

# IN TOO *Deep*



**KIMBERLY DERTING**

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# PRAISE FOR KIMBERLY DERTING

“Falling in love has never felt so good. With the warmth of the sun, and the sand between your toes, Derting takes you on the summer you always imagined...”

—**Heidi McLaughlin**, NY Times bestselling author of *Forever My Girl* (now a major motion picture)

“A strong debut from a promising author.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

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—**VOYA**

“As always, this author writes a gripping tale...With another sequel set up, this intriguing series continues to provide great entertainment for suspense fans.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

“a refreshing take on paranormal romance...”

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“More great suspense from a prolific new writer with a vibrant imagination.”

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—**Claudia Gray, New York Times bestselling author of Stargazer)**

“Fans will be delighted to return to Derting’s fantastical and amazing world, filled with spunky, brave and lovable characters.”

—**Romantic Times**

**IN TOO DEEP**

KIMBERLY

DERTING

**Can two people whose dreams have been cast aside find a new passion...together?**

No one ever expected straight-A student Lauren Taylor to make waves. But that was the old Lauren, before she went to college and became an online stripper to make ends meet. Now, Lauren is on the run with a secret and a bag of cash, fleeing landlocked Arizona for the beaches of California.

Will Gabaldon was one of the hottest surfers on the circuit, but fate had something else in mind. When a surfing accident shattered his budding career, Will was forced into a life of tending bar and doing odd jobs just to survive.

A swim instructor with secrets like Will is the last thing Lauren wants. A distraction like Lauren is the last thing Will needs.

But soon, both discover there's one thing more dangerous than the wave that ended Will's career: *Love*.

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*For CJ—*

I'm grateful I was able to start this journey with you by my side.

# CHAPTER ONE

LAUREN

“Fuck. Me.” I looked back and forth between the printout in my hand and the broken-down shack in front of me. It most definitely wasn’t the “quaint beachside bungalow” listed in the online ad. But I’d already signed the papers, sight unseen.

*Great.* I’d just dropped fifteen thousand bucks on a three-month lease for a piece-of-shit shack, crowded in a row with a bunch of other piece-of-shit shacks.

And was that seriously tinfoil covering the windows?  
*Not cool.*

“Technically, you mean *‘fuck us,’*” Emerson piped in a little too enthusiastically. I loved my best friend, especially her willingness to ditch her family for the summer and spend her entire break with me before returning to the real world, but right now her enthusiasm was making my head pound. “And there are worse things than being fucked, not that you’d know anything about that. Besides, I like it. With a little work, it’ll be adorbs.”

“Okay, one, there’s nothing *adorbs* about it. It probably isn’t even up to code.” I eyed the window AC unit balanced precariously on a slanted two-by-four. “And two,” I complained. “Look around you, Em.” This was *so* not the California of my dreams—the one I’d been imagining since I was a little girl watching reruns of *Baywatch*. “The ad promised beachfront. As in, *we would be stepping off our doorstep onto the sand.* Do you see any beach?”

Emerson squinted, straining dramatically to see across the single-lane blacktop where the sun was just starting to set. She shielded her eyes with her hand and then squealed, “*There!* If you look in just the right place, in between those houses over there, you can see it!” She clapped her hands

together and bounced up and down, thrilled for a quasi-glimpse of an almost-strip of the shore.

I tried to tell myself I should let some of Em's positivity rub off on me. It shouldn't matter where I'd be sleeping for the summer. All that mattered was that we'd finally left dry and dusty Arizona in the rearview mirror. I'd dreamed of this moment practically every single day of my childhood, when I'd submerged myself in the bubble bath, pretending I knew how to swim. Pretending I wasn't afraid to learn how.

Now I could finally put those fears behind me.

"Come on," Emerson gushed, digging through the jumble of bags crammed in the trunk and hauling out a suitcase. "Let's put on something slutty so we can scope out the local action."

"Don't you ever think of anything else?" I bent over and lifted the corner of the doormat, searching for the key the property manager assured me would be waiting for us.

"Um, no." Em sounded baffled. "Why? Do you?"

I laughed while I checked under the other side of the mat.

Sure, I *thought* about guys plenty, but nowhere near as often as Emerson McLean did. Maybe I was just too jaded now, knowing how many men spent too much time—and too much money—watching a stranger undress on the Internet, instead of at home with their wives.

Not that I was complaining. Those men, with their seemingly endless pockets, were the reason Em and I were here in the first place.

I wasn't necessarily proud of the things I'd done, but I wasn't exactly ashamed either. Although, sometimes it would be nice to be an ordinary girl with ordinary baggage, like Em.

Emerson was the only person in the world who not only knew the things I'd done to make money—a secret she swore she'd take to her grave—but who also knew my other secret. One she considered a million times more scandalous.

*Confession: I, Lauren Taylor, still carried my V card.*

A fact Emerson intended to tease me mercilessly about until I “remedied” it. Because in Em’s eyes, that’s what virginity was: A disease in need of curing.

To be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure she was wrong. On my birthday this year, I’d made a pact this would be the year. I was twenty-two, after all. I’d made it through high school and all four years of college without being swept off my feet. But now I was starting to think my soul mate wasn’t out there. Or worse, if he was out there, he was already attached to someone else and spending all his free time surfing the Internet for porn.

Yeah, I was definitely jaded.

So, soul mate or not, it was time. This was the year I would find a guy—he didn’t have to be Prince Charming, he pretty much only had to have his own place and decent breath. I was determined to get it over with. To stop holding onto my virginity like it was some prize.

At some point everyone had it, and everyone—or almost everyone, anyway—gave it up.

It wasn’t like I’d never come close. I’d made out with some minty-breathed potentials. In the end, though, I’d always found some reason to back out before we sealed the deal—bad timing, no chemistry, or just plain not feeling it.

If I didn’t have Emerson cheering me on, I might die a virgin. But she wasn’t the giving-up type.

Before I got the chance to answer her about going out, there was a deep throat-clearing sound—a definite signal for attention if I’d ever heard one. I shot upright just as the distinctly male voice informed us, “Don’t mean to interrupt, ladies, but the keys aren’t there. Billy picked ’em up this afternoon.”

Spinning to face our new mystery guest, and meaning to argue that this *Billy*—whoever he was—had no business taking something that didn’t belong to him, I froze.

Any protests about Billy's thieving ways evaporated on my lips. My eyes suddenly had a mind of their own, and even as I told myself to act like a grown-up, I caught my eyes raking the newcomer from head to freaking toe.

California just got a whole lot more interesting.

The guy in question leaned casually inside the door frame of the house right next to the one we were supposed to be renting—a house that appeared only shades more livable than our own, and I wondered if *this* was our new neighbor.

His swim trunks rested just the right amount of low over his waistline, and revealed what could only be described as the most chiseled set of abs known to man. And seriously, I was comparing them to great works of art, like the statue of David by Michelangelo, which had *literally* been chiseled from stone. From the bronze of this guy's skin I was convinced he'd never heard the word *sunscreen*—not that I was complaining, since his too-deep tan flawlessly emphasized those sculpted abs of his.

“He's just holdin' onto them for you, nothing sketchy or anything. He's harmless, though. Just doin' his job,” Chiseled Abs informed us, looking from me to Em.

Clearly this guy's presence had turned my brain to mush, because I had no clue what—or who, rather—he was talking about. I turned to Emerson for help, but she was too busy undressing him with her eyes to even notice I was still there.

I was on my own.

“Who?” I managed, unable to stop staring despite my brain screaming that I was making this whole exchange weird.

“Billy.” Chiseled Abs's brow dipped and the corners of his lips curving ever so slightly. I got the feeling we weren't the first girls to lose our shit over him. “You can call the landlord and ask, if you want. He asked Billy to pick up the keys when you were late.”

“*Late*,” I repeated distractedly. And then reality came crashing back and I realized what he was saying.

He was right. I *had* told the landlord we would be there by five, but thanks to Em and her raisin-sized bladder, we'd had to stop at just about every rest stop along the way, and now it was well past seven.

"It's all good," Chiseled Abs assured, offering us a wink. "Like I said, Billy's got 'em." His grin grew then, all slow and lazy-like but perfectly timed and utterly intentional, and I knew—I *knew*, in that very instant—that Billy might be harmless, but there was nothing harmless about *this* guy.

Charming, yes. And fuckable, for sure—Emerson would probably bag him by the end of the summer. But guys like Chiseled Abs, who oozed sex and confidence, and who knew the effect they had on women, were rarely harmless.

I wasn't like Em, who would spend her life twisting guys around her little finger just because she could, then toss them aside to move onto her next conquest. I was looking for a good guy. Someone who read books and opened doors. Someone who said please and thank you, and remembered birthdays, anniversaries, and sent texts "just because."

Someone who didn't walk around half-naked. Definitely not someone who spent thousands of dollars watching girls take off their clothes online. And someone who was totally and completely and *truly* harmless.

"Yeah?" I told Chiseled Abs, wishing I could slip inside the skin of my online persona, because whenever I was playing the part of Lola Bang—because, yes, that's the screen name I'd used for my *Secret Admirer* account—I always felt a million times more badass than when I was just plain old Lauren Taylor. "Can you please let *Harmless Billy* know we're here now, and we'd really like to get our car unpacked so we can call it a night?"

Chiseled Abs's grin grew wider as he crossed his arms over the muscled planes of his exquisitely carved chest. And even though guys like him, the ones who thought way too highly of themselves, had never been my type, my stomach flipped just a little. I wondered if this was the real reason my parents had tried to talk me out of California my entire life. I

wondered if my mom had never actually been afraid I would drown or be swept away by a riptide if I learned how to swim. But rather that she'd somehow known that if I ever did make my way to California, I'd discover the truth—that the boys were made differently here. They were carved from stone, and when they smiled at you they could set your panties on fire.

Frankly, if all the boys were like Chiseled Abs here, I would *definitely* need to invest in some new underwear.

“I have an even better idea,” he announced, his voice a husky enticement. He ran a hand over his muscular chest, and even though the gesture appeared absent-minded I wondered if it wasn't calculated. “How 'bout you ladies come with me to The Dunes, and I'll buy you both a burger and a beer? Consider it a welcome-to-the-neighborhood thing.” He sauntered toward us in a way that made it clear he probably didn't get shot down all that often.

Emerson clapped her hands again, “Ooh, I *love* that idea!” she exclaimed.

I looked at the suitcase at my feet, hedging. “I don't know ... I really need to unload some of my stuff ...”

“They got great microbrews,” he threw in, selling the place *and* his charm as he wiggled his brows. “*And an awesome view ...*” and suddenly, I was seeing past the ridiculously hot veneer to the cheesy pick-up artist beyond. Maybe Michelangelo's David was more like a velvet painting of Elvis after all. “Besides,” he added. “Billy's tending bar tonight. We can get your keys while we're there.”

And that was it. I was going to The Dunes whether I liked it or not.

Because clearly Chiseled Abs had worked his magic on Em too.

I was pretty sure there was a five-alarm blaze in her pants.

## CHAPTER TWO

LAUREN

“I’ll take one of each, please!” Emerson enthused, squeezing my arm as her gaze swept up and down each of the guys standing in the crowd around the busy beachside bar. “*Thankyouandamen,*” she gushed all in one word.

Chiseled Abs, who it turned out had a real name he expected us to use—*Lucas Harper*—left us alone so we could claim a table while he went to grab some menus. He’d also chosen to put on a shirt, which Emerson considered a “serious buzz kill,” although clearly, she was finding new ways to console herself.

“Lo,” she enthused, calling me by my nickname and elbowing me to make sure I was paying attention. “Check out that one.” She wiggled her manicured nails in the direction of a hot surfer-looking guy who looked suspiciously like every other hot surfer-looking guy in the packed place.

He lifted his eyebrows at her, letting her know he’d noticed her too.

I slapped Emerson’s hand down. “Don’t encourage them. This place is a serious meat market.”

“I know,” she babbled. “Isn’t it great?”

*Yeah ... great.* Except this wasn’t how I’d imagined my first night in California. I’d pictured Em and me on the beach with beers in our hands as we watched the sun go down.

Instead, after driving all day to find out our crappy bungalow wasn’t even on the beach, we were stuck here, at a crowded beachside bar. There was sand and beer, all right; the floor was sticky with a mixture of both. But all I really wanted right now was to get my keys from this Billy-whoever-he-was and get the hell out of here so I could unpack my things and throw on my favorite sweatpants.



I was more than a little surprised by how busy the place was, especially for a Tuesday night. The girl-to-guy ratio was somewhere in the three to one range, with girls crowding the small space, wearing everything from cropped tops and miniskirts, to bikini tops and leave-nothing-to-the-imagination cutoff jeans. The more skin the better seemed to be the name of the game.

So far, the California boys might have the Tempe boys beat in the looks department, but it turned out boys were still boys, no matter where you went. The guys here had basically the same moves. They sat back and watched the girls like hungry wolves, waiting for one of the lambs to wander away from the flock.

I spotted Lucas's spiky hair as he expertly shouldered his way through the crowd to reach us. He smiled just as wolfishly as the rest of them as he clutched the menus under one arm and balanced three beer bottles in his hands. When he got to our table he set a bottle down in front of each of us and waited expectantly.

I glanced up at him and lifted a brow. "Um, thank you ..." I stretched my gratitude out, giving him the ego stroke he was clearly anticipating. Then, when he didn't produce the information I'd been hoping for, I prompted, "*And my keys ...?*"

"Yeah, that. I couldn't get Billy's attention." Lucas took the seat next to Emerson's and threw the full weight of his attention—and his smoldering gaze—on her. "So tell me about yourselves. What's your story?" he asked.

Em fiddled with the label on her bottle coyly ... as if she'd ever had a coy bone in her body. "What do you wanna know?"

"Well, since you have a carload of suitcases and an impressive accent, why don't you start with where you're from?"

And like that, I became invisible.

Normally, this part didn't bother me, the part where guys were drawn to Em like flies to honey. I didn't blame them. She was the female equivalent of Chiseled Abs here. Plus, she was a puppet master—pulling guys' strings with a well-placed pucker, a flutter of her eyelashes, and a lean in at just the right moment. She took flirtation to a whole new level.

I had my own secret weapons, I just preferred to keep mine undercover ... like a superhero. Or a spy. If I'd tried Em's moves, it would look like I had something stabbing me in my eye or had a problem with my mouth that needed serious medical attention. *Stat.*

Today, however, I wasn't in the mood for a front-row seat to one of her impressive acts.

Em wrinkled her brow and gave her standard: "I don't have an accent, silly." Which came out so full of drawl she may as well have been wearing assless chaps and swinging a lasso. She actually had the nerve to giggle then, making me glare at her as I impatiently waited for either of them to notice I was still at the table, or for Lucas to stop flirting long enough to elaborate on the whole key issue.

He didn't. Instead, he chuckled at Emerson while he took a long pull from his beer and eyed her hungrily. "Oh yeah, you totally do. Besides, even if you didn't—*which you do*—your car's sportin' Arizona plates. So? Where you from? And I mean originally, because you definitely aren't from Arizona, either."

I had to wonder how many hours he'd spent in front of the mirror perfecting that *fuck-me* stare of his, because Em was totally buying into it.

"You caught us." She shrugged, flashing me the same *it's not my fault* look I had seen from her a hundred times before, like she was shocked anyone had noticed poor little ol' her. "I'm from Dallas. *Originally.* Or just outside Dallas—a teensy nothin' of a place called Highland Village. Lo here is from the suburbs of Denver. But we met at ASU."

Arizona. I'd been glad to leave that dust bowl behind.

It hadn't exactly been my first choice for college, but my parents had been insistent about me not straying too far. If they'd had their way, I'd have stayed within commuting distance. If I'd had mine, I would have landed in Florida or one of the Carolinas. Or right here in California. Anyplace with beaches and bikinis ... and lots and lots of water.

So we'd compromised. Arizona met my mom's number one (albeit unspoken) criteria: It was landlocked. But it also met mine: It was far enough from home to give me the breathing room I'd been craving. I could still visit home; it just meant that my mom couldn't pop in without at least giving me a heads-up.

Meeting Em had been a bonus, the single best thing to come out of my stint at ASU. The moment I'd walked into the dorm we'd been assigned to share our freshman year, Em had hooked her arm through mine and told me (totally straight faced) that her favorite color was "sparkles." We'd been inseparable ever since.

"So, you, what ... decided to beach-bum it for the summer?" Lucas asked.

Em shrugged, looking to me to see if she should elaborate. "Something like that ..."

Uncomfortable with the way this conversation was headed, I reached out and tapped the table in front of Lucas, forcing him to stop ogling Emerson long enough to notice me. "About this Billy guy ..."

"Uh, yeah ... like I said, I couldn't get his attention." He pointed to the bar, where a cluster of scantily clad blondes congregated like there was a blowout sale on Prada bags. "Busy night," he told me dismissively, shrugging to let me know he'd given it his best shot.

"Yet, somehow you managed to get our drinks," I persisted, ticked that he wasn't taking this seriously.

He sighed. "Different bartender."

I looked again, this time following to where he was pointing, at the other end of the bar. It was far less crowded

there, where a dark-haired girl was working behind the counter.

I huffed impatiently as I shoved away from our table. “Fine. I’ll get ’em myself.” Busy or not, there was no way I was walking out of this place without our keys.

I was on a mission. As I waded through the sea of tanned and toned bodies, it became more and more obvious I was out of my element in my worn blue jeans and Grateful Dead T-shirt. Whenever someone pushed me, I pushed back, trying not to be skeeved out by the fact that when I did, my hands met exposed flesh more often than not.

If you judged by looks alone, Emerson could easily pass for one of these California girls, with her straight-from-the-bottle blonde hair and those superlong legs of hers. It wasn’t until she opened her mouth and you heard her twang, or you learned of her undying love for Taylor Swift and spangled clothing, that you knew she really belonged deep in the heart of Texas.

Me, not so much. I wasn’t the typical California beauty, but I’d never really been the typical anything. I hadn’t inherited my mother’s sultry Cuban looks. Frankly, I didn’t even pass as Hispanic on the surface. But I also didn’t have my dad’s pale Wasy thing going for me either.

I’d landed somewhere in between mousy and uninspiring.

Still, I had my assets, and I’d learned how to best use them to my advantage. I’d just never been one of those girls who felt comfortable putting those *assets* front and center, at least not in real life.

I blamed my parents for my lingering hang-ups. They were great people, even if a little ... let’s call it *overprotective*. I’d been given every opportunity a kid could dream of, ski lessons, great vacations—they even gave me a horse for my eleventh birthday. What little girl doesn’t want her own pony?

I had it all, as long as it didn’t involve beaches or swimming pools ... anything deemed a drowning hazard. So

there'd never been any reasons to run around in swimsuits the way other kids had. I'd never learned to be shamelessly uninhibited about my body.

But it wasn't like I'd grown up Amish or anything either. Plus, I'd gone to school in Arizona, where it wasn't just hot it was downright sweltering. Most of the girls came to class wearing midriffs and booty shorts.

Personally, I preferred observing all that skin from a distance. And this ... this sliding between all the half-naked bodies ... well, a can of Crisco might have made it easier.

By the time I'd made my way through the crush, I leaned against the bar and let out an audible sigh. I couldn't decide if I deserved a trophy or needed a shower.

From the other side of the counter, I got a good look at the brunette bartender, and was struck by how stunning she was up close. Not a California girl in the typical sense, with her glossy curls and full scarlet lips that stood out against her porcelain skin. She looked airbrushed.

She'd just cracked two beers and passed them to a guy who handed her a twenty. She didn't offer him any change in return, and when he started to complain, she arched a brow at him, letting him know this wasn't a negotiation.

He opened and closed his mouth, and then, when she continued to stare him down, he took his beer and stalked away.

"He'll be back. He always is," she told me, the trace of a smirk transforming her expression. "What can I get you?"

Immediately, I liked her. I wanted to be her. Self-possessed. Poised. Fierce.

Bolstered by our new girl-bond, I figured she might be just the person to help me out. "I'm trying to find Billy!" I had to shout since it was louder over here by the bar.

Her smirk melted as she gave me the once over. Both eyebrows rose this time, and I tried to translate her expression. *Bored? Tired? Unimpressed?*

Then she indicated the swell of bodies squeezed together and clamoring for attention near the other end of the bar. “Yeah? Well, you and just about every other girl here.”

I followed her gaze to where Lucas had pointed earlier when he’d come up empty-handed after going for my keys.

It was like watching sharks locked in a feeding frenzy. I perused the mob of over-glossed lips and barely dressed bodies, as I tried to see what all the fuss was about. I finally managed to catch a glimpse of the bartender beyond them.

*Billy*, I presumed.

Something surged in my stomach, something primal and undeniable. I told myself it was probably just indigestion, even though I knew better.

Billy was ... magnificent.

Billy, with his tousled hair, wearing a T-shirt so snug there was almost no need to imagine the ripped chest hidden beneath. Billy, with his too-good-to-be-true boyish looks, who seemed to laugh in all the right places and flashed his Colgate-worthy smile when he did. Billy, who revealed just the hint of a dimple as he slid drink after drink to the predatory girls who swarmed the other side of his bar.

Billy, who had the keys to my new place.

I crushed the butterflies in my stomach. This was no time to be thinking about strong biceps and sexy lips.

“Thanks,” I told the bartender who’d pointed Billy out.

Trying to channel some of her confidence, I stormed off in his direction. I wasn’t sure if I was seeing red because I was being forced to charge headfirst into a gaggle of beach sluts competing for some guy’s attention, or if I was really just mad at myself (and maybe at Em too) since this whole mess was our fault to begin with. If we’d been on time, I’d already be safely tucked away in my new “cozy beachside bungalow.”

Maybe I was jumping to unfair conclusions about this whole situation. Maybe these were nice girls who were just incredibly comfortable in their own skin—*literally*—the way

Emerson was. Maybe hanging out here and flirting with the hot bartender was their way of blowing off steam.

Maybe I should stop being so judge-y and collect my keys so I could get a good night's sleep, and in the morning I'd have a whole new (less cranky) perspective.

Managing to find an open patch at Billy's end of the bar, I leaned over its sticky, over-shellacked surface. "Hey!" I had to shout so I could be heard above the roar. "You Billy?"

His attention snapped my way, but not before one of the girls whipped her head around to scowl down at me, her platform heels making her at least six inches taller than me. "*Wait your turn!*" Her voice was shrill and nasally.

There went my whole "nice girls" theory.

I opened my mouth to tell her to mind her own damned business, but apparently, she'd said her piece and was done with me, already icing me out as she turned back toward Billy-the-sexy-bartender. It was kind of awe-inspiring, how quickly her nasty expression transformed the moment she was eye to eye with him again. This girl had *game face* down to an art.

She gazed at him like she wanted to gobble him up, no hint that she'd ever bared her fangs at me in the first place.

The bartender, whose attention had jerked to me when I'd called out to him, now coolly examined me the way the dark-haired bartender had. I wondered if he noticed how much I stood out in this place, and if he was thinking I didn't quite measure up to the other girls.

Then his eyes narrowed the slightest bit as he plucked a glass from the rack in front of him. "Name's not Billy," he said absently. He pulled the handle on the tap, filling the glass until foam spilled over the sides before handing it to the girl who acted like it was her job to run interference on his behalf. He winked at the girl. "On the house, Mona."

She picked up her beer and took a not-so-demure sip, batting her false lashes at the bartender. Then she suggestively licked the foam from her overly lined lips. Her tongue made

several more trips around the block, just in case the gesture had been too vague.

It hadn't been.

"Thanks, Will. You're a doll," she cooed.

I stood there for a moment.

Will. His name was *Will*.

"You coming to the Sand and Slam Thursday night?" she asked, not yet ready to give up on him.

*Will-not-Billy* gave the girl a sheepish grin while my cheeks grew hot over my mistake. "Sorry—can't. Busy," he explained.

"Aw, you're no fun! You're always busy," the girl huffed. She took another sip, her tongue doing that god-awful licking thing as it took another not-so-provocative pass around her lips. And when Bartender Will turned his back on her dismissively, she finally called it quits, casting me a *good luck with that* look, before tottering away on her sky-high platforms.

I didn't move right away, so he caught me off guard when he spun back around and leaned across the bar toward me. I opened my mouth, thinking maybe I should apologize or order a drink or something, but I never got the chance.

"Who told you to call me Billy?" His tone and mood were far less banter-y than they had been just seconds ago, when he'd been giving free drinks to the Lip Licker. It only took me a second to make the connection I'd been missing.

Will ... Billy ... of course. I hadn't been mistaken. Billy was short for William.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You *are* him?" My irritation at being here in the first place hit me full blast. "What the hell difference does it make whether you're Bill or Billy or William ...?" My voice raised, and I couldn't help noticing that my accusation had drawn the attention of several pairs of heavily made-up eyes. "Lucas Harper says you have my keys, and I want them."



The noise that had been deafening only moments earlier died down to a dull roar, and now it felt like everyone was listening to us. *To me.*

I shot a glare at those around me and then snapped around to face Will again, but he'd already turned his back on me, snubbing me the same way he had Lip Licker.

“Hey! Are you listening? I said: *Give me my keys!*” I pounded my fist against the bar.

I no longer cared if I attracted a full-blown audience. I refused to be brushed aside.

But he continued to ignore me, and I searched for a way to get his attention. I wasn't above throwing something at his head.

When I saw a giant bronze bell hanging above the bar, I reached for the cord and tugged it as hard as I could. The metallic clang vibrated loudly through the air, ringing hollowly in my ears.

“You!” I shouted at Will's back.

That got him.

He whirled around and I pointed directly at him. “I need to talk to you.”

## CHAPTER THREE

WILL

This chick was so out of her element here.

She wasn't like the other girls who went out of their way to get my attention, with their pouty lips and jutting double D's. Not that I didn't appreciate their efforts.

I just couldn't afford the mess afterward—that clingy part where they wanted to talk, or pretend that just because we'd fucked we were some kind of couple. Or that thing where they couldn't stop texting or stopping by until I finally had to be a dick to get the point across.

Even if I didn't have obligations, even if I wasn't a different person now, I knew better than to piss in the pot I drank from.

I couldn't let anything—or anyone—distract me again.

But there was something different about this girl. She didn't want me. Or ... at least she didn't want me yet. She wasn't giving me the *I wanna rip your clothes off and do filthy things with my mouth* look. I had no idea what I'd done to piss her off, but the look she was giving me was more along the lines of *I want to rip your throat out*.

I had to admit, the look suited her. Maybe I was a degenerate, but with those glittering brown eyes and flushed cheeks of hers ... hell, even the way she slammed her fist on the bar ... she sorta turned me on.

If only she hadn't called me Billy.

No one called me that anymore; most everyone knew better. The second I'd heard that name roll off her lips—even lips as pretty as hers—my hackles had automatically gone up.

She was so fucking lucky she was a girl.

It had taken me several seconds to suppress the throat-punching reflex, and to do so I had to pretend the brown-eyed girl wasn't still standing there. But it was too late to take back the free beer I'd offered Mona, all because Brown Eyes had rattled me. I knew better than to encourage chicks like Mona, the regulars who were constantly begging for a bone—if you know what I mean. Because of that move, she'd think she was special. Think she actually stood a chance of landing me.

*Perfect.*

I'd only hoped the angry little brown-eyed girl had taken the hint when I'd given her the brush off. But the second Mona was gone, she was there again, this time shouting something about her keys or some shit.

That's when it hit me: Brown Eyes had no clue about my past. *Lucas told me you had my keys.*

She was the new tenant in the vacant beach house. The only reason she'd called me Billy in the first place was because Lucas couldn't let the past die.

I told myself it didn't mean anything. I wasn't that guy anymore and none of that old shit mattered now.

Still, it stirred up old memories, and I'd needed a second to get myself back under control. That was when I heard the bell, and realized she had no idea what it meant.

A slow smile fell over my lips. I might not be able to hit her—or even Lucas—for dredging up ancient history the way she had, but there were other ways to make her pay.

Ones I might enjoy even more.

## CHAPTER FOUR

LAUREN

Before I could demand my keys again, the entire bar erupted into earsplitting cheers. I was unexpectedly being grabbed and pushed and pulled from every angle.

When I was lifted off the ground, I instinctively struggled to escape, floundering against those who held me. But that only lasted a second or two before I was dumped onto the bar.

My hands found the edge and I braced myself, ready to hop back down when I heard the first person cry out, “Body shot!”

*What the hell?*

The battle cry was quickly followed by another and another and another, until everyone was chanting the two-word phrase.

I searched for help, trying to locate Emerson or Lucas in the crowd in hopes that one of them might be able to fill me in on what the hell was happening. But they were lost in the swarm of faces and waving arms.

The other bartender—the girl with the flawless skin and dark curls—tapped my shoulder, forcing me to twist around on the countertop. “Pick someone else. Bartenders are off limits.”

“What ...” I stammered. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You picked Will. When you rang the bell.” She said it like the answer was obvious and I was being intentionally dense.

Will appeared beside the dark-haired bartender then, wiping his hands on a dish towel and wearing a smug

expression. From this close, and from this angle, I could see just how green his eyes were, and when he spoke I saw the spark of something sly and playful buried there. “It’s okay, Crystian. I think I can make an exception, just this once.”

His words made the crowd go even wilder.

Crystian shrugged and uncapped a bottle of Cuervo, lifting her eyebrow at me. “This’ll be a whole lot easier if you lie down, honey.”

“I don’t know what you think I agreed to, but I’m *not* doing a body shot! This is all a big misunderstanding,” I insisted as I tried to wiggle off the countertop again, but several pairs of hands shoved me back in place.

Will took a step closer and winked at me knowingly, making me want nothing more than to smack that taunting expression off his face. “You were the one who rang the bell. I don’t make the rules.”

It finally sank in as I realized exactly what this was—different bar, same game. In Tempe, it had been some hot waitress wearing a giant sombrero for the night and calling herself “Tequila Tina.” She’d go around the bar offering body shots for a dollar. She would pull tequila from a holster slung around her waist and the crowd would react like they were about to witness a shootout at the O.K. Corral.

Here, it was a brass bell—*got it*.

Will dangled a set of keys—*my keys*, presumably—defiantly in front of my face, a small smirk tugging the corners of his lips. Was I supposed to swat at them like a playful kitten? Grovel and beg and hope he’d take mercy on me, then thank him for not making me do the body shot? Maybe slick my tongue around my lips the way Lick Lipper had?

*He was a real piece of work.*

When I didn’t make a move toward them, he tossed them on the counter, the challenge fading from his face. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t gonna make you do it. It was my job to hang on to them till you got here. Just take ’em and go.”

I heard several jeers, but that wasn't what made me change my mind. The old me would've walked away—Arizona Lauren. Denver Lauren, for sure.

But this was California Lauren he was challenging.

This Lauren wouldn't back down. This was my do-over. Maybe this Lauren would be more like Lola Bang. More like the brunette bartender who didn't take any crap, and didn't give change from a twenty.

“No way,” I said, taking a breath. “I rang the bell ...”

One of Will's eyebrows jerked up. “You sure? No shame in admitting you're in over your head.”

“Over my head? You sure think an awful lot of yourself, don't you?” I asked pointedly, trying not to let it show that my heart was pounding like crazy. It was just a body shot, no big deal.

Whoops and whistles erupted through the throng of people, and I swore my cheeks were going to burst into flames.

Will grinned, running his hand through already tousled hair that looked like he'd just rolled out of bed. He couldn't seem to help the appeal that oozed from him, and I told myself it was nerves that made my belly quiver and definitely *not* his broad shoulders as he spread his arms wide and leaned forward against the counter.

Cursing under my breath, I lay back, stretching out on the bar. I was determined to get this whole disaster over with. I lifted the bottom of my Grateful Dead T-shirt up to my bra, exposing my belly, while Crystian slipped a slice of lime between my teeth for me to hold. I'd watched enough of these at ASU to know the drill.

When Will's face appeared above me, I squeezed my eyes shut. I refused to let him see that even though I thought he was a complete ass, I couldn't suppress the shiver of anticipation that started in the pit of my stomach and slithered even lower the moment he was leaning over the top of me.

My breath caught in the back of my throat as his hands fell on either side of my rib cage and his wrists brushed against the bare skin of my abdomen. I nearly leapt off the countertop when the first drops of tequila poured into my navel, but somehow I managed to keep my eyes shut.

It was his breathy chuckle that made me risk a quick peek. And when I did, he was staring directly at me, his emerald-colored eyes locking onto mine in a challenge. That was right before he drew my hair aside so he could sprinkle salt along the side of my neck.

He dropped low, the tip of his tongue sliding from just below my ear to the base of my neck, and I wondered if he could feel how furiously my pulse was beating beneath his touch. He took his time collecting the salt, his tongue searching out each grain and making me squirm inside my own skin.

When he finally lifted his head, he stared down at me, studying me intensely as if he was trying to gauge my reaction. I kept my expression as wooden as I could, refusing to give him the satisfaction of knowing how affected I really was.

His insistent lips dropped low then, closing around my belly button, and his tongue, which had only seconds ago been exploring my neck, dove expertly into the pool of liquor awaiting him. Jolts of electricity blazed through my entire body.

I fisted my hands at my sides as the bar around us went utterly silent.

I wanted to tell him he was doing this body shot thing all wrong. It was supposed to be done fast—salt, tequila, lime. *One, two, three.*

Rapid fire.

Not this leisurely exploration of my body. But I was convinced that if I tried to talk the words would get caught behind the massive lump clogging my throat.

The suction of his mouth made me shudder, and despite myself my body betrayed me. Fiery tendrils unfolded, and as he lapped at the tequila, drinking it up, I couldn't help imagining what it would be like if his mouth moved lower ... lower ... *lower* ...

As if punctuating the fact he was finished, he nipped at my skin, making me jump, and goose bumps broke out over every inch of me. Then he dragged his body upward along the contours of my own, ensuring I could feel every single muscle of his chest brushing across me until his mouth was exactly in line with mine.

When his teeth clamped onto the lime between my teeth, he didn't let go. Instead, his lips stayed pressed there, and our breath mingled until I could taste the tequila he'd just lapped from my skin.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, and, with a small gasp, released the lime. It took more effort than it should have to force myself to look away from him as I rolled onto my side and out from beneath him altogether. I tugged the hem of my shirt down again as I hopped off the bar, and when I did, I was met by rounds of applause and catcalls and shouts for more, more ... *more!*

"I did it," I announced breathlessly, holding my hand out as steadily as I could toward him, ignoring the outbursts at my back. "I held up my end."

Will pinched the lime, which was still between his teeth, squeezing the rest of the juice into his mouth before chucking it away. "That you did," he conceded. And then he grabbed the keys and tossed them to me.

My gaze dropped to the small silver keys in my palm.

This was what \$15,000 had bought me: freedom. An entire summer to get my head straight, away from my parents and their well laid plans.

An escape from what had happened back in Arizona.

I spun on my heel.



“Hey!” Will called after me. “Don’t I get a thank-you?”

Not a chance. But I did manage to restrain myself from flipping him off. And when Emerson finally caught up with me out in the parking lot, she was panting from running to keep up with me.

“Never saw you do that before.” Em grinned and bumped my shoulder with hers.

I sighed and bumped her back. “Yeah? Well, think about it. I’ve done worse.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

WILL

I crept in carefully and slid the deadbolt in place, listening to see if Tess had waited up for me. When she didn't call out, I figured she'd crashed for the night.

As quietly as possible, I set my keys on the counter and went to check on her. She was in the same place she'd been every night this week, curled up on the couch, probably pissed that I hadn't bothered letting her know how late I'd be working.

I thought about waking her so she wouldn't have to sleep there all night, or at least tucking a blanket around her—things that might, in some small way, make up for not being a better communicator. Instead, though, I went to my room and collapsed on the bed, not bothering to strip out of my dirty clothes, which reeked of beer and tequila.

A body shot.

One fucking body shot, that's all it had been. So why was my dick still hard?

Because of those innocent brown eyes. And that vanilla scented skin. And the sound she'd made deep in her throat that was part whimper and part gasp that made me want to yank her jeans down right then and there so I could thrust myself deep inside her.

With an entire bar full of people watching.

What kind of an asshole even thinks shit like that?

This one, that's who.

And now ...

Now here I was still thinking about what she'd feel like.

But let's be honest, I doubt there was another dude on this planet who wouldn't wonder what she was hiding beneath that Grateful Dead tee of hers.

She made me want to forget about not pissing in the pot I drank from.

If only I didn't have Tess.

I shouldn't be thinking about the brown-eyed girl at all. This was where I belonged.

Home. Concentrating on Tess and my obligations, and how I would be better from now on. I promised her I'd act like a grown-up now that I was back home.

I crammed my fists in my eyes and let out a heavy sigh. This wasn't the way I'd planned my life.

Man, sometimes life sucked.

I had to get the brown-eyed girl out of my head and wrap my brain around the way things had to be. I wasn't going to have her. Hell, I didn't even deserve her. I had to stay focused on Tess and sorting shit out at home.

Getting up, I went back to the couch and brushed aside the silken strands of sun-streaked hair that hung in Tess's face. I shook her awake gently. "Sorry I didn't call."

## CHAPTER SIX

LAUREN

Morning came way too fast.

I tiptoed out of my bedroom, trying not to trip over the suitcases and boxes Emerson and I had lugged in from the car last night. We'd only brought what we needed for the summer, leaving everything else in storage back in Arizona.

Em and I had moved out of the dorms to share an apartment during our sophomore year, and by comparison our old place had been palatial compared to our new summer digs. But at least our summer bungalow came "furnished," which apparently meant we got a lumpy futon, a couple of squeaky twin beds, and a white plastic patio set that passed for a kitchen table.

But at least the sketchy-looking AC unit hadn't broken down overnight, and we'd discovered a working coffee machine in the kitchen. What more could a girl ask for?

I stubbed my toe on one entire box marked "makeup" in pink glitter marker (three guesses who that belonged to), and bit back a low howl that bubbled up from my throat.

I probably didn't need to be quiet. Emerson slept like the dead and was probably still comatose after staying up late revising her Christmas wish list to include "*Lucas and his superfine abs.*" After all, she told me, giggling as we downed most of the bottle of warm champagne to commemorate our first night in our new place, she didn't want Santa to get confused and send her a boy with just "ordinary abs."

I dragged one of the plastic chairs over and climbed onto it, hoping it wouldn't buckle beneath me. This was the perfect time to double-check the duffle bag I'd hidden away in the small attic when Em hadn't been looking. I felt the weight

in my chest lighten, the way it always did whenever I laid eyes on the bag and confirmed it was still safe.

Eventually I'd need a better place to stash it, but for now the ceiling would have to do.

I wondered if I would ever get used to all the hiding. Not just the gun, but myself too.

