope that it reminds him of me.

Marco

"It's too much." Carrie slumps in the chair in Anna's office, her chin nearly on her chest.

I reach out and take her hand, wanting to support her. "It's a lot. But it can be done."

She lifts anguished eyes to me. "I want this so much. The more I think about it, the more I can see it, how great it could be. But there's no way we can get all this done before I leave."

It's true. There is no way. She's leaving in just over two weeks.

"It's not something that's quick and easy," Anna says in a soft voice. "And I totally agree that it needs to happen. I'm certainly willing to support it, and I know both of you are ... but we really need someone to lead the project, since you're going to Spain."

Carrie sucks on her bottom lip briefly, and I want to lean over and kiss her.

We just had another meeting about Carrie's idea to open a drop-in studio for kids to paint, and maybe do other kinds of art projects that would get them off the streets and keep them out of trouble.

Then Carrie's head shoots up. "I know who can do this."

I blink. "Who?"

"My mom."

I consider that. Mrs. Garner was apparently a high-powered CEO before retiring and Carrie's talked a bunch

about how she's having a hard time dealing with the loss of her career and all that went with it. "That might be a fantastic idea," I say slowly.

Carrie's eyes enlarge. "I think it might be too!" She inhales a long breath. "She needs something to keep her busy, something to focus on. This isn't in her wheelhouse." She looks at Anna. "She used to be the CEO of South Bay Community Health."

Anna nods. "She would certainly bring some good leadership and management skills to the project."

"Let's go talk to her right now." Carrie bounces up out of her seat.

"Hold up." I reach for her hand.

"Why?"

"Uh ..." She's got me there. But I'm a guy who likes to think things through and Carrie likes to act quickly. Sometimes too quickly. "Maybe we should think about whether there's anyone else who could do it."

Anna looks between us. "Finding someone willing to volunteer their time who has the skills to coordinate this basically from the ground up could be a challenge. I can put out some feelers, however, if you want me to."

Carrie meets my eyes. "It makes sense."

"It does. Let's talk about how to approach her, though. Make sure we have our story straight about our reasons for wanting to do this."

"I hate lying to my mom." Carrie's bottom lip pushes out. "I hated lying to Lauren about what I was doing with Julia all those days. I've thought about telling her the truth ... maybe it's long enough after the fact that she won't get upset. And Julia has stayed out of trouble ever since."

Carrie has brought Julia by my place a couple of times. She seemed fascinated with my metal sculpture, as was Carrie actually, and they both spent some time watching me work, which was weird but kind of cool.

“I think part of it is just having attention,” I say.

“Maybe it would open Lauren’s eyes and show her that she needs to put Julia first. I know she’s going through a hard time, but jeez.”

“So, back to your mom ...”

Carrie touched her fingers to her lips. “She’s not exactly ... understanding of artistic temperaments.” She grimaces. “So I don’t know how she’d deal with the kids, but maybe that doesn’t matter. We just need to make sure that the volunteers who work directly with the kids are good with them.”

“I think she’d be fine with them,” I say. “I could see how much she loves her grandchildren.”

“Yes, she does.”

“And she raised four children and did a pretty damn good job of it.”

“But ...”

“I know.” I squeeze her hand. Our eyes meet. “Why don’t you ask her and see what she thinks?”

“If she knows Julia’s involved, it might help. We’ll just have to be careful about how much we say.”

We.

Yeah. I’ll be there with her if she wants.

Carrie’s been killing herself the last few weeks. She found a potential location for the gallery that would be perfect. She’s been helping Hayden put together a speedy wedding. She’s done a photo shoot for Hollywood stars, for Chrissake. She’s been packing and making all the arrangements to move to Spain for nine months. Nine fucking months.

She’s been practicing her Spanish with me—mostly in bed—and she’s so damn cute. For the rest of my life, those phrases I’ve taught her will be accompanied by memories of her sitting with her hair all wild around her shoulders, her lips swollen, sheets pulled up over her beautiful breasts, her bare shoulders gleaming in the lamplight.

I glance at my watch. “I have time now if you think your mom would be home.”

“I’ll call just to make sure.” She reaches for her cellphone.

“Let me know how it goes.” Anna follows us out of her office and we walk through the gallery. “Like I said, I can put out feelers.”

Carrie calls her mom and learns she is in fact home. “Can Marco and I stop by? We have something to talk to you about.”

This is apparently agreeable to Mrs. Garner and Carrie ends the call. “Okay, let’s go.”

As we drive the short distance from the gallery to the Garner home, Carrie scrolls through emails on her phone. “Oh my God. This is crazy.”

I glance at her. “What?”

“I’m getting all kinds of requests from famous people to take pictures of their kids.”

“Like who?”

She names a few movie stars and a country music singer.

“Holy shit.”

“I know! Ever since I did that shoot for Jessica Farris. This is crazy!” She starts tapping in a response, muttering, “How am I supposed to do all this when I’m leaving in two weeks?”

You could stay.

My jaw tight, we pull into the driveway of Carrie’s parents’ home. Carrie leads me to the front door, which she opens and steps in. “Hello! We’re here.”

Mrs. Garner hurries from the kitchen. “Hi!” She grabs Carrie in a big hug. Carrie turns surprised eyes on me, who shrugs. Carrie’s family love each other but they aren’t ones to hug a lot. “Your dad’s on his way home! He was just having coffee with some friends.”

“Why’s he coming home?” Carrie frowns, stepping back and smoothing her hair.

“To hear your news!”

“We just needed to talk to *you*, Mom. It’s about an idea Marco and I have been working on.”

Mrs. Garner’s mouth falls open and her eyes dim. “Oh. What kind of idea?”

“What did you think we wanted to talk to you about?”

“I thought ... maybe you decided not to go to Spain. That you and Marco ... had news. You know.” She drops her head briefly. “Sorry. I guess I jumped to a wrong conclusion.”

My gut clenches. She’d thought ... shit.

I meet Carrie’s eyes and see the same confused expression.

“I thought you were happy I’m going to Spain,” Carrie says slowly to her mom.

“Well, of course I am. We’re so proud of you for getting that scholarship. But it’s far away, and nine months is a long time and ...” She hesitated. “Well, we’re going to miss you.”

Carrie gapes at her mom. “Really?”

My chest aches. How can she not realize how important she is to her family? To *everyone* she comes in contact with. Hayden is already depressed and Carrie hasn’t even left yet. And me ... well, every day that passes and brings us closer to the day she’s going to get on that plane makes my heart shrink.

“Of course, really,” her mother says. “Maybe we don’t say it enough in this family, but we love you, sweetheart.”

Carrie blinks, her eyes glossy. “I love you too, Mom,” she whispers. She touches her fingertips to one eye and sucks in a shaky breath. “Nine months isn’t that long.”

“I suppose it isn’t. And it will be an amazing experience for you.” Mrs. Garner glances at me. “So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Let’s sit.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Garner walks into the living room and we sit on the sofa and loveseat.

“Marco and I have been working on an idea. Julia’s been involved in it a little because it’s something that she’s interested in. She loves to paint, murals. Big pictures. And some of her friends ... Ah hell, I have to be honest.”

Mrs. Garner’s forehead creases. “Okay.”

“Julia got involved with a gang of graffiti artists. Marco caught Julia painting graffiti on the back of Conquistadors. We talked to her about it, and she agreed to do some work for Marco to pay the costs of painting over it.”

“Dear Lord.” Mrs. Garner presses a hand to her chest.

“Yeah. I haven’t told Lauren, but I’m going to. Anyway, we thought maybe there was something we could do to help the other kids she was hanging out with and keep them from getting into trouble. So we—”

“You,” I interject. “This was your idea, Carrie.”

She smiles. “I had this idea of opening a place for kids to go after school, weekends. Somewhere they could do their art that was safe and kept them off the streets.”

“We’ve been talking to Anna Bowes,” I add. “She runs the gallery that sells some of Carrie’s paintings and my sculptures. She has some ideas and connections, and Carrie’s done a bunch of preliminary work, even found a place that looks ideal. But we need to raise some money to pay for the space, buy supplies, and we need to get some volunteers involved.”

“That’s ... a full-time job.” Mrs. Garner tips her head to one side.

“It is,” Carrie agrees. “At least, right now it is. I think once we’re set up, it wouldn’t be a full-time job to keep it going, but it would need someone to manage it.” She squares her shoulders. “Since I’m leaving soon, I thought you’d be the perfect one to do that.”

“Me?” Mrs. Garner’s eyes widen.

“Yes. You keep saying you need some kind of purpose in your life. You need to be busy and productive. This would be a way for you to do it. We couldn’t afford to pay someone with the kinds of skills and experience you have.”

“So you’re asking me to work for free.” Mrs. Garner pauses. “I’m kidding. That’s what volunteer work is. It’s not like I need a job that pays. But ... I don’t have any experience with nonprofits.”

“I know, but ... would it be that much different?”

“I expect there are legal and accounting differences.” Mrs. Garner taps her bottom lip. “I’d be interested in doing some research into it. I’d need some help ...”

“I’m here.” I lift a hand.

Mrs. Garner gives me a long look, then glances at Carrie. “Of course you are.” She smiles, but her eyes hold a hint of something else ... worry? “I know a couple of people I could ask to help with fundraising. And your brother James might be willing to do some pro bono work.”

“So you’ll do it?” Carrie perches on the edge of the couch.

Mrs. Garner doesn’t answer immediately. “Tell me more about Julia.”

Carrie nibbles her bottom lip. “Well, she apparently did do some other, uh—”

“Vandalism,” I say.

Carrie wrinkles her nose.

“Well, it is,” I say evenly. “You know it is.”

“I know. But to her, it was art. She’s really having a hard time with Lauren and Brian’s separation. I know Lauren’s hurting, but she hasn’t talked to any of us about it. She really needs to talk to Julia and spend some time with her.”

