

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN

Me

Jacqueline Francis



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It Should Have Been Me

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Note from the Author

To all the readers I hurt with Book 3,

I read your reviews, and I am sincerely sorry for my selfish and reckless actions. I can only ask for your forgiveness and promise to do better in the future. Never again will I mess with a HEA. I hope this one makes up for it, and I hope you enjoy reading the next instalment of Cat and Scott's story as much as I enjoyed writing it.



TIMING IS A HELL OF a thing. In the end, that's all it comes down to. The potency of an attraction or the purity of a connection means very little if you're on separate journeys. You and I were a perfect fit. We were, there was just too much distance between us to see it.

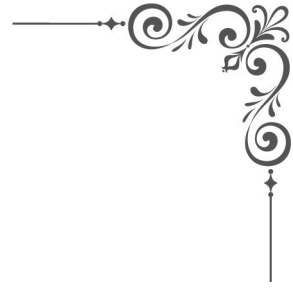
- Beau Taplin // **Separate Journeys**



A ROSE BY ANY OTHER name would smell as sweet.

- William Shakespeare // **Romeo and Juliet**





1. Catalina

Prologue – Five years ago

PI step out of the bathroom, take three long strides, and launch myself onto Scott's sleeping body. I was hoping the jolt would wake him up, but instead, all I get is an irritable groan.

“Wakey, wakey, Soldier,” I sing with just enough chirpiness to irritate him even more. “Let's go for a run.”

Running together is a habit we got into during our first year of college. Our crazy schedules didn't leave us with much quality time, so it was a nice way to destress, stay in shape, and spend with each other. I've been traveling a lot lately, so this is definitely not a part of our daily routine anymore, but it's always a habit I try to resume every time I return home.

My visit this time was shorter than I would've liked. My mother remarried last weekend, and I was so grateful that my schedule allowed me the slightest reprieve to attend the wedding and spend some time with all the people I love. Unfortunately, the time I could spare for this trip was very limited. The deadline for the project I'm working on is looming, and I have to fly back to Europe today. I'm trying to make the best of the last few hours I have left with my fiancé, and here he is smooshing his face into the pillow in an effort to drown out my voice.

“C'mon, wake up,” I say.

He shifts to toss me off his back until I slip onto the bed beside him. “What time is it?” he murmurs tiredly.

I place a soft kiss on his bare shoulder. “It's six o'clock.”

“The fuck? No! I'm not going running at six o'clock on a Sunday morning.” His arm slips around me and he pulls me closer to nuzzle his face against the side of my neck. He lets out a small groan of satisfaction when his hand moves up to cup my breast.

“It's my last day, and I was thinking that when we get back, I could make you those protein pancakes that you love.

What do you□”

I’m silenced when his hand moves up to cover my mouth. “Shhh! It’s too early for this kind of nagging. Just be quiet and cuddle with me.”

I shift his hand back to my breast and he doesn’t protest because he prefers it there. “The sun is shining. The birds are chirping. It’s the perfect temperature for an early morning run.”

“I’m not sure which part of that was supposed to convince me but□” He stops short of finishing his sentence when his hand moves lower down my stomach. “Wait. Why am I feeling so much skin?”

He finally lifts his head to look at me and the sight of me draws a groan of appreciation out of him. I’m wearing quite a skimpy pink running shorts and a blue and pink sports bra, and I’d be lying if I said that the look in his eyes was anything short of ravenous.

“Holy shit! Is that what you’re wearing to go running?” His gaze skims down the length of my body. “Yeah...I’m definitely awake now.”

“Good. Let’s go.” I shift to get off the bed.

“Yo, where you going?” He grasps me around the waist and drags me back to him. “You’re out here advertising an all-you-can-eat buffet and then you’re not even handing out snacks. Nah, let me get a little taste of this.”

“It’s going to get hot soon,” I protest, though it’s very halfhearted.

His hand is already slipping below the waistband of my shorts, and I moan when his fingers slip inside me. “It’s getting hot right now.”

He shifts, pulling the duvet with him as he drags my shorts down my legs and then he disappears beneath the covers. He kisses his way down my stomach, and I feel the heat of his mouth before his teeth sink into my inner thigh. His hands move beneath me, lifting my ass off the bed so his tongue can

lap against my clit before it probes inside me. My fingers slide into his hair as I spiral into a whirlwind of ecstasy.

I'm moaning like crazy, gripping his head as my hips rock up and down. "*Ohhh, Scott. Right there...Right there.*"

My voice is high-pitched with urgency. Scott and I have been together for over four years now, and he has used that time wisely, learning my body inside and out. He knows exactly what I like and how I like it. He knows every pleasure point and the precise spot that drives me delirious. I'm so close, and he knows it because just before I climax, he flips me over. Firm hands grip my hips to hoist them up and then he thrusts into me. Wrapping my hair around his fist, his pelvis hits against my ass.

An orgasm ripples through me and not long after that, his upper body collapses on top of me.

"Well, that's one way to start the day." He lets out a satisfied sigh as he kisses his way up my back. "Good morning, beautiful."

After he slowly withdraws from me, we drop over onto the bed. "How do you have the energy for that, but you complain about going for a run?"

A wide grin spreads over his face before he leans over to kiss me. "I don't cum at the end of a run. It's that simple." He interlinks his fingers with mine and toys with my engagement ring. "I hate that you're leaving today. I miss you like crazy when you're gone."

Hearing the words causes a heaviness in my chest that is becoming increasingly familiar to me. "I keep asking you to come with me."

"You know I can't, Cat. I've got a lot going on, too. And I don't want to delay it. I want to get my life and my finances in order so that we can get married as soon as you get back."

I smile at the thought and prop myself on my elbow. "Speaking about that...why don't we get married on the beach?"

He thinks about it and his eyebrows furrow together. “Hmm...I don’t know. I don’t think it’ll work. You never know what the weather will be like. If it’s windy, it’ll be a mess.”

I groan and throw my head back with playful exasperation. “Ugh! Why do you always have to take the logical, practical route? Switch your math brain off and just throw caution to the wind this once.”

“The statistics still don’t look favorable,” he teases. “Besides, did you forget the size of your family? Trying to plan something like that would be a nightmare.”

“I don’t want a massive wedding with my whole family. I want something small and intimate. Just you and me...on a beach. The next phase of my project is in Portugal, and I was thinking...” I trace my finger across his chest. “...maybe we could get married on a beach in Madeira.”

He stiffens and then his features compress into a deep frown. “What do you mean, the next phase? I thought this was the *last* phase.”

“It was supposed to be, but they just opened a new branch in Madeira, and you know how corporate branding works. Management wants all their offices to have the same look and feel, so they asked me to do the same mural in the foyer of their new building.”

His jaw tightens, and I know him well enough to know that he’s trying to remain calm. “So, when are you expecting this project to end?”

“Based on the budgets and schedules they gave me... around next year Feb.”

“Next year Feb?” His eyes widen with a mixture of exasperation and surprise. “Cat, this is not what we agreed to. You initially told me one year. One year ended back in June. It’s already November, and when I brought this up the last time, you told me this would all be done by Christmas. Now you’re telling me next year Feb. This is becoming frustrating.”

“I know.” I run my hand over his chest to soothe him. “I know, and I’m sorry, but this client is changing everything for me. I’m getting more recognition, more exposure, more experience. They’re putting me in contact with the right people who can help me further my career. I can’t just give up on this project at this stage. This is an opportunity of a lifetime, and I just want to give it my all. And I don’t want to rush it because I have so much pressure on me, and I’m so scared I’m gonna screw it all up.”

“You’re not going to screw it up.” The stress on my face makes him relent almost immediately, and he pulls me into his arms. “You’re doing amazing things, Cat, and I’m so proud of all your accomplishments. I support you, and I want you to succeed, but I can’t help but feel...” He lets out a deflated sigh. “Sometimes I feel like you’ve outgrown this relationship and...and every time you leave, I feel like I get one step closer to you...not coming back.”

“No, Scott.” I shift, pulling him closer and wrapping my arms tightly around him. “That will never happen. I love you, and I want us to get married, and I want to wake up next to you every morning.” I snuggle against his chest and smile at him. “Now, kids and the SUV and the orderly suburban life might be a stretch too far at this point, but you? I don’t ever want a life without you.”

We’ve spoken about kids enough times for him to know that I only want to start a family way, waaaaaaaayyyyyy in the future, so he simply shrugs off the comment with a smile the same way he always does. Right now, my primary focus is building my career and extracting as much adventure and enjoyment out of life as part of the process.

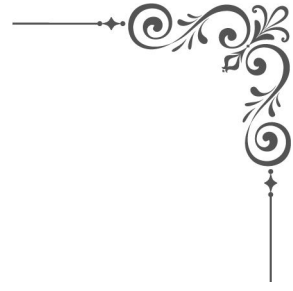
Scott has been amazing through all of this, and our long-distance relationship hasn’t been easy on either of us. Sometimes, I just randomly start crying because I miss him so much. I want to come home and start building my life with him, but at the same time, I’m not ready for my life in Europe to come to an end. I love these international clients because I get to travel around the world. I want to keep doing that and

maybe with the right client base, I could limit my trips to just a few times a year.

I don't have that client base yet, but I'm building a network and a solid reputation in the industry. Everything will soon start falling into place. I'm on the precipice of something great. I can feel it in my gut, and I'm so excited to explore all these opportunities that have been thrust into my path. I just need a little more time to do that. My dreams and my love life aren't in alignment at the moment, but they will be. Eventually, I'll figure out a way to take on these overseas projects without *permanently* living overseas, and then my life will be perfect.

"Just try to be patient," I say. "These next few months are going to go by in a flash. You're gonna drop me off at the airport today and before you know it, it'll be February, and you're gonna be right back there to pick me up again. And just for the record, I could never outgrow you. In fact, with every passing year, my love for you only grows deeper. My body may leave Pasadena, but my heart always stays with you, Scott Carter."

"Okay. I'll be patient." With a sad smile, he tightens his grip around me. "Like, you said, February will be here in no time."



2. Catalina

P*resent day*

I wake up and lazily stretch my arms across the bed, only to feel the empty space beside me. He's already awake. I hear the water running in the shower. For a moment, I consider joining him in there, but I'm anxious, an edgy ball of nerves, and all I want right now is to be alone to sift through my weird thoughts. With all this restlessness coursing through me, the last thing I want is to be touched, so sex is out of the question.

I've been like this since my sister emailed me her wedding invitation about a month ago. Shit! That means I haven't had sex...in *over* a month? What is wrong with me? I've been making excuse after excuse, and that's all they are. Excuses. A hundred different reasons why I'm not in the mood. I've lost count of how many times I've had a headache in the last few weeks. And it's not because I'm not attracted to him anymore. He's sinfully gorgeous. And it's not because I don't love him anymore. I do. He's an incredible man. Caring and tender – he would move heaven and earth for me if I asked him to. My dampened libido has nothing to do with him or who he is. This is *all* me. And with the wedding date rapidly approaching, I'm starting to feel this invitation has somehow highlighted who... he is not.

I groan my exhaustion then get out of bed to draw back the curtains. I love waking up to this sight. Our modest, little apartment has the perfect view of the Eiffel Tower. It won't be the view that greets me each morning for too much longer, though. We're moving again as soon as we fly back from California. There are so many big things in the pipeline, and I am virtually bursting with excitement for what awaits me in a few short weeks. I *love* my life. I live on my own terms. I'm my own boss. My sculpting has taken me to the most amazing places all over the world.

The problem with hopping from city to city was that it became addictive. That's how the travel bug initially sunk its teeth into me, filling my veins with its alluring elixir. I'm a

total crackhead now. I live to discover new towns, explore their little gems. Museums and art galleries are always first on my list, and then I'm on the prowl for anything that excites my vision.

In the last year, we've seen the sunset on a beach in Bali, watched the northern lights outside an igloo in Kakslauttanen, and got a view from above the clouds at the top of Kilimanjaro. Okay, not the very top. I got altitude sickness and couldn't make the last five hundred feet. Still quite impressive, though. We've been backpacking through Spain, literally walked through Spain for six days, and stayed at a different Airbnb every night. We've gone snorkeling at the coral reef. We've trekked through the Amazon...but only for a day. I had the constant fear of being eaten by an anaconda and ended the tour early.

And while I love the sights every place has to offer, this man of mine indulges in the food. Whatever local cuisine is on the menu, he's trying it. And it doesn't matter if it looks gross or repulsive, he makes me try it, too. I've eaten fried tarantulas because of him. But I guess that's why I love him. He has the same adventurous spark as me, and we go wherever the wind takes us. When I look back at what my life used to be like growing up – living on a tight budget and never being able to splurge – the contrast is astonishing. Almost like a rags-to-riches story, and the best part is that I get to see the world while doing what I love most.

I'm not even going to try to be modest. I am doing very well for myself, and with sweat and determination, I've gotten to the point where I don't have to work every day. A big enough project can fund my lifestyle for up to six months, and I use that time to uncover the secrets of every new place I end up in. Sometimes, it still seems surreal – how I ended up here.

Even though I had written off the possibility of going to college, my friend Connor introduced me to a woman, who was an executive at Heimzim Toys. She loved my work and encouraged me to apply for a scholarship fully paid for by the company. My contract included an internship as a junior toy designer while I completed my degree. If that wasn't amazing

enough, they offered me the opportunity to finish the last part of my contract at their branch in Italy. It was something I couldn't turn down.

I hopped on a plane with every intention of returning home the next year...but that didn't happen. Before I even completed my internship, I was offered a short-term job as an artist for an Italian Claymation movie. That one lasted three months, and before it ended, I got another freelance job with a sister company in Sweden. One project led to another and before I knew it, I was hopping between cities, tirelessly trying to keep up with the demand.

I was a one-man show, trying to build a reputation, and each new project kept pushing out the date I was supposed to return home. I was working sixteen-hour days, struggling to juggle everything. My career started taking off. My clients became more demanding. My overseas projects became longer and longer. My trips back home became fewer and fewer. I didn't want to risk losing all that I had built by flying back home every two months.

My relationship with Scott took a lot of strain. We tried to make it work long-distance for about a year and a half, but then one day...he just dumped me. I didn't even see it coming. I knew things were rocky between us, but I was not expecting that *at all*. He'd told me on many occasions that he would support me in pursuing my dreams, but that was nowhere near true. His support ran out very quickly and the brutality of how he ended it whacked me like a shovel to the head.

I begged him to reconsider. He refused. I tried to reconcile. He wasn't interested. After about three months of beating a dead horse, I gave up. I didn't have a reason to go home anymore. Truth be told, I felt too hurt and betrayed to risk seeing him again if I went back, so I threw myself into my career instead.

I cried all the tears I had to cry, then got rid of everything that reminded me of him. The only thing I held on to was the engagement ring he gave me. I didn't have the heart to pawn it or sell it. He used a chunk of his savings to buy it for me when he didn't have much. Knowing what he sacrificed, I couldn't

get rid of it. I still can't, so I simply moved it to my middle finger and carried on with life.

Looking back at it now, I still can't believe we were engaged. He proposed to me one beautiful summer afternoon on the beach. The asshole wrote it in big, bold white letters in the sky. When I said yes, I thought we would be together forever. But then life got in the way. Plans got derailed, and we both ended up in two different places. He wanted to settle down, and I...didn't. Not yet anyway. I wanted to see the world first, live life to the fullest before I put roots down. I asked him so many times to come with me, but he had a passion, too. He wanted to teach, and he couldn't leave it behind. To this day, the irony still gets to me. I helped him discover his passion, and he helped turn mine into a career, and in the end, those very same passions tore us apart.

Eventually, the distance between us grew so wide, we couldn't find our way back to each other. He ended it abruptly over a video call one day, and I haven't seen or heard from him since. But that's about to change because he's the best man at my sister's wedding. On the few occasions that I visited home, I actively avoided him. I told my mother to make excuses as to why he couldn't come over during those few weeks. I just couldn't bear to see him again. He ripped my heart out the day he ended it and then every day after that, when my incessant calls went unanswered. I still don't want to see him again, but I can't avoid him this time. It's impossible.

“Good morning, *ma chérie*.”

JP's sexy French accent sweeps over me and pulls me out of my thoughts. I smile, glancing over my shoulder to look at him. He's wearing nothing but a towel and his skin is still glistening with moisture. Although he's more on the thin side, he's still well-defined, but it's his distinct features that I find most attractive. Sharp nose, square jaw with the cutest cleft in the middle of his chin. That face is definitely a sight I could never get bored with.

“Good morning, love,” I reply, my voice still gruff with sleep.

He rakes a hand through his shoulder-length, blonde hair as he walks toward me. “How are you feeling this morning?” he asks, lightly touching my cheek.

I almost say *fine*, but then I remember the excuse I made up last night. “Okay,” I say, faking a groan of discomfort. “My stomach is still cramping. I’m sure it will get better soon.”

“Maybe you should reschedule your flight. I don’t want you on a plane all by yourself for twelve hours when you aren’t feeling well.”

“I’ll be fine, JP.”

An exaggerated groan precedes his response. “Gah, I hate when you call me that. Why is it so hard for you to say Jean-Pierre?”

“It’s not hard, it’s just long. JP is short and concise.”

“But not sexy,” he counters with a grin.

“Would you prefer...”

“Don’t even—”

I try to put on a French accent, but even I have to admit that it sounds more like a drunk Gérard Depardieu. “Jean-Jean, my little bon-bon.”

He lets out an irritated grunt mixed with a chuckle and playfully slaps my ass. “I hate that even more.”

“What?” I giggle. “That was very sexy. Did it not get you...*hard*?”

He cringes. “You’re so crude sometimes. You know, I was an exchange student in your country, and I just never understood the obsessive need for vulgarity.”

I try not to roll my eyes. That joke barely scraped the surface of crude. “The vulgarity makes it funny...but your facial expression afterward? That makes it *hilarious*.”

“It just sounds so uncultured, but I understand that where you come from, that stuff is considered humor, so...*haw-haw-haw*. That is the best French laugh I can give to your crude American joke.”

“That was so awkward...it was almost cute,” I say with a suppressed snicker.

I’ve toned down my language since we met. Initially, he used to get so offended, but as we got to know each other, he realized my jokes are supposed to be taken in jest, and I realized I should curb my use of certain words. I don’t think I’ve dropped an F-bomb since we started traveling together, but this is our lighthearted compromise – a moderate level of inappropriate humor.

He crosses the bedroom to the closet on the other side to take out a pair of beige chinos and a crisp, white shirt. “Now, back to our discussion...I still don’t understand why you’re flying out today. The wedding is only in two and a half weeks. Why don’t you stay here until the exhibition of my new painting at the gallery and then we can fly there together?”

JP has not been as fortunate as me when it comes to his art career. Even though he’s an incredible painter, he’s struggled to get his work commissioned, but just three weeks ago, a gallery owner took an interest in two of his paintings. It’s an opportunity to get his name out there, and we both agreed that this isn’t something he can pass up.

I actually met him at an art exhibition, and we immediately hit it off because we have so much in common. Our mutual love of art laid a solid foundation for us. He asked me out several times after we met, but I declined because I just wanted to keep things casual at the time. My body and mind were in Europe, but my heart was still stupidly wandering around California.

Things changed when we started traveling together. We were spending more time together, and even though I started to develop feelings for him, I was very reluctant to have anything more than a friendship. I told him a few times that I wasn’t ready for another relationship, but he was so persistent. Clearly, I have a weakness for persistent men because I eventually agreed to *one* date, and now here we are, eighteen months later, living together.

My wandering heart made peace with the past and finally stayed in one place long enough to fall in love again. Look, it wasn't easy. This stupid heart of mine used to skip the country all the time, desperately seeking the man I left behind, the same man who had ruthlessly torn me apart inside, and yet the damn thing still refused to let go. I'd have to calmly convince it that that part of my life was over. Every time it happened, my poor heart returned from its travels aching and sore, but after I rationalized and explained that I didn't need Scott Carter in my life anymore, it would settle down...Well, for a few weeks, and then it would escape custody and fuck off again.

But that hasn't happened for a very long time. I managed to push Scott out of my head for good, and I haven't thought about him in years...until I got that wedding invitation. I don't know why, but I've been a jittery, anxious mess since then. Maybe it's because I haven't seen Scott since my mother married Keith five years ago. He dumped me not even four months later. The memories cause a rush of bile and pain to leap up from my stomach, but I quickly suppress it and refocus my attention back on the conversation.

"Isabella wants me there," I say to JP. "She's panicking about every little detail, and she wants her big sister for support. Also, I want to spend some time with my family. I didn't go home last Christmas like we planned. I miss them. If we wait for your exhibition, we're only going to get there the Friday before. The wedding is on Saturday, and then we have to leave again on Sunday."

He pulls on his shirt and buttons it up. "What if we change our flights so we don't have to leave on Sunday? I'd also like to spend a little more time with your family and get to know them better."

"We can't stay longer than that, Bon-Bon. My new contract starts the very next week, so we only have a few days to pack up everything and fly to London." An excited smile beams on my face, so bright I fear it may blind me. "That contract is going to change our lives. Imagine living all-expenses paid in the most extravagant cities in the world.

Milan. Dubai. Zürich. I honestly can't wait to start this new chapter of our lives."

He smiles, and despite his reserved demeanor, I can sense his excitement, too. "We don't have to imagine. That's going to be our reality in about three weeks. I just hate how badly timed everything is. It's no one's fault. I'm just a little sad that you have to leave so soon. I'm..." He looks at the floor, shifting nervously from one foot to the other before he looks up at me again. "I'm going to miss you."

I feign astonishment and gasp with surprise. "You're gonna miss me?"

He rolls his eyes. "I take it back."

"It's out now. You can't take it back."

JP is an enigma of a person. He's so open to trying new things, yet he is a little more guarded when it comes to matters of the heart. Effort is required for him to admit how he feels. It doesn't stop him from saying it, but there's always that stilted pause before the words leave his mouth. I find it adorable. Another quality I love is how affection-averse he is. He hates hugs and cuddling, and public displays of affection are a big no for him, but he's come a long way. Every day I get a few more kisses, a few more caresses.

I rush toward him, hopping up and wrapping my legs and arms around him. "How much are you going to miss me?"

"It was going to be a lot, but now...only a tiny bit."

Even though he tries to squirm away from the kisses I'm plastering all over his face, I still feel his arms tighten around me. "And how much do you love me?"

"Not much at all," he replies with a straight face. "Very little. I like dancing more than you."

There is nothing he hates more than dancing. He doesn't understand why people feel the urge to move their bodies to music. To him, it's an exercise in futility.

I try to pout through my giggles and lightly hit his shoulder. "You're so mean."

“You know you’re the love of my life.” He smiles, tilting his head up toward me. “You can kiss me now.”

He grips me tighter, and my lips land on his. Normally, it takes mere seconds for me to be seduced by his expert mouth. His lips are soft, and his kiss is always gentle, almost hypnotic in its sensuality. Making love to JP is exactly that. Sweet. Tender. He controls the pace, keeping it slow and leisurely. His kisses are a sheer appreciation of my body, like he wants to spend hours savoring me. And he does. His mouth leaves a trail of warm kisses down my neck. Usually, at this point, I’d be unbuttoning his shirt, wanting to be closer to him in every way, but today I just can’t get into it.

My lie about my stomach cramps has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That ball of nervousness is coiling tighter and tighter. My palms are sweaty, and I can’t get my heart rate to slow down. My level of anxiety has skyrocketed. After five years, I’m going to see Scott again. See, the thing is, just shy of a decade ago, I fell madly, deeply, hopelessly in love with that douche. He broke through all my defenses and now I feel like I don’t have any protection against him, like I might be... vulnerable around him.

I know Scott still visits my mother every second Saturday, but I’ve never asked her about him because I’ve made every effort to move on and I didn’t want the details of his personal life to have any influence over the decisions I made in mine. Isa also stopped talking to me about him at some point because of some pact they’d made about not discussing their exes anymore, so I’m going there blind.

Not knowing anything makes the situation more difficult because I don’t know what to expect when I get home. I keep telling myself that a lot can happen in five years. Scott is probably married with kids now. He was the one who wanted to settle down, after all. In all likelihood, he’s probably already balding (hopefully), and I find comfort in the fact that he may just have a dad bod now. Why am I even stressing about this? I’m going to see him and it’s just going to be...one of those things. It’s going to be fine. I’ve moved on. He’s moved on. It’s going to be fine.

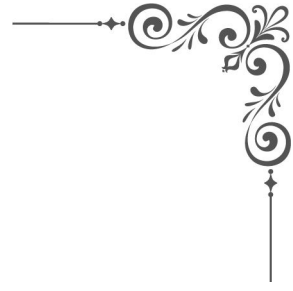
“You seem preoccupied,” JP says, breaking the kiss.

“Sorry. I am.” I unwrap my legs, allowing my feet to find the carpet again. “I’m kinda dreading this twelve-hour flight and just wondering what I’m going to do the whole time without you. And who’s going to hold my hand if we hit that patch of turbulence after take-off.”

“Just close your eyes and pretend I’m there,” he says reassuringly. He lifts my hand in both of his and kisses my knuckles. “Time will go by in a jiffy, and we’ll see each other in a few weeks.”

“I’m going to miss you so much. I can’t bear the thought of not seeing you for the next couple weeks,” I say, and I mean it.

JP and I have been inseparable for well over a year now. He’s such a big part of my life and I hate doing anything without him, especially traveling. The anxiety I’m feeling has nothing to do with him or who he is. This is *all* me, and I have to stop getting caught up in the re-runs of my past happening in my head, constantly thinking about who...he is not.



3. Scott

“I see why you moved to Santa Monica, son,” my dad says as we walk through the door that leads to the outdoor dining area of the Bayview Country Club. “It’s great.”

“I love it here,” I reply, taking a seat at our usual table. “The fact that I can go surfing whenever I want is the best part. It’s laid-back enough to feel like a beach town, but still has the right amount of excitement. It’s the perfect blend of everything.”

Peter sits down beside me. Even though our table is under a shade net, the harsh afternoon sun still pierces through the open spaces, glimmering on the side of his face as he eases back in his chair. “The way Scott kept raving about the lifestyle here made me jealous, so I bought a beach house here, too.”

My father squints against the sunlight as he looks over at Peter. “I thought you already owned two beach houses here.”

“I rent those out. The new one I bought is just for me.” He smiles at our waitress as she places breadsticks in the middle of the table. “Can I have a beer?”

“Pete,” I complain, “we’re hitting the gym in an hour. Beer makes you sluggish, man.”

“Chill, Scott. I’m starting the weekend early. Our boy is getting married soon. We only have two more weeks to enjoy his freedom before he ties the knot.”

“He’s not here yet, and we’re not even close to the weekend. It’s only Wednesday.”

He’s unconvinced by my argument. “Can you just relax and enjoy it with me?”

Relaxation is something that’s not going to come easily to me. Not today. Not anytime between now and when Dylan says *I do*. I don’t know if I’m tense or apprehensive about what’s going to happen on his wedding day. I’m going to see her again, and I don’t know what to expect. All I know is that I

have a shit ton of restless energy that needs to be worked off. I've been gyming for more than two to three hours a day since they announced the wedding date.

The proposal was already unexpected. Dylan and Isa dated for a short time in high school. Then shit got hairy, and they split up and went their separate ways. Dylan got back together with his ex-girlfriend, Francesca, and even though I expressly said it was a bad idea, he married her. A future with Isabella was not in the cards, but then all of a sudden, Dylan gets divorced and he's asking Isa for another chance. After dating again for only a *month*, he proposed and asked me to be his best man. I immediately accepted...then immediately regretted it when I realized that I'm going to be standing at an altar opposite the woman I asked to be my wife and yet...it wouldn't be us getting married.

Getting through that day is going to be torture. It's going to be torture getting through every day from now until the wedding. The uneasiness building inside me is reaching boiling point and the only thing I can do to release the tension is to kill it at the gym. Every day gets a little worse. I lift heavier. I run faster. I push harder. But nothing seems to be helping. I ignore the tight discomfort in my chest and check the time on my phone.

I must have been very distracted and a barely functioning participant in this conversation because I notice that our meals and drinks are already on the table. I don't know how much of the discussion I've missed, so I just jump right back in with a relatively neutral question.

"Where is Dylan, anyway? He's supposed to be here already. He could at least call."

"You know Dylan," Peter replies with a shrug as he takes a swig of beer. "He's still learning the ins and outs of common courtesy. He spent the night at Isabella's place again last night. I only got a text before midnight to say he wasn't coming home. That's how he is, so just calm down. You're so tense all the time. I can't believe I have to say this to you, of all people, but you need to get laid."

My father swallows a piece of his steak before he speaks. “You know, if you’re looking for a nice girl—”

“No, Dad. Stop trying to set me up. The women you keep sending me on blind dates with are stage-five clingers. The one from last week already asked me to meet her mother.” I cut into my grilled chicken and lift a piece to my mouth. “Maybe if you told some of them that I wasn’t going to inherit anything from you, I’d stop getting these marriage proposals on the first fucking date. So, thanks, but no thanks. I’m staying away from that flock of matrimonial doves. They make me want to *stay* single...forever.”

“I just...I just want to see you find happiness again,” he says almost helplessly.

My irritation escapes with a light groan. “I’m happy! I’m doing what I love, working my way up the ranks. I’m the youngest member of the academic committee at one of the largest universities in California. I’m happy. Why do I need to be in a relationship to prove that? And by the way, Pete’s single, too. I don’t see you ragging on him to get a girlfriend.”

“There’s a fundamental difference between your single and my single, Scott. I’m single out of choice. I’m still playing the field because I don’t want to settle down. Ever. You’re single because you want to be...alone.”

“What are you talking about? I date all the time because my father *insists* on sending me on these random blind dates.” I look over at my dad. “Maybe you should listen to Peter more. I do enjoy being alone, so please stop trying to set me up. In fact, you should divorce that psycho wife of yours and join our single club.”

“I’ll be honest,” he replies with a sigh. “You boys don’t make it look very appealing. Peter goes through women so fast he’s going to need a shot soon, and you need to be slapped upside the head to go through any women at all.” He takes a sip of water and resumes cutting another sliver of steak. “Besides, I’m not letting that *psycho* get half of everything. She’s just gonna have to kill me in my sleep.”

I laugh. I went through my whole childhood, never knowing my dad had a sense of humor. We never talked the way we do now. And even though he hadn't initially agreed with my decision to be with Catalina, it was that very decision that led to us having a relationship in the first place. It took him almost two years to warm up to her, and in the end, it wasn't even Cat who softened him. It was her mother. She invited him to lunch one Saturday afternoon and her hospitality and kind heart changed him almost instantly – the same way it softened me. She truly has a gift. After that, Cat started coming along to these weekly lunches I have with him. They were beginning to bond, but all that progress means shit now because she's gone.

“Maybe you should—” I'm cut off when my phone starts ringing. “It's Dylan.” I look over at Peter as I answer and put it on speaker so we can both hear his pitiful excuse.

“Hey, Scott.”

“What's up, Dyl?”

“Sorry, I'm late. We're stuck at this...cake place. Bella's about to lose her shit with this woman, so I just need to make sure she doesn't slap anyone. *I* might slap someone because her assistant just dropped ganache all over my jeans and sneakers. I'm a mess.” His tone is laced with annoyance. “Listen, I'm looking for Peter. I need to ask him for a favor, but I can't get hold of him.”

“He must've forgotten his phone in the car. I'll do it. What do you need?”

“Uh...” He suddenly sounds nervous. “I'd rather ask Peter.”

I hear something in his tone, and Peter does too because he reaches for my phone, but I yank it away from him. “You can ask *me*, Dylan.”

“Please let me speak to Peter. This doesn't involve you.”

That means it does involve me. “This has something to do with Cat, doesn't it?”

Dylan lets out a defeated breath. “She’s flying in today,” he admits, and my reaction is instant. My body freezes, and my blood feels like ice as it runs along my veins.

“By herself?” Pete asks.

“Yeah. Her boyfriend is only flying over the day before the wedding.”

“I didn’t know she was coming *today*,” I say.

“Well, that’s because you and Isabella have a pact, remember?” Dylan replies with a mixture of irritation and satisfaction.

He *hates* this pact of ours, but Isa and I felt that it was a necessary arrangement to put in place after my breakup with Cat and her breakup with Dylan. We both agreed to not talk about our exes because having a constant link to our past relationships would prevent us from moving on. Not that it helped much. Moving on from Catalina Diaz has been a very slow, arduous process, one I don’t think I’ll ever get to the end of.

“Anyway, I was supposed to pick Cat up from the airport,” Dylan continues, “but these fucking people are wasting our time and—”

“I’ll pick her up.”

“No! Scott, you stay the hell away from her. If you think I forgot about that voice note you sent me—”

“Why are you bringing that up? It was a long time ago.”

“It was last year.” He groans his aggravation. “Please, just let Peter do it.”

I think about it for a second. “Sure,” I reply, then hang up.

I’m stunned for a few seconds, sitting there trying to absorb this new information. I thought I had a few more weeks to prepare myself. I’m not ready to see her again and yet...I’m *dying* to see her again.

Peter keeps wary eyes on me as I stand up and drop a few bills on the table. “You heard him. Just let me do it. I’ll pick

her up and take her home...and then you can just avoid her until the wedding.”

I glare at him. “Really? That’s your plan?”

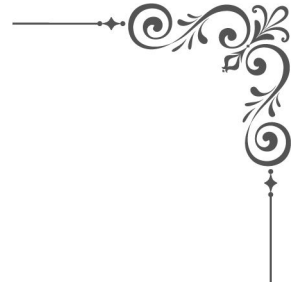
“I’ll go.” Peter stands up as well, taking his car keys out of his pocket.

“No.”

“This is a very bad idea, Scott.”

“Yeah, I know that.” My hands are trembling. I’m so restless, and my throat is closing in on me. “But, Pete, you gotta understand. One day Cat got on a plane and on that day, I fully expected to be right back at the airport a few weeks later to pick her up. That day never came. I just...I just want to see her again...as my *ex*. I need to get *that* moment over and done with as quickly as possible, then maybe this whole wedding will stop feeling so...unbearable.”

He relents and lets out a heavy breath. “Okay. You do what you gotta do.”



4. Catalina

Even though I'm a thousand percent sure I dozed off for most of that twelve-hour flight, I'm still exhausted when the plane finally lands in Los Angeles. I drag my weary body down the narrow aisle and my legs feel like lead as I walk through to baggage collection. It's only three in the afternoon, but my eyes seem to think it's one in the morning. They're sore and heavy, craving sleep. I spot my huge suitcase and it takes a few tries before I manage to drag it off the carousel. Pressing the button to release the handle, I begin rolling it as best I can. It seemed practical to have one big bag for my extended stay, but as I lug this overweight monstrosity toward the exit, I realize I should have just packed three outfits in an overnight bag and used Isa's clothes for the rest of the trip.

The wheel of my case snags on the edge of the automatic sliding door, and even after pulling a few times, it doesn't dislodge. I almost stomp my foot like a spoiled child. I'm tired, and I just want to find Dylan and get the hell out of here. I don't have the energy to fight with a door right now. I shift my bag a little, then try again.

"Let me help you with that."

Shit! I know that voice. I know the smell of that spicy cologne. And when his hand covers mine, the warmth of his skin is all too familiar. I turn to look behind me and there he is. Scott Carter. Effortlessly gorgeous Scott Carter. Absolutely swoon-worthy Scott Carter. Shattered-me-to-pieces Scott Carter. Five years is a long time and those years have matured his features, making them more rugged and defined.

My heart drops and bursts at the same time. I feel like I'm hyperventilating and yet I don't think I'm breathing at all. I was not prepared for this. In no way, shape or form was I equipped to handle the assault of all our memories. In that one moment, I see our entire past and the future we'll never have.

This guy used to make me laugh until my sides hurt. This guy used to kiss me like he needed me more than the air in his lungs. This guy used to hold on to me like I was his whole

world. This guy used to...be *mine*, and my brain can't seem to wrap around the fact that he's not anymore. This is precisely the reason why I always told my mother to keep my visits back home a secret. I've purposely and tactfully avoided him for years. I couldn't take the thought of seeing him again because I guess deep down, I knew I'd feel like this. Just the sight of him is so unexpected and overwhelming that I'm pushed to the brink of tears.

I don't know if he feels the same, but for several seconds he just stands there frozen, his sapphire-blue eyes caressing my face. "Hi," he says softly.

That tiny syllable drags me back five years, sucking me into the past and reminding me of a time when my heart belonged to only him.

"Hi." It comes out as a breathy sigh because my voice is constricted behind the hard lump in my throat.

"How are you?"

I half-smile, still unable to pull out of this nostalgic trance he has me under. "Fine," I lie. "Perfectly fine. And you?"

"Yeah, not great...uh..." He runs a restless hand over his head and looks away from me. "Seeing you...uh...seeing you is a bit of a mind fuck."

This douche. That's what he's going to say to me right off the bat? I don't know why he always has to be so honest. Just this once, could he lie and say that he's doing great so we can both move past this painfully awkward encounter?

"I was not expecting this...at all," he says.

The absurdity of that statement draws my eyebrows together. "How can you say that? You literally came here for me. I'm the one who had no warning. Dylan was supposed to pick me up, but instead, I get *you* and you don't see me freaking out."

"Solid point." He grins and I melt a little. I forgot about that little flutter I get in my chest every time he smiles. He shoves both hands into his back pockets, almost like he's not sure what to do with them. "You, uh, you look different."

I run my hand over my hair, guessing that he's probably referring to the sleek, straight strands subtly highlighted with bursts of bronze and auburn. He always preferred my hair curly, and it's weird how a simple sentence makes me feel so self-conscious about something as insignificant as my hairstyle. Not in a bad way, just in a way that makes me aware that he always notices every little detail about me.

"Uh, you, um...you look different, too," I say.

Likewise, no detail about him goes unnoticed. His dark brown hair is much shorter than I remember, slightly longer than an army crew cut, and it makes him look bigger... broader...bigger. Hell, I'm just going to acknowledge it. He's sexier. He's *way* sexier than he used to be. How is that even possible? And then he decided to wear a navy-blue button-down shirt, which only makes those piercing blue eyes of his stand out more.

Scott in a button-down shirt has always been my kryptonite, and now it's pulled tight over his chest. With his sleeves casually rolled up, I notice the leather bracelets that my mother gave him years ago are still on his left wrist, and they only draw more attention to his thickly muscled forearms. No ring on his left hand. I take in that detail without realizing it, but it's irrelevant. I'm pretty sure he has a girlfriend. A guy like him wouldn't stay single for long. He's gorgeous, absolutely—

Ah, shit! I'm getting carried away, and I quickly reorganize my thoughts, putting them all back in the right places. Those thoughts I just had about Scott□ they're not new thoughts. They're old thoughts that just hopped to the forefront for a millisecond. Old, moldy, decomposing thoughts that need to be pushed to the back of my mind...where they belong.

With a stiff tug, he unhooks my suitcase, then lifts it like it doesn't weigh a ton. "C'mon, my car's this way."

He leads me through the airport to a black Mercedes SUV in the undercover parking lot. The humid July air seems even thicker between the concrete pillars, and I can already feel my

hair starting to frizz. It took me half an hour to straighten it earlier. Seems like a waste now.

“Wow, this is nice,” I comment as he opens the door for me, and I slide onto the leather seat. “When we were in college, you always used to say that you were working so hard for very little financial reward at the end of it. You told me you wouldn’t be able to afford fancy things, but look at you now.”

He loads my bag into the trunk before climbing into the driver’s seat. “Nah, you’re misinterpreting the situation. Teachers don’t get paid much. I didn’t buy this car, I won it. Pete and I had a bet going. He said Dylan would never get back together with Isabella, and I said they’d be married before the end of the year. He lost, so I got this car.”

“Peter must’ve been pissed.”

“He was.”

“How’s he doing otherwise? Has he finally decided to embrace adulthood and...work for a living?”

Scott chuckles. “Nope. You know Pete. He doesn’t want to waste his time working to make someone else rich, so he’s quite happy to just sit at home, watch old movies, and live off his passive income. On the bright side, though, after Dylan divorced Francesca, he moved in with Peter. So, that means Pete’s been living with a *bona fide* chef for over a year and a half. At the very least, he should know how to cook by now.”

“Yeah, Peter still sounds like Peter. And how’s your dad?” For some reason, I can’t stop the questions. I just want to find out everything that I missed out on. “You still meet him for lunch every week?”

“Sure do.” He maneuvers out of the parking lot toward the street. “We have lunch at the country club every Tuesday or Wednesday, depending on when he’s free. I was with him today, actually.”

“And your mom? Did you patch things up with her after we...after we broke up?” That was incredibly hard to say, but I manage to keep my face neutral.

“No.” The afternoon sun beams through the windows as he takes the exit for the highway, heading toward Santa Monica. “But she did send a lovely *I told you so* card...with a fruit basket, which I thought was a nice touch.”

“God, she knows nothing about you,” I say with a giggle. “You don’t eat a lot of fruit, but you don’t *hate* it, either. What was she hoping to achieve with that? I would’ve sent it with two pounds of licorice.”

Laughter rolls out of him, and I get another flashback of our past conversations. It reminds me of just how much I miss his laugh. The sound of it makes me feel a little empty inside.

“That’s because you’re fucking savage! Speaking of licorice...I got this for you.” He reaches over me to open the glove box, then tosses a packet of Jelly Bellies to me. “Consider it a coming home gift.”

At that moment, I know with certainty that I’m not going to get through the next two and a half weeks being around him. It’s too much of something I can really do without. After he drops me off at my mother’s house, I’m just going to avoid him as much as I can until I leave again.

“Listen, I’m just going to stop by my place real quick. Dylan had an incident with some ganache, so I wanna grab a clean set of clothes for him, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” I respond hesitantly, tearing open the little packet of candy.

I pick out the licorice ones and toss them into the ashtray before giving him a handful. I only realize after he pops the little beans into his mouth that I did that without thinking. The thing is, he once told me that he wanted to share every packet of Jelly Bellies with me, and from that second, it became *our* thing. Eating this is something I’ve never done by myself or with another person. It’s sacred somehow, intimate. It’s *ours* and the whole process of sharing it with him is second nature, muscle memory developed from the act of doing this with him for years. Somehow, that makes me feel like my body is slipping into the normal routine of being around him. And it

shouldn't. Nothing about my interactions with him should feel *normal*. I shift uncomfortably and look straight ahead instead.

He sneaks a peek at me, and his lips quirk up slightly. "So...I hear you have a boyfriend?"

I slowly chew the candy in my mouth. "Uh...awkward, but...yes, I do. He'll be flying over the week after next."

"What's he like?"

"He's a great guy, Scott."

His blue eyes fix on me for a few seconds, and he looks a little sad. "He treats you good?"

I nod. "Of course. He's thoughtful and romantic and very kind. He takes really good care of me. And we have a lot in common, too. We both love to travel, and we both love art. He's a painter. His work is amazing. You should see it sometime."

"That's great." His tone remains casual, even though I see his hands tightening on the steering wheel. "I'm happy for you, Cat. You got what you've always wanted."

Even though I know he's genuinely happy for me, I can hear the slight resentment in his voice. It hurts him to know that *he* wasn't what I wanted. Well, that's the way he sees it. He blurs the line between the man I wanted and the life I wanted. He sees it as the same thing. It isn't. It's not that I didn't want *him*. I did. With everything in me, I wanted him. I just didn't want the boring, conventional, mediocre life. I didn't want the house in the suburbs and carpooling the kids to school. I wanted thrill-seeking adventure and never knowing what the future holds. I tried to explain that to him during our last conversation, but he just didn't get it because he can't separate the two — himself from the life he was offering me. It shouldn't matter to him now anyway, though. He dumped me. Quite brutally, in fact, so if anyone should be resentful here, it's me.

We fall into silence and it's a little tense before he speaks again. "So...he's an artist?"

"Yep."

His eyes narrow at me in a somewhat playful way. “I bet he has a man-bun.”

Abject shock plays with my expression and my mouth drops open. “He does not!”

He obviously sees something in my reaction because douche mode immediately kicks in. “He does! You’re dating a guy with a man-bun? Really?”

“Okay...okay, listen. His hair is...a little long and on very...*very* rare occasions...he might—”

“He wears it in a fucking man-bun!”

I erupt with laughter. Even after all these years, he still has the unique ability to make me laugh without inhibitions. It’s weird. We seem to be simultaneously floating between discomfort and familiarity.

“Shit, I can’t believe it.” He’s still chuckling when he stops outside an apartment building and switches off the car. “We’re here.” He unstraps his seatbelt. “Do you want to wait in the car or...do you wanna come up?”

“Uh...I need the bathroom, so I’ll come up.”

I hop out, and he leads me inside to the elevator. After slotting in a key and turning it, he punches in a code, and the elevator takes us up to the twelfth floor. The whole floor is the living space, so we walk straight out of the elevator into his kitchen. Beyond the modern lightwood countertops, the space extends to an open-plan lounge and a small dining area. His apartment is exactly how I pictured it would look.

Rustic style emphasized by rugged, natural finishes. Stone walls and exposed beams on the ceilings make it feel manly, yet still cozy. All the décor has soft, earthy tones. The dark weathered wooden flooring coupled with the sunlight streaming in from the double-volume windows gives this place a homely warmth. It’s right on the beach and the view of the ocean is breathtaking.

“This is beautiful,” I say, looking around.

“Thanks. The view from the roof is even better.”

There's a lingering silence, almost as if this is the part when he offers a quick tour of the place, but he remains quiet, which sort of gives me the vibe that he doesn't want me in his personal space.

I clear my throat and resume the conversation as if the pause didn't happen. "I bet it is. I'm guessing you have exclusive access because you're renting the top floor."

"Oh, I'm not renting. I bought it a few months ago."

My eyes widen. "Beachfront property? Again, I'm going to point out that this is not how I expected a teacher to live."

"Again, I'm going to point out that I have a friend named Peter. I saw this as a lucrative investment, so I asked him for a loan to buy the whole building. I use the rentals from the other tenants to pay back the loan, so technically, it's paying itself off. This way I'm not out of pocket *and* I don't have to pay rent. It'll be mine in about six years."

"You've always been so smart and responsible when it comes to money," I muse.

Something about that comment seems to irritate him, but he ignores it and points to the corridor on the left. "Bathroom is down that way."

After walking past the kitchen on the right, he disappears into his bedroom. I do my business, then wash my hands and make my way back. He still hasn't returned to the lounge. I walk around his apartment to keep myself occupied, taking in the little details. The fruit bowl that only contains bananas because that's the only fruit he eats regularly. The empty can of diet Pepsi on the kitchen counter. The math textbooks on the coffee table. The L-shaped couch and the leather recliner. The gym bag and discarded pair of Nike trainers in the corner of the room. All these things show that this place is *his*. It's his home.

JP and I don't own any furniture. We move around so often that it's too much of a burden to buy anything, so the apartments we rent are always fully furnished. We live in environments where we're surrounded by the designs, tastes,

and preferences of *other* people, *their* things. I don't like yellow and yet the bedroom in our apartment in Paris is all done up in pale yellow. This realization bothers me a little.