My entire life had changed the night my two worlds had collided, my online one and my real life, shattering the wall I'd carefully constructed between them.

Until then, the whole thing had felt like a game. A fantasy. Something that couldn't really hurt me, or anyone I cared about.

Afterward though ...

That's when I realized the implications of what I'd been doing. Of the people who might be hurt if they ever discovered the truth.

Like my parents.

They would die if they knew I'd started my own *Secret Admirer* page, even if I somehow managed to explain it wasn't as seedy as they imagined. To them, it would never be the kind of "work" an ordinary suburban girl from Denver was supposed to be doing. Especially *their* daughter.

They'd never understand that just because I was willing to peel off my sweater in front of a webcam, that didn't make me easy. That I wasn't a prostitute ... despite some of the offers I'd received.

I'd never even considered crossing that line. My little stripping venture was strictly hands-off.

That had been the whole point. That's what had made it so easy for me—the anonymity. I'd gone to great lengths to make sure no one ever knew it was me in front of that camera.

Or at least that's what I'd believed ... until one of my "clients" had landed on my doorstep.

Before then, I'd even gone as far as using a VPN while I was at my local coffee shop to privately conduct all my business transactions—banking, answering emails, accounting—hoping the IP address could never be traced back to me.

What I hadn't counted on was an obsessed viewer tracking me down anyway. Finding me at the coffee shop where I thought I'd been operating under the radar.

I also hadn't realized how he'd blurred the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

Maybe if I had, I would've tried harder. Maybe I could have prevented him from learning my real name. From following me home.

From showing up in my bedroom.

But I hadn't ... and he'd been there, waiting for me.

Now all I wanted was to put that part of my life behind me. To take the money I'd earned and make a fresh start. To pretend that night had never happened, and hope there was no way anyone could ever, *ever* track me down again.

*I'm safe.* I told myself as I locked the front door behind me. *No one—other than Em—even knows I'm here.*

I made sure my new keys were tucked safely inside my tote bag before making my way toward the beach Emerson *swore* she'd spotted the day before. The beach I'd been fantasizing about ever since I was a little girl.

It wasn't far, and it wasn't hard to find. I just followed the sound of the crashing waves. The salty smell was practically tangible, and the second I stepped off the blacktop and my feet sank into the sand, I'd never been surer of my decision to leave my old life behind. The boys of California had nothing on the beaches.

This was the place where my dreams would finally come true. Now all I needed to do was learn how to swim.

If only it were that simple. I had a lifetime of fears to overcome. My mom's voice was in the back of my mind,

telling me about tsunamis and sneaker waves and shark attacks.

*People do this every day*, I told myself—regular people, little kids, the elderly. It wasn't a big deal. I kept repeating those words in my head, right up until the moment I was ankle-deep in the very first waves I'd ever met.

That was when the first whispers of true panic took hold.

*This is the freaking ocean.*

I'd been preparing for this moment for years. I'd seen a million pictures and watched a thousand YouTube videos and imagined this moment all my life. But standing here realizing my plan had been to just ... *jump in and go for it!* Suddenly I was questioning everything.

But that was the thing, I sort of *had* to.

If I didn't, my parents and all their unfounded warnings that I shouldn't ... *couldn't* ... do this would win. If my own fears didn't get the best of me first.

I was never allowed to take swimming lessons at the Y with my friends. Never able to go to the river or even stay at a hotel that *had* a swimming pool. Even when we'd gone to our mountain cabin, the lake had been off-limits.

Mentioning a tropical vacationing was right up there with cursing.

If I didn't jump into the ocean now, when I had the chance, I'd never, *ever* forgive myself.

Otherwise, what had I been scrimping and saving for? Why had I dragged Emerson here, someplace my parents would never approve of?

I threw my towel down in the sand. It was now or never.

The waves roared and the early-morning breeze prickled my skin. I tried not to think about how my skin had tightened the same way the night before, when Will's tongue had skimmed over it. But it was too late—the thought was

crawling through me, same as it had been all night long, keeping me awake as I'd replayed the scene over and over again.

Will-not-Billy, his mouth lingering over my stomach, testing and exploring, making me shiver ...

*Stupid body shot.*

I shook off the memory. Now wasn't the time. Hell, it would *never* be the time. In my brief encounter with Will, I'd learned enough to know he was exactly the kind of guy I'd spent my life avoiding: arrogant.

No. Will wasn't just arrogant, he was downright cocky. Other girls might find that kind of boldness utterly irresistible.

Me, I found it obnoxious.

I shuffled forward, my toes sifting through the sand. With each step, I steered my thoughts away from the night before, forcing myself to forget about Will ... and the feel of his tongue against my bare skin.

The cold was intense, more so than I'd expected, and as the surf rushed forward to meet me, a bubble of alarm surfaced in my chest. It took me a second to catch my breath as my knees were submerged in water that felt like I was in the Arctic rather than sunny SoCal. There was a reprieve as the waves moved back out again, and I trudged a little farther, getting bolder as my body adjusted to the temperature.

When I was waist high and finally somewhat at ease, finding my rhythm with the sea around me, a breaker struck me, stronger than I expected. It sucked me back toward the shore. I struggled to maintain my balance, but after a few floundering moments I tenuously found my footing.

The sand beneath my feet was unstable, almost as fluid as the water itself, and when the wave went out again I was hauled with it.

The ocean was powerful.

All my research ... all I'd read and the videos I'd watched ... all that paled in comparison to experiencing its



strength firsthand.

Once I gave into it, however, and recognized that the water would, eventually, move back toward the beach again, taking me with it, I was able to relax, bobbing along with the tide as my feet still dragged across the bottom.

I wasn't swimming, not by any stretch. I wasn't even floating because my toes still touched the sand. I was just ... drifting ... and it was bliss. *This* was what I'd been hoping for. This was what I'd dreamed of.

I inhaled and exhaled as the waves pushed and pulled me. I leaned my head back, feeling the California sun on my cheeks as the sea buoyed me.

Just when I thought I'd gotten the hang of it, a wave slammed into me from behind. It crashed over the top of me, water rushing over my face and sucking me under.

Dread ripped through me as I gulped the salty water, choking on a mouthful. I kicked to find my footing again, and flailed, desperate to feel the sand beneath me once more.

*Shit just got real.*

This was no longer part of my I-have-a-dream campaign. The waves that only a second ago had been all floaty and safe had turned scary as hell.

*Swim*, my brain screamed. But that wasn't an option.

Swimming was a skill I'd never mastered, thanks to my helicopter parents ... and to the fact I'd been too embarrassed to sign up for swim lessons once I was out from under their overprotective wings.

How was it possible I'd been able to take off my clothes in front of a camera, but the idea of bumping into someone I knew at the pool had given me hives?

So, here I was, panicking as I broke through the surface. I scanned the coastline for anyone who might rescue me.

*Where the hell were all the freaking lifeguards when you needed them?*

But this wasn't a TV show. There were no beefcakes running across the beach in slow-mo. No bleached blondes with bouncy implants whose mascara never streaked.

This was the part where, because I'd been too stubborn or too stupid to do things the right way, I would die. Out here. All alone. They'd find my beach bag and towel, and on my gravestone it would read: "Here lies Lauren Taylor. She never learned to swim."

When the second wave hit me, it was even stronger than the first. This time, I was upended completely before being hauled out with it.

Everything happened too fast. I thrashed to find the bottom, or the surface, but I was disoriented. My eyes burned beneath the murky saltwater and my lungs ached to keep my breath inside me.

It couldn't end this way. But the edges of my vision were tunneling and my chest felt like it would explode.

Just as I figured out which way was up, another wave crashed over me, shoving me down again.

I gasped, no longer able to hold my breath. Bubbles burst from my mouth as I choked on the briny water.

Then, right before everything went black, something, from somewhere, struck me. Something sharp and hard and unforgiving. Pain erupted in my head.

My mom had been right. My first and only attempt to swim would end in a watery death.

That's when I felt arms reaching around me.

At first, I fought them; convinced that whoever had just grabbed me was pushing me farther beneath the water. But after a second ... I realized that wasn't the case at all. Whoever had ahold of me was hauling me toward the surface. Someone was saving me.

When I finally collapsed onto dry ground, I was coughing and gagging. My lungs were on fire.

It took several long minutes before I could take a full breath without choking. And when my vision cleared an unfamiliar face loomed above me.

A guy was staring down at me. A really good-looking guy. And he was smiling. “You scared the heck out of me, you know?”

If I hadn’t wanted to bury my head in the sand at that very moment, I might’ve noted how infectious that smile of his was.

Instead all I could think was: *Kill me now.*

I struggled against the sand and my fatigued muscles to sit up. “I ...,” my voice croaked, “I ... I think I’m okay—” But my words were cut off by another violent coughing fit.

“Take it easy.” My savior flashed me a drop-dead smile, his clear blue eyes glinting down at me. I was starting to suspect there was something in the water in California. Were they genetically modifying perfect human specimens or something? “You just inhaled about a gallon of ocean water. Give your lungs a minute or two to recover.” He pushed me back down onto the sand.

It’s not like I had much choice. I crumpled weakly, staring sullenly up at the sky as I waited for my wheezing to subside. I should be thanking my lucky stars I hadn’t just drowned back there.

But maybe I should have.

Swimming was the worst.

It was hard and it was dangerous, and the ocean was nothing like I’d imagined it would be. It was too powerful, and way too cold and salty, and not only had I almost died, but I itched everywhere. I had sand in places I might never be able to reach.

And now this: Rescued by a good-looking stranger. *Perfect.*

“Thank you.” I finally groaned, telling myself it wasn’t this guy’s fault it hadn’t been the magical experience I’d

dreamed of.

Those piercing blue eyes appeared above me again, his eyebrows pinching together. “What were you thinking coming out here all alone? These might be good swells for surfing, but not so good for swimming, don’t you think?” He said it like he was asking me, even though it was obvious he knew the answer.

But then something he said made its way through the fog of my humiliation. “Is that what *you* were doing? Surfing?” I bolted upright again. My head throbbed as I lifted my hand to the bump that was already forming on my forehead. I searched the sand and saw a long red board. “Was *that* what hit me?” I asked, only then noticing the skintight wetsuit he was wearing.

His expression softened. “I was just paddling out when I saw you. My plan was to pull you to safety ... but then my board got away from me ...” His voice was low and sincere. He pushed aside a salty strand of my hair from my forehead so he could examine my injury. “What were you thinking ... out here all by yourself?”

Maybe I had a concussion because I couldn’t think of the right way to explain *my plan*, not without giving away my complete and total ineptitude. “I—I was trying to ... swim,” I finally blurted out, and as soon as I did I realized how bad that sounded.

He let out a wry chuckle as he dropped my hair. “Yeah. Got that. Maybe next time you should wear some of those little arm floaties.”

Somehow that small laugh was enough to provoke me. I mean, sure, I was the one who’d gone charging headfirst into the ocean, completely incapable of staying afloat. And, yeah, I was the one who’d nearly drowned, but I never asked to be knocked senseless in the process.

And I definitely didn’t deserve to be made fun of for it.

“You know, this is *your* fault, really. If you hadn’t tried to kill me with that ... that *thing* of yours ...” I gestured

toward his board, which was lying just a few feet away.

“Hey, hey, hey.” He defended, but I could tell he wasn’t really taking me seriously. He wasn’t even trying to hold back his grin. “It’s not the surfboard’s fault.” Then his expression turned halfway sheepish. “But, to be fair, you’re not completely wrong. I didn’t mean to get you hurt. I should’ve been more careful.”

“Damn right you should’ve been more careful,” I insisted. “I was doing just fine until you came along. I would’ve been swimming in no time. Turns out, it’s not all that hard.”

Sure, that was a total lie. But I was on fire, and I wasn’t about to back down now.

My savior’s brows drew together as he gave me a strange look. “Did you just say *would have* been swimming?” His smile vanished as the meaning of what I’d just said sunk in. “Are you for real?”

I jumped up too. But then I swayed, and it was by sheer will alone that I managed to stay upright. “Look, like I said, I’d have been just fine if you hadn’t run into me with that *stupid board* of yours. It’s really none of your business how I learn to swim. I didn’t ask you to rescue me.” I tried not to think about how I must look, standing there all covered in sand, with my hair hanging in soggy strands around my face as I scolded this guy for saving *my* life—like an ungrateful disaster.

“Okay, okay. Just hold up a sec.” He raised his hands in surrender; giving me the kind of placating look you give an unreasonable toddler. “You’re right—none of my business. And, technically, I *was* the one who got you hurt. All I’m saying is, you should be more careful.” He winced as his eyes traveled up to my forehead, to the spot where his board had rammed into me. “It’s dangerous out there. Definitely not a place for beginners.”

This time, the way he said it, not like an accusation but with genuine concern, made my hackles go down, and I let out a groan. “Crap. I’m ... ” It was hard for me to admit this, even

when it was way overdue. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I should have known better. *And ...*” I rolled my eyes when his grin made an appearance once again. “I shouldn’t have gotten mad at you for saving me.”

Laughing, he pointed to his surfboard. “I believe you owe ol’ Rosie an apology too.”

I cocked an eyebrow at the bright red board. “You named it?”

“*Her*. I named *her*,” he corrected. “And she accepts your apology.” He held out his hand. “I’m Noah. And *you* must be new around here.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“I’m pretty sure I’d have noticed you, if you’d been here long. Plus,” He scrunched his face at me. “Not a lot of locals throw themselves into swells like that when they can’t swim.”

I frowned as I attempted to brush away the layers of sand on my arms. “Yeah, I guess I didn’t expect it to be so ... *hard*.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” he said. “I have a friend who gives lessons over at the Weston Hills Pool Club. It’s a pretty swank joint, but the lessons are open to the public. If you plan to try something like this again, you should consider taking a few classes first.” He grinned at me as he reached over and ran his hand over the sand on my arm too.

I couldn’t tell if he was being flirtatious or just friendly. I also couldn’t tell which I wanted it to be.

Now that the sting of my near-death experience was wearing off, I was examining my savior through a different lens. He was the kind of guy who could rock a wetsuit, he had a decent sense of humor, plus there was that whole he’d-saved-my-life thing.

I might not love the idea of lessons, but I definitely didn’t hate *him* right now.

I swallowed, trying to think of something clever to say. Maybe even a way to ask him out.

Then he glanced past me, and raised his arm, waving at someone I couldn't see.

I turned to follow his gaze. There was a group of guys, all wearing wetsuits and carrying surfboards under their arms as they waited for Noah, just down the beach. Each of them—no kidding, each and every one of them—was equally hot.

“I hate to do this, but I gotta run.” He bent forward to retrieve his board—*Rosie*—from the sand. “But, make me a deal: no more *swimming* today.” He punctuated *swimming* pointedly, and I laughed.

“Cross my heart.”

He started to take off toward his friends when he stopped. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“Lauren,” I called back to him.

“Will I see you at the Sand and Slam tomorrow night, Lauren?”

I shrugged, telling him with my expression that I had no clue what a *Sand and Slam* even was.

By now his friends were shouting for him, but he waved them off. “It’s a party. On the beach. Can’t miss it. And you should totally come. Everyone’ll be there.” He winked at me. “*I’ll* be there.” And then he turned and started running, carving loose divots through the sand with his long stride.

The Sand and Slam. Where had I heard that before?

Then it hit me.

Last night, at The Dunes. The Lip Licker had been trying to convince Will to go, but he told her he was too busy.

And there he was again. *Will*. Taking up too much space in my brain. Even after a tall, handsome stranger had rescued me ... one who’d invited me to a party.

Maybe going to the Sand and Slam was exactly what I needed. Will wouldn’t be there; he’d said so himself.

Maybe Noah was just the guy I'd been looking for to punch my virginity card once and for all.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

LAUREN

I spent almost an hour in the shower trying to extract all the sand, as the water went from steaming to tepid to downright glacial. By the time I turned it off, I had goose bumps everywhere and my lips had gone numb. I had to rub myself briskly with my towel just to keep my blood pumping.

There was still steam swirling in the air though, and I wiped the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the paint-chipped door as I examined myself.

It wasn't hard to see why I'd done so well online.

Covered by clothes, it was easy to miss that beneath it all I was hiding full breasts and a narrow waist and a fairly decent ass—and these days, guys paid extra for a nice ass.

Em was convinced that was my biggest downfall, the way I dressed. And maybe she was right. I'd never given much thought to my clothes. I liked hiding behind loose T-shirts, baggy jeans, and messy buns.

*Hiding.*

That was the key word, wasn't it? How long would I feel like I was hiding?

I thought a lot about how I'd gone from carefree co-ed to a webcam stripper in the first place. Especially since I wasn't one of those damaged girls who came from a broken home. I didn't have daddy issues. I had nothing to prove, and exposing myself had never really come naturally to me.

For me, it really had been all about the money. And the ability to call my own shots.

So when I'd overheard a guy telling his buddy at the coffee shop one day about how his folks had cut off his credit

card because he'd racked up over a grand on *Secret Admirer*, the wheels in my head had started spinning.

All he'd done, he'd explained, was do a little jerking off while he watched this chick online play with her banging tits. *No big deal.*

Except it was a thousand dollars big. That was the part I'd heard.

This guy had dropped a grand to watch this girl take off her clothes, and he'd never even met her in person. He had no clue who she was. He literally called her "Bangin' Tits." Never even saw her face, he told his friend—everything was from the neck down, the only parts he cared about.

Yet he was willing to land in the doghouse just to watch her take it off.

And all I'd been able to think was: *Easy money.*

Wouldn't that be more profitable than working as a barista? It would definitely be easier than waitressing while a bunch of frat guys who over-drunk and under-tipped played grabass with me.

At first I'd only been messing around with the webcam thing. I checked into the laws to see if sites like *Secret Admirer* were even legal and found out that as long as they had some sort of warning to minors, they absolutely were.

The real work had been the actual stripping.

To make it easier on myself, I'd created an alter ego. That's how Lola Bang had been born. Lola could take her clothes off. Lola, who wore wigs and masks, and who always avoided looking directly at the camera. Lola, who learned how to strip and grind, to arch her back and part her legs, just so.

It was always Lola in front of the camera, not me. Never me.

And when I felt ready, I recorded myself again and again, until I not only looked like Lola, but I felt like her too.

The rest was simple—a CashApp account and a couple well-placed online ads, and before long I had "regular"

subscribers who knew my hours and never asked for more than I was willing to offer.

I told myself I wouldn't do the stripcam forever, and I'd meant it.

I just hadn't expected it to end with someone getting hurt.

Out in the living room, the huge racket Emerson was making drew me back to the present. I finished toweling my hair dry.

"Hey! Sorry about the mess in here! There's just so much sand." I shouted out to her. "You have no idea the places I found it!"

There was a pause, and then an amused voice called back to me. "Trust me, you get used to it."

*What ... the ... hell?* That was *so* not Emerson.

It was as if I was back in that other apartment while a stranger tried to convince me we were meant to be together.

My fingers seized around my damp towel, as I was acutely aware of just how naked I was in here. And how intensely male that voice out there was.

*That voice.*

There was something vaguely familiar about that voice.

Except ... *no way*. Why on earth would *he* be *here*? In my bungalow of all places.

My heart slammed against my rib cage and time crashed to a complete halt. If it was Will, how in the world had he gotten inside, and what the hell did he want?

Had he come to apologize for that scene at The Dunes last night? Or had he made himself a copy of my key, thinking he might actually have a chance at another go-round—Body Shot, Part Two?

Or *maybe* he was he a crazed serial killer who preyed on runaway co-eds.

I mean, forget the part where he was ridiculously good-looking. Ted Bundy was hot, right?

So how was one supposed to proceed when one found a strange man lurking in their summer rental? All I knew for sure was that I couldn't hide in here all day, pretending I didn't know he was out there.

I cracked the door, hoping it really was Will and not some ax-wielding psychopath standing on the other side waiting for me.

But there was no one. The living room was deserted. I could practically hear the horror film soundtrack hanging ominously in the air.

"Um, hello? Is ... my ... *roommate* here?" Maybe a reminder that I didn't live alone would deter whoever was out there from going all Norman Bates on me.

Will popped his head around the corner that led to the kitchen, and even though he couldn't see me inside the bathroom, I breathed a sigh of relief that it really was him. Not that he couldn't still be a serial killer wearing a hot-guy suit.

He ducked back into the kitchen. "Roommate?" he asked, a strange note to his voice. "Well, since Lucas let me in when I got here, you might wanna check over at his place."

*Welp, I guess Em abandoned me the first chance she got.* And then there was one.

Still, so far at least, Will wasn't behaving particularly stabby.

"Okay," I said, feeling a little braver and opening the door a little wider. Steam from the bathroom seeped into the hallway. "So ...?" I prodded. "What are you doing here, *exactly*?"

"Leaky faucet," he said, as if that was all the explanation I needed.

I secured my towel around me and took a few steps closer. "What do you mean, leaky faucet? I never called about that." Besides, wasn't Will a bartender?

Metal clanged against pipes, which explained all the noise I'd thought Emerson was making.

More banging, and then there was a brief pause before he answered. "Yeah. Well, I was supposed to fix it before you moved in yesterday, but something came up."

I tiptoed further into the living room, telling myself I just wanted to see what he was doing in there—that my curiosity had nothing at all to do with Will himself.

But I was a liar. It was almost too much, him being here in my place. I hadn't stopped thinking about him. His lips had practically seared heat blisters onto my belly and now he was here. Where I lived.

I peered around the corner, to where he was sprawled on his back on the kitchen floor, studying the pipes beneath the sink. He was exactly as I'd remembered him—too good-looking for his own good. Except this time *he* was the one flat on his back, not me.

"So ... what? You moonlight as a plumber?"

I heard him chuckle. "If I was a plumber, I'd be making a helluva lot more money," he answered. "I guess you could call me a jack-of-all-trades."

His shirt had inched up, revealing the carved planes of his stomach and the path of hair that trailed from his naval, disappearing into his shorts. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about what *he* would taste like drenched in tequila.

Oblivious to my smutty thoughts about his nether regions, Will kept talking. "I do odd jobs for the owner. You know ... maintenance, repairs ..." His face scrunched up in concentration and his arm flexed as he yanked the wrench. "... key sitting. I told Lucas I had your keys last night so you'd know where to find 'em. He didn't call to tell you I was coming today?"

"Who? Lucas?"

He grinned, and then started to slide out from under the sink. "No. Mr. Patel. The owner." He felt around for the dirty rag at his side and then wiped his hands, before sliding out

from under the sink. “There,” he said. “That should do it. If it leaks again, give him a call and I’ll come back out.”

Considering I hadn’t known there was a leak in the first place, I wasn’t sure I’d even notice another. But if it meant getting Will back out here, maybe I’d take a crack at the pipes myself, see if I couldn’t start a gusher of my own. There was something about a gorgeous guy who knew how to use his hands.

I wondered what else those hands were capable of.

Maybe I’d misjudged Will. Maybe *he* was the guy I’d been searching for.

As he stood up, his bright green eyes landed on me. They drilled right through me, his gaze moving from my head to my toes, and I realized I was standing there in only my towel.

His eyes turned to ice. “You ...,” he uttered, but just that one word said it all. Like he was disgusted to find me standing there.

He swung away from me as he began throwing tools into his metal toolbox. It was as if a switch had been flipped and the friendly fix-it guy had vanished. He couldn’t get out of here fast enough.

I was confused.

Had he thought I was someone else? Did he get me and Emerson mixed up, and think it was her he’d been being all banter-y with? It wouldn’t be the first time I’d been thrown over for Em, although it was certainly the first time I’d been mistaken for her.

I knew then that my first impression of Will hadn’t been off at all. Will would never be *the guy*. He was exactly as much of an ass as I’d thought last night.

“If it leaks again, give Mr. Patel a call.” He snapped the lock on his toolbox closed.

My face turned hot as humiliation got the best of me and I escaped down the hallway to the safety of my bedroom.

Will could show himself out.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

WILL

Tess glanced up at me from her place at the table. “You look like shit,” she stated flatly. If it wasn’t for the slight flex of her jaw, I probably wouldn’t even know she was still mad at all.

“You shouldn’t swear,” I told her, trying to make it sound like I cared that she cussed.

This time the jaw flex was more than slight. “I’m sixteen, and you’re not my dad. If Mom were alive, she’d let me go.”

“You’re not sixteen for another six months. And I know exactly what happens at those parties. No way would Mom have said yes. And no fucking way will I. Final answer.”

She opened her mouth, looking like she was planning to mount another argument. Her cheeks flamed and she made a fist. But I wasn’t budging on this one—the Sand and Slam was off limits.

*Good. Yell at me, I willed. At least then I’d know what’s going on inside that head of yours.*

Then she just ... deflated. “Whatever. Dinner’s on the stove.”

Despite knowing I was in the right, guilt stabbed at me, and I wondered if this would ever get any easier. If I’d ever have the right answers when it came to Tess. I turned away so she couldn’t see me wince. “Thanks,” I mumbled, grabbing a paper plate—the only kind we used—and filled it with scrambled eggs and pancakes—pretty much the only food she ever made. I doused both the pancakes *and* the eggs in syrup.

I hated this. I hated that I was here, with Tess, and still thinking about Lauren.



What was it about that chick that got to me, anyway? And what was she trying to pull with that towel move? Was she trying to fuck with my head or was she really as naive as she acted?

Not a chance. No girl was that clueless.

I probably shouldn't have gone over there in the first place, especially not without an appointment. I damn sure shouldn't have let Lucas let me in. But who the fuck walks around half-naked like that when they're not alone?

*Jesus fuck!*

"What's up your ass?" Tess asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Nothing," I snapped, and when her face fell, I was reminded that she was just a kid. I ran my hand through my hair. I needed to get myself under control. "Crap, sorry, Tess. It's nothing. Really." This was exactly the reason I needed to keep a clear head.

Tess had her own shit to deal with; she deserved for me not to be a total dick.

It was strange being back here after so much time had passed. I'd felt like a stranger that first day, when I'd walked through the door and realized I barely knew my baby sister.

And I doubted I was the only one of us who felt that way.

Five years was a long time to be away, especially for a ten-year-old you'd almost never noticed and barely ever spoken to.

Tess had changed so much in that time. Fifteen now, and frankly, looking more like twenty. She was too damn pretty for her own good—nothing at all like the gawky preteen I'd hardly known before. I couldn't even remember saying good-bye to her when I'd left.

She was right. I wasn't her dad and she didn't need me acting the part.

And it wasn't like I'd rushed home when Tess needed me most. I'd been too busy feeling sorry for myself, holed up in some shithole motel and trying to drink myself into oblivion. By the time news of our mom's death had reached me, nearly three weeks had passed. A lifetime to a grieving teenager.

I still wasn't sure she'd forgiven me, but I definitely didn't think I'd ever forgive myself.

I'd missed my chance to say good-bye to our mom. I'd missed her funeral. And I'd missed the part where my own mother had decided I was too irresponsible to take care of my baby sister and had signed guardianship over to our deadbeat uncle.

Suddenly my washed-up career hadn't seemed so important.

It had taken me two whole days after getting word just to sober up all the way, and another two to haul my ass home. But when I did, and realized our uncle was the same piece of shit he'd always been, trying to figure out how to sell our mom's jewelry on eBay and Craigslist, I'd booted him out. I swore right there and then—to myself and to Tess—I'd figure out a way to make things right.

Tess wrinkled her nose at the food in front of me. “That’s disgusting. I don’t know how you eat it like that.”

I glanced at her syrup-free eggs and grinned, forgetting all about Brown Eyes and the way she'd gotten under my skin. “I don’t know how you can eat *yours* like *that*.” I slid into the chair across from her.

“Seriously, I know you’re mad about the party and all, but I’ll try to start carrying my weight around here. You know, maybe fix you a decent meal once in a while,” I said.

She lifted her eyebrows critically. “Except you probably won’t.”

I grinned. “Yeah, I probably won’t. I swear, sometimes I feel like you’re the grown-up around here.”

Her eyebrows rose a little higher. “One of us has to be.”

“Ouch,” I said, pretending to be insulted as I stabbed a mouthful of eggs with my fork.

Tess’s mood turned serious as she pushed her food around her plate.

“What is it?” I asked, knowing she was beating around the bush in her own way.

“Camden stopped by again yesterday. While you were ... *out*.”

I sighed. “Tess, I’m sorry.” I reached over and squeezed her hand, wondering if I’d ever get this shit right. “I’ll take care of him. It won’t happen again.”

“He said he’s coming back tomorrow night, and that you better be here.”

I couldn’t stand the worry in her face. “I will be,” I told her, inwardly steeling myself because I knew what I had to do. It wasn’t fair to Tess, but neither was putting her through the constant stress of facing that asshole.

“So we’re gonna be okay?” She looked at me, trusting me, begging me to tell her the truth.

I did, then, when I nodded. “It will be. I got it all under control.”

## CHAPTER NINE

LAUREN

Emerson had treated me like I was her own personal Beach Party Barbie.

She'd tossed aside my worn cutoffs and my favorite *Star Wars* tee, threatening to burn them if I tried to wear them to the party, and convinced me instead to shimmy into one of her halter dresses, a cute teal number that, on her, would have only been moderately revealing.

On me ... I felt like I was redefining the word *cleavage*.

Emerson slapped my hand away from my chest when she saw me readjusting my top for the umpteenth time. "Stop. You look amazing." She sighed dramatically. "Seriously. It's a party. At least *try* to look like you're having fun."

"I'm *trying* to look like my boobs aren't making a break for it," I grumbled, glancing around.

I hadn't known what to expect when Noah had invited me to the Sand and Slam. Even though he'd said *everyone* would be here, I'd expected more of a house party with a lot of people.

But a *lot of people* didn't begin to describe the hordes that seemed to have converged from all over the state to pack the beaches. There was music from several live bands, and smoke from bonfires and barbecues and cigarettes and joints. Tiki torches flickered from one end of the sandy strip to the other, and people danced and laughed and shouted. Some even waded into the darkening waves, disappearing into the water.

There was little to no chance I'd be joining them out there.

I wasn't the most scantily dressed, not by a long shot—a lot of guys wore only swim trunks and a lot of girls were dressed in only itty-bitty bikinis. But I still felt like there was a neon arrow pointing directly at my chest.

Em nodded toward my boobs. “Good on them if they do decide to burst out for the night. At least they'll get some much needed attention.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Seriously?” Of all people, Em knew better.

“I'm not talking about those pervos who paid to see them online. I mean in real life. You remember what that is, don't you? That's when a boy meets a girl ...”

I laughed and shoved her. Her drink sloshed over the side of her red Solo cup. We'd each handed over a twenty-dollar entrance fee, which entitled us to a blue wristband and unlimited mai tais. The drinks were god-awful sweet and wicked strong.

“Hey! I got it!” Em squealed, licking the sticky drink from her hands. “Maybe your Knight in Neoprene Armor will notice what a great rack you've got and sweep you off your feet. Again.”

I giggled. Emerson was a sucker for a good love story, and the one about Noah saving me at the beach yesterday had gotten her all worked up. Even better because it had landed us an invitation to a beach party. “A girl can dream,” I told her.

In reality, with this many people, finding Noah was starting to seem like the whole needle in a haystack challenge.

“Oh ... my ... hell.” She nudged me. “There's Lucas. Act cool.”

So ... maybe not a needle. And since when did Emerson start searching for guys *anywhere*? Usually *they* were the ones hunting for *her*.

“As opposed to ...?” I asked.

“You know what I mean.” She ran her tongue over her teeth and flashed them at me for a lipstick check. I gave her

the all-clear nod. “I don’t want him to know I noticed him.”

“But ... you did ...,” I prompted.

“Yeah. But I don’t want him to know that.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so weird.”

Lucas strolled up to us then, wearing just a pair of shorts and his Casanova smile. “Hey, ladies. Great party, huh? I was hopin’ I’d bump into you here.”

“Really?” I asked, a little too enthusiastically. “Em here was just saying the same thing.”

Lucas’s bare chest puffed up. “Yeah?”

Emerson’s foot came down on mine, her warning to *be cool*. Seriously, I’d never seen her so worked up over a guy before. She’d changed outfits three times tonight, which was two times more than I’d ever seen her change before.

I sidestepped her before I answered him. “She was just commenting on how lucky we were to have you as a neighbor. How ... *considerate* you were to help us get our keys the other night.”

He grinned, his focus completely shifting to Emerson. “I was just happy to help. You know ...,” he said, talking only to her now, and just like the other night, it was like I had disappeared. “If you ever need anything ...”

Em let out a soft sigh. “Like what?” she teased.

He closed the distance between them and took the drink from her hand. “I can think of a few things.” And then his mouth was covering hers.

*You’re welcome*, I told Em silently.

I slipped away, even as I realized I’d just lost my “date” for the party. It wasn’t the first time I’d lost her. Em was a great wingwoman, but she was also easily distracted by shiny objects. Case in point: Lucas Harper.

Whatever. There was plenty going on to keep me distracted.

I went to the bar and got a refill. I'd have to watch myself. Too many more of these and I'd need to find some food too, otherwise I'd end up facedown in the sand.

As I sipped my drink, I wandered around listening to a couple of the bands set up along the beach. Most weren't half bad. But even better than the bands was the ocean. Even after my harrowing experience, I doubted the rhythmic sound of the waves could ever get old.

Letting the breeze hit my face, I took a breath and felt my shoulders relax.

My mom was wrong to keep me away all these years—I belonged here. The water might hate me, but I definitely didn't hate it.

And just when I thought I'd found the perfect spot to write a sonnet or a song—an Ode to the Ocean—a voice behind me interrupted my alcohol-induced musings. “Beautiful, isn't it?”

*Will.*

Just hearing his voice caused my nerve endings to tingle. After the way he'd treated me in my kitchen yesterday, when he'd made it clear he was disappointed to find me instead of Emerson there, I should leave. I still couldn't believe how shitty he'd made me feel. But I was frozen, unable to face him and unable to walk away.

“Are you following me?” I quipped, hoping he couldn't read minds, because what I really wanted to know was whether he was shirtless the way Lucas had been. Could I peek without him noticing?

His voice was husky when he answered, “Would that be so wrong of me, Brown Eyes?”

*Brown Eyes.*

He was probably only calling me that because he didn't know my name, but the fact he'd given me a nickname still made my knees wobbly. When it came to Will, my instincts had gone on sabbatical.

His feet scratched through the sand until he came to a stop beside me. It was darker here, away from the flickering lights of the tiki torches. The silence that settled over us stretched out, going on for longer than I was comfortable with. I wanted him to say something first ... anything. But he just stood there. He hadn't exactly struck me as the silent type, so this felt ... odd.

I opened my mouth, deciding I would have to be the one to break the ice. That's when his skin grazed mine.

It was nothing, really. Less than nothing. Just the slightest brush of his elbow, bare where it skimmed my arm. But it was enough to light my entire body up.

I shivered, despite the warmth of the breeze, and both our heads turned at once. Even in the dark, his eyes were so intense I could have identified the exact shade of green.

"About yesterday ..." He didn't finish. He just shook his head, like I was supposed to know what that meant.

I didn't. And then it became even more confusing when his hand closed around my shoulder, his thumb searing a path along my arm.

This time when I opened my mouth, I wasn't sure what I planned to say.

"Hey! You made it. I've been looking all over for you." Noah's cheerful voice cut through the moment, putting a stop to whatever might have been about to happen.

Disappointment—or maybe that was relief—unfurled inside me. Considering the mortifying scene in my kitchen yesterday, getting too close to Will was surely a mistake.

Taking a step back from Will, I saw Noah converging on us with a group of three other guys who looked like his surfer buddies from the day before.

"What's up, man?" Noah acknowledged Will as they approached. Will just nodded back at him in a way that made it clear they already knew each other.



In fact, they all seemed to know one another. A couple of Noah's friends decided I was worth a second, and even third glance, finding my cleavage more enticing than the ocean. None of them bothered to be sly about it, either.

Will moved to stand in front of me, blocking their view. "You two have met?" Will asked Noah.

"Yeah, man," Noah explained with a sideways grin. "This is Lauren, the girl I was telling you about. The one I rescued yesterday."

*Awesome.* So Noah was going around telling people what a hero he was ... and I was the damsel in distress.

But I never got the chance to be embarrassed, because had Will spun around to face me. His teeth were clenched and the muscle at his jaw twitched. "Are you fucking nuts?" he said. "What the hell were you thinking? Noah told me you don't even know how to swim ... and you just ... what ... dove right into the ocean to figure it out?" He ran his hand through his already-tousled hair, agitation clear on his face. "I've heard a lot of stupid things, but never—*never*—anything as *fucked up* as that. You're lucky you're not shark bait right now, you know that?"

I glanced around at Noah and his friends who were all gaping uselessly at Will and me. Then I spun on Will.

What right did he have to preach at me about anything? This was embarrassing, but more than that, I was furious.

I stabbed him in the chest with my finger. "I didn't ask for your input. If I want to learn to swim by jumping off a ship, then I'll damn sure jump."

A couple of Noah's friends snickered, and I turned to glare at them too.

Then I started back in on Will again. "You know what? You're a piece of work. You come to my place and treat me like crap, then you think you can just apologize ..."

I was gearing up to tell him where he could shove his stupid apology, but he cut me off mid-rant when his hand clamped over mine. The expression on his face went rigid, and

even in the dark, there was no mistaking that all the color had drained from his face.

“Holy hell,” Will ground out. I had no clue where he was looking, or what he was looking at, but it wasn’t me.

Scowling, his fingers gripped mine even tighter. His absurdly green eyes dropping to my face. “We can talk later. I need to deal with something.”

Dumbstruck, I watched as he stalked away.

He was heading straight toward a couple who looked like they’d stolen away from the rest of the crowd. It was hard to see them clearly. For the most part, they were camouflaged by shadows ... not to mention the way they were practically fused together. The guy’s face was so buried in the curtain of the girl’s long hair that it looked like he was trying to eat her neck.

But the girl wasn’t exactly pushing him away. Her head was tipped back, and on her face was a look of sheer bliss.

I felt like one of the subscribers to my *Secret Admirer* page, like I was spying on a private moment none of us should be watching.

Will obviously didn’t agree. I could hear his roar above the waves, and then behind me, one of Noah’s friends muttered, “Aw, shit,” just as Will reached the twosome and I saw his fingers close around the girl’s arm.

As he pulled her away from the guy, I wasn’t sure who was more shocked by Will’s actions, the girl or me.

The guy shouted something along the lines of, “What the hell, man!” but it was hard to make out his exact phrasing. All I knew was that when he caught the look on Will’s face, which there was no mistaking, he shrank back and shut his mouth.

Will said something I couldn’t hear, but from the dark look on his face, I imagined it wasn’t friendly. Then the guy turned tail and fled.