Mrs. Garner sighs. “I know. I’ve tried to tell her that.” She eyes Carrie. “But you plan to talk to her about this?”

“Yes.” Carrie sighs. “I shouldn’t have kept it from her, but I didn’t want Julia to get in trouble. She’s struggling and found

a group she thought she fit in with, and I know the graffiti was a bit rebellious. But honestly, she worked hard at Conquistadors to make up for it.”

“If anyone can talk to Lauren about this, it’s you, sweetheart.”

Carrie blinks. “Well, I don’t know about that. But I’m going to try. I should have done it sooner instead of hiding what was going on from her.”

“You thought you were doing the right thing. And it sounds like you made a difference for Julia.”

“She did,” I confirm. Again, Mrs. Garner divides a strange look between us, a curious softness in her eyes. “How’s the garage door working, by the way?”

“Perfect.” She smiles. “Not a problem since the day you fixed it. Thank you again.”

“Hey, it was simple.”

The front door opens and Mr. Garner strides in. “I’m home! What’s going on? Carrie! Marco, good to see you.” He looks around eagerly.

“Relax, Aaron,” Mrs. Garner says with a sigh. “It wasn’t what I thought.”

Carrie’s dad frowns. He turns to Carrie. “You’re still going to Spain?”

Carrie’s bottom lip quivers. “Yes.”

“Oh.”

I sense Carrie’s emotions, almost feeling them myself—love and sadness, affection and distress. I want to wrap my arms around her and hold her and comfort her, and also keep her from leaving. And I sense her parents want to do the same.

We tell Mr. Garner about the project and he surprisingly volunteers to help also, saying that his retired buddies all have lots of money he’s sure they’ll be willing to donate.

“And this will be a good way for us to stay in touch with Marco while Carrie’s gone,” Mrs. Garner says with a wistful

smile.

My insides twist and I sense Carrie's discomfort.

Why do I want that so much? Is it because it'll help me feel connected to Carrie while she's gone? Is it because I want a family? But they're not my family and Carrie and I aren't really together and this fucking sucks.

"So your project is under way," I say to Carrie as we leave.

She nods.

I open the door of my Jeep and help her in. "You don't seem very happy."

She still says nothing, and I round the hood and climb into the driver's seat. I start the vehicle and set my hand on the back of Carrie's seat to reverse out of the driveway.

"I'm confused," she blurts.

I nod. "Talk to me."

"I never thought my parents would miss me if I went away."

"Of course they'll miss you. They're your parents."

"But I always feel so useless around them. Around my whole family."

"You're not useless, Carrie. You clearly have an important role in your family."

"I do?" She gazes back at me, eyes full of shadows.

"Sure."

Her bottom lip quivers, and this time she seriously looks like she's going to cry. She turns away from me to stare out the window. Eventually she says, "I feel bad that they think there's something between us, when there isn't really."

That feels like a rusty knife twisting in my heart.

And the reason? Not just because she's leaving, but because it's not true. There *is* something between us.

CARRIE

I enter my condo and drop my purse onto the kitchen counter, Marco following me. Late-afternoon sunshine streams in the windows to the patio, illuminating the leaves of a big potted plant there, my bright red wall glowing.

My insides are twisted up in knots. I'm so confused.

My parents don't want me to leave. They really are going to miss me. Somehow I didn't think my absence would have any effect on them. Also, I do feel guilty about leading them on about me and Marco. In the end it won't matter, because I'll go to Spain and that will end things between us. Although Mom seems to think otherwise.

Which makes my insides hurt even more.

Then there are all these crazy photography job offers coming in. I want to accept them, but how am I supposed to do that? I only have a couple of weeks, and my days are already full with wedding stuff, getting ready to move, and hopefully moving forward with plans for the drop-in center.

I'm torn between the chance to go to Spain to improve my photography through study and travel, or stay here to seize this opportunity—and stay with my family, friends, and Marco.

I've fallen in love with him.

Leaving him will break my heart and hurt like I've never been hurt before.

I turn to face him. "Marco." Then my mouth dries up and I swallow.

“Yeah?”

“I-I’m confused.”

“About?”

“Everything.” I twist my hands together. “I’m getting all these crazy offers to do portraits for famous people, and I want to do them. But I can’t. Because I’m leaving. And I’m starting to wonder.” God. I can’t tell him how I feel. Can I? I search for words. “I’m starting to wonder if going to Spain is the right thing to do.”

He gazes back at me, his face impassive. “You said you have to do this. You said it was important to you.”

“It is.” I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. This isn’t the response I’m hoping for. “I want to prove myself. You’ve met my family. You know how they see me. I’ve finally done something that almost lives up to all of their achievements. I can’t just bail on this. Then I’ll just be the dumb blonde they’ve always thought I am. But ...” I blink at him. “If I go away for nine months now, I lose these opportunities. I’ll never get that back.”

“Sounds like you have a tough choice to make.”

I stare at him. My lower lip starts to quiver and I swallow again. “Yes. I guess I do.”

I wait. I want him to say something to help with my decision.

Finally he says, “Well. I should go.”

“What?” My heart lurches. “You’re not staying?”

“Not tonight.” He drops his gaze briefly. “You know ... maybe we should just end things now.”

I go very still. “What? Why? W-we have two more weeks. And th-the wedding is next weekend ...”

“Yeah. The wedding.” He nods. Then he moves his hands from mine and wraps his arms around me. He pulls me against him, and I stiffen at first, then slide my arms around his waist

and relax against his body, so big, hard, and warm. Oh so comforting. But he's leaving. Ending things between us.

It's going to happen anyway. We both know it. So why does this hurt so much?

"Next weekend, we'll be at the wedding together, celebrating Beck and Hayden's marriage. We'll do it for them. Right?"

"R-right." We stand for long moments, holding each other tight. How can I let go of him?

Finally he releases me and steps back. He kisses my forehead. "See you next weekend."

Somehow I make it through the week. I feel strangely numb, moving automatically through the tasks I need to get done. I do more packing, pick up things I'll need, meet with my mom and Anna at the gallery—without Marco, help Hayden pick up decorations and force myself to sit through manicures and pedicures the day before the wedding.

I somehow act so normal Hayden doesn't even realize my world is falling apart.

But this is my choice.

It hurts so much that Marco ended things, and yet I understand why. Because we never committed to anything more than this fling before I leave. Somehow it started to feel like so much more than that, though.

But I'm still leaving. So how can I expect anything else from him?

I block out the hurt, preferring numb, focusing on getting things done for my trip and for the wedding.

Beck's parents arrive while the girls are having our pedicures on Friday. Beck picks them up at the airport and drives them to the Hotel del Coronado where the wedding is taking place and where he's reserved a room for them. With my dad's connections and a lucky cancellation, they were able to book the beautiful hotel for the wedding at short notice. Because it's a small, simple ceremony, there's no need for a

rehearsal, so Hayden and Beck are having a quiet dinner tonight with just family.

Wearing flip-flops so as not to ruin my pink toenail polish, I hug Hayden outside the salon. “Have fun tonight.”

Hayden rolls her eyes. “It’s Beck’s parents. I think I might puke.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“They terrify me.”

“They’ll love you.”

Hayden pastes on a brave grin. “Okay! Sure.”

“Seriously. Just be yourself. Honestly, you love Beck. That has to mean something to his parents.”

Hayden bites her lip and nods. “I do love him. I can do this.”

“Of course you can. Just don’t go on about messenger RNA therapeutics or morpholinos, or whatever.”

Hayden laughs. “Got it. Okay. See you tomorrow. You’re coming to the suite at the hotel at one o’clock, right?”

“Right. And I’m bringing champagne.”

“See you then!”

I climb into my car. My numbness is giving way to fluttery nerves in my belly as seeing Marco again grows nearer.

I miss him already and I haven’t even left yet.

Hayden and I stand on the edge of the patio at the Hotel del Coronado. The evening sun is low over the ocean, casting a warm light onto the beach. Glowing candles and pink roses nestled in the sand create the aisle we’ll walk down toward the arbor draped in white tulle and more pink roses. Buddy Holly starts singing “Everyday,” which is my signal to walk down the aisle ahead of my best friend. “Ready?” I whisper.

Hayden nods, looking so beautiful in her white dress. She has a spray of pink roses pinned to the side of her head with a small drape of sheer tulle attached to it and she clutches her

bouquet of flowers in shades of blush, rose, and fuchsia, with a few periwinkles tucked among them. “I’m ready.” She smiles.

Clasping my smaller bouquet of similar flowers, I let out a sigh of happiness, turn, and start down the aisle. The sand is cool on my bare feet, my silver pumps sitting neatly on the patio until later. The guests sit in white chairs arranged in rows on the pale sand. The ocean breeze carries the scent of sea and sunshine, and billows the tulle, and I can’t help but smile at the upbeat rhythm of the music.

My eyes go straight to Marco, standing up at the front with Beck, Cade, and the officiant.

Dear Lord he looks good. He’s wearing his dress blues, his hair neat beneath his white hat, his jaw clean shaven. His dark eyes meet mine from the other end of the aisle and the rest of the world fades away.

I swallow, my steps faltering. What would it be like if I were walking down this aisle toward Marco to become his? Forever and ever.

That’s crazy thinking.

And yet my heart aches with longing, wanting to reach out to him, to hold on to him and never let him go. My throat thickens and I blink rapidly to dispel the tears that threaten. Crying at a wedding is okay because everyone will think they’re tears of happiness. I don’t want to cry tears of sadness today because this is a happy day, the happiest of days for Hayden and Beck as they join their lives.

I make it to the arbor and detach my gaze from Marco’s, stepping to the side and turning to watch Hayden.

The music changes to “I Choose You” by Sara Bareilles, and the words of the song are so fitting. Hayden glows as she begins her stroll down the sandy aisle. I glance at Beck to see his reaction, and the wonder and devotion on his face makes my heart tilt. *That*. That is ... everything.