I lift one of the textbooks and start flipping through the pages. It's all gibberish to me. I don't know how he understands this stuff. On the opposite wall is a notice board with little notes pinned up on it. I walk over for a better look and see that they're all from his students. Some are thanking him; others praise him for making math fun. His students love him. It's apparent in every one of those notes.

"Where are you teaching now, Scott?" I call out.

"Richmond High," he yells back. "I teach tenth grade there and I'm also the assistant football coach."

"I thought you'd be at a private school. The money's better."

"You know I don't do this for the money, Cat. Besides, private school kids are pretentious, spoiled brats."

"Ah, the irony," I snicker. I continue walking through his apartment, taking in the pot plants and pictures on the wall. All these bits of him give me clues about the person he's become. "So, Santa Monica, huh?"

"Yeah. I moved here a few months ago when I transferred to Richmond, which is three blocks from here, and I got this amazing opportunity to guest lecture math to the engineering students twice a week at a university a few miles away, so it's just more convenient here."

"Wow! You're teaching university students as well. That's incredible."

"Yeah, I enjoy it," he concurs, but his voice lacks the level of excitement I was expecting. "I managed to get my foot in the door and the dean was quite impressed, so he put me on the academic committee. Under mentorship, though, because I'm still inexperienced and I'm not permanent staff there, but he's trying to groom me for the role."

"Ooh, sounds dirty."

He lets out a short laugh, still sounding less than enthusiastic. "I'm still having trouble believing it."

I walk to his bedroom and lean against the door frame, watching him rummage through his cupboard. I take note of his sneaker collection. They're not all expensive brands like they were in high school, but he still has an impressive variety of colors and designs, and I'm sure he still matches them to whatever T-shirt he wears.

Only sparing me a sideways glance, he continues with his mission. "Hey, do you remember Manuela?"

"Carlos' little girl?"

"Yeah. She's an engineering student now, and she's doing great! It's just...it's nice to see." He tosses a pair of jeans over his shoulder. "I mean, she was struggling with English when I tutored her, battling with fractions, and now she's acing math. It's such a great feeling to know I was a small part of her success, you know."

"You were a *big* part of her success. You did a lot for all those kids. And what you're doing now is just amazing. You've worked hard to get to where you are and...I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." The response is curt, almost cold. His jaw tightens, and he grabs a pair of sneakers from the bottom of the cupboard before elbowing the door shut. "I guess there are some small rewards in this mediocre life of mine."

The entire sentence is dripping with disdain, another verbal jab that I choose to sidestep. "Do you think Dylan needs socks?" I ask, quickly changing the subject.

"Not sure. Just take a pair from the top drawer there."

I walk to the chest of drawers, but the pictures on top of it grab my attention before I even get a chance to open the top one. "Well, this is awkward."

"Shit," he curses under his breath. "I forgot about those."

My eyes scan over the framed pictures. In front, there are pictures of him with Dylan and Peter, some with his dad, some

with my mom, Keith, and Isa, but at the back...most of them are of the two of us. As I take in the details, memories begin to float through my mind, so vivid it feels like I'm reliving them. The story of the years we dated is told in a series of pictures, but my eyes zone in on the earlier ones where it all began. Looking at them now, the end came too quickly.

The one he took on my porch after we went out for our eighteenth birthday. *"Now I'll always remember what you looked like on the night you gave me your number. Goodnight, beautiful."*

Closer to the edge is the one he took in my bedroom a few days before our first Christmas together. *"You look like every afternoon nap that I want you cuddling in my arms. Girl, you are out here looking like the rest of my life."*

The one of my family that he took from Ms. Jeffries' office when we were still in high school is closer to the front. *"This is what I want. I want it with you and only you. Call me when you're ready to give it to me."*

Behind it is one of us at the beach on the day he proposed, the same beach right outside his window. I'm wrapped in his arms with our mouths pressed together. *"Bring it, Savage. Throw in some nagging, too. I'll deal with anything if it's you...and it absolutely has to be you."*

He'd kissed me right after saying that. My lips tingle with the memory of that kiss. My heart flutters with the excitement I felt on that summer afternoon eight years ago. It's still one of the happiest days of my life. This is weird, though. It's years later. Why does he still have pictures of us in his *bedroom*?

"Doesn't this kinda...dampen the mood when you bring women over?" I ask with as much playfulness as I can muster.

"Nah." A dismissive hand is waved in my direction. "I just tell them you're my sister."

I try to suppress a giggle. "Your...Mexican sister?"

"Foster sister."

"Who you kiss on the mouth?"

“Yeah, they generally don’t understand the dynamics of our family.” The grin stays on his face, but his tone becomes more serious. “I don’t bring women over, Cat. You’re the first to ever come up here and it was a fucking bad idea.” Walking over to me, he opens the drawer and takes out a pair of socks. “We should go.”

“We should.”

But neither of us moves. He just stares at me the same way he always does.

“This is hard,” he whispers.

“So hard.”

“You know this is your fault, right? You could’ve made this so much easier if you just weren’t so...pretty.” His less-than-authentic grin lets me know that he only said that to lighten the mood.

“You can fuck right off, Scott,” I say, also trying to keep my tone somewhat lighthearted. “You were supposed to be *balding*...with a dad bod! And here you are looking like...*this*. Asshole!”

His grin turns into a chuckle. “I’m not even twenty-seven yet. Why would I be balding?”

“Because I was desperately willing it to be so.” I giggle, shaking my head. “Do you still have the abs?”

“Yeah. You wanna see?”

“Fuck no!” I realize as soon as the words leave my mouth that this is the first F-bomb I’ve dropped in years. Despite the tension in the room, it’s a sign that I still feel so comfortable around him.

“They’re a lot more chiseled now,” he says. “I’ve been working out like a maniac these past few weeks, thanks to you. The thought of seeing you again...it drove me a little nuts.”

And just like that, that tiny bit of playfulness we had going dissipates. I cringe, audibly scoffing my irritation. It seems like every lighthearted moment is followed by soul-crushing reality. Can we just smile politely, have idle chit-chats about

the weather, and get through the next couple of weeks without talking about anything deep or significant? It's hard for us to be around each other, but I would prefer it if both of us tried to act...as if it wasn't. "You're impossible. Can you at least pretend like—"

"Like what? Like seeing you again isn't killing me inside? You want me to stand here and pretend I don't wish you and I were still together?" He gives a stiff nod with the added jab of a sarcastic smirk. "Okay, I'll try."

Hearing that sends my brain into a tizzy, and my heartbeat turns into erratic thumps. When I got on the plane a few hours ago, I had a lot of expectations for this trip and I'd mentally prepared for all of them. I expected awkwardness. I expected resentment. I expected a girlfriend or a wife, maybe even a kid. Even though Scott with another woman wasn't exactly something I wanted to see, I had prepared myself to see it. But hearing that...Nothing could have prepared me for that.

What am I supposed to do with that? Those words leave me winded for a few moments. They were so blunt, so painful to hear that I have to shut my eyes to stop tears from escaping. He ignored every one of my phone calls, all my texts, every effort I made to try to make it work for three fucking *months*! He sent me a very clear message. I took that message and my broken heart, and I moved on. Now he's telling me something different, and my brain is not coping with that information.

Despite my pleading and begging, he still ended it, and then he just ignored me. If he had just answered *one* call, responded to *one* message, if he just told me that he was still willing to make it work, I would've come home as soon as that project was done. But he ghosted me instead. The fact that he could cut me out of his life so easily ripped me apart, and now he tells me that he wishes we were still together. That would have been nice to know five years ago. What the hell am I supposed to do with it now?

This would've been bearable if we had broken up for another reason. If one of us had cheated, or if we fell out of love, we wouldn't be in this situation because those reasons entail a change of feelings. But nothing changed. He ended our

relationship abruptly and then those feelings had nowhere to go, so now they're just floating around, hanging heavily in the air between us. They're looking for a place to settle, desperately trying to go back to where they belong, but both of us have silently resolved to just leave them out there stranded...desolate.

He knows my body language so well that I don't even have to tell him I'm crumbling inside.

"Fuck," he curses under his breath. He tosses the jeans and sneakers onto the chest of drawers and pulls me into his arms. "C'mere."

I bury my face in his chest, deeply inhaling the smell of his spicy cologne. In through the nose, out through the mouth, I breathe in the scent I hadn't realized I missed so much until now.

He moves back slightly, gently stroking the tears off my cheeks. I don't know when I started crying. I don't know when I'll stop.

"I'm sorry," he says with a tenderness that only makes my throat close up tighter. "I didn't mean to upset you. That's the last thing I wanted to do. Just forget what I said, okay? You're happy and that's all that matters. You wanted to follow your dreams, and...those dreams were bigger than me...and what I could give you. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. I'm not going to say I don't judge you because...man-bun."

A giggle hiccups out of me despite the tears rolling down my face.

"But he's the guy who brings that adventure you crave. He's the guy who fulfills...*everything* you want out of life." He takes a moment to recompose himself after saying that. "He's the guy who makes you happy, so...I'm happy for you, Catalina...Really, I am."

"And what about you? Are you happy?"

He smiles, but I can still see his sadness. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

I decide to not make the situation worse than it is and accept his words without argument. I use both hands to wipe the moisture off my face. “Ugh...I’m a mess.”

“Is that...” Scott grabs my left hand. “Why do you still wear this?” he asks, tracing his thumb over my ring...*his* ring.

Crap! How did I forget to take it off? I almost roll my eyes at my own thoughts. I moved it to my middle finger, then just...forgot about it. It’s been there for years without me giving it a second thought. This blasted thing is like a piece of me now. It never comes off.

“Does your *boyfriend* know I gave this to you?”

“No,” I reply unsteadily. “He...he doesn’t know about you, Scott.”

The look that comes over his face completely shatters me. A staggered breath drops out of him as if he just got kicked in the stomach and he’s trying to breathe through the pain. His hurt is palpable, and I feel it squeezing my own chest.

“Uh...yeah.” He tries to remain indifferent, but his jaw is tight, and his hands are shaking. “Of course, he doesn’t know about me. I’m just that chapter of your life that you filed under boring before you fucked off and left me.”

My heart drops into my stomach. “Scott, that’s not—”

He’s already halfway to the door. “C’mon, let me take you home.”



IT’S A FORTY-MINUTE drive from Scott’s apartment to my mother’s house, and he remains quiet the whole time. He doesn’t say one word. He doesn’t even look at me until he switches off the car.

“Listen, Cat, you didn’t come all this way just to bicker with me. Your sister is getting married. This is supposed to be a happy occasion, and I don’t want to ruin this for you...or her. So, just forget about everything that happened earlier and enjoy the time with your family. Let’s not allow our issues to take away anything from this special time. Isa and Dylan have

been through a lot this year, so let's just push our feelings aside, smile through the awkwardness, and let them have the wedding they deserve, okay?"

I nod even though I know that's easier said than done. "Thanks, Scott. That means a lot to me." I open the passenger door. "Are you coming in?"

"Yeah...in a bit. Just...just give me a minute."

With a heavy breath, I push the door open and exit the car. I walk down the pathway and up the stairs of the porch that lead to the front door of my childhood home. Before I enter, I turn my ring, hiding the diamond in my palm so my family doesn't recognize it. It should be easier to just take it off...but it isn't.

As soon as I step in, I'm greeted by the familiar smell of my mother's cooking. The sound of Isabella yelling is also very familiar, and I smile to myself as I close the door and make my way to the kitchen.

"I swear to God, ma, if I have to tell her one more time that I *don't* want her stupid fruit cake, I'm going to end up gouging her eyes out."

"Maybe consider something that won't land you in prison," Dylan offers. "I'm still relatively keen on marrying you."

Isabella giggles. "Wow, De Lorenzo. You know, the words *relatively* and *keen* make me feel like this is true love. I'm"

She stops mid-sentence when she sees me entering the kitchen. My mother and Isa screech their excitement before charging toward me, showering me with hugs and kisses.

"You're home, *Mija*," my mother says, tears spilling from her eyes.

I'm not sure if it's because of the exhaustion or my encounter with Scott earlier, but the way she said the word *home* has me blinking back tears again. "I'm home, mom."

They hold on to me for two solid minutes.

“It’s so good to see you,” Isa whispers in my ear, hugging me tighter. “We’ve missed you so much.”

It’s been almost two years since I’ve been back. I was supposed to come home last Christmas, but extremely bad weather delayed our flight for several days, and when the weather finally cleared up, it was already time for me to start a new project. I still FaceTime Isa and my mom a few times a week, but seeing their faces on a screen simply does not compare to being wrapped up in their arms like this.

“Do you want to eat?” mom asks, pulling away from me first.

“A little later, ma.”

I look around as I sit on a barstool in front of the island stove. They’ve refurbished the kitchen. The cupboards are now white, and the countertops have been replaced with sleek grey granite. It’s more modern but still has that homely feel, or maybe that’s just my mom’s presence.

“I love your hair,” Isa says, twisting a lock around her finger.

“I love yours!”

Isa has always been on the eccentric side. Lots of jewelry with an edgy fashion style, and her hair is no exception. As soon as she graduated from high school, she went crazy experimenting with different colors. I thought I was bold with my auburn highlights, but her glossy dark curls are beautifully streaked with bright pink. As usual, her hairstyle is also creative – two French braids twisting up into a messy ponytail. With her hair up, I can see her tattoo of a string of hearts starting from behind her ear to the edge of her jawbone. She looks the same, yet entirely different. The sight of my sister is confirmation that I got so used to missing her that I forgot how much I missed her. A part of me feels the same way about Scott, but I don’t want to think about that right now. It makes me feel guilty and...stupid when I should feel nothing for Scott after the way he treated me.

“So, tell me everything,” I say, facing Isa to give her my undivided attention. “How are the wedding plans going?”

“It’s a disaster! That’s why I wanted you to come early.” She throws her arm around me and rests her head on my shoulder. “I need someone to stop me from killing people.”

“I thought that’s what your fiancé was for? Dammit! You had one job, Dylan.” I wink at him and he smirks.

She sighs heavily. “The lady we asked to bake our cake is constantly trying to convince me to change my choice to a fruit cake when I just want a simple chocolate cake.”

“Didn’t you work for a bakery before?” Dylan chimes in. “Why don’t you just bake one yourself?”

“Oh, yeah. Of course,” she fires back with a hint of sarcasm. “Because I have so much free time to just bake a five-layer wedding cake.”

Although the exchange is playful, pre-wedding stress puts a strain on both their voices. I don’t envy them at all. And yet...I do. It feels like yesterday when Scott and I were talking about planning our wedding and all those plans just ended up being broken promises we made to each other.

Scott and I lived our lives in reverse and our paths only aligned for a short space of time. He grew up in the lap of luxury, traveling all over the world from a young age. He went skiing in Switzerland and sailed the Caribbean on his family’s private yacht. His mother rented out the whole of Universal Studios and flew him and his friends to Florida for his *eleventh* birthday. I got a cake for mine. And I’m not ungrateful. My parents did their very best for us and I love them for it, but Scott doesn’t understand what it’s like to live a life with barriers, to be trapped beneath a glass ceiling.

He got to experience so much, got to see places I had only dreamed of before we even finished high school, so he was ready to put down roots and settle down. I, on the other hand, had never even been to the beach...in California. My first time seeing the ocean was graduation day eight years ago, the day

he proposed. By the time I finished high school, I had known nothing but my hometown.

When the travel bug bit me, it inflamed my curiosity, my taste for adventure. I became addicted, delirious with the need to explore, and putting down roots was right at the bottom of my priority list. It still is. And that stark difference in our priorities is the very reason why Scott and I just didn't work.

Again, I make an active effort to stop thinking about Scott. Seeing him again has clearly impacted me on a deep psychological level because I can't seem to push him out of my mind. That objective becomes ten times harder when he walks through the door carrying my oversized suitcase. He leaves it in the corner of the dining room and makes his way to the kitchen. I don't know what happened in the car, but he's not in the same somber mood he was in just a few minutes ago. He smiles and walks straight to my mother, kissing her on the cheek.

"Hey, Mrs. H."

The name still sounds odd to me. Scott started calling my mom Mrs. H after she married Keith, but I wasn't around for the new name to become *normal* to me. I flew home for the wedding, stayed a few weeks, then left again, so I wasn't a witness to the transition.

"Yo, Isa!" Scott says, ruffling her hair.

She rolls her eyes and lets out a small groan of annoyance the same way she always does. "You know I hate when you call me like that."

"And you know I love that murderous look on your face every time I do it."

Watching their playful bickering brings an instant smile to my face, because that is one thing that has not changed. Scott chuckles when she narrows her eyes at him, but his expression becomes more serious when his focus moves to Dylan.

"Wow," Dylan scoffs, the word glazed with disdain. "You're looking an awful lot like Scott today, *Peter*."

Scott shrugs with indifference. “I’m trying out a little cosplay.”

“You said you’d let Peter handle it,” Dylan mutters irritably.

“I lied.”

They exchange looks for a moment before Scott hands him the jeans and sneakers.

“Thanks,” Dylan says, his mood softening slightly, and it’s only as he exits the kitchen that I notice his soiled clothes.

“Do you want to eat?” my mother asks Scott.

He drops down on the stool beside me. “Did you make chicken?”

“No. I didn’t know you were coming today. Dylan brought Bolognese from the restaurant.”

“I’ll settle for that.”

A minute later, my mother places a plate of steaming food on the counter in front of him with a Ziplock bag of chocolate chip cookies. “Elena brought cookies for you, too.”

Isabella groans. “Why? He *doesn’t* live here! When is she going to get that?”

“Everyone in this neighborhood likes me more than you. When are you going to get *that*?” Scott retorts before digging into his food. “Oh, Mrs. H, I gotta show you something.” He sets his fork down, then takes out his phone and scrolls through his pictures. “Look at this little guy.”

“Awww, *tan lindo*,” mom coos, taking the phone from him to get a better look. “He is just the cutest. Is this the one you’ve decided to adopt?”

“Yep.” Scott takes his phone back. “He still has to get his shots, so he can’t leave his mom just yet. They told me I can only take him home in two weeks. I’m going to see him tomorrow, though.”

“I wanna see.” Isa rushes around the island to also get a look at the tiny Yorkshire terrier on his screen. His face is

mostly brown, but he has a black patch on one eye. “He’s adorable! What are you going to name him?”

“I was thinking about Tucker, but Peter says I should name him Rocky because of the black eye.”

Dylan returns to the kitchen and adds his two cents. “Pete’s a little overzealous when it comes to Rocky, but I have to say I agree with him on this one.”

Isabella nods. “I like Rocky, too.”

“Rocky, it is, then.”

Scott doesn’t show me the puppy. It’s another sign of him putting down roots and he’s obviously avoiding my opinion on the matter.

“Well, hello, family.”

The unexpected voice startles me, and I swivel around on the stool to see Keith standing behind me.

My stepdad pulls me into a big bear hug and kisses the top of my head. “Catalina, it’s so nice to have you home.”

Again, the word jabs me in the throat as I hug him tight. He shakes Dylan’s hand, slaps Scott on the back as a greeting, then walks around the island to kiss my mother. He makes her so happy. Her eyes still light up when she’s around him. There was a time when I thought she would never get over my father’s death, but Keith came in and was like a beacon of healing for her.

Keith’s features are somehow chiseled without being too rugged. He looks like an older version of Boris Kodjoe, and he is what anyone would describe as tall, dark, and handsome. Dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes. He looks so intense and serious until he smiles. He is probably the most light-hearted person I have ever met with the added traits of being kind, caring, and weirdly funny. Admittedly, it took a while for Isa and I to understand his sense of humor.

“Did you kill anyone today, Isa?” Keith asks after kissing her on the head as well.

She giggles. “Not today, dad, but I came close. *Really* close.”

A sharp jolt in my chest is a sign that my body registered that sentence quicker than my brain did. She just called him *dad*. I’ve heard her refer to him that way many times before, but this is the first time I’ve witnessed it in person, and it makes me realize how much I’ve missed. Scott’s transition from calling my mother Mrs. D to Mrs. H. Isa’s transition from Keith to dad. My throat squeezes so tight I can barely get air through. These are small things, petty things, but when added to this gaping hole of everything I’ve missed out on, it’s just becoming too emotionally overwhelming.

I love Keith. I really do and we’ve...talked. He made every effort to get to know Isa and I better, but when I left, our relationship halted while his bond with Isa grew stronger. Why does that hurt so much?

I’m not jealous or angry. In fact, I love that their bond is so deep. She became so reckless after my dad died, barreling down a path of self-destruction, and I didn’t think she would ever get close to another man again. And now she’s getting married and calling Keith dad. It hurts to know I wasn’t part of the process of her getting to this point.

I wasn’t expecting time to stand still while I was away, but it seems like everyone has grown together and moved on... without me. This is *my* family and yet somehow, I feel excluded, like I’m an outsider.

I take a few breaths as I try to pull myself together. Everyone is too distracted to notice anything, and for a moment, I’m glad that none of them see my despondency. That is...until Scott’s hand lands on mine, gently squeezing my fingers, and I instantly know that he’s picked up on the dip in my mood.

“You okay?” he whispers, so only I can hear.

I hate when he does this because it’s the quality that makes him so...Scott. Maybe it’s a by-product of how our relationship started out, but he always puts my feelings first, regardless of what he might be going through. I know he’s still

upset about what happened at his apartment earlier, but he'll put it aside to prioritize me.

I slowly shake my head, and after another squeeze, he releases my hand, and his attention goes back to his phone. My phone dings a few seconds later and when I check it, there's a meme from him: *Don't be sad because sad backward is das... and das not good.*

Aw, man. I forgot about the memes. He used to drive me nuts with them. Seeing his name on my phone again does strange things to me. I've wanted to see his name light up my screen for so long that it feels like some abstract wish that just got fulfilled...a little too late. Somehow, it keeps me trapped in this nostalgic trance. I look up at him and force a smile. "Is that the best you got?"

"Don't play, girl. Because if I—"

There's a naughty warning in his tone. He'll flood my messenger with this crap. "Stand down, Soldier. I surrender and accept defeat gracefully."

I almost cringe once that sentence is out. Calling him *Soldier* only reinforces the fact that my mind is stuck in the past and that is a dangerous place to be.

"Oh, and we're going for a dress fitting tomorrow at ten," Isa says, pulling us out of our small bubble and back to the conversation. "I'll take you there, but I have to get back to work right after, so Dylan will bring you back home."

"Bella, I told you that we've got those food critics coming to the restaurant tomorrow. They're doing a write-up for a magazine, and I have to be there."

"Sorry, I messed up the dates. I thought they were only coming on Friday." She turns to Keith. "Dad?"

"Sure. I have a meeting at twelve, so as long as you girls are done by eleven, I can pick Cat up and still get back to the office on time."

I'm about to object to tell them I can get home by myself when Dylan moves to stand beside Isa and curls his arm

around her neck. “And what did your maid of honor say about his suit?”

Isa giggles. “You know Tom. He says he’ll wear the pink jacket and tie, but he’s wearing it with cargo shorts. I was just grateful that he agreed to give up the floral print Hawaiian shirt for a day, so I took my win and gave no further arguments.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him,” Dylan confirms.

Again, I feel another blow of being away from home for way too long. My sister chose Tommy to be her maid of honor, and he rightfully deserves that title because he’s been there for her through good days, bad days, rain or shine. I know my sister misses me, and there were many times in the beginning when she used to beg me to come home, but eventually, she stopped needing me. I thought I would be bursting with happiness today, and I am, but I find myself constantly on the brink of tears. I’ve been flung into the deep end of my old life, and I’m struggling to swim.

“I can’t believe you’re trying on wedding dresses. Where did the time go?” Keith smiles at me then at Isa, and that smile is both proud and sad at the same time. “I know you’re both going to look beautiful on the day.”

I’m not sure what about that statement makes Scott feel uncomfortable, but he clears his throat and stands up. “I’d better get going.” He takes his plate to the sink, then starts moving toward the front door. “Are we still on for Saturday?”

“Yeah,” Keith replies. “Just tell Peter not to drink before we play. I don’t want you guys to have any excuses when you lose again.”

Scott rolls his eyes. “You’re pushing fifty, Keith. We like to go easy on you.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Besides, my dad was on our team last time. He has no hand-eye coordination.”

Keith laughs. “You use the same lame excuse every time I whip yo’ ass.”

“It’s just embarrassing, is all, but Pete and I keep trying and that’s what counts.” Scott grabs his Ziplock bag of cookies. “Catch you guys on Saturday.” He looks in my direction and gives a non-committal nod. “See you around, Cat.”

I don’t doubt that I will probably run into Scott a few times, but that at least makes me feel like we’re on the same page when it comes to avoiding each other.

“See you around, Scott...and thanks for picking me up.”

“No problem.”

He leaves without saying another word and soon after, Dylan leaves as well to allow us some quality time as a family. The four of us have dinner and my mother dotes about how much she loves having my sister and I back under the same roof again. There’s a simple, inexplicable joy just being in their presence again, to be *home* again.

“I’m staying here tonight,” Isa says as we clear the table. “Will you sleep with me...like you used to when we were kids?”

“Of course.”

Keith and my mother snuggle on the couch to watch a movie while Isa and I clean up. She tells me about how her career is starting to take off. She and Tommy started out doing the lunchtime show at a radio station, KRXM. The two of them can talk utter nonsense for hours and it’s highly entertaining, which is how they got the show in the first place. Last year, they got bumped up to the breakfast slot because their ratings were so good, and now they were offered a contract for the breakfast show at a bigger station, AmpUP Radio. She’s due to start their new show as soon as she gets back from her honeymoon. Her excitement is infectious, and I find myself beaming with happiness. I’m so proud of her.

There isn’t a silent moment. At some points, we’re talking over each other because we can’t contain ourselves. She’s come such a long way. Catching up with her is both joyful and surreal, because I can see how much she’s grown.

After a quick shower, I go to her old bedroom. Isa's best friend, Tommy, moved into my old room about a year after I moved out, and a lot of his stuff is still there, so it feels like *his* room now, not mine. Isa is already under the covers, and she resumes our conversation as I climb in beside her. She asks about my travels, and her questions don't stop. She hangs on my every word, wanting to find out about every town and city I've been to.

"I'm so jealous," she says. "You're living the life, traveling the world, dating a ruggedly hot French dude who adores you and—"

"Shit!" I gasp. "I forgot to call him. Give me one second, Isa."

I want to slap myself. I was so distracted it didn't even register to call JP and let him know I'd arrived safely. Checking my phone, I realize he's probably already asleep because Paris is nine hours ahead of us. I shoot him a quick text instead and promise to call him tomorrow.

"So, were things awkward today between you and Scott?" Isa asks once she has my full attention again.

"Not awkward. It's just...different. I see glimpses of us, but it doesn't *feel* like us. It doesn't feel normal...but I guess I just have to get used to it because this is the new normal."

Isa gives a small pout. "I'm sorry. I know this must be hard for you and I wish I could make it easier, but Scott, Peter, and Dylan come as a package deal. At least it's only for a few weeks, then you'll be jetting off with JP again. I can't wait to finally meet him in person. He's so reserved over the phone, but I'm sure it's just because he's not that comfortable around us yet."

I let out a short laugh. "Uh...no, he's like that in person, too."

"Really? That doesn't seem..." She pauses, uncertain if she should say what she wants out loud. "He doesn't...I mean...that doesn't seem like a quality you'd ordinarily be attracted to."

“Yeah, I guess, but we complement each other in a lot of ways. We just...we have a dynamic that works. He’s an amazing guy and I love the fact that we are so different in so many ways, yet we have the same interests, but I have to admit...he’s tamed me a bit. I’m not so...rough around the edges anymore.”

“Yeah, I can see that about him. He seems quiet and reserved, but still an extrovert.”

“That is the perfect way to describe him. He loves the outdoors.” I whip out my phone again, showing her pictures of JP and I with an accompanying story for each one. “So, this is the igloo we stayed in. It was *so* cold but...” I skip a few pictures until I get to one that shows the northern lights. “Look at the sky. That’s what we fell asleep under.”

“Wow! Did I tell you that I’m jealous? I completely understand why you didn’t come home for two years...and why you probably have no intention of ever moving back here.”

“None whatsoever. Isa, once you see what’s out there, you can’t come back to this.”

She gives me a sad smile. “I know. I just miss you. Chatting through a screen is not the same as having you here, and I’m so glad you came early just for me.”

“Anything for my baby sister.” I pull her in for a tight hug. “Now, about this wedding...it all feels very rushed. You and Dylan only got back together in April and now it’s July and you’re already getting married. You’re very impulsive. And he is too, so I just want to make sure□”

“Cat,” she cuts in, “I’ve already had this talk with mom and Keith. I’m sure. The thing is, no one understands me and Dylan except me and Dylan. I had to learn how he loves and how he wants to be loved. It took some intense therapy to learn that about him because he’s volatile and all over the place, but in the center of all that chaos is this man who loves me for everything I am with all my flaws and bad habits. He just wants me to love him the same way...and I do. It took

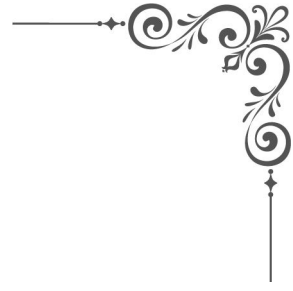
years for us to figure that out, so we are definitely not rushing into this.”

“Okay,” I say, feeling slightly more at ease. “As long as you are happy, I’m happy.”

“I am,” she assures me. “And...are you sure you’re okay with...Dipshit? I don’t want you to feel weird at the wedding. It’s my big day and□”

“I’m fine with Scott,” I reply with a nod. “My plan is to avoid him until the wedding, and it seems like he wants to do the same.”

I omit everything he told me at his apartment. I don’t know what to do with that and I don’t expect her to know either, so I’m just going to pretend like he never said it. Scott dragged me back a few years today. That’s not where I want to be, so I’m going to wrap up all these emotions that have been scampering around since I left his apartment and toss them into the deep crevices at the back of my mind, the same place I’ve buried every other memory of Scott Carter.



5. Scott

My feet pound on the treadmill in a steady rhythm. Sweat drips from my face and down my neck, soaking the collar of my T-shirt. I press a button to increase the speed and inclination and go harder. My muscles are burning. My lungs feel like they're deprived of oxygen. But all I do is go faster.

She didn't tell him about me. Three fucking years, and she didn't think it was something worth mentioning to her *boyfriend*. Well, technically, it was four and a half years, but I don't count past the point that she left because I lost her the second she got onto that plane. She started staying away longer and longer, and eventually, we both had to accept the truth. We wanted different things, and it just wasn't going to work out. I can still recall our conversation like it was yesterday.

"Cat, you said you'd be coming home this weekend."

"I know, but there was another delay, and I only got the additional materials this week—"

"Can't someone else take over from you?"

"No! Scott, this project is important to me. I started it. I want to finish it."

"But you finished it! This is going back to a piece you did three months ago because they just decided they want more detail added on. There are two other artists working with you. One of them can do it for you."

"I already told them I would do it."

"And I don't understand why you would agree to that, knowing it's going to add another month to this project! You didn't even speak to me about it first."

"So, now I have to run all my decisions past you first?"

"When it impacts me, yes!"

She presses her fingers against her forehead. "Scott, I don't want to fight about this again."

"I think it would be a bigger problem if we stopped fighting about this. The last time I saw you was when you flew home for your mother's wedding. That was almost four months ago! And before that...I can't even remember when I saw you last. Am I supposed to be okay with that?"

"No...I'm not okay with it either, which is why I keep asking you to come here. Please, Scott. We can do this together, see the world together, just live on our own terms."

"And where do my dreams fit into all this? I didn't use the only money I had left to put myself through college just to be an extension of you, Catalina. I have a life, too. Any place you go to, you only stay there for a few months. How am I supposed to do what I love if we're moving around all the time?" I lean closer to the screen because that's the closest I can get to her. "You can find lucrative projects here. We can find a way to make this work. Please, just come home."

"I don't...I don't want to come home...not yet."

That one sentence shatters me into a million pieces. "What?"

"I don't want that kind of life." Tears start rolling down her cheek. "I don't want society's norm anymore...where every day is just another Groundhog Day of doing the same thing. This project is changing everything for me, Scott. I've been given an opportunity that most people only dream of. I want to live life to the fullest, experience everything it has to offer. I can't pass this up. If I come home now, I'll sour my relationship with this client, and I don't want that because I'm starting to grow such a great network here. I won't get this kind of momentum going again. I'm going to get stuck in Pasadena just going about a routine, doing the same boring, mundane things every day."

I rub a hard hand over my jaw. "Is that how you see our lives together? Boring and mundane?"

“No.” She shuts her eyes and shakes her head. “That’s not what I’m saying, Scott. You know I love you with my whole heart. I just want more than what Pasadena has to offer. Just give me a little more time. Once this project is done, I’ll come home, but at least I’ll have this client who’s going to open so many doors for me, and it’ll be easier to build a career from there.”

“I’ve been listening to this for months. There’s always going to be another project, another delay, another client... and you’ll keep choosing it over me because the simple fact is...you don’t want this anymore. When you say you don’t want to come home and you want more than Pasadena, I gotta listen to what you’re really saying.” I’m silent for a good minute or so, considering all viable options, and there are none. I exhale a slow breath, trying to keep my composure. My throat is tight, and I can barely swallow, barely say the words that are so hard for me to say. “Cat, I love you...more than anything...but this, uh...” I drop my head, my voice becoming shaky and unsteady. “This is going to be my last call with you.”

“No! Scott, c’mon, please...please! Why can’t you come here and be with me?”

I meet her eyes on the screen, and tears are streaming down her cheeks now. “Baby, I gave up everything to be with you...but I can’t...I can’t give this up, too.”

I didn’t bother listening to any more excuses. I ended the call, and that was the last time I spoke to her until yesterday. She tried calling me back...*every day* for three months or so, sometimes four or five times a day. I didn’t answer. She texted me day and night. I didn’t respond. It took everything in me to ignore her each time. There were days I considered blocking her number just, so I didn’t have to deal with the desperate urge to hear her voice again, but I couldn’t bring myself to cut all lines of communication, especially since it took me *months* to get her number.

Instead, I constantly reminded myself that we’d reached an impasse, the point where we needed to stop fighting. And if she really wanted to speak to me, if she wanted to work it out, she could’ve hopped on a plane and come home to discuss it

with me in person. That didn't happen, either. It's painful to acknowledge, but we just didn't want the same things anymore. She wanted to escape the routine, the predictability, and yet I found so much fulfillment in doing the same thing every day.

I love my students – the college kids, and the tenth graders that give me hell. I shape lives every day. I inspire these kids to be better, motivate them until they understand their self-worth and what they're truly capable of. I'm fucking great at my boring, mundane job because I absolutely love it.

My ringing phone yanks me out of my thoughts. I stop the treadmill, grabbing a towel to dab away the sweat from my face before I answer.

“Hey, Keith,” I say, huffing out hard breaths.

“Hi, Scott. Sorry to spring this on you at the last minute, but I need to ask you for a favor.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Would you be able to pick Catalina up from the boutique and take her home? I wouldn't ask unless it was the last resort. My client shifted our meeting, and I can't get out of it. They should be done in an hour or so. I called Peter, but he's at his beach house, so□”

I sneer my irritation. “Can you guys stop trying to tiptoe around me? I can cope with being around my ex for a few minutes, for fuck's sake.”

“Sorry, Scott.” The sincerity in his voice makes me feel a little bad for snapping. “It's just we all know that the situation must be awkward for you...and Cat, and we're trying not to make it worse.”

“I'm completely capable of dealing with awkward. Send me the address. I'm gonna shower real quick and then I'll pick her up.”

I hang up and groan my frustration. Well, so much for avoiding her. After yesterday, I decided to take Pete's advice and not go anywhere near her unless it was absolutely necessary. Seeing her again stirred up every kind of emotion,

and I'm not sure what to do with all that. I don't resent her for the choices she's made. I'm happy that she's happy, but shit, I am so angry. Not at her...maybe at her. I don't know.

I'm angry because no matter what I did, it wasn't enough for her. I'm angry with all the excuses she made. I'm angry because I'm still so fucking twisted over this woman five years later and her new boyfriend doesn't even know I exist. I'm that insignificant to her. I didn't come up in a single conversation?

When I think about all the shit I had to deal with because of Cameron...How is it possible that I never once came up?

People talk about their exes, right? It's a topic of discussion. Were you in love before? Any long-term relationships? Those are standard questions people ask when they're getting to know the other person. And I was never mentioned? Even random questions. What was high school like for you? Pretty sure I would be somewhere in that answer. In a bad way, but still there. How did you start selling your sculptures? Gee, I wonder who helped her with that?

Cat has made a success of herself all on her own, but I think I deserve the tiniest amount of credit for introducing her to Connor, who then put her in contact with the woman who helped Cat get her internship. But it's like I never existed. She just *Men-In-Blacked* me out of her life. Pressed a little button on the neuralyzer, zapped herself with a blinding light, and then boom...all memories of me disappeared. Three fucking years and...*poof*—gone. I never happened.

I shake off my irritation as I walk to the showers at the back of the gym, gulping down a protein shake. Forty-five minutes later, I'm parked outside the boutique, clenching my hands around the steering wheel. I just have to get used to this. I can't avoid her. Dylan and Keith are a big part of my life, and seeing them will most likely entail seeing her. Just a few weeks, then she'll leave again, and things will go back to normal.

I walk in, take one look at her, and audibly groan. Fuck. My. Life! Yesterday I felt a little more in control, like I had a

handle on the situation. Apart from the unexpected declaration about me...wishing we were still together, I managed to keep myself composed (sort of). It was relatively easy because she was wearing a pair of blue skinny jeans and a loose-fitting white shirt. The straight hair was also a bit of a shock. So were the auburn highlights. She looked casual yet sophisticated, very different from the hip-hop hobo I used to know, and that change in her appearance led to a disconnect in my brain. I didn't see her as quite the same person, and that worked for me...yesterday.

Today, I can still see some very explicit differences from the girl I used to know, but today there is no disconnect. My brain is rapidly firing messages straight to my lower half. Her hair is down again – already a problem. She's wearing a tight pair of pedal pushers with a pink tank top that perfectly accentuates the bronzy tone of her skin. Time has changed her body from a somewhat skinny teenager to an incredibly sexy woman. She's all curves. Still petite, still toned, but somehow more buxom and filled out. Her thighs are thicker, her breasts are fuller, and that peachy ass is even peachier. I want to sink my teeth into it, watch how that ass bounces as I fuck her from behind.

Holy shit! Am I really thinking about having sex with her right now? Yeah, that's me. Here in some random wedding boutique just thinking with my dick again. She spots me from the other side of the room and looks a little surprised to see me. The confidence she carries herself with now makes her even sexier. She used to be quite insecure about her looks and her body (my fault), but that slightly reserved demeanor has faded away. Life experience and independence seem to have pulled her out of her shell. She's so self-assured, almost cocky. The way her hips sway as she saunters toward me tells me that she knows exactly the type of appeal she has.

“Wow, you look an awful lot like Scott today, Keith,” she teases.

“I'm getting exceptionally good at this cosplay.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, pushing those supple tits closer together, and I actively force my eyes to stay on

hers. “Why do they keep roping you into this stuff?”

“They secretly hate me,” I reply with a shrug. “Is Isa still here?”

“No, she left a few minutes ago. I’m not sure why Keith asked you. Sometimes he forgets that I’m an adult and I’m *very* capable of getting around by myself. I can take an Uber. Don’t inconvenience yourself, Scott. I’ll find my own way home.”

“I’m here.” My tone is not rude, but clipped enough to show my impatience. “I’ve already inconvenienced myself. Do you wanna maybe dial back the attitude and get in the car?”

She simply glares at me for a few seconds before she walks out of the boutique to my SUV. After we get in and strap on our seatbelts, I turn to her. I’m looking at her but trying not to look at her. I hate this weird tension we got going between us.

“Uh...listen, I want to see my puppy. The shelter is just a few blocks from here, so can I make a quick stop there, and then I’ll take you back to your mom’s?”

“Sure.”

Once we arrive at the shelter, I fully expect her to stay in the car, but she hops out and follows me in.

“Hi, Megan,” I say when I reach the reception desk.

Megan is one of my engineering students. She and her older sister, Kaitlin, volunteer at the shelter during the summer. Six weeks ago, one of the abandoned dogs they took in gave birth to three puppies, but unfortunately, because of malnourishment during pregnancy, only one survived. Megan posted a picture of him on the class forum, asking if anyone wanted to adopt him, and my thumbs responded at rapid-fire speed. The second I laid eyes on him, I just had to have him.

Megan’s eyes widen when she sees me. “Hi...Oh, hi, Mr. Carter!” Her voice is high-pitched, and her cheeks turn bright red. She adjusts her shirt and runs a quick hand over her curly blonde hair. “We...we weren’t expecting you to come by today.”

Kaitlin gives me a sultry smile. “I’m not complaining.” Her green eyes move down my chest, and she nips her lower lip with her teeth. “It’s nice to see you, Scott. It’s *always* nice to see you.”

A small snicker pops out of Catalina because the flirting is so blatant. Megan is a sweetheart, but she’s very shy and gets overly nervous every time she talks to...pretty much any guy. Her sister, on the other hand, not so sweet and not nervous at all. Kaitlin, as Cat would probably describe her, is a walking thirst trap. She’s told me on more than one occasion exactly what she wants from me. She’s never been in my class. She studied Economics or some shit like that, so she’s never thought that the teacher-student boundaries ever applied to her and I. After she graduated, she became ten times worse, making her intentions more obvious because technically there are no barriers anymore. She calls me Scott to blur the lines further.

“How’s my little guy?” I ask, ignoring the comment.

“Oh, he’s so cute,” Megan replies. “And doing so well.”

We follow her to the back to a small cage at the end of the passage.

“Mama is still a little protective of him,” Megan explains as she unlocks the cage, “so if she starts growling, don’t touch him.”

I wait for her to leave before I squat down and carefully reach into the cage to pick him up. His mom doesn’t seem to mind. I’ve been coming here to check on him every few days, so she must be used to me by now.

“Hey, Rocky,” I say, testing the new name, and yeah, it suits him.

“He’s adorable.”

Cat kneels beside me and pets him on the head. I notice my ring is still on her finger. I’m not even going to try to analyze why she wears it. It’s either going to confuse me or piss me the fuck off. Instead, I focus on the little pup in my hands.

Rocky gives a small yelp as he yawns, then licks my nose. “I love the smell of puppy breath.”

Cat nods. “Me too. And his fur is so soft. I just want to cuddle him all day. We never had a dog growing up.”

“Same. My mom hates pets.”

“Your mom hates everything,” she agrees with a giggle.

We spend about fifteen minutes playing with Rocky before Megan comes back in.

“Sorry, so sorry, Mr. Carter, but we, uh, we need to clean the cages and feed them now.”

“Alright.” I stand up and help Cat up as well.

We walk back to the reception area and Kaitlin’s green eyes slowly appraise me again. I try not to take notice of it, but it’s a little hard when she’s looking at me like she wants to drag me into the nearest storage closet and have her way with me.

“I’ll come back next week,” I say, using Cat as a shield as we walk toward the door.

She winks at me. “See you next week, Scott.”

I exit as quickly as I can and walk back to my car.

“Wow!” Cat says as I open the door for her. “You were getting some serious *come-hither* eyes there.”

After she climbs in, I jog around to get in as well. “Holy shit! That was so awkward. I should be used to it because she does it all the time, but her persistence still shocks me.” My stomach grumbles, and I realize I’ve only had a protein shake today. “Hey, I’m starving. You wanna get something to eat?”

She gives it a moment’s thought, then nods with only the slightest hint of uncertainty. “Sure.” After another second of silence, she turns to give me a curious glance. “Can you explain this conundrum to me? How are you single when you have girls like that so desperately wanting to bang you?”

Just those words make me cringe. “Aah...I don’t want to think about her in that way.”

“Your younger self would’ve been all up in that.”

“I know. It’s quite disappointing how level-headed and responsible I am now.” I switch on the car and back out of the parking bay. “You see, the women who want to...*bang* me, as you so eloquently put it, generally fit into two distinct demographics. College girls who are too young and I could lose my job, and divorced moms at the high school who are too old...and I could lose my job. It kinda narrows down my options.”

“So, you just don’t date...at all?”

“No, I date a *lot*. My dad keeps setting me up on these blind dates, but shit, some of these women...they just see the dollar signs.”

Confusion wrinkles her forehead. “Have your parents changed their mind about your inheritance?”

“C’mon, Cat. You know better than that. Both my parents need to sign to change the clause of the trust fund and my mother still refuses. But my dad doesn’t mention that to them. No, he just leaves me to walk unsuspectingly into these marriage traps. He’s a *great* father.”

I park the car outside a small bistro and unstrap my seatbelt. Cat gets out and meets me on the sidewalk. It’s a beautiful day so we choose the outdoor dining area. A waitress comes to take our order. I decide on the chicken cordon bleu while Cat orders grilled hake with a side salad. As soon as the waitress leaves, she resumes our conversation.

“Any of those relationships blossom into anything?”

“The longest I’ve dated a girl...since you...was eight months,” I reply. “And this is gonna shock you. Do you remember Courtney?”

Her eyebrows crease as she tries to recall. “That shy, nerdy girl who used to sit in front of me in math?”

“Yep. That’s the one. She’s hot as fuck now...and not so shy anymore. We dated, and it was great...and then it was over. We broke up about a year and a half ago.”

“Courtney? Please tell me you didn’t break her heart.”

“That’s a bit judgy. If you must know, *she* ended it.”

She gives me a slanted look of disbelief. “Courtney dumped *you*. Why?”

Our waitress returns with our order, places our meals in front of us, then leaves again. It’s almost like we’re driven by habit, because without a word said, we start sharing our food. I cut a few slices of my chicken and leave it on the side of my plate so she can take a piece whenever she wants. She does the same with her hake. It would be easier to just swap the food over to the other person’s plate, but we don’t eat like that, so there’s just the constant crossing of arms as we help ourselves to each other’s food. It feels so natural, yet at the same time, wildly out of place.

My brain is still playing weird tricks on me. The woman in front of me is Catalina, but somehow...she’s not. She doesn’t look like her. She doesn’t sound like her. She speaks differently now. More eloquent and poised. It makes our whole interaction seem...professional. I’m not sure if it’s that or my simmering anger over the way things ended between us that’s making this conversation pleasant, but still mildly tense. I’m enjoying talking to her, but I just want her to be...Cat again. It’s so weird. She’s right in front of me, yet the woman I once loved still seems thousands of miles away.

“Dumped is such a harsh word.” I push past the weirdness, pick an olive from her salad, and pop it into my mouth. “Courtney is, like, all-round amazing, just really sweet, so she was almost...nurturing about the whole breakup. She very kindly told me that I was emotionally unavailable and that I should consider therapy to deal with my unresolved abandonment issues from my parents. It’s apparently stopping me from connecting with another person, and it’s probably the reason I can’t fall in love.”

She reaches over to take another piece of chicken from my plate. “Is there some truth to that?”