The girl's reaction wasn't nearly as cowardly. She stood her ground. Her expressive face was almost as easy to read as Will's, even in the dark. She went from astonishment to indignation in about three seconds flat.

I couldn't blame her. I was still trying to process the whole scene myself.

Sure, I thought Will was a jerk, but it was still hard to reconcile the charismatic bartender from The Dunes with the brute I was witnessing now.

I would have laughed when the girl poked Will in the chest, the same way I had a few minutes earlier, except I was pretty sure nothing about this was even remotely funny. I suspected I had just witnessed Will catching his girlfriend cheating on him.

Then Will was shouting at the girl again, and I was almost glad I couldn't make out what they were saying. Her outrage was nothing compared to whatever he was unleashing on her now. The poor girl didn't stand a chance.

I heard fleeting bits of his words, and I couldn't believe the things coming out of his mouth. "*How dare you ... warned you ...*" and something about "*... should have known better ...*"

When she burst into tears I thought he might take pity on her, but instead he grabbed her arm again and started to drag her across the sand.

That's when she twisted around and punched him. Hard. Right in the face.

"*Daaamn,*" one of the guys behind me cracked.

I told myself to stop watching, that none of this was my business, but I was in too deep. I had to see where this was going.

Will lifted his hand to his nose, a dazed expression on his face.

The girl didn't look the slightest bit apologetic. She and Will stared at each other for several long angry moments.

Then, she stormed off in the opposite direction of the guy who'd been making a meal of her neck.

Will muttered something under his breath, and then ran his hand under his nose and wiped it across his board shorts, leaving a streak of blood.

“Guess poor Will’s in the doghouse,” Noah said, his arm settling heavily over my shoulder. “Poor Will.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed. I might’ve felt sorry for Will, if it hadn’t been for the fact that he’d basically backed the girl into a corner. What kind of man treats a woman he cares about—even if he did just catch her with another man—that way? Part of me was glad she’d hit him so hard. The way he’d manhandled her, he’d gotten what he deserved.

Suddenly all of this—the party and the fight I’d witnessed—were too much, and the weight of Noah’s arm was suffocating.

“Where you going?” Noah asked, sounding disappointed when I shrugged out from underneath him. “I thought we were gonna hang out? See where the night takes us.”

I started walking the way I’d come, away from where Will was standing, and where his girlfriend had just gone. I hoped I’d find Emerson, but if I didn’t, that was okay too. She and Lucas were having fun and I didn’t want to spoil that.

“Thanks but no thanks,” I called back to Noah. “Maybe some other time.”

But I already knew ...

Noah wouldn’t be the guy.

## CHAPTER TEN

LAUREN

I leaned back in one of the wobbly plastic lawn chairs that I'd dragged outside onto our small lanai, where I balanced my laptop on my knees. I'd gotten up early to enjoy the peace and quiet of the morning. We might only have a semi-view of the beach, but I was seriously getting used to the sounds and the smells that came from living this close to the water. I wondered how I would ever go back to living inland again.

This was the one perk of calling it an early night—no hangover when I'd rolled out of bed at the crack of dawn. Although it was maybe the only perk, because I was pretty sure I'd missed the party to end all parties.

I never did find Em when I'd decided to leave, not that I'd tried all that hard. I'd made my way home by myself, and by the time I had, the festivities had stretched all the way to our end of the beach. I'd been propositioned and catcalled all the way back. Once I'd locked myself inside, the sounds of the party raging out on the sand had continued into the early hours of the morning.

I must've been dead to the world by the time Em came home, because I never even heard her sneak in.

My coffee was starting to get cold, but I sipped it anyway, too content to get up and top it off.

I heard the slider over at Lucas's place scrape on its tracks. His patio was impossible to miss, littered with an array of surfboards and beach towels left to hang dry in the sun. There were beach chairs and candles and *High Surf Advisory* and *Clothing Optional Beyond This Point* signs that looked so real he must have stolen them. In the dark last night, I'd used the colorful string lights he'd hung in crisscrossing patterns as a beacon to pick out my place from the rest.

I totally didn't want to be that annoying nosy neighbor in everyone's business, so when I heard the door rasping closed again, followed by shuffling footsteps, I tried to glance sideways at the wooden wall separating our patios without actually moving my head.

But it was no use. The barrier wasn't see-through enough.

After a few more steps the footsteps froze.

"Um ... I ... Hey, *you* ..."

I didn't have to see the person sneaking out of Lucas's place to know who it was; her drawl was thicker in the morning. No wonder I hadn't heard her come in last night.

"Oh. My. God!" I gave Emerson my best holier-than-thou once-over. "Are you doing the walk of shame right now?"

Her hair was a cloud of blonde cotton candy. Her face was still creased from the sheets, and her clothes were rumped as she clutched her sandals to her chest. Her grin went from sheepish to brazen as she realized there was no point denying it. "Since when do I have any shame?"

"Where's ..." I nodded toward the house next door. "You know who?"

She chewed her lip. "Still in bed. I think I might've killed him."

I took another sip of my cold coffee and passed it to her. "That sounds about right."

She dropped her sandals and settled onto the tile patio beside my chair, sitting cross-legged. She took a drink of my coffee, not complaining that it was pretty gross by now—caffeine was caffeine.

We watched a couple of seagulls fight over a cigarette butt, before one of them realized it wasn't food and flew away, giving the other full access.

Emerson finally said, "Sorry about last night. You mad at me?"

“For what?”

“Ditching you.” She turned and squinted up at me. “I ...” She shrugged. “Lucas and me ... you know.”

“Gross. Spare me the details.” I reached for the cup. “But it’s fine, really. Besides, I’m pretty sure I ditched you first.”

“You mean ... you and what’s-his-name?” When she said *what’s-his-name* she wasn’t messing with me, she really didn’t remember Noah’s name.

“No. Nothing like that. I came home by myself.”

“Aw. That makes me sad.” She made a pouty face for my benefit and then took the coffee again. “So, you never found him?”

“No, I did.” I thought of Will then, and how, for a second there, when he’d first sneaked up on me, I actually believed maybe there’d been some sort of shift between us. Some change. That maybe ...

*Maybe, what?* I asked myself. *Maybe I’d misjudged him?*

Hardly. Not after the blowup I’d witnessed between him and his girlfriend.

But even if she had cheated on him, he must’ve had some role in it, right? Done something to push her into another man’s arms?

I wondered what had happened after they’d taken off. Had Will gone after her so they could make up? Or had that been the final straw? The end of them?

What was wrong with me? Why did I even care?

“But I got ...” I tried to decide how to explain my craptastic night. “... sidetracked.”

Emerson nodded, as if I’d just offered a perfectly reasonable explanation. Then she hopped up. “Hey, what are your plans for the day? Wanna go shopping?”

“Can’t,” I said, grateful to have an excuse. I wasn’t like Emerson, who considered shopping a sport. I nodded toward the computer, still perched on my lap. “I’ve got a date.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

LAUREN

At exactly two-thirty that afternoon I was being buzzed through the gates of the Weston Hills Pool Club. Butterflies swirled in my stomach at the thought of what I was about to do.

Swim lessons.

I'd been putting this off for the past four years, ever since I'd been out of my parents' house and old enough to decide for myself. I'd always made some excuse—too busy with school, I didn't have a way to get myself to lessons, I was broke.

But then I started making money of my own and I bought a car, and my class load, well, that had never really been an issue. School had always been easy for me, even college. What it really boiled down to was that I was a full-grown woman who was afraid to swim.

But clearly I wasn't going to just magically overcome that fear on my own.

Noah might not have been the hero I'd been hoping for, but he'd been right about that at least: it was time I enlisted some professional help.

I gripped the steering wheel as I made my way up the long, winding hill toward the entrance. Noah had warned me this place was swank, but when I rounded the final curve and caught a glimpse of the building it seemed less like someplace you took swim lessons and more like an upscale hotel, complete with valet service.

The butterflies launched into assault mode. I was so out of my element here.

I was more worried, though, that if I didn't figure this whole swimming thing out, I might have to admit that my parents had been right all along—swimming was dangerous.

I'd lived in the shadow of their fears my entire life, even if I'd never heard the whole story behind them.

I wasn't stupid though. My mother's family had fled Cuba when she was just a girl, and there was no way that wasn't, at least in part, at the root of her anxiety. She never talked about that part of her childhood. It was a taboo subject in our house. But I'd gathered enough information on my own to know those voyages had been treacherous. Overcrowded and plagued with disease and starvation, and those were the boats that had withstood the crossings. Some sank with everyone onboard.

If I were her, I might not ever want to set foot near water either.

But that was the thing. I wasn't her. And for as long as I could remember I'd wanted to swim.

Now I was getting my chance.

After parking my own car—yes, thank you, I can still handle that much myself—I checked in at the front counter. A girl who was barely in puberty slid some release forms across the counter. Basically, I was promising not to sue the club if I drowned—as if that made any sense.

Then she handed me a key to a locker and told me to meet my instructor in the pool at three sharp.

The locker room was nothing like the ones we'd had in gym class at my high school. Everything about this place was ultra-fancy, and only made the butterflies worse.

I slammed the beechwood locker closed and followed the signs to the outdoor pool deck, which was just beyond the ladies' locker room.

I stopped short when I saw that the pool was already swarming with little kids and I wondered if I was in the wrong place, or if I'd been confused about where I was supposed to meet my instructor.

I glanced around uncertainly for someone who could help me. But all I saw were parents huddled together on metal bleachers on the other side of the pool. I doubted they had the answers I was looking for.

Cutting back through the locker room, I went to the front desk.

“I think there’s some sort of mistake,” I told the girl, who flashed me an annoyed look when she was forced to tear her eyes from her iPhone. “I’m supposed to be taking a swim lesson, but there are a bunch of kids in there.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “What? In the Beginning Swim class?” Then she looked back down at her phone, already losing interest in my dilemma. “You should be out there too. Class starts in T minus sixty seconds.”

“I ... um ... *Beginning Swim ...?*” *Crap.* The kids. The lesson. “Is ... is Beginning Swim a *kids*’ class?”

The girl stopped just short of rolling her eyes, but the eye-roll was implied in her tone. “Technically, it’s an *all-ages* class. For beginners.” She enunciated *beginners* like I was slow.

All ages. It was *all ages*. Me and a bunch of children.

I could leave. Walk away now and forget all about this swimming nonsense. Give up and admit defeat.

The girl behind the counter read my mind. “Do you want a refund?”

I did. I totally did.

But ... *double crap.*

I also didn’t.

She’d said that other thing too, that part about the lesson being for beginners, and I was as beginner as they came.

Who cared if I would be the oldest “kid” in the pool? No one outside of this place would ever have to know. Just me

and those kids and *their* helicopter parents. Odds were, I'd never run into any of them ever again, right?

I didn't answer the girl about the refund because, to be perfectly honest, she didn't deserve an answer. I couldn't give up now.

I was New Lauren. California Lauren. And I could do this.

I spun on my heel and marched right back out to the pool deck.

And that's where I saw Will. Standing near the edge of the pool, looking for all the world like he owned the place.



Apparently, this was New Will I was witnessing, because this was so not the Will I'd met that first night at The Dunes when he licked tequila from my navel. Or even the same Will who'd been on the beach last night, when he'd caught his girlfriend cuddled up with another guy.

This Will was trying to coax one particularly terrified little girl off the top step.

"Gracie," he was saying in a voice I would never, not in a million years, have expected to come out of his mouth as he stretched his hand toward her. "How 'bout we make a deal, you and me? You only have to try this one lesson, and if you still hate the water, you don't ever have to come back here again."

It wasn't hard to guess which mom belonged to the little girl, because there was only one who was standing over the little girl's shoulder, biting her lip so raw it looked like it might bleed any second.

But Will didn't look nervous at all. His patience seemed endless, as he concentrated solely on the little girl in front of him.

The girl frowned, her lips puckering as she considered his proposal. "Pinkie swear?" she finally asked, not looking the least bit convinced.

Will eased closer to her, raising his hand out of the water and lifting his pinkie toward her. "Pinkie swear," he told Gracie as if they were the only two people in the entire pool club.

She reached out and wrapped her tiny finger around his, and when the deal was sealed, her narrow shoulders visibly relaxed. This time, when Will held his hand out for her, she let him lead her down to the second step, and then the third, where she bounced up and down anxiously, waiting for the lesson to start.

There was still time to change my mind; Will still hadn't noticed me yet. Maybe New Lauren was okay with chickening out.

Then Will glanced up.

Confusion scrolled over his face, and before I had the chance to register anything else, he'd lifted Gracie back to the top step. "Wait here a sec, will ya?"

And he was coming out of the pool. Right toward me, water dripping off of him.

*Ho-ly. Hell.*

How many six-packs could one set of abs have?

I told myself to look away. For my own good. Looking at him was like looking at the sun, too much intensity in one white-hot package. Wasn't this exactly how people went blind?

But unlike at the Sand and Slam, this was broad daylight and there was no more guessing what he'd been concealing under those tight T-shirts of his. I could make out every sinew and every muscle of Will's chest.

He cocked his head at me as he shook the water from his bronzed skin. “Hey, Brown Eyes!” My cheeks flushed all degrees of hot when I realized I was just standing there, gaping. I’d lost complete control of my ability to move.

When had I become the girl who was so easily captivated by a nice piece of man candy?

“What are you—” he started, then his eyes slid down to my swimsuit, and now he was the one staring.

My face got even hotter, if that was possible.

Then he cleared his throat and reached for a clipboard lying on top of a duffle bag. He did a quick scan of the roster, and without missing a beat, gave me a knowing look. “Okay, yeah. So, go ahead and get in the pool with the rest of the class. We were just about to get started.”

“What are you even doing here?” I squeaked in a voice so high-pitched probably only dogs could hear it.

But somehow Will had understood, because he answered. “Remember that jack-of-all-trades thing? Well, this is one of them. I work here too.”

My brain glitched. *Will is my instructor ... Will is my instructor ... Will is my instructor ...*

I blinked, trying to force my thoughts under control, because this ... this was nuts. It was bad enough I was in Beginning Swimming with the little kids, but now Will was teaching the class?

Will was “the friend” Noah knew who taught lessons. No way could I let Will teach me. I never should have come here in the first place.

“I ... this was just a misunderstanding,” I said, and turned to make my escape back into the locker room, my bare feet slapping hard against the concrete.

But Will stopped me. “Hey, hold up a sec.” I was glad his voice was low. This was the last conversation I wanted to have in front of prying little ears. His head dipped closer to mine. “I know this must be tough for you.” My skin betrayed

me by peppering with goose bumps the moment his fingers reached out to mine. “But it’s not a bad idea.” He frowned. “You were right to get mad at me last night, when I said you were stupid for trying to teach yourself to swim. I didn’t mean to insult you, but what you did was ...” His brows furrowed. “It was reckless, Brown Eyes. But this is what I do. I teach people to swim—let me help you.” I told myself *not* to look into his eyes, but when I heard the urgency in his voice, I couldn’t stop myself.

And that’s when he had me. He wasn’t lying.

*Dammit.*

My shoulders wilted as I peered past him. “Okay, fine. Yes, but ...” I grimaced, not even sure where to start. “Not like this. Not with a bunch of ... *toddlers*.” I nodded toward the pool, where several of the kids were trying to keep their heads above water as they balanced on their tiptoes.

Will chuckled. “Come on, these kids are well past toddling.” And just when I was about to let him know I wasn’t in the mood to be teased, his fingers squeezed mine. “Look, don’t be that way. It’ll be okay. Let me show you.” He coaxed me forward, and even though each step closer to the water made my chest tighten with anxiety, his grip was sure and comforting.

And before I could run away, I was standing at the pool’s edge.

I should have objected—this whole thing was ridiculous. But I didn’t want to. *I need this lesson*, I justified. Plus, there was that part of me that ... even after everything I’d witnessed, couldn’t help being drawn to Will.

Before I could back out entirely, he made an announcement. “Class,” he said, and just like that all eyes were on him. “Today I have a special surprise for you.”

I suddenly wished I’d drowned in the ocean after all. I stood awkwardly, feeling like there was a spotlight shining down on me. Even the parents waited to see what Will had to say.

Will's hand settled on the small of my back. "We're going to have a helper for class! Say hi to Lauren."

A helper. So that was how he was going to play this.

I could live with that.

I glanced down at the gap-toothed grins as the kids in the pool waved at me.

They were sort of adorable. Maybe this wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

I turned to Will, and he smiled at me, not gap-toothed at all, and a different kind of butterflies erupted.

"Okay," I agreed. "Let's do this."



## CHAPTER TWELVE

LAUREN

The hour-long lesson wasn't nearly as torturous as I'd imagined it would be.

The time flew, and with Will by my side, I almost forgot I was terrified of the water.

Almost.

I still panicked as I descended the steps, my heart racing and cold sweat prickling the back of my neck as I remembered the way I'd choked on the salty ocean water. How I'd had to be dragged to safety.

But after I was submerged, at least to my waist, I was able to breathe evenly again, and then I was nervous about something else altogether—having an audience. But after a few stealthy glances toward the bleachers, it wasn't hard to tell I was pretty much invisible to the mom crowd.

They were much more interested in the lessons. Or more specifically in the instructor. I caught several eager mommies eyeing Will hungrily.

There may even have been a few camera phones snapping pics for posterity.

And who could blame them, really? Shirtless Will was hard *not* to look at. I'd caught myself peeking at his defined muscles more than once.

The first thing the class was supposed to master was putting our faces in the water and holding our breath.

I had a lock on that one. So, as Will's "helper" it was my job to assist the kids who didn't.

The whole thing was sort of gross, really.

There was lots of sputtering, plenty of disgusting snot bubbles, and so much choking that I prayed I wouldn't have to give any of them mouth-to-mouth. There were no snot bubbles on *Baywatch*.

On her first try, Gracie got her face in the water and Will gave her an enthusiastic, and utterly endearing, thumbs-up, making her flash her toothless grin at him. This Will was so the opposite of the one I'd known up until now, I had to wonder which Will was the real Will.

When he announced he wanted us to try lying back in the water, to see if we could float on our backs, my time as an observer came to an end. The closest I'd ever come to floating was when I used to soak in my parents' Jacuzzi tub, and now I was quickly learning that one had nothing at all to do with the other.

I told myself I could do this. It was irrational to be afraid of drowning—Will wouldn't ask me to do this if it wasn't safe.

But every time I tried to lean back, my body instinctively curled in on itself. I was about as graceful as a drowning cat. I only hoped I wouldn't end up with my own snot bubbles.

I jolted when I felt Will's hand slip beneath my back, moving low as he supported me. I tried—one more time—to stay afloat.

"Relax," Will soothed, lifting my body so I was lying flat atop the water's surface. I found myself eye to eye with him. "Keep your chest up and your head back." His voice was gentle ... slow. "Remember to breathe."

*Breathe.* Easier said than done.

His hands were distracting. They were tethering either side of my hips as I drifted. We stayed like that forever. Too long, probably, and I wondered if anyone noticed the way I was looking at him, and the way he was looking at me.

Then one of his thumbs moved, just the barest amount, and heat lashed through me. I jolted again. This time it was

just a slight shift, only enough for the two of us to notice. But Will's eyes clouded over.

He released me abruptly. "You're ... doing great." His voice was rough and low, but he recovered quickly as he turned to the boy on the other side of me. "How you doin', Jackson? You look like a champ!"

I started to sink, and I thrashed just before my feet hit the pool floor. I didn't have time to be embarrassed that I couldn't float without Will's guidance. I was too humiliated that I'd let him affect me.

If not for the look on his face, or the way he'd practically shoved me away from him, I might not suspect he'd been just as bothered. He didn't seem half as unsettled as I was by whatever had just passed between us.

But I was sure I hadn't imagined it.



"Lauren, wait up a sec."

*Lauren. Not Brown Eyes.*

I had my gym bag slung over my shoulder and was just about to unlock my car when I saw Will jogging my way. I tried not to notice that he was still in his swim trunks, his chest all tan and muscular. "What's up?" I asked.

"I'm ..." The word drifted off as his face screwed up in concentration.

*Shit.* I knew that look. That wasn't the *same time next week* look. That was the *I think we need a break* look.

My stomach dropped.

I sighed. "Yeah?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not sure this is gonna work out."

And there it was. “I assume you mean my swim lessons.”

“Yeah, that. The lessons ... maybe they weren’t such a great idea after all.”

Since he’d been the one to talk me into staying, I felt like I deserved some sort of explanation. “Can I at least ask *why*? Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” He shook his head. And then, as if he was convincing himself, “No. No, of course not. I just ...”

I pursed my lips, waiting for more, irritated that he was beating around the bush. I’d thought it was sweet the way he’d talked Gracie off the steps and told the kids I was his “helper” rather than some loser grown-up who’d never learned to swim. And now here we were, with him basically *firing* me.

“Really? Because I thought it went fine.” My hands were on my hips as I bridged the gap between us. “Are you embarrassed to have me in your class? Or did one of those bitch moms complain about me being there? Because I saw them with their iPhones, and they damn sure weren’t taking pictures of their kids.” I tried to punch a hole in his chest with my finger.

He chuckled, closing his hand over mine to keep me from impaling him. “Take it easy, Brown Eyes. It’s nothing like that. Really. It’s just ...” His eyes found mine and I could see that this had nothing to do with the swim mommies. “I don’t know how to say this, but I think you need more attention than I can give you.” And then, his grip shifted, and his thumb moved over my wrist.

I wasn’t sure I could handle any more attention than he was giving me at that very moment. It would’ve been easier if he’d released my hand, because God knew I wasn’t capable of taking it back myself. And from the way he was looking at me, his eyes searching mine, I didn’t think I ever wanted my hand back.

Emerson always gave me shit about not giving guys a chance. Maybe that was why I was still carrying my V card.

There was no point denying that Will drove me absolutely and utterly insane, but he also made me want to explore these crazy new feelings I was having. Actually made me want to give up the card, and not just because I'd put myself under some self-imposed deadline.

But then the truth of what he'd said sank in, and mortification washed over me.

"Oh my God," I breathed, extracting my hand from his. "So, you're saying I'm ... *that terrible*? That I suck so hard I can't even be in your *beginner* swim class? *The one for children*?" I seriously might die, right here and now.

His eyes shot to mine, a fathomless eddy of surprise and concern. "No!" he insisted. "That's not it at all! What I'm saying is that it's not fair to the other students. I need to focus on them." He hovered on the brink of something more, and again it drove me crazy, that hedging thing he did. He shook his head, then. "And I can't do that with you there."

I paused just a second to make sure I hadn't misunderstood him. And then I cocked my hip to one side, studying him with a wicked grin. "So it's not that I suck, it's that I'm ... *distracting*?" I let the last word dangle there, thinking how much easier *that* was on my ego.

Will flinched, his green eyes clouding over. Then he crossed his arms over his bare chest. He looked like an angry Adonis. "Think much of yourself? That's not even close to what I said. Lifeguard says there are too many people in the pool and you're the last to join. Simple as that."

I wanted to tell him I wasn't buying it—he was full of shit. If it was a matter of numbers, he wouldn't have offered to teach me in the first place. No, this was personal.

But it was too late, he was already walking away from me.

Besides, did it matter what his reasons were? I couldn't *make* him teach me how to swim and I couldn't tell him *why* I needed to learn so badly.

Basically, I was back to square one. I was gonna have to figure it out on my own.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WILL

“Tess, open up.” I rapped on the door.

She’d already been in there when I’d come home last night after the Sand and Slam, and even though she’d made a point of banging and slamming around to let me know she was furious, I hadn’t seen her since. I’d decided to give her time to cool off. Let her sleep on it.

But enough was enough. We needed to hash this thing out. “We need to talk,” I said through the door. “About what happened ... last night at the party.”

I thought maybe she’d keep up the whole silent treatment thing some more. Keep me in the dark.

But then I heard scuffling, which was a good sign because it wasn’t slamming, and the door unlocked. I waited for it to open, but when I realized that wasn’t going to happen, I let myself in.

Tess was there, sitting on the edge of our mom’s bed.

I hadn’t been in this room since I’d come home, and I was guessing Tess hadn’t spent much time in here either.

Not much had changed over the years though. Everything was exactly as I remembered: the bedspread, the sunny yellow curtains, even the oil painting of the beach my mom had painted when she was in college was still hanging above her bed. She’d passed on her love of the ocean to my sister and me. Her dresser was something straight out of the seventies, dark carved wood with gold leaf handles. And on the top of the dresser were the ceramic bowls and popsicle stick boxes and seashell necklaces that Tess and I had made for her when we were kids. There was even the same collection of framed family photos.

Everything was covered in dust. A whole lot of dust.

Tess's eyes were red and raw as she watched me absorb the room.

"I miss her too," I admitted, picking up a picture of the three of us, when Tess had been the fattest baby known to man. Mom cradled the chubby infant in her arms. I wiped away the layer of film that concealed our mother's face.

"Why weren't you here?" Tess asked, and I almost buckled beneath the weight of my own guilt. That was the million-dollar question, wasn't it? The one behind all of Tess's sullen moods and quiet stares. Finally—*finally*—she was putting it out there. "Why didn't you come home when we needed you?"

*Fuck.*

I'd been such a dick. Then and now.

At first, after my accident, everything had been scrambled—not just in my head, but in my whole life. I thought I'd heal, maybe do a little rehab, and get back on my board again. Pick back up where I left off.

Compete again.

And that's what I tried to do. Not just once, but again and again.

But every time I went in the water, it was ... wrong.

At first I blamed the injury. I tried to convince myself it was only physical, that my balance was off, and I just needed more time to recover, which was really just an excuse to party more. To drink more.

And when that hadn't worked, when my body and my memory had healed, and I couldn't use that as an excuse anymore, I told myself enough was enough. Everything was better.

But it wasn't.

That's when I realized that the real problem wasn't physical. It was in my head. It was me—I was scared.



I'd lost something the day the waves had taken me down in Australia. The day I'd been slammed head first against the reef and lost consciousness.

The day I'd been airlifted to Sydney General Hospital.

I'd lost that fearlessness every surfer needs. Every *good* surfer, anyway.

Sure I could paddle out and get up, but I was no longer the savage I needed to be.

Still, I didn't give up, not right away. I entered some competitions to get my name back into the rankings. But I lost all of them, even the minor ones.

After a while, the sponsors backed out. And the girls, the ones who followed the circuit, stopped pursuing me. Eventually, the money dried up.

I stopped caring ... about myself or anyone else.

When the call came in about my mom, I didn't even bother listening to the voicemail. Tess was alone for weeks before I realized what had happened.

I'd never be able to undo that.

"I was so selfish. I didn't know how to put anyone else first. How to care about anyone but me. But I'm here now, Tess. And I'm trying. This is uncharted water for me too." I set the picture down and let out a breath. I had no clue how to talk to a teenager, let alone my own sister. "Last night ..." I raked my fingers through my hair. "God, last night I wanted to kill that little fucker. Kid got off lucky; I shoulda knocked his teeth in." Tess shot a glare at me, and I realized I'd screwed up again.

*Damn, this was hard.*

I settled down on the bed next to her and rested my shoulder against hers. "Wicked right hook, by the way."

She finally cracked and looked up at me, flashing me a crooked grin. It was the best grin I'd ever seen. "Right? Mom taught me."

“I know. She taught me too. Only I’m pretty sure she didn’t mean for you to break your brother’s nose with it.”

“Please,” she retorted. “Stop being such a baby, it’s not broken.”

I reached up and winced dramatically as I tested it. She was right. It wasn’t broken, but it still hurt like a mother. I wasn’t lying about her ability to land a punch. “Maybe not this time. But how ’bout next time, we try using our big-girl words?”

She let out a long, low sigh. “I’m sorry.”

I would’ve ribbed her, about the whole apology thing—we Gabaldons were notoriously bad apologizers—but something told me this wasn’t the time. This was probably hard enough for her, admitting she was wrong. Instead, I nodded. “I suppose I could’ve handled things better myself. I shouldn’t have charged in like that. I wasn’t trying to embarrass you, you know?”

She nodded too, her eyes searching mine, and looking so much more grown-up than fifteen. “I know. I shouldn’t have sneaked out. I just ...”

She faltered, but I knew, because I’d been fifteen once. “You wanted to go to the party. I get that. But we have to come to some sort of agreement. You gotta trust that I know some things, and one of those things is that you’re not quite ready for all that yet. Especially when it comes to ...” I kept picturing that guy with his hands all over my little sister, and I wanted to hunt him down and shove my fist down his throat. “Guys.”

“I’m not a child, you know? I know all about the birds and the bees.” She crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow at me. “I’ve got my own boobs and everything.”

I shot off the bed and covered my ears to block out the sound of her voice. “Okay, *one*, shut your mouth. There’ll be no more boob talk in this house. That goes for sex too.”

She beamed at me. “Got it. You’re not into boobs.”

I scowled down at her. “I like boobs just fine. But I’m not one of your girlfriends. We don’t need to braid each other’s hair or talk about Pinterest and shit.”

“Fine. This is officially a Pinterest-free zone. So, what’s number two?”

“Two is ...” I let out a breath. She was the reason I was here. She was the reason for everything I was trying to accomplish. Tess was the reason I had to stay away from distractions like Lauren. I needed a clear head, which was the exact opposite of how I’d felt when I’d looked up and seen Lauren standing there at the pool today. Even in that ugly one-piece of hers, she’d made me hard. How messed up was that, when Gracie and Jackson and the other kids had been counting on me to teach them to swim?

Yet I couldn’t stop picturing Lauren while she’d floated on top of the water. I couldn’t stop thinking of my hands on her. I wanted to peel her swimsuit off with my teeth.

I’d done the right thing when I’d told Lauren I couldn’t give her lessons anymore. It wasn’t just about my obligation to Tess. This had to do with the kids in my class. What kind of instructor would I be if I couldn’t even concentrate because all I was thinking about was Lauren, her skin all slippery and wet?

I couldn’t mess things up for Tess. “I got your back. I’ll try to be reasonable, but you need to know that every decision I make is because I love you, Tessie.”

She sprang up from the bed and practically suffocated me by wrapping her arms around me. “Aw. I love you too, you big softy.” It was the first time we’d hugged since we were kids, when Tess had toddled around after me, practically begging for me to acknowledge her existence.

*Progress*, I thought, not wanting to admit how much this small step meant to me.

“All right, all right,” I said, landing a decisive peck on her forehead. “What did I say about us not being girlfriends?” I pushed her away from me. “Whaddaya say we go grab us

some shakes?” When she nodded, I added. “You just gotta give me your word you’ll stay outta trouble. I don’t think my heart can take much more of this.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LAUREN

Emerson came out of her bedroom, securing simple silver hoops in her ears, but nothing else she wore was simple. “Okay? For real?” she accused. “You’ve been moping around all day. You’re not really gonna stay here all night too, are you? Get your ass up and come out with us.”

“I’m just not up for it tonight. Besides, I’m not exactly dressed for ...” I cast a meaningful glance at my worn sweatpants. “... well, anything.”

Em, on the other hand, would easily fit in with the rest of the crowd at The Dunes in her body-hugging neon pink dress and strappy heels.

“Mm-hmm. I see that.” She assessed me with a skeptical eye. “You got this whole bag lady vibe goin’ on. What’s up with that? I think a night out might be exactly what you need.”

“I’m just tired is all.” *Tired*. That was my excuse when I came home from the pool club yesterday and all I wanted to do was watch *Gilmore Girls* and eat cookie dough straight from the tube. Tired was what I told her again today when she asked me to go to the beach with her.

I didn’t want her to know what was really wrong with me: that Will had fired me as a student.

“You’re so fucking lame I can’t even believe we’re friends.” Em rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

But her eye-roll was a dead giveaway. She so wasn’t mad at me.

I grinned. “You love me and you know it. Besides, I’ll try to do better, I swear.”

Her mood buoyed at my promise. She took my hands and squeezed them, shrugging like she could barely contain herself. “Good, because Lucas has a roommate. *And* he’s hot. And since you won’t go out tonight, you owe me. So you know what that means ...” She raised her perfectly tweezed brows at me.

*Perfect*, I thought, realizing I’d just managed to get myself roped into a double date of some kind. Em was always setting me up with friends of the guys she was either hooking up with, or trying to hook up with. Worked out great for her, but for me it was nothing short of painful. Most of the guys were innocuous, if not a little on the boring side.

But sometimes things turned crazy, and I ended up with some douchebag who couldn’t imagine there was a girl on this planet who wasn’t falling all over herself to jump into bed with him. Yet, there I was, wanting to go home all by my lonesome. Go figure.

Still, this was Em I was talking about. Em, who’d agreed to spend the summer here with me, practically on no notice at all, simply because I’d asked.

A small smile found my lips, not an answer exactly, but Emerson understood.

“Yes?” she asked, her voice rising hopefully.

I shrugged. “Yeah, fine, whatever.”

Emerson squealed and threw her arms around me, rocking me back and forth in one of her famous scream-hugs, her high-pitched words bleeding together, “Youarethebest!” She planted a big, glossy kiss on my forehead. “And I swear you won’t regret it!” She stepped back then and wrinkled her nose, giving me an *ooh! you’re not gonna like this* look. “I almost forgot to tell you. Your mom called my cell today.” She clenched her jaw, revealing her lower teeth with a hiss. “You seriously need to stop avoiding her. At least call her back and tell her you’re alive. I have no idea what her message said.” Her eyes widened. “She used *The Spanish*. I thought you said she never did that.”

I cringed. Emerson was right. Growing up, it had been an unspoken rule of my mom's: *All English, all the time*. I was surprised my mom had even bothered leaving a message in Spanish at all. She knew my knowledge was limited to Señor Diablo's second-year high school class.

Basically, I could ask where the bathroom was. *Not useful*.

If my mom was breaking her own rule, she was either super pissed or super freaked out.

"I'll call her." I wasn't sure if I was lying or not, because I didn't think I'd ever be ready to tell my parents that I'd up and moved to California the way I had.

In typical Em fashion, she immediately forgot all about her brush with *The Spanish*. She plucked her sparkly purse from the counter and blew an air kiss at me from the door. "Don't wait up. If I'm lucky, I'll be getting *lucky*," she gushed.

"Be safe, *tramp!*" I shouted at the open door.

"Be reckless, *virgin!*" Em fired back, using her favorite insult, and then we both giggled as Emerson slammed the door behind her. I waited until I heard her heels clicking against the sidewalk, followed by the sound of Lucas joining her as their voices tangled together, rising and falling until they were indistinguishable, and eventually, faded into oblivion.

Making my way to the sofa, I pulled out my cell and counted the number of missed calls from *both* of my parents. Seventeen, and that was only since yesterday. I was glad I'd severed myself from their cell plan the moment I'd started earning my own money. I wasn't a child anymore; I didn't need them tracking my whereabouts.

I shouldn't complain, though. My folks were the best. Really. They were as supportive as they came, almost to a fault. But my mom never could understand why I couldn't give up my childhood dreams of wanting to live near the ocean. In her eyes, I might as well have waved a red flag and announced I planned to be a bullfighter.

I braced myself for the inevitable and dialed.

When I heard her voice on the other end, I plastered on my fakest smile. “Mama?” I said cheerfully, and then waited while the angry woman on the other end chewed me up one side and down the other for not answering my phone.

When she was finally forced to take a breath, I said. “Everything’s great. I’m sorry. I’ve just been busy.” And then, I committed what my mother considered the ultimate sin when I out and out lied to her. “Yeah, it’s hot here. You know, Arizona in the summertime ...”

By the time I got off the phone, I wanted to restart this entire day. Maybe even this entire week.

But I’d also figured out what I needed to do.

I texted Emerson: *Meet you at The Dunes in 20!*

I waited until I got the *YAY!!!* back from her, and then dragged a chair to the almost-unnoticeable opening in the ceiling so I could pull down my duffle bag. It only took a minute to count out the money I’d need tonight. Then, I tallied how much was left—somewhere in the neighborhood of \$21,000, cash I’d withdrawn before leaving Arizona, in case someone was tracing my card transactions. I didn’t touch the gun.

When I was finished, I zipped the bag closed and hoisted it back to its hiding place. And even after it was safely tucked away I had to take several long breaths just to calm myself.

I might not be ready to tell my parents the truth about where I was, but I wasn’t ready to let my dream die yet either.

And now I had a plan.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### LAUREN

In less than twenty minutes I'd managed to fix my hair, throw on some lip gloss, and shimmy into one of Emerson's dresses since hers were still the only ones unpacked ... because of course she'd already unpacked her "going out" clothes. The only hitch was that in Em's dresses I was sure to draw some notice. Maybe tonight that wouldn't be such a bad thing.

By the time the cab driver deposited me in front of The Dunes, I felt halfway hot, which was saying something considering I'd been dressed for Dumpster-diving less than half an hour earlier. Even before I reached the entrance, I could feel the eyes on me, which actually made me feel better. Maybe Emerson had been right. Maybe I really did need a night out.

Just like the first time we were here, my heart pounded extra hard as I passed my ID to the bouncer, as if somehow, some way he'd know who I was or what I'd done. He wouldn't of course. No one would, that was the point of using the bogus name online.

He looked from me to my ID, and then gave me the green light, letting me pass. I slid it back into the small gold purse I carried, right next to the plain white envelope I'd stuffed inside.

Emerson was waiting for me on the other side of the door, and when she saw me, she wrapped her arms around my neck. I could practically taste the Fireball on her breath.

"Shot!" she shouted in my ear, and from out of nowhere, someone was handing me what she'd been drinking.

I downed the cinnamon whiskey, making a face as it burned a path down my throat and I wondered for the

millionth time why Emerson loved this stuff so much. “Can I get a beer now?” I asked.

Em giggled. “Of course!” She took my hand, and without actual introductions, she placed it into some guy’s, all but forcing the two of us to hold hands. “Zane!” Em shouted at him, because it was even louder tonight than it had been the first time we’d been here. Music was pulsing and the people were jammed together. “Lauren wants a beer. Go get her one!”

Zane, who was apparently the guy whose hand I was holding, flashed me a gorgeous smile. Like Lucas, he had a little bit of that panty thing going for him—the one where the California boys started fires down there. He pressed his free hand to his chest and did a little bow. “I’m Zane,” he explained, in case I’d missed the part where Emerson had screamed his name in my ear. “Apparently, I’ll be your personal butler this evening.” It didn’t escape my notice that he hadn’t yet released my hand.

It also didn’t escape my notice that his eyes had wandered several times to my chest, where *the girls* were barely contained in the little blue number I’d pilfered from Emerson’s closet.

“You don’t have to do what she says, you know?” I nodded toward Emerson, who was rounding up Lucas and dragging him toward the dance floor. As far as she was concerned, her obligation to me had ended the moment she’d found someone to fulfill my drinking needs.