Hayden’s eyes are mostly for Beck, but she does smile at Cade and Marco as she arrives at Beck’s side. She meets my

eyes as she hands over the bouquet and turns to face her future husband.

As I listen to the ceremony and vows, I glance around to take in friends and family watching—Beck’s parents sitting in the front row along with Marco’s former lieutenant commander and his wife, and on the other side of the aisle, Hayden’s aunt and uncle, cousins, and their wives and kids.

“Hayden and Beck, you have expressed your love to one another with the vows you have just made. With these promises in mind, I pronounce you husband and wife. You have kissed many times, but today is your first kiss ... not as partners or lovers or best friends, but as husband and wife. Your kiss is another promise to each other.” The officiant smiles. “You may kiss your bride.”

Holding Hayden’s hands, Beck tugs her close. She goes onto her toes and their lips meet in a soft kiss, then one more ... then another one that turns longer and hotter. The guests erupt into applause and cheers, and they pull apart smiling.

The bride and groom practically dance back up the aisle to the patio, followed by Cade, then Marco and me, arm in arm. The feel of his strong muscles beneath the crisp uniform jacket makes me quiver. I sense the tension in his body and know I’m not the only one feeling this strain, despite his easy smile and seemingly relaxed demeanor.

Ed Sheeran sings “Kiss Me” as Beck and Hayden, then Marco and I take our turns signing the wedding documents at a small table in the back of the patio. Acutely aware of Marco, I try to act normal as I sign my name. The signature is definitely shaky. Marco holds my chair for me to stand and I give him a small smile as I rise and step away, the magnetic pull I feel for him making it hard not to throw myself at him.

It’s done—short, simple, and sweet—and it’s time for the party. Servers circulate with glasses of champagne and hors d’oeuvres. Cade, Marco, and I accompany Hayden and Beck back out to the beach where the photographer arranges us and takes a few photographs before the sun sets completely, some with the iconic white and red-roofed hotel in the background.

Hayden mostly wants candid shots, so thankfully this doesn't take long. I call upon my years of experience posing for the camera to keep a perfect smile on my face, especially when standing next to Marco.

Luckily Hayden is wrapped up in her day such that she doesn't seem to recognize the tension between Marco and me, or the fact that I'm shaky and strained, because even though I know I'm doing a good job of acting, and Hayden isn't always the most intuitive person, Hayden knows me well enough that normally she would have noticed.

Marco

I watch Carrie sit on a low stone wall and cross her legs to brush sand off her feet.

She's beautiful. So goddamn beautiful. When I saw her walking over the sand toward me in that pretty blue dress, holding a bouquet of flowers, all big beautiful eyes and shiny lips and sexy curves, I damn near lost my shit.

She's leaving.

Of course she has to go. Why would I think this will end any other way? Why would I think what we had would end any differently than with other people I cared about? The parents who were ripped out of my life. The families I so wanted to fit in with, who didn't want me. The fiancée who couldn't wait for me.

Seeing Liz again that night at Conquistadors only served to remind me what it feels like to be abandoned.

I have to do this. It's important to me to prove myself.

I'm not sure what she has to prove. She's amazing. Talented, caring, bright. So bright ... like the sun. But I get that it's important to her. Her photography is important and she does have talent.

It was the hardest thing I've ever done, to leave her that night, harder than the first time I scuba dived and nearly fucking panicked, harder than underwater demolition training, harder than any deployment. But I can't ask her to give up her dream. If she wants that, I want it for her. But that night, my insides shredded, I made the decision to protect my heart—for once, *I* was going to be the one who left first.

She slips her feet into silver high-heeled shoes as I approach her with a glass of champagne. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She takes the champagne and stands. “You look good too. Your uniforms are very handsome.”

I glance down at myself. “Thanks.”

“The wedding was perfect.”

We're making awkward small talk. I hate it. “It was.” I sip my champagne. I work to keep my demeanor relaxed, my smile casual, so she won't know that my insides feel like someone has taken a welding torch to them.

“We just have to dance together once,” Carrie says.

That's going to be torture. “Yeah.”

The photographer pauses in front of us to take a picture and we lean our heads together and smile into the camera.

“Nice.” Hayden approaches with a swish of her long skirt. “You two both look amazing.”

“*You* look amazing.” I kiss Hayden's cheek.

“Aw, thank you.” Hayden beams at me and clinks her champagne flute against mine.

We move inside to the salon that's been arranged for dinner. The tables look beautiful with the pink floral arrangements and decorations, the room glowing with low lighting and candles, cutlery and glasses glinting on blue-sequined table coverings.

I follow Carrie across the room to the small head table where she sets her bouquet next to Hayden's. Beck's parents are already seated and she says hello to them. Carrie and I

aren't seated beside each other for dinner, but it doesn't matter; my appetite has deserted me. I barely taste the mushroom bisque, poke at the salad, and take a couple of mouthfuls of short rib of beef in a Beaujolais sauce. It's delicious, but my stomach is too knotted to eat.

After Cade and I have done our toast to the groom, Carrie rises to toast her best friend. I can see the signs of nerves in the faint tremble of her fingers and tightness of her lips, but she puts on a good act and everyone else sees a beautiful, confident, articulate woman. "I guess I can take responsibility for this marriage," she says. "Since it was me who dragged Hayden to Conquistadors for a tequila-tasting evening." She smiles. "I've spent most our friendship trying to drag Hayden out of her lab or away from her computer to have some fun. I think Hayden envisioned doing body shots and getting totally trashed." Carrie pauses. "The body shots didn't happen *that* night."

The guests laugh.

"We had a lot to learn about tequila. When we got to Conquistadors, Hayden recognized the hot bartender with the long hair, beard, and sexy smile. Turned out, they'd already met, when she'd managed to smack into a post while checking her cellphone rushing back to her office, and he'd saved her from falling. But I still take credit, because if I hadn't made Hayden go to Conquistadors that night, they never would have found each other again." She grins. "I've loved seeing Hayden blossom with Beck's love. He's exactly the right man for her. And I think she's exactly the right woman for him. Join me in a toast to Hayden."

Back out on the patio, beneath twinkling white lights strung above us and the stars far above that, Hayden and Beck dance first, to Eric Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight," then Carrie and I join, along with Cade and the date he brought. Having her in my arms like this, my hand on her hip, breathing in that familiar vanilla musk scent, is excruciating. We don't talk, but our eyes meet and hold as we slowly move to the music. My chest burns and my skin feels tight, like I'm going to burst out

of it in agony. It's almost unbearable, the urge to pick her up and carry her out of here pushing at my skin from the inside.

"Your speech was great."

"Thank you. You and Cade were funny. But touching. You're both good friends to Beck."

"We'd do anything for each other."

"I know."

I hold her gaze as more couples join us on the dance floor. "So you leave Saturday morning."

"Yes."

"You're all set."

"Yes." She pauses. "I have something for you."

"Yeah?" My heart bumps.

"It's up in the suite. When we're done here, I'll go get it."

"I, uh, actually have something for you, too."

"Oh."

The song ends and Beck and Hayden part and move to pair up with Beck's parents, Hayden dancing with Mr. Whitcomb, Beck with his mom. I meet Carrie's eyes and she nods, and we make our way through the salon to the hotel lobby and elevators. There are other events going on at the hotel this evening and people mill about, so we aren't alone until we get off the elevator. My room's on the same floor.

"I'll meet you at the suite," I tell her.

"Okay."

Weeks ago, Carrie and I talked about staying here at the hotel the night of the wedding and I booked a room, which I will now sleep in alone. May as well use it so I don't have to worry about drinking and driving. Because once my best man duties are done, I'm going to be drinking. A lot.

I make the quick trip into the dark room to retrieve the wrapped gift I brought for her. I didn't know if I'd have the guts to give it to her, but she gave me the perfect opening.

I knock softly on the door and she opens it, then moves to the dresser and picks up the big wrapped package in two hands. She turns to face me. The only light in the room comes from the floor lamp in the corner, illuminating the gleaming waves of her golden hair.

Trying not to show any emotion, I extend my gift to her. “This is for you.”

We exchange gifts.

“Should we open them?” I ask.

She rubs a hand up and down her forearm. “Only if you want to. You don’t have to. You can look at it later.”

“Let’s do it. You first.”

She unwraps the layers of tissue wound around the small metal sculpture. A dolphin. She gazes at it. “It’s beautiful, Marco.”

“Dolphins are friendly, sociable, and playful.” I swallow thickly. “They’re like you.”

Her head jerks up and our eyes meet.

“They’re also incredibly smart,” I add, my voice gruff. “Like you.”

Her eyes shine in the lamp light. We stare at each other in a moment that stretches out painfully. Then I blink down at the package I’m holding. I rip the paper off slowly and hold the framed photograph in both hands, staring at it. Then I close my eyes. “Wow. That is amazing.”

She presses her lips together, shifting from one foot to the other.

I study the image again. “How did you get that light, the way the ocean is sparkling like that? The whale looks like it’s glowing.”

“Total fluke.” She smiles weakly.

“Bullshit. You’re so talented, Carrie.” I pause. “I saw some of your pictures at the gallery yesterday. They were all sold.”

She gasps. “All of them?”

“Yep.” I turn my gaze back to the photograph. “I love this. So powerful.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought. It reminds me of you.”

My head lifts and I meet her eyes again.”

“It’s big, but gentle. And these whales are friendly and interact with other cetacean species, like d-dolphins.” She stops, swallows, and my own throat thickens, thinking about the dolphin I made for her. “Also, humpback whales have a loose-knit social structure. Sometimes they live alone or sometimes they live in transient groups. And that reminded me of you too, and how you’ve found family.”

Jesus. I can’t speak. There’s something that feels like a tennis ball lodged in my throat. I swallow a few times. “Did I ever tell you about the time a horny whale attacked our submarine?”

What the hell am I doing? Trying to get out of this without breaking down in tears, I guess.