I half snort, half-laugh. “Nah, I can connect with another person just fine. Falling in love was easy for me. It’s falling

out of love that seems to be damn near impossible.”

“You are preaching to the choir!” The gleam in her eyes lets me know that she understands me. “Dude, the struggle is real.”

“Right? Put it up top, girl.” I raise my hand. “You know what I’m talking about.”

She giggles, giving me a high five, and I start to see a glimmer of who she used to be. Man, I miss her smile. Still the prettiest smile I’ve ever seen. Still lights up my whole world.

“You know, you’re still calling me *girl* like you used to when we were younger. You do realize I’m not a girl anymore?” She cocks an eyebrow, trying to sound mature. “I’m a *woman* now.”

“Yeah, I’m...*very* much aware of that.” My eyes sweep over her body, lingering a little too long on her chest. “When did you get those?”

“What?” She stops chewing. A blush creeps up her cheeks and she sits there shocked, gaping at me. “Are you seriously checking out my boobs right now?”

“How can I not? They’re so *perky* this morning.” My eyes move back to the cleavage peeping out of her pink tank top. Her breasts are still pert and small like I remember, but damn, they are just the fullest versions of themselves. “Just all up there...saying *hi* to everyone.”

Giggles spurt out of her, and she turns the cutest shade of red. And there she is. That’s the girl I dated for three years. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Can I touch it?” I ask just to get a more dramatic reaction.

She laughs harder. “No!”

“Just a quick grope...a tiny, little squeeze. You won’t even notice.”

“Still no.”

“Grinch!” I like that I can still joke with her like this and hearing her laughter makes me want to recapture the essence

of what we once were even more.

“I see why your blind dates go so well,” she teases. “You’re such a charmer.”

“Cat, if my blind dates had tits like yours, I wouldn’t mind them being stage-five clingers. They could cling to me as much as they want, rub themselves *all* over me. But seriously, though...Can I touch it?”

Her squeaky giggles draw laughter out of me this time. People in the bistro are looking at us like we’re crazy. And I guess we are. I’m joking with my ex-fiancé about groping her tits.

“You never give up. It’s—” Her ringing phone cuts her off, and the smile drops off her face. “It’s JP.”

By her tone, I figure JP is her new boyfriend. Somehow, it sucks all the playfulness out of the moment. It’s a video call, so I mentally brace myself for the conversation that’s about to happen right in front of me.

“Hi, love,” she greets, and I grit my teeth.

“*Ma chérie*, I miss your face.” His thick French accent floats through the speaker of her phone. “My heart is singing just seeing you.”

I roll my eyes. Who the fuck talks like that?

“Look at what a little distance does to you,” she teases with a hiccup of a laugh. “Now you’re all poetic and openly telling me how much you miss me. I should go away more often.”

“I only miss you a little.”

Seeing the smile on her face as she speaks to him is ripping me open. She used to smile at me like that.

“I miss you a lot.” A careful glance is cast in my direction, and I pretend like I’m not listening and scroll through my phone instead. “Is that guy from the gallery still giving you a hard time?”

“He wants a bigger commission this time and I might be forced to give it to him. That gallery is my biggest source of income.”

“He’s such an asshole!”

JP scoffs, sounding disappointed. “I hate when you speak like that. You’re too pretty to be using such crude words.”

Cat ignores his admonishment as if she’s used to it. “Did you start with your new painting?”

“Not yet. I can’t focus. I need inspiration and I can’t seem to find it. I think I’m putting undue pressure on myself, but I’ll figure something out. What time is it there?”

“Just before twelve.”

“Ah, lunchtime. I hope you’re eating lunch. You always forget to eat.”

Her smile grows wider, like she appreciates the sentiment. “I only skip meals if I’m busy with a sculpture. I’m having lunch right now.”

“With your family? Let me say hi.”

“Uh...” Nervousness twitches on her face. “I’m not with my family. I’m having lunch...with Scott.”

“Who’s Scott?”

“He’s...he’s an old friend from high school. We’re just catching up.”

My hands ball into fists, and I take a deep breath to calm down. Her eyes meet mine and she can tell I’m pissed because she immediately looks away.

“Well, let me not keep you. You haven’t seen everyone in such a long time. Enjoy your lunch with your friend. We’ll chat later. Tell...Scott, is it? Tell him I said hi.”

“I will. Love you.”

“I...”

Cat takes note of the hesitation and gives him a look. “Say it.”

“I...love you, too.”

She gives him a nod of satisfaction. “Bye, Bon-bon.”

She hangs up and refuses to look at me. She wants to avoid this topic, but I’m having none of that.

“Your fucking friend from high school?”

She releases a loaded breath, finally lifting her eyes to meet my livid scowl, and the person I barely recognize returns. “Look, Scott, you and I are over, and the fact that you’re best friends with my future brother-in-law *and* my stepdad means that you are going to be part of my life, whether I like it or not. But JP and I have a rule that we don’t talk about our past relationships, and I’m not breaking that rule just because you’ve...basically appropriated my family while I was gone.”

I take a second to let my rage settle. “So, what? You’re just going to pretend you and I never happened? *Men-in-Black* me out of your life?”

“When did *Men-in-Black* become a verb?”

“Today. Do you really not see the issue in this?”

“No, that’s exactly the point. I don’t want *this* to become an issue in my relationship.”

I rub a hard hand over my jaw, struggling to keep my voice low because I don’t want to cause a scene. “You’re still wearing my fucking ring. Cat, I’m gonna go out on a limb here and speak for all guys. No man, not a single one, would be okay with his girlfriend wearing the engagement ring that her *ex-fiancé* gave her. That would definitely be an issue, and the fact that he doesn’t know it’s an issue makes it an even bigger issue.”

She shuts her eyes, shaking her head like she just wants this problem to go away. “This doesn’t concern you, Scott. What happens between me and JP is none of your business. So, to him, the name *Scott* is just one of my friends from high school.”

“Yeah, of course,” I sneer. “We wouldn’t want him to know how many times I had you screaming that name.”

She flushes, but only for a mere second before she grabs her purse, tosses some bills on the table, and storms off. I get up and rush after her because this conversation isn't over.

"Arrogant asshole!" she mutters as she barrels toward my car. "Just take me home." She opens the door and I slam it shut before she gets in.

"Do you ever think about it?" I ask.

"What? You being an arrogant asshole?"

"No, you screaming my name."

She's angry. She's fucking fuming, but the heat in those pretty brown eyes is not from anger alone. She's thinking about it, about me. I can tell by the way her breathing changes, and I can't discern whether she wants to slap me or throw herself at me. I'll take either.

"Scott," she begins with a mocking smirk, "I am a very happy, very *satisfied* woman. What makes you think you're even an afterthought in my life?"

"I don't know." I lift her hand, so my ring is right in her face. "Let's consider exhibit A, shall we?"

"Stop fanning the flames of your ego, Scott Carter," she counters with indifference. "It's just a fashion accessory. I think we should give more weight to exhibit B."

"Which is?"

Her smile is nothing short of smug. "I gave him my number on the first day."

That catches me off-guard, and I take a step back as if I just got hit in the stomach and turn away from her. "Shit," I grind out.

I run my hands over my hair as I pace back and forth a few times. She could've told me that she slept with him on the first night and it wouldn't affect me so much. It took me almost three months to get her number. I had to jump through hoops, bend over backward to earn her trust just to get her number. JP getting it on the first day is proof that he never got the walls or

the bullshit. He got all the things I had to work for without even half the effort.

“Let me take you home,” I say shakily.

I walk around the car and get into the driver’s seat. Cat wordlessly gets in as well, and both of us remain silent. We drive for ten minutes before it starts bugging me to the point that I have to say something.

“I can’t believe you gave him your number on the first day.”

“I didn’t. I just said that to shut you up.”

“What?” My head snaps sideways to glare at her. “You fucking savage! Jesus! You’re a horrible human being.”

“You deserved it.”

I can hear the irritation in her voice, and I’m guessing it’s because she didn’t want to admit the truth. She could’ve kept the upper hand and left me to drive myself crazy with that thought. I never would’ve found out when he actually got her number, but Catalina is not spiteful like that. She’s incapable of saying things if it hurts someone’s feelings. She just tried it out now, and it took her all of ten minutes to backtrack, because she knew how deeply that comment wounded me. There’s a lot about her that has changed, but that’s one of the things that stayed the same. It’s one of the many reasons why I fell in love with her.

We’re quiet for another five minutes and a part of me knows that I should remain distant, drop her off at home, and avoid her until the wedding. Being around her is going to mess with my head. It already is, and I’m going to be worse off when she leaves again. But the other part of me wants to spend more time with her. She’s fluctuating between different versions of herself. The fiery fighter who’s still compassionate and the accomplished artist who’s kinda...stiff.

My emotions are all over the board. Our argument has left a bitter taste in my mouth. I’m still angry. I’m hurt. I’m upset. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t intrigued to find out who the hell this woman is now. I want to see how the years have

shaped her, find out what has changed and what has stayed the same.

This is exactly the kind of mind frame that leads to poor decisions because my next question flies out of my mouth without me giving it proper thought. “So, what are you doing tomorrow?”

“Eat shit, Scott!”

That spitfire attitude of hers is definitely still intact. “Raincheck. I’m still stuffed from lunch. You want to go to the beach with me?”

Her eyes narrow with vexation, and she glowers at me. “After today, why would I want to go anywhere with you? In fact, doing *anything* else would be a far better use of my time. I would rather stay at home and...and knit a scarf.”

“You don’t know how to knit.”

“I learned.”

Even for the new version of herself, knitting is a bit of a stretch. “No, you didn’t. And just to be clear, it’s not like I want to hang out with your cranky ass either, but it’s summer vacation. I’ve got nothing but time, and everyone else is busy.”

She grows more irritable. “Oh, so I’m just a filler because no one else is available?”

“Yep.” I stop in front of her house and give her a stiff nod. “So, are you coming with me to the beach tomorrow?”

“No. Just stay the hell away from me.”

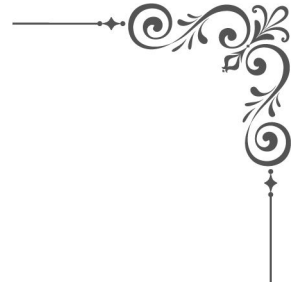
“Fine. What time should I pick you up?”

My persistence gets the tiniest glimmer of a smile, and she softens. “Ten.”

“Alright.” I grin. “See you tomorrow, Savage.”

“Such a douche,” she scoffs as she hops out of the car.

After she slams the door shut, I throw my head back against the seat and groan. This is such a bad idea. What the hell am I doing to myself?



6. Catalina

“What? Pancakes?” Keith calls from downstairs.

“C” I groan, struggling to open my eyes. Keith is the only one still at home. Isa leaves for work at four in the morning because her breakfast show starts at six and my mom usually starts her shift at the hospital at six as well. Keith is a partner at a prestigious law firm and basically comes and goes as he pleases, so it’s just the two of us in the house this morning.

“Yes, please!” I yell back.

I grab my phone to exit the app I was using to listen to Isabella’s radio show. I was so engrossed that I only realize then that I’m still comfortably nestled up in bed. I’m supposed to be dressed already, but I was enjoying the show so much, I got completely sidetracked. I haven’t laughed so much in ages and I kinda just want to laze in bed and recover from that. But the promise of Keith’s pancakes is enough motivation to get my ass in gear.

I get out of bed and stumble into the bathroom to brush my teeth. By the time I walk downstairs, my pancakes are already waiting on the island with a cup of coffee. Keith has Chaka Khan booming through the speakers as he dances around the kitchen.

I smile to myself. Although it’s a different genre of music, my dad used to do the same thing. I never knew where he got the energy to be so chirpy in the morning, and I think the same thing about Keith.

“You remind me so much of my dad sometimes,” I say as I watch him slide across the kitchen floor. “There are moments when I think you and him must have been best friends and parts of him rubbed off on you.”

Keith gives me an odd smile as he takes his plate and cup to the dining room. “Well, maybe your mother is attracted to very specific qualities.”

I follow him in with my breakfast and sit down beside him. “You have a lot in common with him. I wonder whether the two of you would’ve gotten along if you had met him.”

“I know for a fact that your dad and I would never have gotten along,” he replies between bites.

I giggle. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because we’d both be in love with the same woman. How would that work?”

“It wouldn’t.” I take a bite, and it’s as delicious as I remember. “These are so good. Are you busy today?”

“So busy. I have back-to-back meetings and have to be in court at four, so I think I might only get home at seven this evening. Oh! You’re going to be all alone today. Your mom’s working the late shift. Isa and Dylan are going to dance class. Did she tell you?”

“She mentioned it last night. She said they’re learning some choreography for their first dance, and she goes for lessons every Friday because Dylan has two left feet.”

Keith chuckles. “He is exceptionally good at sports, but anything else that requires body movement, he sucks at it.”

I smile to myself. That’s not exactly the truth, according to Isa. She quite enjoys his body movements, but I’m not going to tell Keith that.

“I’m sorry, Cat. Your mom and I always work crazy hours, and Isa has so much to wrap up because their new show starts right after she gets back from her honeymoon. Next week will be better beca—”

“Keith, would you relax?” I place my hand on his to calm him down. “Isa explained all your work schedules to me before I even booked a plane ticket. I came here knowing that I would have to keep myself entertained for most of the day until you guys get home from work. It’s totally fine. I’ll probably get some clay and sculpt a new piece or something. Please don’t stress about me.”

He takes a sip of his coffee, looking a little relieved. “Okay, that makes me feel better. What are your plans for today?”

I’m not sure why I’m nervous about answering this question. I feel the uptick in my heart rate. Maybe it’s guilt, not nervousness. Should I be feeling guilty? I know I’m not doing anything wrong, and I have no intention of rekindling anything with Scott, but I’m still going to be spending the day with my ex-fiancé. Maybe I’m feeling guilty because I could’ve easily avoided this. I had every reason to say no yesterday, and I did, but Scott is so annoyingly persistent that I caved without much of a fight. He knows exactly how to work me. He’s an expert in that department because he has months of experience in breaking down my defenses.

“Um...I’m...I’m going to the beach with...Scott,” I admit apprehensively.

Keith stares at me for a long time, dark brown eyes scrutinizing me intensely. He remains silent for about a minute before he gives a wary nod. “Okay.”

Picking up his empty plate, he stands up and walks to the kitchen. I get up and quickly follow behind him.

“Okay? You give me *the look* then just say okay?”

“What look? I didn’t give a look.”

“You most definitely gave a look. Do you think it’s a bad idea?” As soon as the question leaves my mouth, I realize that I’m looking for someone to talk me out of this because I clearly can’t do it myself.

“I think it’s a very bad idea.”

And there. He’s trying to talk me out of it, and what do I say? “We’re just friends, Keith. We’re just going to hang out at the beach today. It’s no big deal.”

“Okay.” He sighs, setting the dirty dishes in the sink. “You’re a grown woman. I can’t tell you what to do. You’re free to choose, but you’re not free from the consequences of that choice.”

“There won’t be any consequences. We’re just going to the beach.”

He gives a small shrug of acceptance. “Okay. I trust your judgment. Scott’s too. I’m sure both of you are capable of knowing what’s best.”

I walk over to him and give him a tight hug. “Thanks. You’re a great dad, Keith.”

He plants a kiss on the top of my head. “You know, I wouldn’t be a good dad if I didn’t make good dad jokes.”

“Please don’t.” I pull away with a small groan. “Your dad jokes are worse than your lawyer jokes.”

“This one is not just good, it’s relevant to you.”

I relent. “Fine. Tell me.”

“What do a tick and the Eiffel Tower have in common?”

“What?”

“They’re both Paris sites.” He allows a second for me to get it. I get it, but I just can’t dignify that with a response. “Get it? Parasites? Paris sites? And then you were...living in Paris. No?”

I deadpan. “That was...awful.”

“You don’t find that funny? That’s hilarious.”

“Please go to work before I lose the last remnants of respect I have for you.”

He chuckles and ruffles my hair. “Alright, kiddo. I’ll see you later.”

After he grabs his laptop bag and leaves, I phone JP. I tell him that I’m going out with Scott again today because I don’t like hiding things from him. He doesn’t even bat an eyelid about it. JP is not the jealous or possessive type. He’s so laid back and relaxed. Nothing fazes him, but that may be because he doesn’t know who Scott is to me – I mean...*was* to me.

I have an internal debate about telling him. He made the rule about not talking about our past relationships. When we

first became friends, he knew I wasn't in a good space because of a bad breakup, and he told me that he didn't want to be the shoulder to cry on. He said it was the easiest way for a guy to get friend-zoned and he wanted more than that, so we just never spoke about our exes. That rule was easy enough to adhere to when we were a million miles away, but I don't want JP coming here blind. The fact is, this situation is not conventional. My ex is very close to my family, and it's something he needs to know regardless of the *rules*.

“So, Bon-bon,” I begin, and I can hear the nervousness in my voice. I don't think he'll overreact, but we've never spoken about our exes before, so I can't be sure. “There's something I need to tell you about Scott. He's□”

“Sorry, love. I've got another call coming in. It's my mother. Can I take it and call you back in a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

I hang up, then walk upstairs to get ready. I put on a mahogany knitted crochet bikini with shell tassels hanging over my midriff, so it looks like a half-top instead of a bikini. I tug on my denim shorts and slide my feet into flip-flops as I walk into the bathroom. Lifting my hair, I twist it into a messy bun. I check my phone and JP hasn't called back, so I grab a beach bag and start throwing in everything I need. A towel, a change of clothes, and a few snacks. I'm still packing the containers into the bag when I hear the door open. He still doesn't knock.

“Cat, you're here?”

“Where else would I be?” I call back. “I'm in the kitchen.”

“Are you ready to—” He stops when I turn to face him, his wide blue eyes landing on my chest then slowly traveling down my stomach...then my thighs. “Oh my God! What has happened to your body? Holy shit! You're so...you're just... you're so thick now...*everywhere*.” He covers his eyes with his hand but still peeps through his fingers.

I roll my eyes. In the four and a half years that I dated Scott, these types of appraisals were somewhat of a regular

occurrence, and I grew very accustomed to them. Maybe it's because he was trying to reverse the effects of the name-calling, but he's always been very vocal about his attraction to me. That clearly hasn't changed.

"You literally saw me yesterday."

"Not like this." He drops his hand from his face. "It's like your ass and thighs have doubled in size...in a good way...in the *best* way. How are you plump and toned at the same time? It's like you work out, but you still eat cake. It's so confusing for my brain. And this area..." He gestures to my upper half without touching me. "...is so juicy. Honestly, Cat, your tits are their own entities now. They deserve their own names."

My face lets him know how much I hate that idea. "No."

"Let's give them porn star names. Like...Starla and Carla."

"I could not think of anything worse if I tried."

"And the three of us could have a *menage trois*. You could join if you want."

"I'll pass, thanks." I let out a little humph of impatience. "Listen, are we going to go to the beach, or...are you just going to keep gawking at me?"

"I'm good with option two. Yeah, option two works for me." His eyes take another leisurely stroll up and down my body. Shutting his eyes, he lets out a low groan. "And now I have to be with you for the whole fucking day...and you're looking like this."

"You need a minute?"

A naughty grin curves on his lips. "I need three."

I know exactly what he means by that. It's always been an inside joke between us and the intention behind that statement leaves me feeling...flustered. Images rapidly flash through my mind. His hands on my body. His lips on my neck. Oh, the things he could do to me in three minutes.

Those thoughts seem to pull me back into that nostalgic trance, just like they did yesterday and the day before. I'm starting to hate this feeling because my body then reacts to him

the way it used to. My face heats up. My thighs clench together to soothe the ache between them. It doesn't help that his sleeveless T-shirt is showing off his sculpted arms and the curve of his rounded pecs. The cap he's wearing back to front makes him look cute, with just the right amount of sex appeal. Despite my best efforts, I can't peel my eyes off him.

This has been relatively playful, but I know he picks up the small changes. That slight elevation in my breathing doesn't escape him because his smile widens, and he takes a step toward me. He has always read my body language so well. "I caught that."

"Caught what?" I maintain the distance, inching backward until my butt hits the island counter.

"You know what I'm talking about." His next step has me flush against the island, and he places each hand on either side of me. "The same thing happened yesterday. You just thought about getting naked with me."

I try to keep my voice steady when I answer. "You're fanning your ego again."

His eyes skim over me and his close proximity only quickens my pulse even more. Never in a million years would I be able to forget Scott or every indescribable moment of pleasure I felt when I was with him, but time and distance have a way of erasing the smaller details. JP is shorter than him and not nearly as broad, so I forgot how intimidating it was to be at the mercy of someone his size. I forgot how dominating and erotic his mere presence was. I forgot about how utterly submissive it felt to have his big body looming over mine...and I'm quite astounded that it took so little to push me to the verge of submission. I'm right on the edge.

"Old habits die hard," he whispers, his lips moving closer to my ear. His warm breath causes goosebumps to tickle down my arms. "You look at me like that...and I'm going to react."

"How am I looking at you?" I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

"You're looking at me like you want something from me."

His forefinger traces a path along my collarbone, then down the middle of my chest. My nipples harden against the soft knitted fabric and my breasts feel full and heavy, like they're craving for his hands to cup them, squeeze them. Old habits really do die hard because I don't stop him from touching me.

Keeping his eyes on mine, his hand travels lower down my stomach, the shells lightly clicking together as it moves between the tassels. His finger slips beneath the waistband of my shorts, and when he yanks my pelvis against his, a needy gasp escapes my lips. It's out now. I can't take it back and his lips tilt up in a cocky grin.

"It's not something I would expect from someone as *satisfied* as you," he taunts. "Or maybe...you're not satisfied. You need something more stimulating, Cat?"

And that's my cue to end it before he starts reading into something that isn't there. "If you're suggesting that getting naked with you is more stimulating, I can assure you I'd much rather knit that scarf."

I give him a naughty wink, and he chuckles. "Solid burn, Savage. You think knitting would be more stimulating?"

"More stimulating than this conversation. And, honestly, the knitting needles would feel thicker in my hands."

"Fuck off!" That gets an outright laugh out of him and the sound of it fills me with the type of giddiness I think I've only ever felt with him. He places his hand over his heart as if he's genuinely offended. "Why are you always so brutal?"

"It's not that. It's just that your ego is so fragile. You're too cocky for your own good. Now, stop with the inappropriate touching and back up off me, Soldier. I would actually like to go to the beach sometime today."

"Yeah."

He reluctantly steps back. I grab the beach bag, then we head out to his car.

My day at the beach with Scott is...odd. There's familiarity, yet there are times when it feels like we're

strangers. I see bursts of how we used to be, but then it's clouded with the reminder that we're not those same people anymore. He's grown. I've grown. We've grown on two separate paths, so we've outgrown each other. Something about that makes me sad.

We surf for the better part of the afternoon. I'm a lot better than I was when he first taught me, but I haven't done it in a while, so I'm a little rusty, slipping off the board a few times.

After we've had enough of the water, we change into dry clothes and take a walk to a small café. We eat lunch, then return to the beach to watch the sunset. I kick off my flip-flops and sink my toes into the warm sand as I sit down. Reaching into my beach bag, I pull out a small ice cream container.

Scott gasps dramatically as he sits down beside me. "What could that be? Tell me mystical ice cream container, what do you contain? Because I know it's *not* ice cream."

I giggle and peel off the lid. "It's pineapple...with chili powder."

"My favorite," he says, taking a piece. "I like this better than mango."

Scott generally doesn't like fruit. He only makes an exception for bananas in his protein smoothies or as a post-workout snack. But he never says no to fruit coated with chili powder. He loves the combination of sweet and spicy.

I untie my hair and shake out my curls, allowing them to dry in the late afternoon sun. I feel Scott's eyes on me and for a moment, he just stares at me, a strange expression on his face.

"Is...everything okay?" I ask warily.

"Yeah...sorry, uh..." He gives an uncertain smile, raking his hand over his head. "I haven't seen you with your hair curly since you got back and...it's just...it's nice." And then he awkwardly moves along. This has happened for the last two days, and I realize that we are now seamlessly transitioning between being tense and comfortable around each other. "So,

where's your favorite place that you've been to so far?" he asks, resuming the conversation we started at the café.

"I don't have a favorite. Each place has its little quirks that make it unique and special. I stayed in Japan for three months and everyone there is so disciplined. It's a complete culture shock, but I loved it because the technology there is out of this world. But then I also stayed in this tiny rural village in Cambodia for two months where there was no electricity and I loved that because the people there welcomed me like family. I learned so many life skills there, like how to fish...and milk a cow. It was amazing and *so* humbling. I can't choose a favorite."

"That sounds awesome." He takes another piece of pineapple. "How does it work, though? Do you just sculpt wherever you are and ship it from there?"

"No, a lot of the time I move to the city where I'm actually doing the project. Some of them are massive, others are murals, so I need to be on site to do them. I prefer to take on corporate clients who want my art across multiple locations. That way, it's a steady stream of income *and* I get to travel, but those types of contracts are hard to come by. That's why this project I'm starting in a few weeks is exactly what I'm looking for. I chased it for nine *months* because it's so lucrative. They were skeptical about giving me the contract because I'm only one person, but I worked my butt off to prove myself...and I got it."

He smiles, and I can tell that he is genuinely happy for me. "If it's even possible, you're even more passionate about your work now. That fiery determination is burning even brighter than before." He looks down for a second, and the moment is sort of bittersweet, but he snaps himself out of it and continues the conversation. "So, how much can you make from one project?"

I shrug. "Well, it depends on the size, whether it's a private or corporate client. Most of my clients these days are chain stores or hotels, but sometimes I land a good private client that wants something custom-made. My last one took about eight

weeks because it was massive and *very* intricate, but if I convert it to dollars, I got...just under ninety thousand for it.”

“Shit! Ninety thousand?” The words burst out of him in shock. “And that’s just one project? No offense, but who spends that kind of money on...art?”

“Scott, you of all people know that the rich don’t know what to do with their money, so they spend it on all kinds of things, and that’s why I love Europe. It may just be my personal experience, but people there just have a deeper appreciation for art and they’re willing to spend more. I guess that’s the reason why I managed to build a client base there so quickly compared to here. But, yeah, not everyone needs to get a return before they decide to buy something. Some people just want something...pretty.”

“Wow!” He shakes his head. “My mind is still reeling. Teachers are so underpaid. Let’s move on before I start getting angry about the disparities in the world. What about food? Can you choose a favorite food?”

“I’ve been all over the world...and my mom’s cooking is still the best. I can give you my worst, though. Tarantulas. JP and I went to the Amazon and these things are everywhere, so they catch them, then throw them in some batter and fry them.” I shiver with repulsion just thinking about it. “And JP made me try it. I *hated* it.”

“Tarantulas? How does it taste?”

“Uh...it’s like a mixture of chicken...and cod, which is weird. The legs are kinda crispy, but the body...” I try to suppress a gag reflex as I remember the texture. “...is soft and fleshy, so yeah, it’s chicken-y. You’d probably love it.”

His face scrunches with disgust. “Nope! I would never even go to the Amazon, let alone eat the spiders there.”

I smile, a sad smile, because he just highlighted another reason why we just couldn’t make it work, why us breaking up was so necessary. Scott has the brain of a mathematician. He analyzes everything, statistically weighing up the odds before

he does anything. While he's always open to trying something different, certain things are just a flat-out no for him.

Maybe that's not even his math brain talking. Maybe that's the spoiled brat in him that simply hates the wilderness because it lacks all modern luxuries and conveniences. This is one of the crucial differences between him and JP. JP needs no convincing for anything. If I said let's go bungee jumping at Niagara Falls, JP would already be booking our flight tickets. That's how we initially became travel buddies. Anything I suggested, he just jumped straight in without question.

"How did you even make it through that trip?" Scott asks. "I would've thought the idea of roaming anacondas would freak you the fuck out. We've watched hundreds of horror movies together and you couldn't even make it through *Anaconda* because you were scared of the *fictional* snakes."

"It did freak me out!" I'm giggling because he knows me so well. "I canceled the tour after the first day, but the point is I experienced it."

There's silence for a beat before he gives me a sideways glance. "You're so different. You're not the same person I remember. You've changed so much...in a good way. You're more confident and self-assured. It's nice to see. You've just...blossomed into this incredible woman, Cat."

A small smile plays on my lips. "Thank you, but I don't feel like I've changed at all."

"You wouldn't because in all the ways that matter, you're still the same. You're still caring, still feisty, still savage...but with everything else, you've changed."

"How so?"

"Well, for starters, you don't speak Spanish anymore. I was expecting you to cuss me out in Spanish when we were arguing yesterday, and you didn't."

"I still speak..." I try to think of the last time I spoke in my mother tongue, and I can't even remember. I think I've uttered a phrase here or there over a video chat with my family, but that's about it. "You're right. I haven't spoken Spanish in a

while because no one I know understands it. Please don't say that's the only thing, because then that's just upsetting."

"You're also... You're a little stiff."

"Stiff?" My mouth drops open in shock. "I'm not stiff!"

"Yeah, you're a little stiff," he counters with a chuckle. "I mean, you're so poised and professional now. You don't use any curse words. In fact, you seem like the new you would get offended by the way the old you used to speak. You're... you're stiff."

I'm speechless for a moment. "I'm... a little offended by that statement."

"Don't be. It wasn't an insult, just an observation. And it's easy to see because I haven't matured one bit. I'm in the company of sixteen-year-olds all day whose only mission in life is to get Mr. Arnold to sit on a whoopie cushion."

"Kids still do that?"

"Yep. In all fairness, they only did it because we had a bet going. I made it a geometry problem. The terms were that they had to get the whoopie cushion onto his chair while he was still standing in front of the class. The student distracting him had to be at the right angle so that he didn't see the other student in his peripheral vision. The distraction could only be in the form of a question asked in his class. No big movements or anything out of the ordinary."

"Very creative," I say with a giggle. "And you didn't feel bad for making this Mr. Arnold guy the butt of your prank?"

"Nope. He told me that math was a subject that was impossible to make fun, and that most students never apply it in their real lives. I think you can imagine my level of gloating when my students finally got it right."

I laugh again. "You are so petty when it comes to things like that."

"Yeah, that's my level of maturity. You, though?" He sneaks another peek in my direction. "You're... I don't know, you've matured from life and experiences. When we first

started hanging out, you were so overburdened. You had all this weight on your shoulders and now...you're just embracing everything. It's pretty remarkable to see that kind of change. You have this gleam in your eyes that shows how happy you are to be living your dream."

"I have you to thank for that."

"Yeah." He drops his head to look at the sand, not wanting me to see the hurt on his face. "But who am I? I'm just your friend from high school, right?"

"Scott—"

He ignores me and stands up. "C'mon, let's go for a walk."

The sound of the waves crashing is soothing, and the sky is painted with streaks of color – orange, purple and pink fading to blue on the horizon. We walk close to the shore; the surf wetting our feet as the water ebbs and flows. His mood has dipped, and he's sullen as he lightly kicks the wet sand, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"Are you living your dream, Scott?" I ask softly.

"Well...yeah, I guess. I love my life and all the people in it. I love what I do. I mean, I'm still at the bottom, but I love this journey I'm on to work my way up. I love the challenges...and I really love my students."

I give him a teasing smile. "Especially the ones who look at you with *come-hither* eyes."

He chuckles, and it breaks the tension a fraction. "I wish I could say that's a bonus, but it's really awkward. When the dean appointed me as a guest lecturer, he sat me down and had a long chat with me about how I should avoid getting involved with students, especially if I wanted to be on the academic committee. I wasn't interested in...fraternizing with students, but he felt it was something that needed to be said because... well, believe it or not, Kaitlin is one of the *milder* girls on campus."

"Wow! Is it that big of a problem?"

“You have no idea. Cat, I have girls in my class who don’t even take math as a subject. I have sociology majors sitting there, listening to me babble on about linear programming. I guess it’s because I’m young, so they tend to blur the line. But it’s only been a few months. I’m sure the novelty will wear off soon.”

“Uh...no. I’m sure the same will still be happening when you’re forty. You’re the hot lecturer now. That’s like catnip for college girls. I hate to break it to you, but that’s never going to wear off.”

He gives me a playful nudge as we continue to walk along the shore. “You still think I’m hot?”

“I’d have to be dead...or at the very least, without hot blood flowing through me to ever stop thinking that.” Shit, am I flirting with him? I quickly change the direction of the conversation. “So, what exactly does one do on the academic committee?”

He seems reluctant to answer. “It’s just admin stuff. We’re in charge of all academic decision-making, stuff like policies and the curriculum of the courses. It’s just making sure the quality of each degree is kept up to standard.”

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t impressed. “That job sounds like something most people would probably only attain at the age of...fifty or something. When did you get so smart?”

“I was always smart. You were just too distracted by my hotness to notice.”

This time, I veer away from the path of flirting. “But seriously, though. That sounds like a huge role for someone who’s only been teaching for such a short time.”

“I guess it is. The dean sees potential in me, but as I said, I’m under mentorship because I’m not qualified for the role yet. I have to do a research paper to prove myself, I guess. That sounds easier than it is because I’m a numbers guy. Words and high-level language skills are not my forte, but they’ve paired with another professor to show me the ropes.”

“What are you researching?”

Again, he goes quiet, focusing on the water before he answers. “Um...so, the professor they paired me with to co-write this paper is from the social sciences department. We’re gonna use statistical analysis to debunk the concept of phi... and by doing so, we want to...well, *he* also wants to debunk society’s perception of beauty standards.”

“You want to debunk phi?” I feel like my eyes light up like a Christmas tree. “Phi is the foundation of art. It’s the reason why the brain interprets something as beautiful, symmetrical...perfect.”

“Exactly...which is why we want to debunk it.”

I smile. “You have officially got my attention. Firstly, I want to know why you want to debunk it. Secondly, I want to know how you plan on doing that.”

He stops walking, turning to face me. I’ve known Scott for a long time, and I generally know his body language, but at this moment, I can’t read him. We’ve been fluctuating between varying levels of comfort today, so I’m not sure what’s going through his mind.

“Uh...” He looks down, not meeting my eyes. “I’d rather not get into it. This is another conversation that isn’t going to *stimulate* you, Cat. Let’s just talk about something else.”

And that’s when I see it. He’s still harboring so much animosity because of that stupid comment I made on the day we broke up. He’s under the impression that I think he’s boring, that his passions are boring, so he’s reluctant to share any part of that with me. When is he going to get that that was never the case?

“No, I find it very interesting,” I reply adamantly. “Will you tell me about it?”

“I sincerely doubt you want to listen to theories about the golden ratio or the Fibonacci sequence. It doesn’t tend to spark one’s desire for thrill-seeking adventure.”

The words hurt me as much as they hurt him. “Don’t do that.”

“What? Be real?”

I reach out to take his hand, but he steps back, rigidly avoiding any form of contact. For a few seconds, he just stares at it, and I still can't read the expression on his face. Anger is brewing within him. I don't know if he's angry with me or the situation, but there's this latent hostility that he's trying so hard to hide from me. A solid minute goes by, then without warning, he grabs my outstretched hand, yanks me toward him, and wraps his arm around me.

"Dance with me," he says.

I'm confused because that was very unexpected, but I don't pull away. "There's no music."

"I don't care." He lifts my left hand in his right and starts to sway. Lowering his head, he nuzzles his face against the side of mine.

"Why are we dancing?" I whisper in his ear, and I'm not sure if he hears me over the roaring of the waves behind us.

"I proposed to you on this beach," he responds after some time. "Eight years ago, on a day just like today, I asked you to be my wife...and you said yes. I don't know how things got so messed up, but somewhere along the line, I stopped being enough for you."

"Scott, that isn't what happened," I argue. "You were always more than enough for me. I didn't—"

"I don't wanna hear. It doesn't matter now, anyway." He pauses for a long while. "You were supposed to be my dance partner for life and...and before you leave again, I just want one moment where I can go back in time to that day when I danced with you just like this." He grips me tighter, and I feel his fingers toying with the engagement ring. "Just one moment where I pretend that this ring is on the right finger. Can you give me that?"

I nod and slip both my arms around his neck, hugging him tight. We stay there for a long time, silently swaying as the sun sinks lower in the sky. I feel the steady thump of his heart, and I feel his pain in every beat because it's my pain, too. I start to

wonder how we got to this point when neither of us wanted to end it.

“I hate this,” he says softly. “You used to be my comfort at the end of a long day and...and now I don’t even know how to be around you. I hate that.”

“Me too.” I shift back slightly so I can look up at him. “It’s unfortunate that we ended up going down different paths, but this is where we are now. We can’t change what has happened, but...but I still care about you, Scott. That’s something that’s never going to change, and I hate feeling so awkward around you, too. I don’t want us to feel like this for the next two weeks. I want to catch up and find out what’s been happening in your life. I wanna move past...the past because, like I said yesterday, you’re part of my family now, so we have to get used to...being around each other.”

He nods, mildly amused. “And how do you propose we do that? You want me to *Men-In-Black* you out of my life too and pretend we never dated?”

“I’m going to point this out again. *Men-In-Black* is not a verb. And what I’m proposing is that...we go back to how we were before...before we started dating.”

“Oh, the friendzone?” He grits his teeth. “Wow! I can’t think of anything better than being shoved back into the fucking friendzone.”

I ignore his abrasive tone and continue. “Remember when we used to watch documentaries about serial killers? That used to be fun, right?”

“Drinking bleach seems like more fun at this juncture.”

“Or...we could make some popcorn and watch a horror movie?”

“I’m not sure about you, but I think the sexual tension rising between us is going to make that *pretty* awkward.”

His arms tighten around me, pulling me closer to his chest. I know exactly what he’s talking about. His heated skin. The hard muscles. It’s enough to make me draw in a silent breath,

but I ignore it like every other glance and touch that has happened between us over the last few days.

“I would call that more of a...*I-hate-you-for-breaking-my-heart-tension* and not really...a *sexual* tension.”

“Nah, it’s sexual. I’ve thought about you naked at least fifteen times today, and you may hide it better than me, but I can guarantee that you’ve had the same thoughts about me. I know what it feels like when you hate me and what it feels like when you want me. I consider myself an expert on invoking both those feelings in you.”

“Mmm...” I nod. “I can understand how someone as arrogant as you could be, so blinded by the smoke you’re blowing up your own ass that you might misinterpret the signs to be the same thing. I assure you; they are not. You should maybe do a research paper where you statistically evaluate the differences between them because you’re clearly confusing the two.”

He laughs, that full, heartfelt laugh that I love so much, and it gets a laugh out of me, too. The weirdness between us seems to dissipate, and for the first time in three days, the world doesn’t seem out of tilt. The past is still there, but it doesn’t seem so overpowering. It finally feels like we’re...at ease with each other.

“So, horror movie?” I ask as our laughter dies down.

He nods. “Sure.”

We take a slow stroll back to our original spot. After yanking his surfboard out of the sand, we walk to his apartment building. Scott gives me one of his hoodies and a pair of boxers when we enter his apartment. I shower and wash my hair because I have sand in some awkward places, then I get dressed in his clothes. I have to use a safety pin to keep his boxers from falling off my hips. I check my phone and JP still hasn’t called me back. All I got was a voice note to say he’ll call me tomorrow to explain what happened with his mom.

Still towel-drying my hair, I meet him in the kitchen where he's already taken out chicken and vegetables and laid them out on the counter. "So, I was thinking for dinner, you could make that chicken stir-fry. I love the way you make it."

I smile. "With rice?"

"Yep. And then afterward, we can remind ourselves of what a good thriller is, and watch *Saw*."

"Good choice. Go shower. I'll get dinner started and then—Wait. Which *Saw* are we talking about?"

He's hesitant to reply. "The first one...and then...*Saw* 3D."

"No! You're so petty! Are you really trying to prove a point from, like, seven years ago?"

"There are obvious loopholes that you are just refusing to see."

I roll my eyes and start slicing the raw chicken. "Get out of here. This discussion is over." I start rummaging through the kitchen to find utensils. "Oh, hey. Where are your pans?"

"They're not in the oven, if that's where you were going to look. Most people keep them in a cupboard."

"Just get out of my face."

He returns twenty minutes later shirtless, wearing nothing but a grey pair of sweatpants that is enticingly too low on his narrow hips. A thin film of moisture glistens on his tanned skin. He wasn't lying about those abs. They are more chiseled now, and I have to subdue the urge to run my hands over every defined bump. The V at his hips is...*Shit!* I'm checking him out again. His chest was bare the entire time we were surfing, yet seeing it now has heat spreading up my neck and onto my cheeks because now we're in his apartment...alone. This feels a lot more intimate somehow. Watching a movie with him was obviously not my smartest idea. I really didn't think this through properly.

He comes to stand behind me, peering over my shoulder into the pan. "That smells amazing."

“It’s almost done. Here, try some.” I try to ignore his closeness and the way my pulse is rapidly thrumming beneath my skin. Carefully, I take a spoonful, blow it then lift it to his lips. “Does it need more salt?”

“Nah, it’s perfect.” He chews a bit more. “Man, I miss your cooking. Your mom’s food is great, but it just doesn’t taste the same.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve cooked,” I admit. “I move around so much that I don’t even own a set of pots and pans, so we just end up eating out all the time.”

“You do know that eating out doesn’t literally mean *out*... like outside. Spiders should never be on the menu.”

I give a wry smile. “Can you grab some plates?”

He brings two plates to the counter, and I dish up a portion for each of us.

“So, what do you want to drink?” he asks, opening the fridge.

“Do you have wine?”

“Wine? You drink wine now? I’ve only ever seen you drink twice. Once on our eighteenth birthday and again when we went out to celebrate our twenty-first birthday. You got wasted that night and swore you’d never touch alcohol again.”

“Oh, that promise dissolved after I went to a few clubs. Give me music and dancing, and alcohol becomes my best friend.”

“Hmm...well, that’s another change.” He peers inside the fridge. “I don’t have wine. I have beer and Pepsi...and water.”

“I’ll take Pepsi.”

He brings it over and pours it into a glass for me. “Is man-bun quite the party animal, too?”

I giggle at the nickname. “No. He’s quite reserved in that sense. He thinks it’s uncultured to get drunk in public and he *hates* dancing.”

“Sounds like a fun guy.”

His sarcasm doesn't go unnoticed, but I ignore it. I don't need to justify my choices to Scott, especially when it comes to the man in my life. JP and I may be the classic case of opposites attract, but in all the ways that count, we're very compatible. I don't love him despite our differences. I love him *because* of our differences. I like that he balances out my wilder tendencies and shows me the more sophisticated side of life.

I carry my plate and drink to the table, and we eat dinner, talking about the most random things. Our theories about how the world would end and what we would keep in an underground bunker, just in case. The whole discussion is childish and a little silly, but I thoroughly enjoy it because douche over here is still so much fun to talk to. He says he hasn't changed or matured, but he has. Even in this silly conversation, I can see the differences. He's so smart, and he's got this analytical view of the world, which just makes him fascinating to listen to.

The conversation is very different from how it was earlier. It's not stilted at all. There are no random moments of awkwardness sprinkled in between, no past hurt creeping in unexpectedly. We're just enjoying each other's company and that helps us flow effortlessly from one topic to the next.

After dinner, he washes up, and I make a big bowl of popcorn. We dump two packets of Jelly Bellies in there and it's only when we're about to start the movie that I realize the TV is in his bedroom. Yeah, I definitely didn't think this through.

The room is in darkness with the light from the screen illuminating his face and it causes shadows to dance on the wall. He's already sitting against the headboard, legs outstretched on the bed. I sit down on the foot side as far away from him as possible.

"Now, I want you to pay very special attention to everything Lawrence Gordon says and does because—"

I stuff a handful of popcorn into my mouth. "I can't believe you've been holding onto this argument for so long."

“Things have to make sense to me. You’re irrational, which is why you can jump off bridges and walk through jungles infested with anacondas. That’s irrational behavior that makes absolutely no sense to me. It’s also why you can overlook critical loopholes in a plotline.”

“Can we just enjoy the movie?”

“This is how I enjoy a movie.” His eyes move to the bowl of popcorn. “Are you gonna share some of that?”

“Sure. Come get some.”

I hear rustling behind me as he shifts on the bed and then he lies down on his stomach beside me. I flop over to lie on the bed as well, adopting the same position, and elevating myself on my elbows. I move the bowl of popcorn between us, and for some reason, he shifts closer to me until the length of his body is flush against mine.

It feels like the million times we sat cuddling, watching movies together. Spending time with him doesn’t just feel intimate. It feels domesticated, and I start to wonder if this is what it would feel like to live this kind of life. Going to the beach together. Eating dinner together. Watching movies together. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy every minute, but I just don’t see myself doing this *every* day.

“Best kill?” he asks randomly, breaking the silence.

I try to peel the candy off my back teeth with my tongue as I think about it. “That Venus flytrap in Saw two.”

“God, you’re sick.”

“Well, what’s yours?”

“The one where they had to give a pound of flesh in Saw five.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised, but that’s even worse.”

“It didn’t have to be, though.”

“I know,” I say, rolling my eyes because I’ve heard this a million times. “You have a bias toward Saw five.”

“I do. It’s my favorite because it’s the most realistic. If they all worked together, none of them would’ve died.” Make that a million and one times. “It’s simple math, really. All those tasks were manageable for five people, but they were so focused on their own survival, they lost a person on each task. It just highlights the selfishness of human behavior, and the world would be a better place if people just compromised occasionally.”

“That’s why you’re a great teacher, Soldier. You can find a life lesson in a horror movie.”

“The *entire* Saw franchise is about life lessons, Cat. You’re telling me you just watch it for the killings?”

It feels like a trick question, but I answer anyway. “Uh... yeah. I have bloodlust. What do you want from me?”

“You’re so messed up,” he chuckles, shifting another inch.

I look over at him. “If you move any closer, you’re gonna be on top of me.”

“Yeah...” His voice drops to a hoarse whisper. “It kinda feels weird to have you on my bed and *not* be on top of you.”

There’s a stilted pause and the air in the room seems to get thicker with all the things we’re thinking but not saying. I decide to break the silence. “You’re making this...very awkward.”

He smiles. “Maybe it would be less awkward if we just got the sexual tension out of the way.”

“There’s no sexual tension.”

“You don’t feel it?” he whispers. His hand moves to my face, tilting my head so my lips are angled toward his. “I’m dying to kiss you right now.”

He leans closer, so close I stop breathing because even the slightest movement would have my mouth touching his.

I place my forefinger on his lips and gently urge him back to a safe distance. “But you can’t...because that would be cheating, and I’m not about to do that to JP.”

I thought that would get him to back off, but instead, his smile widens. “You know it doesn’t count as cheating if you just let me stick the tip in.”

It’s another inside joke that gets me giggling again, even though I really don’t want to be laughing at this situation. “You are *so* inappropriate.”

“Wow, Stiff. An actual laugh? I wasn’t expecting that from you.” He gives me a coltish nudge with his shoulder. “So, it’s a no to dipping the tip, then?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“No!”