Zane grinned, leaning close in a hush-hush kind of way. “To be honest, she kind of terrifies me. I’ve never seen a girl wrap Lucas around her finger the way your friend has.”

I laughed. “You must be the roommate.”

“Guilty,” he admitted, while his thumb stroked across the back of my hand. He held my gaze like he was trying to hypnotize me, and I wondered if I shouldn’t clue him in that I was only in this for Emerson’s sake. His seduction moves—while not half bad—were being wasted on the wrong girl. I was here for other reasons.

I lifted a brow. “About that beer ...”

“Wouldn’t want to keep you waiting.”

We waded through a sea of bodies until we reached the bar. I made it a point *not* to search out Will, even though I knew he was there because there was a cluster of girls converged at the same end of the bar he’d been working the other night. He obviously had his own fan club.

But even without trying, I caught a glimpse of his irresistible smile between the bobbing blonde heads, and my stomach clenched just the tiniest amount.

Crystian, the pretty dark-haired bartender spotted us and gave me a nod. “Hey, Body Shot! What can I get ya?”

“Corona,” I answered, pretending I didn’t just feel Will’s eyes shoot my way from his end of the bar.

From behind me, Zane’s hand landed just above my hip.

“Make it two!” Zane called out to the girl behind the counter as he dropped the money for both our drinks on the countertop.

My cheeks burned as I recalled the last time I’d been here, at this very bar—*on this very bar*—with Will’s lips roving over my skin.

Whatever humiliation I felt, I needed to get over it. I needed to make peace with Will if my plan was going to work.

Taking a breath and forcing my gaze upward, I glanced Will’s way. But he wasn’t paying attention to me anymore. I watched him work for several seconds, trying to figure out why I was so confused by him. Everything about him exuded confidence and magnetism, and every girl here wanted a piece of him. But he also projected an aloofness, an air of indifference that made it clear he didn’t let anyone get too close.

I’d recognized it right away, maybe because I understood it. It was exactly how I’d always felt—never wanting to let anyone in. It was the same quality that made me

think he was a jackass that first night when I'd demanded my keys and he'd all but ignored me.

I guess that was the thing, part of the appeal. Most girls wanted what they couldn't have.

But there was that other side to him, too. The side I'd seen at the pool, when Gracie had been too afraid to come down off the step. A tenderness I doubted he showed here at The Dunes ... at least not all that often, and definitely not on purpose.

He looked up then, and his green eyes locked on mine. I didn't want to blink or breathe, and all I could think was, *I know you're in there*. And when he didn't look away I thought maybe, just maybe, he was letting me know I was right.

Then Zane was there, his breath too hot against my ear. "Ready?"

Will's jaw clenched and his shoulders stiffened, but that quick flash of emotion lasted only a second before the other Will—the indifferent one—was back. He spent extra time on his next customer, a leggy brunette who leaned all the way over the bar, practically spilling out of her dress.

*Like I was one to judge.*

When she ran the tip of her acrylic nail across his forearm, along the veins that bulged over his muscles, he shot one more look my way, and I wondered if he meant for me to notice.

"Ready," I told Zane, and reached for his hand again, and this time it was me dragging him through the crowd as I downed my Corona and hauled him toward the dance floor.



Three shots and who knew how many beers later, the floor was wobbly beneath my feet. Somewhere along the way, I'd lost track of Emerson, or she'd lost track of me, and now I was alone with Zane. He did his best to pull me away from the

dance floor so he could get me someplace quiet—and presumably dark—so we could “talk.” But I kept shooting him down. I needed to keep moving to stop the world from spinning.

“One more song,” I insisted. “This one’s my fav’rite.”

“I thought the last one was your favorite.” He laughed when he said it and let me drag him between the crush of dancers.

He gave me the most indecent smile, which I knew was meant to convey the promise of things to come. The night wouldn’t end the way he wanted, but I didn’t have the heart to stop him when he wrapped his arm around my waist and pressed himself to me, in part because his grip steadied me. We danced for almost a full minute like that, with his hips grinding against mine, while my alcohol-infused brain tried to keep up with the song even though I was positive we were *way* off beat.

“You’re beautiful!” he shouted above the music. Then he leaned close, his mouth against my ear. He mumbled something I couldn’t understand and then his tongue flicked over my earlobe.

My stomach churned and I rolled my head away from his clumsy attempt to seduce me. I tried my best to laugh it off. “All right, I think we’re done here.”

He ignored my protest and his grip on my waist tightened. Immediately, my head cleared. It was time to put the brakes on, before he got the wrong idea about how this night would end.

“My turn.” An unfriendly voice interrupted us, and I flinched, bumping Zane’s chin with my forehead.

Zane grinned at me—an I-got-this grin—before he informed the guy, “I don’t think so, pal. We’re a little busy here ...” But he never finished what he was saying because he was abruptly jerked away from me.

I swayed, confused. Glancing up, I found Will’s eyes boring into me, his hand firmly clamped on Zane’s shoulder

while he scowled at me.

“I wasn’t asking,” Will told Zane, his jaw tense. His hard eyes never looked away from mine. “Either you walk away now or I’ll have you bounced.” He tipped his head toward the entrance, to where the enormous bouncer was watching the scene as it unfolded on the dance floor.

Zane’s startled expression moved from Will to me. His eyes widened as it dawned on him that this wasn’t just about a guy getting handsy on the dance floor—this was personal. Zane frowned. “You okay with this?” he asked me, obviously caught somewhere between disappointment and humiliation.

I glanced up at Will, who raised his eyebrows, waiting for my response. I shot him a warning look, but it was Zane I answered, “I’ll be fine.”

Zane didn’t look thrilled by my decision. He slunk off the dance floor just as the music changed. The new song was slower—not slow, but *slower*—and Will reached for me, pulling me into his arms a lot like Zane had.

But unlike with Zane, I *wanted* Will’s arms around me. I *liked* that he’d come after me. I liked that Will was my rescuer, even if I hadn’t exactly been drowning this time.

It was almost unnatural how warm he was. How everyplace our bodies connected, which was almost everywhere, heat came off him and radiated directly into me. *Through me*. I strained to be closer to that. To breathe him in, his heat and his scent, which was an intoxicating combination of soap and beer and sea and sweat.

The floor was swaying again, but this time it had nothing to do with the booze.

Will’s hands were around my waist, but they weren’t demanding the way Zane’s had been. “You don’t seem to have trouble making friends.” His words rumbled against my ear, and even his voice made me unsteady.

I looked up and found his gaze. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He grinned down at me. “I guess that depends on the friends.” He wasn’t at all subtle. I got the message. Zane wasn’t the kind of friend Will wanted me to have.

I let my eyes wander to my arms, which were draped around his neck. His brown hair tickled the backs of my hands, and I wondered what it would be like to tangle my fingers in his hair and caress those silken strands. “What about you?” I asked, turning my attention back to him again. It was hard to concentrate, and I couldn’t decide if that was because I was tipsy, or because I was so close to Will. “Are you my friend?”

Will’s face fell, his eyes going suddenly distant. “I don’t know what we are. I don’t really do friends.”

I smiled, warmth blooming in my chest. “That’s funny, I didn’t ask you to *do* me.”

His eyes snapped back to mine and he studied me for second, and then he dropped his chin on the top of my head and laughed. It was maybe the first time I felt like I’d gotten the upper hand since we met. His grip on my waist tightened. “You’re something else.” And then he whispered against my ear, “He was right, you know? You really are beautiful.”

My face could have burst into flames that very moment. I don’t know why it was entirely different, hearing those words come from Will’s lips. Or maybe I did. “He only said that because my rack looks so good in this dress.” I dared a quick glance up.

Will was watching me, a wicked grin finding his lips. “I’m not saying he’s wrong, but that’s not what I meant. I meant you—*you’re* beautiful.”

I lowered my lids but kept my eyes on him. “And distracting?” I challenged.

“Yes,” he growled, leaning in. “And distracting.”

“Is that why you cut in? Because you couldn’t keep your eyes off me?”

Will stopped moving, but his gaze turned hard. “No. I cut in because your date couldn’t keep his goddamned hands to himself. And because I saw the way you were squirming,

and I figured you could use a hand.” He was angry, there was no mistaking it—his grip had turned rigid. “You really need to be careful. Not all guys got the memo that no means no, especially after a few drinks.”

I bristled against his warning, even though I knew he was right. “Zane’s harmless,” I defended.

“You don’t know that. You hardly know the guy.”

“I can take care of myself.” I pulled out of his grip, and he didn’t try to stop me the way Zane had. I didn’t need a lecture, especially not from Will who not only might have a girlfriend, but also made it clear we might not even be friends. Maybe I’d made a mistake coming here.

I turned and pushed my way through the crowd. I could feel Will right behind me.

“I’ve done all right so far,” I shot over my shoulder. “I don’t need a bodyguard.”

I passed the table where Zane was sitting and he shot to his feet hopefully. But I ignored him and kept walking.

Before I could escape, Will caught my arm and pulled me to a stop. “Okay, look. I’m sure you’re right. Zane’s probably ... *charming*.” The word dripped with sarcasm, and I crossed my arms petulantly, averting my gaze from his. “I shouldn’t have chased your boyfriend away.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop. You know that’s not what he is.”

He grinned, that smug expression of his firmly back in place. “Good. I’m glad you see things my way. Can we stop fighting now?”

Several girls eyed Will, and I wondered whether I should take my opportunity to make my strange request ... before I lost his attention to someone else.

“Fine. On one condition.”

“I’m listening ...” His grin grew as he crossed his arms over his muscular chest, making us look like we were in a



standoff, and I wondered exactly what he thought I was planning to propose.

I crooked my index finger toward him, and he leaned closer so no one could hear what I had to say. “I know you said you couldn’t, but I *need* you to teach me to swim. No kids this time, and no one else can know about it,” I said, stating my demands. “I want private lessons.”

He reached for a strand of my hair and twisted it around his finger. The glint in his eyes made it clear he was toying with me. “And if I agree ... what’s in it for me?”

Tugging away so my hair fell from his fingers, I reached into my purse and pulled out the envelope. When I handed it to him, he regarded me with a raised eyebrow.

I indicated the envelope in his hand. “Cash,” I said somberly. “There’s a thousand dollars in that envelope.”

He jerked back, the playful gleam becoming wary. “Jesus, Brown Eyes, is this some kind of joke?” He tried to pass the envelope back to me. “I don’t want your money.”

Frowning, I shook my head and refused to take it. “I’m serious. I need your help. This is ... *embarrassing* for me, and I don’t know a lot of people here. You’re an expert. Plus, you already give lessons ...” I looked at him thoughtfully. “I suppose I could ask Zane to teach me.”

His eyes narrowed as he seemed to be deciding whether he believed I would actually ask Zane for help. Then he reluctantly pocketed the cash. “Fine,” he muttered. “You win. Meet me at the pool tomorrow. After hours.” And when he realized I might not know what “after hours” was, he added, “Eight o’clock.” He shoved his hand and the money in his jeans pocket. “We’ll only have the pool for an hour, so try not to be late.”

And then he turned and stormed back toward the bar just as I heard Emerson’s voice behind me, and I wondered how long she’d been standing there. “Who pissed in his snowflakes?”

I spun around to face her. “Corn,” I said absently, looking past her to where Zane and Lucas were talking, probably about how Will had all but dragged me off the dance floor.

“What?” Em asked, dragging my attention away from them just as Zane caught my eye.

“Cornflakes. It’s ‘who pissed in his Cornflakes?’” I grinned at her, avoiding her answer with a question of my own. “You know what sounds good right now? A Denny’s Grand Slam. We should get outta here and get something to eat. Whaddaya say?”

She draped her arm around me just as Lucas and Zane joined us, and I realized we weren’t ditching them just yet. But a booth at Denny’s was a far safer place than a dance floor at The Dunes.

And tomorrow, Will would teach me how to swim.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LAUREN

I wasn't a second late for my lesson. I didn't want to jeopardize the tentative truce Will and I had struck the night before.

Still, I was surprised to hear myself breathe, "You're here ..." when I found him waiting for me as I stepped out of the locker room. I guess part of me had been convinced I'd imagined the whole thing—some sort of drunken hallucination.

He gave me a stupid grin. "Deal's a deal, right?"

My palms were sweaty and my mouth grew parched as I neared the pool. It was fear, I told myself. But I was less than convinced as I realize I was concentrating more on Will than the water.

The hour-long lesson went by in a blur. I tried not to be disappointed that Will was all business. He kept a polite, but professional distance. Had I expected that last night on the dance floor had changed anything between us? That he would take more of a hands-on approach?

Maybe I just *wanted* more of the "hands-on" part.

I let my eyes wander over the muscles of his chest, and had to swallow back a moan. Oh yeah, I definitely wanted his hands on me.

I still had no clue what his deal was.

Will was a mystery. One minute he was flirtatious and banter-y, the next he was acting like a complete jackhole to the girl who may or may not still be his girlfriend. And then, just when I thought I'd seen enough to come to a verdict, he went and took on the role of sweet and considerate swim coach.

Today? Well, today he was ...

Too far away, that's what he was.

“Good. Now let's see you try that again,” he told me from the other end of the pool, the only place he seemed to be. “Only this time, try *not* sinking.” His eyes crinkled at the corners.

“Ha, ha,” I said drily. “I suppose *you* were born knowing how to swim.” I replayed the instructions he'd given me: Head back, chest high, hips up, legs straight.

“I was, actually.” The water rippled, but I was concentrating on what I was doing. I took a deep breath and leaned backward. “My mom says I swam before I walked.”

I laughed, and my entire body folded as I started to go under. Again. “Your mom sounds like a liar.”

Will's voice enveloped me like a caress. “Focus on what you're doing,” he told me. “But you're right. She totally was.” He was closer now, no longer all the way across the pool, and knowing that made it even harder to pay attention.

*Head back.*

I inhaled and tried again.

*Chest high.*

I sank backward and let the water cradle me.

*Hips up.*

I tried to remember to breathe.

*Legs straight.*

“Now, relax.” Will's voice was right above me, but instead of startling me, it made me feel more secure. Will was here. Even if I did sink again, he would catch me.

Not to mention the part where I was only in four feet of water—I could probably catch myself.

But that didn't happen. I buoyed like that for several seconds ... then a minute. I was light. Weightless.

It was amazing.

His voice held me again, like an anchor, keeping me in place. “Brown Eyes?”

“Mmm?”

“Open your eyes.”

I smiled to myself. “I thought they were.”

When I opened them, he was beaming down at me. “You did it.”

I let my shoulders collapse. The water closed in around me right before I stood up.

That was the feeling I’d been waiting for my whole life—not just the sensation of floating—*really floating*—but the sense of accomplishment. I couldn’t hold back my grin. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Hell yeah, you did. We should go celebrate.”



Our celebration consisted of stale beer and quite possibly the best pizza I’d ever tasted in my entire life.

“Told ya,” Will bragged as I peeled my third piece from the silver disc. “You could go coast to coast and never have another slice like this.” We’d ordered the Supreme on the Chicago-style crust. The toppings were so thick I should probably be eating with a fork, but it was pizza, so all decorum had flown out the window.

It was so not ladylike, and I so didn’t care.

“And you grew up with this joint? How do you not weigh a ton?” I bit into my slice and moaned. Flavor exploded across my tongue. I let the mozzarella stretch until I finally had to break it off with my finger. Will waited, watching me as if he’d baked the pizza himself. When I could finally talk again, I said. “Seriously, I might have to move away just so I don’t blow up.”

A dark look crossed his face, and I wanted it to be because I'd just said I'd have to move away. Then he picked up his own slice. "You'd be beautiful no matter what."

*Um, what was that?* Maybe not what I'd been hoping for, but still ...

"Did you just call me beautiful again?"

He scarfed down a huge bite and exaggeratedly pointed at his mouth with his index finger. His eyes were wide with an *I can't answer you* expression.

"Whatever. You totally did." Loving the way my stomach flipped. "Keep that up and a girl could get a big head." Then I took a swig from my mug and cringed. "Okay, seriously, what's the deal with this beer?"

He swallowed his bite, which took a second, and wiped his mouth on his napkin. "Sorry. Shoulda warned you. *Great* pizza, but super-shitty beer."

I wrinkled my nose. "And people are ... *okay* with that?"

"It's kinda become their thing. People come from all over *because* of it. You should see their Yelp reviews—the worse the beer, the better the ratings. They tried changing the formula once—getting some good local microbrews on tap—but people went ballistic. They had to go back to the shitty-beer thing."

When my glass was empty, Will refilled it from the pitcher on the table between us. I would have waved him off since I wasn't particularly craving seconds, but this was an entirely new version of Will. This Will was relaxed, and I didn't want the evening ending any sooner than it had to.

I wanted to ask him about the girlfriend, and where they stood. But I never could get the question past my lips. "So, you've lived here your whole life?" I asked instead, completely chickening out.

He shrugged. "Give or take a few years. I left for a while to do some other things, but they didn't work out, so I came back."

“Things like what?”

“Just ... you know, things.” He shifted, and I realized I might be losing him. This was a road he didn’t want to go down. “What about you?” he asked, switching the subject. “You’re not from here, so where then?”

I was even less comfortable. My past, especially my recent past, wasn’t an easy place for me, but I could field the simple questions, I supposed. “Grew up in Denver and went to ASU for college.”

“Arizona, huh?” He tilted his head to the side and studied me. “So what’d you move here for? I mean, other than the great pizza and even better company.” He smiled, and it occurred to me I could get used to his cocky grins.

This was difficult territory for me. Even Emerson didn’t know the real reason I’d been in such a hurry to leave, and I told her almost everything.

“Em and I just wanted to ... get away for a while.”

“Get away, hmm?” His green eyes narrowed. “And you just thought, *Hey, there’s an ocean here, maybe I’ll learn to swim*, is that what you’re telling me?”

I wanted to laugh, because it sounded ludicrous when he said it like that, even though that was pretty much what it boiled down to. “Look,” I told him, taking another drink of the beer, which was tasting better by the second. “Believe what you want, but what better place to learn.” I leaned back in my chair and forced myself to hold his suspicious gaze.

He was quiet for a moment, and I could see him mulling that over. He didn’t believe me, not entirely, but eventually he nodded. “Well, you could definitely do worse in the teacher department if I do say so myself.”

“And you do say so yourself. Right?” I goaded.

“Hell yeah, I do.” I should be glad he wasn’t pounding his chest like Tarzan. This was definitely Cocky Will. “You could do a whole lot worse than me.”

My eyes followed his hand. He was wearing a snug T-shirt that didn't hide his muscled arms. *Hell yeah, I could.*

I reached my glass out to his. "So then, here's to great pizza and shitty beer."

He leaned forward too, and just as I touched my glass to his, his eyes captured mine. "And beautiful girls," he added.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LAUREN

The house was dark when I came inside. I figured Emerson had either called it a night already or was having another sleepover at Lucas's place. So, when her voice shot out at me, I nearly peed my pants.

"And just where have you been, young lady?"

I yelped, trying to find her in the crypt-like room. "Em! You scared the bejeezus outta me!"

The lamp next to the futon flipped on, and Emerson's face was bathed in its glow as she studied me. "Maybe you should've thought of that when you didn't call to let me know how late you'd be."

"Since when have you decided to keep tabs on me?"

"Since we're living in a strange town, and you coulda been facedown in a ditch somewhere." The look on her face said she was dead serious.

"Okay," I told her. "I should've at least texted. If you must know, I was at a swim lesson." Emerson knew how much learning to swim meant to me, she'd even offered to teach me herself. But even if I thought she could take it seriously, Em had never given a swim lesson in her life. And knowing how to swim and knowing how to teach someone to swim were two entirely different things.

She checked the time on her phone. "Swim? You? At midnight?"

Was it midnight already?

"So," I started. "It was a lesson ... followed by pizza and beer."

That perked Emerson up. “So, what you mean is, you had a *date*?”

Laughing at the thought of Will and me on a date, I went to the bathroom so I could hang my damp swimsuit on the towel rack. I needed it to be dry again for tomorrow night’s lesson. “No,” I hollered back to her. “I do not mean a date. I mean a swim lesson followed by pizza and beer. The end.”

Emerson followed me.

“Holy shit!” she cried, her fingers creeping toward my swimsuit like it might explode if she weren’t careful. “What the hell is that thing? When you said you were taking a swim lesson, I didn’t realize you meant you traveled back in time to take it.”

“Shut up!” I huffed, snatching the suit back down off the rack. I clutched the soggy red fabric to my chest. I knew I didn’t have a lot of experience in this area, but I was embarrassed that I might have gotten it so wrong. I chewed my lip. “It’s not that bad ... is it?”

“Of course not. It’s great. If you’re trying to cover up that bulky chastity belt you’re sportin’.” She frowned at me. “Jeez, Lo, are you trying to repel the entire male species?”

I blew out a breath. I was definitely not trying to repel Will. Was that really the message I’d been sending with my swimsuit?

But Emerson had picked up on something else.

“Oh, my God. You’ve *found* someone, haven’t you? To ...” she glanced down to my lady parts. “Go where no man’s gone before?”

“No!” I denied. “I mean, I don’t know. Maybe someone. I haven’t decided yet.”

Sure, I’d crossed Will off the list right out of the gate. But this new Will, the one I’d seen over the past two days, definitely had me rethinking him as a possibility. He’d been sweet and endearing, *and* he’d called me beautiful.

It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if the first guy I slept with had all those attributes ... plus rocked a hard body to boot.

I dared a glance at Emerson, who was staring at me with her mouth hanging open as if I'd just confessed to having a thing for her dad—who, let's be honest, wasn't half bad in a dad sort of way.

“Stop. Is that really so strange? It was bound to happen eventually.” I scowled at her. “Besides. I said I haven't decided yet.”

“Does this someone happen to have a name? Is he the one teaching you to swim, by any chance?”

I wasn't ready to share details, but I nodded. “Yes. He's giving me private lessons.”

“And you're wearing ... that?” She snatched it out of my hand. “Uh-uh. Over my dead body. You'll never seal the deal in that thing. You gotta think ... sluttier.” She turned and went to her room and started rummaging through her dresser drawers. Finally, she came back with a teeny, tiny string bikini. “This. This is the one. No man'll be able to resist you in this!”

“Em, no. I can't. No man will be able to resist because it won't even cover anything.”

“Exactly. That's why it's perfect. Trust me. Wear this and he'll be putty in your hands.” I held it in front of me and studied myself in the mirror, while Emerson stared at me over my shoulder. “Just look at you.” She gave my shoulders a hard squeeze. “My little girl's all grown-up.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WILL

The pounding interrupted one of the first wet dreams I'd had since I was sixteen years old, which was about the time I'd discovered I could convince real-life girls to do to me the things I'd only been doing to myself for years.

This particular dream involved being buried between Lauren's soft thighs, while her legs were wrapped tightly around my hips, insisting I thrust deeper. Drive harder. Grinding in time with her.

I'd never wake again if I could stay like this ... dream or no dream.

But the pounding was like a jackhammer, and reluctantly I rolled out of bed.

*Fuck!* I rubbed my hand over the top of my shorts to make my hard-on go down.

"Hold your fucking horses! I'm coming!" I winced from the early morning sun coming through the shades. "What?" I growled, swinging the door wide.

Camden stood there, his unwashed, greasy gray hair sticking out in every direction. He was skinnier now—hard living had taken its toll—but he was still the same Uncle Cam he'd always been, and my reaction was just as visceral as it had been when I'd up and left all those years ago.

I'd never understood why my mom kept letting him back into our lives, brother or not. He was a leech who never gave a shit about anyone but himself.

Camden tried to push inside, but I pushed back. Tess didn't need to know he was here. I dragged him around the corner of the house by one of his scrawny arms, not caring if I

snapped it in the process. “What do you want, Cam?” My voice was low, but I doubted he’d missed the warning in it.

He rubbed the scruff on his jaw. “You know what I want,” he protested, his eyes darting in several directions at once. That was the thing; he could never stop looking for the angle. Even now, he was trying to figure out if there was a way to push my buttons so he could get what he wanted.

“I already gave you everything I have.”

“It wasn’t enough. I need more.” He pulled his pockets inside out. “You’re leaving me no choice, Billy.” His pathetic whine made my skin crawl.

He glanced over my shoulder then, a sly smile making an appearance. I turned in time to see Tess standing there on the sidewalk, wearing only her sleep shirt. The worried expression on her face made me want to punch Cam in the throat.

I seized a handful of his shirt and dragged him to me. “Listen, you piece of shit, I gave you what I had, now leave us the fuck alone. If I see you around here again, I’m gonna break the last of those festering teeth outta your mouth.” When I let go of him, he flopped to the ground.

“You’re not listening, Billy. If you don’t give me more ... right now, I swear I’ll never sign those papers you gave me.” His voice was shrill, and I knew he meant for Tess to hear every word. “I have legal guardianship, you know. I can take her any time. It’s what your momma wanted.”

I was afraid of what I’d do if I kept listening to him, because I didn’t just want to smash his teeth in, I wanted to crack his fucking skull open. “Mom was sick and you know it,” I muttered. And then, because what choice did I have, I told him, “Stay here.”

I wrapped my arm around Tess and drew her back inside the house, away from Cam and his threats.

I was sure that if I took him to court, no judge would grant him custody of Tess—he was an addict. He was a fucking mess.

But what I wasn't so sure about was what *would* happen to Tess if he drew attention to our situation.

I wanted Cam to sign guardianship over to me; that way, no one would come poking around, questioning whether *I* was fit to take care of her. Because maybe a bartender who worked late hours and taught swim lessons on the side wouldn't cut it either.

And what if opening that can of worms meant that the courts decided to take Tess away from me and place her in foster care?

Inside the house, I found the envelope Lauren had given me the other night at The Dunes ... when she'd asked me to give her private swim lessons. I'd planned to give it back to her—I didn't want her money.

But now ...

*Jesus!* Cam left me no choice.

I marched back outside, to where Cam was chewing on his filthy fingernails. I shoved the envelope at him. "Take it, you piece of shit. Take it and get the fuck out of here. And if there's any shred of decency left in you, you'll sign those papers. Otherwise I'm taking you to court."

"You don't actually think you're fit to raise a kid, do you? Where were you all these years? How you planning to support her when you can barely support yourself?" he railed.

When I turned to leave, I nearly smacked into Tess. She'd followed me back outside. I dragged her away. Yet even when we were back in the house and the door was closed, we could hear him, shouting about suing and moving Tess away from here and how he would ruin our lives.

It wasn't enough that he was walking away with an envelope of cash in his hand. It would never be enough.

She looked at me with that same *What are we gonna do?* expression she'd been wearing ever since the day I'd gotten back here.

“I told you. I got this. He can’t hurt us,” I promised for the millionth time. And, Jesus-to-fucking-Christ, I hoped it was true.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

LAUREN

Will was already in the pool when I stepped out of the locker room and onto the pool deck.

This time my pounding heart had nothing to do with my lesson. I should never have let Em convince me this was a good idea.

No way could I drop my towel.

“This works better if you actually get *in* the water,” Will joked, while my fingers clung to the plain white terrycloth like it was a lifeline.

But what was my alternative? Run back into the locker room and tell Will I’d changed my mind?

And what would that accomplish? The whole point was to get Will’s attention—at least it had been the point when Em and I had hatched this scheme of ours. If I let go of the towel, I was pretty sure that goal would be unlocked. Besides, I was already here and Will was down there, waiting for me.

I took a deep breath and let the towel slide to the ground.

That was all it took.

From the pool, I heard Will’s sharp intake of breath, and that one, simple sound sent electric shockwaves coursing through my body. His green eyes were on me then. All over me. Burrowing through me, scorching my skin as they roamed over every inch of my body.

I might not have gotten my mom’s bold Latin complexion, but I’d definitely gotten the whole curves-in-all-the-right-places thing, and I’d been hoping Will would notice.



At our first private lesson last night, I'd done what I always did: played it safe. I wore the one-piece swimsuit that, as Emerson so delicately put it was about as eye-catching as a garbage sack. But after our lesson, and after he'd taken me out for pizza, I wasn't so sure I wanted to play it safe with Will. Maybe he wasn't the jerk I'd thought he was.

I hadn't gone with Emerson's bikini, because I had one that was even more daring, one I'd bought for Lola Bang. It had micro, *micro* triangles that barely covered my nipples, let alone my full breasts.

It was a bold move.

"I ... uh ...," Will stammered. He cleared his throat, which was probably the third time he'd done that since I'd dropped my towel. Finally, he tore his gaze away and scowled. "What are you waiting for? We only have about an hour of light left."

I made my way toward the edge of the pool. "You're the boss," I said, biting my lip to stop from smiling.

I eased into the warm water. I relished the feel of it, letting it glide over my skin. Only when I was submerged up to my neck would Will even look at me again, like somehow the water shielded him from seeing too much of me—because clearly, that's the way water worked.

His mood improved once I was immersed, and he managed to keep his eyes above the surface. He acted exactly like ... himself. Like he hadn't even noticed the bikini, or my barely covered breasts. He'd slipped into full-on teacher mode, cool and collected. He was patient as he ran through several drills, things like hanging onto the side of the pool wall while I practiced kicking, even though I assured him I already knew how to kick.

Mostly, though, I just felt ridiculous, and moderately offended.

I decided to put an end to this nonsense. I stood up in the waist-high water, my hands on my hips. "This is great and all, but when am I going to learn *actual swimming*?"

Will let out a sigh that sounded like he was dealing with an unreasonable child. “Lauren, first you have to learn the basics.” Then, almost against his will, his eyes fell to my chest. And just as quickly he hastily looked away, his gaze landing awkwardly on my throat as he finished, “When you’re ready, you’ll swim,” he continued distractedly. “Trust me, you’re not even close yet. Swimming’s not something you can master overnight. It takes time ... practice ... *patience*.”

I wanted to laugh, but I couldn’t decide if this was funny or not. I’d come here to be objectified, and now I was getting a lecture on patience.

I wished I’d worn my stupid one-piece so he’d just look at me already. “I just ... ” I just ... didn’t know what I just. I was confused. This ... swimming ... trying to make Will notice me ... coming to California in the first place ... maybe I’d been expecting too much.

The water swelled as he moved toward me. And then he said my name again, “Lauren.” Only this time, the way he said it made me realize I should never take up acting—I was terrible at hiding my feelings. His thumb was on my cheek, brushing away a tear I hadn’t even realized was there. I shivered beneath his touch. “It’s okay.” His low, reassuring voice scraped my nerves. “You’ll be able to swim in no time. Especially if you do the things I show you. You might not be ready for the Olympics or anything, but you’ll definitely be swimming on your own.”

He was so close I could feel his breath against my face, and something about the way his palm cupped my jaw made me feel treasured. My heart thundered inside my chest as my eyes locked onto his.

I told myself to look away. Maybe I had miscalculated. Maybe Will was the wrong kind of guy to be playing games with. But before common sense could win out, his lips were there, possessing mine, and I forgot everything that was at stake.

I didn’t resist. I didn’t want to. My mouth parted willingly and I was inviting his tongue inside. A medley of

sensations assaulted me, churning my insides and upending the world as I knew it.

It wasn't the way I'd imagined our first kiss would be—and I *had* imagined it, several times since that first night when he'd done a body shot off me. I'd pictured him being gentle or playful, but nothing like the way he was devouring me, consuming me. Trying to possess me.

His lips still on mine, he released my face as his hands moved impatiently around my waist to pull me closer. Beneath the flimsy fabric that separated us, I could feel how hard he was.

I should've been shocked—I liked a good make-out session as much as the next girl, but this was always the point when I'd made other guys stop. Sure, I was daring in front of a webcam. But in person, I was the girl no man had managed to conquer.

But here ... now ... with Will ... none of that mattered. The old me was erased.

I was just as restless as he was. I squirmed impatiently, trying to get closer, closer, closer to him. I squeezed my eyes against the unfamiliar sensations that rippled through me as I moved against him, gripping the swelling muscles of his shoulders, using him as leverage, bracing myself. All the while, I let his tongue explore mine ... let him make my head and my body reel.

One of his hands found the front of my swim top and I released a small whimper as his fingers cupped my breast. His hand disappeared then, beneath the fabric, and his thumb flicked over the tip of my nipple, already tightened to a hard nub. Electricity sizzled through me.

I buried my hands in his hair and rocked my hips against his. An unexpected wave of pleasure shook me.

He groaned my name and dragged his mouth away from my tender lips.

“Don't stop,” I gasped, needing his lips on me again.

He lowered his head then, peeling the Lycra triangle all the way back, and, just like that first night at The Dunes when I'd been up on the bar, his tongue darted over my sensitive skin, exploring me in a way no one ever had before.

“Will ...,” I half-moaned, half-whimpered. My fingers tangled deeper into his damp hair. I could have been telling him to stop or begging him for more. I'd never been more conflicted.

But he seemed to know, and his mouth closed around the hardened bud, teasing and nipping, his tongue finding just the right places to drive me out of my mind.

Suddenly, there was no reason *not* to do this. I couldn't imagine why I'd ever denied myself before. I had no intention of stopping. This—what Will was doing to me now—was the most exquisite kind of frustration.

“Will,” I breathed again, and this time there was nothing conflicted about it. I reached down, my hand plunging beneath the water as I fumbled for the waistband of his trunks, searching for him.

My fingers tangled into his coarse hairs as they slipped inside his shorts, and when I found him, rock-hard, I gasped again. I didn't have to be experienced to know I was doing this right. The proof was right in my palm.

*I had done this to him. I had made him this way.*

I closed my fingers around him, power and need coursing through me like a fever. Will moved in my hand at the same time I stroked him, his hips pumping forward against my touch.

“Jesus, Lauren. You're so fucking incredible. *Jesus ...*” He released my nipple then, as his hands reached around my ass and he hoisted me up. I wrapped my legs around him as he carried me through the water until my back rested against the side of the pool.

He tugged the front of my bottoms down, his hand finding its way between my legs. He parted me expertly, and

the second his finger slid inside me, a fire ignited. This was it. This was what I'd been waiting for. What I wanted.

Now. *Here.*

“Yes,” I whispered raggedly, my own fingers digging into his powerful shoulders. I squeezed my eyes shut against the sensations mounting inside me.

Will's arms tightened, his entire body going rigid as he stopped moving. His finger slipped out of me even though his hand stayed poised where it was. “Fuck.” His breath was hot against my cheek. “Jesus Christ, Lauren.”

There was an ache in his voice, and I frowned.

“What—” I rasped, but he cut me off.

He was still holding me against the edge of the pool. And he was still so incredibly hard that I very nearly begged—*begged*—him to keep going.

So when the next words fell from his lips, I wasn't sure if I wanted to smack him or bite my own lip to keep from crying. “We can't do this. What were we thinking? What was I thinking?”

He let go of me and I dropped like a piece of lead, back to the pool floor. It took me a second to get my balance. My lips were swollen, and I could still feel his heart hammering against my ribs.

“We can't do this,” he repeated, his voice hoarse as his chin fell to the top of my head.

I shoved away from him. My brain whirled, silently repeating one word as I suddenly wished I had my towel back: *rejected.*

I pushed sluggishly through the water toward the steps. “Don't worry,” I managed, not bothering to look back at him. “It won't happen again.”

I stayed in the locker room for as long as I could, standing under the lukewarm shower and trying to wash away the memory of his hands on my skin.

When I finally made my way to the parking lot, there was a note stuffed beneath my windshield wiper. I assumed the scribbled handwriting was Will's since he was the only person I knew around here. Also, the only person who would have written the cryptic message that made me want to die of humiliation: *Pay you back by the end of the week. Sorry.*

Great. He was sorry. I guess that was supposed to make everything better.

I slumped onto the driver's seat, crumpling the slip of paper and letting it fall to the floor.

I guess I'd just been fired as a student. Again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

WILL

I didn't go home just yet. I didn't want Tess to see me like this, all keyed up. Sometimes she was too smart for her own good—she'd know within seconds something was up. She deserved better than a piece-of-shit brother like me, especially since she was counting on me. Trusted me.

And since I wasn't ready to give her up to that fucker Cam, she was stuck with me.

I hovered over my drink, hating myself, and hating Lauren for making me feel like such an asshole. I could still taste her, which made my brain buzz and my skin tingle. I could feel her too. All over me, soft and pliable and willing—so fucking willing. And, even now, while I hated the both of us, the memory of touching her, of my teeth grazing her nipple, was making me hard all over again.

I stopped staring at my drink and threw it back in one shot. The whiskey burned going down, but I needed something to wash her away. I slammed the glass against the bar and gave the bartender—a skinny guy with snakebite piercings and long blond dreads—a *one more round* nod.

Wordlessly, he refilled my glass because he got it: I was in a bad fucking place.

“Hey,” a raspy voice interrupted from over my shoulder. “Aren't you that one guy? Billy Galbadorn or something like that?”

Swiveling lopsidedly on my stool, I bit back the caustic remark that rose involuntarily to my lips. Normally, when someone asked, I told them to fuck off. But I was drunk and this chick was hot ... in a daddy-issues kind of way.

I propped an elbow against the bar and grinned at her. “Close enough. What's your name, beautiful?”

Her smile was downright wicked, and suddenly the fact I was still hard might not be such a bad thing. “Does it make a difference?” she answered. She lifted a finger to one black leather strap of her skimpy top and let it trace a path all the way down to the exposed valley between her tits.

I knew then that the whiskey had never been the answer at all. Maybe this girl, or one like her—someone I felt nothing for—was exactly what I needed to take the edge off before heading home.

I snaked my hand out to her waist, and when she just grinned at me in response, I captured her, hauling her between my knees until I had her right where I wanted her, firmly entrenched between my thighs. “Only if it makes a difference to you,” I growled.

Again, that wicked smile was my answer, and without any more small talk, I claimed her cherry red lips, which were not quite as sweet and supple as Lauren’s had been, but more than willing.

I reached down, not caring that there was no question we were making a scene now, and I stroked those long legs of hers, squeezing just beneath her too-short skirt where her lace panties made an appearance. I told myself I didn’t care that she wasn’t Lauren. In fact, I preferred her this way—the exact opposite of Lauren.

*This girl* would make things better. Easier.

“Let’s get out of here,” I whispered roughly against her ear, when I finally stopped kissing her long enough to pay my tab.

She didn’t argue. And she didn’t care that I hadn’t remembered her name, not even after she had to tell it to me for the third time.

I stumbled out of the motel room sometime after midnight, leaving her half-dressed and wholly unsatisfied because, for the second time that night, and for a totally different reason, I couldn’t go through with it.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LAUREN

“Drop the spoon and back away from the Häagen-Dazs.”

I licked what was left of the double chocolate chunk from the spoon clutched in my hand.