She chokes. “No!”

I force a grin and set the picture on the dresser. “Yeah. He was going to rape us.”

Carrie falls against the dresser laughing. “You’re making this up.”

“I am not. You can ask Cade. He was there too. We were about thirty miles off the coast when we discovered there was an unidentified object following us, about five hundred yards behind. We tried to take evasive action, but we couldn’t lose it. Chief Wallace picked three of us to go out and see what was happening. We exited the submarine using a torpedo tube and waited for whatever was shadowing us to show. I damn near died when I saw it was a fucking humpback whale and he had a motherfucking hard-on.”

Carrie laughs more.

“Have you ever seen an erect whale penis?”

She shakes her head, still quaking with laughter. “No!”

“Well, let me tell you, it’s huge and it’s freaky.” I grin. “Cade was the one who smacked him on the nose. Well, that did it, he lost his stiffer and dropped back. Cade saved us from being whale raped.”

Carrie wipes her eyes. “I’m still not sure I believe you.”

Our eyes meet and our smiles fade. I tried to lighten things up but once again, the air thickens around us. “You’re gorgeous.”

Carrie draws in a shaky breath. “Oh, Marco.”

I reach for her and pull her into my arms again, this time pressing her against me chest to chest, thigh to thigh. I tilt my head and capture her mouth with mine in a long, aching kiss. Desire and yearning expand inside me. She wraps her arms around me and kisses me back, a poignant, long kiss goodbye, both of us holding on as if we’ll never let go.

I bury my face in her hair, breathing in her scent. Her height and curves fit me perfectly. I’ll never find another woman who fits me so well; a woman who cares as deeply as I do but isn’t afraid to show the love she feels; a woman who brings joy to so many people; a woman who forces me to look inside myself and recognize that deep-down longing for home. Love. Approval. Acceptance.

She gave all that to me, and yet ... it’s still not enough. *I’m still not enough.*

“I’ll miss you, Supermodel.”

“I’ll miss you too.” Her voice is clogged with tears.

I release her and step back to pick up the framed picture. “I’ll take this to my room now,” I say, my voice gravelly. “So it’s safe. See you back down there.”

MARCO

The door to the bar opens Friday morning and a woman walks in.

My aching head lifts from the inventory sheets I'm peering at with bleary eyes, unable to stop myself from hoping it's Carrie.

This woman's hair is as long as Carrie's, and she's tall and slender like Carrie, but the blond hair is redder, the complexion paler with freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks.

Nope, not Carrie. Who's leaving in less than twenty-four hours.

"Hi," the woman says with a smile that doesn't quite dispel the shadows in her eyes. "You must be Cade."

I tip my head. "Nope, sorry. I'm Marco."

"Oh. I have an interview with Cade Hardy. "

"Interview? Oh right." I give my head a shake. "For the waitress position."

The corners of her pretty mouth tighten briefly, but she smiles again and nods. "Yes. I'm Reese Kirkwell."

"Well, Cade must be running late. Have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

Her eyebrows lift.

"I meant coffee, pop ... water."

“Of course. A glass of water would be great, thanks.”

I add ice to a glass and fill it with water, then slide it across the bar to her. She’s gazing around the room taking everything in. It’s only ten in the morning, so the bar is empty.

She’s pretty, in a thin, delicate way. She looks like someone with a lot of nervous energy. Hopefully she’s strong enough to carry a tray of food. And strong enough to put up with cranky customers.

Not *all* our customers are cranky. Generally, good service goes a long way to keeping them happy. But there are some people you can never satisfy, and then there are the ones who drink too much and get rowdy ... although the guys and I keep an eye on things and try to make sure that doesn’t happen.

When I meet her eyes, though, I see intelligence and what looks like determination. So yeah, she’s probably capable of waitressing here.

Noise from the back rooms alerts me to Cade’s arrival. Footsteps clomp down the hall and Cade appears. His gaze falls on Reese. “Sorry I’m late.”

I shake my head. Cade has bedhead and his shirt is wrinkled. He no doubt just rolled out of the sack with one of his many hookups.

Reese slides off the stool to greet Cade. “No problem.” Her smile is professional.

Cade shakes her hand. “Come on back to my office, Reese. I have your résumé there.”

Reese flashes Marco a smile as she follows Cade back behind the bar and down the hall. I hope Cade hires her and she can start right fucking now. Like, today.

I try again to focus on inventory, but my head pounds like a motherfucker and my gut feels a little queasy. Yeah, I probably tossed back a few too many shots of Patrón last night. I grimace and rub my forehead.

The interview doesn’t last long and soon Cade and Reese reappear. “So, Reese is going to start Monday,” Cade tells me.

“Did you two meet?”

“Yes, briefly.” I smile at the new hire. “Welcome to Conquistadors.”

“Thank you.” Reese smiles politely. “I’ll see you both Monday.”

I turn to Cade, who stares after Reese as she walks out of the bar. In a pair of snug, ankle-length black pants, she does have a most excellent ass, although I’m noticing in a detached way because the only ass I really want to look at is Carrie’s.

Cade, however, has a hungry look on his face.

“No,” I say. “Absolutely not. Don’t even think about it.”

Cade scowls. “What?”

“I know you’re on a sex bender, but our staff is off-limits.”

Cade rolls his eyes. “Sex bender. Right.”

I wave a hand. “Whatever. We have enough problems keeping people; don’t get any ideas about her.”

“I’m not stupid.”

This is true. Cade has a goddamn brilliant mind. He can also be arrogant as hell. He loves a challenge and is always confident in his ability to find solutions, overcome obstacles, and conquer enemies.

“So does she have a lot of experience?”

“Heh. Didn’t ask her that.”

“Fuck you. I meant waitressing.”

“Yeah.” Cade shrugs. “Lots. Some high-end places in New York.”

“New York. Huh. What’s she doing here?”

“I didn’t ask her personal questions.”

“Oh no? You didn’t ask her if she was busy tonight? Of or if you could do her on the desk in the office?”

“Jesus Christ. Lighten up, would you?”

I scowl.

“Just when you started to act like someone had taken the poker out of your ass, now you’re back to being Mr. Moody.”

I pick up a beer glass to set it on the glass shelf over the bar and to my horror, with the forcible crack as I smack the glass down, the shelf shatters and crashes down, every tumbler on it going with it and breaking on the terra-cotta tile floor.

Silence expands in the bar.

I bend my head and grip the edge of the counter.

“Dude,” Cade says quietly. “What the fuck.”

“Jesus.” Beck’s strong voice comes from behind me. “What’s going on?”

I look up and frown. “What the hell are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be on your honeymoon?”

Beck rolls his eyes. “I said we were coming back Friday. Hayden wants to say goodbye to Carrie.”

“Oh. Right.”

“What happened here?”

I clench my teeth and push away from the counter to go get a broom. “My fault. Sorry.”

“Wait.” Beck’s command has me halting. Beck points to the other side of the bar where Cade rests on a stool. “Sit.”

My head jerks back and I give Beck a disbelieving look. “Shut the fuck up.”

“No, *you* shut the fuck up. Sit down and listen.”

I kind of feel like punching my friend. My hands curl into fists and my shoulders bunch.

Beck lifts his chin.

I narrow my eyes.

But I go around the end of the bar and sit. I cross my arms and wait.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Cade asks in a surprisingly neutral tone.

“Nothing.”

“Not nothing. You’ve been a total dickhead the last week. Actually, longer than that.” Cade pauses. “Is this about Carrie leaving?”

I firm my lips and stare at my sandals.

My head whips up when Cade and Beck both burst out laughing. I glare at them.

“Oh, this is too funny,” Beck says. “Ha! We were warning you to be careful of Carrie because women get attached when you screw around ... but *you’re* the one who’s gotten all emotionally involved.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Hilarious.”

“Yep.” Cade grins and slaps a hand on the bar. “You dumb fucker.”

I rise, ready to hammer a fist into Cade’s face.

“Sit down,” Beck says. “You’re not a dumb fucker. Mr. Man Whore here doesn’t know what it’s like to fall in love.”

“True that.” Cade shakes his head.

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?” Beck asks me.

I slump. “Yeah.”

“And she’s leaving.”

“Yep.”

“She doesn’t feel the same?”

I sigh and rub my burning eyes. “Apparently not. It felt like she did, but she’s leaving.”

“It’s only for nine months,” Cade says in a bewildered tone. “Not forever.”

I frown. “Nine months *is* forever.”

“No, it’s not.”

I inhale a long breath and let it out, not sure if I have the guts to say it. “I was gone for six months when Liz found someone else.”

I dare a look at Beck, then Cade, and they both stare back at me blankly.

“Carrie’s not fucking Liz.” Cade pauses. “Okay, that sounded wrong. But you know what I mean.”

I shrug. “Might as well be. Liz left me. Carrie’s leaving me. Everyone leaves me.” *Except you guys*. Unless I keep acting like an ass. Then they might leave me too. Déjà vu. Just like my foster families. Act out and pretend you don’t give a shit and they’ll believe you. Why would they stick around if they think I don’t give a shit?

Fuck.

I turn and set my elbows on the bar and lower my head into my hands, my heart a cold knot in my chest.

A big, warm hand lands on my shoulder and grips it. “Marco, man. We’re here for you.”

Beck.

“Yeah,” Cade adds in a low voice.

“Talk to us,” Beck says. “Did you tell her how you feel?”

“No. I couldn’t tell her. She needs to do this, and I don’t want to stand in her way.”

“But seriously, nine months ... Yeah, yeah, I know—”

“Liz loved me.” I scowl. “She wore my ring. She was going to marry me. She couldn’t wait six goddamn months.”

I feel the look Beck and Cade exchange.

“When you trust someone and they betray you, that’s a reflection on them ... not on you. You know that, right?” Beck asks.

I consider that. No. That’s not how it works. I’m the problem.

“Right?” he says again.