He places the bowl of popcorn on the floor, and in one swift motion, I’m on my back and he’s on top of me. My breath hitches for a few reasons. The sudden movement that got me beneath him. The feel of the bare skin of his chest meeting my palms. And the bulge that provocatively presses against me at just the right spot. I know I should tell him to get off me, but I reason with myself that it’s just Scott being the douche that he is. He’s trying to push his boundaries the same way he used to, but I know he won’t try anything.

This playful banter is as far as this interaction will go. And it *is* playful. I’m just going to ignore the overwhelming urge I have to slide my hand down his rock-hard abs and into his sweatpants. I’m just going to pretend that I’m not having fleeting thoughts of that sexy mouth all over my body. And I’m not going to pay any attention to the moisture pooling between my thighs when I feel his cock throb against me. Those are just minor side effects of this very *playful* exchange.

Bracing himself on his forearms, he gently brushes my hair back. “So, what’s your body count?”

“Scott, I just like serial killers. I don’t go around actually killing people myself.”

“You know what I meant.”

I do, but this is not a discussion I want to have with Scott. He's my ex. It's a little weird. "I thought we were supposed to be paying attention to the movie so we can identify the many loopholes in the plot."

"C'mon, don't act like you don't want to know, too."

I shift a little because having his body pressed against me is awakening something in me, something I haven't felt in years. "I don't care about how many women you've slept with since me."

"Yeah, you do."

It takes two quick seconds of thinking about it before my curiosity gets the better of me. "Fine. How many?"

"I asked you first."

"Okay, let's both reveal on three. One...Two...Three..."

"Three."

"Two...and a half."

"Slut."

"Man-whore!"

And then we're laughing again. Mentally, I chastise myself. I should tell him to get off me. I should tell him that this whole interaction is not okay and establish proper boundaries. But it's almost like I forgot how much fun it is to just...be around him, how at ease he makes me feel to discuss pretty much *anything*. I only realize then how much I've missed this, and I just can't bring myself to stop.

"In my defense, it did take me over a year before I could even stomach touching someone else," he says.

"Same."

"So, were they any good?"

"Uh...wow, this conversation is taking a weird turn, but, um, the first one...which is the one I count as half...was supposed to be a one-night stand...but I just couldn't go through with it. I was trying to experiment. I was partying a lot

at the time, and I wanted to see what it was like, but it was uncomfortable, and he just wasn't..." *You. He didn't look like you. He didn't smell like you. And he sure as fuck didn't feel like you.* I say all that in my head, but all I end up voicing is, "Uh...I just didn't like it. The second guy, Cody, I knew him for about three months." That one was just me seeking comfort, a way to nurse my broken heart. It was driven by sheer loneliness, but Scott doesn't need to know that, especially because he was the one who broke my heart in the first place. "And that was much better. It was...*very* nice. What about you?"

"A blind date that went too far, which resulted in a *fake* pregnancy. That sort of freaked me out because I'm always safe, but she had me doubting myself, so I never made that mistake again. I considered disowning my dad after that one. Then there was Courtney, which was eight months of grade-A emotionally unavailable sex. And then there was a one-night stand which shouldn't have happened. I was so fucked up over you." His thumb lightly caresses my hairline before trailing down to my ear and over my cheek. "Your mom told me you were moving in with your new *boyfriend*..." The word drips with disdain. "...and, I don't know, I just...I lost my mind and got totally shitfaced...I don't even remember her name, which makes me the world's biggest dick, so I never did that again, either. And, uh, yeah, I haven't been with anyone since."

With just a few sentences, Scott has highlighted a stark difference between us. I was trying not to show weakness by telling him the true reason I slept with Cody, yet he just tells it like it is. Our past set the foundation for our entire relationship. To earn my trust, he exposed himself to me entirely, and that hasn't changed at all. He lays out his whole heart, and this quality of his is so disarming. It reels me in without any fight or resistance.

To an untrained ear, his tone is casual, as if we're just talking about the latest series on Netflix, but I can hear the somberness it's burdened with. He doesn't see it as a weakness to be so open with me.

He chuckles. “You know, I used to be an exceptionally good man-whore before you. It’s shameful what has become of me.”

I nod my agreement. “Peter must be disappointed.”

I’m trying to keep the conversation light, but hearing about him with other women is kinda grating me. I’m not jealous. Okay...I’m a little jealous. And, generally, I’m not the jealous type, but the thought of him being with these other women is affecting me more than it should, more than I want it to. I have no right to be upset about this. *I’m* the one in a relationship here. I guess a part of me still feels like□ I cut that thought off at the knees. I shouldn’t be feeling anything.

“And what about man-bun?” There’s a hesitant curiosity in his voice.

I glower at him. “Stop calling him that. And if you must know. JP and I have a great sex life.”

“I thought so.”

I said that just to shut him up again, but I’m not sure it worked because there’s an odd grin on his face, and I can’t quite read it. I was expecting more of a reaction from him. I just had to convince myself to remain neutral despite my juvenile jealousy, and the only response I get is a tight jaw. That’s a sign that he’s pissed off, but it’s hard to tell because he covers it easily with a lazy smile. Scott is not the jealous type either, but he’s very possessive, so this behavior is strange to me.

“What’s that weird smirk on your face, Soldier?”

“Just thinking.”

“About?”

“I’m thinking about when the words *nice* and *great* became the adjectives you use to describe sex?”

“What’s wrong with *great*?” Even I can hear the defensiveness in my voice. “*Great* is a *great* word. And my sex life is the epitome of greatness.”

I said the last bit to wipe the smug smirk off his face, but instead, it grows wider, and his cockiness starts to show.

“A day at the beach is *great*. Dinner was *great*. Trader Joe’s customer service is *great*. There are much better adjectives for sex. Maybe it’s been so long that you don’t remember. You want me to remind you of what *mind-blowing* feels like, Cat?” His tone is playful with a hint of arrogance, but the brazen lust burning in those blue orbs is very serious. The way his skin heats up beneath my palms is very real. “Maybe you forgot what *hot*...” His eyes drop to my mouth and my body stiffens with anticipation. “...*sweaty*...” My nipples perk up. “...*mind-blowing* sex feels like. I’ll happily reacquaint you, make you scream until your lungs burn...” He lowers his lips to whisper in my ear. “...fuck you until your legs are numb.”

With every word, I feel myself getting wetter, my breathing becoming more erratic. My body is in a state of lecherous chaos, and he got me into this state without even touching me. I’m aching to have his hands on me. I’m trying to steady myself and regain my balance on this very wobbly precipice. I’m on the verge of tumbling over and doing something I’ll regret.

“You up for it, Cat?” He subtly shifts his hips, his erection pressing harder against me, and I bite my lip to stop a moan. “I think you can feel that I’m *up* for it.”

I take a few seconds and talk myself away from the ledge. “Raincheck.” It was supposed to come out as bored and indifferent, but instead, I sound breathless and a tad needy, so I clear my throat. “I could get the same effect from a good run, so I’ll save my lungs and legs for my morning jog tomorrow.”

“Suit yourself.” He smiles like he already knew rejection was coming. “But if you’re gonna deny me mind-blowing sex, can I at least get ten minutes alone with Starla and Carla?”

“I hate those names...and it’s a no for that, too.”

“C’mon, Grinchy. Just let me cop a feel.”

“I’ll let you grope *one* boob.”

“Really?”

“No! Get off me.”

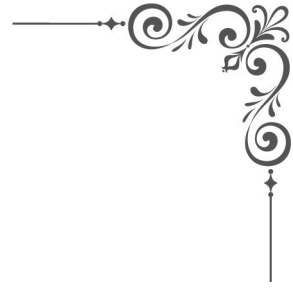
“Fine.” He lifts off me, retrieves the bowl of popcorn, and sets it down in front of us before making himself comfortable, lying on his stomach beside me. “Guess I’ll just have to hang out with your cranky ass for the rest of the night. Boobs would’ve made it worth it.”

I toss over onto my stomach as well. “The only thing that makes being around you slightly bearable is the candy. I’d be long gone were it not for the Jelly Bellies.”

He picks out a chocolate pudding bean, our favorite flavor, and hands it to me like it’s a peace offering even though we weren’t fighting. I accept it before grabbing another handful of popcorn.

We settle in to watch the rest of the movie, and I take in a slow, silent breath. Today has taken me on a rollercoaster ride of emotions. Scott has drawn out so many feelings from me in the space of a few hours. I don’t fully understand the dynamics of this new relationship we find ourselves in. I hated the awkward tension and stiltedness, but us being this comfortable around each other is proving to be more problematic.

I’m in a relationship, and I shouldn’t be engaging in this kind of behavior with another man, my ex-fiancé no less. I think this is about as much of a catch-up as I’m going to allow myself to have with Scott. I’m just going to go back to my original plan of avoiding him unless it’s absolutely necessary.



7. Scott

I mentally count the days. Wednesday. Thursday. Friday. Three days. In three days, she's managed to completely fuck me up. She got in my head good. Today is day four, and I don't want to even think about the wreck I'm going to be when my head hits the pillow tonight.

I was never under any illusions that Cat and I would get back together. If I thought for even a second that there was the slightest chance that we could work it out, I would've called her again. But I know I'm not what she wants. These last three days have solidified that. It rips me apart inside to acknowledge it, but she's moved on. The problem is I haven't. I've still got all these feelings for her, and I don't know what the fuck to do with them. It's got me acting all crazy. One minute I'm angry, the next minute I'm on top of her, craving to taste those lips one more time.

I'm confused and there's no reason to be. The simple fact of the matter is what we had wasn't enough for her. It's a harsh reality I need to live with. I'm not what she wants anymore... and yet sometimes she looks at me like I'm *all* that she wants. Shit, she got in my head good. Maybe I'm reading too much into it. Maybe I'm just projecting what I want and deluding myself into thinking she wants the same thing.

Nah. I've never read her body wrong. Her mouth may blow me off with taunts and subtle sarcasm, but her body told me something different last night. That body is still mine. I feel it every time I get near her. She still responds to me in the same way. Bated breaths. Parted lips. Her nipples pucker up if I just look at her.

I'm not deluding myself. She still wants me. And, unfortunately, one of the very many feelings I have floating around is how badly I want her, too. It's like my body is conditioned to...her. She gets within a few inches of me and something switches on inside me, something that makes me crave her, something that makes me desperate to smell her,

touch her, taste her. Five years later and Catalina Diaz still has me twisted into a pretzel over her.

I park behind Dylan's car, and my dad, Peter, and I get out of my SUV. We walk up the porch stairs to the front door. Peter walks in first and I let my dad enter before me. He only recently started joining us for our basketball games on Saturday mornings, so he's still a bit uncomfortable when he walks in. I trust Keith and Mrs. H to make him feel at home, though.

Cat is in the dining room with her foot up on one of the chairs, tying the laces of her sneaker. She's wearing running shorts and a tight tank top, and I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep them restrained.

"Hey, short stuff!" Peter scoops her up and spins her around. "Man, it's good to see you."

"Hi, Peter," she says when he sets her down on the floor again. "It's been a while, huh?"

"Time has been kind to you. You look good."

"Thanks. You're not too bad yourself. How have you been? Scott tells me that you're still resisting adulting at all costs."

He snickers. "Yep. I'm still living my dream as an unemployed individual."

"When are you going to do something better...or more productive with your life?" my dad asks. "You have so much potential."

Peter turns to give him his full attention. "You know, Dylan's mom keeps asking me the same thing, so I'm going to give you the same answer. Never. I'm never going to do more than what I'm doing right now. I can afford to be lazy, so I think I'm living to my absolute full potential."

My dad sighs his disapproval as he walks over to Cat to pull her into a hug. "It's nice to see you again, my dear."

Her face beams with excitement. "It's nice to see you, too, Eddy."

His correction is firm, as it always is. “It’s Edward, Catalina.”

From behind him, I mouth the words as he says them because his response is so predictable. Cat giggles because she knew it was coming too. He hates when she calls him that, and he lets her know it *every* time, but she refuses to budge on it. Keith also started calling him *Eddy* because of her.

“Edward is so uptight and boring,” she explains, and it’s not the first time. “Eddy suits you better.”

“Anyone who knows me knows that I *am* uptight and boring.”

“Only on Thursdays, dad. Every other day you’re a riot.”

A small titter escapes him before he continues the conversation. “How are you doing, Catalina?”

“I’m doing very well, thanks. And you?”

“Busy. My days don’t seem to end. I would’ve loved some help running my multi-million-dollar company, but Scott decided to become a teacher.”

She shakes her head with disappointment. “What a waste of space he turned out to be.”

“If he wasn’t my only child, I would’ve sold him to recoup my money.”

“Ah, here we go again,” I say with a suppressed laugh.

My father is always taking jabs like that at me, but I know he’s proud of me and what I’ve achieved, especially because I achieved it all on my own. I haven’t taken a cent from my parents since the day I left home.

“Hey, Eddy,” Keith calls from the kitchen. “You want some breakfast before we leave?”

“Sure, Keith.” My dad leaves us to join Keith, Dylan, and Mrs. H in the kitchen.

Taking a step toward her, I close the gap between us, my eyes fixated on her perky tits. It’s really hard to ignore them. “Starla, Carla, you ladies look *amazing* this morning.” My

gaze travels up from her chest to meet the unimpressed smirk on her face. “Cat...you’re kinda cute, too.”

“Did he just greet your boobs?” Peter asks from beside me.

“Yeah.” Cat gives a slow nod, as if it’s simultaneously offensive and expected. “They have names now.”

“Hmm...can I meet them?”

“I’ll fucking slaughter you, Pete.”

He laughs even though he knows full well that I’m not joking. “Geez, relax. You know I’m just kidding. I’m totally holding out for her mother.”

“I heard that,” Keith yells from the kitchen.

Peter steps away from us and into the open-plan kitchen, taking a seat next to my dad on a barstool at the island. “What’s for breakfast this morning, Mrs. Diaz?”

“It’s Mrs. Hart,” Keith corrects, but Pete pretends he doesn’t hear him.

“Any chance *you* might be on the menu?”

“Sorry, Peter. There’s only *caballeros pobreson* on the menu today.” Mrs. H giggles at his antics because she knows he just does it to annoy Keith.

“What about tomorrow? I could come by when your husband’s not around.”

Keith just shakes his head. “When are you going to stop flirting with my wife, Peter?”

“When she stops being so attractive, Keith.”

“So...never?”

“Yeah, about then.”

Their chatter becomes background noise when I focus my attention on Cat again. She stretches her arms before doing a few lunges, stretching out her legs as well.

“Going for a run?” I ask.

“Yep, I’m gonna go for a...*long, hard...run*. I can’t think of anything *better* that would get my lungs burning and my legs numb,” she teases with a sassy smile. “Can you?”

I chuckle but don’t reply to that question.

She tries to keep a serious face as she straightens again. “And then I’m going to come back and eat some cake. I hear the combination does *incredible* things for the body.”

I catch the strap of her tank top with my forefinger, toying with it as I urge her closer. “*Incredible* is an understatement.”

And there it is. That unmistakable intensity in her dark brown eyes. I’m not deluding myself. She still wants me.

“This is becoming a habit of yours.” It’s unclear if the firmness in her voice is directed at me or herself. “You need to stop touching me, Scott.”

“You need to stop letting me, Cat.”

I wink at her, and her annoyance only amuses me more, but I end the conversation there and walk to the kitchen to have breakfast with the rest of the guys. After polishing off Mrs. H’s delicious *caballeros pobreson*, the five of us load up into my SUV and drive to the basketball courts behind the school I used to tutor at.

“I think Keith and I should be on a team this week,” I suggest, tossing the ball to Peter as we enter the court.

“Wanna know what winning feels like for a change?” Keith taunts with an arrogant smirk.

“I’ve been practicing,” my dad assures me. “I think we might stand a chance this week.”

“Yeah, I’m not buying that. Dad, I love ya, which is why I’m going to be straight with you. You’re like the kid on the team that’s only ever gonna get the participation award.”

“Practice has made me better...*much* better than the last time.”

To prove my point, Peter tosses the ball to him. “Here, catch.”

My father tries to catch it by looping both arms around it, but ends up catching fresh air and sunlight instead. Peter puts his head down to hide his laughter.

“What exactly have you been practicing, dad?”

“I didn’t *physically* practice...but I watched a lot of games.”

“Yeah, that’s not...” I shake my head. “Never mind. Let’s play.”

Even though my dad sucks at basketball, and I mean *bad*, we still have a lot of fun. He might not be able to throw or catch, but his long arms can stop a pass. Surprisingly, Peter and I take the lead about ten minutes in. Something that has *never* happened. At half-time, Keith adopts my dad onto his team, saying Dylan is distracted and they need the extra hands.

Pete and I hold our lead until the timer goes off and our victory dance at the end of the game is anything but humble. We’re sweaty and huffing, but we still give the dance our all.

Keith regards us with disparagement as we proudly hop and bounce around the court. “Dylan didn’t have his head in the game today, and Eddy and I are twice your age. If I were the two of you, I wouldn’t be so smug.”

“But you’re *not* us,” I say, rocking my hips and pumping my fists in the air. “We’ll take our *win* with a bucket of smug, thank you very much.”

“Why don’t you save the dancing for later?” Keith suggests, feigning annoyance. “Aren’t you boys going out tonight for Dylan’s bachelor party?”

“It’s not a real bachelor party,” Peter replies. “Because Dylan and Isa decided they want to have a *joint* party. Who the fuck does that?”

“A guy who loves his fiancé and thinks she’s the hottest woman on the planet,” Dylan quips. “I don’t need strippers. Besides, Tommy is the only person Bella hangs out with socially, so she didn’t want a big party either. At least Cat will be there tonight, so□ Shit.” Dylan looks at me, pulling his lips in to hide a smile. “Are you okay with that, Scott?” He places

his hand over his heart as if he genuinely feels bad for me when the asshole is loving the shit out of this moment. “We can always withdraw her invitation if being around her is going to...*destroy you inside.*”

I grit my teeth because he’s referring to that stupid voice note I sent him. “Nah, I’ll be fine, but thanks *so much* for caring.”

His smirk turns into a chuckle. “Anytime.”

Keith picks up on the weird vibes between us and looks over at my father. “Yo, Eddy. You want to practice some shots with me?”

“Sure.”

I wait for them to walk back to the middle of the court before I focus on Dylan. He may be smiling and giving me shit on the outside, but he’s very good at hiding his true feelings, and I can tell something is bothering him. “You were off your game today, Dyl. What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just pre-wedding jitters, I guess.”

“You can’t lie to us,” Peter says. “We know you, Dylan.”

He lets out a heavy sigh, walking over to sit down on the bench at the far side of the court. He rests his elbows on his thighs and drops his head. Pete and I sit down on either side of him.

“I don’t know if I should do this,” he admits softly.

Peter looks over at me and, considering everything that happened in Dylan’s and Isa’s past, he feels compelled to ask what we’re both thinking. “Are you...having second thoughts, because if there’s any doubt, I would recommend calling off the wedding instead of going through with marrying her. Considering how your relationship with Fran ended—”

“No, Pete, it’s not that. I’m a hundred percent sure I want to marry her. I want nothing more, but there’s something I haven’t...I haven’t told you guys.” He’s silent for a long while and we give him time to collect his thoughts. The planets need to align before Dylan ever opens up about anything, so we

don't rush him. "See, the thing is...I can't have kids. I'm not going to get into the details, but that's what's bothering me."

"Have you told Isabella about this?" I ask.

"Yeah, she knows. She knew about this before we even got back together. It was something that came out during those anger management sessions we had with Dr. Burkman."

Pete's eyebrows draw together in confusion. "So...what's the problem?"

"The problem is..." He goes silent again, thinking of how to articulate what he wants to say. "The problem is...I thought I accepted it, but...shit, as the wedding gets closer, I'm starting to have doubts. She keeps saying it's not important when it is. She says we don't need kids to be happy, but... eventually, she's gonna see other people our age having babies. Colleagues at work and friends from high school, and...and she's going to realize how much she wants that, too...But I can't give her that." Dylan shrugs, still looking despondent. "Some of the stuff Fran said when we got divorced has been playing on my mind and...I know she said those things because she was angry, but"

"Isa and Fran are not the same at all," I cut in. "Fran was... she was very rigid about certain things, and I'm guessing news like that didn't fit into the plans she had about your future together, but Isa isn't like that. She adapts to anything, so if she says it's not an issue for her, I'm sure she means it."

"I know...I just...I can't help but feel that as time goes on, she's going to end up resenting me."

"Do you love her, Dyl?"

"You know I do."

"And she loves you?"

He grins. "Most days."

"And the two of you can communicate openly about this issue...any issue for that matter?"

"We do now, yeah."

“Then you can work it out. No matter what the issue is, if both of you are willing to put your all into it, you can make it work. To make any relationship work, you need the three *coms*. Compromise, compatibility, and communication. You guys have all three, so I promise you can make find a way to make it work, no matter what.”

“And you need to trust what you have, Dyl,” Peter adds. “I’m no romantic, but you and Isabella are amazing together. You’ve been through so much and came out stronger at the end of it. You need to have faith in that.”

Dylan looks over at him in disbelief. “Wow, Pete. I didn’t know you had a sentimental side. It’s kinda...sweet, but creepy as fuck.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “I lost a car because of this wedding. I have a vested interest in seeing the two of you succeed. Besides, you shouldn’t let something like this make you doubt yourself or what you have to offer. You bring a lot to the table with or without kids. So, you gotta ask yourself this...When a defining moment comes along, you can do one of two things. Define the moment, or let the moment define you.”

My eyes narrow at him because I know he didn’t think of that himself. “What movie is that from?”

“Tin Cup. Released in 1996. Kevin Costner and Rene Russo.”

“It’s good,” I say with a nod of approval.

“You’re both right,” Dylan says, giving me a somewhat rueful smile. “I didn’t overcome so many obstacles to be with this woman just to start doubting now, right? Thanks, guys. I needed to hear that.” He looks at me, then at Peter. “Can we bring it in for a group hug?”

I can’t help but laugh. My boy has always been a sensitive soul.

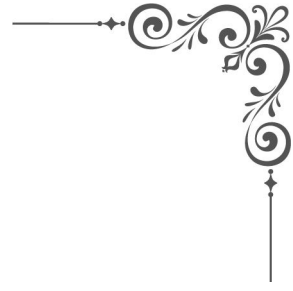
“Sure.” Peter tosses his arm over Dylan to pull him closer. “But we’re changing our panties straight after.” We have our little group hug, and Peter is the first to pull away, looking hyper and pumped up. “Alright. So, now that the sappiness is

out of the way and you're in a better mood, let's focus on tonight. We are getting *shitfaced* because you're getting married!"

"I'm getting married." Dylan nods and stands up. "I'm getting married!"

"Yeah, you are!"

And then we're whooping and slapping him on the back. I would love to know what the excitement Dylan is experiencing right now feels like, but I guess I have to settle for just watching the joy in the eyes of my best friend.



8. Catalina

Isabella pulls my hair back so tight my eyebrows lift higher. My hair is secured in a high ponytail and then she uses a tiny bit of gel to smooth out the frizz and make it look sleek.

“I look a little cheap.”

“Very cheap,” Tommy agrees with a nod. “If I sold you for a dollar, I’d probably get change.”

I give him an unimpressed scowl before I stand up to walk to the mirror for a better look. JP’s words from our earlier conversation play on my mind as I take in my reflection. “JP was right. The whole outfit is very unbecoming and unsophisticated.”

“We’re not going to a cocktail party...or a ball,” Isa retorts. “You’re not supposed to look sophisticated. And he said that although he did not approve, you still look *hot*. Also, unbecoming isn’t even a word that should be used in this century.”

She knows exactly what was said on the call because she and Tommy did not leave my side the entire time. They actually spoke to JP more than I did, so I still haven’t had a chance to tell him about Scott. It is officially on my to-do list for tomorrow.

“Besides, we’re going to *Grit*,” Tommy adds. “The name should tell you that you are adequately dressed.”

It’s a simple outfit, but undeniably eye-catching. Tight, black skirt that stops midway down my thighs, black over-the-knee boots, and a white camisole that doesn’t quite cover the edges of my black lace bra. This is an old skirt of mine, but I’m definitely more filled out than I used to be because it’s not just tighter now, it’s much shorter. I’ve thought about changing it a few times, but it makes my legs look longer than they actually are. I look...tall, which is a rarity, and that in itself is amazing.

Isa adjusts her breasts in her tight red dress, scooping them up, then pushing them together. “Should I wear this with a push-up bra?” she asks.

“If you push them up any more, they’ll be part of your chin.” Tommy walks over to Isa to help adjust her cleavage.

“I don’t understand the dynamics of your relationship,” I say as I apply eyeliner. “How is Dylan okay with him... touching you like that?”

“Dylan knows that I have absolutely no interest in her. We’ve been friends for years, so he knows how we are with each other. Besides, Izzy is the furthest thing from my type. If I had to be completely honest, Dylan’s sister, Dana, is probably more my type than your sister.”

Isabella’s head snaps up from her makeup bag to glare at him. “That was a very random comment.”

Tommy shrugs. “What? She’s really cute. I’m not gonna pretend as if I don’t see it just because your fiancé is super-protective of his sister and could hospitalize me with one punch.”

“It was the way you said it that was weird.” Isa waits for him to explain himself, and when he doesn’t, she turns her attention back to me. “I think it’s just about trust. Like, when you were dating Scott, he was fine with you being friends with Connor.”

I giggle, thinking about Scott’s reaction to Peter this morning and we’re not even dating anymore. “Yeah, but Connor would be a dead man if he even thought about touching my boobs.”

Tommy comes to stand behind me, using gel to style the front of his hair. It’s sandy blonde at the roots and green at the tips, which complement his sea-green eyes. Just like my sister, he is very eccentric with his hair color. “Dylan is *crazy* possessive when it comes to any other guy,” he says, turning from left to right to make sure the sides are neat and sleek. “Do you remember how many fights he got into in high school because of this ho?” He gives my sister a playful wink. “He’s

just not like that with me because he knows there's nothing to worry about."

"Hey." Isa's eyes light up. "Let's make this a topic of discussion on our show next week. Boundaries when it comes to friends and□"

"It's our last week, IzzyB. We have a full lineup. With the farewells and tributes and best moments from previous shows, we've got no time, but I like where your head's at. Let's incorporate it into our new show when we move over."

Isa beams with excitement. "I still can't believe we got that show. I just hope we don't lose our spark because we have to tone down our language."

"We're still fun without cussing, aren't we?"

"It's debatable."

"You know what? It doesn't matter. We got the breakfast show, babe! That's a prime-time slot and we're going to kill it because we won't allow ourselves to fail."

Watching their happiness puts a smile on my face and yet somehow it seems abstract, like I can only witness it. I'm not a part of it.

"Speaking about Connor," Isa says. "When are you gonna see him?"

I tilt my head to the side as I put on my big silver hoop earrings. "Monday. He's been busy with—" I'm cut off when music starts blaring.

Here come the Men in Black.

"What is that?" I ask, looking around as the beat and lyrics fill the room.

Tommy starts picking up the discarded clothes, looking for the source as the song continues to play.

They won't let you remember.

"It's your phone," Isa says as she retrieves it from under her pillow and hands it to me.

An annoyed humph bursts out of me when I see the name flashing on my screen. “Really, Scott?” I answer. “You set *Men in Black* as your personalized ringtone? This song is, like, a hundred years old.”

I can picture the grin that forms on his face. “It’s the original, so it’s timeless...and listen to the lyrics. Just like the *Men in Black*, I, too, ain’t on any government list. I straight don’t *exist*...” He pauses to let that simmer with me for a few seconds. “No name and no fingerprints. It’s sad.” He fakes a melancholic sigh. “But it’s fitting.”

“Why are you such an asshole?”

“Genetics. I get it from my mother’s side. How’re you doing, beautiful?”

I don’t understand the effect this man has on me. I’m irritated yet I still feel my face heat up. “I was in a better mood two minutes ago. Any particular reason you decided to call?”

“Yeah, the limo just picked us up. We’ll be there in ten minutes. Dyl asked if you can please make sure Isa is ready.”

“Tommy came over early to make sure of that,” I respond with a short laugh. “So, a limo, huh? That’s fancy.”

“Peter organized it, so we all have a designated driver for the night.”

“Clever. Look at Peter slowly taking on adult roles. I’m proud of him.”

“I’ll tell him you said so.”

We exchange goodbyes before I hang up and look over at Isa.

“I bet Dylan wanted to make sure I’m ready,” she says. “He gets Scott to call every time because he hates listening to my excuses.”

“Do you guys go out as a group often?”

“Yeah. Since Dylan and I got back together, we go out all the time. Tom is usually Peter’s plus one, which I guess is the same as when we were in high school.”

“We’re more of each other’s wingmen now,” Tommy clarifies, “because Peter still refuses to make me his bitch, but...you can’t win them all.”

“So, Scott is like the fifth wheel?” I ask without thinking.

“No! Scott’s dad is always trying to set him up, so sometimes he brings these weird blind dates along. Man, some of those chicks were straight-up crazy. Tommy, do you remember the one who—” She must see something on my face because she stops herself. “Are you alright, Cat?”

“Fine.”

I’m not, but this feeling of exclusion is becoming familiar to me now. It’s a byproduct of my choices and I have to get used to it. This is something I’m going to feel every time I come home to visit, so I might as well find a way to deal with it while I’m here.

A horn blares outside. We kiss Keith and my mom goodbye before rushing out. Isa is first into the limo and seats herself next to Dylan at the back, slinging her legs over him. Tommy moves to the opposite side and sits next to Peter on the left side, which only leaves an empty seat on the right... next to Scott. The second he lays eyes on me, I feel my whole world tilt off its axis. I know that look. I know exactly what it means. On the outside, he appears unaffected, but everything he’s thinking is reflected in those blazing blue eyes. And they are blazing, burning for me, so hot I feel their heat prickling every inch of my skin.

He looks sexy as all hell in a black-collared shirt and blue jeans that are ripped at the knee. I release a slow breath to steady myself.

“Fuck,” he groans as I sit down beside him. He turns slightly and lowers his lips to my ear. “Could your skirt get any tighter?”

“Could your attitude get any more obnoxious?”

His gaze moves down my body, slowly, purposefully, like he’s undressing me with his eyes. “I bet I wouldn’t even be able to get my hand up there,” he whispers with a teasing grin.

“Good,” I reply, trying not to let my voice give away the effect those words just had on me. “Because your hand shouldn’t be anywhere near there.”

“Oh, my God!” Dylan shouts. “I am the luckiest guy in the world. My fiancé is so hot!” He looks at her as if he’s totally enamored. “I can’t wait to marry you.”

“I’m sure you’re counting down the number of sleeps like a child before Christmas.” Peter laughs, actively trying not to cringe at Dylan’s declaration, and pops open a bottle of champagne. The white foam spills on the floor of the limo. He pours each of us a glass, handing it to us one by one. “To the future Mr. and Mrs. De Lorenzo,” he toasts, raising his glass.

“How about we start the night off with a drinking game?” Tommy says after gulping down his champagne. “Pete, did you bring the tequila?”

“Got it right here.” Peter retrieves a sealed bottle and a saltshaker from behind him, then opens the small bar fridge to take out a plate of sliced lime.

“Alright. So, I’m going to ask both of you a few questions. You get it wrong; you take a shot. You get it right, the rest of us take a shot.” He takes out a piece of paper from his pocket. “Dylan, you’ll go first. Okay, what is Isabella’s weirdest sex kink?”

Scott chuckles from beside me. “Diving right in there, Tommy. You’re not gonna even ease them into it? That’s going hard-core with no lube.”

“Lube is for sissies, Scotty.” He turns back to Isa. “And you better bite the pillow, bitch, because I am going in dry!” His attention shifts to Dylan again. “I’m waiting.”

“Um...I don’t know how to answer that,” he replies coyly. “Isabella and I haven’t had sex yet because...we’re waiting for marriage.”

“Dylan, nobody in this car believes that bullshit, and I would like to inform you that refusal to answer results in two shots.”

“Fine. It’s, uh...” Even in the dim light of the limo, his cheeks going three shades redder is noticeable. “It’s, uh, Brock...from... from Lawng Island.” He purposely thickens his New York accent to say that, though I’m not sure why. “I’m not explaining that to anyone, but that’s her kink. Nothing turns her on more than that.” He turns to give Isa a small nod. “Ain’t that right, sweetheart?”

The laughter that erupts from Isa is so high-pitched, it borders on a screech. Tommy and Dylan are canning themselves, and it seems like it’s an inside joke that only the three of them understand. Again, I feel the pinch of Tommy knowing this about her and not me. I don’t even think I’m jealous. I think I’m just upset because it feels like I’ve been replaced. My sister doesn’t need me anymore.

Tommy slaps Peter on the back. “Pete, pour us all a round. Dylan is absolutely right! It’s fucking Brock from Long Island.” He still can’t stop laughing. “You’re into some weird shit, babe.”

We drink our shots before Tommy continues with the game. “IzzyB, who is Dylan’s hall pass?”

“Oh! I know this one. Anna Kendrick.”

“Correct! Another round, Pete.”

Tommy moves swiftly along as we down the next shot of tequila. “Okay, Dylan, what was the first movie the two of you ever watched together?”

He thinks about it for a few seconds. “I think it was...*The Matrix*.”

“I wish it was *The Matrix*,” Isa snaps. “You forced me to watch *The Longest Ride* with you, don’t you remember? I wanted to watch *Taken*, but Dylan” She abruptly stops mid-sentence as if she just realized something. She looks over at Dylan and, after a short, silent exchange, she gently squeezes his hand and carries on. “The dork insisted that we watch *The Longest Ride*. I’ve never been so appalled in my whole life.”

“Is that a porn movie?” I ask. “At the very least, that sounds like the title of a sextape.”

“What?” Peter is shocked by this. “Dylan made you watch a porn movie? That doesn’t sound like him.”

“It’s not a porn movie,” she clarifies. “The title is deceptive. I would’ve even preferred a porn movie. No, this was a corny romance based on a Nicholas Sparks novel.”

“Ah.” Peter lets out a breath of relief, like everything is right in the world again. “That sounds like my boy.”

“Well, you got it wrong, Dylan, so you’re doing a body shot.” Tommy nestles the shot glass between Isa’s breasts.

“I don’t know how Dylan is okay with that,” Scott whispers from beside me. “I’d fucking kill a guy if he ever touched you like that.”

I want to correct him, tell him that he shouldn’t be speaking in the present tense because there is a man who touches me like that, but for some strange reason, I can’t get the words out.

Isa tilts her neck to the side and Dylan shakes a bit of salt. He licks the salt off her neck, grasping the shot glass from her breasts with his mouth, and then finishing it off with the slice of lime she’s gripping with her teeth.

Dylan takes a moment to kiss her, but Tommy is already moving on to the next question. “Alright, Izzy, what is the biggest heartbreak that Dylan still hasn’t gotten over?”

“Hmm...” She stares at Dylan for a moment as if the answer might be written in his expression. “Well, I think we’ve worked through a lot of our issues in therapy, so I don’t think it’s the heartbreak I caused...right?”

He nods to assure her it’s not.

“So, if it’s not me...then I’m going to take a wild guess and say...it’s Justin and Selena’s break up.”

“No!” Peter’s mouth drops open. “Dyl, please tell me that’s not true.”

“Pete, it hurts me to this day,” he replies, pulling his lips in to stop a laugh. “A part of me still wishes that they’d get back together.”

“How are we friends with this guy?” Peter looks over at Scott, who just shakes his head and sighs his disappointment.

“Fuck if I know, Pete.”

We have another shot, and Tommy continues with the game. I’m a little tipsy when the limo comes to a stop. We file out one by one, and Scott waits at the door, holding out his hand to assist me. The weird thing is I was reaching for his hand before I saw him outside the door, almost like my brain already assumed he’d be standing there because that’s just the type of guy he is.

He keeps lascivious eyes on me as I adjust my skirt, but doesn’t say anything as we walk toward the entrance of the club. *Grit* is not the type of club you’d expect rich, preppy guys like Scott and Peter to come to, but Isa loves this place because the music is sort of raunchy and so is the vibe. It has a sex club feel to it. Ominous red lighting casts shadows over the bare concrete walls, reminding me of the red-light district in Amsterdam. It sort of has the same smutty atmosphere, too. We pass the VIP section and catch a glimpse of men in suits getting private lap dances.

“Wow!” Peter says, throwing his arm over Scott’s shoulder. “Did you see some of the women here tonight? Why don’t we get some drinks, then see if we can get into that VIP section? I need to see some tits tonight because Dylan doesn’t know what a proper bachelor party is supposed to be like.”

Scott chuckles. “Yeah, maybe later.”

The thought of Scott hooking up with another woman tonight hadn’t even crossed my mind, but now that I’m aware of the possibility, I feel strangely uncomfortable. It’s that stupid juvenile jealousy again, and I quickly remind myself that he’s a single man who can do whatever he likes.

We head straight to the bar and get more tequila. I know that mixing alcohol is bad, but I chase it with a caramel vodka to take away the bitterness. It doesn’t take long to start feeling the effects of that. My face heats up and my body begins to buzz. The DJ seems to know the inner workings of my being because he’s playing music that gets my feet moving.

Isa yells her excitement when she hears a familiar beat blaring through the speakers. “That’s my song!” She grabs Dylan and drags him to the dance floor.

Peter orders another round, and I raise my hand to stop him. “No, no. I think I’ve reached my limit for the night.”

“Relax, Stiff.” Scott nudges my arm with his. “Surely, you can let your hair down for one night.”

He challenges me with his eyes, and I narrow mine in defiance. He smiles when I give in and have another drink.

“C’mon, Stiff.” Scott downs his shot of tequila, rids the burn by sucking on a slice of lime, then takes my hand and twirls me around. “Let’s let those hips out the cage.”

That statement was another indirect dig at JP...and me too, I guess. But I don’t care. It’s been a good few months since I’ve been out partying, and I want to let loose and have fun and not worry about being...proper or well-behaved.

Time has not changed a thing. I realize this the second we get to the middle of the dance floor. Scott twirls me once and our bodies synchronize almost instantly. Our feet move in unison, hips swaying in the same rhythm. He’s still so smooth, pulling my arm around his neck before his fingertips trail a path down my sides to my hips.

The beat has us hooked, and his hands stay on my hips as they shake and wind to the music. Spinning me around, my back hits his chest and his big hand slides across my stomach, pulling me closer until I’m flush against him. Wasn’t I just telling him this morning that he should stop touching me? And look at me now. I’ll dissect the intricate layers of my hypocrisy tomorrow. Right now, I’m enjoying myself too much to care.

I’ve always loved dancing with him. He’s energy and fun personified. It’s so easy to get lost in the moment and let the world fade into the background. There’s nothing but me, him, and the music. We dance for a few more songs before my sister calls me with her forefinger to join her on one of the tables.

She is freaking raucous tonight. I'm probably just as bad. I mean, I'm sort of twerking on a table, shouting out the lyrics of every song. I don't know where Tommy found glow sticks, but his shirt is undone, and his skin is lit up in neon green and pink. The alcohol starts to wear off, so Isa and I head back to the bar to get more shots.

"I'm having so much fun!" she shouts to be heard over the music.

"Me too. It's been a while since I've been to a club."

The bartender slides two tequilas to us, and after knocking them back, Isa orders another two. "You and Scott seem to be getting along just fine. I was honestly expecting some awkwardness between the two of you, and it makes me so happy to see that you guys are mature enough to not let the past affect you. Dylan and I were very hostile toward each other after our breakup, so it's refreshing to see that both of you are still able to enjoy each other's company. I'm so glad that my wedding won't be uncomfortable for you." She pulls me in for a tight hug, and she is just beaming with excitement. "It's going to be a perfect day...I can't wait to marry that dork." She giggles, her eyes zoning in on him through the crowd. "Just look at him. He's the sexiest thing I've ever laid eyes on. I'm going to ride the shit out of him tonight, so if you see us disappear in about two hours, don't come looking for us. You'll only see me again tomorrow afternoon. I'll come over to mom's house when my legs start working again."

She says this as I'm about to swallow my next shot and the liquid burns as it comes up my throat again with my laughter. That second one brings back my inebriated contentment. "Well, at least one of us is getting lucky tonight."

"I'm sure you can't wait for JP to get here so you can get a good fucking."

I giggle but choose not to tell her that JP and I haven't had sex in over a month. It's only going to lead to questions I don't want to answer.

I plaster on my most believable smile. "I can't wait to see him again."

And I'm not lying. I miss JP and I want to see him. I'm just in a weird place right now, stuck in a time warp where my old life is merging with my new one. It's messing with my head, but worse than that, it's messing with my feelings. I'm hoping that seeing JP again will bring my mind back to where it's supposed to be. The displacement of all my thoughts about JP when I'm around Scott is becoming a problem.

This is confirmed when we return to the dance floor and Scott's arms instantly loop around me again. My hands move up and around his neck as we dance, and I catch myself staring at him. He's gorgeous. I'm forcing myself not to think about how amazing it all feels, everything, this whole night. Dancing with him again, being in his arms – it's the reason why I'm trapped in this warp. It's like I'm on an ocean of time, stuck in the past on a little lifeboat, struggling to paddle my way back to the present. It's overwhelming, yet I still feel so...alive, so happy.

Alcohol does not stop flowing. With every passing hour, more of our drunkenness starts to show. I'm sweaty and unkempt, my hair sticking to my skin. Isa's speech is slurred. Dylan is not so steady on his feet. Scott's cheeks are a rosy red. Peter has some girl pressed against a pillar. He's been talking to her for over an hour now, and I've caught them kissing a few times. Tommy is dancing with a group of women who seem to be in their early forties, just enjoying a girl's night out.

An hour later, Isa and Dylan disappear as she promised, and not long after that, Peter walks up to us. "Are you guys ready to leave?" He looks over at the tall, dark-haired woman staring at him with sultry brown eyes. "Because I'm ready to get out of here."

Scott looks at me and smiles because I'm still dancing with no intention of stopping. "Nah, we're not ready to leave. It's only two o'clock. It's still early, Pete. Why don't you stay for a bit?"

"Hmm...tough choice. Stay here with you two...or get my world rocked by that model over there." He taps Scott on the shoulder to say goodbye. "She's a *model*. Don't take it

personally, but it's a landslide victory for her. Sorry, but I'm out. I'll send the limo back for you guys."

"Aren't you the one who's always preaching the philosophy of bros before hos?" Scott quips.

"Alright, let's make a deal. Show me your tits, and if they're even twenty percent as hot as hers, I'll stay."

Scott laughs, shoving him lightly. "Fine, you win. Have a good night, Pete."

"Trust me...I will."

As soon as he steps away, Scott and I continue dancing as if the interruption never happened. Another half hour goes by before I tug Scott's sleeve for him to lower his head. "Let's get another drink."

"Yes! I'm gonna run to the gents. Meet me at the bar."

"You want another tequila?"

"Yeah."

I walk over to the bar and order another round of tequila. My face is hot, and my skin is glistening with sweat.

"What's a pretty woman like you doing in a place like this?"

I turn to my left to see the dark-haired stranger standing beside me. He's not a bad-looking guy, but I'm not interested.

"Ordering a drink," I reply, facing the bartender again.

"Why don't I get that for you?"

"No, thanks. I can pay for my own drink."

"I saw you on the table earlier." He flashes me a flirty smile. "Care to indulge me in a dance?"

I'm still thinking of a way to politely tell him to get lost when he reaches out to skim his fingertips down my arm.

"Yo, watch your hands, bud." Scott removes his hand from my arm, giving it a firm shake before he releases it. His tone is almost menacing in its friendliness. "Why don't you back off and give her some space?"

“I was just asking the lady if she wants to dance.”

“Aw, that’s nice of you, but she already has a dance partner for the night. Thanks so much for asking, though. I’m sure she appreciates that.”

Scott stares him down until he eventually stands up to leave. I smile to myself. Some things never change. He’s still so protective, and I hate that I’m swooning a little.

“Here are your drinks, ma’am.”

The bartender’s voice makes me face the bar again, and Scott moves to stand behind me, placing his hands on either side of me with his chest right up against my back. His body envelops mine as if he’s trying to protect me from flirty strangers and their wandering eyes, but his good intentions are having a very bad effect on me. I shut my eyes for a second and try to regain some stability. Our next shot of tequila is gulped down in one hard swallow, and I feel its magic almost immediately.

“I can’t leave you alone for a second,” he mutters irritably and now his warm breath is tickling my neck. I can’t even... “Every time we go out, I gotta deal with some random guy trying to hit on you.” Again, he’s speaking as if this is something that happens in the present tense, and again, I don’t correct him. His chin lightly grazes my shoulder as he leans closer to my ear. “You and this skirt are a very dangerous combination. Can’t say I blame him, though.”

His closeness is affecting me more than I want it to. I have the crazy urge to reach back and bring his lips down to the valley between my neck and shoulder. I fight the urge by turning around to face him. Some distance is needed between us, so I place my elbows on the bar behind me and lean back. That was a very bad decision because his gaze drops straight to my breasts. They’re literally in his face now and his eyes are devouring me. My heart beats a little faster. Between my thighs get a little slicker. My body gets a little hotter. I’m trying to convince myself that it’s just the alcohol, but I dated this guy for four and a half years. I know exactly the effect *he* has on me.

“Maybe he’s picking up on the vibe you’re actually giving off to me.” An easy grin lifts the corners of his mouth as his eyes move down the length of my body. “You look like you wanna do a lot more than dancing tonight.”

I lift an eyebrow to show him how ridiculous I find his statement, even though I know *exactly* what vibes I’ve been giving off. He hasn’t misread them. “Misogynistic much?” I ask. “Just because a woman wears a short skirt doesn’t mean you need to take it as an invitation.”

“I’m not talking about the way you’re dressed.” His head dips toward my ear again as one hand moves off the bar and onto my thigh, sliding up to grip my side. He pulls me closer until my breasts are pressed against his chest. The heat from his body mixed with the alcohol running through my veins is a potent cocktail, and I feel like I might pass out. “I’m talking about the way you keep looking at me, the way your lips are silently begging for mine, this little shiver you get every time I’m close to you. Your body never lies to me. Don’t think I don’t feel it.”

“Feel what exactly?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

“How badly you want me inside you.” The smooth skin of his clean-shaven jaw rubs against my cheek. His cologne pervades the space between us, and I’m at breaking point. “I’m right here, Cat,” he whispers, both playful and seductive. “If you want something from me...take it.”

I slowly turn my head toward him, and he’s right. His mouth is a mere inch from mine. My eyes flick between his eyes and lips. I’m dizzy, and the alcohol rises to my cheeks, making me incredibly hot. Everything seems to stop. Time stands still. The chatter and music fade into the background. There’s nothing except us and the magnetic force that seems to be pulling my lips toward his. My mouth lightly touches his, and he stops breathing, his eyes widening slightly, like he was simply taunting me yet not expecting me to actually respond.

If I’m honest, I wasn’t expecting it either. I keep telling myself to pull away, to not let this go further, but I can’t seem to stop. He feels so good. I press my mouth to his, loving the

supple texture. Soft yet firm, and so deliciously plump against my own. My lips had once been branded by his kiss, but now it's like a distant memory that my brain is desperately trying to recall. In the deep recesses of my mind, I know what it feels like, but I want to remember how a simple kiss from him could so easily overpower all my senses. I want to remind myself of the sensation of getting swept up in a whirlwind of unbridled passion.