“I’m serious, Lo. Ice cream for breakfast can only mean one thing.” Emerson raised a pointed eyebrow at me while she waited for my defense.

But I didn’t have one. It was exactly what Em had been warning me about for years: *Guys were dogs*.

And it wasn’t like I hadn’t believed her, but I guess I’d always held out hope, too—that somewhere out there was the exception to the rule. You know, that one perfect guy who would prove her wrong—prove *me* wrong—by sweeping me off my feet and showing everyone he was different. Special.

What on earth had made me think Will might be that guy?

Clearly, I’d been smoking crack, because he’d turned out to be just as bad as the rest of them. Worse even.

*I can’t believe I almost ...*

I stopped myself. It wasn’t like anything had actually happened between us. I hadn’t *almost* let him do anything.

I’d made a simple mistake and I needed to stop beating myself up over it. Everyone was entitled to a lapse in judgment now and then. End of story.

So what was wrong with me, then, that I hadn’t stopped thinking about Will for the entire time I’d been cloistered inside my not-so-beachside bungalow? Why couldn’t I get him off my mind? Why, whenever I drifted off to sleep, did I dream of him, and whenever the pizza guy

knocked on the door did I foolishly hope that maybe, this time, it might be—please let it be—Will, coming, not to drop off the money he'd promised to pay me back, but to beg my forgiveness?

Because the jerk was drop-dead gorgeous, that's why. And because I'd let him touch my lady parts and light a fire no one else had ever lit before. Because I was stupid, just like all those guys who'd sat on the other side of their computer screens, dropping just a few more bucks to get a peek at my boobs or to watch me touch myself. Because I'd made the mistake of letting my guard down.

Because I was human, that's why.

*Ugh!*

I put the cover back on the ice cream carton and tossed the spoon in the sink. "There—happy?" I asked.

"Not till you get your ass dressed, and maybe run a comb through that rat's nest of yours. You dragged me all the way to California, and now I'm takin' *you* to the beach."

I sighed. "Fine. Whatever."

But Em was right again, just like she had been about the whole *guys are dogs* thing. The beach *would* be good. I'd been inside the house for the past three days, living on nothing but ice cream and pizza delivery. Given half a chance, my best friend was actually prone to moments of brilliance.

I was done with all this feeling-sorry-for-myself crap. Will could go screw himself as far as I was concerned. I didn't move here to get my panties in a wad over some guy; I came to prove I was capable of living my own life. That my dreams were just as important as my parents' dreams.

Except, I had no idea what those dreams were anymore.

Even before Will had up and quit on me, I'd been having doubts about myself.

Swimming wasn't just scary, it was hard. And from day one it had been obvious I wasn't exactly a natural. But did

that mean I'd made a terrible mistake moving here in the first place?

Emerson had only come because of me, but that didn't mean she didn't love it here.

So maybe swimming *wasn't* my thing. Big deal. I never thought I'd say this, but maybe I needed to be more like Em and look on the bright side of things—I was in California, after all. Maybe I could find something else to make me want to stay.

I brushed my teeth, pulled my hair into a ponytail, and slipped into my bikini—the Lola Bang one, because even though Will didn't want to see me in it, that didn't mean it wasn't completely killer on me.

When I came back out, Em was grinning at me. “There's the girl I know and love.” She hooked her arm through mine. “Now, let's go get you laid.”

“Or ...” I offered as an alternative, because maybe our goals didn't exactly align, but at least she was still looking out for me, “how 'bout we start small and work on our tans.”

“How is it possible that my best friend in the whole wide world is gonna die a virgin?” She led me outside. “You're going to end up like my aunt—the crazy cat lady who posts cat pictures and cat memes on her Facebook page.”

“Nope. I'm allergic.”

She shrugged. “Still. You know what they say, if you don't use it, you lose it.”

Already, I was feeling better. I cocked my head to the side, letting it fall against Em's shoulder. “Nope. Not a real thing.”

“Pretty sure it is. It just ... dries up. Shrivels into a black hole or something.”

I gave her a *you're crazy* look. “If *it* shrivels up, how can it still be a hole?”

She just rolled her eyes. “Science, dummy. And trust me, you do *not* want to mess with science.”

When we reached the end of the road, our toes sank into the already hot sand. We stopped to stare at each other.

“I love you,” I told her.

“I know,” she said back. And then we took off racing toward the water like little girls until my legs ached, and we both collapsed onto our backs and made sand angels. Emerson told me all about Lucas and everything they’d done—which was pretty much everything.

Suddenly, it didn’t matter *why* I was here, because I was here with Emerson. And we had the entire summer until she had to leave me and I needed to decide what I would do next.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LAUREN

I didn't even realize I'd dozed off until I heard Emerson's ear-piercing squeals. When I turned my head, I saw Lucas wrapping his arms around her as he hauled her down in the sand. Em was giggling, even while she pretended to fend him off.

"Holy crap!" I shot up diving for my cell phone to figure out how long I'd been out. It had only been about forty-five minutes, but my head felt fuzzy from the heat.

Lucas got to his feet and flung Emerson over his shoulder like she weighed less than nothing. She squealed louder and protested harder, but she wasn't fooling anyone—she was exactly where she wanted to be.

"We're going for a dip!" she shouted to me as Lucas started jogging toward the shore.

I waved her away while I reached for my sunscreen. The last thing I needed was a blistering sunburn.

"Need some help with that?"

I tossed my head around to see Zane on the other side of me, kneeling in the sand beside two surfboards that I assumed were his and Lucas's. I must've done a shitty job hiding my surprise, because Zane's hands went up in surrender.

"Don't worry," he explained. "I promise to be on my best behavior." His brow fell and his expression turned solemn. "I'm really sorry about the other night. I don't know what got into me."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard one of these apologies, and it wouldn't be the first time I'd accepted one. I shook my head. "Seemed pretty obvious to me. You had a little too much

to drink.” I flipped open the cap of my sunscreen, ignoring his offer to help.

“Look, I get it. I came on too strong. But I don’t want you to get the wrong idea; I’m not always like that.”

I rubbed the lotion over my arm, avoiding his eyes.

“Seriously, Lauren, I’m sorry. I was hoping we could be friends.”

I went still. *Friends*. I’d asked Will if we were friends and look where that had gotten me.

But Zane wasn’t Will, I reminded myself. Zane was here, and he was looking at me in such a puppy-dog-ish way that I allowed myself a cautious smile. “Friends, huh?”

“No strings.” Leaning forward, he held out his hand in truce. “You have my word.”

I sighed, allowing myself a truce smile as I put my hand in his. He shook it, as if we were striking a business deal.

“You surf?” he asked, nodding toward the boards. “I got an extra wetsuit.”

I drew my hand away. “I don’t even swim.” I’d spent the past three days eating ice cream and thinking about why I’d really come to California. Suddenly, I wasn’t sure if I was in love with the idea of swimming as much as I’d been in love with the idea of doing something my parents had been so adamantly opposed to.

Maybe a little of this, a little of that.

But now, I think it might’ve been one of those childish dreams I needed to let go of. I wasn’t a swimmer. Admitting it now was strange. I’d been hiding that fact my entire life, making excuses and outright lying. Saying it now was sort of ... freeing.

Zane laughed, which wasn’t exactly the reaction I’d hoped for. “That’s not a big deal.” Also, not what I’d expected. He looked at me eagerly. “I can show you how.”

“To swim or to surf?” I laughed, because the idea of him trying to teach me either was absurd.

“Either? Both? You choose.”

I scoffed. “You’re pretty confident, but I think you mighta met your match. I think I’m *unteachable*.”

He jumped up and sand flew everywhere. He held his hand out to help me up. “I accept your challenge. We’ll start with swimming, and work our way up.”

I let him take my hand, still trying to decide. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “Why not? What’s the worst that can happen?” He tugged and I was up then.

“Um, I could die. Like, literally ... I could drown.” I did my best to push down the panic from my last encounter with the formidable waves, which also just so happened to be my first one.

He laughed as he started dragging me in the direction of the ocean. “No way. We’re friends now, and friends don’t let friends die.”



As a teacher, Zane wasn’t half bad.

I mean, he wasn’t half good either, so I supposed one sorta balanced out the other. As a swimmer, I wasn’t any better or worse than when we’d started, but my confidence had skyrocketed. The fear was still there, but after my lessons with Will, it was definitely beginning to fade, and I’d ended up having a blast with Zane.

Way more fun than plowing my way through a large pepperoni with extra cheese all by myself.

By the time Zane was chasing me back toward the beach, I was stumbling from exhaustion, and laughing about my lack of skills, and dripping with itchy seawater. I collapsed

in the sand before we even reached our towels, where Emerson and Lucas were going at it as if no one could see them making out in plain sight.

“Ugh,” I complained, “Seriously, I never realized there was so much sand. It’s everywhere.” I tried wiping the grains from my legs, only to have them cling to my hands.

“Yep, that’s kinda how it works here ... you know, *at the beach.*” Zane enunciated the last three words as he wrapped his elbows around his knees and studied the surf. “It’s incredible, though. Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

I followed his gaze, watching the waves crest and break as the water came rushing in over the sand. “Have you lived here all your life?” I asked.

“Nah. I’m a Midwest boy. Newton, Iowa, to be exact. Tiny little town smack dab in the middle of nowhere.” All of a sudden there was a twang to his voice, and I wondered if he was exaggerating it for my benefit.

“Never heard of it.”

He gave me a sidelong glance. “No one has.”

I tried to decide what to make of him. A few nights ago, I’d wanted to write him off. But today ... I was having second thoughts. Maybe my initial impression hadn’t been the best one. Maybe he’d been right and we really could be friends.

“Crap,” I blurted out, dropping low and using Zane’s shoulder as a shield. The move wasn’t subtle, and Zane immediately twisted to see what—or who, rather—I was hiding from.

It was Will, of course, just coming out of the water. No matter where I went, I couldn’t seem to escape him. Maybe it was whatever pheromones he gave off. Or, more likely, it was because I’d been partially on the lookout for him.

Will balanced a surfboard under his arm; its bold green and yellow pattern was vibrant even from this distance.



Zane didn't have a problem helping me hide out. "What's the deal with you two, anyway?" he asked, sheltering me the best he could.

I peeked around him. Will still hadn't spotted me yet, and I tried not to notice the way his wetsuit clung to him, revealing that perfect athletic physique of his. Even from this far away, and with his face turned away from me, he made my blood pound. He was still searching the waves, watching for something as he effortlessly held his surfboard underneath one arm.

"Nothing," I answered, my heart picking up speed. "I thought he was my friend. But it turns out, I was wrong."

Several other surfers bobbed farther out, where the swells were calmer, just before they rolled in to crest closer to the shore. Will lifted his arm to wave, and I watched as one surfer broke away from the pack to paddle in. It wasn't until the surfboard—a long, sleek silver board—was being carried out of the water that I realized the surfer he was waiting for was a girl.

The same girl from the Sand and Slam.

I could see her better now than I had at the party. She was tall, and even in her wetsuit I could tell she was slender and athletic. She shook her soggy hair as she dragged the tail of her board through the sand. Will laughed at the girl, and I told myself the heavy twinge in my gut wasn't jealousy even as I leaned away from Zane to get a better view of her.

Zane tensed beside me, and then he said. "C'mon. Let's get outta here."

"No. Wait." I held my breath, everything inside me on edge. "Who is she?" I shouldn't be asking, but I had to know.

Zane's eyes felt heavy on me, but I couldn't tear mine away from Will or the girl. "That's Tess." He sounded almost reluctant to answer, and I wondered what I heard in his voice—was he indifferent, annoyed, jealous?

I kept pressing. "Tess?"

“She’s the reason he came back,” Zane explained, still watching me.

I swiveled to face him. “Back? From where?”

He looked puzzled by my question, like the answer was obvious. “You don’t know? About Will ... *Billy*?”

There was that name again, and the memory of that first night at the Dunes, when Will’s lips had been on my stomach, was fresh in my mind, haunting me.

Making me shiver.

“He said he didn’t like to be called that,” I told Zane absently.

“I’m sure he doesn’t. Probably brings back a lot of bad memories.” Zane settled back, leaning against his hands. “Your friend *Billy* was a big-time surfer. Traveled all over the world and was coming up through the ranks in all the major competitions. He had sponsors and was on the verge of going pro. Everything a guy dreams of.”

“So?” I asked. “What happened?”

“From what I hear, *she* did.”

My gaze swung back in their direction. To where Will, or *Billy* rather, and this Tess girl were standing near the edge of the water.

Zane went on, not even aware that his explanation was tying my stomach in knots. “He came back for her and let his whole career go to shit.”

As if he’d heard us talking about him, Will looked my way then, scanning the beach. He didn’t notice me at first; looked right through me. But then his gaze landed directly on me.

I froze, my breath caught in my throat, and my heart stuttered.

“I’m sorry,” Zane said, because of course he’d noticed too—that flash of recognition in Will’s eyes right before he

glanced away, all in the blink of an instant. “I thought you already knew.”

Will turned his back then as he fell in step next to Tess, the girl he’d come back for. The girl he’d ended his surfing career for.

When he reached her, he dropped his free arm around her neck and drew her close, whispering something in her ear.

I couldn’t watch for another second. My stomach lurched, and I staggered to my feet. I might’ve said, “I gotta go,” but I couldn’t be sure because by that point my head was spinning. I couldn’t stop thinking about the way Will had kissed me, what, only three days ago? The way he’d put his mouth on my nipple and his hand between my thighs.

I thought they’d broken up, but clearly I’d been wrong.

Tess was the real reason he’d put the brakes on. The reason he’d left me that note about paying me back. He wouldn’t ... *couldn’t* teach me anymore, because of her.

Will or Billy, or whatever the hell his name was, definitely wasn’t the kind of guy I’d thought he was.

Or rather, he was exactly the kind of guy I’d pegged him for ... that first night at The Dunes, when he’d been surrounded by slutty girls all vying for his attention. When he’d drawn out the body shot, his lips lingering too long over my skin.

He was a scumbag.

I felt sorry for myself. But worse, I felt bad for Tess. Tess, who probably had no idea that the person she was in love with had almost fucked me in the pool during my private swimming lesson.

I didn’t remember stumbling across the beach or crossing the street to my bungalow, but when I locked the door behind me, I fell on my bed, still wearing my swimsuit, all covered in sand. I made a silent pact: I’d never, ever, ever, *ever* fall for a guy like Will—or maybe any guy—*ever again*.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WILL

Seeing Lauren again had been like having my fingernails ripped off one at a time.

Three days hadn't been long enough.

Fuck, three years might not be enough.

I considered trying to talk Tess into moving away from here, but I knew she'd never go for it. The old house held too many memories. And even if they weren't all good, she was probably right; I'd have a hard time leaving it too.

The best I could hope for is that this summer would end, and so would Lauren's lease. She'd be gone before I knew it.

Until then, I decided all I had to do was avoid her.

It almost worked; I almost didn't see her at all. Watching Tess out in those waves had been something else. It had been years since we'd spent this much time together, and I hadn't expected her to be so ... so, what? Improved? Good?

*Fucking amazing*, that's what she was.

She'd blown my mind out there. Finding waves no else could. Staying up when I'd have said it was impossible.

She was incredible.

She was like me.

The old me.

Part of me resented her for it, even while I cheered her on. That part of my life was over. And I didn't want it back.

Tess wanted it though. The competitions. The travel. The accolades and recognition. The sponsors and fame and fortune.

She didn't understand there was a downside to it all. That coming up through the ranks was tough, and competition brought out the ugly side in almost everyone. The money was hard to come by, the schedules were brutal, and most competitors never succeeded the way I had.

And worst of all, sometimes it wasn't just your body that took a beating ... something I'd learned all too well.

She was determined, though. And if I was being totally honest with myself, she was damn good. She stood a chance.

But that inner voice was there, warning me that letting her surf was a bad idea. As her brother, and after what happened to me, I should discourage her. Keep her from getting injured the way I had.

I'd never forgive myself if something happened to Tess. Sure, a concussion sucked, but at least I'd walked out of my hospital room.

Some surfers weren't so lucky.

That was when I felt someone watching me. Even before looking, I knew who it was. I could sense her presence in my gut.

*Lauren.*

When I'd turned and spotted her sitting with Zane, it felt like someone had punched a hole in my chest. I had no idea how this girl had gotten to me in such a short amount of time, but she damn sure had. I hadn't stopped thinking about her for days, couldn't stop wanting her, craving her.

And seeing her now ...

I forced myself to concentrate on Tess instead.

I caught up with my sister and hooked my arm around her shoulder. Smiling, I tugged her closer, blocking Lauren from my view. "Come on," I told Tess. "Let's get this over with."



“You sure you wanna do this?” Big Chuck asked. I looked out the window, to where Tess was waiting for me. The look on her face was the same uncertain look she’d been giving me ever since I told her what I’d planned to do. But the wheels were already in motion. Even if I wanted to, there was no backing out now.

I rubbed my hand over the familiar surface of my board one last time and fought the lump in my throat. “Don’t really need it anymore.”

“Yeah, I heard. Tough blow,” Chuck said.

Shrugging, I passed the surfboard across the cluttered counter of Big Chuck’s Pro Shop, but Chuck stopped me. “Signed,” he said. “Dude wanted you to sign it.”

“So he’s a collector?” Seemed a shame to let a board like this gather dust in some basement somewhere.

“Nah. Just a fan, I guess. For that much cash, if he wants his board autographed, who am I to argue, right?”

I took the Sharpie Chuck handed me and tried not to feel guilty about defacing my lucky board. It wasn’t as much cash as I’d have gotten for winning one of the big invitationals or anything, but it’d be enough to pay Lauren back and hopefully get Camden off our case for good ... in time to get Tess settled into a routine before school started up again.

When I was done, I passed the pen back to him.

“Sorry to hear about your mom, man,” Chuck said.

“Thanks.” I rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly eager to escape the crowded store I’d spent so many hours in growing up.

Chuck counted out the money, taking his time. “How’s Tess handling it?”

I glanced out at the sidewalk. She wasn't paying attention now, and I studied her carefully.

Things were getting better, both *for* her and *with* her. At least that's what I told myself to keep from running away, which seemed a million times easier than holding it together. Camden might have legal guardianship of Tess, but so far I'd managed to keep him at bay by paying him off with as much money as I could scrounge together. But even I knew that couldn't go on forever.

I was already pulling double shifts at the bar, teaching swim lessons, and doing odd jobs whenever I could find them. If I had more self-control, I never would have quit giving Lauren lessons. Except there was no way I could spend that much time alone with her and keep my hands to myself.

And right now, Tess needed me to keep my head in the game ... at least until this Cam mess was straightened out. I couldn't afford to get twisted up over some girl.

The cash from selling my board would have to do for now. I hoped to use it to convince Cam to sign guardianship over to me. Then I could work on giving Tess the kind of life she deserved.

Chuck handed me the bills. "She's okay then?" he pressed when I hadn't answered him.

I lifted a shoulder. "She'll be okay. We're figuring things out." I pocketed the money and left my board behind, the last reminder of the days when I'd been on my way to being a champion.

But I had a different life now, and a new future.

I stepped out of the pro shop, and grinned at my little sister, whose shiny hair was naturally highlighted from spending hours out on the water, the same way mine had once been.

Familiar green eyes looked back at me. "We good?" she asked, biting her lip nervously.

I nodded. "We're great, Tess. Everything's great."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LAUREN

It took me a good week to decide I couldn't keep wallowing in self-pity. That I needed someplace regular to be, like a job or some other activity to get me out of the house on a regular basis. I'd gone down to the beach several times, lying to myself at first that I *hadn't* been trying to catch another glimpse of Will or his girlfriend. But when I'd come home disappointed not to see him, I realized I was wrong. That was exactly why I'd gone, and it had to end. I didn't want to add stalking to the list of things I wasn't proud of.

I still couldn't swim, even though Zane had tried his best to convince me he could teach me if I'd just give him a chance. He was fine and all. Decent enough company while Emerson spent more and more time with Lucas, but mostly, I wanted to be left alone.

Except that was a lie too.

The truth was, being alone only made things worse. The more time I spent by myself, the more resentful I became. Resentful that I'd let Will get in my head ... and nearly into my pants. That he'd made me feel things I'd never felt before.

I needed to get out.

When I pulled into the parking lot, I wondered if this was the right call. It was one thing to imagine being the kind of do-gooder who made the world a better place, it was another to actually go through with it. Maybe I wasn't cut out for a job like this, even if it was only a volunteer gig.

But the alternative was going back to my couch to stew over Will, and that held about as much appeal as the shark attacks my mother had warned me about.



If I'd been expecting someplace fancy, like Will's pool club, I was sorely mistaken. The sign said *West Beach Rec Center*, and it could have been worse, I supposed. There were no chain link fences or metal detectors, which I took as a good sign. But it was definitely more industrial than I'd pictured. A warehouse surrounded by a field of blacktop and more warehouses.

Several teens were loitering on the steps and in the parking lot, and I made sure to lock my car.

Inside, the place was less warehouse-y and more gymnasium-ish. There were kids of all ages playing video games and table tennis and sprawled on couches watching television. They traffic-jammed as they moved from one activity to another.

Utter chaos.

"Can I help you?" a rumpled-looking man asked as he came out from behind a reception desk that looked like it had been struck by a Category Five hurricane. It was cluttered with stacks of loose papers and binders overflowing with more papers, envelopes, clipboards, and folders.

The man attempted to straighten himself, tucking in the front of his short-sleeved shirt with one hand while he smoothed his comb-over with the other. He had what I hoped was a coffee stain on his tie.

"I'm Lauren Taylor. I called about the volunteer position."

His eyes narrowed, making it seem like he was having a hard time placing me, and I wondered how many people were actually clamoring to volunteer here. But then he pasted on an over-bright smile. "Oh yeah, the IT girl." He held out his hand and I shook it. His grip was warm and doughy. "Norman Wall. But you can call me Norm. I believe we spoke on the phone."

"Well, not *IT*, exactly," I explained again, because we'd already had this exact conversation. "But I do know my

way around a computer. You said you wanted someone who could teach the kids online basics?”

He led me through a doorway, into a small classroom that had several long tables. On each table there were computers that looked like they’d been teleported from the ’80s. The clunky screens were dull gray, their plastic hulls yellowed with age. The machines around me hummed loudly, and I wondered how many of them were on their last legs.

“Tell me a little about your computer background,” Norm said, pulling out a chair, and I got the distinct impression he took his job very seriously.

“Let’s see,” I started. “I was a business major at ASU, where I took several computer and technology courses.” I left out the part where the bulk of my IT experience had been gained off-campus, running my *Secret Admirer* page. Personally, I thought Norm might appreciate that little tidbit, but I doubted that info would be a big hit with the rec center’s board of directors.

I wondered if he expected more from me—experience teaching or working with kids—but before I could come up with anything else to pad my imaginary résumé, Norm was bobbing his head enthusiastically. “Sounds great. Come with me.” He led the way back to the reception desk as he began digging through a stack of paperwork. “I think you’ll fit in great here.”

And that was that.

He slid the forms toward me. “There’s just the matter of a background check, standard stuff for all our volunteers, but we’d like you to start right away.”



“I’m taking you out to celebrate!” Emerson gushed, squeezing me in one of her ginormous bear hugs. She didn’t scream in my ear, so at least I still had my hearing.

“Geez, Em, it’s not a real job or anything. It’s a volunteer gig at a youth center, for Christ’s sake.”

“Baby steps,” she explained, like I was on my way to something bigger and better, rather than hauling my sorry butt out of the house a couple of times a week. “And I don’t care if you’re ‘tired,’ I’m taking you out, so hurry up and change.”

When I realized she wasn’t going to budge, I laid out my terms. “Okay, fine, but *not* to The Dunes. Anywhere but there.”

She shrugged and clapped simultaneously, reminding me of the cheerleader I’d long suspected she’d been in high school, something she’d denied vehemently whenever I broached the subject. “I knew you’d say that. Lucas and Zane picked some honky-tonk dive bar where we can get shitty drunk and you don’t have to worry about running into *you-know-who*.” She lifted her eyebrows, making me wonder just how much she really did know.

I thought I’d been doing a pretty good job hiding my feelings, covering up everything that had happened (or almost happened) between Will and me. To be honest, I figured she’d been too *preoccupied* to notice. She’d been so wrapped up in Lucas I was pretty sure our little beachside bungalow could’ve caught fire and Emerson would’ve complained that the AC was on the fritz.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I tried to bluff.

But Em was having none of that. “Mm-hmm. I thought you were into some swim guy, but I saw the way that bartender guy cut in with you and Zane that night you were dancing at The Dunes. And the way you got all twitchy after you saw him at the beach the other day. And how neither of you can take your eyes off each other when you’re together. Something’s up with you two.”

Clearly I underestimated Emerson’s powers of observation. “Doesn’t matter,” I told her. “I don’t plan to see him again. Like ever.”

“Course it matters. People don’t act like that unless they’re hot for each other. Trust me, I’ve been hot for a few guys in my day.”

Had I really been that transparent?

“No, seriously. It doesn’t matter,” I insisted, brushing past her to go to my room so I could change. Suddenly, getting shitfaced was the best idea I’d ever heard. “He has a girlfriend.” I slammed my door, not wanting to hear Em’s response to that bombshell, or get her advice on it. I just wanted to forget all about Will.

Half an hour later I was ready, and in a *way* better frame of mind. This time I was wearing one of my own dresses, a boho-inspired sundress made of gauzy fabric that showed just the right amount of skin, which tonight was plenty. I slipped on a pair of short boots, which were the exact opposite of something I’d have worn to The Dunes, and somehow seemed like just the thing to wear to a honky-tonk.

Zane and Lucas were already waiting for us, and from the appreciative look on Zane’s face, I knew I’d picked right.

Emerson gave me the once-over. “For someone who says she doesn’t like guys gawking, your dress doesn’t leave much to the imagination.” From anyone else, that might’ve been considered a dig, but from Em, it was a full-blown compliment.

“Thanks. You look pretty smokin’, yourself.” I grinned, wondering how Zane had even noticed me while she was in the room. Emerson had the kind of long legs I coveted, and she showed them off every chance she got, like now, in her daringly short denim skirt. The cowboy boots, a throwback to her Dallas roots, were the perfect touch.

“I know,” she said, tossing her perfect platinum blonde waves over one shoulder.

“Sexy as hell, baby,” Lucas agreed, throwing a possessive arm around Emerson’s waist and planting his lips on the side of her neck.

“All right, you two. Lauren and I don’t want to watch this crap all night,” Zane protested, reaching for the door. “Let’s blow.”

Lucas didn’t release Emerson, just started hauling her toward the door while he continued to maul her neck and her ear. “Hear that, babe? Zane wants to blow. We might need to find a whole different kinda bar to take him to. Whaddaya think?” Em giggled in the circle of Lucas’s arm, and I couldn’t help the smile that found my lips.

Zane gave Lucas a playful shove as they stumbled past him through the doorway, and I realized this was exactly what I needed. A night out with friends.

Zane and Lucas continued making digs at each other all the way to the bar, which was exactly the kind of place Emerson had described—a hole-in-the-wall cowboy joint, a lot like most of the hole-in-the-wall cowboy joints back in Arizona. There was a jukebox against one wall, and someone had put some sappy Carrie Underwood song on repeat for the first fifteen minutes we were there. By the time we were having our second round, “Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)” by Big & Rich had started, and Emerson was dragging me out to the dance floor so we could show these “city boys” the way things were done.

Except, Zane wasn’t a city boy. I already knew he was Iowa born and raised. When his boots hit the floorboards, he kept up with Emerson better than I did. Before I realized what was happening, he and Emerson were spinning circles around me. Lucas didn’t bother trying to keep up with either of them, and after a few minutes, I stopped trying too.

I met Lucas at our table and he handed me another beer. “She’s something else, isn’t she?” He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

I smiled, because I knew what he meant. Em was a whirlwind, and not just on the dance floor. She’d been my best friend from the first day we’d met almost four years ago, when both of us had been out-of-state transplants at ASU. She had been as wild and outgoing as I’d been introspective and

cautious, but she'd never tried to make me more like her, and I wouldn't change a single hair on her head either.

She was the only person who knew almost all my secrets.

Everything except what had happened the night Jefferson Brandt showed up in my bedroom.

"Damn right she is," I said, turning to face him and chugging the beer in my hand. When I'd downed it, I slammed it on the table. "And if you fuck her over, I swear on a stack of Bibles, I'll hunt you down and cut your balls off."

Lucas's mouth dropped open in a stunned expression. Then his lips stretched into a wide grin as he reached out and hauled me against him. It was the strangest hug I'd ever gotten.

"You're as good a friend as she says you are," he said against the top of my head. He let me go then, and went back to watching Em. "I won't hurt her. Promise."

Satisfied that he meant what he said, I went to the bar just as another song started. This wasn't like The Dunes, where it was hard to get service ... or get noticed. The bartender spotted me right away, and eyed me in a way that made it clear there wouldn't be any delays in my orders tonight.

"I'll have a Stella," I said, and while I was waiting for him to grab my beer, I nodded at him. "I like your piercings." I pointed at the studs spaced evenly below his bottom lip.

His tongue moved to toy with one of the metal studs as he grinned at me, a look verging on a leer. I took my drink and hoped he didn't think I'd been flirting.

Zane and Emerson were back, and Zane slipped his hand around mine. "You girls play pool?"

I gave Em a quick look. "I don't know ...," I hedged.

But she was all over it. "Yes! Boys against girls!"

"That hardly seems fair. Maybe we should make things more even," Zane said with a squeeze to my hand.

“No, thanks. Lo’s on my team,” Em declared, already heading toward the one available table and scouring the racks for “the cutest stick” she could find.

I shrugged at Zane, as if the decision were out of my hands and started racking the balls. I let Zane pick out my pool cue as a consolation for not being my partner. When he saw me fumbling over the order of the balls, he used the opportunity to lean over my shoulder to rearrange them while he explained the alternating solids-and-stripes pattern. I pretended I was engrossed in his description, but all I could think about was how close he was.

Normally, this was the point I would tell a guy this wasn’t going anywhere, remind him we were *friends*, so he didn’t get the wrong idea.

Instead, I said nothing.

Maybe Zane wouldn’t be the worst person to lose my virginity to. We *were* friends. Maybe that was enough.

Emerson and I agreed to let Lucas break, and when he sank a ball on that first shot, he called dibs on stripes for the boys’ team, leaving solids for the girls. When it was my turn, I struggled to line up the blemished white ball with the shiny red one, and missed by a mile when I tried to send it across the table into the right corner pocket.

Emerson played about as badly as I did until the guys had only two striped balls to our complete set of solids still remaining on the pool table. That was when Zane ordered yet another round of drinks and Emerson gave me the signal. Apparently, we were done messing around.

“Here,” Zane offered, coming up behind me as I reached for my cue again, this time chalking it until the blue powder covered both the tip and my fingers. “Let me show you.”

I blew the residue away in a cloud of cobalt dust. “That’s okay.” I offered him a sly grin. “I got this.” I rounded the table and used my cue to point at the yellow ball. “Side pocket.”

Zane eyed me doubtfully when I called my shot as he recognized my mistake. Their orange striped ball was in the path of our yellow one.

“Lauren ...” It was obvious from the way he said my name he was patronizing me, but that’s exactly the reaction I’d wanted.

I liked that he questioned me. I liked that I was about to blow his mind.

Ignoring his half-assed attempt to warn me, I bent forward at the waist, keeping my legs straight as I concentrated on my shot. I used my hand to brace the tip of the cue as I elevated my back elbow so my aim would come down hard on the cue ball—because, yeah, Zane, I knew that “the white ball” had a name.

I held my breath and tucked my chin as I struck down on the cue ball. Just as I’d hoped, my aim was spot-on, and when the ball jumped, it cleared the boys’ striped ball and landed with a solid *thunk* against our yellow one.

Our ball shot straight toward the side of the table and dropped like a rock into the pocket I’d called. I couldn’t have contained my smile if I’d tried.

I went to work on the next ball, a far easier shot, and I sank it with barely a second glance. The next two went in just as fluidly, and by my fifth shot, I ventured a quick look up at Zane and Lucas.

Both were watching me, mouths hanging open. Emerson looked like she might explode from trying to hold back her enthusiasm.

When I missed my next shot, I whirled around and feigned innocence with a pert little shrug. “Beginner’s luck, I guess.”

“*Bullshit*,” Lucas announced, dragging out the “bull” to let us know what he really thought. “We just got hustled, Z.” He snatched his cue and lined up his next shot, only to choke, missing by a mile.



Emerson strutted up to the table next, and flashed him a mocking look over her shoulder. “Aw, that’s a shame. I guess I’ll just have to wrap things up here.” That was Em’s strong suit—clean up—which is exactly what she did.

She cleared the table of our solids *and* the eight-ball, and when she spun back around and leaned against the rail, she sighed. “Wanna play again, boys? Maybe make it interesting this time?”

I glanced at Zane. Emerson and I had pulled this stunt hundreds of times—deceived guys who thought they were unbeatable, especially by a couple of girls. It was fun to see them underestimate us, make derisive comments even, only to have us wipe the floor with them. Even better if we could earn a few bucks in the process.

Zane lifted his hands in defeat. “I know when I’m in over my head.”

“I’ll play.”

I whipped around to face the last person I expected to see tonight.

Will looked every bit as comfortable here, in this shit-kicking cowboy bar, as he had behind the counter of The Dunes or carrying a surfboard on the beach. He was dressed casually in blue jeans and a black T-shirt that accentuated the muscles of his chest and exposed the cut of his biceps. After what Zane had told me about Will’s background, about the surfing career he’d given up for Tess, it made sense he was in the shape he was. And even though he was no longer competing, I knew he still surfed.

My pulse quickened as his eyes fell on me. He dropped a hundred-dollar bill onto the green felt and Emerson snatched it up. “You’re on.” She didn’t bother to ask whether I was still interested in playing. Or even whether I was still staying or not.

I scanned the bar, hating how badly I wanted to know if *she* was here too—Tess. “What about a partner?” I asked, feeling the words stick in my throat.

Will watched me like he didn't have a care in the world. He shrugged. "Don't have one."

Something in my chest loosened, and I had to remind myself that just because she wasn't here that didn't mean she didn't exist.

Zane scooted closer, making a point of the fact that he was the one handing me my beer. Thankfully, he stopped short of peeing on me since I got the impression this was his way of marking his territory. "You sure you wanna do this?" he asked, even though I hadn't agreed to anything.

I took the beer, downing a long drink and telling myself it was normal to be nervous with that much money on the line. Except what did I care? I had a duffle full of cash that said his hundred bucks made no difference.

It was Will who made me nervous ... or mad ... or whatever the hell I was feeling right now.

"No," I muttered under my breath, taking yet another swallow. "But it won't last long," I assured him. And then I grinned, because that much was true at least. This game would be over in no time.

"I'll play with him," Lucas volunteered, and Emerson glared at her latest boy toy.

"Traitor," she accused.

Lucas wiggled his eyebrows. "Don't be mad, babe. You saw me play. Trust me, I'm doin' you a favor playing for the enemy."

Casting an appreciative smile his way, she cocked her head. "You say the sweetest things."

As much as I wanted to ask Zane to take me home, I just as badly wanted to show Will up. To wipe that smug look off his face once and for all.

"Fine. I'll play," I said, glaring at Will. "It's your money."

"Not for long," Emerson threw in, and I could practically hear her spending it already.

Zane started to help me rack the balls, but I gave him a look to let him know I didn't need his help this time; I understood the pattern just fine. Since we'd won the last game, Em and I let the guys decide who would break. Lucas decided to go first again, and like last time, he sank one ball on the first shot.

Zane stayed glued to my hip, carrying my beer wherever I went. I couldn't decide if he was trying to keep Will away with his presence or trying to charm me with his attentiveness. Unfortunately, he was failing on both accounts, managing only to come across as clingy.

Will didn't seem to mind Zane's proximity. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd swear it only made him work harder to annoy me, or Zane ... or both of us.

Being stuck in such confined quarters with Will, while having Zane buzzing around me like a bothersome gnat was irritating. I downed the last of my beer. "I'm getting another," I announced, and when Zane started to follow, I held up a hand. "I got this."

By the look on his face, you'd have thought I just kicked a baby, but I was past caring. My mood had soured, and having Zane underfoot when I went to the bar would only have made it worse.

I needed a breather.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

WILL

I thought about not going after her because I knew damn well I was the reason she was fuming right now.

But that was also *why* I was so compelled to follow her. I liked that side of her.

Was that fucked up? *Absolutely.*

But it's not like I could control what her quick temper did to me. I also couldn't help noticing the way her nipples strained against the practically see-through fabric of her dress, or the way they'd hardened the moment she'd spotted me standing there.

That was when I was convinced I wasn't alone in this ... whatever the fuck was happening between us. She might not like it, but she definitely felt something for me, same as I did for her.

Her nipples didn't get hard when that Zane kid hovered around her.

So here I was, pursuing her.

"I had no idea you'd be here tonight, you know." When she spun away from the bar to face me, her molten brown eyes flashed with fury, and I almost felt bad. She might be attracted to me, but goddamnit, I pissed her off, too.

I knew I'd fucked up that night at the pool when I'd lost control and let myself kiss her ... touch her. Hell, she'd paid me to teach her to swim and I'd almost fucked her right then and there. I should've had more self-control, and if she hadn't been so eager, I might have.

But fuck, she had been willing ... and wet ... and ...

I shifted uncomfortably, the memory making me stiff in my jeans, even now. God, even while she was glaring at me I still wanted to grab her and bend her over the bar. What did that say about me?

“Well, now you know,” she spat. “So why don’t you just ... leave?” She sagged forward against the bar at the same time the bartender handed her another drink. Apparently, she’d moved on from beer and had ordered something dark on ice. She took a long swallow.

“Lauren, I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, her eyes going all sad and soft, and for some reason that was a hell of a lot worse than having her pissed at me, because I was defenseless against sad. “I don’t even know what you’re apologizing for. I’m not the one you should say sorry to.”

Her supple lips were begging to be kissed.

“I’m not sure what—” I’d just started talking when a raspy voice called my name, or at least a version of it.

“*Billy!* Wondered when you’d be back for more.” The girl was as hot as my whiskey-drenched memory had recalled. Tonight she was wearing a black leather skirt with a matching vest. The buttons strained, revealing bare skin beneath. Her black boots were more combat than cowboy, and the hot pink feather clipped in her hair was neither.

But it was her legs I remembered most—long and tan, and silky smooth. There was no way this could end well.

Lauren was doing her level best to kill the both of us with her pointed stare, so I figured I ought to do the gentlemanly thing and introduce the two of them.