“No.” My jaw tightens.

“Fuck.” He drops his head. “Listen to me. You’re not responsible for people letting you down.”

My chest feels tight, like I’m underwater and straining for air. “That’s how I’ve always felt,” I choke out.

“I know. But you need to get over that. Not everyone’s gonna leave you. We’re here for you.”

It feels goddamn uncomfortable with my biggest fear being exposed like this, laid out in front of them to inspect and dissect. Except ... these guys already know that about me. We’re all tough guys who’ve been taught never to show weakness, but there’s no way to avoid that when you spend so much time together in intense training and dangerous combat deployments. These two know that about me and respect me anyway, and there’s no one else I trust enough to make myself that vulnerable with. Okay, them and Carrie. “Easy to say,” I mutter, lifting my head but still staring at my hands.

“You know we all have shit we deal with,” Beck says quietly. “We all have different demons, and we all have fears.”

I jerk my head in a nod.

“Do you trust Carrie?” Beck asks.

“Of course I do. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Sure it matters. If you trust her, you should have told her how you felt.”

“Right.”

“Look, you’re the one who lectured me about being afraid to admit how I felt about Hayden. Now you’re doing the same thing.”

“It’s different. Hayden was in love with you. I could see that.”

“Pretty sure I can see that Carrie’s in love with you.”

“Why are you two so blind when it comes to women?” Cade asks.

I lift my head to give Cade a long look, and Beck does the same.

Cade holds his hands up. “Okay, fine. I’m out.”

Beck turns back to me. “What if you told her how you felt? What if you told her you didn’t want her to go, and that was what she needed to hear to stay?”

I stare at Beck. “You don’t know that.”

“No, I don’t. But you don’t know the opposite ... that if you told her you cared and didn’t want her to go, she’d leave anyway.”

“I can’t ask her to stay! This is her dream.”

“Is it?”

I frown. “What the hell does that mean? Of course it is.”

“You guys don’t talk about that kind of shit? Hopes and dreams?”

“Jesus,” Cade mutters.

“Yeah,” I say slowly. “We kind of did.”

“What does she really want out of life?”

I think about it. I think about all the times she was so touched by my compliments, because they felt different from how other people complimented her. How she always felt judged by her looks, not by her accomplishments—first as a kid when she was awkward and odd, then as an adult when she earned her living by her appearance. How her family makes her feel inferior because of their successes.

What does Carrie really want out of life?

She wants to contribute. She wants to accomplish something meaningful. She wants the same things I do: acceptance, belonging, approval. Love.

She said she has to go to Spain to prove herself. And yet in my mind there’s no need for that, because she proves herself to me every damn day, with the hugeness of her heart, the love

for her family and friends, the desire to help kids she doesn't even know.

Despair nearly swamps me. I was too chickenshit to admit how I felt, to take a chance on asking her to wait for me. I love her, but I'm not brave enough to trust her, to trust that she'll be faithful to me, that she'll come back to me. It's so goddamn hard for me to do that, though, after years of having that drilled into me.

I remember that feeling when my parents were taken away—how helpless and frightened and lost I was. And I'm terrified that if I love someone and she leaves me, I'll feel like that fourteen-year-old boy all over again. I can't do that again.

But I'm not that boy. I'm a man. I've proven how strong I am.

I came so close to having it all. With Carrie. I have to get over that shit if I'm ever going to have the things I really want in life.

"I didn't tell her," I mumble. "That I don't want her to go. That she doesn't have to prove anything." Then I remember that conversation at her place ... when she said she wasn't sure if she was doing the right thing. What if ... what if she'd been waiting for me to tell her I didn't want her to go? I smack a hand on the bar. "Dammit! I should have told her."

I can't ask her not to leave. But I can at least tell her how I feel. And maybe see if we have a future together.

Beck smiles. "So do it."

"She leaves tomorrow."

"That means there's time."

I shake my head. "She really thinks she needs to do this. I want her to know that she can."

"You'd wait for her to come back?" Cade asks quietly.

"Christ. Yes. It fucking rips me apart, but yeah, I'd wait for her. If she wanted me to."

Sid walks in the front door, ready to start work. “Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Sid.”

They make some small talk I’m oblivious to, my brain spinning. What the hell am I supposed to do?

Assess. Prioritize. Act.

I can’t just sit here with my thumb up my ass, crying because she’s gone. I have to fucking *do* something.

Adrenaline flashes through my veins, making my skin itch and my muscles twitch. The need to act is a physical necessity. But I have to think things through. I can’t just rush over to her place the day before she’s supposed to leave and beg her not to go.

I need a plan.

Carrie

I sit on the edge of my seat at the American Airlines gate at San Diego International Airport, boarding pass in one hand, a big paper cup of coffee in the other, waiting for my boarding group to be called.

I’m doing this.

After my visit with Grandma Garner last night, I’ve come to terms with what I need to do.

Marco only wanted something short term and fun. And that’s okay. Well, it actually hurts like fuck, but I can’t make him fall in love with me if it’s not meant to be. I have to make decisions that are best for me and my life.

I sip my coffee, watching the gate agents check boarding passes and smile as people file through.

I’m going to Madrid. It’s going to be amazing.

It’s my turn to board. I shift my coffee to my other hand and grab the handle of my carry-on to move into the line. Soon I’m trudging down the jet bridge toward the plane. A flight

attendant greets me with a bright smile as I enter. I find my seat and pause to juggle coffee, purse, and carry-on. A male flight attendant appears and helps me lift the carry-on on into one of the overhead bins.

“Thank you.” I smile gratefully at him. I want to be independent, but sometimes help is nice.

Before boarding, I made sure I have what I’ll need for the flight to New York, where I’ll spend a few hours at JFK: my e-reader, my earbuds, a muffin I purchased. I pull these items out of my purse and tuck them into the seat pocket in front of me, settling into my window seat.

The two seats next to me are empty. Probably too much to hope they’ll remain empty for the flight so I can spread out a bit.

People continue to board and fill the plane as I flip through the airline magazine, looking at beautiful pictures from around the world. I pause and smile when I see the ad for LeRoux Perfumes—it’s a picture of me. Super glam with tons of Photoshop work, I’m almost unrecognizable in the photo.

That part of my life is done. In some ways it’s sad ... I’ve made a good living from it and have met some great people, many of whom are still friends. They threw a going-away party for me Thursday night. It was fun, but a little poignant. Then Hayden and I had lunch yesterday, which was even sadder. Hayden was visibly upset, which disturbed me.

“You’re not leaving because I’m married, are you?” Hayden asked, almost fearfully. “I know after Beck and I got together, we didn’t see each other as much, but I’ll still have time for you even though we’re married.”

“We didn’t see each other all that much before that,” I reminded her. “You work long hours.”

“Have I neglected you?” Hayden asked. “Am I a bad friend?” Her eyebrows sloped down as she stared at me. “Is that why you’re leaving?”

“Of course you’re not a bad friend!” I laughed. “You’re my best friend and I love you. And it’s totally natural that you’d

want to spend time with the man you love.”

“Just because I’m married now doesn’t mean things will change between us.” And Hayden started to cry.

“Hayden, stop!” I grabbed my friend’s hand. “I’m doing this for me.”

There was some truth to Hayden’s concerns, though. But I wouldn’t admit that. Hayden apparently feels guilty enough.

I sigh and flip another page in the magazine. Someone stops in the aisle and sets a bag on the aisle seat. Damn. Someone is sitting here.

I glance over to smile at whoever it is. And my heart slams to a stop.

Marco.

My mouth falls open and the magazine slides from my lap to the floor. I can only stare at him as he hoists the bag into the compartment above the seat.

Damn, he looks good, wearing softly worn jeans, a gray plaid shirt left untucked, and a casual black sport jacket, his usual stubble darkening his strong jaw. The flight attendant stands behind him, the expression on her face hilariously eager and lustful.

He lowers himself into the seat and proceeds to flip up the two armrests between us, then shifts over to the seat right next to me. His big body takes up substantial room in the narrow space. “Hi.”

I blink, my mouth still hanging open.

I feel his energy. I breathe in his cedar and lime scent. I swallow, my skin hot everywhere, my heart racing so fast I might have a heart attack. “What are you doing here?” I finally manage to say.

He smiles and reaches out to smooth a strand of my hair back. “I’m coming to Spain with you.”

CARRIE

My world spins. I gape at Marco, sitting next to me, close enough that our arms touch. I want to put a hand out and feel him ... is this real? “What?”

This makes no sense. What is even happening?

“I’m coming to Spain with you,” he repeats.

I close my eyes. “Why? I don’t understand. How? What ... ?”

He grins and strokes my hair again with a tender gesture. “We need to talk.”

“So you ... you got on this flight so we could talk?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Let’s get your seatbelt fastened and once they stop yakking about emergency exits and shit, we can talk.” He reaches across me to find my seatbelt and I fumble to locate the other end and click them together. Then he does up his own.

Someone sits in the aisle seat next to Marco, an older man. Marco smiles at him, then reaches for my hand.

I sit waiting, my heart thudding so loud I can’t even hear the flight attendant talking as the plane begins to move slowly away from the terminal. I turn to peer out the window but have no idea what I’m looking at.

We taxi and taxi, sit and wait, and then finally with a roar of the engines we're speeding down the runway and lifting off. I'm usually a little nervous about takeoffs and landings, but today I'm so confused and distracted by Marco's big, warm hand holding mine I forget to be afraid.

I don't know what's going on.

"Okay?" Marco murmurs, squeezing my hand.

I nod and dare a glance at him. His eyes are warm, but also hold a hint of something else ... uncertainty? Fear? I'm pretty sure he's not afraid of flying, with the career he had. I wouldn't think he's afraid of *anything*.

"I can't let you go," he says.

Again ... is this real? I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts.