He remains completely still as my mouth caresses his, and I can feel the rigidity of his body as my hand moves up to his face to stop him from shifting away. I need to taste him. My tongue darts out to run along the seam of his lips and he allows me entry. The subtle moistness draws me in, and my tongue ventures in further.

It's at this point that his hesitance disappears. The breath he'd been holding is released into my mouth with a low groan. The small vibration of it hits the back of my throat, filling me with a burning desire. Molten heat spreads through me. Every inch of my skin is on fire, aflame with raw lust. His tongue dives between my lips and he kisses me like only he can, the type of kiss that sucks the air right out of me. How have I survived without this for so long?

I'm panting, and the lingering taste of alcohol on his breath is an unexpected aphrodisiac that I'm quickly falling victim to. Clasp the side of my jaw, he deepens the kiss, holding nothing back. My arms slide around his neck, pulling him closer. I want more of him, all of him. He must sense it because he pulls away a fraction.

"Come home with me," he whispers hoarsely.

That simple sentence is like a bucket of cold water thrown right in my face. What the hell am I doing?

"Shit!" I push him off me and quickly shift away from him. The reality of what I did, what I'm doing, what I so desperately want to do, hits me like a ton of bricks. "Shit! Scott...I, uh..."

My mind can't even formulate words. I need to get away from him before I do something stupid...something *more*

stupid. I leave him at the bar and rush off to the ladies' restroom. As soon as the door swings shut behind me, I race to the faucet, splashing cold water on my face and dabbing some around my neck. When I look in the mirror, I see the familiar flush on my cheeks, the undeniable effect of his kiss. Crap! What the hell did I do? I take a few minutes to pull myself together, steadying my breaths and my heart rate. I know he wouldn't have left in the time I've been in here, but a small part of me is hoping he did because I don't think I can face him.

I exhale slowly and exit the restroom, heading back toward the bar.

"Hey."

A voice as smooth as chocolate echoes behind me, and I slowly turn to face him. A dim red glow barely illuminates his features, but I have no problem reading the expression on his face. I know that grin. I know that glint in his blue eyes.

He takes a few steps toward me, and I raise my hand to stop him. "Scott...stay there. Don't come any closer."

All I get is a wider grin and another step closer, like he's enjoying toying with me.

"I mean it. What just happened...shouldn't have happened. I didn't want to do that."

"You sure?" Another step closer and I take a step back to maintain the gap between us. "Because it felt like you *really* wanted to do that."

"I didn't." I sound more panicked than sure of myself. "Scott, I don't want to be that person. I'm not the type to cheat. I'm drunk. That was a lapse in judgment."

"A lapse in judgment?" The amusement fades from his eyes and is replaced with simmering anger. "You're going to blame alcohol for what just happened?"

"I shouldn't have done that. Kissing you was a mistake."

"Mistakes generally only happen once, Cat."

"That *did* only happen once."

“Count again.”

He grabs the back of my neck, pulling me toward him, and his mouth crashes down on mine. His point is proven immediately because I don't even have the will to resist. Cupping my face with both hands, he shoves me up against the wall.

The cold concrete is a harsh contrast to my scorching skin, and it causes a sharp prickle just beneath the surface. I would care if my lips weren't being assaulted by the bruising kiss of Scott Carter. His mouth is hard, aggressive, letting me know just how pissed off he is, and I kiss him back with the same voracity.

His lips move lower, his teeth grazing my neck. “Try telling me again that you don't want this.”

Those words only remind me of how wrong *this* is, reinforcing my guilt. I need to stop. I'm already knee-deep in the *more stupid* territory and I'm dangerously close to entering the *Holy hell! He's never gonna forgive me* zone. My hands move onto Scott's chest, and I have every intention of pushing him off me. But then this asshole places his hand over mine, sliding it down his chiseled abs and onto the hard bulge in his jeans. I gasp when I'm reminded of the sheer size of him, and my thighs clench in anticipation. He gives no fucks about the footsteps and chatter behind us as people walk through the corridor to the restrooms.

Keeping his hand on mine, he rubs it up and down his cock, slow enough for me to feel every rock-solid inch sliding against my palm. “This is what you do to me.” Guttural groans reverberate against the hollow spot at the base of my throat and that sexy sound slices right through my intoxicated haze, making me hotter, wetter. He abruptly pulls away, his ragged breaths fanning my lips. “I'm giving you two options. You can come home with me...or I'm dragging you into this bathroom and fucking you up against the door. Either way, you're mine tonight.”

The audacity of this man!

“God, you’re still so entitled.” His arrogance infuriates me to no end, and I don’t know if it’s anger or lust that has my temperature rising to these abnormally high levels. “You can’t always take what you want.”

A glimmer of a smile dances on his cheek. “Watch me.”

He grabs my hand, tugging me through the crowd and out the front entrance. His steps quicken once we’re outside and he spots the limo. Scott leans into the front window to tell the driver his address and then I’m yanked into the back seat. Grabbing the backs of my thighs, he spreads my legs and pulls me on top of him. The tinted window between us and the driver slides up, and those sapphire blue eyes lock on mine. Even in my inebriated state, I can sense that this is where things take a turn. He brings my mouth to his, and I stop fighting, stop resisting. Teeth, tongue, lips – he wants it? He’s getting all of it. Wild, fierce, furious – he’s getting *all* of it.

I know I haven’t had sex in a month, but he makes me feel like it’s been years. I’m on him, writhing against him like some wanton harlot who’s been starved of affection for too long. Like a thirsty straggler lost in the desert, I’m all over him as if this mouth, this body, this cock throbbing between my legs are an oasis I’ve stumbled upon, and I’m drinking him in, gulping down his essence. But my thirst is unquenchable, my need for him knows no bounds.

Light from the streetlamps bounces in and out through the windows, dancing on our bodies as we drive through the city. He cups my breast, squeezing it until I moan. It barely lasts a few seconds before his firm hands slide up my thighs, dragging my skirt up, but the damn thing is so tight it barely goes up an inch. His movements are disjointed. His kisses are sloppy. His body is shaking with restlessness. This guy wants me so bad he doesn’t know where to focus his energy. Thick fingers slip beneath my panties and his breathing staggers when he feels how wet I am. Bringing his fingers to his lips, he licks them clean.

“You still on the pill?” he asks breathlessly.

I can only nod.

And with that, he decides he's done with foreplay. Clumsy fingers fumble with the zipper of his jeans, and then the silky skin of his shaft is rubbing my inner thigh. His impatience is such a turn-on. Scott is usually smooth, charmingly composed, and I love that I've turned him into this floundering, ravenous mess. Keeping his eyes on mine, he shifts my panties and positions himself at my entrance. My breath catches when the tip of his cock tries to squeeze into me. He shifts his hips, but his movements are restrained. He grips my ass, trying to pull me against him, but my skirt is rigid, making it impossible for either of us to move. He fiddles with the zipper and still no luck.

"This fucking skirt!" His frustration is clear by the way his jaw tightens, the way he bites into his clenched fist.

He's on the verge of losing it when the limo comes to a stop. He quickly zips his jeans, then helps me tug down my skirt. He grabs my hand, almost dragging me out, and I battle to keep up with his long, hasty strides as we walk to the elevator. Once we're inside, he inserts the key for the twelfth floor, and we start traveling up. He doesn't touch me. He just keeps those hungry blue eyes on me, biding his time as the elevator ascends from floor to floor.

All that changes the second the elevator dings and the doors open. He grasps my waist, finding the nearest surface, the island in the kitchen, and I'm dropped onto it. The basket of bananas and block of knives are tossed off to make room for me. He tries to move his hips between my legs and still can't get it right.

"This skirt is going to kill me. It's like a goddamn chastity belt." His nails bite into my thigh as he grips either side of the seam and rips it right off me. He smirks. "Better. Now, where my girls at?"

I'm stripped of my tank top. My bra follows a few seconds later, and he groans as his heated gaze travels over me. "Your body is amazing. Starla and Carla are just...Wow!"

He gropes my breasts with both hands and his face drops between them, nuzzling licking, urging me down against the

wooden countertop as his mouth moves lower over my stomach. The heels of my boots are hooked up on the counter and he buries his head between my legs. I feel the heat of his mouth through my thin lace panties. The material is rough on my skin as he licks me over them. Slow, erotic strokes of his tongue. My head falls back. My back arches. My body is in a confused state. Numb from the alcohol but still overly sensitive. The world is spinning and the ecstatic electricity zipping through me is only making me more light-headed. I don't know how or when my panties were removed, but his mouth hits my bare skin and I cry out.

“Oh, baby, I've missed you so much,” he murmurs. By the way his tongue firmly laps my clit and probes inside me, I realize he's not talking to me.

My hands rake over his head as my hips begin to move. I want to grip his hair, but it's too short, so I just hold him in place as I ride his face. When did I become this person? So greedy and eager and unrestrained? It takes a second to realize that I've always been this person. When did I stop? The languid flicks against my clit pull me back into the moment.

“Let go, Cat,” he whispers. “Cum on my tongue. I wanna taste you.”

With a desperate moan of his name, I do as he requests. I see a kaleidoscope of colors as my orgasm ripples through me and each wave of pleasure accentuates my unstable drunkenness. He's still wiping the moisture off the corner of his lower lip with his thumb when I lift off the counter and slam my mouth on his. Ferocious. Rapacious. I can't get enough of him.

“I want you inside me.” It's an aching plea. “Please, Scott. *Please*. I want you inside me *now*.”

Begging is so unbecoming, but I can't wait a second longer. Buttons undone. Zipper undone. And when he shoves his jeans and boxers off his waist and the blunt tip of his cock penetrates me, pushing into my slick wetness, I come completely *un-fucking-done*. Nails scrape down his taut abdomen down to his narrow hips and my lips find that spot

on his neck that makes him go wild. Gripping my ass, he sinks into me. After five years, his thickness feels uncomfortable, and I bite my lower lip as my tender skin is forced to stretch around him.

“Cat...*aah*...” He pushes in deeper, and his head drops onto my shoulder as if the sensation is too overwhelming for him. “It’s been a while. I’m not going to last long.”

I nip his earlobe. “Then you better make it the best three minutes of my life, Soldier.”

A faint chuckle floats up to my ears. “Challenge accepted.”

In one swift motion, he withdraws, pulls me off the counter, and spins me around. The coarse texture of the wood grazes my nipples as he shoves me down against the surface. He’s bending me over, readying me for his next assault.

“This ass is so *peachy*.”

He takes a second to pay tribute to my ass, sinking his teeth into my right cheek. His mouth moves lower between my legs, and he licks me from my swollen clit up to between my ass cheeks. I suck in sharply, uncertain if I like it or not. The path his tongue takes is so unexpected it feels almost invasive, like a violation of sorts. But then I remind myself that this is Scott Carter I’m fucking. He has free reign over my body, access to every part of me. He still thinks he owns me, and at this particular moment, I feel no need to correct him.

Goosebumps break out on my skin as his tongue travels up my back and a hard slap follows as he straightens again. I grit my teeth, loving the sting on my ass, the vibration that tickles my core. His entry this time is rougher, but his thrusts are slow and hard, so very hard, hitting that spot deep inside me. His body covers mine, encapsulating me with his strength.

I jerk forward every time he slams into me, the edge of the counter bruising my hips. One hand slides beneath me, cupping my breast to hold me steady. The other moves down my arm and he interlinks his fingers with mine. Our bodies are hot, damp with sweat, and the muscled wall of his chest glides up and down against my back. I’m panting now. Rapid breaths

are expelled from my lungs with each slap of his hips against my ass. His taking of me is primal, virile. He's a fucking animal.

Beads of perspiration dot my forehead as it becomes more strenuous to take the full force of him. Husky moans fill the air, bursting from my mouth as he plunges in and out of me until my breath stops altogether. The pressure has reached its peak and I can't seem to take in air.

"I'm coming." My body stiffens as I wait for it to take over. The implosion happens in euphoric waves of delight, ebbing and flowing through my entire body before I feel moisture trickle down my thighs.

My muscles clench around his cock, and his breathing elevates. His thrusts quicken, becoming more urgent. That sexy mouth bites into my shoulder, his fingers tightening around mine. He pumps faster and faster, harder and deeper. A strained groan rumbles in his throat before he collapses on top of me. Breathless and limp, we just stay there until we can feel our legs again. He shifts a little, off me and onto the counter. His face is a few inches from mine as he gently brushes the damp hair off my forehead.

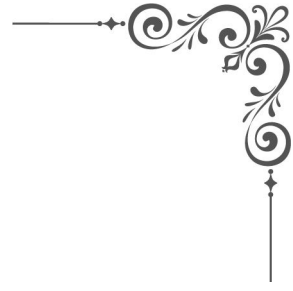
"Hi, beautiful."

"Hi." I smile. In fact, I'm probably beaming. Slowly, he straightens, and I lift off the counter, turning to face him. "Well, at least we got the sexual tension out of the way."

An odd grin splits his face, and he traces his thumb over my mouth. "Cat, you make it sound like this is over, and you're about to high-tail it outta here. I didn't even spend any quality time with my two porn stars." He cups my breasts and nips my lower lip with his teeth. "You can forget about leaving. I'm not done with you...not even close."

His arms slip around me to pull me closer, and I can already feel his cock starting to stir again. Praise should be given for this man's recovery time. He'll be ready to go again in another minute or so, and that naughty look in his eyes tells me that he's going to go hard. I take a deep breath and release

it slowly as I brace myself for what's to come. I'm going to be so sore tomorrow.



9. Scott

“**S**hit! What have I done?”

The panicked voice and rustling in my bedroom pull me out of my slumber. I'm not hungover, but I'm not ready to wake up yet either. My eyes squint, trying to adjust to the light as I look for the source of the noise.

“Where are my clothes?” She tosses pillows around the room, then drops to her knees to check under the bed. “Oh, my God! What did I do last night?”

I grumble, rolling from my stomach to my back, and sit up against the headboard. “I love the sound of regret in the morning,” I say tiredly.

I give her a playful smile, but she continues manically scrounging around my room. She looks adorable in the black shirt I wore last night, her hair all messy and wild. It would be a great sight to wake up to if she didn't look so horrified.

“Where's my underwear?”

“In the kitchen somewhere.” I attempt to rub the sleep from my eyes. “I ripped it, though. Don't you remember?”

“What? No. How am I supposed to go home looking like this?”

“Relax. Your clothes are still here from when we went to the beach on Friday. You can wear that.”

That does nothing to settle her anxiety. “What's my mother going to say?”

“Don't worry. I texted her last night. I told her you were having way too much fun, and we didn't want to wake them up, so you were gonna crash at my place and I'd bring you home later.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “When did you text her?”

“At the club. When I went to the gents...I came back, and that guy was hitting on you.”

Wide brown eyes stare at me with exasperation and her temper instantly flares. “Wait. You knew this was going to happen?”

“You didn’t?”

She shuts her eyes, shaking her head. “I need to get out of here.”

I stretch my arms over my head, still trying to wake up. “No, you don’t. C’mon, I’ll make you breakfast, and we can discuss all the bad decisions we made last night.”

“Breakfast?” She’s truly appalled by this idea. “No! I can’t have breakfast with you. Firstly, it’s two in the afternoon. Secondly, I have eight missed calls from my boyfriend. *Eight*. He’s probably worried sick. I need to leave. Oh, my God! What am I going to tell him?”

It’s not like I didn’t know she had a boyfriend, but hearing that sort of pisses me off a little...A lot. “You’re not about to treat me like a one-night stand, Cat.”

She’s flabbergasted, speechless for a moment or two. “What were you expecting, Scott? What do you think is going to happen here?”

I think about it, and honestly, I don’t know what I was expecting. I wasn’t expecting us to get back together. I wasn’t expecting her to break up with...man-bun. A one-night stand is the most realistic outcome of this situation. It’s very clear now that there are critical drawbacks to thinking with my dick. The damn thing has no foresight and no ability to assess the long-term implications of a decision. It’s completely consumed with instant gratification and simply does not think things through.

“I wasn’t expecting anything, but after last night—”

“Last night never should have happened.”

Instant trigger. “Uh-huh. And after which orgasm did you realize that?” Not gonna lie, the look of absolute mortification on her face is very satisfying. “Was it the one in the kitchen, the shower, my dining table? There were so many here in my

bedroom. Maybe it was one of those that led to this sudden epiphany.”

“Don’t be a douche about this,” she snaps. Livid brown eyes stay on me as she crosses the room to stand beside the bed, her finger pointed right in my face. “*You* were the one who kept pursuing this, knowing I’m in a relationship.”

“Cat, in case you forgot, *you* kissed *me*.”

“I know,” she says, and the guilt shows openly in her eyes. “That was very wrong of me. I shouldn’t have kissed you. None of this should have happened, and it can’t continue. I’m in love with JP.”

This is grinding me more every time I hear it. I toss my legs over the side of the bed, keeping the sheet over me because I’m naked underneath. I can do nothing but glower at her for a solid minute. “How long have you been with this guy? Just over a year?”

“Eighteen months.”

“And you’re sure it’s love?”

“Yes. Very sure, a hundred percent certain.”

“Hmm...c’mere.” I grab the front of my shirt and tug her toward me. “I wanna tell you a little secret. It’s a juicy one. Are you ready to hear it?”

She rolls her eyes. “I don’t have time for games. Out with it, Scott.”

Even with me sitting and her standing, she’s not much taller than me, but I pull her closer so I can whisper in her ear. “It took me four days to get into your panties. Four days and I had you *begging* for me. I think maybe you should reevaluate your definition of *love*.”

An open palm flies at my face, the sound crackling through my bedroom. In all the time I’ve known Cat, she has only ever slapped me on three occasions, so I know I really have to push her to the point of bubbling rage to get that reaction. And I’m glad. I’m glad I pushed her to this point because I’ve been skirting around the same point for a few days now. I run my

tongue along the inside of my cheek to get rid of the sting. The suppressed smile on my face gets her more riled up.

“You arrogant fucking prick!” She’s fuming, her breaths coming out hard and erratic. “Just because you’re stuck in the past, you decided to drag me back with you. You’re sad and lonely and miserable, so you want me to feel the same way. I’m sorry I’m happy. I’m sorry I found love again, and you didn’t.” She points to the photos on my chest of drawers. “At some point, you have to let go. I’ve moved on. You need to do the same.”

“Oh, yeah,” I agree with a sarcastic smirk. “You’re just the poster child for that, aren’t ya? Emblematic. They should put up billboards of you all over the city. You know what would be a good picture? You naked on my kitchen counter with my head between your legs and at the bottom, we can put a nice little slogan saying: *This is what moving on looks like.*”

The second slap is a zinger, but it stings a little less because I expected it, intentionally provoked it. I used to be an expert at drawing out her hate, her anger, basically every adverse emotion, and it’s nice to know that I haven’t lost my touch. I chuckle because she is spitting fire now. Not gonna lie, it’s really nice to see the woman I fell in love with instead of the stiff who’s been inhabiting her body for the last four days...years. I don’t know when she became like that.

“You can fuck right off, Scott!” Unadulterated rage causes her voice to tremble. “Yesterday was a moment of weakness. I was drunk. I got caught up in the moment. One thing led to another. That’s it.”

I’m getting tired of the bullshit she’s trying to feed me. “Are you still drunk, or have you sobered up? All this attitude I’m getting makes me think you’re sober.”

“Yes,” she replies irritably. “I’m sober now.”

“Good.” My hands slowly glide up her smooth thighs. “Because now you don’t have any excuses to hide behind. You keep saying last night was a mistake, and it only happened because you were drunk, so let me show you how easily I can make it happen again.”

My hands move beneath my black shirt. She tries to smack them off her, but I grip her waist and toss her onto the bed beside me, pushing her legs apart to settle myself between them. She lifts her hips off the bed, trying to toss me off, but all that does is press her soft flesh against my very eager cock. A light murmur escapes her lips when she feels it, and she stops moving.

“Okay, now that we’re comfortable.” I smile at her, and her jaw tightens with annoyance. “Why don’t we play a game?”

“I don’t want to play a game. I want to go home, so get off me.”

“Let me tell you how it’s going to work. I’m going to start kissing your neck...you know that spot that makes you moan my name in the sexiest way...Yeah, I’m gonna start there.” My hand slides up her thigh, dragging my shirt up with it. She’s naked underneath and with her legs spread, she’s so vulnerable. She’s mine for the taking. Something about that excites me and my breath hitches. “And then I’m going start touching you...*everywhere*. And you know that I know where every pleasure point on your body is located. Then once you’re hot and ready and your pussy is dripping for me, I’m gonna slide my dick inside you and fuck you until you can’t stand.” Just the thought has my fingers pressing harder into her thigh. “Now, if at any point you want me to stop, all you have to do is tell me you don’t want me, and I’ll stop. Let’s see if sober you reacts differently to drunk you. Ready to play?”

“No,” she hisses. “Get. Off. Me!”

“Those aren’t the right words.”

I tilt her head for better access and my tongue sweeps up her neck, closing over that sensitive spot just below her jawbone.

“Scott...” It’s half moan, half protest. “Stop messing around. Just take me home.”

“Still not the right words, Cat.” I brace myself on my forearms to look down at her flushed face and my amused expression angers her even more. “I’ll take you home when

we're done. Then later tonight you can lay awake in bed, lamenting about all the mistakes you've made and how it took you only *four* days to make them."

Both her hands fly at me, shoving at my chest as she calls me every name under the sun. I take all of it. I give her a few seconds to unleash her fury before I grab both her wrists. Using one hand, I pin them on the mattress above her head.

"Get the hell off me, Scott!" She's seething, shaking with exasperation...and lust.

"Tell me you don't want me, and I'll get off you."

She just stares at me with those beautiful, big brown eyes, reminding me of a time when she used to be mine. A part of me is so desperate to have her again and the other part is so angry that this is the only way I can have her at all. Just physical and nothing else.

I hold her gaze, my hand moving to the buttons of my shirt. Slowly, I undo them, one by one, spreading the material until those perky tits are exposed. Brownish-pink nipples are erect and just begging for my attention. I lightly trace my fingertips over her side, then up to her ribs, drawing small patterns on her flawless skin. Everything about her is so soft, mesmerizing. I lose myself for a moment, just savoring the exquisite beauty that is Catalina Diaz, the irreplaceable love of my life.

My hand moves up to cup her breast. Firm and supple, it fills my palm. As I tease her nipples, I feel more moisture glaze my dick and it intrigues me enough to investigate. My hand makes a detour, sliding down her stomach and between her legs. A gruff groan leaves my body when her wetness coats my fingers.

"All this for me?" I flash her a cocky grin. "You really shouldn't have."

Her eyes narrow into a death stare. "Let me go."

"Say the magic words."

"I don't..."

“Almost there.”

She tries to tug her hands free, but I tighten my grip. She wriggles beneath me, trying to shift away from my probing fingers, but eventually one works its way inside her...and then another. Her back arches off the bed, pushing her breasts up toward my face. I can't resist taking one pert nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it until she moans my name. Watching her, feeling her – it's driving me fucking wild.

“I don't want...*oh, Scott...*” Her eyes drift closed as I massage her clit. “I don't...I don't want to hurt him.”

“That's not the same thing.”

An elated gasp burst from her lips when I remove my fingers and rub my cock along her slick entrance. I grit my teeth, using every ounce of control I possess to restrain myself. “I'm giving you ten more seconds and then I'm taking what's mine.”

“I'm not yours!” she spits out between ragged breaths. “Not anymore. And what you're trying to prove is pointless. So, I like a quick roll in the sack with you. So what? All you proved is that I'm just like any other woman who can't resist the *amazing* Scott Carter. It doesn't change anything. We're over. You dumped me, remember?”

This was never supposed to be a fun game. She's right. The douche in me was simply trying to prove a point, but things are beginning to turn sour, and I feel the change happening in both of us. Hostility levels rise. Bitterness starts to seep through the cracks. Raw acrimony hangs thick and heavy in the air.

“Holy shit! You have got to be kidding me. What choice did I have? You didn't want this anymore.”

“I didn't want this? Are you crazy? Of course, I wanted this.” Tears well up in her eyes, but she's too enraged to let them fall. “I wanted *you*. I wanted you with every part of my being.”

It didn't escape me – not even for one-tenth of a second – that she just spoke in the past tense. “You have an odd way of

showing it.”

“I begged...I *begged* you to come with me.”

“I begged you to come home.”

And those few words open the floodgates. Indignation starts gushing in. A deluge of anger hits with torrential force. Resentment washes over us like a tidal wave, and we’re left drowning, suffocating in our own pain.

“We were magic, Cat, and you didn’t want to fight for us.”

“*You* broke up with *me!*” She’s yelling now, riled up and livid, hurt blazing in her brown eyes. “You know, you’re supposed to be the smart one. I tried calling you a million times. I made it very clear that I didn’t want us to end. You *know* that because you read all my messages and ignored every one of them. And now you wanna play the part of the broken-hearted lover when all of this was your fucking choice! This is what *you* wanted.” She tries to yank her hands free again, becoming more frustrated when I still refuse to let go.

“How did you expect it to work?”

She chews the inside of her lip, a sign that she doesn’t want to cry in front of me. “It doesn’t matter. I found someone I can make it work with, and I love him because he’s *nothing* like—”

I slam my lips on hers, shutting her up, because I can’t take hearing one more word about him. The thought of him touching her, his hands on her body – it’s going to make me lose my fucking mind. My tongue plunges into her mouth. She kisses me back with the same ardent intensity, offering no resistance...because she can’t resist me. This body is mine and will always come back to me.

I shift my hips, pushing deeper into her wet heat, and she moans into my mouth. With a soft whimper, she breaks the kiss when I shove my hips closer to hers. I’m not a gentle guy, and I’m well aware of what I did to her just mere hours ago. I don’t need more proof than the bruises on her hips, the deep purple love bites on her thighs to know that last night has left her sore and tender. Call me a caveman, but she needed a

reminder of who this body belonged to. Her eyebrows pinch together as she tries to breathe through the discomfort.

I press in further and her thighs clamp around my waist to halt my entry. “No, no, baby.” I grasp her thigh, forcing her legs apart again. “You’ll take every inch of me.”

Using my thumb, I spread her lips a little more to accommodate my girth. Not that I need much help. Her pussy is drenched, so ready for me. I drive my pelvis forward until I’m buried to the hilt. I feel the tension between my shoulder blades. My whole body stiffens, and ragged exhales stumble out of me. I love the feeling of being inside her. She’s so deliciously tight, gripping my cock like she wants to keep me there forever.

I take a second to steady myself before my hips shift again. Careful not to lose control, my movements are languid and purposeful. Drawing out slow and slamming in hard. I kiss her the same way. I want her to feel the scalding heat of me burning the memory of my kiss onto her lips. I want her to feel the searing sting of me claiming her with every thrust.

“You feel me, Cat?” I lift her leg higher up my waist, hitting that spot that makes her moan like crazy. She tries to keep her expression neutral, but the ecstasy she feels is on full display, in every needy sound that bursts out of her, in the way her body writhes beneath me. My breaths are heavy too, lumbered with lust and the growing friction between us. “You feel what I’m doing? This is me ruining you for every other guy. Even when you leave again, this moment will still play on your mind. Every time you screw him, you’ll be wishing it was me. And later, when you call him, you can lie about who you were with last night, even though you’ll still be feeling me right *here*.” I hit against her hard enough for her to flinch. “And then you can tell him just how much you *love* him...with my cum still inside you.”

“Fuck you!”

“Yeah, fuck me!” I rasp, each word coated with acerbic venom. “Fuck me and everything I gave up just to be with you. Fuck me and my ring that ended up as a fashion

accessory you wear on the wrong finger. Fuck me and all my feelings that have nowhere to go because you're not here."

Rage, blind rage spreads through me, spilling like acid into my veins. I feel it blistering beneath my skin. This shit is tearing me up inside. I thrust harder, deeper, my teeth sinking into her lip, nails biting into her thigh. She shattered me, and I want her to feel the sharp, jagged shards of the wreckage she left behind. My movements become faster, more urgent, my hand tightening around her wrists. Eyes locked on mine; she stares at me wordlessly. She takes all the wrath I'm unleashing, every vitriolic word, her only response being the aching whimpers that leave those perfect lips.

"Fuck me and everything you threw away just to end up right back in my bed because you still can't get enough of me." I release her hands and flip over, bringing her with me so she's straddled on top of me. "Now, fuck me...because this is the only dick you've wanted for five years."

For a good minute, she does nothing but stare at me, her eyes searching mine like she's trying to locate the source of all my animosity, yet the same animosity is reflected in her eyes, too. I'm so tense, my hand trembles when she lifts it to her face. A soft kiss is placed on my palm and her gentleness is a soothing contrast to the cataclysmic storm raging within me.

"You're so arrogant," she whispers. Her tongue circles my forefinger before she pulls it into her mouth. She knows exactly what that does to me and a satisfied smirk curves on her lips when she feels my cock twitch. "Let's get one thing straight, asshole." She drags my wet finger to her nipple, pressing her hand against mine until I cup her breast. "This ring never would have changed fingers if you hadn't ended it. You were my forever, my whole world, and *you* threw it all away. I called you...For three straight months, I called you every day, multiple times a day...and you didn't answer."

"No available flights, Cat?"

She scoffs, not even bothering to justify her actions. I don't want to hear it, anyway. It's just going to be another pitiful

excuse about a project she had to do. But what happened after that one? Or the one after that? Or the one after that?

“Let’s not bicker about things we can’t change. We’re over now.” Slowly, she removes my shirt, her dark hair cascading over her bare shoulders. “If you want me so badly, you can have me...any way you want.” Her hips begin to move, rocking against me with enough force to stifle my breath. “It was so easy for you to get me here, right? Naked on top of you? So, take me.” Lowering herself, her supple breasts are pressed to my chest. Her tongue lightly traces my lower lip as her hips gyrate in slow, seductive circles. I’m spellbound, utterly at her mercy. “Take everything you want from me, enough to keep you obsessing about me for the next five years. Take me knowing that all you’ll ever know after me is emotionally unavailable sex. Take it all...because when this is over, I want you to stay the hell away from me.”

“Aw, baby.” I grin, sliding my hands up her back and weaving one into her hair. “I’m not the problem here. I dare you to stay away from *me*.”

“Shut up. I’m done talking.”

Her lips touch mine, and I fall mindlessly into it, kissing her deeply, fervently. The hand in her hair tightens to keep her in place as my mouth devours hers. Games are forgotten. One-upping each other is forgotten. All our hurt and anger and resentment meld together, creating a desperate yearning, drawing us into each other until we’re a sensual entanglement, a cocoon of legs and arms.

She rides me. Breasts glide against my chest. Teeth graze across her shoulder. Nails scrape down my abs.

She rides me. Soft sighs tickle my neck. Unsteady breaths fill the space between us. Heated skin dampens with sweat.

She rides me. Pressure mounts. Exigency builds. Tension escalates.

“Cat...” I murmur, utterly overwhelmed with every sensation pulsating through me. I want more, but it’s already too much.

“Take what you want from me, Scott.”

Whispers are urgent. Mouths are insatiable. Bodies are unraveling. She rides me. I grip her waist, dragging her up and down the length of me. Her movements are slow, so torturously slow, because she wants me to remember every second of how she took me to this peak...and then how she toppled me over.

I feel it. My eyes shut. My body stiffens. “I’m coming.”

With a staggering groan, I spill over inside her, my hands squeezing her ass. I’m barely cognizant of the increased pitch of her moans. I’m only aware that she orgasmed when she collapses against my chest.

Her breathing hasn’t even slowed when she lifts off me and walks to the bathroom to shower. When I manage to pull myself together, I silently walk in and hang her clothes on the towel rail. She emerges ten minutes later, staring me down with cold indifference. It’s the polar opposite of the heat I saw flickering in her eyes just a few minutes ago, and I’m having none of that. Nope. We’re not playing that game today. She can slap me. She can call me names. And when she hops on a plane in two weeks, she can leave here absolutely loathing me. But she will *not* shut me out. I have spent too much time on the other side of a wall with this woman. No way in hell is she exiling me again.

“I’ll see you at the wedding,” she says, heading to the elevator.

I grip the waistband of her denim shorts, yanking her toward me as I slowly slip my spare key into her pocket. I keep my hand there for longer than necessary, ensuring she knows that she’s letting me touch her. “Just in case you want to stop by before then.” I smirk and her temper flares again. “The code is my birthday.”

Evidence of our night together is still all over my kitchen floor. Knives and bananas are scattered everywhere. Casually tiptoeing over the mess and her ripped panties, she sighs her aggravation as she steps into the elevator. “Goodbye, Scott.”

I place my hands on either side of the elevator doors to keep them open. “Hang on. You forgot something.”

“What?”

With one hand, I grasp the back of her neck and bring her lips to mine. For a few short seconds, she forgets that this was supposed to be the end of us and kisses me back. She quickly breaks away, looking irritated at herself.

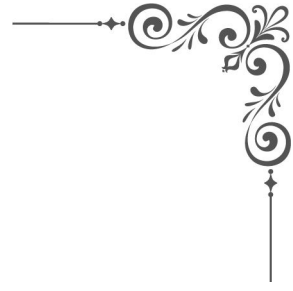
“Hey,” I say, running my forefinger across her chin. “I love you.”

Surprise widens her eyes, but then she quickly looks away as if the words hurt her. They hurt me, too. “I can’t see you again, Scott.”

“So you keep saying.” I step out of the elevator. “Now, when you get home, don’t forget to call your boyfriend. He’s probably worried sick.” I wink at her just to infuriate her. In all honesty, it infuriates me more.

She sneers. “Asshole,” she mutters under her breath as the elevator doors close in front of me.

I smile. Well, that’s better than indifference.



10. Catalina

What the hell have I done? How many times did I do it? The questions circulate in my mind as I pay the Uber driver and get out of the car. I'm filled with apprehension as I walk down the narrow pathway and up the porch steps. I don't know what awaits me on the other side of this door. I just spent the night at my ex-fiancé's place. I don't know what I'm going to tell my family and, more importantly, what the hell am I going to tell JP?

Fuck Scott!

Ugh! I already did, didn't I? My anger is misdirected because this is not all on him. I'm just as much to blame for what happened. How could I have let this happen? After Cameron, I swore to myself that I would never be a cheat. I didn't want to ever hurt another person that way and, at the smallest temptation, I caved. In my defense, Scott is not a small temptation. He's six-foot-two-inches of irresistible temptation, and I clearly couldn't resist.

Memories of last night flood my mind. Sex with Scott has always been amazing, but last night was just...I can't even describe it. He's so rough, a possessive brute, and I've always lost myself in the strength of him. I love the way he just takes what he wants, so I...let him. Over and over again. I woke up panicked this afternoon and told him that last night shouldn't have happened because I so desperately wanted that to be the truth. I lashed out because of my own shame, my pathetic lack of willpower. Guilt is ripping through my insides, but I don't regret it and that makes the guilt eat at me even more.

Today was different, though. Today revealed that we both haven't healed from our breakup. I suppose it's to be expected. The end was too abrupt, and it's not something either of us wanted. But now he blames me, and I blame him, and both of us are so bitter about...everything. I can't stand it. I know I needed to walk away from Scott today. I'm in a happy, loving relationship and what happened between us can't *ever* happen again. But I hate the way I left. I hate the tension between us.

And then the words *I love you* left his lips and hearing that after the night we shared is slowly killing me. I don't know what he expects me to do with that information. Three little words can't change our circumstances. I'm in a different place now. I have a boyfriend, a career, a life that I've built without him.

Everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours has thrown my world into shambles. I have everything I want out of life. I'm exactly where I want to be in life. But I've gone and messed it all up. I destroyed everything I've built for one night, and I don't know what to do now. I have no idea how to fix it.

I sneak into the house as quietly as I can. I'm thankful that Isa isn't here yet, and my mom and Keith are having an afternoon nap. I already had a shower earlier, but I need another one. His cologne seems to be embedded in my pores, and it's still emanating from my body. I can still feel him on every inch of my skin, as if his touch is imprinted on me. The taste of him still lingers on my lips. I want it all off. I want to wash away the betrayal and guilt before I call JP.

Stepping into the shower, I let the hot water run over my head and down my back. My body feels limp and sore and *used*. He ravaged me today, took everything he wanted...and I let him. I told him he could take all of me. Hell, I gave it to him and now I feel like I have nothing left. All I had to do to stop it was tell him I didn't want him, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't even lie because I have never wanted anything more. I thought I was loyal. At the very least, I thought I'd have divided loyalty, and last night proves that my loyalty still lies with the man who broke my heart. It's a sickening acknowledgment. The guilt churns within me and my stomach flips over. I'm utterly disgusted with myself.

You feel what I'm doing? This is me ruining you for every other guy. Even when you leave again, this moment will still play on your mind.

He wasn't wrong because even as tears spill from my eyes, I can't stop thinking about him. I scrub myself until my skin is

red and raw, but I can still feel him. It takes another twenty minutes for me to work up the courage to call JP.

“Hi, love,” I say when his face appears on my screen.

I’m greeted with disappointment. “I’ve been trying to reach you for hours. I was worried about you.”

“I’m so sorry. We went out last night...and I didn’t take my phone with me. We left the club late, so I just stayed over at a friend’s place.”

“I know,” he says with a heavy sigh. “I got hold of your mother and she told me.”

My heart starts galloping, beating hard against my ribs. “You spoke to my mother?” I ask, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible. “What...what did she tell you?”

I can see the agitation on his face. “She said you were with your friend Scott...again.”

I should tell him. I know I should tell him. The truth is right there at the tip of my tongue, but I just...can’t. How do I tell him that I cheated on him with my ex-fiancé? He doesn’t even know I had an ex-fiancé. How do I break news like this over the phone when he’s thousands of miles away, when he’s looking at me with so much love and trust? Bile rises from my stomach, and I’m so close to throwing up.

I take a few deep breaths, swallowing my nerves to tell him, but I chicken out at the last second. “Uh...we met...we met some of our other friends...” My tongue feels thick, and I taste the bitterness of the lies spilling out of me. “Then all of us went over to Scott’s place...and we just crashed in his living room.”

And later, when you call him, you can lie about who you were with last night, even though you’ll still be feeling me right here.

I cringe at the words echoing in my head, swallowing hard as I battle to keep my composure. A slight shudder runs through my body, and I press my thighs together because I do feel him. Scott used to be a bully and sometimes it still shows in his behavior. He knows exactly how to phrase things to

warp the mind. It's not his intention to hurt me, but that doesn't mean his words don't leave a lasting impact.

"Someone there must've had a phone. You could've still called."

"I'm sorry, Bon-bon. I didn't mean to worry you. I just haven't been out dancing for a while and I guess...I got carried away."

"Hmm...dancing is the culprit." Despite his irritable mood, he gives a small smile. "Always the problem with you, but at least you had fun with your friends. Next time, just be responsible about it. I'm all the way over here, and I felt entirely helpless not knowing where you were and if you were okay."

I squash my uneasiness into a tight ball and blink back the tears that are on the brink of falling. I don't deserve him. "I'm sorry."

He nods, accepting my apology, and I feel like shit that he softened so easily because I should be begging for forgiveness. "How are all the wedding plans going?"

I try to smile. "Good. Isa still has a few more things to sort out, so after I have lunch with Connor tomorrow, I'm going with her and Tommy to do the last-minute run-around."

"Sounds like fun." He pauses for a second or two. "Are you okay, *ma cherie*? You don't seem like yourself. Where are the giggles? Where are the snappy comebacks?" He gasps and winks at me. "Where are all your inappropriate jokes?"

"I'm trying to polish up my act for you, trying to be a respectable woman, and then maybe you might start liking me." This playful banter is the norm between us, but it feels off today. At least for me.

"No." He shakes his head in horror. "No chance of that happening. Ever. Nothing could make me like you."

"You told me you missed me the other day. I thought we were making progress."

"I was sniffing too much paint that day."

I giggle, and this time it's real. I really do love him, and I chose to be with him because he is the polar opposite of Scott. Maybe I did that because I didn't want any reminders, but I love him all the same. JP is just a warm, gentle soul and I hate what I did to him. He doesn't deserve that.

"You're such an asshole," I tease, but my voice sounds a little weighed down.

"Ah, I was wondering where my girlfriend disappeared to. I thought you were abducted by aliens, and this was an imposter I was speaking to, but you finally arrived...And, now thinking about it...aliens would have brought you right back."

"Wow, you're on a roll today. I'm supposed to be the funny one in this relationship." Another pang of guilt hits me, but I manage to keep my smile intact.

"So, listen," he continues. "Remember, I told you I was looking for inspiration before I start with my new painting, and when my mother called the other day, she told me about this meditation camp. It's all about balancing your energy and cleansing your aura. I want to try it and see if it works."

"That's sounds great. You should try it."

"The only problem is that it's out in the wilderness. They want us to disconnect from the world and reconnect with nature, so there isn't any cellphone reception there. I won't be able to call you for the next few days."

Somehow, I'm simultaneously relieved and disappointed. At least now I won't have to battle this guilt while talking to him every day. It will give me a chance to pull myself together before he flies over.

"Well, that sucks," I say, and only a part of me means it.

"I'm sorry, my love. I just thought it would be better to do it now while we're apart anyway, and we don't have time when we get back because we have to pack and leave for London. It's only ten days. I have to be back before the exhibition next Thursday, so I'll call you when I get back to Paris."

“Okay.” I give a somber nod, then blow a kiss. “Travel safe. I’ll miss you.” That part I mean wholeheartedly.

“I’ll miss you, too. And...I...I love you.”

I smile through my growing disappointment in myself. “I love you, too, Bon-bon.”

And then you can tell him just how much you love him... with my cum still inside you.

The sting of those words brings tears to my eyes, and I hang up before they roll down my cheek. Two men told me they love me today, and I feel torn between them even though I’ve already made up my mind about who I want to be with. I’ve built a life with JP. And not only do we love each other, but our dreams also align. We want the same things. Being with him is the obvious choice...yet I still feel my heart straying back to Scott. I’m just trying to make peace with the past. That’s all. There are too many feelings that have resurfaced, my old ones somehow dominating the new ones.

What’s most prominent, though, is this overwhelming sense of confusion, because I clearly don’t know where to place my loyalty. I never wanted to end my relationship with Scott, so maybe that’s why I feel so uncertain about everything now and my undecided loyalty is actually the biggest problem here. I was with Scott for so long that having sex with him doesn’t feel wrong...until I remember that I *cheated* on my boyfriend. And once I deal with that, I’ll be just fine.

“I got pizza!” Isabella yells from downstairs.

It’s only when I hear the invitation that I realize how hungry I am. I haven’t eaten since yesterday. Keith and I emerge from our respective bedrooms at the same time and walk down the stairs together.

“You’re home,” he comments, giving me *the look* again. “Must’ve been one wild party.”

“It was.” I try to sound as chirpy as possible. “Isa bailed early, but I wasn’t ready to leave. Scott had to pry me off the dance floor.” I take a slice of pizza topped with pepperoni and extra cheese and sit down at the dining table. “I think we only

left at four this morning. I was so exhausted, I just passed out on his couch.”

The lies are just rolling off my tongue now. Everyone else had left. No one knows what really happened last night except Scott and I, and I intend to keep it that way. The only person that needs to know about that is JP, and I’m still trying to figure out how and when I’m going to tell him. I don’t know if I should tell him before he flies over or tell him in person after the wedding. I don’t know. All I know is that I don’t have the emotional strength to tell him today, not with my head buzzing non-stop with memories of Scott.

Even though I have never kept secrets from my sister, this time I have to. She already has so much stress to deal with. I don’t want to burden her with this as well. I just want her to focus on her happy day.

Keith takes a few slices for himself, and after taking a bite, he goes back to giving me the look. “Is Jean-Pierre okay with...with you having spent the night at Scott’s place? I can’t imagine any man who would be...comfortable with his girlfriend spending the night at her ex’s apartment.”

Isa decides to answer for me. “Dad, JP has nothing to worry about. Cat is the most faithful girlfriend on the planet. She dated Scott long-distance for a *year and a half* and not once did she stray. He knows he can trust her.”

The statement is like a kick to the stomach. Guilt and shame rise in my throat, and I’m utterly nauseated.

It took me four days to get into your panties. Four days and I had you begging for me. I think maybe you should reevaluate your definition of love.

His words keep taunting me, reminding me of all the choices I willingly made, and now I can’t seem to fully accept the consequences. Keith was the one who warned me about this right from the beginning, but I just couldn’t stay away from that douche. I’m not even going to over-analyze his comment. I cheated on JP because I fell into temptation. I didn’t cheat on Scott because there hadn’t been any temptation.

Hmm...Well, no need to over-analyze that. The fact that I was never even tempted speaks volumes.

“Besides,” Isa says, lifting a slice to her mouth, “Cat and Scott would never do that to me. Can you imagine that kind of scandal at my wedding? Like we don’t have enough gossip and rumors floating around. Dylan is getting married eighteen months after ending a five-year relationship with Francesca. People are already talking shit, saying I’m the rebound, and that he’s using me to get over her. Whatever. I don’t care what they think, but we definitely don’t need any more drama surrounding my wedding.”

It’s official. I’m a despicable human being and the world’s worst big sister. Last night when I was all over Scott, the furthest thought from my mind was what would happen when JP and Scott meet each other at the wedding, or what might happen if anyone ever found out. I have no idea how I’m going to handle this situation.

“Come now, Isa,” Keith says lightly. “I wasn’t even suggesting that Cat would ever cheat. All I’m saying is there’s a history there and I don’t know many guys who would be comfortable with that situation.”

I’m so tired of feeling like a horrid person that I decide to tell the truth about this one. “So, um...JP doesn’t know that Scott and I were engaged...or that we were even a couple.”

“What!” they both shout in unison.

“I promise I’ll tell him as soon as he gets here, but *I* want to be the one to tell him, so please don’t mention it at all.”

They exchange looks, then their wary eyes return to me. “How is that even possible?” Isa asks. “You were *engaged*. How could you not tell him something like that?”

“It’s not like I intentionally kept it from him. He said he didn’t want to know about any of my ex-boyfriends.”

“Okay,” Keith says after some time. “We won’t say anything, but this is not something he should walk into blind. I really think you need to tell him about Scott before he gets here. Your whole family knows that you and Scott dated. It

will be so much worse for him if he finds out from someone else.”

I nod because I can feel the weight of the situation getting heavier and heavier. The situation was already messy, but I’ve gone and made it a million times worse. “I’ll tell him.”

Isa absentmindedly strokes my hand as if she can sense the trepidation building inside. “Mom!” she yells unexpectedly, and I jolt with surprise. “Where are you? The food’s getting cold.”

We hear grumbles before my mother’s heavy footsteps come trudging down the stairs. She’s still rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she sits down beside Keith. He puts his arm around her and draws her close for a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I was enjoying my nap,” she complains.

“You can eat and go straight back to bed,” he says, handing her a plate with two slices. “I’ll do the dishes.”