“Lauren, this is ...” I faltered, because even though I could remember what her legs felt like, I couldn’t conjure up a name to save my life.

Working up my best self-effacing expression, I silently implored the girl to help me out.

“Heidi,” the girl said, throwing me a bone, along with a look that said I owed her one—a debt she’d never collect on. She held out her pink-polished fingers to Lauren for a handshake.

“Heidi,” I finished as if she hadn’t just said it for me. “Heidi—Lauren.”

Lauren drained her glass, ignoring both of us as she turned back to the bartender. “Can I get a shot, too?”

The bartender, who seemed to be enjoying himself a little too much, asked, “Of what?”

“Don’t care. Whatever’s closest.”

I would’ve told Lauren she might wanna slow down, take it easy on the liquor, except I wasn’t her dad, as Tess had so delicately phrased it.

Heidi dropped the hand she’d been holding out, unbothered that Lauren had just brushed off her attempt to be civil. “I’ll have the same,” she said to the bartender.

“Two *whatevers* coming up,” the bartender said, like it made no difference to him. He slid two shot glasses filled with amber liquid toward the last two girls I wanted comparing notes—the one I couldn’t stop thinking about and the one I’d tried to use as a placeholder for her.

Lauren picked up her shot and threw it back without missing a beat. Within seconds, her face scrunched up as she made a fist with her other hand and leaned forward, waiting for the liquor to blaze a trail to her gut.

Heidi took a sniff of her drink and then tasted it. “Someone shoulda told you—always sip Jäger.” She said it like she was some sort of Jägermeister connoisseur—something no one should be proud of.

I scowled at the bartender. “Dude, that’s messed up.” Lauren took several deep breaths, and I started to worry she might puke or something. I put my hand beneath her chin. “You okay, Brown Eyes?”

“Oh, I get it. She gets a cute nickname, and you can’t even remember my name.” Heidi was still nursing her drink and watching me suspiciously, like anything I did was her business.

Lauren knocked my hand away, but her gaze was unfocused and slightly bleary. “I’m fine,” she said combatively, and then told the bartender, “I’ll have another.”

Heidi barked with laughter, a sound that resonated through the bar and grated on my nerves. “I like her. She’s got spunk.”

Biting back a scathing remark, I tried to reason with Lauren. “That’s probably not a good idea. Maybe I should get your friend now.” I started to wave, meaning to get the blonde girl’s attention—Emerson something-or-other. But Zane saw me instead.

Lauren’s gaze landed on me with almost laser-like precision as she tried to burn a hole right through me with that stare, and for a second I thought I might’ve been wrong—maybe she was totally fine. “Mind your own business,” she slurred, and before I could talk her out of it, she picked up her second shot and downed it.

Then, when I was about to tell her she’d had enough, she reached out and grabbed Heidi’s shot and threw the rest of that one back too. Heidi didn’t try to stop her. I was pretty sure Heidi was glad to have front-row seats to the shit show unfolding in front of her.

The third shot went down even rougher than the first and second had. Lauren had to swallow several times, and I was pretty sure not all of the swallows were Jäger.

“Do you need to go to the restroom?” I asked, almost certain where this was headed.

“Why can’t you just stay away from me? I can’t believe I ever thought I liked you. I can’t believe I let you kiss me.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Zane freeze where he was. I couldn’t say I wasn’t a little satisfied he’d just heard

that. But Lauren wasn't finished just yet, not by a long shot, and I had a feeling she'd be regretting a hell of a lot come morning.

"What are you looking at?" she asked, turning on Zane now. "I told you I was fine. I don't need you to come over here and rescue me." She waved him away. "I got this."

Zane did what any self-respecting guy would do and backed away.

I, on the other hand, wasn't going anywhere. Clearly, I was a glutton for punishment, and Lauren was more than happy to dish it out.

"You're just like all the rest of 'em—a first-class prick. I should've never ..." She swallowed again. "... trusted you."

Her friend was coming now, the tall blonde girl. Hopefully Lauren would listen to her since she wasn't listening to me.

But before her friend reached us, Lauren got up from her stool.

"I can't believe I wanted you to fu—" She swayed then, and tried to catch the bar, but when she missed it, I caught her instead.

"Lauren, come on. Let's get you someplace ..."

That's when she bent forward and lost it ... all over the floor, all over her shoes, and all over mine.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LAUREN

I leaned back against the cool metal of the stall while Emerson applied a wet paper towel compress against my cheek and forehead, the way any good girlfriend should in the aftermath of what I'd just done. "How bad was it?" I moaned. My head was still spinning as I tried to make sense of it all.

"You puked. Like, everywhere."

"Yeah, I gathered that much, Em. I meant the rest of it."

Emerson sat back on her heels and contemplated me. She reached out and swiped at my smudged mascara. "I only caught the tail end of what went on out there, but it was pretty bad." I didn't need her to elaborate, her sympathetic face said it all: I'd made a mess of everything.

"Zane?"

She let out a breath. "Pretty bent. Last I heard, when I was helping you get in here, Lucas was trying to convince him to wait for us."

I tried to recall Zane's expression when I'd been standing at the bar yelling at ... pretty much everyone. But everything blurred together in a storm cloud of accusations and regret. How in the world had I let myself get so out of control, *so wasted*?

Zane wasn't entirely blameless; he'd been the one handing me beer after beer while we played pool. But it wasn't like I hadn't accepted them. I knew what I was doing. I'd wanted to get drunk; that was my entire reason for coming out tonight—to obliterate Will from my memory. Even if only for the night.

Instead, Will had managed to crash my little pity party and ruin everything.

I groaned, burying my face in my hands while Emerson left the stall to get a fresh wad of paper towels. The ones she came back with were cold and damp and felt like heaven against my burning cheeks.

“How come you didn’t tell me?” When I looked up, her probing gaze was on me. “About Will ... and the kiss?” she asked.

I slumped even harder against the metal wall, opening my mouth. When I tried to think of the right thing to say, nothing seemed to fit. Why *hadn’t* I told her? Because the kiss meant nothing? Because I had no intention of letting it happen again? Because Will already had a girlfriend?

Yes. It was all of those things, and none all at once. I was more confused than ever when it came to Will. “I don’t know, Em. I just ... I wasn’t sure what to say.”

Emerson went perfectly still, the wad of paper towels crumpled in her hand. “Oh my God. Oh. My. God,” she repeated, her voice was filled with awe. “You *like* him.” She wasn’t asking. She was stating a fact.

I shook my head, sitting up straighter now, and the sudden shift in position sent new waves of dizziness whirling through my head.

“Don’t try to deny it. I know you. You totally do.” She gave me a weird look, seeing me in a whole new light. “I mean, I knew *he* liked you. It was so obvious. But you ... you never like anyone.”

There was a knock on the bathroom door, and I jumped. The door opened and Will’s voice was there, echoing off the bathroom tiles. “Hello?”

I shot Emerson a *pretend we’re not in here* stare, but she countered me with a *you’re crazy* look and ignored my silent plea. She got up and left the stall. “She’s doing better.” I heard her tell Will in complete disregard of my wishes.

The door to the bar opened again and I heard them both go out, still talking in low voices ... about me. I leaned my head back against the wall and thought about the mess I'd made. How had I ended up here, puking in a bathroom stall at a honky-tonk?

Then the whoosh of the door came again, and this time I didn't hear the click of Emerson's heeled boots, only heavy footsteps and I knew it must be Will.

I held my breath, feeling myself coming apart at the seams. He was out there, on the other side of the metal door now. How was I supposed to do this?

"Lauren." He wasn't asking if I was in here, or if I was okay, but just hearing him say my name, just hearing his voice ...

I felt sick all over again, and I wondered why he was even still here at all. Hadn't I done enough damage? I didn't dare glance down at his shoes to see how true that really was.

"Go away," I croaked.

"You know I can't do that," he said.

I scoffed. "Of course you can. I mean it, leave me alone."

There was a long silence.

Then, "I'm coming in."

My heart slammed against my ribs. "No!" I jumped up to stop the door when I realized I hadn't locked it after Emerson had left.

But I was too late, and it swung all the way open. I found myself face-to-mascara-streaked-face with Will.

My humiliation was complete.

I didn't have long to worry about how I'd disgraced myself, or to consider how I looked now, because the moment I was on my feet, my vision tunneled in on itself. For the briefest second, I thought I'd just gotten up too fast, and it

would pass. But before I realized what was happening, everything tilted sideways, and I was falling.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WILL

“You’re safe now.” Lauren’s silky brown hair tickled my chin as I whispered reassurances against the top of her head, and it was harder than it should have been to resist the urge to press my lips to her scalp. “I got you.” I tightened my grip on her as I kicked the bathroom door open and found myself inside the noisy bar once more.

That dick, Zane, was there, waiting on the other side of the door. He tried to get all in my face even though I was carrying Lauren. Even though he’d been too big a pussy to venture into the girls’ bathroom to see for himself how Lauren was holding up. Didn’t say much for his character if you asked me, not that anyone was asking.

But now that I’d come out carrying her, he was acting like I was violating her just by having my hands on her.

“I’ll take her from here.” He held out his arms like he seriously thought I was just going to hand her over to him. I’d already convinced Lauren’s blonde friend to give me the key to their place so I could take Lauren home. All I wanted now was to get her away from this place so I could put her to bed ... and that’s exactly what I planned to do.

I shoved past him. “No, you won’t. I’m taking her home. Feel free to call it a night.”

And that was that. No one else got in my way, not even Heidi, who’d laughed her ass off when Lauren had puked on me after reading me the riot act.

By the time I got Lauren settled in the passenger seat of my pickup, she was alert and watching me with those liquid brown eyes of hers.

“Thank you,” she whispered in a voice that was a million times less critical than the one she’d used when she’d

been shouting at me from her barstool. “For ...” She hesitated, shifting her eyes away from mine. “... back there, with Zane.”

I finished buckling her in, even though she probably could’ve done it for herself, and tried not to notice the way her nipples turned to hard buds when my chest brushed over hers. “I wondered if you were awake.”

She gave me a weak smile. “I was trying to decide which was worse, going home with you or staying there with him.”

I hid my smile, pretending to be offended. “Ouch.”

Half-heartedly, she rolled her eyes while I closed her door and hurried around to climb inside.

We were on the road before she spoke again. “I’m so embarrassed about your shoes.”

This time I didn’t bother hiding the smile. “You should be, that was disgusting.” But when I glanced her way, she didn’t look so good, leaning her forehead against the passenger side window the way she was. She looked like she might be sick again. “Hey, how you doin’ over there? You okay?” I didn’t wait for an answer. I pulled into the nearest gas station and left the engine running. “Be right back.”

When I came out, I offered her a box of soda crackers and a bottle of ginger ale. “Drink it—it’ll help settle your stomach.”

She uncapped the bottle and took a small sip, watching me suspiciously. “Why are you doing this?” She took another swallow, a bigger one this time.

Her question surprised me, but mostly because I didn’t have a quick answer for it. It wouldn’t have been that big a deal to just leave her there, and if she were anyone else I probably would have. Hell, I probably should have—Zane and Emerson would’ve made sure she made it home just as safely as I could. Honestly, from the way I felt about her, as twisted up as she made me, it would have been the safer bet.

I never knew if I wanted to avoid her like the plague or rip her damn clothes off.

I mean, sure I did. I *definitely* wanted to rip her clothes off. It was the avoiding her part I couldn't quite wrap my head around. I should be taking care of shit at home—Tess and Cam and work. I didn't have time for Lauren.

But then tonight I'd walked into the bar and Zane had given me a look that said the two of them were a done deal. That, in his mind at least, I was too late—Lauren was already his. Suddenly, just the possibility that I'd already lost my chance with her had been too much for me.

I might've gone off the rails a bit forcing myself into the pool game.

But in the moment, it hadn't mattered whether she might feel the same way about him. I'd decided to prod her, prod both of them, to see where they stood.

Now I couldn't help grinning at her, because the fact she was here, in the cab of my truck, was answer enough. "Because I have to." It was the only answer that made any sense to me.

She frowned, and I wondered why I couldn't just say what I meant. Why I couldn't stop thinking about her. I knew I wanted to figure out if there was something happening here between us, and the idea scared the shit out of me.

Maybe that was *why* I couldn't seem to say the right thing—because it mattered too damn much.

I put the truck in reverse while she nibbled on the crackers, her head sagging against the window again. When we reached the winding curves of the Coast Highway on our way back to her place, I felt her fingers close around my arm. "*Pull over,*" she gulped.

"You gonna be sick?" It was a stupid question.

"Only if I have to keep smelling this dress." Her face was screwed up in a mix of anguish and disgust. She unbuckled her seatbelt and was ripping at the thin fabric. It was the first time I realized she hadn't just gotten sick on my shoes. Her friend had cleaned her up the best she could, but it hadn't been good enough. "Do you have anything I can put

on?" she practically begged, and I had to tear my eyes away from her because she already had the dress halfway over her head.

I leaned over the back of the bench seat, searching for something, but there was just a bunch of crap piled up back there. "Here," I finally said, tugging at the hem of my shirt and dragging it over my head. "Put this on."

She didn't have to be asked twice, and even though I'd only pulled off to the side of the two-lane Coast Highway and anyone driving past could see her, she stripped out of the offending dress.

I assumed she was still drunk, because she had absolutely zero inhibitions.

And no bra.

I told myself I shouldn't look because all she had on now were a tiny pair of lace panties, but, Jesus Christ, how could I not? In the pale light coming from the faraway streetlamp, her breasts were exactly as perfect as I remembered them, and her nipples were hard and dark and I swear to God they were just begging me to touch them. I squirmed in my seat, unable, even if I'd wanted to, to *stop* staring. I had the impulse to reach around her slender waist with both hands and drag her on top of me. Of grinding myself into her. Of running my mouth everywhere over her flawless skin. Tasting her silken flesh.

She worked fast, so I did too, burning the image of her exquisite body into my mind's eye, because I planned to use that memory for as long as I could.

She shrugged into my black shirt, which hung well past her waist and covered up those delicate panties of hers. Breathing a sigh of relief, she slumped into the seat, letting her head drop back.

"Better?" I tried to laugh, even though I was in my own version of agony now.

"You have no idea."



I took the wadded-up dress and threw it on the floor so the smell wouldn't bother her, and wondered when I'd turned into such a mother hen. First Tess and now Lauren. If I wasn't careful, I'd grow a set of tits and start trying to nurse puppies or something. These goddamned girls were making me soft. A year ago I wouldn't have given two shits about whether some chick drank too much and called me a prick.

Hell, it had happened more often than not, and I'd probably just laughed it off.

But when Lauren said it, it meant something. Not because she was right, which she totally was—that part I didn't care about. I cared because *she* did, even if she said she didn't.

I wanted her to think differently of me.

I opened my mouth. I needed to tell her as much, so there'd be no more confusion.

She stopped me, her voice haggard around the edges. "I wish you wouldn't be so nice."

In the darkness of the cab I could see the outline of her features and I knew she wasn't looking at me. "Why's that?" I asked.

She rolled her head away, so she was facing the window. "Because it makes it harder." There was a tremor in her words, and she sighed. "I meant it, Will, what I said at the bar." There was a long, stretched out silence, and then she said, "I need you to just stay away from me."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LAUREN

I barely made it out of bed without throwing up again.

But when I saw the envelope sitting on my nightstand, stuffed with ten crisp one hundred dollar bills that nearly did me in.

Will had paid me back.

Will had been here ... in my bedroom. He'd left me crackers and soda.

It took several seconds sitting upright for my head, and the floor for that matter, to stop spinning.

Despite the raging headache, I remembered everything with appalling high-def clarity, starting with the part where Will had strutted in and challenged me to a game of pool. It had all gone downhill from there.

I still had no idea what possessed him to swoop in and save me the way he had, but I'd been grateful when I'd inhaled that intoxicating scent of Irish Spring and sweat and realized I was buried in his arms. "You're safe," his voice had crooned from above me. Even though *safe* wasn't the word I'd have chosen, I'd let him carry me anyway.

At least during those few minutes when I was in his arms, the world had stopped spinning.

I remembered, too, the way he'd pampered me, stopping to buy me the Saltines and ginger ale, and giving me the shirt, literally, off his back, because I couldn't stomach the smell of my own dress. The icing on the cake was that I hadn't even blinked about stripping down in front of him, something I'd never have done if I'd been thinking clearly.

At least not without the anonymity of a webcam to shield me.

I had to remind myself that despite his Boy Scout–like behavior, Will was still a no-good cheating ass, which was why I couldn't be around him anymore. The thought that last night could very well have been the last time I'd ever see him triggered my stomach acids all over again. I had to nibble on the now-stale crackers and wash them down with the nearly flat soda.

After my shower and two cups of black coffee, I stuffed the paperwork Norm had given me the day before into my purse. Today was my first day at the West Beach Rec Center, and the last thing I needed was for my new supervisor to think I was a complete flake.

Besides, better to face a bunch of kids with this pounding headache than to stay here and risk being grilled by Emerson about what she thought was going on between Will and me.



It didn't take long before I realized I was spinning my wheels. I could no more teach these kids the basics of computers on the relics we were provided than I could connect to the Internet using tin cans and string.

I looked at the ancient machines and wondered where they'd unearthed these things, or rather from which archeological dig.

Glancing out at the expectant faces staring back at me, my heart squeezed. I'd never done anything like this before, and I was surprised by how quickly I felt a sense of obligation toward these kids. They weren't like me.

I might not have been the richest kid in our Denver suburb, but I'd certainly never gone without, either. My dad was a dentist and my mom was a real estate agent. They both worked hard to provide the things we needed ... and then some.

It only took me about two seconds in my new “classroom” to understand that these kids lived a different kind of life. From a show of hands, I learned that not one of them had a computer at home. Their school had tablets, but those were strictly for use in the classroom and had limited internet access. Only two, of the eight in this class alone, had spent any substantial time on computers, and that had been at a relative’s house, where they’d mostly played online games.

I sort of expected more enthusiasm about having me here, but it also didn’t take long to figure out that most these kids weren’t super thrilled about the idea of “learning computers.” Most were just hoping to score some free Internet time.

But the way I saw it, we lived in a world ruled by technology. Mostly, these were middle schoolers, with a couple younger high schoolers. But by their age, most of their peers had regular access to PCs, laptops, and tablets. Heck, most had their own cell phones.

I pinched the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. I needed a new game plan, a way to get the kind of equipment these kids would need to get the leg up they deserved.

A boy sitting at the front, wearing a shirt several sizes too large for him and threadbare jeans stared at me through narrow slits. His name was Walker. “Do I need to call Norm or something? You don’t look so good,” Walker asked.

He wasn’t wrong. I didn’t feel so good either. Despite my third and fourth cups of coffee, and the reservoir of water I’d managed to chug, my head hadn’t stopped pounding. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t still think clearly, and sitting here looking at their apathetic faces, I’d come up with an idea.

I offered a weak laugh. “I’m fine, but I’m cutting class short today.” No one groaned or tried to convince me to stay. “But here’s the deal, I want you guys back here first thing tomorrow. We’re gonna try this again, all right?”

There were a couple grumbles that sounded suspiciously like “whatever” and “if you say so,” and I

wondered if I hadn't just lost half my class. I got the feeling these kids were automatically wary of authority figures, especially when that "authority figure" couldn't hold her shit together.

After giving Norm a not-so-farfetched excuse that I felt sick but promising to come in early the next day, I made a quick escape.

I was practically giddy by the time I got home. I snuck inside, careful to avoid drawing attention from either Zane, who might be outside since he lived right next door with Lucas, or Emerson, who might be inside, because she was, well, my roommate after all. I got in and out in a flash, leaving no evidence I'd ever been there in the first place.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the closest electronics store my phone's GPS had located, I considered my options.

This was where things got sticky.

I worried about how shady it was going to look when I walked into that big-box chain store and paid for ten laptops in cash. But I couldn't back out now. Even if it made me look suspicious, I was getting these kids their computers.

And after buying the laptops, I stopped at two other stores to get all the accessories I needed—software, cables, and even a state-of-the-art laser printer. I paid for everything with hundred dollar bills, and by the time I was finished, I'd burned through a huge chunk of my cash reserve.

That was okay though. Tomorrow would be a game changer for these kids.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WILL

I slammed the glass down on the bar, causing the poor girl in front of me to jump a mile. She stared at me for a slack-jawed second, as if trying to decide if it was even safe to reach for her drink. Then she practically threw her money down, snatched her extra-fruity-whatever-the-fuck-she'd-ordered, and skittered away without a second glance.

I wouldn't be scoring any points for charm tonight, not that I gave two fucks.

Still, it wasn't her fault—or the fault of any of the other half-dozen girls I'd chased away with my abrasive attitude. I just wasn't in the mood to put up with their shallow conversations or their obvious attempts to entice me.

This was all Lauren's fault.

If it hadn't been for Lauren, this would be just your average, ordinary Friday night. I'd charm the pants off these ladies and walk away with the tips for my efforts. Instead, if I kept it up, I'd probably owe the owner for all the broken barware.

*Stay away from me.* Lauren's words repeated through my head on an endless loop.

That wasn't how I'd planned the night to go when I'd run into her.

When I'd given her a ride home last night, I'd wanted to tell her that I wanted to start over again. Do things differently. See if we had a chance.

Then she'd stripped out of her dress. With only those lacy panties covering her ...

It had been so hard to think then, when all I could concentrate on were the things I wanted to do to her. All the

places I'd wanted to put my mouth ...

And then she'd said those words:

*Stay away from me.*

She hadn't explained why, but it didn't matter.

I had no intention of forcing myself on someone who clearly couldn't stand me.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

LAUREN

Even though he was our next-door neighbor, and Em's new boyfriend, I was surprised to find Lucas standing right outside my door when I burst out of the house the next morning. I wanted everything to go perfectly, and I'd been running over my plan again and again in my head.

"Hey ... you," I said, keeping my voice down. He was polishing—or waxing or whatever you called it—a surfboard that was perched against the side of our house. "You're up early."

I must have looked nervous when I glanced around, because Lucas grinned at me knowingly "Don't worry, Zane's at work. I just wanted to get in a few waves while Emerson was still crashed." I immediately relaxed, and he went back to buffing the long board. "Did you know she snores?"

"How could I not? Our dorm was the size of a shoebox. I had to wear earplugs our entire freshman year." I nodded toward the board. "Well, have fun with that." I was about to go when he flipped it around, and something about the board made the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I gave it a second glance, tilting my head for a better look. "Isn't that —" I started. "That sorta looks the same as Will's surfboard."

Lucas stroked it possessively. "It is ... well, was." He tapped something scrawled along the bottom left edge. "That's his autograph, right there. Billy Gabaldon."

I leaned closer, squinting so I could make out the name.

"Why do *you* have it?"

"Bought it."

Frowning, I did a double take. "Why?"



“Because ... it’s *Billy Gabaldon’s* board. Why *wouldn’t* I buy it?”

I thought about what my real question was, and tried again. “Why was he selling it?”

Lucas ran an appreciative hand over the green and yellow pattern. “I dunno. For Tess, probably.”

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled even more. There was that name again—*Tess*. I needed to get out of there.

But Lucas stopped me. “How much do you know about him? Billy, I mean?”

I blew out a breath to make it clear I was put out by this conversation. “I know he doesn’t like to be called Billy,” I said irritably. “And that he was some kind of surfer and he gave it all up for this Tess girl.”

Lucas frowned at me. “I mean, yeah, sorta. That’s about half right. He was a surfer—a really great one. There was no one like him. He got more tunnel love than anyone I ever saw.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Tunnel love? Is that some sort of euphemism I should know about?”

Lucas snorted. “Surfing. Dude could ride the inside of a wave—the tunnel—like nobody’s business. Fuckin’ awesome, if you ask me!”

I had to laugh at Lucas’s enthusiasm. No wonder he bought the board. “Got it.”

“I still can’t believe he had to give it up. Everyone was hopin’ it was only temporary. That he’d heal and be back at it, ya know?”

“Nope. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“From the accident,” he prompted. And when I just shook my head, he elaborated. “He took a header during a competition. He was riding a barrel when a huge swell came outta nowhere and slammed him into a reef. Fucked him up real bad. Massive concussion—bad enough that he had to go

to ground after that. That wipeout pretty much killed his career.”

The fact that Will had suffered an injury didn't make me any less disgusted by his decision, but at least it made some sense. No one gave up world-class competitions over a girl. But at least if he couldn't surf anymore, his ex would be an easy fallback.

“And that's when he got back with Tess?” I asked, wondering why I even cared. It had been the right call, not to get involved in their brand of fucked-up drama.

“*Got back with Tess?*” Lucas was shaking his head. “I don't know what you heard, but that's messed up. Tess isn't Billy's *girlfriend*. She's his *sister*.”

*Tess.*

Tess from the Sand and Slam. Tess from the beach.

She wasn't Will's girlfriend?

But that didn't make sense.

So, Will hadn't been cheating on her when he'd kissed me. When he'd stroked me and put his hands and lips on me ...

I put my hand against the wall to steady myself. “That can't be right.” Zane had told me ... Lucas had come back for Tess.

But had he actually said Tess was Will's girlfriend, or had he only led me to believe that was the case?

“No. It's true.” Lucas said. “And Billy didn't come home right after his accident. In fact, if their mom hadn't died, he might never have come back at all. But he did the right thing and stepped up. Been workin' his ass off to take care of Tess ever since.” He pointed to the board. “Must be in pretty bad shape if he had to sell the board though. Needed the cash, I guess.”

Suddenly everything I'd believed about Will crumbled. It was a lot to process, and I wasn't sure where to start.

Will had come back here to take care of his sister because she needed him? He'd sold Lucas his surfboard so he could support her?

Not that it mattered, really, but I still couldn't stop myself from asking. "How long ago did it happen? His mom dying?"

"'Bout a year, give or take. Maybe six months after his accident. She wasn't sick very long—happened pretty fast. Some kind of cancer. She never told anyone about it until the very end. They weren't real close or anything, but Billy probably woulda come back if he'd known. By the time she died, he'd already gone off the grid, career wise. No one could reach him in time and he missed the funeral." Lucas ran his hand through his spiky hair. "Kinda makes you wanna call your mom, doesn't it?"

I knew Lucas was just saying it, but I actually *did* want to call my mom. Will and Tess's story was tragic, and my vision blurred as I tried to imagine not being there while my mom was sick and dying.

"I gotta go," I said, waving absently and making a quick escape. I couldn't hear any more about Will or Tess or sick moms. I'd been excited when I'd gotten up that morning for the big day I had ahead of me, and hearing Will's story had put a serious damper on it.

Still, it didn't stop me from dialing my mom on my way to the rec center, just to say hi.



"Norm, come out here. You have to see this!" My heart was beating double time as I propped the front door open and called for my new supervisor. There might not be fences wrapped with razor wire, but this still wasn't the kind of neighborhood where you left your keys in your car ... or a giant box of brand-new laptops unattended for too long.

Norm rushed from his office, his face flushed and blotchy, and his eyes bulging. “What is it? Where’s the fire?”

“Hurry!” I nodded toward the parking lot. “No fire, but you won’t believe what just happened.”

*And if he had any sense, he shouldn’t.* But it didn’t stop me from praying I could pull this off. My acting skills were about to be put to the test, and if I played my part right, this performance would be Oscar-worthy.

By the time he reached me, he was sweating. I worried that if that brief burst of exercise had been such a strain, then what I was about to do might cause his heart to actually explode. It didn’t matter though. The kids needed these computers.

“Check it out,” I told him, grabbing his arm and towing him along. “I was just getting out of my car when some guy pulled into the lot and dropped these off.”

We reached my car, where I’d unloaded the box I’d meticulously packed the night before. Inside were ten laptops, loaded with the latest and greatest in hardware and software. Not only would I teach these kids the fundamentals of computers, I hoped to introduce them to skills like coding and Web developing and basic graphic design.

I wanted to turn them into full-blown cybergeeks.

Norm looked into the box and then back at me. I tried to decide if I saw any trace of suspicion, but after several long seconds, his mouth went slack. “So this guy, he just ... *dropped them off?*”

“Look!” I gasped dramatically. “There’s a note!”

He fumbled for the envelope and ripped it open. I waited while he read it, not needing to see it to know what it said:

*To Whom It May Concern:*

*I’ve recently had a run of luck and wanted to pay my good fortune forward. Please accept this donation to your organization. I hope these computers help to teach many*

*children the skills they need in this ever-changing world we live in.*

*Signed,*

*Anonymous*

I had to force myself not to mouth along with the words as Norm read it again to the staff members inside, even as he took credit for finding the box himself.

I didn't care about any of that. All I cared about was that the kids would have the computers they deserved.

It took several hours to get the laptops up and running, but I enlisted my class for help, all but the one kid who hadn't bothered to show up again this morning. Apparently I hadn't been as disappointing as I'd thought.

I walked them through the steps of unpacking the computers and booting them up, one at a time. And while we did that, I memorized each of their names. I talked Norm into giving me the passwords to the wireless routers they used at the center for their main computers, and while we waited for each computer to connect, I made different connections, getting to know more about my new students.

I knew that Walker, the boy who'd been wearing the tattered blue jeans the day before, lived with his grandmother. That's what he'd told me, almost in the same breath he'd admitted that his mom had been in jail since he was a baby and he's never known his dad. It was one of those moments when I realized that what I was doing was bigger than just teaching some kids how to point and click.

I knew that Annalisa was only thirteen, but had already lived in seven foster homes. She liked the one she was in now. They had two other foster children and another girl they'd officially adopted a couple years ago. They were good to her, she said. She even had her own bedroom. I got the feeling she hoped they would adopt her too, so she could stop moving from place to place.

I sort of wished they would too.

It was amazing to watch these kids progress in only one afternoon. At first everything I explained to them was gibberish. But after just a few hours it started to sink in. These were smart kids who'd never been given a chance. I could hardly imagine how much more I could teach them.

This was the real reason I'd left Arizona. This was how I'd use the skills I'd learned by running my web page. Now it would serve a purpose.

This, right here with these kids ... I was proud of. I finally felt like I belonged somewhere.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

LAUREN

Emerson knocked on my bedroom door, but didn't bother waiting for an answer before she peeked inside. "Lo?" she loud-whispered into the dark.

I would have played possum but it probably wouldn't have made a difference. Em had a poor grasp on the whole "boundaries" thing. Knocking was just her way of pretending to go along with social norms.

"I know you're awake. That's the fakest snore I've ever heard," she said, not even bothering to whisper this time, and I remembered that other thing, the one where Emerson could also tell when someone was trying to blow her off.

"You would know. You're the house expert on snoring."

"Dang. Kitty got claws."

I rolled onto my back and sighed. "So, I guess what you're trying to tell me is I wasn't really tired?" I said it like a question, as if Em knew me better than I knew myself.

"Not anymore," she informed me. "Only senior citizens and farmers go to bed this early, and last I checked we're not in Kansas anymore. Besides, this came for you." She held up a dress—*my boho dress*, to be precise—wrapped in clear plastic, fresh from the dry cleaner. "Will dropped it off ..." Her words faded at the end, like she was reluctant to say that last part.

I shot upright. "Is he still here?"

She shook her head. "No. He just said sorry it took so long to return, and then he bounced." She hung the dress on the back of my door, and eased down next to me, making my bed dip drastically.

I thought maybe she was waiting for me to say something, but I couldn't. I'd been waiting to see Will, hoping to run into him, and at the same time kind of hoping I wouldn't because what would I even say if I did? That I was sorry for thinking he was a big, fat jerk, and for announcing as much to everyone within earshot? That I knew now what a good guy he really was for coming home like he had to take care of his sister, even after his dreams had been crushed?

Or the real truth? That I couldn't stop thinking about him, and I wanted him to do things to me that I'd never let any other guy do before?

For just a fleeting moment, my heart had soared at the possibility that the dress had been some sort of white flag, a chance for me to call a truce between us. But I'd been wrong. He was polite, that's all. The fact that he'd left right away proved he had no interest in seeing me.

"Lauren," Em said, her hands folding around mine. "It's been two weeks. You have to stop moping around. Lucas told me what you thought ... about Will's sister."

I looked up and met her eyes, and wondered why she hadn't said anything before. "I'm not moping."

"Yeah, you are. You go to that sad-kids center all day long, and then you come back here and go straight to your room. We barely talk anymore. We never do anything. You're acting like an old woman."

Old Lauren would've defended the kids at the center, telling her they weren't "sad," they were just underprivileged. I might even have tried to convince Emerson it would do *her* some good to come down and meet them. Give back a little herself.

Instead, I grimaced because she'd hit the nail on the head with her play-by-play of my daily routine. I thought I'd done a better job hiding how pathetic I'd become, but clearly I was delusional. The rec center had become my only social life, which made *me* the sad one considering my circle of friends consisted of a bunch of elementary, middle, and high schoolers



who sat around learning the ins and outs of Google and Excel all day.

“Or a farmer,” I added with a wry grin.

“Or that.” She scowled at me. “This is *so* not funny. I’m being serious here. I get it, your feelings are hurt. Well, guess what? That’s life. Everyone goes through this shit, and everyone survives it.” She tapped the imaginary wristwatch on her arm. “I’ve given you two whole weeks, and now it’s time to get your shit together.”

I sighed, hard. “Get my shit together and do what?”

Emerson sighed too, a long, languorous sound as she stretched out on the narrow twin bed, tucking her arms behind her head. “And do *whomever* you want. Preferably someone superhot.”



Okay, so it wasn’t so much a who I wanted to do as a *what* that I finally landed on to make myself feel better.

I’d come all this way with the dream of learning to swim, but I’d scrapped the idea as soon as it became glaringly obvious that I was a *non*-swimmer.

But that was the thing; I didn’t have to be a non-swimmer. I might not be gold-medal material, but I could still do the whole swimming thing. And I didn’t need Will or Zane to make it happen.

Turns out, finding someone to give me swim lessons in Southern California wasn’t all that hard and I’d landed a new instructor within the week. She wasn’t as easy on the eyes as Will, but she was patient when I was hesitant and definitely knew her stuff. And after several lessons and a whole lotta practice, I was finally able to make it from one end of the pool to the other. No small feat for someone like me, who, in the beginning looked like I was assaulting the water rather than trying to swim in it.

One night, after my lesson ended, I decided to swing by the rec center on my way home. There was always something happening there, even if it was just a teen movie or game night.

When I got there, the kids were all gathered in the Commons watching some singing competition on TV. The Commons was perfect for parties or movie nights, with a giant flat-panel TV—definitely from this century and likely a gift from some fancy donor, judging by the run-down state of the rest of the furniture the kids were lounging on.

“Hey, Lauren!” Walker called when he saw me come in.

I nodded to him and grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the back counter while I leaned against the wall to check out a few minutes of the show they were all so engrossed in. It was one of those competitions where undiscovered singers compete for a massive payout and a huge contract with a record label—a rags-to-riches kind of gig.

Then the show cut to a commercial, and entirely different types of images filled the screen. The spot was for *Law & Order: Special Victim’s Unit*, an episode in which a girl let herself into her a dark apartment only to have a hand clamped around her mouth. I’d seen ads like these hundreds of times—a woman victimized and the special crime unit who brought the perpetrator to justice. I’ve never had a hard time watching them.

But for some reason, this time ... this episode ...

As I began shaking, it wasn’t hard to figure out why. The girl being attacked in her apartment had sparked a memory of something else. Of *someone* else.

Jefferson Brandt.

Before that night, I’d only known him as my stalker—username *yourxmanxjefferson95*. I’d had to block his account after he’d sent one too many messages about “taking our relationship to the next level,” a strict violation of the terms of agreement for *Secret Admirer*. Not to mention, super creepy.

But even then, I hadn't been concerned for my safety. I'd always taken precautions against my online world comingling with my real life ... or at least I thought I had.

Somehow, though, he'd figured out my real identity. And where I lived. Then, he'd found his way inside the tiny two-bedroom apartment Emerson and I shared off campus.

Em had gone to Dallas to visit her parents for the weekend, so I'd been alone when I'd come home to find him there, in my bedroom.

He could have passed as one of my professors—threads of gray making an appearance along his temples, inquisitive hazel eyes, rumpled khakis. But he wasn't a professor. And before I could ask who he was ... or what he wanted, he'd said, "Don't be afraid. You know me. I told you, we belong together."

My heart had lodged in my throat as I'd made the connection—this was the man behind the account I'd blocked.

*How had he found me? And if he knows, how long before others knew too?*

*Or worse. What if my parents find out what I've done?*

"You need to go," My voice had come out strangled as I'd inched toward my nightstand where I kept my pepper spray.

"Just one dance. I'll make it worth your while," he'd said. "I have money." He'd shown me then, shoving his messenger bag, which looked like it could have been filled with ungraded papers or textbooks. But it hadn't been filled with books. "Fifty thousand."

I would have expected that much cash to be ... more *substantial*.

The sum was staggering, and for a second, a tiny part of me had considered his bizarre request.

But ... no. A webcam was one thing—detached. Impersonal. What he'd asked was anything but.

Once I crossed that line, there was no *uncrossing* it.

Besides, if this guy had tracked me down, if he'd broken into my home and was offering me all this money, what were the odds all he really expected from me was a dance?

When I didn't respond to his request, he shot to his feet, blocking my path to the nightstand as he dropped his bag. It landed with a heavy thud. "Please," he'd said again, begging now. "Just this one night. Just this one dance."

"I don't want your money." I'd tried to sound firm. "I want you to get the hell out of here." I kicked his bag for emphasis.

But that had been a mistake.

He'd charged me, shoving me against the bedroom wall. Pinning me. His hot breath had come in shallow bursts.

My heart exploded, and I remembered thinking *this is how I'll die*. At the hands of this lunatic.

"I won't hurt you," he said, even as his body smothered mine. "If you need more, I can get it." His words were ragged.

I screamed then, refusing to wait for what came next.

It had been enough. Startled by the sound, I'd taken the opportunity to twist away from him. I lunged for the top drawer of my nightstand, and before I could find out if he could stop me, I turned the canister of pepper spray on him.

"Take your bag and leave. And if you ever, *ever* come back, I'm going to the police."

Apparently, he'd taken my threat seriously.

After he was gone, I'd barricaded myself inside. I'd been so shaken I hadn't been able to sleep. So shaken I'd taken down my *Secret Admirer* page.

The bag was out there when I'd opened my door the next morning. I wondered how no one wandered by and discovered it. How all that cash hadn't been stolen.

But the entire fifty thousand was there. I knew because I'd been curious, my hands shaking as I'd counted it. And inside, at the bottom of the rolled bills, was a note, just like the one I'd left for Norm at the rec center, only much, much shorter.

*Keep it*, the note had read.

That's it, just: *Keep it*.