"I know you have to do this," he continues, now holding my hand in both his. His strength seeps into me and eases my shivering inside despite my hot skin. "I know you have to go to Spain. I get it. I want to tell you something, though. Well, I want to tell you a lot of things. Things I should have said sooner." He grimaces.

"How did you do this?"

"I watched you book your flight and pick your seat, so I knew which flight you were on. I booked this yesterday, after I figured out what I had to do. A little luck helped, that this seat wasn't taken."

"But ... why?"

"I told you. Because I can't let you go, and there are things I need to say to you."

"But ... how long are you coming to Spain for? Because ... "

"Just a couple of weeks." He shrugs. "The guys said they could manage without me that long, even though I am pretty much indispensable."

I have to smile at that. "Right."

“I’ll help get you settled,” he continues. “In your apartment. Get the lay of the land. Maybe take you to a topless beach.”

“There aren’t any beaches in Madrid.”

“Damn.” He grins. “Maybe we can take a quick weekend trip to the Mediterranean.”

My lower belly does a little flip. My heart starts to flutter with joy. I’m still not sure what is happening here, but hope blossoms inside me.

He turns my hand over in his and looks down at where our fingers join. “Okay,” he says. “Here’s the deal. I know it was supposed to be a short little fun fling until you left. But the truth is ... I fell in love with you.” He blows out a sharp breath. “And this is going to be really fucking awkward for the next few hours if you don’t feel the same.”

I gaze at him, heart pounding wildly. “I do.”

His head snaps up. “You do ... what?”

“Feel the same.”

He closes his eyes, his beautiful mouth going soft. “Thank Christ.” Then his eyes pop open. “Really?”

“Really.” My mouth trembles as I smile. “I thought you only wanted to have a little fun. I thought you were okay with me leaving.”

“Fuck no. I fucking hated it.” His grip on my fingers becomes painful, but he quickly realizes and relaxes it. “But you kept saying you had to go. And I didn’t want to try to take this away from you. I know it’s important to you, even though I don’t think ... Well, that’s the other thing I should have said to you.”

“What?” I stare into his eyes.

“I know you think you have to prove yourself to your family. But you really don’t.”

I blink.

“You don’t know how they see you. And maybe *they* don’t even know how they see you. You’re their glue. They *need* you. Maybe I can see it more clearly because I’m an outsider, but you’re the one who brings them all together. You’re the light. You’re the fun-loving, genuine, charming one everybody loves. They need you, Carrie. They admire you, even if you don’t feel that.”

My bottom lip quivered. “I think ...” My throat tightens. “I don’t know if they *need* me.”

“They do. What the hell would Julia do without you?”

“Okay, well, Julia maybe needs me. A little.”

“What about your grandma?” he demands. “Who would make sure she gets to dance?”

Tears sting my eyes.

“And your mom ... who else even realized she was unhappy? Who else would try to make things better for her?”

A tear escapes and slides down my cheek. I brush it away.

“I bet there are more things you’ve done for all of them I don’t even know about,” he continues. “They do need you, Carrie. And you know how upset your mom and dad were that you’re leaving. They’re going to miss you like fuck.”

I almost laugh at his crudeness, but more tears threaten. “Okay, okay. You know what? I kind of figured that out last night.”

“What?” It’s his turn to gape.

I try a smile. “I went to say goodbye to Grandma last night and she said some things that made me think. She really gets me.”

Marco’s lips curve. “Yeah.”

“She went through the same kind of feelings of not being valued when she chose to work as a burlesque dancer. She almost quit. But she found a man who loved her, who saw who she really was beneath glitter and ruffles and pasties, and he gave her the confidence to keep going. And I realized ...

you're like that too. You see what's inside me, not just the exterior. You encourage me and support me." I pause. "Grandma asked what I really wanted to achieve by going to Spain, and I told her I want to accomplish something that will make my family take me seriously and be proud of me. She told me the only person I really need to prove things to is ... me." I sigh. "I think I'm the only one who's been doubting myself."

He tips his head. "Yeah. I'd agree with that. I don't totally get it, but then I again, I think I do. I just think you need to realize what an amazing woman you are. How talented you are. How smart. How caring." He pauses. "How loved."

Blinking rapidly, I touch my fingertips to my trembling lips. "Oh, Marco. You helped me realize that too."

"If you need to prove to yourself that you can do this, then you totally should. It's gonna be hard. But that's the other thing I wanted to tell you. I'll wait for you." His jaw tenses "Nine months is a long time." He appears to grind his teeth and my heart clutches. "It's a long time to be apart and ... and things can change. Feelings can change." His hand tightens on mine again and I feel the slight trembling in his.

I turn my head slowly from side to side, knowing what he's thinking about. Liz.

"But I'll wait for you to come back," he continues, voice gruff. "Maybe I can even come visit you in Spain again. We can Skype. I'll email you every goddamn day."

"Oh God." I pull in a long breath and slowly let it out. "Marco. I love you so much. That means so much to me. And I want you to know, I'd wait for you too. I totally would. I'm not Liz."

His eyes narrow and his forehead furrows at my words. I realize how they sounded ... like I'm about to reject him.

I shake my head. "I don't know her and I don't know what the hell is wrong with her, but she didn't— She couldn't have loved you the way I do. Because I'd wait for you ... forever"

"But ... ?" Apprehension shadows his eyes.

I smile. “But I don’t *have* to wait for you. Because last night ... I changed my mind about going to Spain.”

He draws back and stares at me searchingly. “What? What the fuck? But you’re on this plane.”

“Yeah. I had the ticket. I figured I might as well go and have a vacation. I’ve never been to Spain and I’ve been practicing my Spanish.” I smile. “But I’m only staying a few weeks. And then I’m going to come back and figure out what I want to do with my life ... in San Diego.”

“Seriously?”

I nod, holding his gaze. “I made a mistake. I applied for that scholarship on a whim. I’ve been known to be a bit impulsive.”

“No, really?”

I smile. “I was feeling ... I don’t know, not left out exactly. But Hayden was in love and my modeling career was coming to an end, and I felt like I needed to do something. I saw the ad online and I went for it. It sounded fun and exciting. I never thought I’d be accepted, and then when I was, everybody was so impressed. How could I not do it?”

He makes a rough noise in his throat and reaches to pull me against him. The seatbelts are in the way and it’s awkward, but I nestle into him, one arm going around his neck in a tight squeeze. We sit like that for long moments, oblivious to the activity in the plane around us.

“Carrie. Damn. I love you.”

I huff out a laugh with a little shake of my head. “Because I screwed up?”

“Well ... yeah. I love everything about you. Even your screwups.”

Now I sniff as more tears well up. “I love you too, Marco.”

He finds my mouth with his in a slow, tender kiss. My eyes flutter shut and I pour my feelings into that kiss, all the longing and sadness and love I’ve been feeling and hiding.

“Christ,” he mutters, leaning his forehead against mine. “This is going to be a long fucking flight.”

I smile. “Oh yeah.”

“I can’t believe this. I booked this flight and snuck on the plane and here you’re not really leaving after all.”

“Well, I am. For a few weeks.” I smooth my hand over his shoulder. “I wasn’t sure what would happen when I got back. It seemed like you were okay that things were done between us, and I knew it would be awkward, but I figured I could just avoid going to Conquistadors as much as possible and not hang out with you guys.”

“You were going to come back and not talk to me?”

“I thought we were done. I thought that’s what you wanted.”

He nods, his mouth a grim line. “I didn’t want that. I’m sorry, Carrie. I should have told you how I felt before you left. I was so goddamn afraid.” He grimaces. “You know what happened with Liz. We were engaged. She couldn’t wait long enough for me to come home, and when I got back she was married to someone else. Everyone I’ve ever loved has left or been taken away from me—my parents, my sister, all the foster parents I wanted so much to love me.”

“I know,” I whisper, my chest feeling like metal bands are squeezing it. I clasp his arm.

“I screwed up by not telling you how I really felt. I should have been brave enough. And then I realized I’d lost you because of it, and I’d never get the things I really want—”

His voice has gone so low I can barely hear it. I lean in closer, knowing how difficult this is for him.

“I’d never get the things I really want unless I was man enough to be honest.”

“What are the things you really want?”

“You.”

My heart jolts.

“Home. Family. Love. Somewhere I belong.”

“I want all that too.”

He nods. “I know.”

“And I realized I wasn’t going to get that by running away to Spain.”

“The guys told me I should have asked you to stay, but I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t ask you to give up something like that for me.”

“And I haven’t,” I say softly. “I made this choice based on what’s best for me. I was going to miss my family and my friends. I really, *really* want to be involved in setting up the drop-in art place for the kids. And I want to do all those jobs people were offering me, taking pictures of their kids.”

He gazes at me, his face softening. “See? I told you you’re talented and amazing.”

I smile back at him. I might just be ready to believe that now. It took some tough soul searching to admit that I was going to Spain for the wrong reasons. I have things to do here. I have to make sure Julia is okay. I have to make sure Grandma still has some fun in her life. I have so many reasons not to go, and I’m not even a little disappointed at not going to school in Madrid for nine months. I’m excited about visiting Spain, though, planning to make the most of my time there and take tons of pictures. And oh wow ... with Marco there with me ...

“This is going to be an even better trip than I expected,” I say softly, snuggling into him again as best I can.

“Hey. I know how we could outdo Beck and Hayden.”

I pull back and frown at him.

“Mile-high club, baby.”

I laugh and swat at his shoulder. “Shut up.”

“Maybe not this flight. But we’ve got a seven-hour flight coming up. That would definitely help pass the time.”

“Hmmm ...”

MARCO

“It’s our last day.”

I turn onto my side to face Carrie in the bed we’ve shared for the last two weeks. She’s so goddamn gorgeous it takes my breath away every single day.

When I booked my flight, I included the return flight home, but Carrie didn’t, planning to decide when she got here how long she’d stay. She’s chosen to fly home with me.

The time has flown by.