She smiles and leans in for another kiss. “Thank you.”

I love watching them together. They’re so good for each other. My mother smiles as she bites into her pizza. Her eyes lift every few seconds, flicking between Isa and I before she looks away. She seems sad.

“What’s the matter, Ma?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she replies softly. “It’s just...It’s been so long since I had both my girls under the same roof. In two weeks, Isa will be married, and you’ll leave again. Both my babies are out of the house. It seems like just yesterday when I was changing diapers and now you’re both all grown up, making your own way through life...I know I have to get used to this empty house, but it hasn’t been easy, and eventually, both of you will be too busy to even visit me□”

“Ah, mom,” Isa cuts in when tears start rolling down my mother’s face. “Dylan and I will visit every second Saturday, just like we do now. I promise that won’t change after we get married.”

I can’t make the same promise, so I remain quiet.

“Sorry, I’m just emotional.” My mother wipes the tears off her cheeks.

Keith pulls her close again. “Well, you still have me, and I’m pretty amazing.”

Isa sucks in a breath. “Dad, I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but everything you bring to the table is overshadowed by your unbearably bad jokes.”

“Isabella,” mom reprimands sternly. “You know Keith tries his best. It’s not his fault. It’s a curse that was placed on him many moons ago. We tried to lift it. We sought counseling to put him back in touch with his old sense of humor. We went to comedy clubs for inspiration. We...*prayed*. Dammit, did we pray. And still nothing. The second he said *I do* and became a father; the wretched curse of dad jokes fell upon him, and I don’t think it can be reversed.”

Keith rolls his eyes, sitting there with the most unimpressed expression on his face while my mother hits him with a few more verbal jabs. That look is pure gold, and Isa and I burst with laughter.

“Uh...that was...uncalled for, hitting a little below the belt there, hon.”

That look on his face has morphed into something more comical, and we are wheezing now.

“Alright.” He’s trying not to laugh too because he doesn’t want to give my mother the satisfaction. “I see how it is in this house. Guess who’s not getting pancakes...for a *month*.” He stands up and collects the dirty plates.

We erupt with protests.

“Ah, don’t be like that, Keith. You make the *best* pancakes.”

“It’s a bit extreme, dad. We’re just kidding. Where’s your sense of humor?”

“I’m cursed, remember? I don’t have one.”

My mother is still in fits of giggles, and I swear I’ve never seen her so happy. “Maybe the only way to reverse the curse is

to divorce me so that you're not a stepdad anymore."

He finally smiles, then leans down to kiss her. "Well, that's never going to happen." He walks a few steps around the table and bends down to throw an arm around me and Isa. "And even if your mother decides to divorce my ass and leave me for someone funnier, I'm your dad for life now." He plucks a kiss on my head, then Isa's. "So, all of you are stuck with me and my bad dad jokes."

He gives us a quick hug and when he pulls away; I feel like it wasn't enough. He straightens and takes the dirty dishes to the kitchen.

"Love you, honey," mom calls out after him, though there is still a mischievous taunt in her tone. "He's so cute."

She starts chatting to Isa about the wedding plans, and I quietly stand up and walk to the kitchen.

"Hey, Keith," I say softly.

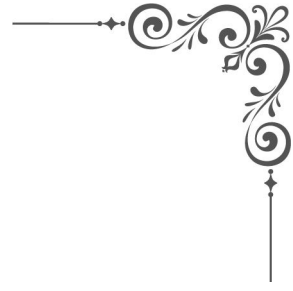
"If you're here to butter me up for pancakes, it's not going to work."

"I'm not. I just...I wanted to ask if...if I could get another hug?"

He stops with the dishes, grabbing a dishtowel to wipe his hands as he crosses the kitchen. Placing his hands on my shoulders, he searches my eyes to try to find what's bothering me. "Is everything okay, kiddo?"

I nod. "Yeah, I guess I just want one of your dad hugs. They're much better than your dad jokes."

He smiles and pulls me against his chest. With my arms wrapped around him, I listen to the steady beat of his heart, and it soothes me. I'm craving steadiness. Interacting with Scott and JP today has caused a whirlwind of confusion and anxiety, love and lust, uncertainty and doubt. I want to calm the riot inside me. I just want to find a mere inkling of peace today, and I find it in the rhythmic thump against my ear. I find it in the sturdy, reliable arms of my stepdad. I cling to him because right now, he's the only man in my life who doesn't come with complications.



11. Catalina

“And that’s when I realized,” Connor says, taking another spoonful of ice cream. “I can’t be with someone who hasn’t even watched *Star Wars*. What am I getting myself into?”

Connor is the type of friend that even if I don’t speak to him for months, we can still have a conversation and pick up right where we left off. It’s a very easy-going, low-maintenance relationship. Always has been. We just click on a weird level. He’s an adorable nerd. Exceptionally cute, I would say. With soft hazel eyes, ginger locks, and a slight dusting of freckles across his nose and cheeks, it’s not difficult for him to get a girl’s attention. What’s difficult is for a girl to keep his attention. I’m not sure if it stems from insecurity, but he’s always the one to call it quits, almost like he wants to break up with the girl before she breaks up with him.

I’ve just spent the last four hours catching up with him, and we somehow ended up sitting in the outdoor dining area of a little ice cream parlor. We’ve already had two milkshakes each and decided to share a sundae. Connor has a crazy sweet tooth, and I’m going to be bouncing off the walls soon if I don’t slow down my sugar intake.

I lick my spoon clean before pointing it at him. “That’s not a valid reason to break up with someone. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Did you not hear anything I just said? It makes perfect sense.”

“I’ve been telling you for years that this is a problem and, Connor, I really think it’s time that you address your commitment issues.”

I stuff another spoonful of creamy deliciousness into my mouth, but don’t stop talking. It’s a habit of mine that JP can’t stand. I can hear his voice in my head playfully admonishing me for speaking with my mouth full, and the guilt I’m trying to suppress resurfaces. After my talk with Keith, I decided to

be completely honest with JP. Not just about being engaged to Scott, but about *sleeping* with him, too. I can't let him come here blind, if he even comes here at all once I tell him what I've done. I need to stop being a coward, tell him the truth, and accept the consequences of my actions, no matter what they might be.

The problem is, I can't get hold of him. I know he said he was going away, but I didn't think he would leave *immediately*. I tried calling him on Saturday night right after Isa left my mother's house. Five times actually, and it went straight to voicemail. I tried again and again all of yesterday and still nothing. My anxiety levels are driving me to the point of madness.

"You do this every time you start liking a girl," I say, trying to distract myself from the uneasiness in my stomach. "You'll find the smallest, most insignificant fault, turn it into this massive problem that you just can't live with, and end the relationship."

"*Star Wars* trivia is, like, eighty percent of my personality. It'll never work."

"Why don't you arrange a movie night instead? Watch it with her, and if she hates it, you know it's not meant to be, but to just end it without even trying is so *stupid*."

"Cat, how has she been alive for twenty-two years and she hasn't watched *Star Wars* yet? What has she been doing this whole time? It shows that her priorities growing up were askew."

I roll my eyes. "God, you're hopeless. Please give her a chance, otherwise you're gonna end up growing old with nothing but games, my friend." I sigh. "And on the topic. How's work?"

Connor found his passion in testing and reviewing games. Based on how he was when we were younger, it was an obvious career choice, and he *loves* it.

"Great. Still loving it. Who wouldn't want to sit around and play games all day? But I have to admit, I enjoyed it a lot

more when you were still here and used to help me with the testing.”

“Yeah, I miss that, too.” I think back on the memories with fondness. I had to stop when I started traveling so often because some places I visited didn’t even have Wi-Fi. “Remember those games where we’d play for, like, twenty-four hours straight? It used to drive Scott nuts. He’d come pick me up the next day, and I was just...dead to the world.”

And now Scott is the one dominating my thoughts, overriding the guilt, or maybe making it worse. I’m not sure. Man, I miss him. I miss everything we used to do together. Simple things like watching a movie or going for a run or sitting on his bed eating nachos. Sometimes we’d sit up talking until the early hours of the morning and at midnight, he’d just take a break and run out to get us nachos. He’d come back, and we’d just carry on talking. I miss that so much. I’d pushed all these memories out of my head, but now those memories are mixing with the feel of his lips and the smell of his cologne, and my stomach is just a bubbling volcano of confusion.

I silently eat our sundae, lost in my thoughts, before I look up at Connor again. “Those were the days, hey, Connor,” I say idly.

His eyes narrow before they widen. “Oh, my God! You slept with Scott.”

“What! How...” I stare at him, gaping, shocked. “How do you know that?”

“Because I know you. You just mentioned Scott’s name and look at what you turned into.”

This panics me because I don’t know what kind of vibes I’m inadvertently giving off. “What are you talking about? I haven’t turned into anything.”

“Catalina, you’re all red in the face and doe-eyed and... swoony.”

“I’m not! I’m really not!” I stop and think about it. “Oh, crap! Am I? Shit! Isa is going to kill me if she finds out and if

you picked it up so easily...”

“I think she’s too distracted with the wedding so she’s not paying enough attention to notice, but...this is not a bad thing if you guys are thinking about getting back together.”

“We’re not,” I blurt out.

“Wait. You’re *not* getting back together...even though you had sex with him?”

I shake my head. “No. Scott and I are not reconciling.”

He eyes me warily before clasping his hands together on the table. “I’m going to ask you a series of questions, and I want you to answer honestly.”

“Okay.”

“Are you going to tell JP?”

“Yes...I have to. I can’t keep something like this from him. I’ll never be able to live with myself or the guilt.”

“Are you considering ending it with JP and trying again with Scott?”

“No. Connor, JP and I have built an amazing life together and my career is escalating at meteorite speed right now. I’ve already signed a three-year contract with an exclusive hotel chain, which starts about a week after the wedding. I can’t even tell you how excited I am about that. They want all their hotels to have this renaissance feel and they want me to design and sculpt the pieces for the foyers and the gardens, not by myself obviously, but heading up that project. That contract is going to take me to cities like Milan and Dubai. Even if I wanted to, which I don’t, backing out of that contract would be such a career-limiting move. I don’t even have an established client base here. Moving back to Pasadena means I have to start at the bottom again, and why would I give up Milan and Dubai for *Pasadena*? No, Connor. That’s my future. Scott... Scott is the past.” A hard lump forms in my throat just hearing myself say that. “We’re over now...and I have no thoughts about trying again.”

“Do you have any intention of...getting naked with him again?”

“No! I told him I can’t see him again until the wedding.”

“Are you sure...because that look on your face...”

I glower at him. “I’m sure. I didn’t leave on the best terms yesterday...and I hate that. I hate that there’s this tension between us. I hate that we’re so mad at each other. I think...if I get a chance at the wedding when JP is not around...I’m going to pull him aside and just smooth things over because I can’t leave like this. He still has feelings for me, and I want him to move on and be happy. He needs to let go, and I don’t think he can do that if he’s harboring all this animosity toward me. But that’s it. No other contact other than that.”

Connor eats another two spoons of ice cream and then fixes worried eyes on me. “Do you still have feelings for him?”

“Of course. I still care about him.”

“More than that, Cat. You’re telling me how amazing your life is with JP and yet you were willing to jeopardize it by jumping into bed with your ex. Do you think you might still be in love with Scott?”

The question throws me for a second and I stumble a bit. “No.”

“You hesitated.”

“I didn’t. I—”

“Helloooo, beautiful people,” Tommy sings, tossing his arm around Connor’s neck. “How are you doing, Conman? I haven’t seen you in *ages*.”

“That’s because I actively try to avoid you,” Connor replies.

Our two best friends have a love-hate relationship, and Isa and I generally don’t get involved in their squabbles. Isa leans on the back of my chair, resting her chin on my head as we watch the two of them.

“Oh, Connor, didn’t the doctor tell you to lay off the bacon? It’s making you salty as fuck.” Tommy twists one of his ginger locks around his finger. “You know, I’m sure you were probably born with dark hair, but the high sodium level in your blood has caused you to lose pigmentation.”

Connor rolls his eyes and slaps his hand away like he’s shooing a fly. “Why do you insist on touching me?”

“I don’t know. You come across as the type who was deprived of affection as a child. I’ll give you all the love you need, Conman.” Tommy grabs his face with both hands and forces him to look up. “So, are you joining us for some lingerie shopping, you beautiful ginger man-child?”

“Nope, I think I’ll pass. I’m gonna go play some games.” He turns to me and winks. “And then I’m gonna watch *Star Wars* with my girlfriend.”

Tommy shakes his head in disappointment. “How do you get laid, Connor? Like...ever? How do you even have a girlfriend?”

“Magic thumbs.” Connor smirks, moving his thumbs in circles on an imaginary controller. “You guys have a good one. Cat, I’m free on Saturday again if you want to come over.”

“Sure. I’m going to the spa with my mom and Isa, but I’ll come by after.”

I wait for him to leave before I pay the bill and walk into the mall with Isa and Tommy. We head up the escalators to the Victoria’s Secret store on the second floor.

“What colors are we looking for, IzzyB?” Tommy asks, scanning the array of bras on display.

“I don’t know.” Isa moves around him to look through the underwear on the next rack. “I’m not sure if I should be a bit racy with red or more demure with a dusty pink. That is my wedding color, after all.”

“Dusty pink and demure? For your wedding night? Babe, who are you trying to fool when we all know you were made for these streets? No. What you need is something that screams: *This is where the ho’s at.*”

Isa rolls her eyes but still follows him across the store to the more scandalous selections.

“Hey, wasn’t Dana supposed to join us?” Tommy asks, flicking through the lace teddies.

“She was,” Isa replies, “but she canceled at the last minute. She said she doesn’t want to see what kind of lingerie turns her brother on, so she decided to bail on us and hang out with Dylan and Ney-ney.”

If there is one aspect of Isa’s life that I am fully aware of, it’s her relationship with Neymar. He’s about seven or eight months old and my sister is obsessed with him. She speaks about him with so much love and adoration that anyone would swear it was her child. Neymar’s mother is a teenager who ran away from home to escape her abusive father, and Dylan’s parents were kind enough to take her in after she asked them for a job to work at their restaurant.

Isa bends over backward to help in whatever way she can. She’s even roped me into babysitting with her tonight because Neymar’s mom is working the late shift and doesn’t have anyone to look after him. While I’m not keen on getting drooled on, I relented because I want to spend as much time as I can with my sister before I have to leave again.

“Why don’t I ever get the option of canceling and just chilling with the boys?” Tommy complains.

“It’s the unfortunate burden you carry as my best friend.” She selects a pink and white teddy from the rack and presses it against herself. “What about this one?”

He rejects it with a shake of his head. “Not sexy enough.”

We spend the next twenty minutes debating on what to buy before Isa settles on a red one-piece, which is basically just lace and string sewn together. After we check out, Isa drives me back to her place.

“De Lorenzo, are you here?” she calls out as soon as we walk in the front door.

“In the living room,” he calls back.

My sister hears a little gurgle and almost explodes with excitement. “I can’t wait for you to meet him,” she says, grabbing my wrist to lead me to the living room.

We find Dylan hunched over, holding onto Neymar’s tiny fingers as the little guy takes wobbly steps across the room. There are building blocks haphazardly tossed into one corner and an array of vehicles strewn over her couch. Isa doesn’t seem to mind the mess at all because her face lights up as soon as she sees them. I understand now why she was raving about this kid. He is adorable. Thick, black curls and the chubbiest little cheeks – he’s just a tiny ball of cuteness.

“Hey, Ney-ney,” Isa says.

“Say hi to Bella,” Dylan coaxes before scooping him up. He walks over to Isa and kisses her. “Hi, Cat.”

“Hi, Dylan. You look tired.”

“It’s been a day,” Dylan says with the exhaustion of a man who has not had a break in hours, though the smile on his face shows that he’s satisfied with how he spent his time. “He was so busy today, and Dana had to leave and go back to the shelter, so it was just us for most of the afternoon. He does not want to sit still for a second, but we somehow managed to coordinate our efforts to cook dinner, isn’t that right, Ney?”

Isa takes Neymar from Dylan and hooks him on her hip. “You made dinner? Your mom would be so proud. You’re probably gonna be a better chef than Dylan when you’re older.”

Isa and I play with Neymar while Dylan finishes off dinner. I generally tend to avoid kids, but this little rascal is impossible to resist. Dylan wasn’t lying when he said Neymar is a busy body. He is all over the place, but Isa handles him with ease. She seems to be natural. Dylan, however, is pure dad material.

During dinner, he keeps Neymar on his lap and doesn’t seem to mind little fingers in his plate, smashing his pasta. Neymar lifts a handful and basically shoves it into Dylan’s mouth. I had my reservations about my sister rushing into this

marriage, but the more I watch them together, the more I realize that she absolutely made the right choice in him as a life partner. He is caring and doting, and his love for Isabella is very obvious.

“Mmm...” Dylan says, trying to catch the stray pieces before they fall off his chin. “I think you just helped me find the missing ingredient that would make this the perfect dish. That handful of spit? Wow, that made this so...soggy. Top notch stuff, Ney.”

Isa gives him a teasing wink. “He’s so good at sharing.”

I’ve never given much thought to settling down and starting a family. Having kids was something I had bookmarked for the very distant future, but seeing the way the three of them interact is conjuring thoughts and feelings I have genuinely never felt before. For the first time, I’m considering what it might be like to be a mom...and I quickly shut that down.

After dinner, Dylan gets Neymar cleaned up while Isa and I do the dishes. They both end up falling asleep on the couch with Neymar sprawled across his chest.

Isa snaps a picture of that perfect moment, then looks over at me with a wide smile. “And this is why we love babysitting this little guy. He makes my heart melt.”

“Dylan will make an amazing dad. Are you guys planning on having kids soon after the wedding? You both seem ready.”

Her smile droops a bit, sadness taking over her expression. “We’re not...we’re not planning anything. We’re just going to take it one day at a time and if things are supposed to happen, they’ll happen. If Dylan decides he’s ready to adopt in the future, then we’ll do that, but I’ll be happy whether we have kids or not.”

The fact that adoption was the only option given lets me know that there’s a deeply personal issue they are dealing with. I know my sister would be more forthcoming with details if this was an issue related to her, but because it relates

to Dylan, I respect his privacy and don't probe with further questions.

I sneak away to call JP again while Isa makes us hot chocolate. It goes straight to voice mail, so I leave another message for him to call me as soon as he can before I go back to the living room and curl up on the other couch with my sister.

"I still can't believe that you're getting married," I whisper so that we don't disturb the boys. "You were such an adventurous spirit. I never thought you'd settle down."

"What are you talking about? I'm still adventurous. I have adventures every day."

I raise a skeptical brow. I've been home for a week and I've only seen her do normal, run-of-the-mill things. "What adventures?"

"Just yesterday, Dylan and I went to the grocery store. I hopped into the shopping cart, put on a blindfold, and he took me around the store. I would make him randomly stop, select whatever item I pointed to in the aisle, and then we came home and he had to make dinner with all the ingredients I chose. Let's just say that hake, chicken, and chickpeas can go together in one dish. That's what an amazing chef Dylan is, and then we had Fruit Loops mixed in yogurt for dessert."

"That's...not an adventure."

She scoffs at me with a playful smile. "Of course, it is. See, you love the big adventures. Bungee jumping off Victoria Falls and hiking up Kilimanjaro, but I much prefer the little adventures. It's intimate and personal and things only *we* have shared."

I get what she's trying to say, but when the world is so big and open for exploration, the little adventures seem like I'd be settling for second best. I don't disagree with my sister's choices. I know that she can make even the most mundane tasks fun, but I want more than that.

I shrug. "I guess I just want more...excitement. I love chasing the next high."

“Well, my job, my relationship with Dylan, Tommy, and dad – all of that fulfills me, so I don’t need to chase anything. You have an amazing life, Cat, but sometimes you seem like... you’re still yearning for something. You ever wonder if the reason why you keep chasing more is because...maybe what you have isn’t enough?”

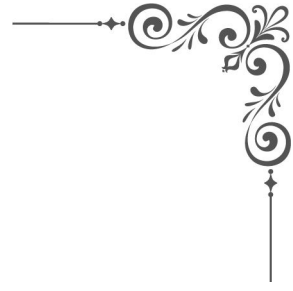
The question stuns me because the thought has honestly never crossed my mind. I’m happy. I’m fulfilled...aren’t I? I do these things because I enjoy doing them, not because I feel like something is...missing.

“I’m very satisfied with my life. I have a flourishing career and an amazing boyfriend. I’m not yearning for anything.”

The retort comes out a little snappy, and even I have to admit that I sound a bit defensive because that amazing boyfriend I have – I cheated on him. And even though it sickens me to my very core to acknowledge this, I cheated on him with the one man I’ve been yearning for for years.

Isa takes note of my tone and reaches out to take my hand. “Sorry, I wasn’t insinuating that you weren’t happy in your relationship. I just meant maybe you should start exploring other avenues in your career. Like...I love my job, but I wanted to start helping more charities and organizations in the community, which is why my boss moved us over to AmpUp Radio. So, I’ll still be doing what I love, but in a slightly different way. That’s all I was suggesting, maybe a different client base or slightly different projects.”

Talk about an overreaction on my part. That was clearly fueled by guilt and self-loathing. The fact that my mind automatically jumped to JP is a very telling sign that there is a problem. And the problem is that up until I got here, I didn’t know I had a problem. And the bigger problem is...how the hell am I going to solve it?



12. Catalina

I click on the icon to open the app on my phone, then busy myself making a cup of coffee as the sound of Isa's voice comes through the speakers. I've been listening to her and Tommy every morning since I've been back, and I am thoroughly hooked. They have that energy that's borderline addictive to listen to.

Keith left early this morning. He needs to be at the office by six-thirty this whole week, so it's just me alone with my thoughts, and I'd rather listen to my sister than my conscience. Hearing their chirpy voices is already lifting my spirits.

Isa: And it's a beautiful Thursday morning in sunny Los Angeles. Highs of eighty-nine degrees today.

Tommy: June-gloom is over, people! It's a perfect day for the beach. Thank you for joining me and my gorgeous co-host, IzzyB, on the Crude Awakening, coming at you every day from six to nine a.m. on KRXM. We're still taking your requests for your best moments. Who do we have on the line?

Isa: We have...Britney. How's it going, Britney?

Britney: Hi, guys! Oh, my God! I can't believe I finally got through. I've been trying since last week.

Tommy: Phone lines have been crazy busy. Where're you calling from, Brit?

Britney: Monterey Park. I just wanted to say thank you for an amazing show. I love listening to you guys. You make my morning, and I'm so sad we only have a few more days with you. I tune in as soon as I drop the kids off at school... because, you know, I don't want Tommy to have any influence over their impressionable young minds.

Tommy: I do make the biggest impact on the innocent ones. So, what was your favorite moment on the show?

Britney: I have two. The first was when you guys interviewed that author, James...something or the other, and

Tommy hadn't read his latest book, and he made such weird comments, it derailed the entire interview.

Isa: *Oh, yeah! I remember that. It was James Montana, by the way. As a reminder to everyone, Tommy told James that he felt so connected to the character, Emery. He said he felt like they were kindred spirits, and then James kindly informed him that Emery was the dog.*

Tommy: *Who names a dog Emery? Honestly? But at least I made a good recovery. I said it felt like Emery was my spirit animal.*

Isa: *Uh...he still didn't believe you, Tom.*

Tommy: *In my defense, I can't read.*

Isa: *Ah, Thomas McClarkson, ladies and gentlemen. The great degenerate. He's still trying to figure out how elevators work. For those of you who don't know this, Tommy and I have been working together on and off for close to nine years now. Our first job together was in a small hardware store not too far from here. I know him a long time, so trust me when I say that he defies the theory of evolution. Don't be fooled by his opposable thumbs. This guy only has two brain cells and they're both fighting for third place. He's honestly the reason why shampoo bottles come with instructions.*

Tommy: *I'm really not. I just told you I can't read.*

I giggle as I sip my coffee. I love listening to their banter and the way they play off each other. Their producer, Damon, and Sydney, who reads the news and the traffic report, also add such a fun dynamic to the team. The show as a whole is very entertaining.

Tommy: *Yo, Damon, can you pull that interview? We'll play it right after the traffic report. What's your other fav, Brit?*

Britney: *It's a snippet from when you guys had the lunchtime show. That segment you used to do...On The Spot With Scott.*

That gets my attention, and I almost choke on my coffee. Scott had a slot on her show? How did I not know about this?

The question only plagues me for a second before I realize it's probably because of that stupid pact they made.

Isa: Which one in particular are you looking for?

Brit: It's the one where he was going around asking people if they thought they could find love on online dating apps and he talked to a woman...Kiara, I think it was, or maybe it was Kiesha, and she kept getting those unsolicited dong pics.

Tommy: Yes. Yes! Yes! I love that one. It definitely ranks in my top ten. Brit, babe, thanks for the request, but we have to love and leave you as we hand over to Sydney for the traffic. What are the roads looking like, Syd? Give us good news. Please tell us that the 5 is accident-free this morning.

Sydney: There is in fact a three-car pile-up on the infamous I-5 heading toward Lynwood. Expect about a thirty-minute delay.

Isa: Can people just learn to drive in this city?

I barely pay attention to the traffic report as I head upstairs to brush my teeth. Jingles of commercials float through the speakers, and they play two songs before the interview with the author is aired. It's hilarious listening to Tommy fumble around, making it very obvious to everyone that he hadn't read the book. As time draws on, my heart rate increases. I hate to admit it, but I'm excited to hear Scott's snippet, and I'm anxiously waiting for them to get to it. They play another song before I finally hear his voice. I haven't seen or heard from him in three days and my heart flutters listening to him.

Scott: Isa, Tommy, how're you guys doing this afternoon?

Isa: Great. Where are you today, Scott?

Scott: I'm here at Manhattan Beach, soaking up the sun, and I just found my first unsuspecting victim. Hi, ma'am. What's your name?

Caller: It's...it's Kiesha. Who are you?

Scott: Hi, Kiesha. You're live on...The Spot with Scott (stilted pause). Guys, that sounds cornier every time. Do I have to say that?

Isa: Yes! Own it, Scott.

Scott: Fine. Kiesha, you're live on KRXM. Say hi to the team in the studio.

Kiesha: Uh...hi.

Isa: Hey, Kiesha. Welcome to the show. Today we're discussing whether it's possible to find love through a dating app or social media. Scott is our man on the ground, getting the opinion from the regular person on the street. Now, be as candid as you like. We hold nothing back on this show. What are your thoughts? Can you find love in the digital world?

Kiesha: Hell no! Single men these days be trippin'. They don't know how to treat a lady. They just be sliding into your DMs with their dicks all hanging out.

Tommy: I'm going to be honest. That sounds like a fun time to me.

Kiesha: You think so until you get thirty of them. You see a man looking fine as hell. Suave and groomed and respectable. You think: Mmmm, that's a zaddy right there. You send him a message saying: Hey there, sweet thang. How about a movie on Thursday night? What do you get back? Dick pic!

Sydney: Preach it, sister. I know exactly what you mean.

Kiesha: You see that guy with a cute baby face, looking sweet with that boy next door charm. You send him a message saying: Let's go out for breakfast sometime. What do you get back? Dick pic...with a 'do you want to put this sausage in your mouth?'

Sydney: Is it weird that I just got hungry?

Isa: Is there ever a time when you're not hungry?

Scott: Maybe it's not a bad thing. You get to see what's under the hood before you take the car out for a spin.

It's evident from the tone of Scott's voice that he is desperately trying to hold back a laugh, and he sounds so cute that it draws more laughter out of me, too.

Kiesha: You see that guy on your screen, looking like he just walked off the cover of GQ magazine, all chiseled and sexy. You send him a message saying: Hi, I'd like to get to know you better and what do you get?

Scott: Let me guess. Dick pic.

Kiesha: Dick. Fucking. Pic!

Scott: I can see how that can turn a person off online dating apps.

Kiesha: Who said anything about being turned off? I rode ALL them dicks.

Scott: Holy shit!

Kiesha: And I didn't call none of them the next day, so what I'm saying is that you can't find love on these apps...but you can find you some good dick.

Laughter erupts, and that's all I hear for a full thirty seconds. At this point, I'm folded over the kitchen counter laughing, too. It's obvious why Isa loves her job so much. It's non-stop fun.

Scott: Guys, let's cut it...I can't...I just can't.

Isa: No! You stay in it and finish off like a man!

Kiesha: You know, you look like you just stepped off the cover of GQ magazine.

Scott: That's very kind of you. Thank you.

Kiesha: Are you single?

Scott: Uh...yeah. Very single. My EX-girlfriend thinks my life is boring. Little does she know I get to meet people like you every day. Tell her I'm not boring and mediocre, Kiesha.

Kiesha: He's not boring. This guy right here is so much fun. And he's hot, too. Girl, how'd you let this fine man go? He's such a catch.

Scott: Aw, thanks, Kiesha, but she can't hear you. She's not fricken here!

Tommy: Careful, Scotty. Your broken heart is showing.

Kiesha: *Is this a recent breakup?*

Scott: *Nah, it's been a year.*

Kiesha: *And you still so whipped? Coochie must be good.*

Scott: *You have no idea.*

Kiesha: *I think I can make you forget all about her.*

Scott: *I doubt that...but I'm not opposed to you trying. You're adorable.*

Damon: *Scott, you're not allowed to flirt with the guests.*

Kiesha: *Yeah, let me lay some good loving on you. I bet you can put it down like a Don.*

Scott: *I can.*

Kiesha: *You wanna show me?*

Scott: *You don't want me to buy you dinner first?*

Tommy: *Some professional lines are being crossed here, Scotty.*

Kiesha: *Let's skip dinner and go straight for breakfast. Ima let you know exactly which kind of sausage I like in my mouth.*

His heartfelt laughter booms through the speakers again, setting off Tommy and Isa as well, and I can't help but laugh with them.

Scott: *Guys, I'm out. Kiesha and I are going for breakfast.*

Tommy's voice comes through the airwaves to conclude the snippet before they head into another song, and I'm still grinning. God, he's adorable, a natural flirt. From what he's told me about the women he's slept with since we broke up, I know he didn't follow through with that. I can almost guarantee that they didn't even hook up, but my charming ex probably still took her out for breakfast. The entertainment value of that snippet is pure gold, but I heard more than jokes and giggles. What also came through loud and clear was his pain.

He kept his voice light, so the listeners may not have picked up on it, but I did. He's carrying so much hurt from the past, hurt he blames me for. I need to set the record straight and make things right between us. I can't leave here with all this bad blood and ill feelings. I just need a small gap at the wedding, just a few minutes to talk to him so we can resolve this once and for all. I know he's mad. I'm mad too, but it's been five years now. We need to let this go.



I TRY TO PUSH SCOTT out of my mind, and it works for a few hours. I go to the mall to buy a pair of rosy-pink shoes to go with my dress. Why Isa chose that as her theme color is beyond me because I found it impossible to find heels in that exact shade. I also buy some clay to keep myself busy for the next few days. But no matter how hard I try to keep my mind occupied; it keeps drifting back to Scott. Between guilt, anxiety, and sheer loathing of myself for what I said to him on Sunday, I'm on the verge of going crazy. I need to speak to him. Not at the wedding. Now.

The second I turn the key; I realize this is a mistake. Actually, I realized it was a mistake as soon as I jumped into the cab. It was a mantra I repeated to myself the whole thirty-minute drive here, and I'm still chanting it in my head when the elevator doors open in front of me.

I know I shouldn't be here, but I need to get this off my chest. Uneasiness has been growing in the pit of my stomach for the last three days and I can't take it anymore. I've tried to keep myself busy, but I'm too distracted to focus on anything. I met Connor on Monday and that was probably the most sociable I've been all week. The rest of the time I've either been trying to call JP or watching Netflix in my pajamas. Neither has helped my mental state at all. Everyone's at work and sitting alone in bed, wallowing in depression isn't a fun way to pass the time. But there's one thing I can fix, and that's this undercurrent of animosity between me and Scott, which is why I'm here now. I need to resolve this.

I don't see him in the kitchen or the lounge, so I walk to his bedroom and find him shirtless on his bed, propped up against the headboard with his laptop on his outstretched legs. He's lost in thought, eyes fixated on the screen as his fingers rapidly tap against the keyboard.

"So..." I say to announce my presence. "I think maybe I was a little harsh the other day."

He looks up and the widest smile spreads across his face. He places his laptop on the nightstand beside the bed to give me his full attention. "Is that right, Savage?"

"Yep."

His piercing blue eyes move over my body, taking in my maroon peekaboo summer dress. I think they call it a peekaboo because the small twist in the front accentuates the chest area and my cleavage just sort of peeks out of the top of it. His gaze lingers there before moving down to my thighs. He's looking at me like he wants to devour me, and I feel incredibly self-conscious.

I start to heat up beneath his sweltering perusal of my body. This is exactly why my gut instinct was trying to tell me that coming here was a bad idea. I make a mental note to always be fully covered when I'm around him because I feel like I'm melting into a puddle. Then again, he looked at me the same way when I was dressed in his hoodie. Maybe the key takeaway message is not what I wear around him, but that I just shouldn't be around him. Yet somehow, I'm still standing at the entrance of this bedroom.

Taking a deep breath, I ignore his penetrating stare and his very bare chest. Instead, I lean against the door frame and focus on the edge of the bed so I can forge ahead. "I wanted... I wanted to talk to you. I didn't like how I left here on Sunday. I didn't like what we said to each other. I can't leave here with you...hating me."

"I could never hate you, Catalina. I'm just...I'm just angry. I'm mad at you. I'm mad at me." He runs a restless hand over his short hair, then down his neck, rubbing the back of it like he's carrying all the tension there. "I'm mad at this whole

goddamn situation. Did I mention that I'm *so* fucking mad at you?"

"Uh...yeah, I picked up on that. You're not exactly subtle about it. I was on the receiving end of it on Sunday. But that being said, I wasn't exactly...*kind* on Sunday, either. I lashed out and said some things I shouldn't have said." I drop my head, feeling ashamed of myself. "I don't want you to obsess about me for the next five years. I didn't mean that. And I shouldn't have said that all you'll ever know after me is emotionally unavailable sex. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that either. Just like how you didn't mean it when you said you wanted to ruin me for every other guy. We were both angry, and we said—"

"No, I meant it," he cuts in, and my head snaps up to look at him. "Don't speak for me. I meant *all* of it. You can be the bigger person, Cat. That's great. You do you. You can wish me the best of luck, *Men-In-Black* me out of your life again, and live happily ever after with your new boyfriend. Good on you for being that person. But that's not me. I'm childish and selfish and entitled...and I'm still crazy in love with you. I want you to be happy, really I do, but I'm not going to pretend for one second that I don't wish you were still mine. You don't have to take your words back because they're true. You're it for me. It was always you...It's still you. Fuck, it's always ever going to be *you*. See, the key difference between you and me is that when I said I wanted to be with you forever...I meant it."

If there's anyone who knows how to get my blood boiling, it's this man. "Oh, you're gonna go down that road, huh?"

"The circumstances speak for themselves, Cat. I was always sure about us. You know, the first day I kissed you, your mom told me that if I was uncertain about my feelings for you, we should just stay friends because you couldn't take another man breaking your heart. When I got home that night, I called my financial advisor and started planning for the day when my mother would eventually cut me off. That's how sure I was and yet you...even on the day I proposed, you were still doubting us. Oh, we're too young, what if we break up in a

year, what if we fall out of love...*always* with the what-ifs. The fact is, I fell too hard, too fast, and you had your walls up with me. I'm the reason for those walls, so I can't say I blame you. I made bad choices. I have to deal with the consequences...and maybe this is my karma for hurting you the way I did. I guess I have to live with that." Even after all these years, I can still see the regret and remorse on his face, but he gives a nonchalant shrug, like it's just one of those things. "It is what it is."

I let out a heavy sigh, shaking my head at him. "God, you infuriate me sometimes. My what-ifs were based on insecurities, not doubt. There's a difference. And you can't blame karma for how things turned out. We were both unwilling to compromise, and we were *both* wrong in how we handled...*everything*. I should've come home when I said I would, and you should've answered your damn phone, but we were both stupid and this is the situation we now find ourselves in. You're right. It is what it is." I sneer, trying to keep my rising anger in check. "Now, I'm going to take responsibility for my part in the way it ended, but I'll tell you what I'm not gonna do. I'm not going to play that game of who loved who more. If we start going into the details of all the shit I had to overcome just to open up and fall for you, you know I'll beat your ass hands down. My uphill battle was steeper, so my fall was harder. It might've taken me longer, but I put my all into our relationship. I held nothing back, and you know it. So, don't play that game with me. You'll lose. Don't you dare turn this on me, whining like a little bitch, going on as if I didn't love you. I loved you. With the power of a thousand suns, I fucking loved you."

"If that's true, how is it possible that your boyfriend doesn't know about me? I'd even accept it if he thought I was a total asshole, but you just wrote me off...like I'm that insignificant to you."

"That's not what happened, Scott." I let out another sigh of disappointment because this is another issue that I handled abominably. "When JP and I met, I had no interest in anything more than a friendship. I kept telling him that I wasn't ready for another relationship, and he eventually figured out that I

was still...heartbroken, I guess.” I take another deep breath because, for some reason, I still feel the heaviness that heartbreak left in my chest. “When I finally agreed to go on a date with him, he told me that he didn’t want to know what happened in my past because then he’d end up being my shoulder to cry on and that would land him in the friendzone, so we just agreed to never talk about my past. That’s the only reason why I haven’t told him about you. I didn’t *Men-In-Black* you out of my life. Asshole!”

He pulls his lips in to stop a smile, but slowly, very slowly, it forms on his face until he’s grinning from ear to ear. That smile confirms that whatever doubt or annoyance he’d been feeling has somehow disappeared. Ugh! He’s gorgeous. “I love you.”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear it. All these declarations of love you keep sprouting out would’ve been really nice to know five years ago. I can do nothing with it now.”

“I do, though.” A small titter pops out of him. “And you’re so cute when you’re mad. It makes me love you even more.” The playful tenderness in his tone is already softening me. “I miss you, Cat. You left here...and my pillows still smell like you...I only had the willpower to last one more day without seeing you again.”

Ah, and there it goes. Last line of defense has dissolved into nothingness. I love that he exposes his vulnerabilities to me so easily, but I hate the effect it has on me. I’m a sitting duck now, open and susceptible to his charms.

“Did you miss me?” he asks.

“No.” Even though my reply is immediate, we both know I’m lying. It’s so blatant that he doesn’t even bother calling me out on it, and just moves along.

“Did my girls miss me?”

I roll my eyes. “They’re not your girls.”

He bites his lower lip, trying to hide the naughtiness on his face, and he uses his eyebrows to hint at my breasts. “Maybe you should tell them that.”

I look down and these treacherous nipples of mine are swollen and damn near popping out of my dress. “Oh, God,” I say under my breath, crossing my arms over my chest to cover them up.

“I think Starla and Carla are trying to tell you something.” He’s utterly amused by my embarrassment. “I’m just reading between the lines here, but I think they want me. Maybe we should just have makeup sex.”

“What? No! Scott, you’re impossible! We’re not having makeup sex because we’re *not* making up! We’re over! Finished. I’m in a relationship with *another* man. I just came over to smooth things out with you, and you suggest makeup sex. What is wrong with you?”

“Jesus!” he says, slightly taken aback by my attack. “No need to get your panties in a bunch. If you find it so offensive, we can just have regular sex.”

Despite my annoyance, I start giggling. Uninhibited and ceaseless, it spurts out of me, and it gets him going, too. I love watching him laugh, the way his face turns red. It’s infectious.

As our laughter dies down, I decide that this needs to end here. The hostility has dissipated. That’s all I wanted to achieve, so now it’s time to leave. “Um...I’m gonna get going.”

“Stay for a bit. Like...three minutes or so.”

“You’re a douche.” I’m giggling again. “And the answer is no. A vehement no!”

That cocky grin is plastered on his face again and his eyes are slowly taking me in from head to toe. “You don’t trust yourself to be alone with me.”

“Nope. I do not. Not with you...looking like that.” I gesture to his bare chest in all its chiseled glory. “And definitely not with you...looking at me like that.”

He drops his head back against the headboard. “How am I looking at you?”

I don't know when it happened, but Playfulness left the building then Lust crept in through the back door when no one was watching, and the sneaky bugger obviously switched off the aircon because it is uncomfortably hot in here. Those smoldering blue eyes remain fixed on me, and I can see every dirty thought running through his mind. He doesn't even try to hide his arousal. It's growing beneath his sweatpants. My throat runs dry, my heart rate quickens, and I feel moisture dampening my panties.

“Like...*that*,” I reply, my voice sounding a little hoarse. “You're undressing me with your eyes and—”

“I am...and if you come a little closer, I could do it with my hands instead.”

I'm trying to turn away from him, steer clear of this catastrophic shit-fest we're on the brink of, but I can't even think straight at this moment. I take a deep breath and force logic to override my hormones for a change. “Scott, we can't do this. It's wrong on so many levels. I don't want to cheat on JP.”

“You already have. A few times, actually. One more time isn't going to make a difference.”

Justification like that would only work on someone who's looking for any excuse to fall into temptation. That's me. I'm that guy. That worked on me. I'm astonished at how easily I was convinced. Once again, my divided loyalty comes into play. Only it's not divided. It's heavily leaning to one side. Arguably, the *wrong* side. It is a notable fact that my body has no idea how to win this argument.

I try to find another reason because wanting this man is so ingrained in me that this whole interaction doesn't feel wrong even though it's very, very *wrong*. “And I don't want drama at the wedding. Isa will kill me if she finds out.”

“She won't. It will be our dirty little secret.”

I take a second to breathe through the effect those words have on me before I continue. “And what about you, Scott? You still have feelings for me.”

“A lot. So many.”

“Exactly. And they’re going to get hurt. I don’t want that.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about me?”

“You’re not getting it! I have to worry about you because you’re clearly not thinking straight. You and I have been making very bad decisions together...and I don’t know how to deal with the consequences. I’ve been losing my mind trying to get hold of JP, but when I do eventually speak to him again, I...I don’t even know how I’m going to tell him about this, about us, our past together. How do I tell him that I slept with another man...and that man just happens to be my ex-fiancé? *When* am I going to tell him? Do I tell him before he gets here to save him the embarrassment? Do I tell him when he gets here, so we can at least have the discussion in person? Do I tell him before or after the wedding, so I don’t ruin my sister’s special day? These questions are driving me crazy, Scott. This whole situation is a disaster.”

He heard every word I said, and all I get in return is a slight nod of indifference. “You seem stressed out. I still recommend that you move closer so I can...comfort you.”

I’m torn between holding back a smile and flinging something at him. “Can you please take this seriously?”

“Okay, answer this for me. If you and I had to get naked and just have sex for the rest of the afternoon, and I’m talking, like, earth-shattering, mind-blowing, dick-numbing sex – Do you think everyone will hate you once they find out what you’ve done?”

“Yes!”

“Now, explain to me how it would be different if you turned and walked out of my apartment right now.”

I think about it and humph my irritation when I realize the answer. “Nothing would be different.”

And there’s that naughty smile again. “I don’t about you, but I’m all in for option one.”

“Scott, you’re thinking with your dick again!”

“I’m literally incapable of thinking with any other part of me when it comes to you.”

“This is going to get messy if you start having expectations, Soldier. I’m leaving in eleven days, and *nothing* is going to change my mind about that.”

The slight drop in his expression lets me know that he did have some sort of expectations. “So, you’re still unwilling to compromise?”

“There’s no need to compromise. You and I are over! I’ve moved on. I have my whole future planned out. And even if this wasn’t the most amazing opportunity of my entire life, I’m not in a position to compromise right now. Backing out of this contract is not an option for me. Being known as the unreliable artist to an international hotel chain could get me blacklisted. No corporate client would touch me after that, and corporates are my biggest source of income. It could cost me my entire career, so no. I’m not budging on this, not one inch.”

“Alright. You can keep that one.” Lecherous eyes stay focused on me as he slides his hand down his taut abs and into his sweatpants. “And I’ve got every other inch you want right here. Come get you some.”

I see the outline of his hand beneath his sweatpants, slowly stroking up and down the length of his cock, and his breaths get heavier. The heat from my body burns up the oxygen around me and I stop breathing. Frozen in place, all I can do is watch him watch me. I catch the slightest hint of pink as his tongue glides over his teeth. The movement is almost predatory, like he’s patiently waiting for the moment when he can ravage me. I try to keep it in, but a moan leaves my lips and even I can hear the neediness in that small sound.

“Please stop looking at me like that.”

“I can’t.”

His hand moves a little faster. There’s something so erotic, so perverse about the way he’s shamelessly staring at me, the way he’s pleasuring himself while doing it. I’m so turned on by it because I can see that pleasure in the heavy-lidded

expression on his face, hear it in the ragged breaths he keeps sucking in.

“On a scale of one to ten,” he says, his voice thick and gruff with desire, “how wet are you right now?”

“Honestly...” I shut my eyes to the sight of him and drop my forehead against the door frame because I’m about to ignite. “...I could drown a small village.”

I’m not sure if that’s a groan or a snicker I hear, but the husky sound gets me even more aroused.

“It will be the last time, I swear.”

It’s the hoarseness in his voice that pushes me right to the brink. I try to collect my thoughts, debating with myself if I’m actually going to go through this...again. “I’m going to hell.” Flustered and practically sizzling inside, I look at him again. Why did he have to be so *hot*? It should be a sin. “I’m not going to pass go. I’m not going to collect two hundred dollars. I am going straight to hell.”

Maybe another person would’ve been empathetic to my internal conflict, but douche over here just smirks at me in that sexy way he always does and says, “I got a seat for you if you need a ride there.”

That’s it. Willpower gone. I don’t know how the space between us disappears, but I’m on top of him the next second. It all happens so fast that his eyes are wide with surprise when my mouth lands on his. A little chuckle echoes in his throat before his fingers thread into my curls.

“Last time,” I say, and he gives a small nod of agreement.

His hand fists in my hair as his teeth scrape over my bottom lip. His tongue follows the same path before delving into my mouth. That kiss is dirty, abrasive. I don’t know what it is about his kiss that completely unravels me. It flares my passion on the inside and turns me into a quivering mess on the outside.

I work my way down his body, my mouth trailing down his neck, then his chest, moving lower until he’s lifting his hips so I can tug down his sweatpants. Our eyes lock as my

tongue runs from the base of his shaft upward, a slow stroke, a little tease. He reaches down, rubbing his thumb over my lips, parting them until he can push his tip between them. Pre-cum lines my tongue and I moan, savoring the taste of him.

“You have the sexiest mouth,” he rasps.

He shifts his pelvis, urging me to take him deeper, and I do. The second my lips wrap around him, every muscle on his abdomen flexes and his head drops back against the headboard. I’m only halfway down when I feel it hit the back of my throat, so my hand and mouth have to work in unison. His hand weaves into my hair, holding my head in place as his hips jerk upward in time with my eager mouth. Low groans, strained and heavy, rumble in his chest. Incoherent words mix with my name as they leave his lips. Rubbing and licking, swirling my tongue around his tip, I know exactly what to do to drive him wild, and wild is exactly what I get when I’m hoisted up a few minutes later. My dress is yanked off, my underwear quickly discarded.