I'd been tempted, because yeah, why look a gift horse in the mouth? But the answer was simple: Because it hadn't been mine.

So, I'd decided to track the guy down and give it back. I didn't want any ties with him.

Except the universe had laughed in my face over that one. No good deed, and all that crap.

I never had the chance to return the fat wads of cash to their rightful owner, because that owner—the guy who'd been in my bedroom begging—*begging!*—for just one dance, for me to maybe just spend a few minutes with him—had killed himself. Right after he'd left my place.

Maybe that had been his plan all along, to give me the money, then take his own life. I'll never know, just as I'll never know if I could've stopped him. Helped him.

Maybe if I'd have said yes ...

Maybe if I'd given him the dance ... chatted with him ... given him a few minutes of my time ...

Suddenly, the cookie I'd just eaten was finding its way back up my throat. I raced for the restroom, and when I got there, I clung to the toilet until I'd retched up every last bite I'd eaten for the past twenty-four hours. Maybe for the past month. When I was finished, I didn't go back out to the Commons, I went to my computer classroom instead, so I could have a few minutes alone.

I leaned my cheek against one of the cheap Formica tabletops as I waited for the memories to pass.

I'd learned about Jefferson Brandt's suicide while I was trying to track him down online. That was how I discovered he had a family. How I'd gotten the address where I anonymously dropped off the money that was rightfully theirs.

The man who'd been watching me online for almost a year, the man who'd sneaked into my home and offered me a bag of cash to dance for him had been married. Had children. And now they had the money he'd tried to give me.

I probably should have gone to the police to let them know he'd broken into my apartment the night he'd killed himself, but I'd been too afraid. Or maybe it was too embarrassed. I couldn't imagine walking into the police station and explaining our relationship, or lack thereof.

Instead, I'd bought a gun, which had been far easier than it should have been. And even though I didn't carry it on me, I always kept pepper spray in my purse now because I lived in fear.

When Em had come home, she'd known something was off, but I never told her about the guy in our apartment—I didn't want to scare her too. But I checked in my closet and under the bed whenever I came home, and over my shoulder every time we were out. I worried that my secret identity would be discovered by someone else—my parents would be devastated if they ever found out about Lola Bang.

Em and I had moved to California less than two weeks later, but I still carried the burden of Jefferson Brandt's death with me .

When I heard the knock on the classroom door, my head popped up, because how poetic would that be ... if the cops showed up now, asking questions about my involvement in Jefferson Brandt's death?

But of course, it wasn't the cops.

The classroom door had a big glass opening and I could see the girl on the other side. All over again, my stomach clenched.

“Come in,” I croaked. This night had just flipped from miserable to downright bizarre in the blink of an eye.

What was Tess doing here? Tess, who I’d once thought was Will’s girlfriend, and who he definitely loved, but not in the way I’d believed.

She came inside hesitantly, and I realized how young she looked up close. It was hard to fathom I could have mistaken the two of them for a couple, even from a distance.

Even more jarring, were the similarities I could see now that I was looking for them. She and Will shared the same emerald-colored eyes and the same messy brown waves. Although hers was long and sun-streaked and pulled back into an untamed bun.

“I was hoping I could get your help with something.” She chewed her bottom lip, which was full, her cheeks bright pink like she’d just come in from spending the day at the beach.

I got up from the hard plastic seat I’d been in. “What is it?”

She came inside all the way and fidgeted with one of the woven leather bracelets she wore around both wrists. “You teach the computer classes, right?”

I nodded.

“I was hoping maybe you could help me make a résumé.” Her clear eyes did that thing her brother’s did and seemed to see directly into me. “I need to get a job.”

I thought of what Lucas had said, about Will having to sell his surfboard because he’d needed the money. I guess he needed his sister to pitch in too.

“Sure,” I said, feeling like an even bigger jerk for the fact that I’d sort of hated her before. “When do you need it?”

She perked up. “The sooner the better,” she explained. “Do you have time now?”

“Now?”

“Well, yeah. I was kinda hoping to start job hunting tomorrow, and we don’t have a printer at home. Or a decent computer. We will, eventually. But for now ...” she trailed off, giving me a hopeful look that I recognized all too well. It was the kind of look Emerson used when she was asking me to do something she knew I didn’t want to do. “I could really use your help.”

I mean, what kind of person would I have been if I’d turned her down? Besides, what else did I have on my busy social calendar?

I pulled out a chair in front of one of the laptops. “No time like the present. How ’bout we just dive in?” I dragged another of the plastic chairs next to mine and patted it.

Tess squealed, reminding me again she was younger than I’d first thought as she rounded the table and plopped down beside me. I probably should’ve told her that at her age she wouldn’t need a résumé; that mostly she’d be leaving a lot of blank spots where previous employment history was supposed to go. But now that she was here, I wanted to find out more about her ... and, if I was being totally honest, about Will too.

I started to open a file on the computer, but then decided against it and passed the laptop to her. If I was going to do this, I might as well teach her something in the process. “Go ahead,” I told her. “Let’s start with your name.”

She was a fast learner. She followed my instructions timidly at first, but the longer we worked, the more confident she grew, and by the time we were finished, she had a pretty decent grasp of how to build a résumé.

Tess was an open book. If I asked a question, she answered with more information than I needed. It was extra endearing.

I’d learned that her birthday wasn’t until November, and she was only fifteen, but she didn’t plan to let that deter her in her job hunt. She was convinced she’d have no trouble landing something, because not only could she pass for older—which was true—but surfers were notoriously unreliable.



The local pro shops just needed warm bodies they could count on.

She told me she'd spent her entire life in West Beach, and that this fall, she'd be starting her sophomore year at West Beach High. She got decent enough grades, but she hated math and anything math related. And more than anything in the entire world she loved to surf—a talent she shared with her brother.

That last part she volunteered. I didn't even have to ask.

Tess talked about her mom too. She explained that her mom had died of pancreatic cancer. She felt cheated because there hadn't been enough time to say good-bye. She was dry-eyed when she explained what it had been like, watching her mom go from energetic and full of life, to withered and incapacitated in the space of a heartbeat.

But I wasn't. I wanted to hug her. To cry for her ... and for Will.

She mentioned her brother several times, and each time she did I meant to tell her I knew him. But I couldn't quite figure out a way to explain who he was to me. I couldn't call him my friend, because he wasn't. Not really. Yet he was more than just an acquaintance.

The longer we talked, the more impossible it became to confess.

“Will's gonna take care of me.” Tess was just saving her file so she could print the copies she would take with her tomorrow when she got started on her job hunt. She planned to hit the surf shops, but also coffee stands and burger joints, any place with hours flexible enough that she could still find time to surf and go to school. In that order. “He passed the state lifeguard exams, which is a really big deal. He has a big interview this week. If he gets the job, everything'll be okay.”

I hadn't thought about Will's future before. I knew about his surfing career, and I wondered if he would have

come back here if he hadn't gotten injured. If taking care of Tess would've been enough.

I was starting to learn that life couldn't always be planned.

I frowned, as I considered what Tess had said. "Everything, like what?"

Tess lowered her head and shrugged. "It's all just been ... hard on him ..." She looked down, toying with her bracelets again. "I know he's trying—working a lot and taking classes to meet the requirements. So getting this would be a huge break for him. For us." For the first time, I got the definite feeling she was holding back. But I didn't want to push her.

"Well," I said, grinning at her. "You ready to print some of these up so you can get that McJob of yours?"

The mischievous smile of hers was back. "I'd be happy at some crap-ass food cart serving stale donuts and lukewarm coffee. As long as they pay me on time, what do I care, right?"

I laughed as I got up to grab her résumés off the printer, but I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said, about how everything would be okay if only Will got that job.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LAUREN

I had a tough time sleeping that night. I couldn't stop thinking about how I'd ended up here. All my life I'd wanted to live near the ocean, but now I couldn't help wondering whether I was chasing my dreams, or if I was really just running from my past.

I'd sort of stumbled into the webcam thing, and even though I'd never planned to do it long term or anything, I also hadn't meant for it to end so abruptly. Or under such disastrous circumstances.

But maybe that's the way it was meant to be.

Sudden. And final.

Maybe it was all for the best.

I'd always just gone along with what was expected of me, doing what everyone else thought I should do, letting my parents make most of my major decisions. Even being a business major had been their doing. The stripcam was the only thing I'd ever really done on my own, and I'd kept that on the down low.

But I'd never given much thought to what would come next.

Maybe the rec center was what I'd needed to jump-start my life. To push me in this new direction. Here. In California. Not the sand and surf, but these kids who needed someone to teach them to navigate the world of computers and online technology.

So I could help someone other than myself. Give them the advantages they deserved.

So I could start living for me.

That's where my head was as I sat in the computer lab late the next afternoon, when Tess came bursting in like a tornado. She bounced up and down as her bright eyes sparkled and her blonde-streaked hair whipped wildly behind her. "Lauren! I did it! *We* did it!"

She didn't even have to explain, her enthusiasm said it all. "A job? You got a job already?" I shot up from my chair.

She was nodding when she reached me, and I threw my arms around her. "Yay!" I squeezed her hard and then drew back. "So? Which crap-ass food cart will I be getting my stale donuts from?"

Her eyes went wide and she bit her bottom lip excitedly. "No food cart—it's the pro shop! Big Chuck hired me, and I'll be selling Sex Wax and boards and wetsuits. It's right up my alley! Plus, he totally gets that I need surf time."

I had no idea who Big Chuck was, but I giggled, because how could I not? "I assume Sex Wax is a surf thing ..."

Tess rolled her eyes at me. "You totally aren't from around here, are you?"

"Nope."

She lifted her eyebrows, like she'd just come up with the most brilliant plan ever. "You should let me teach you to surf. You know, to repay you for your help!"

I'd spent plenty of time watching the surfers off the shore, and tried to imagine myself on a surfboard. Me, someone who could barely manage to stay afloat in the motionless water of the kiddie pool. "I think I'll take a hard pass. Let's chalk that up to *it's the thought that counts* and call us even."

Tess flashed me her winning smile, and something shifted inside me. This was definitely right. Being here. Doing this. "Okay, fine," she conceded. "Maybe not surfing, but I'll figure out a way to repay you."



Even though it was still light out when I was leaving the rec center that evening, most of the parking lots in the area had cleared out. It made it easier to hear the argument spilling out from the narrow alleyway between the large community center building and the warehouse next door.

Whatever the disagreement was about, it was heated and my skin prickled involuntarily. I glanced around, making sure the coast was clear before beelining toward my car.

Even before that night at my apartment with Jefferson Brandt, my knee-jerk reaction had always been to mind my own business. If I'd had earbuds, I would have plugged those in my ears in an effort *not* to get involved.

Except today ...

Today something made me slow down. Something familiar about the raised voices. Or at least one of them.

Because that's when I realized it was Tess's voice I was hearing.

I couldn't see her ... couldn't see either of them for that matter since they were in the alley, but Tess was arguing with a man, and he definitely wasn't Will. And Tess, I reminded myself, was only fifteen.

Taking a deep breath and reaching into my purse for my can of pepper spray. I eased closer, telling myself I only wanted to make sure Tess wasn't in any trouble. I hated shit like this. I wasn't a badass, but I also couldn't let some asshole—dangerous or not—push a teenage girl around.

When I heard the quiver in Tess's voice, my fingers tightened around the pepper spray. "I promise it won't be long. I got a job. I'll get you some money as soon as I can."

As much as I wanted to peek around the corner, I stayed where I was. My back was pressed against the wall so I could listen to what was happening.

“Look, Tessie,” a gravelly voice said back to her, much quieter than it had been just seconds ago. His greasy tone made me cringe. “You know I don’t wanna be like this. I love you and your brother, but he’s not cooperating.” He paused to take a breath and the sound was so audible it made me think the mere act of speaking was an effort for this guy. I wondered what kind of trouble Will had gotten them into, and why this guy thought Tess would have whatever money he was after. “I just don’t think you have it in you to get me the kinda dough I need, and I don’t have time to wait for you to fill your piggy bank.”

Tess was quiet, and I started to think the guy might be doing something more than just talking. I took a breath and clutched the small canister of pepper spray, ready to pounce, when I heard her again. “We both know this wasn’t how Mom wanted things, Uncle Cam.”

*Uncle?* I let my head fall back, but only because Tess didn’t sound scared of the piece of shit. In fact, she sounded furious. “She would have *wanted* me to live with Will, and more than that, she would’ve hated that you’re blackmailing us like this.”

A slight pause. “Your mom was too weak, and too sick, to know what she wanted.”

There was a smacking sound—a hard slap. But I’d seen Tess deck her brother at the Sand and Slam, and I didn’t, for a second, think *her uncle* had just hit *her*. If I had, I’d have come out guns—or rather, pepper spray—blazing.

A slow smile found my lips, even as I stayed ready to jump to Tess’s rescue.

It wasn’t necessary though, because the next thing I heard were footsteps running in the opposite direction, followed by Tess’s Uncle Cam shouting, “You ungrateful brat! I shoulda had Social Services pick you up when I had the chance! In fact, maybe it’s time I placed that call!” Even when the footsteps had vanished, and he was probably just talking to himself, he kept on ranting, “Maybe they’d be interested in the fact that your no-good brother’s trying to keep you from your

rightful guardian! If you and your brother can't come up with the cash I need, I think I should call that social worker of yours and let the state find a proper home for you!"

I wasn't sure if Tess had heard that last part or not, but I sure had, and my gut twisted. So that's why Will worked so much. Why he'd sold his surfboard and who knew what else. Why Tess needed a résumé. Their uncle was blackmailing them, threatening to call Social Services and have her taken away from Will if they didn't pay him off.

*What a sleazeball.*

If he was half as disgusting as he sounded, I doubted the state would even take him seriously, but that wasn't the point. The very fact he was willing to make the threat turned my stomach, and I understood why Tess had run off so suddenly. Why would anyone want to be around someone as vile as him?

I thought about bolting for my car then, but for reasons I couldn't explain, I stayed right where I was.

When he came around the corner, he practically knocked me over. He was far less intimidating than he'd sounded. He was older than I'd imagined, although no less greasy, and tired in a way that said he'd lived a really *rough* life. The word junkie popped into my head and I doubted I was that far off.

"Scuse me," he grumbled, barely glancing up, and not seeming to care that I'd probably heard at least part of his conversation with his niece.

He brushed past me, and I was hit by the wall of his sour breath. Wincing, I opened my mouth, not sure what I planned to say, but I couldn't just ignore the heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach. My heart was hammering way too hard.

"Hey! I need to talk to you," I managed, which probably wasn't the smoothest thing I could've said, but at least it got him to stop.

"Yeah? What do *you* want?" He narrowed his eyes like he was trying to decide if I was worth his time. Like he had

better and more important places to be, which we both knew couldn't possibly be true.

“I need you to answer a couple of questions for me.”

“What's in it for me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Depends,” I told him, realizing I had the upper hand with a guy like him—someone who was so desperate for money he'd stoop low enough to blackmail his own family, “on how honest your answers are.”

He licked the front of his gross, decayed teeth, and the heaviness in my stomach turned to nausea. He bobbed his head to the side, which I took to be a *go ahead* shrug.

“Okay, first, why would Social Services care if you called them on Will and Tess?” I raised my brows as I crossed my arms over my chest to let him know I expected the full answer. “And what I mean is, what leverage do you have over them?”

His narrowed eyes became mere slits at the mention of Will and Tess, but he recovered quickly, giving me another shrug-nod, as if it made no difference to him whether he answered truthfully or not. He was obviously practiced at trivializations and duplicity. “I'm the girl's guardian. It's all legal and whatnot. My sister signed papers before she died that said I would be in charge of Tess.” He gave me a smug look at the end of his explanation.

The look I returned was pointed. “And the money? The cash you're trying to extort from them? What's that all about?”

“What can I say? I need cash, and they can get it for me. I don't care how, long as they do.” He scowled at me then. “I answered your questions, and I ain't got nothin' in return. We're done here.” He pivoted on his heel and started to walk away.

“Wait!” I called after him, holding up a crisp hundred-dollar bill I'd pulled from my purse. “Just one more question.”

He eyeballed the bill, and then gave me that narrow-eyed gaze again, but he wasn't about to turn down the money



and he came sniffing back. Before he could snatch it from my hand, I withdrew it, just out of his reach.

“One more,” he insisted, never taking his eyes off the bill.

“If they give you the money you’ve been asking for, then what are you offering them in return?”

His small decayed teeth made a slow appearance as his lips parted in a sickly smile. He reached up and tugged the hundred from my fingers. “Then, when I decide it’s enough, I’ll sign the papers giving Billy guardianship.”

I closed my eyes. This wasn’t the kind of guy who’d ever be finished with them. He’d continue extorting them until Tess reached her eighteenth birthday and they didn’t need his signature any more, and hopefully he wouldn’t have bankrupted them in the process.

He turned to leave again, and this time when I stopped him, it wasn’t with a hundred-dollar bill. “What would you say if *I* made you a deal?”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

LAUREN

After my run-in with Tess's uncle Camden, I felt like I needed a long, hot shower to strip away any residual skeeze he might have left on me. He wasn't exactly the kindly uncle who bounced you on his knee at family gatherings. I suspected he was more the type who would sell his own mother for a nickel given half a chance.

So when I came home, I must have somehow missed that Will's truck was parked on the street out front, because when I came rushing through the front door, he was there, standing square in the middle of my living room.

I stopped short, my pulse picking up as I took an involuntary step back toward the door, caught off-guard to find someone other than Em in our place. My mind actually tried to convince me I'd walked into the wrong house by mistake.

But I was definitely in the right place. Our stuff was cluttered around the living room—the blanket my mom had crocheted for me was spread out on the couch, the panda Em had slept with since she was a little girl was sitting right on top of it, and a laundry basket filled with both of our clothes was by the front door, waiting to be taken to the Laundromat.

Our stuff, our place.

“Um ... where's Em?”

He frowned at me. “She's not here.”

Confused, I blinked. “Then ... what are you ...?”

“She let me in. Before she left.”

There was something off about his tone, but I couldn't quite read it. He wasn't thrilled to see me, that much was obvious. But it was more than that. I'd done something to cause the black look he was pinning me with.

I just didn't know what yet.

I'd only just left the rec center, so there was no way he knew about his uncle or our newly forged arrangement. Camden might be repulsive but he wasn't *that* stupid, was he?

Was Will mad that I'd helped Tess with her résumé? Was that what this was all about?

"Why?" I asked, not sure whether I wanted clarification about my offense, or his reason for being here.

"I told you," Will stated flatly. "I do maintenance around here. Your roommate called the owner about a flickering light—said it was driving her crazy. Landlord asked me to come check it out."

I nodded. Sort of. And swallowed uncomfortably. Something was definitely off.

I glanced uneasily at his toolbox, at the tools he'd strewn around on the drop cloth on the floor. But Will remained silent, his eyes never leaving me.

Part of me wanted to flee, to escape that probing scowl of his. But the other part ... God, I'd wanted to see him for so long that even having him shooting daggers at me was almost liberating.

And then I saw it.

My chest tightened as my eyes darted from Will to my duffle bag. It was lying on the floor behind Will's toolbox. He was still watching me, and I realized that's what he'd been waiting for: For me to realize I'd been caught.

"What the fuck?" I whispered, the world tilting beneath me.

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Lauren." He took two long strides and caught my arms. He spoke from between clenched teeth, his voice low, like he was worried someone might be listening, the way I always was. "I was gonna ask you the same thing—*what the fuck?* What's with all the cash ... and why the fuck do you have a gun?" His grip tightened, his intense eyes drilling into mine.

I meant to lie, to tell him it wasn't mine, but instead I whispered, "It's not what you think."

A muscle twitched at the corner of his jaw. "And what do I think?"

His hands on my arms were distracting. I wanted to be indignant, outraged, but goose bumps peppering my skin double-crossed me. I wanted nothing more than for Will to touch me more. To kiss me. To make me melt and gasp and beg for mercy.

His brow wrinkled and his thumbs twitched, setting my skin on fire beneath his touch. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

I opened my mouth, trying to formulate an answer, something to explain what had happened, to explain it in a way that wouldn't make him look at me differently. But I didn't have to.

His mouth, when it descended on mine, was predatory. And I responded. It was as if he'd set a torch to me. I'd spent too many weeks thinking about this ... about him.

I clung to his shoulders, my fingers fisting the back of his shirt. He was my lifeline and I refused to let go of him.

This was exactly what I'd wanted. Having Will against me was like holding onto solid steel. I molded to him, becoming soft and pliable. Trembling when his tongue sought mine.

"I missed you so much," he whispered roughly against my lips. "I thought about doing this every single second of every single day." He caught a handful of my hair and tangled his fingers through it, claiming it. "God, you taste ... I don't know what you taste, but I can't get you out of my head." His voice shivered through me, rough and raw, and the second his meaning sunk in, I stopped tormenting myself over what I *should* do.

I was done being the unattainable girl. I wanted more. I wanted everything.

I drew him away from the living room, leading him to my bedroom. Our feet were clumsy as we stumbled over each other, a tangle of limbs. I'd never been surer of anything in my life, not even the day I left Arizona behind once and for all. I wanted Will, and I knew this was right.

The decision made, I kicked off my shoes and slammed the door behind us. I stepped back from Will and reached for the bottom of my shirt. Gradually, deliberately, the way I would have if I'd been hiding my identity in front of my webcam, I teased the hem up.

He groaned and started to reach for me.

"No. Just watch," I insisted as I revealed my belly in a slow, provocative display. I unzipped my shorts and dipped my finger into the lace front of my panties, giving him a peek at what was buried inside.

It was freeing to strip in front of a real person, for someone who knew me. For someone I was about to give myself to.

Will's hooded eyes glazed over. "You are sexy as fuck," he growled, no longer content to wait by the door. Not content to watch. He caught me in his arms just as I'd tossed my shorts on top of my T-shirt.

I was quivering, his male scent and the strength of him against my bare skin making me shudder. I let him lift me and carry me the rest of the way. We were still kissing as we fell on my way-too-narrow twin bed and he landed on top of me, taking up all the space. I wrapped my legs around him.

"I have a condom," I said breathlessly, reaching for my nightstand, because even though I was still a virgin, Emerson thought if she gave me enough condoms, eventually I'd be forced to use them. So, I got them for birthdays, Christmas, and even obscure holidays like Flag Day. The first one I pulled out was glow-in-the-dark and had a jack-o'-lantern on the wrapper—a Halloween gift.

Will grinned. "I got this." He reached for his wallet, and I wasn't sure if I should be offended that he was ready at

the drop of a hat, or relieved not to have to dig through Em's assortment of novelty rubbers.

I took the packet from him. "Let me." I'd never done this before, any of it, but I couldn't get over the rush of power it gave me. I thought I'd be uncertain or shaky, but I reached for his jeans, undoing his zipper, and when Will whispered, "Jesus, Lauren ..." it only fueled my confidence.

I pushed him backward, down on the pillow and climbed on top of him, straddling his hips. My hair spilled around his face as I kissed him. I pulled his shirt up, my hand probing the ridges of his muscled stomach, and my fingertips slipped just beneath his waistband. I grew bolder, and my fingers roved lower until they closed around the silky skin of his erection.

I'd replayed our swimming pool encounter so many times that I hadn't expected to be surprised. Yet, I didn't remember him being so ... *large*.

But he was so much more than I'd remembered.

*What if he didn't fit? Was that a thing?*

But the idea of stopping ... again ... was unthinkable. And unlike my swimming lesson, Will didn't seem inclined to fire me this time. Instead, his kisses grew deeper, more intense, as he spurred me on, banishing any doubts I had.

Then he gripped my hips, and together we rolled over until he was on top of me. He braced himself with one hand, reached behind his head and grabbed his collar, pulling his shirt off. I stared at his wide chest, at his amazingly cut abs, and at the broad, beautiful muscles of his shoulders, until eventually, I found his eyes.

"I want you," I gasped.

Will's jeans were gone in a second, with his briefs right behind. I would have taken my own bra off, but I didn't have to because Will reached behind me, and with a well-practiced flick of his fingers, it was unclasped—a fun party trick. And then his hands were beneath the front of it, cupping my breasts hungrily as he slipped the lacy fabric out of his way. When his

mouth fell to the hard tip of my nipple, I could sense his urgency.

I gasped again, my entire body shivering. His tongue against my skin was like nothing I'd ever known, and I arched upward, desperate to feel him. "*Will ... Will ... Will,*" I murmured.

Will yanked my panties down, doing away with the last of my clothing. I'd meant to put the condom on him, but when he reached for the wrapper, it was buried inside my clenched fist.

Everything was hazy, except for Will.

His hands were on me, his lips too, and everywhere they touched, I was fevered. When his fingers disappeared between my legs, I parted them willingly. And when he shifted so he was between them too, I could feel the tension coming off him in waves. I wanted to tell him it was okay, that this was right, but my voice was caught behind a thick knot of desire in my throat.

His fingers explored me, first one, and then another, and it was like lightning jolting through me, in the most exquisite way. They were slick and white hot, and instead of retreating, I strained toward them. I needed to be closer. To follow that sensation.

I clawed for his hips while need pulsed through me, knowing he was the only thing that could fill that ache.

Will changed positions so he was poised directly above me, and I felt the tip of him, that rock-hard tip, touch me. Slip just inside of me.

*It was too big.*

But the thought was fleeting, gone as Will stilled, every muscle in his body remaining perfectly rigid as he gazed down at me. He was so amazingly perfect.

*Now, now, now,* I wanted to cry out, but I couldn't. So I pressed my fingertips into his shoulders, and he thrust the rest of the way inside me.

There was a brief surge of anguish, and I squeezed my eyes against it.

Will's entire body went rigid. "Son of a bitch," he muttered, his forehead dropping heavily to mine.

But the pain had passed by then, and the most incredible swell of urgency consumed me. I put my hands on either side of his face and rained small kisses all over his lips and chin and nose, as I rocked forward, needing him. Needing him. *Needing*.

The look on his face twisted into tortured ecstasy as Will, no longer able to stop himself, withdrew and thrust again.

"Oh my God," I uttered. I reached lower now, grasping his hips as I slowly began to mimic his rhythm, until we were moving in sync. I locked my legs around his, and his fingers laced through mine while his lips traced my cheeks, my neck, my mouth. Inside of me, the sensation was building, and even though I'd never done this before, I knew what I was so impatient for. I kept searching for it, letting Will show me the way.

When I reached that crest, I squeezed my eyes closed again, but this time not in pain. This time it was because my entire world exploded in the most amazing, most shattering way. I gasped and clutched Will, while he stilled protectively around me, letting me cling to him while it was his turn to rain gentle kisses over *my* forehead and cheeks, as he whispered how beautiful I was.

And when my body finally relaxed, and my breathing evened out, Will took one final thrust. When he collapsed against me, his breath was warm against my cheek.

"Dammit, Lauren, why didn't you tell me you were a virgin?"

A small, satisfied smile pulled at my lips. "That's the worst pillow talk ever."

"Considering what I just learned about you, it's the *best* pillow talk you've ever had." He rolled onto his side,



propping himself on one elbow and staring down at me. He reached out and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear.

Sighing, I asked. “Would it have mattered?”

“It might have. Hell, I don’t know.” He pulled me closer, tucking me against him. I couldn’t help noticing how perfectly we fit together. “Probably not, but you could’ve at least warned me.”

I wiggled a little, my hip rubbing right against his thighs, and I could feel him getting hard all over again. “That was sort of the point. I didn’t want you to change your mind.”

He drew his hips away, just the barest amount. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Stop. I’m fine. It was ...” I leaned up so my lips could reach his neck, and I nipped at him playfully. “It was fucking awesome.”

His laugh rumbled against me. “Now *that’s* some kickass pillow talk.” He bent his head so I could reach him, and he kissed me again.

My lips felt raw, but I parted them, and our tongues met. I doubted I could ever get tired of this ... of Will. He tasted like every fantasy I’d ever had, felt like heaven. I could hardly believe I’d waited so long to do this. Or that it had taken me so long to find someone like Will to do it with.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” I sighed, our breaths lingering together.

“Really?” He laughed. “Because the last time I saw you, you told me to stay the hell away from you. I sorta took you seriously.”

I felt like such a jerk. How many times had I rerun that night over in my head? The way I’d drunkenly shouted at him in the bar ... right before I’d thrown up and had to be carried out—by Will, no less. Then, I’d told him the exact same thing again in his truck. No wonder he’d taken me seriously. He had no idea that Lucas had set me straight about Tess.

“Things changed,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t have to explain that I’d thought he had a girlfriend. I slipped my hand to his waist, letting my fingers explore more leisurely this time. He hardened immediately beneath my touch.

“I’m glad they did,” he said, his mouth meeting mine.

On my nightstand, his phone vibrated, and he groaned. I released him so he could stretch over the top of me to check it, and when he gave me an apologetic look I knew I wasn’t going to like what he had to say. “I’m sorry. I have to get home. I don’t have time to explain everything, but I live with my little sister.”

I sat up too. “Is everything okay?”

He leaned down again, and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I’m sure it’s fine.” His brow wrinkled, as he tried to decide how to explain. “Just a family dispute. She’s upset, is all.”

I hadn’t gotten the chance to tell him I’d already met Tess, and that I knew what an asshole their uncle was—there’d be plenty of time for that later. But I could only imagine Tess was still upset over her altercation with the jerk.

While Will tugged on his jeans and pulled his t-shirt over his head, I admired the view. I didn’t bother covering myself, and when he looked my way, he grimaced. “Fuck.” He ran a finger beneath my chin. “You are so fucking beautiful, you know that?”

I smiled because he wasn’t really asking me. And then he planted a decisive kiss on my mouth. “If I don’t get outta here now, I’ll never go. Just promise we can do this again ... like, a lot. And swear you won’t tell me to stay away from you again.”

“Pinkie swear,” I told him, but instead of wrapping his finger around mine, he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and set my lips on fire one last time.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

LAUREN

My head was still reeling when I finally got out of bed to grab a midnight snack. I was tender, but it was a good tender, the kind that kept the memory of Will with me. Not that I could have so easily forgotten him, especially with his musky scent clinging to every inch of me.

I kept replaying every touch and kiss and stroke in my head, and I couldn't wait for the chance to do it all again.

But when I reached the living room and spotted my duffle bag still sitting right next to Will's toolbox, I realized there was so much we'd left unsaid.

"Crap." I hauled the bag out of the way even though there was little to no chance Emerson was coming home any time soon. How was I going to explain this to him? Maybe I wouldn't have to. Maybe Will would forget all about the money and the gun.

Or maybe, I thought grinning wickedly, I could find a way to distract him if he brought it up again.

Just then, my phone chimed with a text message, and I forgot all about illicit money and secret duffle bags as I lunged for it, hoping the message was from Will.

*Still thinking about tonight, the message read. Round two tomorrow?*

I was beaming when I responded back, *And rounds three and four?*

*You're the boss*, he answered, and when I closed out of my messages, I could hardly believe this was my life. The idea of repeat performances had my toes curling already. If all guys could do what Will had done to me tonight, I understood why Emerson had been pushing me so hard to cash in my V card.

I was about to put my phone down when I saw the missed voicemail from Norm at the West Beach Rec Center. He'd called several hours ago, sometime between my run-in with Will's uncle in the parking lot and my run-in with Will in my bedroom. I put it on speaker while I smeared cream cheese on a bagel.

But as I listened, my appetite vanished.

"Hey, Lauren. We ran your background check through the local police department, and we just got a call back about it—something about an incident in Tempe. Anyway, I gave the officer who contacted me your number, and just thought you should know to expect a call from him."

A boulder settled over my chest, crushing me.

An incident. In Tempe.

It was exactly what I'd been dreading, ever since I'd run away. The reason I'd never told Emerson about that night. Why I kept a gun hidden in a duffle bag and looked over my shoulder everywhere I went.

Someone must have finally made the connection that Jefferson Brandt had come to see me the night he'd killed himself. Must know about the fifty thousand dollars, and what he'd wanted me to do for it.

Must know I was Lola Bang.

What if they thought I had something to do with his death? Would my friends and family believe my story? Would they know I was innocent?

My legs crumpled and I wilted into one of the kitchen chairs. I buried my face in my hands. This was all wrong. This was supposed to be my escape from everything that had happened that night. My chance to start again.

I guess that wasn't the way things worked; there were no clean slates.

And now, it seemed the police knew where to find me. This changed everything, whether I liked it to or not.

Just as I'd gotten settled. Figured out my purpose for coming here.

Sorted things out with Will.

*Will ...*

This wasn't the time to be selfish. Who knew how much longer until the police showed up, and the last thing I wanted was to have them—or Social Services—nosing into Tess and Will's situation.

I couldn't do that to them. I had to be smart. I had to think of what was best for them.

That meant leaving.

Knowing I was doing the right thing helped to calm me. Survival mode kicked in, and by the time I was finished packing and putting the finishing touches on what would need to be taken care of, I ran my hand over my ponytail and blew out a breath.

*Everything would be fine,* I assured myself, and somehow, I believed it.

Kicking the duffel bag under Emerson's bed, I dropped a note on her pillow and locked the door behind me. Then I disappeared into the cab that was waiting outside.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

WILL

It took me way too long at the courthouse, getting all the paperwork squared away, and it was hard not taking out my phone every thirty seconds to check it. Something that was so out of character for me.

I was the asshole who did one-night stands.

It was official, one night with Lauren and she'd turned me into a thirteen-year-old boy. When I finally looked, it was tough not to feel bent that she hadn't bothered to text me once during the entire day.

I'd have to make her suffer, just a little. Maybe even get her to beg.

Fuck! Just imagining Lauren begging for mercy was making me hard, and then I was the one suffering. I shifted. It was damn near impossible to think of anything but her full breasts and the way she'd whimpered my name as she finally let go.

Last night had been the best night of my life, hands down. I almost couldn't wrap my brain around the fact Lauren had been a virgin, and I probably shouldn't feel like such a goddamned conqueror who'd planted my flag on some mountain. But fuck if I didn't. For whatever reason, she'd decided to give her virginity up to me, and I damn sure wouldn't give her the chance to regret that choice.

From the first time I'd laid eyes on her, I'd never wanted someone so badly. I wasn't used to being the pursuer. I'd always been the one making a quick getaway before whatever poor girl I'd been sweet-talking just hours earlier finally came to the realization that all she'd been to me was another notch. I'd always been the one dodging tearful phone calls and stalker-y texts.

But now that I finally had Lauren, I had no intention of fucking it up.

The whole gun thing still bugged me. I mean, who the hell keeps a gym bag full of hundred-dollar bills and a gun hidden in their ceiling?

People with something to hide, that's who.

Still. I didn't care what her secrets were, as long as she let me help her keep them. As far as I was concerned, she was mine now. And that meant if she was in some sort of trouble, I planned to do everything in my power to protect her.

My attorney came out of the clerk's office and handed me a file. "It's official," she said, looking from me to Tess, and back to me again. "You now have sole legal custody of Teresa Christine Gabaldon."

"Tess," Tess corrected automatically, but her eyes were brimming with tears as she looked up at me. "So does this mean he can't hurt us anymore? No more threats?"

"I told you to trust me; I was taking care of it."

Tess squealed and threw herself at me.

"Thank you," I mouthed to Amanda Connors, the attorney I'd hired to handle my custody case when Camden turned down my final offer—the money I'd made selling my surfboard and everything else I had that was worth a shit, in exchange for signing the custody papers.

I'd taken the cash earmarked for Cam and hired Amanda instead. There had been some risk that the court would swing in our uncle's favor once and for all, but I'd had enough of Cam's blackmail—and I knew Tess had too. It had been time to take that chance for Tess's sake. I couldn't let Cam hold this over our heads forever.

Amanda raised one dark brow and gave me a look I recognized all too well—the one that said we should take our celebration someplace private.

If this were any other time, I might have considered her offer. She was fine as hell, especially with the whole lusty

lawyer vibe she was giving off. But right now, all I could think about was dropping Tess safely at home so I could get back to Lauren. Drag her ass to bed. I didn't even care that I sounded like some sort of Neanderthal. If I'd owned a club, I might have considered using it.

I pretended not to grasp Amanda's meaningful look, and without letting go of Tess, I extended my hand to my lawyer, making it clear we were on a handshake-only basis. "I can't thank you enough."

Tess finally released me. "You're a life saver!" she gushed, reaching out for her turn to shake Amanda's hand. She was completely clueless about the disappointed look being directed my way.

As we left the courthouse, I dropped my arm around Tess's shoulder. "*Lifesaver*, huh? Painting in on a bit thick, don't you think? I always figured if worst came to worst, you'd be able to hold your own."

Tess looked up at me and frowned. "I wasn't talking about me, dumbass. I meant that if I had to live with Uncle Camden I would have smothered him in his sleep." Her eyebrows ticked up. "Your sexy lady attorney *literally* saved his life."

I laughed, even harder because I'd been wrong about Tess not picking up on Amanda's suggestive glances and her take-me stares. "Jesus Christ, I gotta stop thinking of you as eleven. You notice everything, don't you?"

"You mean like the fact you've been moping around for the past few weeks like someone ran over your dog?"

Grimacing, I nodded. "Yeah, like that."

We reached the truck and I unlocked her door. "All I know for sure is, whoever she is, you two must've worked things out, because you've been halfway decent all day. Feel free to thank her for me."

Tess climbed up inside the truck.

"And what makes you so sure I'm not in a good mood because of the news we just got?" I asked.



She reached for the door handle. “Nope. It’s a girl,” she shot back. And right before she slammed the door closed, she said, “And she must be somethin’ else because you’re what we like to call ‘in love,’ my friend.”

Muttering to myself as I walked around to the driver’s side, I climbed in beside her. I couldn’t believe how transparent I was, or how close to home Tess had hit with her assessment of my recent behavior.

Wasn’t it too soon to be in love? Sure, I couldn’t stop thinking about Lauren and the things I wanted to do to her, and I definitely wanted to take care of her—every protective instinct I possessed had kicked into overdrive the moment I’d unzipped that duffel bag of hers.

But love?

“I’m not in love,” I protested as I started the engine. “And I’m not your friend either.” I grinned then, just a little, as I flashed her a wry look. “In fact, I’m pretty sure these papers here sort of make me your father, which means I can officially ground you now.”

Tess reached over and slugged me in the arm. “Never gonna happen. But keep it up and you’ll have to sleep with one eye open.”



I felt like kind of a douche showing up with an armload of flowers like this. When I’d stopped at the flower stand, the lady started drilling me with all kinds of questions about what kind of flowers my girl liked best, and the thing was ... I had no fucking clue. So I bought a bouquet of each, ten in all, each wrapped in this plastic cellophane crap.