The apartment she rented is in the Justicia barrio, and it’s pretty cool, in an old building but completely modern, with sleek albeit minimal furniture. Luckily she rented it by the month and had no trouble canceling after the first month. It’s close to the school, a neighborhood with a lot of young professionals, within walking distance to many of the sights we wanted to see, and close to the metro station for those attractions not so close. We’ve strolled along stylish, upscale streets lined with boutiques and restaurants and private galleries, quiet during the day but lively and vibrant at night.

We’ve wandered beautiful boulevards and toured so many museums and art galleries. We visited Retiro Park, the Royal Palace of Madrid, and Palacio de Cibeles. We shopped along Gran Vía, walking until our feet hurt, then stopping for tapas and craft beers, enjoying the sunshine and people watching beneath leafy trees. We strolled along the wide, tree-lined Paseo del Prado and explored the Golden Triangle of Art. After that, I declared we were done looking at “old paintings,”

which generated a small argument about what exactly I want to do versus looking at art, architecture, and shops.

“I want to see a bullfight,” I stated.

“That’s horrible! I’m not going to a bullfight!” Her outrage was so cute.

“And a football game.”

She frowned.

“Soccer,” I clarified. “It’s huge here.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Maybe I could do a soccer game.”

A heated negotiation ensued that resulted in us going to a bullfight Sunday evening at the La Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas, which ended with Carrie hiding her face in tears when they started stabbing the bull, and a soccer game, which had her yawning, but she was a good sport about it and I love her for compromising.

We took the train to Valencia for a few days. With its palm trees and beach location, we almost felt like we were home in California. We lounged by the hotel pool and yes, we went to the beach and Carrie sunbathed topless, definitely one of the highlights of the trip.

Carrie has taken tons of photographs and spent time working on them while we kicked back at the apartment or the hotel room, but apparently she still has a lot of images to go through and edit.

We spent our nights (and quite a few mornings and afternoons) entwined in the bed beneath the deliciously soft European duvet, making love and talking about so many things ... our childhoods, our friends, our plans and hopes and dreams, whether fried eggs are better sunny side up or over easy, and even a spirited debate about politics. I like to yank her chain and be a devil’s advocate, but we’re of a similar worldview.

Now, knowing we’re leaving tomorrow, I feel a little sad. This apartment has been *our* place and we’ll be going back to separate homes. But we’ll still be a couple.

“I’ll miss this place,” I say, moving over her and between her beautiful thighs, where I fit perfectly.

“Me too.”

I prop myself on my elbows, arms on either side of her head. She gazes up at me, and I study her face, so beautiful and open, her blue eyes warm, her mouth enticing.

“Thank you for coming with me,” she says. “This has been amazing.”

“You’re sure you have no regrets?”

She rolls her head on the pillow. “I probably could have learned a lot here, but the school even says that they don’t really teach photography; it’s more about advice and support and learning by doing.”

“You can do that at home.”

“I can. I do think it would be amazing to live here,” she adds with a wistful look around. “But I may be a little biased because you’ve been with me. I miss people at home already, though, and ...” She lowers her eyes briefly, then meets mine again. “I’d really, *really* miss you. So ...”

I kiss her mouth. “I’d miss you too. But I meant what I said ... I’d wait for you if that was what you wanted.”

“I know. And I love you for that.”

“I’ll support you however I can, in whatever you want to do.”

“Thank you. Same for me. Hey, I could wait tables at Conquistadors. Don’t you need more servers?”

I grin and brush another kiss over her mouth. “We just hired a couple. Girl named Reese and a guy named Tony.”

“Okay, good. But I could help if you ever need it.”

“Thank you. This is what I need help with right now ...” I nudge her with my erection. “Mr. Big is hungry again.”

She shakes with laughter as I kiss her again, wrapping her arms and legs around me. “Mr. Big is insatiable.”

“So is that tight little pussy of yours. So we’re a match made in heaven.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

I kiss her again, longer, deeper, licking into her mouth, sucking on her tongue, biting softly at her lips, then I bury my face in the side of her neck and breathe in her vanilla musk scent. It fills my head and heat spreads through my body, centering in the heavy ache at my groin. “I love you, Carrie.”

“I love you too.” She licks my jaw. “¿Quieres joder?”

A laugh shoots out of me and I feel a burst of love for her in my chest. “Sí.”

She’s the best. The best for me. Sweetness to my dark, soothing to my roughness. But maybe I can give her something, too—she looks after everybody else but I want to look after her.

Sex with her is like that, too—giving each other something. Telling each other something. Back and forth. I’ve never had anything like it and I want this forever.

I press her down into the mattress, my dick throbbing against her soft body, my hands buried in her hair, my thumbs stroking her cheekbones. Her arms tighten around my shoulders, and fire flashes through my veins when her heels dig into my ass. A groan rumbles up my throat.

I kiss her again, tongues sliding together, her soft sounds of pleasure surrounding me. I shift to touch her everywhere, her full breasts with hard nipples, the dip of her waist, the smooth line of her hip and thigh. I kiss her and kiss her and kiss her until we’re both panting and inside out with desire.

“Marco. I need you.”

“I need you, too. Always. Forever.”

I want this so much it hurts. But it’s not terrifying anymore. I feel safe with her. Wanted. Valued. My throat burns, my eyes stinging.

I reach between us for my cock to find my way inside her body, desperate need pulsing through me, centered there where

I'm so hard and aching. "Fuck, you feel so good bare."

We talked about her birth control pills and sexual health and agreed to dispense with condoms, and Mr. Big and I were *very* happy about that. I push inside her in a long slide of pleasure and she's scalding hot around me, so tight, so wet.

I rock into her body and she moves against me in an erotic rhythm, murmured words and soft sighs passing our lips between deep kisses. She's all smooth skin, warm curves, that heady scent making me lightheaded. Every move feels like rapture. Bliss. Happiness.

As Carrie's body tightens beneath me and her fingers dig into me, I lift my head to watch her face, taking in her whimpers of delight as she comes, rippling around me. So fucking beautiful. The best kind of high. Then I can't hold off and my own mighty orgasm crashes over me. I press my face to her neck, holding myself deep inside her. "Love you. So much."

"Mmm. Love you too."

EPILOGUE

Marco

“G Gallery is committed to promoting youth art, providing a safe place where young artists can explore their talents, promoting neighborhood beautification through art, and fostering creative cooperation and safety.”

I watch Carrie speak from the podium set up in the big space, looking out at the small group gathered for the opening of G Gallery. In the audience are her family, including her niece, Julia; all her siblings, who’ve also gotten involved; her friends, including Hayden and Beck; Julia’s graffiti gang friends; a bunch of media covering the event for local news; a city councilmember; and some other business owners in the community. I meet Carrie’s eyes and smilingly encourage her.

Pride swells inside me, watching her up there speaking so eloquently and confidently, looking gorgeous but also professional in a tailored dress that hugs her curves. I’m also proud of what she’s accomplished with this gallery over the last few months. She and her mom have worked tirelessly to raise money to support the gallery, recruit volunteers, and deal with city regulations.

“We know that outdoor murals have been effective in reducing graffiti vandalism,” she continues. “Engaging our youth in these projects and supporting arts and culture creates economic development and social benefits. We want to capture the imaginations of youth and focus their efforts in positive ways so they can develop their talents, grow, and contribute to the community in meaningful ways.”

She goes on to thank the many people involved in the project, and then with a ceremonial snip of a big ribbon across the front of the room they declare G Gallery open.

We raised enough money to pay a small salary to a director—Carrie. The board of directors included her mother and her sister, and some of our larger donors. She's also going to teach photography to kids if there's enough interest.

Her photography continues to sell well at Bowes Gallery, as do my sculptures, much to my amusement, since I don't really consider myself an artist. But hey, the money I make gets donated to G Gallery, so that's a good thing.

Carrie starts mingling with the crowd and I move toward her. I wrap her up in a big hug and feel the slight trembling of her body. Nerves. She's been terrified about this whole thing. "You did great," I murmur. "Perfect."

"Thank you."

I give her a quick kiss and then stay at her side as we talk to various guests.

Hayden and Beck join us. "This is awesome, Carrie!" Hayden says. "I'm so impressed!"

Carrie beams a big smile, and I know that not only am I proud of my girl, she's proud of herself. And that's about the best thing of all.

When everyone has toured the gallery to see the various art spaces, the storage rooms for paints, pencils, canvases and sketch pads, the small snack kitchen and offices, the guests departed, and we've closed up ready to open tomorrow, some of us go to Conquistadors to celebrate.

Carrie's parents come, Beck and Hayden obviously, Cade, and Anna Bowes join us. Carrie's siblings decline due to having kids they need to get home and to bed.

We sit at a big round table and Reese, our new server, approaches to take our orders.

"I think champagne is in order," I say. "Bring us a bottle of Veuve Clicquot. That should be good to start."

Reese nods and departs.

“She doesn’t smile much,” I mutter to Cade.

“I know.” Cade is watching Reese with a weird expression. Kind of like the day he hired her.

“You’re not fucking around with her, are you?” I demand in a low voice.

“No!”

“Okay, good. We have a hard enough time keeping people.”

“So why did you all name the bar Conquistadors?” Mrs. Garner asks.

“Well.” I glance at Beck, then Cade. “We thought it was fitting. All three of us had some ... challenges growing up. Then we all decided to become SEALs, which is another huge challenge. We all made it—we were three of the fifteen who made it out of a class of a hundred forty-five when we started. We decided that naming the bar would remind us that we can conquer any challenges if we put our mind to it.”

Mrs. Garner nods approvingly. She’s aware of my childhood struggles and it means a lot to me that the Garners have included me as part of their family. I feel a sense of belonging and acceptance I’ve never felt with anyone else, except my SEAL brothers, and of course Carrie.

“Cade.”

Everyone turns to look at the woman who’s stopped beside the table. A statuesque brunette with stunning dark eyes and full lips gazes at Cade—the date Cade brought to Beck and Hayden’s wedding.