“I have a feeling this is going to get rough,” I say, anticipation pumping through my veins.

I get another sexy smirk as he stands up to strip off his sweatpants. “Girl, I’m about to tear this pussy *up*.”

My giggle comes to an abrupt halt when he grips me and turns me onto my side. Spreading my legs like a scissor, he straddles one of my thighs, my other leg is clasped at his waist, and then he enters me. Thick and hard, he fills me, the angle of penetration sending me into a rapturous spiral.

“Fuck.” He grits his teeth as he plunges deeper.

His tongue leaves a moist path up my side, stopping at my breast. My nipple is teased and tormented, nibbled and sucked before he moves higher. His upper body comes over me and his long fingers curl around my throat. His mouth is rough as it moves to my neck, his teeth grating my skin as it closes over my chin, but when he turns my head a little to my right, his lips capture mine in a slow, sensual kiss.

Titillating bursts of ecstasy shoot through me when he begins to pump in and out. I'm spinning now, lost in a vortex of unyielding fervency. All I can do is clutch the sheets, twist them around my fingers because I need something to hold on to. Thrusts get harder, causing my breasts to bounce with the force of it. The grip on my throat tightens a little. But that kiss remains soft and gentle. It's the ultimate paradox. Scott kisses me like I'm an invaluable possession that should be worshipped and adored, yet he fucks me like I'm nothing more than a cheap whore whose only purpose is to be used for his pleasure.

And he *fucks* me. Until my steady breaths turn into desperate pants. Until my moans turn into screams. Until the carnal delight building inside me turns into an earth-shattering orgasm. Yet he still doesn't stop. He's relentless. Again and again, he takes me to that climax. He pushes me to my limit, and I can't take anymore. I'm begging him to stop. I'm begging him to keep going. I'm a mindless mess. I don't even know what I want. Just when I feel like I might collapse, I finally hear that change in his breathing. His body stiffens above me, and hot liquid runs between my legs. I'm wet and sweaty, drained of all bodily fluids, drained of energy. Just drained.

He drops over beside me, and we both just lay there for a few minutes, sated and spent, as we try to catch our breath. When I feel like I actually have control of my muscles again, I roll onto my stomach and rest my chin on his chest. My fingertips lightly trace over his skin from his collarbone down to his pecs.

“Well, that was fun.”

A groan of satisfaction vibrates beneath my hands. “That was the last time, so I had to make it count.”

“Was I an unfortunate distraction from what you were working on?”

“A big one. And with distractions like that, I won't be able to work again today. It's very unfortunate.”

“Were you busy with your theory of debunking phi?”

He tenses slightly. “Yep.”

I continue drawing small patterns on his chest. “Do you want to tell me what your research is about?”

“Nope.”

I don’t push for an answer. This is obviously something personal to him that he doesn’t want to share with me. Given the fact that I made it clear that I have no intention of staying, I see this for what it is. It’s a boundary he doesn’t want me to cross. Instead, I switch to a conversation to keep the mood light.

“So...I heard you on Isa’s show this morning. I didn’t know you had a slot. On the Spot with Scott.”

“Oh, you found out about that, huh?” He chuckles. “The name was pretty corny, but I really enjoyed doing that.”

“How’d you get into it?”

“Isa and Tommy started off on the afternoon show, so I used to call in a lot, and one day they were arguing about...” He purses his lips as he tries to recall. “I think the topic was... whether the man should pay on the first date. I was at the mall when I called in, so they asked me to just ask some of the other shoppers. It was such a great segment that Isa asked me to make sure I was in a public place the next time I called in. It started becoming a regular thing, so Damon gave me a ten-minute slot.”

“That’s so cool! And when I heard you this morning, you sound like a natural. Why did you stop?”

“Oh, I had to stop once they got the breakfast show because I had classes in the morning.”

I smile even though I’m low-key upset that I missed all this. “You must’ve met some weird people doing that. Kiesha sounded like a riot, though.”

“Yeah, some people were a bit weird, but Kiesha was off-the-rails crazy. I took her out for breakfast the next day. She was hilarious.”

I smile to myself because I know him so well. “I figured you would. So, tell me something else I don’t know.”

He places his hand over mine, absentmindedly toying with the ring on my finger. The gesture tugs on my heartstrings because it’s something he always used to do. He rolls his head toward me until our eyes meet. “Mmm...so other than my part-time job on radio...I have developed a very strange addiction, a guilty pleasure of sorts. I like...watching kids fall down.”

I giggle. “What?”

“Yeah. I’m obsessed with those home videos where this random kid is walking around and then boom – a ball hits him in the face and he falls over...” He’s laughing just thinking about it. “And the younger, the better. You see these tiny three-year-olds with their chubby little legs and they’re running after something and trip over their own feet. And then those little arms and legs are flailing in the wind like a beetle stuck on its back because they can’t get up on their own. It fricken kills me! And the worst part is I’ve watched so many that it messed up my algorithm on YouTube, so I keep getting more popping up on my feed. I couldn’t stop even if I tried, and trust me, I’m not trying.”

“You’re so mean,” I say, slapping his chest. “As a teacher, that shouldn’t be something you enjoy.”

“This is totally confidential, Cat. You can’t tell anyone. What about you? Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Well...I have...you know what? I don’t want to say mine. You’re just going to end up judging me.”

“I won’t.” He lifts my hand from his chest and interlinks his fingers with mine. “You can tell me.”

“Okay...so I watched...*Sharknado*...”

“No.” His eyes widen with shock and horror. “No, Cat. Please say it isn’t so.”

“It is so...I watched all six of them, actually.”

“I swear to God if you tell me you liked—”

“I loved them.”

“Ah, baby, I used to have you up on a pedestal.” A shallow breath of utmost disappointment is released, and he’s so disgusted he can’t even look at me. “And your fall from grace is just pitiful...and sad. It’s like I don’t even know you anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Scott. I was going through a thing—”

“A lot of people go through a thing.” He shifts onto his side, propping up on his elbow and resting his head on his hand. He feels it’s necessary for me to see the condescension on his face. “*I* went through a thing. You don’t see me acting irrationally and developing unhealthy habits.”

“Yes, of course. Watching kids fall down is a much better coping mechanism.”

“You should try it. It will change your life.” He shakes his head, still trying to come to grips with this revelation. “And it’s still better than fucking *Sharknado*. You’re so much better than what you have become. Jeffrey Dahmer would turn in his grave if he had to see you now.”

“This is getting kinda personal, and I want you to know that you just hit me where it hurts.”

“That was the intention.” He gently brushes my hair off my forehead. “At least you’re still pretty.”

“We must always be thankful for small miracles.”

“So pretty.” He rolls on top of me, bracing himself on his forearms. “Hey, can I...can I kiss you?”

I wait for a beat before I answer. “What happened to *this will be the last time?*”

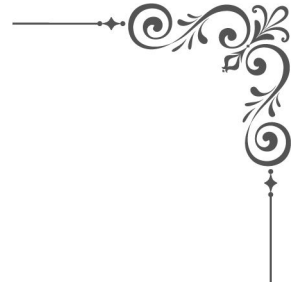
“Yeah.” That shy grin curves on his lips, the one that makes my heart flutter. “I know what I said. This kiss isn’t going to lead to sex. It’s going to be devoid of any kind of lust. I just want to feel your lips...one last time. Just one kiss. I promise I won’t go further than that.” His body tenses above me, almost like he’s expecting rejection. He’s so nervous it makes me nervous, too. It makes me feel like I’m about to kiss

him for the first time...or maybe the second, because our second kiss felt almost exactly like this. "Say yes," he whispers.

I hesitate only for a second. "Yes."

His lips brush against mine, slowly, sensually, but it's only when his tongue ventures into my mouth that I feel the true intimacy of it. When a kiss is stripped of lust, other things have to be thrown in to replace it. Things like affection and tenderness. Things like appreciation and yearning. I feel all of it in his kiss. The longer it goes on, the more I get sucked into it. The longer his mouth massages mine, the more I see it for what it is. It's a trip, a shove, a rug pulled from underneath me. I'm not sure how to describe it. I know it's unintentional, but that kiss was designed to make me lose my footing. This man is a stumbling block on my path to a future that I've already mapped out, a future without him. And I can't, I absolutely cannot fall for Scott Carter. Not again.

I keep kissing him, though, because I can't stop. *It's fine*, I assure myself. I'm a hundred percent certain that I can catch myself before I hit the ground. His hand moves to my neck, tilting my head up so he can deepen the kiss, and I just melt into him, moaning as the velvety feel of his tongue languidly caresses the inside of my mouth. Okay, after factoring in some very realistic probabilities, I'm now eighty percent certain... Oh, God, his lips are a taste of heaven...seventy-five... seventy...Fuck it! I was never good at math, anyway.



13. Scott

The harsh bounce of my mattress as someone dive-bombs onto my bed yanks me out of my sleep.

“Rise and shine, Soldier,” she sings chirpily. “A new day awaits.”

“Cat?” I can barely open my eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought we could go for a run.”

“That’s a fuck no from me.” I think about flipping over onto my back, but I’m too tired. Instead, I stay on my stomach, adjust my pillow, and smooch my face into it so I can go back to sleep.

“Please.”

“Did you just take a thirty-minute cab ride all the way here to go for a run?”

“Yes! C’mon, it will be fun.”

“What time is it?” I groan tiredly.

“It’s a quarter to seven.”

“A quarter to seven? Are you out of your goddamn mind? Some of us who have normal jobs like to sleep in on our days off. I’m not going for a run at a fucking quarter to seven.”

“Well, you spent so much time complaining that it’s ten to seven now. C’mon. Get up. Get up. Get up!” She hops off the bed and tugs my arm until my tired body is halfway to the edge of the bed. “Get your ass out of bed!”

I honestly forgot what a nag she was. “Jesus! Fine. I’m up.”

It’s only when I rub the sleep from my eyes and get out of bed that I see she’s already in running gear and there’s a small bag in the corner of my room. I assume a change of clothes is in there. She certainly came prepared.

I make a quick job of brushing my teeth and changing, pulling on a cap as I walk back to my kitchen. Twisting it back to front, I head for the fridge. After taking out two bottles of water, we do some light warm-up stretches. This is something we used to do together, and I'm trying really hard not to read into the familiarity of the situation. Yesterday, she made it very clear that there's no chance for us, so...why is she here?

I don't question it, though. Instead, I walk with her to the back exit of my apartment building that leads directly to the beach. We head toward The Strand, which is the running path along the ocean that eventually leads to the Venice Boardwalk. We take in the sights and the early morning sun.

Once we reach the boardwalk, we take a break, catch our breaths and check out some of the street performers before we start running back. Despite the early hour, it's already scorching hot. We're drenched in sweat, but thankfully, my apartment building is already in view.

"I can finally pick up Rocky next Tuesday," I say as our feet thump against the ground.

"That's great. How's it going to work in your apartment, though? He's got no room."

"Well, we're on the beach, so it's easy enough to step outside. Plus, I also have the top floor, so I have roof access. I converted the whole thing into a little garden for him. The grass is fake, but there's sufficient space for him to run around. It'll be a nice chill spot for the two of us."

"You can show me when we get back."

I don't confirm or deny her request because I'm still not sure what the hell is going on. I thought she just came for the run, so I assumed she'd be leaving once we were done.

Stepping into my apartment building is a cool reprieve from the oppressive heat, and I'm huffing hard as we step into the elevator. Bending over slightly, I place my hands above my knees to catch my breath.

Her golden bronzed skin is damp and glistening, her dark curls clinging to her neck. Those perky tits rise and fall in time

with her quickened breathing, and my eyes rove over every voluptuous curve. This woman is stunning. Everything about her is pure perfection.

“Stop looking at me like that.” She smirks and gives me a naughty wink.

“It’s a little hard when you’re dressed like that.”

Heat and tension rise between us, and she awkwardly clears her throat. “Why don’t we end off with abs and burpees?”

“Sure.”

The elevator dings, the doors open, and both of us walk to my living room.

We do three sets, ten reps of burpees with a thirty-second break in between, then move on to five sets, twenty reps of various ab exercises. I miss doing this with her. We move from one exercise to another in unison. Whether it’s working out, dancing, or sex, our bodies find a way to synchronize with each other. After we’re done with abs, she walks a few feet to the kitchen for another bottle of water. She takes a few gulps as she whips out her phone so we can catch the last hour of the *Crude Awakening*.

I move into pushups, also intending to do five sets, twenty reps with a one-minute plank to break up each set. Between my first and second sets, Cat returns to the living room.

“You want some extra resistance?” she asks, kicking off her sneakers.

This is another thing she used to do while we were working out together, and once again, I don’t call her out on it. “Okay.”

She walks over to lie on my back. As I straighten my arms for the second set, she hooks her feet up on my ass cheeks, resting her head between my shoulder blades, and makes herself comfortable, like she’s getting ready to read a good book.

“I can’t believe my sister has her own radio show.”

I inhale as I lower myself to the ground and exhale on the way up. “She and Tommy have worked so hard to get to where they are. I’m really happy for both of them, and their new show they’re prepping for at AmpUp Radio is going to be even better.”

“It’s just amazing to see. One minute she was this rebellious, self-destructive teenager, and now she’s entertainment personified. Time can change so much.”

“Time is constant, baby. Things change and people change as they move through time, but it’s not time that brings about the change.” I lower myself and push up again. “Time is a linear construct. It will continue to move into the future at a steady rate of one second per second, and it will do that whether you move with it or not. Things change *over* time, not because of it.”

I finish my last pushup of the second set, then set the timer on my phone for one minute. I brace myself on my forearms and hold in a plank position.

“Hmm...” She’s silent for a while as she ponders a bit. “If time is linear, do you think time travel is possible?”

“Yes and no. If it’s possible to travel forward, we should theoretically be able to travel backward, but if it was in fact physically possible, I’m sure we’d see evidence of people who have actually time traveled and we haven’t. I mean...unless you believe some of those quacks on social media. But, yeah, I think we have the ability to time travel. I just don’t think we have the means to do it just yet.” I feel the burn in my stomach muscles and hold steady for the last fifteen seconds. “Could you lie here in front of me instead? It’s a little hard to have this discussion without looking at you.”

I straighten my arms for the third set, and she crawls between my arms to lie on the floor directly beneath me, her head between my hands.

“You’re so sweaty.” She reaches for my towel that I’d tossed on the couch and dabs my face. “Have you heard of the butterfly effect?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure,” I reply, a little breathless as I start pushing my upper body up and down, stopping when our bodies lightly touch. “Tell me about it.”

“So, there’s a theory that if you had to change even the smallest thing in the past, it could have a major impact on the future. They say something as simple as a butterfly flapping its wings could lead to a catastrophe later on. No matter how insignificant something may seem, if you change it, it creates another version of history, which in turn creates an alternate reality in the future. Maybe the butterfly thing isn’t true, but the concept makes sense.”

“Yeah. It makes perfect sense,” I concur with a nod.

She seems to get lost in her thoughts for a while. “If you had to look back on your life, what do you think that moment is? That one moment that if you had to change it, your life would be completely different? That butterfly effect moment?”

“I’d have to think about it.” I finish off my third set and set my timer for another minute. Braced on my forearms in a plank, I’m closer to her and brush a damp curl off her forehead. The urge to kiss her is overwhelming, but I fight to resist it. “What’s yours?”

“I would say...it was my trip to the toy store with my dad. I was eight, and I had done well in school, and he told me I could choose any toy I wanted...that was less than twenty dollars.” She giggles at the memory with a hint of sadness in her eyes. “So, we went to the toy store, and out of all the dolls and plastic jewelry and kitchen sets, I chose play dough. And I went home, and I sculpted a dinosaur. My dad loved it so much, he took a picture, and we stuck it on my bedroom wall. A few days later, he bought me proper clay, and I was hooked ever since.” She pauses for a second, blinking back tears before she continues. “After he died, I stopped sculpting...and it was that same photo of the dinosaur that I took along with me when Mrs. Jeffries asked us to bring photos of our childhood. Seeing that picture made me start sculpting again. The next day, you came over and saw my sculptures. You called Connor, and that changed my whole life.” Her voice is laced with all the bittersweet implications that moment

entailed. I only pick up on it because I feel it too. “That day we were sitting on my porch, and you asked why I stopped sculpting, and it was the first time I opened up to you, the first time I let my guard down...and that changed everything for us, too. After that, I found it impossible to...not fall for you. If I hadn’t seen the picture, I wouldn’t have been sculpting that day. You would’ve had no reason to bring it up and none of that would’ve happened. Do you remember that day?”

“Of course, I remember that day. It was the first day you didn’t cross off on the calendar.” My smile stretches from ear to ear because I still remember the excitement I felt that day. “What made you think about that?”

“I don’t know. Just the wedding...and you – everything seems to be reminding me of the past. I guess my mind is drawing all these links about how my life unfolded, and that particular moment in the store seemed insignificant at the time, but the butterfly effect of choosing play dough that day led to me bonding with my dad. And it led to me falling hopelessly in love with you. It led to me finding an incredibly lucrative career. Like, I don’t know if I’d still be waiting tables now because I don’t know if I would’ve gone to college if I hadn’t met Connor. My life would have been entirely different if it wasn’t for that moment.” She wipes the sweat off my brow again as I continue to huff out hot air. She’s looking at me like that love might still be there, but that’s the type of look that will lead to expectations, so I simply ignore it. “Have you thought about what your butterfly effect moment was?”

“Uh...” I think back and try to pinpoint it. “So, I was in junior year at high school and Coach comes up to me and Peter one day and says: We got a new rookie on the team. He’s good, but he’s not focused. I need you two to take him under your wing. We get back to the locker room and there’s the new kid, waiting for us. I looked at Peter and said: Fuck no! This kid didn’t even have a single designer label on him. He was a riff-raff. He comes to me and says: Coach told me to speak to you. He holds out his hand and I just look at it like...is he really expecting me to touch him?”

She laughs. “Geez, you were such a jerk!”

“I know!” I finish off the fourth set and move back into plank for another minute. I’m breathing hard but continue with my story. “He read me like a book. He pulled up his sleeve to show me his watch, which must’ve cost about ten grand, and he said: Do you respect me now, asshole? I laughed because he’s a tenacious little shit and then I finally shook his hand. I said: Hi, my name’s Scott. He said: I’m Dylan, and I want you to know that you just gave me your respect for something I can take off. You may be richer than me, have better clothes, but if I look at what you value, I’m always gonna have more than you. Have that at the back of your mind the next time you think about disrespecting me.”

“Wow! Dylan schooled your ass that day.”

“I was too ignorant to see it then, but having Dylan in my life has humbled me in ways I can’t explain. He showed me that status and popularity and image weren’t the most important things. He doesn’t care about that stuff, and he started making me question why I did.” I lift up from plank and do my last set of twenty. “Dylan changed the whole game for me because on one sunny Saturday afternoon in September, I got into the car with him and drove to a dingy diner on the other side of town, said the most awful things to you...and that set me on a completely different path. If it wasn’t for that day, I’d be married to Beth right now. My dad would be grooming me to take over as CEO of his company.” I let out a deep breath as I finish the last pushup. “Done.”

I stand up, and she walks with me to the kitchen. She hops on the counter as I start preparing a smoothie. I toss a banana, two scoops of vanilla protein powder, and almond milk into a blender.

“Dylan is the reason I found my first love and my second love.” I switch on the blender for thirty seconds, then pour my smoothie into a glass. “Dylan is the reason I came to talk to you the first time at school. I told him Peter was going to be pissed when he found out about you and me, and Dyl said he’s already pissed. At that point, he had already shown me enough times how to not give a fuck about other people’s opinions, and during lunch, I just walked up to you and sat down.”

“So, meeting Dylan caused the butterfly effect in your life?”

“Yeah. And he’s still flapping his little wings. If he weren’t getting married, you wouldn’t be here. And we can trace all this back to that moment when I decided to say hi to the new kid in school.”

“Hey, Soldier.” A strange expression comes over her face, and she takes my hand to pull me closer. “Knowing how everything turned out between us, would you go back and change anything...not with Dylan, of course...but with us? Like, would you have maybe not come to the diner? I mean, when I think about everything you gave up for me—”

“Hey.” I cup her face with both hands. “Don’t ever let that thought even cross your mind. I would do it again the same way in a heartbeat. You may not be in my life anymore, but this is still the life I want, this is the person I want to be. I wouldn’t want to go back to being the asshole I was.”

“You’re still an asshole,” she teases.

“Yeah, but not *that* kind of asshole. And I don’t want to be a CEO. I love teaching and I would rather be alone than stuck in a loveless marriage with Beth. I love my life now but in the context of you specifically...I don’t know how to explain it. It’s weird. There’s this pain I feel right here.” I lift her hand and place it in the middle of my chest. “It started on the day I ended that call with you, and it hasn’t let up since. It’s always there, and when you leave again in ten days, it’s still going to be there. Chances are it will get worse. But I’ll keep carrying it around because it’s almost like a part of me now. Most days it’s bearable. I just sort of push it aside and try not to think about it, but there are some days when it hurts so bad, I can’t even breathe. That hollowness in my chest when you’re not around— I feel so...empty without you. I fucking hate it...but I wouldn’t change it. The entire chain reaction of the butterfly effect stems from a single choice and that’s all life is – it’s the sum of a series of choices. The sum of our choices unfortunately led us here. But if you’re asking if I would change anything that happened between us just for this pain to go away, my answer is never. I’d take it a million times over.

In any version of our history, in any alternate form of our reality, in any lifetime that may exist – if someone came to me and said this is what you’ll have to go through to spend three years with Catalina Diaz, I’ll take all of it without a second thought...because I love you.”

She doesn’t say it back. Instead, she lets out a deflated sigh. “It was four and a half years,” she whispers before she wraps her arms around my neck to give me a tight hug. “I wish things had turned out differently for us, Scott. I hate what I did to you...to *us*. I was selfish and□”

She’s on the verge of tears, and I put a stop to it right then and there. “Cat, don’t do that to yourself. You weren’t selfish. You’re feeling guilty about what happened between us, but you shouldn’t feel guilty about pursuing what you love. You’re not selfish for following your dreams with relentless passion. Couples either grow together or they grow apart, but they have to give each other room to grow. That’s all that happened. When we were together, we were amazing, and when we burned, we burned bright...but then we burned out. There’s nothing to feel guilty about.”

Even though she’s not fully convinced, she gives a small nod. “I think□” She’s silenced by the sound of a buzzer. “What was that?”

“It’s sort of like a doorbell. It means someone’s in the elevator.” My eyebrows crease because I’m not expecting anyone. I walk to the elevator and press the button on the intercom. “Who is it?”

“It’s Dylan.”

“Shit!” I whisper. My eyes widen and I look over at Cat. “You need to hide.”

“Why? We can just say...we went for a run. That is what happened.”

“Cat, trust me, if Dylan sees you here, he’s gonna piece everything together, and then he’s gonna tell Isabella□”

That jolts her into motion, and she hops off the counter. “What should I do?”

“Just go down the hall and hide in the bathroom. I’ll try to get rid of him.”

I wait for her to disappear before letting Dylan in.

“Hey, Scott.”

“What’s up, Dyl?”

“Are you ready to go?”

My eyebrows crease in confusion. “Go where?”

“We’re gonna practice today.”

I groan inwardly, regretting for the hundredth time that I agreed to do this. “Sorry, Dyl. I totally forgot.”

“No worries. I figured you would. That’s why I got here early. Why don’t you have a shower, and we can go?”

“Uh...nah, I’m good.”

“You sure?” He’s picking up on the weird vibe because he raises skeptical eyebrows at me. “You look like you need a shower.”

“We’re gonna get sweaty again anyway, right? I’ll shower when I get back.”

The way he narrows his eyes at me lets me know that he knows something’s up. “Everything okay?”

“Couldn’t be better, Dyl. Listen, I’m just gonna take a leak and then we’ll go, alright?” I hurry down the corridor to the bathroom. “Cat,” I whisper, quietly shutting the door. “Listen, I gotta go do a thing with Dylan. It totally slipped my mind, but I can’t back out. You’ll be able to see his car from my bedroom window. Just wait for us to leave and then you can slip out.”

Her quiet giggle tells me she’s equally petrified and amused. “Feels like the good old days when you used to hide me from your friends.”

“Low blow,” I whisper, then just sort of linger there awkwardly. I don’t really want to leave because I don’t know when I’ll see her again. “I’ll see you...around.” Now it’s even

more awkward because my natural instinct is to kiss her goodbye, and I can't do that, so I settle on a weird pat on the shoulder. "Bye."

"Bye."

I slip out and head back to the kitchen area only to find Dylan holding up Cat's sneakers and he has that usual shit-eating grin on his face. "Have your feet...shrunk, Scott?"

Fuck! He knows. He stares me down, challenging me with his eyes.

"I told you I was messing around with some cosplay."

He smirks, but it's not his usual playful smirk. Dylan only smirks like that when he's trying to hide the anger rising within him. "I strongly advise you to stop messing around because if your *'cosplay'* ends up ruining my wedding or hurting Bella, it's gonna be me and you, Scott."

Dylan is usually quite laid back, but he has a violent temper. We've clashed on many occasions, so I take his threatening tone very seriously. "The cosplay has already stopped," I assure him with a nod.

He doesn't care about the details. He takes my word for it and moves on. "Alright, let's go."

He's already back in high spirits by the time we get down to his car, and I realize that absolutely nothing is going to dull my boy's enthusiasm. He is so pumped for this wedding because he talks about what he's planning for the reception all the way to Pete's condo. On the corny scale, it's a new low, even for Dylan, but Pete and I will inevitably go along with it because...it's Dylan. We've been dragged along for whatever crazy ride he decides to take us on for years. No point in stopping now.

"Pete," Dylan yells as he opens the front door, "you home, sweetheart?"

Dylan has been living with Peter for a year and a half now, so they've gotten into this weird habit of speaking to each other like they're a married couple.

We don't get a reply, so I follow Dylan upstairs to Peter's bedroom. "Both of you are the same," he complains. "I bet he also forgot, and he's still asleep right now because he has the luxury of just sleeping in until eleven on a Friday morning."

"Every morning," I correct. "He has that luxury *every* morning."

"Yo, Pete, wake up," Dylan says as we barge into his bedroom.

"Fuck, Dyl!" Pete's panicked voice shocks me, but it's the sight before me that halts me in my tracks.

I shouldn't be surprised at what we find, but holy shit, am I surprised at what we find. Peter is shirtless, sprawled on top of some girl. It looks like we stumbled into a heavy make-out session because the room is hot as hell and her legs are still wrapped around him.

Pete frantically looks around before he checks on her to assess their respective states of nakedness. She's fine, though, still fully clothed in a pair of shorts and an oversized T-shirt (*his* T-shirt), and he seems relieved about that.

"Shit." Dylan looks worriedly between me and Peter. "Pete, I don't know if you know this, but...but there's a girl trapped beneath you."

"I'm fully aware, thanks."

Peter's annoyed tone is a clear instruction for us to leave the room, but Dylan ignores him and approaches the bed.

"Hi, I'm Dylan." He reaches out to shake her hand.

"Lia," she responds somewhat apprehensively. "Mahalia, but you can call me...Lia."

There's something familiar about her. I recognize her but I can't quite place where I've seen her before. It's not a face one would easily forget. She's a stunner. Her hazel eyes are complimented by her light-tan skin and pitch-black hair. The fullness of her lips seems to soften the sharpness of her prominent cheekbones and angular jawline. Her features are

distinct and sultry at the same time. She could be a model. Wait! That's it. That's where I've seen her before.

"Nice to meet you, Lia," Dylan says. "Sorry to barge in on you like this, but we didn't expect Peter to have a woman in here because he never invites girls over." He looks over at me. "Isn't that right, Scott? He's *never* brought a girl home before."

"Never." I try to keep a straight face when I confirm this, but Peter's discomfort is pushing me to breaking point.

"Wow, that must mean you really like her, huh, Pete?"

"Fuck, Dyl." Pete drops his forehead against Lia's shoulder, using her as a sanctuary from the onslaught of embarrassment he's receiving. He takes a moment to recover, then pins a cold stare on Dylan. "We're friends, but this is inappropriate."

"Is it?" Dylan feigns shock. "How inappropriate would you say? Like, if you had to rate it on a scale, would you put it on the lower end? Like that time Scott sent me that super-creaky voice note in the middle of the night..."

"Leave me out of this, please."

"Or would you put it more on the higher end, like that time when you groped your dick in front of my fiancé...*during* my proposal?"

The laughter I'm trying to contain comes out as a snort.

Peter just shuts his eyes and shakes his head as if he's silently wishing for a natural disaster to come along and end his misery. "The things you'll do to prove a point."

A giggle escapes Lia, and it eases the tension a fraction. "Did you do that?"

"I didn't know he was proposing," he replies before his focus shifts back to Dylan. "Consider this me giving you official notice. I'm kicking you out. You have one week to pack up your shit and get the fuck out of here."

It sounds harsh, but Pete only says that because Dylan is getting married next weekend, so he'll be gone in a week,

anyway.

“You’re talking out of anger again, honey. We’ll find a way to work this out.” Dylan winks at Peter, which only pisses him off even more. “Well, I think we’ve done enough damage. We’ll meet you downstairs, Pete. Lia, it was lovely meeting you.”

Dylan and I are still chuckling as we walk back to the front door. We don’t say anything about it because we’re saving all our words for when we get Peter alone. He’s grumpy as fuck when he joins us ten minutes later and says nothing when he gets into the backseat of Dylan’s Lamborghini Urus.

As soon as he slams the door shut, Dylan starts singing as he backs out of the driveway. “Peter and Lia sitting in a tree.”

“Shut up, Dyl.”

Shifting in my seat, I look back at him. “You brought her home...to your house? Not even the beach house. Your actual house.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, so? What’s the big deal? I do it all the time.”

“K. I. S. S. I. N. G.”

“Pete, we’ve been friends since the second grade. You have done that exactly *zero* times.”

“First comes love. Then comes marriage.”

“That’s real mature, Dylan.” Peter groans and throws his head back against the seat. “I swear to God, Scott, today’s the day I donate him to charity. I don’t want him anymore.”

“Then comes baby Peter in a tiny carriage.” Dylan makes a right, then starts the song again.

I refuse to let the background commotion detract from my line of questioning. “And she looked familiar, too. Wasn’t she the model that you hooked up with on the night of Dylan’s bachelor party?”

“You went back for seconds?” Dylan asks in astonishment. “One time wasn’t enough for you? You had to go back and

smash that again. I don't blame you, Pete. Use her for what she's good for, then kick her to the curb."

Dylan is such a wholesome soul that he physically cringes just saying that, but Pete wasn't lying about the lengths Dylan will go to just to prove a point. He said that to get a reaction, and that's exactly what he gets.

"Yo, don't talk about her like that," Peter snaps, and that releases the loudest howl of laughter from Dylan.

Eyes wide, he looks over at me to see if I'm just as shocked as he is. "Fuck me! You do like her. You like her a lot!"

"I don't." Pete immediately goes on the defensive. "I don't...like her. We've just been hanging out. Is that a crime?"

"I'm not as good at math as Scott is, but I do know that hanging out plus making out equals dating."

"I'm not dating her!"

My friend is in denial and in dire need of some perspective. "Okay, how often do you guys *'hang out'* together?" I ask.

"Well, she's...she's sort of been staying at my place since the bachelor party, so...every day."

"Wait! What!" Dylan meets his eyes in the rearview mirror. "That's almost a week. She's been staying with you for a week? How did I not know about this?"

"Because you're never home, Dyl. You've been sleeping over at Isabella's house every night since you proposed. You only come home to shower, change, and have breakfast."

"So, how did you go from a one-night stand to her just...living with you?" I ask as Dylan parks the car.

Peter lets out an irritable breath, reluctant to answer. "It's a long story, but her dad kicked her out, so I told her she could stay with me until she gets a new place."

We hop out of the car and walk toward the entrance of the dance studio. I exchange looks with Dylan because that's a

very weird situation, and it seems like Pete's been blinded by beauty because he's not seeing any red flags. "Not gonna lie, that sounds a little sus to me," I say. "I don't know her, but I'm picking up some low-key forty-niner vibes. That's definitely a sob story a gold-digger would use to manipulate an unsuspecting victim. Are you sure she's not lying about her dad, playing the sympathy card to...I don't know...exploit you for your money?"

That comment pisses him off. "She's not trying to *exploit* me, alright? She's a model, for fuck's sake. Besides, you know I don't hook up with chicks who are...poor. She comes from money, too. Her dad owns the Bayview Country Club."

This sounds even more suspicious to me. "My dad and I go there all the time. We know the owner. I don't think he has a daughter."

We walk past the reception area across the shiny wooden flooring and stop outside the entrance of a large room, waiting for the group of seven-year-olds to finish their ballet class. I get a text from Tommy saying he's going to be ten minutes late, and Pete waits for me to reply before resuming the conversation. He's adamant about proving me wrong.

"Of course, he has a daughter. *She's* his daughter. Remember that day you left to pick Cat up from the airport?" He waits for me to nod. "About ten minutes after you left, he chewed her out in front of everyone. It was brutal, so...after we hooked up the night of the bachelor party, I offered to let her stay with me. And she's not trying to exploit me because she made it very clear that she is utterly repulsed by the thought of dating me."

"Yeah, it definitely looked like she can't stand you," Dylan quips.

"That's probably why she was lying down," I add with a discreet smirk.

An unimpressed grimace is what we get in return. "Fuck off, the both of you." He shakes his head. "Can we talk about something else, please? Like this voice note you keep referring to."

Dylan's eyes light up. "I didn't let you listen to the voice note?" He's already pulling his cell phone out of his back pocket.

"Dyl, c'mon. That's not necessary."

"Oh, I think it is, Scott. I told you I'd use this as a gentle reminder one day."

In the last hour, Dylan has solidified about a hundred reasons why we should just cut all ties with him.

He presses play and my manhood already starts disintegrating when I hear the sound of my drunken, lethargic voice.

Dyl...Hey, Dyl. You know what I was thinking? I was thinking we should celebrate. Sort of like a new year celebration...even though we're a few days too late. Your divorce just got finalized, so you're a free man. I'm a free man. Let's go out and celebrate. Well, I'm already out celebrating. You just have to meet me here. And don't worry. I'm not gonna remind you about all the times when I told you that marrying Francesca was a terrible mistake. I mean, it was a fucking huge mistake, but we won't talk about the numerous occasions when I warned you that she was pushing you into something you didn't want to do. I won't even mention that time when I told you that there was no spark in your relationship. Divorce is one of those things that could happen to anyone...who's not genuinely in love with their spouse because they're still harboring feelings for their ex. It's no one's fault. Okay, it was about eighty percent your fault, but don't beat yourself up over it. And even though the whole messy ordeal could've been completely avoided if you just listened to me when I said DON'T marry her, I'm going to leave that conversation for another day. Tonight is all about celebrating. You wanna know what I'm celebrating, Dyl? I went to visit Mrs. H today, and she told me that...that Cat moved in with her new boyfriend. Isn't that great? I just wanna shout it out from the rooftops how happy I am. I gotta say, happiness at this moment is feeling like she fucking destroyed me inside, but I'm sure that's just because I ate some bad guacamole. Dyl, why aren't you here yet...Oh, yeah, because I'm still recording this. Listen,

meet me at Caleo's. You better be here in ten minutes because there's a cute blonde giving me the eye. Tall, blonde, big boobs – Cat always said that was my type, right? Short hobos aren't my thing anymore, so you better get here before I end up leaving with her.

Dylan shrugs as he shoves his phone back into his pocket. “Let’s say I got there too late.”

“See that?” The expression on Peter’s face is nothing short of smug. “That’s the reason why I’ll never fall in love. Women are not worth that kind of trouble.”

We wait until all the girls have filed out of the room before we enter. Dylan has already explained his plan for the reception the first time we practiced this, so we don’t ask any questions as we take our assigned positions in front of the mirror. Pete and I generally hate every second of this, so we rely on Dylan and Tommy to provide the gumption from this ball-shrinking exercise.

“I wouldn’t say that with so much confidence if I were you, Pete,” Dylan says. “Once a woman sinks her claws into you, you have no defenses, no control, so you better buckle up because I heard a rumor about you. You wanna know what I heard?”

“What?”

“Well, a little birdie told me that he saw...Peter and Lia sitting in a tree. K. I. S. S. I. N. G.”

“Shut up, Dyl. Put the music on and let’s get this over with.”



DYLAN DROPS ME OFF three hours later, and I’m a little thrown when I step out of the elevator and into my kitchen. I thought Cat would’ve left, but no. She’s made herself very comfortable in my apartment. She’s had a shower and changed into one of my hoodies. CNCO is blaring on her phone, and she’s at my stove, dancing to the beat as she cooks.

For a moment, I just lean against the wall and watch her. Everything about this looks so right. Cat dancing barefoot in my kitchen, her curls bouncing wildly as she sways – it looks like the home I’ve always wanted to have with her. But hearing that voice note earlier reminded me that Cat living a life like this with me is like clipping the wings of a wild bird.

She was meant to be free, soar high. When I look at all the things she was able to achieve without me, it’s obvious that staying with me would’ve only held her back. Deep down, I have this longing that it should’ve been me. It should’ve been me she wakes up to every morning. It should’ve been me that she shares all these amazing moments with. But I have to accept that she was destined for something so much greater than me.

Though, while she’s here dancing in my kitchen, I’m going to make the best of *this* amazing moment. I walk up behind her, grab her wrist, and twirl her into my arms.

A surprised gasp pops out of her before a smile takes over her face. “Hi.”

“*Bailar conmigo.*”

“Of course.” She accepts my request to dance by sliding her arms around my neck as I lead her into step. Her smile widens when I sing along to the words of the song. “Your pronunciation has gotten a lot better. I expected your Spanish to get a little rusty.”

“Nah, I still speak to your mom all the time.” Our feet move in a natural rhythm to the beat. “So, CNCO, huh?”

“Well, we were talking about that first day that I didn’t cross off the calendar, and *Bailemos* was playing that morning when you came to my house and found me dancing in the kitchen.”

My hand glides over her back. “And now I find you dancing in my kitchen. What’s for lunch?”

“Yeah, chicken fajitas. I figured it’s the least I could do after waking you up so early.”

“Nah, I still don’t forgive you.”

We move across the floor with a spin here and a dip there, using the entire space as our own private dance floor. Her squeaky giggles will linger in my apartment long after she leaves.

Even though she cooked lunch, we end up talking and lose track of time. Eventually, she remembers that we haven't eaten and suggests that we have dinner on the roof. I'm not keen on the idea because she's sort of unknowingly inserting herself into all these private spaces of mine. Despite my reservations, I agree, and we take our plates up to the roof.

She gasps when we step out into the late afternoon sun. "Wow, Scott! This is beautiful. And the view of the ocean from up here is just breathtaking."

Astroturf is laid across the whole floor and a few potted plants are neatly lined up against one side. Wooden panels cover the existing concrete walls, and I've draped them with fairy lights, which gives everything a relaxed Zen sort of vibe. The whole set up just proves that I did learn *one* good thing from my mother.

"Is this an inflatable pool?" she asks, kneeling beside it. Lifting the brown throw blanket that covers it, she sneaks a peak. "Yep, that's an inflatable pool."

"What? It's the same comfort for a fifth of the cost."

She still looks skeptical. "I doubt that."

"Don't bash it 'til you try it."

She hands me her plate, then gets in. After shifting the plush throw pillows around, she leans back and lets out a satisfied sigh. "You. Are. Right!" She stretches her arms out along the back and soaks in the late afternoon sun. "This is so comfortable. I could fall asleep right here."

I hand her the plates before I get in. "Don't doubt me next time. I used to live in the lap of luxury and a spoiled brat on a budget can be very innovative."

"Look at you living a bougie lifestyle on a basic bank account."

I sit back against the opposite side, stretching my legs to prop my feet up on the other side. “Well, it was either this or selling my kidney. And I’m saving the latter for when I upgrade to a king-size bed.”

We eat as we watch the sun sink lower in the sky, listening to the sound of the waves in the distance. Our outdoor ceiling is an ever-changing array of colors. Bursts of pink. Streaks of orange and blue. The same colors are painted over the ocean. As it gets darker, the fairy lights turn on automatically and cast a warm yellow glow on the wooden walls.

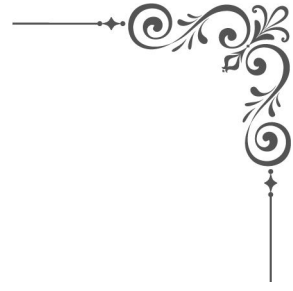
“This is magical,” Cat says. “It’s beautiful...and peaceful. This whole day has just been incredible.”

She says it with the sort of wonderment that seems misplaced considering all the places she’s been and all the sights she’s seen. It’s just a quiet, uneventful dinner in an inflatable pool on my rooftop.

I look around to make sure I haven’t missed anything extraordinary because her behavior is a little weird. “I’m sure you’ve experienced more spectacular moments than this.”

“You would think so. I thought so too...but being up here with *you*...” She meets my eyes, and I can tell she’s blinking back tears, though I’m not sure why. “It’s making me doubt that.”

She leaves that cryptic comment hanging in the air for a few seconds before she shakes it off and resumes the conversation as if it wasn’t said at all.



14. Scott

I'm not sure if I'm angry or confused. That's still up for debate. What I do know with certainty is that I'm frustrated. Cat left here on Friday night but then started texting me as soon as she got home. She spent the weekend with her family, but that didn't halt the texting. In fact, on Saturday, it continued until two in the morning.

I was sort of okay with that, but then yesterday morning, she showed up at my place again fully kit in running gear. We went for a run. As soon as we got back, she showered, then cooked, then spent the *entire* afternoon here. She left after four and that was only because Isa was done at the dressmaker and Cat needed to get home before Isa got there. Today, same thing. The only difference was that after she showered, we went to the shelter to pick up Rocky, and she played with him all afternoon.

Now, I have a routine. At least once a month, I take a drive up toward Corral Canyon and sit out there all night watching the stars. I enjoy the quietness and the solitude. It's just a way to escape the pressures of life and unwind. This month, I had planned to go there tonight because there's going to be a comet sighting at 20:23. I was going to do this by myself, so at 18:30, I subtly suggested to Cat that I was going out and she needed to leave.

I admit that this was a mistake on my part because then she asked where I was going and by the end of it; I caved and agreed to take her along with me. This is yet another insert into yet another personal space in my life, and I allowed it to happen.

She doesn't realize she's doing it, but she's slowly creeping back into my life, tainting it with pieces of her. The smell of her shampoo on my pillows. Her hair on my brush. Her running gear in my laundry basket. These little things are beginning to bug me because it's the same things that are going to drive me crazy when she leaves. She's already contaminated my entire apartment, including my rooftop,

which was supposed to be a sanctuary of sorts. And now it's spilling over into other parts that I deem sacred and I can't seem to stop it. So, when I say frustrated, it is one hundred percent directed at *me*.

After we load up pillows, a comforter, our food, and everything we need for Rocky into the trunk, we take a slow drive up to Corral Canyon. Cat is oblivious to my self-inflicted torture. She's too preoccupied with Rocky to notice. She's holding him up, rubbing her nose against his as she sings him weird cheerleading chants.

"Who's the cutest? Who. Is. The. Cutest? You are. You are. You are the cutest." She pouts as she looks over at me. "I think I love him."

I smile. "I think he knows."

When we get to my usual spot on the top of the hill where the road ends, I turn onto the gravel path and reverse closer to the edge. The salty ocean air is crisp as I jump out and walk to the back of my SUV to pop the trunk. I drop the two backseats and lay the thick comforter to cover the entire tailboard. I rearrange the pillows and shift Rocky's new bed to the corner at the back.

"That is so cute," Cat says, coming to stand behind me. "It looks like a little couch." She looks down at Rocky. "And just in case you didn't know it was your bed, it has your name embroidered on it. You are one spoiled little pup." She turns to me. "A personalized bed? You don't think it's a bit much?"

"He needs to live the bougie life, too."

We still have another hour to kill before the comet, but between talking, eating pizza, and playing with Rocky, the time goes by quite quickly. Rocky falls asleep, and after nestling him into his new bed, Cat and I move our pillows to the open end of the trunk, lying on our stomachs so we have a clear view. Stars are sprinkled across the navy night sky and the moon is big and bright, illuminating everything around us in a warm, white glow. A light breeze rustles the leaves, and the hum of crickets can be heard in the background.

“Look, Scott!” She grabs my arm excitedly and points to my left. “There it is!”

We watch in awe as it trail-blazes across the sky in all its majestic glory, leaving a powdery white streak in its wake. It gets smaller and smaller until it disappears into the distance. The remnants of the white streak stay a little longer before it also dissipates into nothingness, and then it’s like the moment never happened. Everything goes back to normal. It sort of reminds me of my relationship with Cat. Like I told her, when we were together, we burned bright, but then we burned out.

I look over at her. “That was amazing...while it lasted.”

She nods. “When something is that extraordinary, it imprints on your memories, and in that way, I guess it lasts forever.”

“That’s one way to look at it. And even if we can’t see it anymore, it’s still burning somewhere in outer space, so maybe in another world, it still exists.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes light up. “Hey, did you know many things in outer space are in the ratio of phi? I can’t remember the specific details, but I think it’s the ratio of the earth in relation to the moon and Saturn to its rings or something like that. I think it even exists to some extent in black holes. I don’t know if that helps with your research, but I thought I’d just throw it out there.”

“Uh...it doesn’t help at all, but thanks for the suggestion,” I respond with a laugh.

“I figured. I was just sort of hoping that I could con you into telling me more about the paper you’re writing.”

I contemplate whether I should just tell her. It’s not some big secret. I just didn’t want to share certain parts of my life with her because it makes me feel...exposed. Like I’ve left myself wide open with no protection. I want boundaries. It’s very clear that I *need* boundaries, but seeing that I’ve done a shitty job of maintaining any form of limits anyway, I suppose it doesn’t make much of a difference.

I let out a sigh of defeat. “So, you know phi is 1.618, and □”

“But why is it 1.618?” She crosses her arms and rests her chin on them as if she’s getting comfortable, priming herself to listen to a really long story. “Tell me all the background. Explain it to me like you used to explain math to me in school.”

“Well, I don’t have a pen and paper, so I’m gonna use my phone.”

Her eyes light up with excitement. “Yeah! Bring out the big guns.”

“So, it starts with the Fibonacci sequence.” I type the sequence on my phone: *0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233*. “The Fibonacci sequence is a series of numbers where each number is the sum of the two preceding numbers, and it continues into perpetuity. So, zero plus one is one. One plus one is two. One plus two is three. Two plus three is five. Three plus five is eight. You get the picture. Now, if you divide any number in the sequence by the number before it, you get one point six-ish, but once you get to the fourteenth number, which is 233, the ratio is 1.618, the golden ratio, and it remains unchanged into infinity.” I scroll through the pictures on my phone that show how the ratio is used to construct the logarithmic golden spiral. “So, if you use the Fibonacci sequence and start drawing rectangles that are in the ratio of 1 to 1.618 like in this picture here, and then if you draw a straight line that runs from one corner through the opposite corner of each rectangle, you’ll get this spiral which is the shape of the Nautilus shell.”