But now that I was standing here, the gesture seemed less thoughtful and more like something a nervous sixteen-year-old would do on his first date, which was exactly how I felt. My palms were sweating, my legs were restless, and I couldn’t find the courage to even knock on the door.

If this was what love was all about, then why on earth would anyone sign up willingly?

This blew.

After I gave myself a brief pep talk, during which I reminded myself I'd faced some of the fiercest waves known to man on my surfboard, and that girls were constantly giving me both their numbers and their panties, I finally rapped my knuckles against the weathered wooden door.

When Lauren's blonde roommate answered and her eyes dropped to the armload of flowers I was wielding, I felt as exposed as if I'd been standing there completely undressed. "Will?" she frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"I mean, I just ... I thought you knew ..." She shifted nervously and gave me a look that made me feel like I'd missed something major. "Lauren's gone."

"Gone? But that's her car."

"She left me a note ... and the car," she explained, still doing that wince thing. "But she was gone when I got here this morning."

"Did she say where? Or when she was coming back?"

She shook her head. "I found this." She held up the remnants of a broken phone, which I assumed was supposed to be Lauren's. "And from the note she left me, I got the feeling she isn't planning to come back."

"I don't understand." I dropped the flowers in a heap. But suddenly I *did* understand. This was why she hadn't texted or called me. "Why would she do this?"

She opened the door wider then. "Come inside, I think it's time we have a talk."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

LAUREN

I stared out the window at the fields, lush and green now that summer had descended on the Rockies. Even though it was July, there were still veins of snow visible in the high, far-off peaks. It was like staring at the most vivid portrait, and I wondered how I'd never noticed the breathtaking views before. I'd spent so much of my life wanting to be someplace else, to live some other life, that I'd somehow forgotten to appreciate the one right under my nose.

Not anymore though. Now, my parents' mountain cabin, and this stunning scenery from the enormous windows, was exactly what I needed. Being here gave me what I needed: time. Time to plot my next step. And maybe, given enough time, I might even get over Will.

My eyes burned, and I wrapped my arms even tighter around myself as I tried to shove the memories of him away. I couldn't even think of him without my insides shredding. Did I really believe I'd wake up one day and my feelings would just ... what, evaporate?

I was delusional if I thought that would happen.

I'd been stupid in the first place, letting myself get attached. Letting him burrow into my heart. I'd known better.

I didn't deserve that kind of happiness.

And now what I needed was to put some time and distance between myself and that night Jefferson Brandt had dropped his bag of cash on my doorstep, otherwise I'd forever be looking over my shoulder, wondering when my past would catch up with me.

Not that I'd let Will in on purpose. I wasn't even sure how he'd managed it ... how he'd gotten to me. He hadn't

exactly swept me off my feet or anything. But here he was, making me ache for a life I wasn't worthy of.

I jumped when I felt warm fingers curl around my arms from behind. "Are you sure you'll be okay if I go?"

I turned to face my mother, smiling at my own edginess because who else would it have been all the way out here? The cabin wasn't necessarily remote, but it was far enough from civilization that it didn't even have a real address.

My mom's sleek black hair was pulled away from her face, and her sharp-eyed gaze landed on me. *You're not fooling anyone*, that look accused. It was the same way she'd been watching me ever since she'd picked me up from the airport just over two weeks ago, no questions asked.

I knew she wanted me to tell her not to go now, but I wouldn't. She'd already stayed for too long, and what I needed now was to be alone. Besides, my dad was probably going crazy without her. I wasn't sure they'd ever been apart for more than a couple of nights, let alone two entire weeks.

But she was my mom, and every time I'd told her to go, she'd insisted on staying just a little longer. If I wanted to, it wouldn't take much to talk her into staying now too.

"I'll be fine." And when she didn't look convinced, I added, "I promise."

She sighed, her eyes, and everything about her, softening. She had the kind of looks that made it hard for people to guess how old she was. I couldn't count the number of times we'd been mistaken as friends, although never as sisters since you had to search to see the resemblance between us. "I wish you'd just tell me what happened. It'll eat you up if you keep it bottled inside. Don't let whatever it is make you bitter, *mi hija*."

My eyes stung. "You haven't called me that since I was a little girl."

She pressed her soft hand to my cheek and held my gaze. "I never should have stopped. I can no more turn my

back on my past than you can on yours. It's our histories that define us, make us into the people we become."

I hoped that wasn't true.

"What if you've done things you're not proud of? What if your past is painful and you wish you'd done things differently?"

"That's how you know you're human. Sometimes those are the things that define us most." She smiled. "*Especially* those."

The tears pooled now. If my mother was right, and our pasts really were what defined us, then I was in serious trouble. I didn't imagine that an ex-Internet stripper who hadn't bothered to help a man who was on the brink of ending his life was someone anyone should be proud of. Maybe this was all one giant karmic bitch-slap. The universe's way of doling out exactly what I deserved. Giving me a taste of something—or rather, *someone*—as wonderful as Will, only to rip him away from me.

But it was better this way. This way Will and Tess could stay together. This way my past didn't put them at risk.

"I never told you why I didn't want you near the water." My mother's voice was pensive now.

"I had my theories," I admitted. "It couldn't have been easy when your family came from Cuba."

She shook her head. "That's partly true. I always thought it was my job to protect you. But now ... now, I think it was myself I was protecting all that time. I was too afraid of losing you to let you learn to swim." Sighing, she settled onto the sofa, her eyes roving over the view as she said, "I was only seven when my family decided to flee Cuba. My father found us passage on a boat with many other families. We sold everything we owned to pay our way. Because I was so young, I didn't realize how dangerous the journey would be, or that, more likely, we would be intercepted by the Coast Guard and sent back to Cuba as defectors. To my brother and me, it was simply an adventure."

“I didn’t know you have a brother.”

She blinked hard as she continued to stare out the window. “I don’t. Not anymore. The journey should have taken less than a week. Or so my parents told us. But something must have gone wrong, because I knew how to count and it was dark far more times than it should have been. We were packed into the boat with very few provisions. My father tried to keep our family together ... to keep us safe, as much as possible. But at some point, people started to fall ill. Dysentery, my father—who was a doctor—told us. Without clean water or proper medications, it wasn’t long before people in our boat were throwing the dead overboard.”

My chest ached. How had I never known this about her before? “But you made it.”

“Some of us did,” my mom explained. “My brother—Roberto—he got sick too. By then, getting sick, even if it wasn’t dysentery, was cause for panic. Half the people on our boat had died, and the other half were terrified of dying.” Her chin trembled as her eyes met mine. “They didn’t even give him a chance. My parents tried to stop them, but the others ... they ...” She squeezed her eyes shut, and tears slid down her cheeks. “They threw him overboard. He wasn’t even dead yet, but he was too weak to swim when they threw him into the ocean. My mother tried to go after him, but my father stopped her.”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen my mom cry before—I tried to remember if I had. But she was sobbing now, and I wondered why she’d never told me her story before. I pulled her close and wrapped my arms around her, waiting silently while she grieved for her long-dead brother. “I’m sorry ... I’m so sorry,” I repeated over and over, and for the first time ever, I finally understood why my mother hated the water. Why she’d done her best to frighten me. To keep me away from it. I wished she’d told me sooner. I still might have wanted to swim, but at least I would have respected how painful it was for her.

I handed her the box of tissues I’d been carrying around the house with me.

When she finally quieted, she straightened her shoulders. “It was a long, *long* time ago. I haven’t spoken about Roberto in years, but I think about him every time I look at you.” She stroked my cheek again. “You have his eyes.”

I smiled. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you where I was going,” I said. “It’s just ... I was just ...” Why was it so hard to explain?

My mom patted my knee. “You wanted to follow your own path. I get it. Believe me, I get it.” She inhaled deeply. “I swore I would never do to you the things my parents did to me, and yet, that’s exactly what I did when I convinced you to go to college in Arizona.”

“What do you mean?”

My mom sniffed, but her eyes were sparkling. “I mean ... my parents weren’t exactly thrilled about your father.”

“Why? What’s wrong with dad?” It was hard to imagine anyone not liking my father. Even growing up, whenever I was mad at my parents because they refused to see things my way, it was almost always my mom I argued with. My dad ... it was impossible not to like him.

“Nothing. Except he’s not Cuban, in case you hadn’t noticed. And he’s a dentist to boot. When my father left Cuba, he was a doctor—*a real doctor*,” she added with a nostalgic smile. “But when we moved here, he had to drive taxis just to make ends meet. I think my parents always expected me to marry a nice Hispanic boy and give them nice Hispanic grandbabies. When I met your father and told them I was moving to Colorado to be with him ...” She laughed. “You’d have thought I had announced I was moving to the moon to become a Martian.”

“But you did it anyway?”

“Of course I did. It was my life, not theirs.” She met my gaze meaningfully, and I knew what she was telling me. It was my life, and it was time for me to make the decisions that were right for me. “Eventually they came around. And when you were born, do you know what your Nana said to me?” I

shook my head and she pressed her hand to my cheek. “She told me she was glad I’d married your father because he’d given us you.”

Now I was the one who was crying, and my mom passed the box of tissues back to me. “I wish I could’ve known her better.” My voice cracked as I blotted my eyes.

“Me too, *mi hija*. Me too.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

LAUREN

It was getting dark by the time my mom finally left, and I wandered into the kitchen to force myself to eat, which was one of my mom's conditions—I wasn't allowed to starve myself. And just to be sure I held up my end, she'd left me a giant pot of paella, heavy on the prawns, along with enough lasagna to choke a horse. I guess she thought I was planning to dig in and stay for the winter.

Neither alternative was particularly appetizing at the moment, which said more about my state of mind than about my mom's cooking, so instead I popped a couple slices of bread in the toaster. While I waited, I glanced down at the faraway lake and watched the moon's reflection hover on the surface of the dark water. Even though it was summer, it was cooler up here, high in the Rockies, than it had been on the California coast, so I pulled my sweater tighter around myself as the night temperatures dipped.

When I heard the knocking at the front door, my pulse leapt, and I had to remind myself that even though the cabin was isolated, there were still neighbors who lived along the long road my parents had eponymously dubbed Taylor Street.

Still, just because there were neighbors, I knew better than to take chances, and I glanced to where my mother had left the loaded shotgun propped against the wall, right next to the coat rack—a friendly little reminder that meant: “Hi, welcome to our humble abode, but try to fuck with me and I won't hesitate to blow your brains out.”

A little less sweet than one of those cross-stitch plaques that read: *Home Sweet Home*.

I felt better knowing the gun was within arm's reach as I crept to the door. It was probably just my mom anyway. She

was always forgetting things and had to go back for them. Road trips always took twice as long with her.

Opening the door, I was prepared to give her a hard time when my pulse slipped into overdrive. Whatever accusation I'd meant for my mother escaped on a gasp as I stood there, shaking my head, because this was wrong on so many levels.

I'd come here to escape, to get away from everything—*everyone*. To make a clean break.

But the truth came crashing down on me ... you can never truly escape your past. The proof was standing in front of me, looking completely disheveled, his bloodshot eyes pinning me to the ground where I stood.

“You didn't think I would let you go that easily, did you?” Will's voice scraped, low and rusty as if he hadn't used it in days.

My airway narrowed as my fingers flew to my neck.

“Invite me in.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Long seconds passed. Finally, I managed, “Will,” but I sounded just as raw as he had.

“I mean it, Lauren. I've come all this way for you, and I want you to tell me to come in. You need to hear me out.”

I opened my mouth to tell him no, but the anguish in his eyes and the hurt laced through his words forced me to step back instead. “How—how did you find me?” My hands shook as I closed the door behind him. I suddenly wished there was something that could guard my heart as efficiently as the shotgun could protect the cabin.

My first thought, when I turned to face him, was that he looked like hell. He rubbed his hand over stubble that probably hadn't been shaved in days, and his clothes were rumpled like he'd been sleeping in them. His hair, which always had that sexy just-rolled-out-of-bed look, now stuck out in every direction, as if he had no use for mirrors.

But not one of those things mattered. As disheveled as he was, I still wanted to dig my fingers through his hair, to feel his tongue against mine, to breathe him in and wrap myself around him. To feel him pulsing inside me.

I took a step back because I had no business thinking of him that way.

But for every pace I took, he took one toward me, and his stride was longer. It wasn't long before he closed the distance I was trying to put between us.

"I met your dad. Nice guy," Will announced.

My mouth had gone bone dry. "He wouldn't just tell you where I was. He doesn't even know you."

"But he knows your roommate. Emerson called to let him know I was coming."

I would have asked why no one bothered to warn me, but I already knew the answer. Even if I hadn't smashed my cell phone to pieces, part of the cabin's appeal, at least from my parents' perspective, had always been disconnecting from all things electronic. *Translation: No cell reception.*

"So he just gave you directions so you could ambush me? That doesn't sound like something my dad would do." I took another step back and smacked into the wall behind me.

I was trapped, and suddenly Will was there too, standing directly in front of me.

He flattened one palm against the pine wall beside my head, and he leaned in close. Just his nearness made my skin tingle. "He's a reasonable guy, your dad, and after we talked a while, he understood why I needed to see you so badly. Plus, I'm pretty sure Emerson put in a few good words for me."

I could feel the blood rushing past my ears. Will's presence—his piercing green eyes, his broad shoulders, not to mention whatever pheromones he was putting off—was wreaking havoc on me, and making me second guess my every move.

“You shouldn’t have come.” I’d meant to sound confident, but it was unconvincing, and even I didn’t buy it. I couldn’t think clearly. I needed to get away from him, so I tried to duck beneath his arm.

But Will caught me, and once he was touching me, my senses were humming. Even through my sweater, his grip on my arm made me shiver. My body was as traitorous as Em turned out to be.

“Please,” Will rasped. “I don’t know everything, just what Emerson told me, but give me a chance. Talk to me. Let me help you figure this out.” He leaned his forehead against mine, and I didn’t stop him. I doubt I could have if I’d tried. There was something in his plea, something that made him seem somehow *broken*, and his undoing shattered me too.

Without thinking, I reached up and pressed my palm against his cheek. “Will, don’t make me say it. You’d never understand.”

He caught my wrist, and set my skin on fire. My eyes jerked to his. “Try me,” he whispered roughly. “All I’m asking is that you try me.”

I swallowed, wondering how I’d ever find the right words. With Em it had been easy. She’d never cared about my *Secret Admirer* page. Even though I hadn’t told her about that night, it wasn’t because I was afraid she’d judge me. But with Will, there was no way he wouldn’t. And what if, after I bared myself to him—really exposed the true me—he couldn’t stand to be around me? Couldn’t stomach me anymore? I wasn’t sure I could live with that. It was easier to run away.

But was it really? His touch seared my skin until that was all I could think about.

Will was here ... Will was here ... *Will was here.*

“Emerson showed me the note you left her,” Will explained. “And the money you told her to give to my uncle. I don’t understand. Why did you leave money for my uncle, Lauren?”

I wilted. He deserved this much at least. “Because of Tess. I met her at the rec center ... where I volunteer.” I watched his expression shift, morphing from confusion as he told me he knew about my instructions for the money, to something in the neighborhood of clarity.

He smiled wryly. “Yeah. She and I have talked a lot while you were gone. I told her about you ... about us. So it was strange to find out she already knew you, and that you were part of the reason she has her new job.” His eyes narrowed on me. “But I still don’t get it; how did you even know about our uncle?”

I continued, my throat aching as I realized I should have told him all this in the first place. “I overheard him—your uncle—threatening Tess one day when she was leaving. He told her he would send a social worker to your place and have her taken away from you if she didn’t get him more money.” I winced, because then his expression shifted again, this time going dark.

“That piece of shit was threatening my sister? I’ll kill the bastard!”

I reached up and ran my thumb across the twitching muscle of his jaw. And then I couldn’t resist, I let my fingers stroke the thick stubble along his chin. “Probably not the best plan. Then Tess’ll have no one.” The last thing I wanted was for Will to get into trouble.

He let out a shallow breath and frowned, looking torn. I knew this had to be tough for him. “You’re right,” he finally conceded, capturing my hand in his. “But your plan was just as bad. Guys like Cam don’t just take the cash and disappear.” His lips pressed into a hard line. “They’re like leeches. They latch on until they bleed you dry. He would have dragged this on until Tess turned eighteen.”

I bit my lip. “What do you mean, *would have*?”

“I mean, he no longer has anything to hold over us. You should have come to me instead of trying to handle him yourself; I’d never let anything happen to Tess. And I would never have forgiven myself if Cam had done something to

you.” He rubbed his hand over his face. “It doesn’t matter now. The paperwork’s final, and I’ve got legal custody of Tess. Cam can’t fuck with us anymore.”

“Will, that’s amazing! Tess must be beside herself.” I was so excited I forgot all about keeping Will at a distance, and I threw my arms around his neck. And when I pulled back, those intense, green eyes of his pierced right through me. And beneath me, I felt what he’d been reining in—every ounce of his potency ... his longing ... and his need—all bunched up and tense beneath me, just waiting to be unleashed.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

WILL

I caught Lauren as she threw herself at me, and even though I knew she meant to congratulate me about Tess, that's not what the embrace turned into. Once she was in my arms, once I could feel her body against mine, I could no longer resist her.

I forgot all about my dickhead uncle and the nightmare I'd gone through searching for Lauren. Her friend had helped me up to a point, but if she'd known where Lauren had run off to, she'd stayed tight lipped about it. The best she'd offered was to make introductions between me and Lauren's old man. It had been up to me to convince the guy I was worthy of his only daughter.

He'd made me work for it too. Grilled me about my life, my goals, and my intentions. Made me think long and hard about what kind of man I wanted to be.

Through the entire process, one thing never wavered—I needed Lauren.

And now that I was here, all I could concentrate on was the way she felt against me, and all the things I intended to do to her.

When I opened my mouth, all the speeches I'd been planning, about how reckless her behavior had been, about how I'd been out of my mind with worry when I'd realized she'd up and bolted, and everything else I'd come up with during the long drive from California to Colorado, flew out the window. "These were the worst fucking weeks of my life," I confessed in a rush.

I thought she might try to defend herself or explain her actions. Instead, I felt her lips, hot against my neck. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so, *so* sorry."

And just hearing her voice and feeling her touch, but mostly her touch, everything inside me unwound. I crushed her to me and shoved her against the wall all in one swift motion. I kicked her legs apart, my knees keeping them pinned even though she wasn't trying to stop me. "I don't want to be without you again. Do you understand? Ever."

She watched me with those coffee-colored eyes of hers, nodding, while her lips parted in a slow smile. She was so damn soft and smelled so fucking amazing. I buried my hands in her hair and she leaned back, letting her head fall against the wall.

I told myself *I* was the one in control, and I swore I'd go slow this time—not like last time when everything had been urgent, rushed. But even as I tried to convince myself, I wondered if I'd ever really be in control again. She was in my head, making a complete, fucking mess of me.

When I felt her hips tilting to meet mine, I nearly lost myself. Groaning, I settled my mouth over hers and reached beneath her, lifting her all the way off the floor. I knew she could feel how hard I was, and I smiled around her breathless gasp as I carried her from the wall, settling her onto the rug in front of the sofa.

She was mine. *She was fucking mine.*

I hovered over her, mesmerized by the way she looked up at me with those incredibly liquid brown eyes of hers. My breath caught when her fingers slipped beneath my shirt, wandering over my skin. She pushed it over my head, then planted sizzling kisses along my chest, nipping with her teeth in all the right places.

Suddenly, there were too many clothes between us, and I stripped her of her sweater, her thin top, her jeans. Her bra was tiny and lacy, and she gave me a meaningful grin as she unclasped the front of it, releasing those luscious breasts of hers. I wanted to ravage her, but I forced myself to slow down.

"I've thought about this for so long," I told her. Her skin was sweet like honey and the peak of her nipple stiffened



as my tongue caressed it. She moaned beneath me, making me even harder. I wasn't sure how long I could hold out.

When she reached for my jeans, I stopped her. "No way. You first."

She gave me a puzzled look, and then, as I began to move lower, still glancing up to watch her, her eyes went wide with understanding.

Goddamn, this girl would be the death of me.

Her barely-there panties were all that stood in my way as I lowered myself between her thighs. She was trembling as I held her hips.

"Relax." I let my thumbs find their way beneath the lace, moving slowly toward the center of her. "Trust me."

"I do," she said, sounding so much bolder than I thought she would as she reached down and wiggle out of her underwear.

My fingers parted her then, gliding inside of her. She was slippery and hot, and feeling her like that nearly pushed me to the brink. I lowered my head and my tongue slipped between her slick folds as I lost myself in the taste of her.

I couldn't get enough of her. I barely felt her fingers in my hair, barely heard as she whimpered my name or pressed her hips higher and harder as she begged me to finish what I'd started.

She came quickly. And when she thrust against me in one last, urgent shudder, I gripped her, waiting until she'd finished trembling.

"Will," she gasped, and it was a plea as she tore at me insistently, pulling me up and groping my jeans in an effort to get them off.

I kissed her demandingly, settling between her legs. I didn't want to scare her with how goddamned badly I needed her. I was desperate to be inside her.

My mind went blank as I thrust, and then thrust again and again and again. Burying myself as deep as I could get.

Telling myself to go slow even as I plunged into her harder and faster and harder again. It was over within minutes, and ended with me panting her name, “Lauren,” and shuddering above her.

I collapsed in a satisfied heap on top of her, my arms clamped around her. When I felt her stroking my back, I rolled to the side and took her with me, not willing to ever let her go.

She pressed her hand over my heart, and I heard myself say, “I never thought I’d be the kind of guy who would fall in love.” I dropped my hand on hers, hoping I hadn’t just terrified her with my confession.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

LAUREN

*Love.*

It was the last thing I'd expected from Will.

"Will ..." I started to say, pulling a blanket from the couch and draping it over us.

"Let me go first." He turned onto his side so he was facing me. He had that look, the one he always seemed to have, like he was hiding a smile just behind that serious expression. He bit his bottom lip. "I've been a jackass pretty much my entire life, Lauren. I've treated girls like they were disposable, never getting attached, never giving any of them a reason to want to *be* attached to me. Then one day you walked in, and ..." He frowned, and somehow he even managed to make that look like he was hiding a smile as he shook his head. "I can't explain it, but you *refused* to put up with my shit, and fuck if that didn't turn me on."

I reached between us and ran a hand lazily over his bare stomach, doubting I'd ever get tired of admiring this view. "I came here to get over you, you know."

He caught my hand, narrowing his eyes. "I thought you came here because you were in some kind of trouble. Emerson seemed to think this had something to do with unpaid parking tickets in Tempe."

He had my complete attention now. "Parking tickets?"

"Yeah. That's what she said. Parking tickets." He lifted an eyebrow as he studied me and I got the sense he knew I'd thought it was something else. "When your volunteer paperwork was run, it came back that you had somewhere in the neighborhood of five hundred bucks in unpaid parking violations from campus security." He smirked. "Apparently, they take that shit pretty seriously."

There was no way I could hide my relief as Will ran his hand absently along my arm. “Emerson said she wired the money to the college the day after you left, so you’re no longer a fugitive. Everything’s been taken care of. And for the record, I don’t want you to get over me. I want you to come back to California and move in with me. Anything you *think* is going to come up—any problems you’ve been running from—we can figure them out together. I mean it, Lauren, I love you.”

“What about Tess?”

“Tess is a big girl. Plus, I told her where I was going, and we talked about this.” He looked down at me. “She likes you.” He grinned, and my pulse sped up. “Says you’ve got mad computer skills.”

If only things were that simple. There was a reason I was so good with computers. “I’ve done some shitty things, Will.”

“So have I. Didn’t you hear that part where I was an asshole?”

“Not like that.” I wasn’t sure I could do this, but if I didn’t tell him now I never would. Besides, it was the right thing to do. “I ...” I sat up and went for it. “I used to strip.”

Will sat up too. “As in, dancing?”

I shook my head. “No, not really. As in, on the Internet. I ran an online peepshow. A *Secret Admirer* page. I did it to be anonymous—I almost never showed my face. But I did take off my clothes for money.”

When he didn’t say anything, just kept watching me, I shrugged, feeling more self-conscious than ever. “I told you it was shitty.”

He scowled. “Seriously? You thought *that* would scare me away?” He reached for me, and I swear I could feel the relief coming off him as he gathered me in his arms. “Jesus, Lauren, you actually scared me for a second.”

“That doesn’t freak you out? Not even a little?”

“I mean, I hate the idea of other guys looking at you. And I’d really rather you not do it anymore. But it’s definitely not the worst thing I’ve ever heard. If I’m being totally honest ...” He drew away so I could see his face, and he plastered a kiss on my neck, and then lower, on my collarbone. When he reached my breast, his tongue orbited my nipple in lazy circles. By the time he lifted his head again, my stomach was tied in knots. “It’s actually sorta fucking hot.” He tackled me, drawing me beneath him.

“Is that where you got all that money?” His voice was somewhere between a growl and a groan.

“Yeah. Most of it ...”

He lifted his head, and my body rebelled against having his lips that far from me. “But ...?”

I shrugged, still not sure how to explain Jefferson Brandt, and how he’d shown up in my house. I didn’t want to have this conversation. Not now. And Will seemed more than happy to oblige as he dove back down to kiss my breasts. His tongue traced the dark halo around my nipple as he worked it into a taut point, finally taking it into his mouth.

His lack of concern about my past was unexpected, and even as I arched up, to give him better access, I couldn’t help asking, “Don’t you want to talk ... about ... the gun?” The last two words came out on a strangled sigh, and Will laughed as he took a teasing nibble of my skin.

“I do,” he admitted. “I want you to feel like you can tell me everything. But I won’t push you.” He eased up on his elbows, so he was watching me, and I wondered if he could see the ache he’d caused inside of me. “Look, I know you told me a long time ago that you don’t need to be taken care of, but if you let me, I’ll be there along the way. I can keep a secret, Lauren.” He ran his hand along my thigh, letting it slip higher and higher, until his thumb was teasing me, stroking that need even hotter. “I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe ... but only when you ask, and not a minute sooner.” He grinned as I shifted, so I was lifting my hips toward his hand,

begging him without words to put me out of my misery. “And if you play your cards right, I might even teach you to swim.”

I gasped, reaching for him and pulling him on top of me. “Oh, I can swim,” I said against his lips, when I opened my legs and felt him plunge inside. “You lost your chance for that.”

“Then maybe I’ll teach you some other things ...” he said, and I closed my eyes as he did exactly as he promised.



We didn’t leave first thing the next morning, or even in the afternoon. It wasn’t until dusk that we’d finally peeled ourselves out of bed and showered. And then we ran out of hot water because of all the things we did in the shower.

True to his word, Will taught me some “other things.” He was a great instructor—much better than he’d been at the pool—and I was more than eager to learn the things he was teaching me. Along the way, I managed to surprise him with a few tricks of my own, giving him a private peek at why my website had been so popular. I’d put the *tease* in striptease, and by the time I was finished, Will was begging me to put him out of his misery.

Who was I to argue?

I’d never miss the anonymity of the camera again, not with Will’s hungry eyes on me. He was the only person I wanted to strip for—as me or as Lola.

No doubt we’d be making several detours on our way back to California.

After throwing the last of my things in the trunk, I came back in and caught Will admiring the view from the window, and I did a little admiring of my own.

“You have the best ass,” I told him, easing behind him and wrapping my arms around his waist. My hand dropped

lower, and within seconds he was already responding to my touch, stiffening beneath my fingers.

He turned, his eyes landing on my lips, looking like he wanted to devour me. “Should we stay another night?”

“I thought you had to get back to start your new job?”

He searched my face. “Some things are more important.”

I shot him a skeptical look. “Hmm ... pretty sure your new boss would disagree. Besides, I think Tess’ll put out an APB if you don’t check in soon.”

He pressed a kiss to the tip of my nose. “Trust me, Tess can handle herself. She’ll just be glad I found her a new mommy.”

I punched him in the chest, giggling. “Call me mommy again and you’ll be driving back down that mountain alone.”

He hauled me into the strong circle of his arms as he laughed against my ear. “Never.”

I remembered the first time I’d seen Will behind the bar at The Dunes. I’d been convinced he was a player. A first-class jackass, as untrustworthy and unfaithful as they came.

But now I knew the real him. I couldn’t imagine feeling safer with anyone.

He’d made it easy to explain why I’d started stripping in the first place—to make money, plain and simple. I knew it made me sound mercenary, and I had been. I’d been eager to break free from the road my parents were pushing me down, and I needed my own income. So I could save enough to live my own dreams.

Childhood dreams that had morphed into something better and more satisfying than I ever could have imagined.

More though, I couldn’t believe he was so willing to accept my past. He made me feel safe. Loved.

And he hadn’t even blinked when I’d told him about Jefferson Brandt.

“There was nothing you could have done,” he’d said, his fingers grazing the ticklish skin behind my ear, and moving lower then, tracing my neck and making me shiver. “He was obviously depressed, Lauren. His showing up at your place might’ve been a cry for help, but what he really needed was a mental health professional. You couldn’t have predicted what he was gonna do.”

Will and I had been lying in bed when I’d told him, and I’d honestly believed he’d spent all my energy during our last session. I hadn’t thought there was anything left in me. But Will’s touch was electric and he’d been watching me intently, and suddenly it hadn’t mattered that we’d been talking about Jefferson Brandt, all I could think about was Will, Will ... *Will*.

I’d closed my eyes against the way my body was reacting to him, feeling like I was betraying Jefferson Brandt’s memory. “I should have stopped him. I should have at least tried.”

“Stop beating yourself up. You can’t change the past. He’s gone, and you’re here.” His fingers had slipped lower, circling my nipple. My eyes lifted to his and he’d said, “*We’re* here.”

“Yes.” I’d finally surrendered, because he was right. He was very, *very* right. “Yes.”

I’d given in to him completely then ... all over again. I’d let him kiss me until my pulse had been racing and my thighs shifted restlessly. And when I hadn’t been able to wait another moment, I’d taken control, pushing Will onto his back so I could drink in his incredible form. He was beautiful and strong and mine.

He’d gazed at me from beneath hooded eyes when I’d climbed up and straddled him. And when he’d started to reach between us, I’d stopped him.

“Don’t,” I’d ordered. “Let me.”

I’d moved my hand until it had closed around him, already hard and ready for me. His eyes had clamped shut and



he'd bit his lips. "God, you're the most ..."

"Shh." I'd lowered my mouth to his, shutting him up the most effective way I knew how.

It hadn't been the time for talking. I'd wanted him, right there. I'd wanted to show him what he did to me.

I'd eased up until the tip of his erection was pressed at my slick opening, and hot need had pulsed through me.

And then I'd finally ended both of our anguish, lowering myself onto him, letting him fill me. It had been pure bliss, the rush of power as I'd kept my eyes fastened to his, wanting to witness the expressions altering the planes of his face.

Will's hands had locked onto my hips as I'd begun rocking, undulating back and forth, up and down. In no time we'd been moving in perfect synchronicity, riding each ripple, each wave with abandon.

Will had reached between us then, his thumb finding the oversensitive spot that made me wild as I rode harder, harder, *harder*. And when I'd finally reached that crescendo, I'd collapsed into him, gasping.

Will had rolled us over and thrust several more times, grinding his hips into mine, and then he too had collapsed. He'd dragged me close, sighing heavily into my hair.

Later, when I felt like I could breathe again, I whispered, "About the gun," because we needed to have this conversation eventually. "I thought I needed it for protection, but I don't. Not anymore."

Will laced his fingers through mine, like he was silently conveying his approval. "I'd feel better not having it in the house with Tess, but it's your decision." He squeezed my hands, our palms pressed together. "You're the most amazing woman I've ever known, Lauren."

I got lost in his unbelievably gorgeous face, wondering how I'd ever gotten so lucky. "When you said you loved me ..." I began.

“And you looked like a deer caught in the headlights?” he finished, and even though I knew he was teasing me, I felt bad I’d left him hanging like that. I should’ve told him then how I felt.

I let go of his hands so I could feel him above me. I let my hands move over his arms, his chest, his back. “You surprised me is all,” I explained, hoping to make him understand it had nothing to do with him.

“I know.”

I met his gaze. “I *do* love you. More than I thought possible. I’m ready to go back and do this with you.” And I was, wherever it took us. Because that was the thing; this adventure we were about to embark on was going to be surprising and messy and confusing at times.

I’d always been such a planner that I hadn’t realized before: this was what life was all about, the ups and downs, and everything in between.

Will had learned that lesson when his mom had died, and he’d ended up with a little sister who was counting on him. I’d discovered it when I’d come to California with one dream and walked away with another, far better one.

It was what you made of those changes—those life-altering moments—that defined you. Those were the parts that made life interesting.

And amazing.

## **EXCLUSIVE SNEAK PEEK**

*Ready for more?*

Turn the page for a peek of Emerson and Lucas's story ...

**OUT OF BOUNDS**

# CHAPTER ONE

## EMERSON

I came to a dead stop in the middle of the sidewalk, asking myself how it had come to this. How I'd failed so miserably. Did my best friend in the whole wide world really believe in fairytales? "You sure you wanna do this?"

Lauren stopped too, midstep, her shoulders slumping. "Em, we've been through this. I'm not abandoning you." She dropped the box she'd been lugging and came back to where I stood. This whole beach-house-for-the-summer thing had been her idea in the first place. A way to celebrate that college was finally behind us. She tilted her head to the side, studying me as she placed her hands over mine as I clung to the carton marked "BATHROOM" in bold black Sharpie. "It's not like I'm skipping town or anything. I'll be less than a mile away."

I shot a meaningful look to where Will—Lauren's *new* roommate—had plucked her abandoned box from the walkway and was hoisting it into the back of his pickup truck. I lowered my voice, trying my best to be discreet. "I mean... are you sure you wanna move in with..." I gave a quick nod his way and resorted to Pig Latin. "... im-hay? He looks etchy-skay."

She took the box I was holding and passed it to Will, too. He managed it with one hand as he winked at me, not bothering to pretend he wasn't eavesdropping. "Me? I'm sketchy as hell," he agreed, flashing me the dimple that had surely done Lauren in. "I plan to do shady things to your friend here." Then he smacked her on her ass with his free hand, and she blushed.

*Fuck.* It was too late. I'd already lost her.

I let out an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. Whatever. Go on, then. But don't come crying to me when it all goes to shit." I scowled as I imparted my wisest words on her. "And it sure'nuff *always* goes to shit."

“Be careful, your Texas is showing.” She grinned, and then cast a calculated glance over my shoulder to the house next door—Lucas’s place. “Like you’re one to talk ...”

I settled my hands on my hips, preparing for battle. “If you have something to say, spit it out already.”

She opened her mouth, looking like she was about to launch into another explanation about how I might not be keeping a toothbrush over at his house, but that I’d hardly spent a single night at our place in the ten weeks since we’d moved here.

She was starting to sound like a broken record. This was the same discussion we’d had when she’d dropped the bomb on me that she’d be shacking up with Will.

Ten weeks. That’s all the time she’d known him. Not enough, if you asked me, not that anyone had.

Thankfully, Will laid on the horn, letting us both know he had better places to be than stuffed inside the hot cab of his truck watching the two of us say our farewells. Instead, she wrapped me in a hug. “Not everyone are your parents, Em.”

I wiggled out of her sappy embrace. When had my best friend become such a cliché? “And not everyone are yours, Lo.”

She blew me a kiss as she climbed into the pickup. “I’m only a mile away,” she reminded me cheerily, before riding off into the sunset with her white knight.



**M**e, I was less about sunsets and white knights, and more about Sex on the Beach (the drink *and* the extracurricular activity) and one seriously hot surfer boy.

I didn’t need Lauren, I was livin’ the dream. At least that’s what I’d been telling myself ever since Lauren had up and ditched me for *he who shall not be named*. Seriously, if this was what it felt like to be dumped, I’d take a hard pass.

No wonder there were so many heartsick country songs written about it.

I preferred the no-strings attached thing I had going on. I was the love ‘em and leave ‘em type.

So what was I doing here now then? Why was I waiting for my hot surfer boy at his place?

Because Lucas Harper wasn’t just any hot surfer boy, he had become a complication...with a capital C.

Meeting him on the very first day Lauren and I had moved into our summer digs had been...*unexpected*. From the moment I’d first laid eyes on him, I couldn’t wait to get him naked.

Fortunately for me, Lucas had been more than willing to oblige.

*That’s* why I was waiting. Not because I had developed—God forbid—*feelings* for him or anything. Because no way ... I refused to let myself become one of *those girls*.

When the keys jiggled in the lock, I adjusted “my girls” to make sure they were displayed to perfect advantage. I did my best to look somewhere between Suzie Homemaker and porn star, emphasis on the porn star. Zane had picked up a double shift at the bar, so I wasn’t in danger of wasting my boobalicious efforts on Lucas’s roommate.

When Lucas came through the door his feet were still caked with sand from the beach.

“I made you dinner,” I announced, leaning across the table to give Lucas a better view of what I had to offer.

As usual, Lucas didn’t disappoint. His gaze didn’t even glance toward the takeout pizza box and the roll of paper towels I’d set out—my version of “cooking.” His eyes went straight to the cleavage peeking out from behind the apron I’d hijacked from a box Lauren had marked “KITCHEN.”

This ...

This was the expression I’d been waiting for.

Who needed Lauren and her sentimental drivel? I had Lucas. Sweet, hot, uncomplicated Lucas.

I grinned when he attempted to lean his surfboard against the wall, but missed entirely. The board clattered loudly onto the tiled floor. “Great,” he said absently, his eyes going suddenly dark—darker even than the mahogany they already were. They traveled down the apron, and I realized it probably dawned on him I wasn’t wearing anything underneath. “I’m famished.”



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This book has really been a lifetime in the making; it just took some amazing people to convince me to make the leap from kissing scenes in Young Adult books (where all the fun stuff happens off the page) to full-blown romance (where anything goes). First off, I need to give credit where credit is due, to an amazing group of women who jumpstarted this whole crazy adventure at a writing retreat in the desert. There may have been cosmos involved. But the truth is, without these women to cheer me along during this entire journey, I might never have started in the first place. So, thank you, CC-ers!

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***Penny: The Engineering Tail of the Fourth Little Pig***

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Derting has been in love with *love* since the first grade, when she would make “boyfriends” hold her hand during recess ... whether they wanted to or not. In high school, she discovered romance novels and she’s been hooked ever since! She is the award-winning author of the Body Finder series, the Pledge trilogy, and the Taking trilogy, as well as the co-author of multiple award-winning picture books. Her books have been translated into 15 languages, and both *The Body Finder* and *The Pledge* were YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults selections. These days, she spends entirely too much time ordering stuff off the Internet, bingeing Netflix, and holding hands with a guy who doesn’t have to be forced (her husband).