“Amelia, hi.” Cade shifts in his chair, then rises. “How are you?”

“Not good. Why won’t you answer my calls? My texts? I don’t understand.”

Reese arrives at the table with a tray full of champagne flutes and begins to set them at each place, clearly aware of the

woman but keeping her focus on the glasses. Doing her job. Everyone else has fallen silent, the air in the room going heavy.

“I told you, Amelia.” Cade gently takes her arm and tries to shift her away from the table, presumably so they can have this conversation a little more privately.

But Amelia stands firm in her spiky heels. My eyebrows rise as I see tears in her eyes. “You didn’t really mean that. What we had was special. You said that yourself!” She’s not keeping her voice low, and we can all hear.

“Amelia, I told you I don’t do relationships. You said you were fine with one night.”

“But you brought me to a wedding! I met your friends! That has to mean something.”

Reese pops the cork on the bottle of champagne, studiously ignoring Cade and Amelia, and everyone at the table tries to focus on that and ignore the drama playing out next to them. “This is so nice,” Carrie says in a bright tone, reaching for the glass Reese has just filled for her. “Thank you, Marco.”

I nod, Amelia’s sobs growing fainter as Cade leads her out of the bar. “Congratulations again, belleza.”

When all the glasses are filled, I lift mine in a toast. “To G Gallery. And to Cheryl and Carrie. Congratulations on all your hard work.”

We clink glasses together and sip the sparkling wine.

“Thank you all for your support,” Carrie says to everyone. “We couldn’t have done it without you.”

Cade rejoins us and picks up his glass. “Sorry about that,” he mutters.

I catch Reese’s face as she moves away from the table with the empty wine bottle ... an eye roll and a lip curl. I press my lips together to repress a smile.

This isn’t the time to lecture Cade again on his man-whore ways. But, Jesus, we can’t have women showing up crying and

disturbing customers.

We decide to order food. “Let’s just get a bunch of things to share,” Beck suggests, waving Reese over. “Hey, Reese. Can you bring us some nachos, some chips and dip, uh, jalapeño poppers. And hey, Sid’s got something new we can try: Tater Tot nachos.”

Reese winces. “Um, yeah about that ...”

Beck frowns. “What?”

“They’re ... well, you’re the boss. You should try them, if you haven’t. I’ll get those right out for you.”

I meet Beck’s eyes. What the hell was that? Is Reese dissing our menu to customers? That can’t happen. We all know our food isn’t the best in the city, but still, our serving staff has to at least pretend it is.

“What’s up with that?” Cade asks. “Do I need to talk to her?”

“Maybe.” I frown.

Talk turns to Carrie’s latest job for a Hollywood star. “It’s pretty exciting,” she says with a luminous smile. “I hope it goes okay. I like dogs, but I haven’t photographed them a lot.”

“Hopefully he’s well trained,” Hayden says.

“I’m sure he is.”

“What are you going to do?”

“She wants something creative, but I think I need to meet the dog first and see what his personality is.”

My eyebrows rise, but I’m not going to argue with that.

Reese soon brings out our food. We pass the platters around, taking nachos and poppers and chips. “This is the new item.” I pick up a cheesy Tater Tot and pop it into my mouth. I chew. And swallow. “Well.”

Reese actually watches me expectantly, holding her tray in both hands. “I know what he’s trying to do,” she says. “Using

some fresh ingredients would be so much better.” Her lip curls again. “Those are made with frozen Tater Tots.”

I hoist an eyebrow at her. Right ... Cade said she’d worked in some high-end places in New York.

Cade rises to his feet. “Hey, Reese, can I talk to you for a minute in the office?”

Reese’s lips purse and her face tightens. “Of course.”

They disappear.

“It’s not that bad,” Carrie says. “But she’s right.”

I sigh. “Yeah.” This is still an issue we have to deal with.

“The nachos are good,” Mrs. Garner says brightly.

Even *they* could be better.

A tight-lipped Reese returns to take orders for another round of drinks. Hopefully Cade wasn’t an asshole to her.

Later, when everyone has said good night, I hook my arm around Carrie’s neck and pull her against me. “Your place or mine?” I ask. “Wait, you know what? I’m getting tired of asking that.”

She gives me a slow blink of her big blue eyes.

“We need to move in together.”

She slides my arms around my waist, pressing her front to my side. “I guess that wouldn’t be a big stretch.”

“So, for the last time, your place or mine?”

She smiles. “I love your house.”

“It needs work.”

“It does. But it would be fun to make it ours. And you need the garage for your welding.”

“Yeah. So you’ll move in with me?”

“Yes. I’d love to.” Her eyes glow.

“Then let’s go to my place.”

This is working out perfectly.

When we arrive at my house, I open the front door and let her enter ahead of me. She walks into the living room and stops. Candles glow everywhere. Luckily they're battery operated, so I had no fear of leaving them on while out. An enormous bouquet of her favorite flowers, multicolored tulips, takes up nearly the whole coffee table, and a bottle of champagne sits in an ice bucket with two flutes next to it.

"Whoa," she says. "What's this?"

"Another celebration."

She turns to me, head tilted. And I hold out the ring.

Her gaze drops to the big brilliant-cut diamond twinkling in the candlelight. "Oh!" Her eyes widen and her lips part. Her gaze shoots back up.

"Carrie ... I know I can be kind of stubborn and serious, and it's hard for me to talk about my feelings. But I love you and I promise I will always be honest with you. You're so beautiful, inside and out, and you bring joy into the lives of everyone you meet—including mine. I know you want to make a difference in the world, and you do. You light up my darkness." I swallow, the ring trembling in my hand. "I want to be worthy of your loving heart. I want to look after you and protect you and love you for the rest of our lives. I don't just want to move in with you ... I want to marry you."

"Oh, Marco." Her long eyelashes flutter. "You *are* worthy. You're an amazing man. You've overcome huge challenges because you're so strong and brave. I've seen how loyal and committed you are, how you give so much of yourself to everything you do. Of course I'll marry you. I love you."

"I love you too." I move closer and reach for her hand, my voice coming out oddly husky. I clear my throat to dislodge the sandy feeling. "I want us to make a family."

"We *are* a family." She admires the ring now adorning her left hand, then leans in to kiss me. "This is where we belong. Both of us."

She has that right. Finally I have what I've always wanted and never thought possible, but now my focus was no longer

on myself, on trying to be what others wanted so I could have family. It's on giving Carrie everything *she* needs. On being everything *she* needs. And that means I have it all too.

And I remind her, "And those who drink from the Agave will live happily ever after."

Thank you for reading Hot Shot! Would you like to read more of Carrie and Marco? [Click here to get a bonus epilogue for signing up for my mailing list!](#)

Are you wondering what's up with the new waitress? Reese and Cade's story is [Long Shot – get it now!](#) And read on for an excerpt!

CONQUISTADORS' DRINK RECIPES

Paloma

Ingredients:

Kosher salt

Grapefruit wedge

2 oz tequila blanco

1 oz fresh lime juice

3 oz fresh grapefruit juice

1 tsp sugar

3 oz club soda

Pour kosher salt on a plate. Rub rim of a highball glass with a grapefruit wedge; dip rim of glass in salt. Combine grapefruit juice, lime juice and sugar in a glass; stir until sugar is dissolved. Stir in tequila, add ice and top off with club soda. Garnish with grapefruit wedge.

El Diablo Picante

Ingredients:

For the rim:

1 tsp sugar

1 tsp salt

1/2 tsp cayenne

1/2 tsp cinnamon

2 tbsp freshly squeezed lime juice

For the cocktail:

3/4 oz tamarind concentrate

2 oz reposado tequila

1/2 oz freshly squeezed lemon juice

1/4 oz Triple Sec 1/4 oz freshly squeezed lime juice

1/2 oz simple syrup

cinnamon stick

Mix sugar, salt, cayenne and cinnamon on a saucer. Pour 2 tablespoons lime juice onto a second saucer. Turn an Old Fashioned glass in lime juice to moisten the rim, then spin glass in the cayenne mixture to coat the rim.

Add tamarind concentrate, tequila, lime juice, simple syrup, lemon juice and Triple Sec to shaker. Fill with ice and shake well, about 30 seconds. Strain into serving glass. Garnish with cinnamon stick.

Sangrita

Ingredients:

1/4 cup freshly squeezed orange juice

4 tsp grenadine syrup

1/4 cup tomato juice

1/4 cup freshly squeezed lime juice

1/4 tsp salt

1/2 tsp salsa picante or bottled hot sauce to taste

Mix all the ingredients in a pitcher. Cover and refrigerate for at least an hour, allowing the flavors to meld. Serve with a shot of tequila on the side.

OTHER BOOKS BY KELLY JAMIESON

Heller Brothers Hockey

Breakaway

Faceoff

One Man Advantage

Hat Trick

Offside

Power Series

Power Struggle

Taming Tara

Power Shift

Rule of Three Series

Rule of Three

Rhythm of Three

Reward of Three

San Amaro Singles

With Strings Attached

How to Love

Slammed

Windy City Kink

Sweet Obsession

All Messed Up

Playing Dirty

Brew Crew

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Slap Shot

Playing Hurt

Big Stick

Last Shot

Body Shot

Hot Shot

Long Shot

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Cross Check

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Loving Maddie from A to Z

Love Me

Friends with Benefits

Love Me More

2 Hot 2 Handle

Lost and Found

One Wicked Night

Sweet Deal

Hot Ride

Crazy Ever After

All I Want for Christmas

Sexpresso Night

Irish Sex Fairy

Conference Call

Rigger

You Really Got Me

How Sweet It Is

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Jamieson is a best-selling author of over sixty romance novels and novellas. Her writing has been described as “emotionally complex” , “sweet and satisfying” and “blisteringly sexy.” She likes coffee (black), wine (mostly white), shoes (high heels) and hockey!

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