“Oh, wait. Stop right there. Let me show you something quickly, so you can see where my head is at.” She pulls out her phone and shows me a picture of a rose. “I sculpted this based on the golden spiral. When a rose blossoms, the petals spread out in that spiral shape, which is why it’s so beautiful. I’m struggling to see how you could debunk the beauty of something that is so prevalent in nature. And it’s not just in nature. Even if you take business logos like Twitter or Google, they all use the ratio of 1.618. The human brain interprets

those to be aesthetically appealing because the design and the spacing are based on phi. Same with a human face – people are seen as more attractive if their features are in the correct proportions of phi. Kim Kardashian’s face is 91% accurate to the golden ratio because it’s so symmetrical, and that is why so many people see her as beautiful. Based on phi, she is. I don’t think you can debunk something that has so much proof behind it. Society wouldn’t have beauty standards in the first place if there wasn’t already a perception of what is aesthetically appealing.”

Seeing her passion for this subject brings an instant smile to my face. “The other professor is going to delve into society’s perceptions and standards. I’m just trying to statistically debunk the concept that phi is basically akin to perfection.”

She flips over onto her back and looks up at me. “And how do you plan to do that when all the odds are stacked against you?”

“Well, when we do this sort of thing, the starting point has to be the perfect system or situation, then you start changing variables and see if perfection is maintained within that system. Phi is all about symmetry, so we could start moving things around in different dimensions, change the ratios of certain features of a human face, and then look at the final result. Let’s take you, for instance□”

“Why me?”

“Well, firstly, phi can’t be written as a simple fraction, which makes it irrational...just like you.”

A laugh pops out of her, and she shoves my shoulder. “Asshole!”

“And secondly, your face is...flawless. If I had to measure the distance from the top of your nose to the center of your lips, I bet it would be 1.618 times the distance from the center of your lips to the bottom of your chin. And from your eyes to the base of your nose and your nose to the bottom of your mouth, the ratio will be 1 to 1.618. And your upper lip in relation to your lower lip – I’m pretty damn sure the ratio

would be 1 to 1.618. It's the reason why they're so perfect." I run my thumb over her mouth, feeling the plumpness I'm so desperately craving. It's only been a few days since the last time I kissed her, yet it feels like an eternity. "But phi implies that beauty is objective when beauty is very subjective. It exists on varying levels depending on the eyes gazing upon it. Not everyone finds Kim Kardashian attractive. You're of the opinion that the closer something is to the ratio, the more aesthetically appealing it is. There's about a three percent margin of error, but theoretically, if something doesn't fit into those proportions, it should be...less attractive. And that's not the case. Realistically, twenty percent of all things in nature are not in line with 1.618. Twenty percent is not a statistical anomaly. It proves that beauty can exist even if it's not in that ratio because one rose is not more perfect than another. And this mouth and this face..." My thumb runs over her cheek. "They aren't as perfect as they appear. The eyes gazing upon them should be able to find the same beauty in another, and thus the concept of phi tapers down to a mere myth. Based on this, the idea of perfection ceases to exist."

Realization seems to click inside her because she stares at me for a long time. "So, that's what you're trying to debunk?"

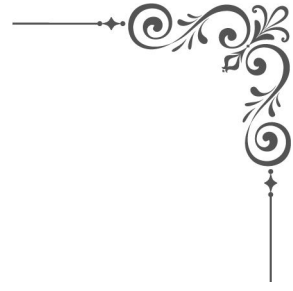
"Cat, for the sake of my own sanity...I think I need to."

Her hand moves to stroke my cheek. Silence stretches between us as her eyes search mine. Whatever it is she's looking for, she finds it because she lifts her head and presses her mouth against mine. I'm startled for a second because I don't know what to make of this kiss, but I mentally shelve that as a mind-fuck to unpack tomorrow. Tonight, I resign myself to making more bad decisions. My body moves over hers and I deepen the kiss.

I didn't want *her* to spill over and taint other parts of my life. And yet here she is contaminating more of it. Now, whenever I come to this hilltop, I won't be able to watch the sunset without thinking about her. I won't be able to take in the colors of the sky as dusk falls without remembering the sound of her voice. I won't be able to enjoy the silence because all I'll hear is the desperate way she keeps moaning

my name as my mouth makes love to hers. She's infused her memory into this very private part of my life and when she fucks off and leaves me again, I won't be able to come here without feeling like something is missing.

And the thing is, I let this happen. As much as I feel unable to stop and pull away from her, as much as I feel out of my depths and out of control, I have to acknowledge that this is a choice...a choice in a series of choices that will inevitably lead to me getting my heart broken again.



15. Catalina

I'm crumbling. I'm disintegrating. I'm falling into an endless abyss and there's no net to catch me. I'm trapped in a vortex and my life is spiraling out of control. This morning, I woke up in the back of Scott's SUV. We didn't have sex last night. It was just a kiss, but last night was the second night I fell asleep beside a man who isn't my boyfriend.

I told my mom I was spending the night at Connor's because he wanted me to help him test a new game. According to her, I've been with Connor every time I've gone out. The lies are piling up. The guilt is spilling over. My life is falling into disarray. And I can stop it. The solution is very easy. All I have to do is stop spending time with Scott. I just need to stay away from him. I just need to wake up, push him out of my head, and go about my business. But I can't. This is why I'm feeling so out of control. This is a very basic thing that I simply cannot do. I feel powerless trying to stop this urge to see him. And to make matters worse, I feel utterly overwhelmed because I still can't get hold of JP.

And then a few minutes ago, Dylan called Scott. He'd heard from my mother that I had slept over at Connor's and his exact words to Scott were: *I know she's not with you because we're friends and you wouldn't test my temper like this. But can you just pass a message on to Connor for me? We're going to her mother's house in two hours, so he better make damn sure that Cat is back home by then.*

The drive home has been quiet and awkward. Questions and issues linger in the air. Scott seems to be deep in thought. He's barely looked at me since he woke up this morning. When he pulls up in front of my mother's house, he looks into the backseat to check on Rocky, who's still sleeping peacefully.

Scott is still avoiding eye contact while he waits for me to exit. I get out of the car and close the door, but I can't leave with this tension hanging between us. I tap on the window and he lets out a slow breath before he opens it.

“Are you angry with me?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nah, I’m not angry. Just confused.” He gets out of the car and meets me on the sidewalk, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Do you know how well I know you?”

I’m confused by the question. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Tenth grade, Mrs. William’s English class. We were discussing some poem, I can’t remember which one, but she asked us to write a summary of how we interpreted it and each of us had to go up and state our thoughts in front of the class. As she was calling people up one by one, I noticed how your knee was bouncing and when it was finally your turn, your voice was so shaky you could barely speak. I just sat there thinking, damn, this girl is so nervous. In junior year, Kyle brought his pet snake to school, and he was taunting you with it. You were pressing your thumb against your palm, and I realized that you do that when you’re scared.”

I half-smile. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“I’m saying that I know you, Cat. I know all your gestures and I know that your body never lies to me. Because of your boyfriend, there are certain things you don’t want to say out loud, but if you think I didn’t feel what happened when you kissed me yesterday, you’re wrong. If you think I don’t see the way you look at me, you’re wrong. I know that you’re still in love with me. I’ve felt it *every* time you’ve kissed me. You can’t hide something like that from me.”

The weight of my bad decisions comes crashing down on me. I didn’t want to hurt him. I didn’t want to hurt JP. But now it seems like an inevitability. I shouldn’t have kissed Scott last night because he’s right in what he’s saying. He felt what I felt. Last night, he kissed me like only he can. He kissed me like he wanted to draw me into him, make me a part of him. Time stood still, and we got lost in the infinite microseconds. The moment dilated and expanded, consuming both of us into a static vacuum where only he and I existed. And it was in that

moment that the feeling I'd been trying to squash erupted inside of me with powerful intensity. I felt it spreading through my body. I felt it captivate my soul. I felt it in every beat of my heart. And I couldn't *not* acknowledge it anymore. I do love him. I never stopped loving him.

But now I'm stuck at a crossroads, and I don't know what to do. Scott is my past. I have a very different future planned out, and that kiss has now tangled me in a web I can't get out of. His sapphire eyes stay locked on mine, waiting for an answer that I don't have.

"Scott, I...I don't know what you want me to say."

"I want you to tell me what's happening between us."

"N-nothing."

"Nothing!" He steps back as if I've slapped him, rubbing a hand over his head as he paces up and down the sidewalk. If he wasn't angry before, he's definitely angry now. "Are you fucking kidding me right now? Cat, last week you told me that you were still going to leave. You told me that I shouldn't have any expectations...so I didn't. We had sex, you left my apartment, and I thought that was the end of it. I was fine with that. But then you came over to my place the next day, you texted me all weekend, and then you were right back at my apartment on Monday morning. And again yesterday. You're cooking in my kitchen. You're eating on my rooftop. You're just...hanging out with me *all* the time. You're creeping back into my life, Cat! A life you said you didn't want. You did all that knowing that I'm still in love with you. And if that wasn't bad enough, you kissed me last night. And then when I call you out on this bullshit, you tell me nothing is going on between us. What am I supposed to make of that then? How am I supposed to interpret what you did last night?"

Hurt and exasperation thicken his voice and I feel like everything is collapsing inside me. "Scott, you know what my situation is, and I don't want to complicate things more than□"

"I'm very aware of your situation, Catalina. It's you who keeps complicating things. If you wanted to keep things

simple, why did you come to my place yesterday? Why did you spend the night with me? Why the fuck did you kiss me?"

"What?!"

My sister's surprised shriek causes both our heads to snap in the direction of her voice. She's standing at the front of the SUV with her arms crossed, impatiently thrumming her fingers on her arm. Dylan is right behind her, staring at Scott like he's about to murder him.

"Please tell me that I didn't just hear what I think I heard."

Scott's jaw is tight when he replies. "No, you heard right."

"So, Cat kissed you? And you kissed her? You kissed... each other?"

His eyes shift to meet Isa's furious scowl. "It was completely platonic...just a casual kiss between friends. Nothing to worry about."

"Oh, wow! That's great! I mean, as long as her boyfriend knows about this casual hookup, there's no problem. If he's fine with it, then I'm totally fine with it. Does he know?"

The level of sarcasm is an indication of how mad she is. I'm afraid to answer, so Scott takes this one too. "He's not aware, no."

"I didn't think so, seeing that this happened last night. You know, my boss let me leave right after my show this morning and I thought I could spend some quality time with my mother and sister, and instead, I come home to this crap." She shuts her eyes, rubbing her temples as she tries to compose herself. "At least it was just one kiss, so we can all just pretend it never happened and move along."

Scott and I exchange a glance and even though we do it very discreetly, it doesn't escape my sister's razor-sharp eyes.

"Wait. What was that look? This was just one kiss, right?"

"Well, would you look at the time?" Scott is still angry. I can see it in his body language, but he puts on his chirpiest voice because he's trying to avoid this confrontation at all

costs. “Listen, I’d love to stay and chat, but I have so much shit to do, so I’d better get going. I think—”

This sets Isabella off instantly. “I swear to God, Scott, I will fucking cut you.”

“Ah, there’s no need for that, Isa.” He smiles at me, but it’s tight and forced, not the way he smiled at me just twenty-four hours ago. “The one your sister left me with is deep enough.”

His response lets Isa know that it’s worse than she thought, and she releases a slow breath. “Give it to me straight. How bad is the problem?”

“We crossed a lot of lines,” is Scott’s swift reply.

The look she gives us is betrayal mixed with pure disappointment. “I can’t believe you guys would do that to us. Right before our wedding! Do you realize that Dylan only got divorced eighteen months ago? The amount of gossip and scandalous stories floating between our families is already ridiculous. We didn’t need any more drama. If JP finds out, if anyone finds out, it will be all people gossip about. They’ll remember the scandal more than the actual wedding.”

I swallow my bile and shame and rush to reassure her. “There won’t be a scandal, okay? JP’s art exhibition is today, so he should be back in Paris. I’m gonna call him later and explain everything.” Just thinking about what that’s going to do to him pushes me to the point of a panic attack. “I’ll fix this. JP won’t fly over and there won’t be any drama at the wedding. I’m so sorry, Isa. All this is my fault, and I’ll make sure—” I’m silenced when a car drives past us and turns into the driveway. “Why is Keith home from work so early?”

We watch as Keith parks, and Dylan waves to him when he gets out of the car. “Hey, Keith.”

“Hey! Looks like the gang’s all here.” His eyes move to me and he gives me a playful wink. “I have a surprise for you.”

He opens up the back door and my heart stops. My blood runs cold and I can’t feel my legs. I hear the change in Scott’s

breathing behind me, ragged and unsteady. When I turn back to look at him, his face is ashen, as white as snow.

He steps out of the car and gives me the widest smile. “*Ma cherie*...the face I’ve been dying to see.”

My reaction is instantaneous. No buildup. No warning. I just burst into tears. “JP.” It’s a strangled whisper, catching behind the tight knot in my throat. “What are you doing here?”

Isa’s eyes stay pinned on us, nervous and anxious as she watches everything unfold.

“I couldn’t wait to see you and I told you I wanted to spend some time with your family before we fly back, so I asked the gallery to move up my exhibition, then decided to fly over early to surprise you. And when I saw how many missed calls and messages you left on my phone, I knew I had to get here quick. Keith was kind enough to keep it a secret and pick me up from the airport.” More tears spill out of me, and I’m desperately trying not to gasp out the pain constricting my airwaves right now. He crosses the pathway and meets me on the sidewalk, placing both hands on my shoulders. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m just...I’m just so...happy to see you,” I choke out.

I can’t see Scott, but I feel his body tense behind me. JP leans in to kiss me, and I subtly turn to give him my cheek instead. I can’t kiss another man when the memory of Scott’s lips is still lingering on my own. I’m thankful that JP is not the affectionate type. He’s quite reserved with public displays of affection, and the fact that we have an audience makes him pull away from me the second after his mouth touches my cheek.

JP looks past me and stretches out his hand. “You must be Scott. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

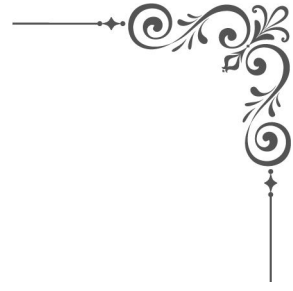
Scott remains frozen for a few seconds, just staring at JP’s hand. “Uh...yeah.” His voice is thick and strained when he finally takes JP’s hand and gives it a firm shake. “I’m Scott.”

“Thanks for taking care of my Catalina these last few days.”

It's the *my* Catalina that gets Scott's fists clenching at his sides. "No problem," he replies through gritted teeth. "Listen, I'm sure you guys want to catch up. Dyl and I were just about to go shoot some hoops, right, Dyl?" He says all of this without making eye contact with anyone.

Dylan may be pissed, but he doesn't let that overshadow Scott's feelings at this moment. "Yeah, let's go." He kisses Isabella. "I'll see you in a bit."

Scott leaves without even looking in my direction. Just a week ago, I went over to Scott's apartment to smooth things over so that I wouldn't leave here with ill feelings and now everything is so much worse. I watch him walk away, then look over at JP's smiling face, and I start to wonder how I managed to mess up so badly in such a short space of time.



16. Scott

“Really?” Dylan asks as he opens the door to get the basketball from my backseat. “I thought you said the cosplay was over.”

“It was...until it wasn’t,” I reply as we walk to the court.

Rage is bubbling beneath my skin, and I really don’t need Dylan to give me shit right now. But he’s going to because... he’s Dylan. And I know I messed up, so I don’t need any reminders. I just met her boyfriend. That was enough of a reminder. And watching that guy put his hands on her, kiss her, call her *my Catalina*— Fuck, I’m ready to explode!

I just have to push this volatility aside and burn it off on the court. I have to, or else I’m going to lose my mind thinking about them together.

I kneel beside the bench and tie Rocky’s leash around the leg of it. “Sorry I have to do this to you, bud, but I can’t have you all over the court while we’re running around.”

“This is such a fuckup. How do you intend to keep this from her boyfriend?”

“Uh...simple. By not telling him.”

He tosses the ball to me, using a little more force than necessary. “Scott, this is not a joke. Do you think he didn’t notice the way you looked at her? You think he’s not going to pick up on the underlying tension? We were with him for less than five minutes, and it was awkward as fuck. You can’t hide this. If he finds out before or at the wedding, it’s going to be a disaster.”

I shake off whatever it is I’m feeling. It will have to wait for another day to be felt. My friend asked me to be his best man for a reason, and I have to honor that by making him my number one priority. “He’s not going to find out. At least not before the wedding. Dyl, it’s probably going to kill me to see them together, but I won’t do anything to mess up your special day. I know how important it is for you and Isabella.”

He shakes his head as he swipes the ball away from me. “You didn’t have to complicate things like this. I don’t understand why you couldn’t just stay away from her.”

I stop dead in my tracks. “Did you really just say that to me? *You*, of all people?” I snort out a laugh. “Don’t play that self-righteous card with me, Dylan. It’s not like you could stay away from Isabella, either.”

“Bella and I were different. We were both single.”

“Were you now?” I grin because I know I hit a tender spot with that question. My boy hates to acknowledge this, but it is a fact. “Emotional cheating is still cheating, Dyl.”

“Fuck you, Scott!” He tosses the ball at me, and I chuck it back with the same amount of force. “You know exactly how everything played out. And need I remind you that a lot of it was *your* fault?”

“My part in it doesn’t change anything. You knew what you wanted and you couldn’t live a lie anymore. So, get off your high horse and stop preaching to me about how I should’ve stayed away when you’re guilty of the same thing. That chain you always wear around your neck? I know it came from Isabella because I was there the day she gave it to you. It came off when you broke up with her, and it was back on *long* before you and Fran got divorced. Loving these Diaz women is more of a curse than a blessing, a curse that neither of us has been able to lift in *years*.”

He stares off into the distance as if he’s pondering something. “My mother’s lying. That prophecy was real.”

He says it more to himself than to me. I don’t know what he’s talking about anyway, so I don’t bother trying to find out. Instead, I take advantage of his distraction and snatch the ball away from him, sending it flying into the hoop.

“Hard facts coming at ya, Dyl. At one point in our lives, we’ve both hated these Diaz women. At one point in our lives, we’ve both had to admit that we were stuck in relationships that weren’t going to work because we were still in love with these Diaz women – me with Courtney, you with Francesca.

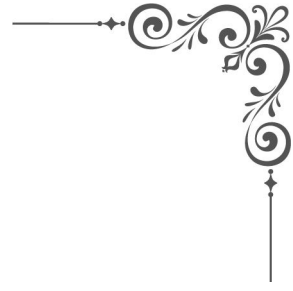
Let me make it simple by putting it in a math riddle for you. If you have *one* heart and you give it away to *one* woman, what do you have left for anyone else?"

"Nothing."

"Fucking nothing, Dylan, so at this particular point in our lives, both of us have to accept that we're trapped in this curse for the long haul...whether we like it or not."

"We should've run when we had the chance."

"Ah, Dyl, you're still so naïve," I say with a laugh. "The reality is we never had a chance."



17. Catalina

I release a slow breath as I take in my reflection in the mirror. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. I've gone through the last two days in a state of nauseated discomfort. It's like I'm clamping down vomit and sheer disgust with myself every second. I skipped dessert because it's been a struggle to keep my dinner down. JP has spent most of his time with my mom and Keith, so we haven't spent much time alone for him to notice how off-ish I've been. My mother has noticed my odd behavior and has tried talking to me about it a few times, but I've avoided the discussion like the plague. Her loyalty lies with Scott, and quite honestly, I'm afraid of what her advice might be if I tell her the truth.

So, I've pretty much just been lying to everyone and manipulating my way through every situation. I'm a total bitch for doing this, but I played on JP's reserved demeanor. On Wednesday night, I casually mentioned that my mother is old-fashioned when it comes to unwed couples sharing a bed and allowed him to come up with sleeping arrangements. I knew he'd suggest that we sleep in separate rooms, so I've avoided any kind of intimacy so far.

I won't be so lucky tomorrow night, though. We're all going to be staying at the Royale hotel where the wedding reception will be held, and I'll be sharing a room with JP. I don't know how I'm going to worm my way out of that one, but that is a problem for tomorrow. Right now, I have to figure out how I'm going to get through the rest of this rehearsal dinner.

Scott must have given himself a pep talk because he arrived here cool and composed, not showing a hint of emotion, but the volatility is still there. Just like with that audio snippet with Keisha, he's hiding it behind humor and casual conversation, but I see it each time our eyes collide. It's right below the surface, threatening to brim over every time JP touches me. I'm grateful that JP isn't an affectionate man because it would have only made a bad situation even worse.

I grip the edge of the sink, exhaling slowly as I try to pull myself together. I can't wait for this night to be over. If the tense awkwardness doesn't kill me, lying to JP will. Even though I'm fully aware that I did this to myself, my heart can't take deceiving him this way.

"Are you okay?"

My sister's voice startles me, and I spin toward the door to look at her. "This is so hard," I admit. "I hate lying to JP. I hate what this is doing to Scott. But mostly, I hate myself because I'm the reason we're all in this shit-fest in the first place. I'm so sorry, Isa. I shouldn't be putting this on you when tomorrow is your big day."

Keeping cautious eyes on me, she quickly closes the gap between us and pulls me into a hug. "Cat, if you"

"Don't worry about me," I interject, grasping her shoulders so I can look her in the eye. "Your only concern is the wedding tomorrow. No matter what, it's going to be perfect. I'm fine. I just needed a bit of a breather. Scott is out there talking to JP like nothing happened, and that somehow...makes the betrayal worse."

She looks at me like I'm stupid for not realizing that this would happen. And the thing is, I did know this would happen, but thinking about it and living through it are two very different things.

I take in one more deep breath, then walk with Isa back to the tables. Dylan's dad decided to host it at their family restaurant, *Piatto Pieno*, and their Italian heritage is evident in the décor, the atmosphere. When the low lighting and red-brick walls mix with the subtle garlicky aroma, it creates a sense of warmth that feels more like a home than a business. Isa gives me a reassuring pat on the back as we approach the table before she disappears to mingle with the other guests. I wait for the waitress to clear away the dirty dessert bowls, then I sit down beside JP.

"I'm not a big fan of music," JP says.

Tommy narrows his eyes and scrutinizes him. “Were you chained in a cold, wet cellar as a child? Only a soulless individual wouldn’t like music.”

“Now, Tommy, be nice,” I chastise with a giggle from across the table.

JP turns to me. “Scott was telling me how you got him hooked on Latin pop.”

“To be honest with you, JP, she got me hooked on a lot of things. Latin pop is only my second favorite.” Those crystal blue eyes stay locked on mine as he pulls his cell phone out of his pocket. “CNCO has been Cat’s favorite band since high school. Let me play a song for you.”

A few seconds later, a beat fills the air, and JP leans closer to the phone so he can hear the song over the chatter around us. Scott has already sent me a message through the song Men In Black, so I can’t say I’m surprised by this, but I also can’t say that it doesn’t annoy the living shit out of me. The song floating through the speaker of his phone is called *Pretend*, which is all about two people sneaking around and hooking up on the down-low. Of course, JP can’t piece it together because most of the song is in Spanish, and the background noise makes it difficult to hear the lyrics.

“But for now we just pretend,” Scott sings along softly before his eyes move from JP to me. “Catchy, ain’t it?”

“Asshole,” I mouth, but the grin on his face shows me that he’s unperturbed because he has the audacity to wink at me.

He has better coping mechanisms than me because I am an emotional mess. All this lying and deceit is ripping me apart.

“I like it,” JP agrees with a non-committal nod. “So, what’s your favorite?”

Scott’s eyebrows crease. “Song?”

“No. You said that she got you hooked on a lot of things, but Latin pop was only your second favorite. What’s your favorite?”

I don't think Isa would've told Tommy that Scott and I... did the nasty, but she must've told him that JP is unaware that we dated because he exchanges a quick look with me. We both know Scott, so we've naturally assumed what his *favorite* thing is. It's either me or a particular body part, which I'm guessing JP won't take kindly to knowing about.

"Fruit coated with chili powder," Scott responds, and Tommy's breath of relief is audible. "You should try it. Mango, pineapple – it's very addictive."

This conversation is making me very uncomfortable, so I try to steer it in another direction. "I can't believe Peter left so early."

"He's in the honeymoon phase. They couldn't wait to get out of here," Scott says with a chuckle. "Is it just me, or is Lia a little weird?"

"She's not that bad, Scotty," Tommy counters.

"She's sweet," I say. "A little quirky, but very sweet."

"I agree, she's nice, but I don't know, there's just something off. I can't quite put my finger on what's bugging me about her."

"Come to think of it, she was giving off some subtle forty-niner vibes."

"Yes!" Scott replies. "That's what I was trying to tell Pete, but he's hearing none of that."

"What's a forty-niner?" JP asks, and Tommy starts singing in his best Southern accent.

"*Stood a miner, forty-niner, and his daughter, Clementine.* Have you ever heard of that song?"

"No."

"Well, allow me to edumacate you," Tommy says, still keeping the accent. "In 1949, there was a gold rush which saw an influx of people into California, all of them looking to get rich quick. Those prospectors, the gold-diggers, are now affectionately known as the forty-niners."

JP lets that sink in. “So, you think she’s just with him...for the money?”

“Yep,” Scott replies without hesitation. “I think so. It’s probably not the only reason she’s with him, but she’s staying with him because her dad kicked her out, so I think it plays a big part.”

“I don’t.” I take a sip of water. “They seem like they get along well, and it looks like she genuinely likes Peter. And most of all, I’m glad he’s decided to see someone on more than one occasion.”

“I don’t think it will last much longer,” Tommy offers. “It’s all about the challenge for Pete, so he’s gonna get bored soon and probably dump her.”

“Maybe he’ll be different this time,” JP says. “He seemed...how do you say it? Into her? Yes, he seemed into her?”

Tommy laughs. “I guess being French does make you a romantic at heart. But the truth is Peter has had his share of forty-niners, so he doesn’t trust the intentions of most women. He’s basically given up on trying to find love because he doesn’t believe the perfect woman exists. She can’t keep the charade up for long and eventually he’ll see what we’re seeing.”

“That’s a little sad.” JP looks over at Scott. “What about you? Have you found the perfect woman?”

For a moment, Scott falters. His composed exterior crumbles and his raw pain shows instead. “I thought I did once...but I think I may be with Peter on this one. The perfect woman doesn’t exist. They’re all the same. Like roses. Beautiful and flawless at first glance, but nothing really sets them apart. One rose is just like another, so theoretically, that means they’re all replaceable.”

JP’s chuckle is mildly condescending. “But a woman is not a rose, Scott. I agree that the beauty and perfection of a rose lie at surface level. The color and shape of the petals, the way they spread when it blooms. But a woman’s beauty goes far

deeper. It lies within. You don't see it, you *feel* it...in the way she holds you, kisses you, makes love to you. It's in her tears, her anger, her vulnerability. It's in the beauty spot located in the oddest place, a crooked tooth you can only see when she smiles. It's in the stretch marks on her skin after she has your baby. But in saying all that, maybe you and your friend, Peter, are right. The perfect woman doesn't exist because, unlike a rose, a woman's perfection lies in her imperfection."

Scott stares at him for a long time. Apart from a tight jaw, his face is expressionless, and I have no idea what he's thinking.

"You know, JP, there have been a few times in my life when my ignorance has been laid bare. This is one of those times. You and I are very different. You're creative and aloof. I suppose because you paint, your eyes catch details that the rest of us don't necessarily see. I, on the other hand, am logical, analytical. I will break things down, deconstruct them to a granular level until it makes sense to me...yet nothing, not even all the number crunching I've done, could've prepared me for that answer."

I see it then. From that small interaction, I can conclude that this wedding would've been drama-free if I didn't fuck up so badly because JP and Scott, despite their differences, actually get along really well.

"Maybe being so analytical has also made you cynical." JP lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "I can only hope that one day you're as lucky as me to find the *perfect* woman."

Scott slams his hand on the table harder than necessary as he stands up, startling all of us. "Let's hope," he grinds out. "Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I am going to head home and get some beauty sleep. Big day tomorrow. Thank you for a wonderful evening."

Tommy stands up, too. I don't think he had any intention of leaving, but he's probably trying to make Scott's swift exit seem believable. "Scott's right. It's late. I'm going to get my beauty sleep in, too."

We watch them leave before JP turns to me. “Your friend Scott is a little intense.”

Despite all the crazy emotions running amok inside me, I force a smile. “You notice it more because you’re so laid back, Bon-bon.”

“I find it a little strange, though. The two of you seem to know each other quite well. How come you’ve never mentioned him before?”

Because you asked me to leave my past in the past. That’s what I want to say, but shrug instead. “I guess...the topic of him never came up.”

“I think he has a crush on you.”

My eyes widen, and I look at the table so I don’t give anything away. “What makes you say that?”

“Just the way he looks at you. He stares at you all the time. Do you not notice that?”

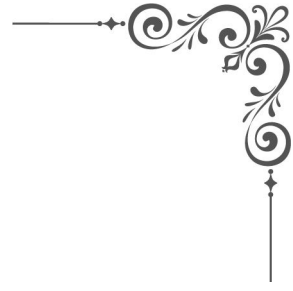
No, I stopped noticing that years ago. It’s a personality trait of his now. I dated him for four and a half years. I must’ve just gotten accustomed to it somewhere along the way.

“No, I haven’t noticed. I’m sure you’re just reading too much into it.”

I let out a deflated sigh. I’ve wanted to tell JP about Scott for the last two days, not about me cheating just yet, but I wanted to tell him that we used to date like I promised Keith I would. I had prepped myself to do it tonight but now I’ve lost the balls to come clean because after this conversation with JP, admitting the truth is going to open up a whole can of worms. He’ll notice the ring on my finger. He’ll realize that what Scott’s feeling is more than just a crush. And then he’ll start asking questions and I’ll cave, burst into tears, and tell him everything. The ticking bomb will detonate all over my sister’s special day, and she’ll never forgive me.

But on the flip side of that is me pretending that everything is fine, even though I feel like the most despicable human being. I have to hold my head up high and look Scott in the

eye even though I can't bear to witness the pain he's going through because of me. And then afterward, I still have to own up to my mistakes and tell JP what happened. When all this is over, I would've broken the hearts of the two men I care most about. They'll both hate me, and I'll be left miserable and alone. If I'm truly honest with myself, that's exactly what I deserve.



18. Scott

Dylan shakes his hands as if that will somehow flick the restlessness out of his system. I smile, turning my attention back to my reflection as I try to get the knot in my tie perfect.

“You nervous, Dyl?”

“No. Why would I be nervous?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because it’s your wedding day.”

“Oh, is that today? I was wondering what all the flowers were for.”

Peter walks in then with Tommy right behind him. “Hey, what’s up with all the flowers? Is someone getting married today?”

“Scott says it might be me.”

Peter feigns shock, then throws his arm around Dylan and slaps a kiss on his temple. “Well then, congratulations, boy!”

“Tom, the pink suit is fire.” It’s not really a suit. It’s a pink tie and jacket, which he’s paired with a pair of cargo shorts. I continue fiddling with my tie, shifting my focus between them and my reflection in the full-length mirror. “I wasn’t sure what to expect. I thought it would clash with the green hair, but it’s very complementary.”

“Thanks, Scotty, but to be fair, I can pretty much pull off anything. So, did you bring your girlfriend again, Peter?”

“I did...but she’s not my girlfriend.”

“Well, you’ve been spending a lot of time with good ol’ Clementine. What is that in the air? Is that commitment I smell?”

“Her name is Lia,” Peter corrects firmly, his expression tightening with annoyance. “And we’re not dating, for fuck’s sake.”

Tommy walks over when he sees that I'm still struggling with my tie. "Let a pro show you how it's done, Scotty. This is what happens when your fancy private school doesn't enforce a uniform policy." He shifts his attention to Pete. "You're with her every day. Sounds like dating to me. And please refrain from cussing for the next hour. We're in church, you heathen."

I look down at the perfect knot in my tie. "Thanks, Tom." Maybe now is not the right time to have this discussion, but I feel the need to voice my opinion because Peter seems oblivious. "Pete, I can't really explain it, but I'm picking up a weird vibe...like she's hiding something...or there's something she's purposely making sure you don't see."

"You think so?"

Peter trusts my judgment because I tried to warn Dylan that his relationship with Francesca was doomed from the start. Nobody listened to me and look at where that got him.

"Yeah, something's off about her," I reply. "I put up a fake persona almost all through high school. I know what it looks like when someone is trying to be something they're not."

Hell, I'm doing it right now. Pretending to be okay. Faking smiles and pleasantries for the sake of Isa and Dylan when, in reality, I just want to punch something.

"Relax, Scott. I'm not planning on falling in love with her. We're just having some fun."

"Alright, Pete." I don't argue the point further. I've said my piece. Peter is a grown man who can make his own decisions. Instead, I turn back to Tommy. "What are you doing here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be with the women?"

"I needed to get away from all the estrogen. Torrential floods are happening in the other room. The moms are crying. The sisters are crying. Pretty much everyone is crying except Dylan's goth sister. Though she doesn't look like she was dressed by Goths-R-Us today. She's looking hella cute in that pink dress."

Dylan grits his teeth, switching to overprotective brother mode. "That's my sister, Tom."

Tommy gives an unremorseful shrug. “I keep telling you. That doesn’t make her any less cute.”

Peter laughs because Tommy has no filter when it comes to expressing his opinion. “You clearly have a thing for her. Why don’t you just ask her out?”

“Because I’ll kill him,” Dylan responds, but he says it so casually that one wouldn’t necessarily perceive it as a death threat. But it is, and I decide to intervene.

“I suggest we leave before any blood is shed.” I pull on my tuxedo jacket and straighten the collar. “You ready, Dyl?”

“Let’s bring it in for a group hug first.”

I smile as we all huddle together. Dyl has always been the sentimental type. It used to bug me to the nth degree when we were younger, but now it’s one of the things I appreciate most about him. I bring objective logic to our small circle of friends. I come with facts and hard-core truth whether they want to hear it or not. Pete brings perspective and understanding because he is generally the voice of reason when Dylan and I get into it (and we’ve had many heated arguments over the years). But Dylan...Dylan brings heart. He’s compassion personified.

“Okay, I’m gonna head back to the tropical storm of tears,” Tommy announces. “See you guys at the altar.”

I realize the second we walk out the door that the dressing room was a haven for me. The weight of the day settles on my shoulders as we head down the corridor that leads to the church. We walk up the stairs that lead to the altar and I take my place beside Dylan. Peter is on my other side, one step below me.

I nod a greeting to the priest. “Good morning, Father.”

Dylan spared no expense for this wedding and it can be seen in the pink roses neatly placed on miniature pillars on either side of the aisle as well as the white lace draped between the benches. The church is already packed, and more people are streaming in through the double doors.

The first notes on the piano have me drawing in a sharp breath, bracing myself for the day ahead. Two little flower girls come down the aisle first, sprinkling rose petals along the path. Tommy follows them with Dylan's sister behind him and then my eyes catch sight of Cat. Dressed in an off-the-shoulder pale pink dress, she looks stunning, radiant. The smooth material hugs every sensuous curve, and the knee-high slit adds a slight hint of sexiness to this vision of elegance.

She slowly ascends the stairs and stops when she's standing directly opposite me. Time has confused the flow of events. This was supposed to be *my* moment. *We* were supposed to be saying vows to each other. It should've been me getting married to the woman I love, but instead, I'm out here feeling robbed of the one thing I wanted more than anything. *Her*. She's just a few feet in front of me and yet the distance between us is so wide, so vast, it feels like she's unreachable.

Silent moments pass. Our eyes lock and we lose ourselves in a time warp. Memories of the past. Possibilities of a future we never got to experience. A thousand words of yearning pass between us, and yet not one word is said. Keith and Isa reach the bottom of the stairs and Cat finally looks away, breaking the spell. I push my feelings aside, put on my game face, and focus on the happy couple. Today is about celebrating their journey, their love.

"Look at her, Scott," Dylan whispers in awe. "She's gorgeous. I don't know what right I did in this world to deserve her."

I watch as Isa walks down the aisle with Keith, the long train of her dress slowly dragging behind her. Keeping true to her style, the dress is not the traditional white. The top is lacy, looking very much like a corset while the bottom flares into layers of pearl and pale pink silk. Dylan is right. She looks stunning.

Isabella is beaming as she walks up the stairs to meet us at the altar and my boy looks like a kid on Christmas day. I hang onto every word as he recites his vows, his eyes bright with excitement. It could be tears. I don't doubt for a second that

this sentimental fool is probably on the verge of crying. I hand him the ring and he slides it onto her finger.

“Can I kiss her now?” Dylan whispers.

“Not yet,” Father Matteo whispers back, and a slight murmur of laughter flitters through the church from the people who were able to hear that quiet exchange.

A sniffle draws my attention back to Cat. She carefully dabs her eyes, trying not to spoil her makeup as we listen to the final prayers. Tommy is not holding up much better, either.

Father Matteo raises his arms. “I now pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. De Lorenzo.”

“Can I kiss her now?”

“Yes. You may kiss your bride.”

Dylan’s arm slips around Isa’s waist faster than the priest says the words and his lips land on hers. Their excitement is infectious because applause breaks out. It’s so loud no one hears Dylan telling her how much he loves her.

“My Queen of Spades,” he whispers.

“My King of Hearts,” she whispers back.

Despite the noise around us, I hear that little exchange, and I can’t help but smile.

We pose for a few pictures before Dylan and Isa make their way down the stairs. Tommy makes a show of looping his arm through Pete’s, and I hold out my forearm so Cat can do the same. She’s still lightly dabbing her eyes.

“Emotional day, huh?”

“Yep. And my face seems to be leaking makeup. I’m a hot mess.”

I chuckle. “No, you’re not. You look beautiful.”

We walk out of the church into raining pink confetti and I get pulled in all different directions by Cat’s aunts. A hug from this Aunt Verónica, a kiss from Aunt Letta, and, of course, the overtly flirtatious arm-rub from Aunt Maria.

“You know, I expected it to be you and Catalina up there on that altar first,” she says, looping her arm through mine as we walk to the garden at the back of the church.

“Me too,” I reply, struggling to keep the weighted sadness out of my voice. “Life had other plans, though.”

“Don’t close yourself off. Be open to finding love again.” She eyes me with a naughty smirk. “I’m still single. You can always come home with me tonight.”

I laugh. Many things have changed over time, but Aunt Maria has stayed the same. “I can barely keep up with you on the dance floor. Anything more is just asking for trouble.”

“You’re right. You young studs are only nice to look at. But then at least save a dance for me.”

“I will.”

She winks at me, then saunters off to greet one of Cat’s uncles.

“Was Aunt Maria trying to get you to go home with her again?” Cat asks.

I turn to face her, stuffing my hands into my pockets. It’s second nature to touch her and I want to make sure my hands are occupied, so I don’t draw unnecessary attention to us. “You know how she is.”

“Yep.” She smiles and points to the rest of the bridal party. “My mom says they’re calling us for photos.”

I nod and walk with her to the far end of the garden. The photographer, Sadie, is pretty eccentric. I expected nothing less from Isabella. Sadie came along with props and instructs us to do some of the most ridiculous poses. One with Dylan fake-crying while Isa straps on a ball and chain. One with Pete, Dyl, and I pretending to run away from her while she’s flinging a lasso around him. Even one where Dylan has a caveman club in his hand while she’s tossed over his shoulder. It’s great fun until the *serious* pictures need to be taken. The ones with aunts and uncles, parents, siblings, and, of course, those who are technically not part of the family yet.

JP takes his turn being photographed with Cat. I see his hands slip around her waist, and it takes everything in me to not storm toward them and shove him off her. I want to rip his arms off his body and beat him half to death with them. And yet...at the same time, I want to have a beer with him and talk about all the secrets of the universe. He is one of the most intellectually stimulating people I have ever had the pleasure of talking to. I hate him so much because he is so hard to hate. He's such a nice guy that I actually feel bad for doing what I did to him. A part of me wishes he was a jerk because then I would be able to justify my actions somehow. But no, he's pleasant and well-mannered and kind and just...a nice guy. I feel like shit because I slept with his girlfriend behind his back, yet I still want to punch him in the face because she's fucking *mine*.

"If you stare any harder, you're going to turn them to stone," Pete says from beside me.

I realize then that my hands are tightly clenched into fists at my sides, and I exhale a slow breath to release the tension from my body. "If I kill him, will you help me get rid of the body?"

"Of course. Just as long as I don't have to do any digging. Manual labor and I aren't friends." He taps me on the back. "Just a few hours and then it's done."

Those words don't have the desired effect because once it's done, it's done, and then I'll probably never see her again.

The venue in the Royale Hotel has been set up as if they would be hosting royalty. My eyes generally skip the details in décor, but even I can admit that the luminous pink lighting, the sheer pink satin draped across the ceiling, and the long-stemmed vases filled with pink and white roses are enough for me to stop and take in the extravagance of it.

The table for the bridesmaids and groomsmen is adjacent to the main table where Dylan and Isa are already seated. I'm trying not to torture myself too much and make small talk with Cat's family as I wait for the formalities to start.

Dylan's dad kicks off a short prayer and thanks all the guests in attendance before handing the mic over to Dylan's godfather. This guy goes on for fifteen full minutes about every embarrassing childhood memory from Dylan running naked through the neighbor's yard to him making mud cakes...then actually eating them. Dyl is hiding his head in shame for most of it, but his uncle has the crowd in stitches and has no intention of letting up. He's a tough act to follow, so I'm a little nervous when I take the mic from him.

"Good evening, everyone." I wait for the crowd to settle down before I start with my speech. "They say that best friends make good times better and hard times easier. I wholeheartedly...*disagree*. Dylan and I have been friends for almost a decade now and if there is one thing I've learned from this tenacious little shit is that friendships are *hard* and true friends will most likely make them harder." He gives me a knowing smile and I continue. "You see, best friends aren't there to make you feel better. Best friends are there to tell you when you're being a jerk and you need to take your head out of your ass. Best friends are there to push you out of your comfort zone and tell you hard truths even when you don't want to hear them. Best friends will have you running around at two in the morning doing things that are borderline illegal... like stealing a horse."

Dylan interrupts me then. "We didn't steal it. We borrowed it."

I chuckle. "Best friends will have you driving with them to dingy diners on the wrong side of town when you'd rather be lazing by the poolside." I take a breath, trying not to get too emotional. "Dyl, I can't even explain how you've changed my life. You set me on a path that led to me being the person I am today. You have challenged me. You have humbled me. And none of that was easy. Standing here today, watching you with your beautiful bride...It's amazing to see, especially because of all the things you both had to work through and overcome to get to this point. I'm so proud of you. Now, before you start getting sentimental, don't twist anything I've said. Peter and I still don't like you. There are many days when we still question why we're friends with you."

“We’re still trying to find someone who’ll take you off our hands,” Peter shouts, and chuckles from the crowd flutter through the air.

“But all jokes aside, we love you, Dyl.” My eyes move to his wife. “Yo, Isa!”

She groans her annoyance, and the smile on my face automatically widens.

“You’ve been like a little sister to me, and I know there were times when you absolutely hated me. I know this because those times were always accompanied by a threat to inflict bodily harm on me. But all these years later and you haven’t stabbed me once, so I’m gonna take that as a good sign. I also want to take this time to remind you that we have a pact, and even though you’re getting married, we still have a date every year on the twenty-third of December to watch *Die Hard* together.”

She smiles and quickly swipes a tear off her cheek. “It’s the only Christmas movie worth watching.”

“It is,” I reply with a nod of approval. “Isabella, you’ve gained a husband who is fiercely loyal, extremely protective, and very, *very* annoying.”

“Fuck off,” Dylan mouths to me when the crowd erupts with laughter again.

“But he loves you to the depths of his soul. And he doesn’t like to acknowledge this...but he always has. Be good to each other.” I face the crowd, raising my glass of champagne. “Ladies and gentlemen, to Mr. and Mrs. De Lorenzo.”

Applause and whistles fill the room. Isa gets up and pulls me into a hug. “I love you, Scott...like the brother I always knew I never wanted. Thank you for always being there for us.”

“You don’t have to thank me. Just take care of him and don’t ever take what you guys share for granted. Love like that only comes once.”

I kiss her cheek, then return to my table and sit down between Tommy and Peter.

“That was a great speech, Scotty.”

“It was very touching,” JP agrees.

“Thanks.”

I make an active effort to not look at them across the table, just in case I snap. His hand is hanging on the back of her chair and his fingers are caressing her bare shoulder. There’s only so much I can take, so I shift in my chair and watch as the happy couple cut the wedding cake and feed each other a slice.

After the cake-cutting, Dylan’s mother makes an announcement, calling all the single ladies to the center of the room. Cat and Lia stand up and walk to the middle of the dance floor. They are met by all the other single women at the wedding, all anxiously waiting for Isa to toss her bouquet. Lia seems way too eager, standing in front, holding a stance like she’s ready to tackle anyone who gets in the way of her and that bouquet.

“Not gonna lie, Pete, but your girl is displaying some major red flags for a stage-five clinger.”

“It’s, like, her life goal to get married, so I’m guessing that shit like that gets her very excited.”

Tommy and I exchange confused glances because Pete is actively avoiding any form of commitment, yet he just casually threw that comment out there when women like that usually have him running for the hills. Is she doing some pseudo-reverse psychology manipulation to get him used to the idea? What kind of voodoo magic has she worked on him?

“And that...and that doesn’t bother you, Pete?”

“Why would it? She doesn’t want to get married to *me*. I’m just the fuckboy she’s using until she finds someone who’s...husband material.”

Tommy lets out a solemn sigh. “You’ve let her cheapen you, Pete. You know I would’ve treated you so much better.”

“I know. And I still choose her. Don’t take it personally. I’m just a sucker for tits.”

I laugh and refocus my attention back on the commotion. Lia's efforts are all in vain because the flowers land effortlessly in the hands of Aunt Maria. She does a little victory dance before all the women return to their respective tables.

"Now, can all the single men report to the dance floor?"

"That's us, boys." Tommy stands up first, then halts when he notices we're still in our seats. "Aren't you guys coming?"

"We just talked about this," Peter says. "I have no intention of getting married...*ever*. The only person I'm making an exception for is Cat's mom."

"You always have to take it that one step too far," she retorts with an unimpressed eye-roll.

Tommy turns to me. "What about you? You coming?"

"Nope. That ship has sailed for me, Tom."

"Party poopers." He looks over at JP. "C'mon. Maybe one of us might be the next one to get hitched."

They walk to the dance floor and we all watch as Isa places her foot on the chair. An overzealous *oooh* resounds through the venue as Dylan's hand slowly sneaks beneath her dress.

"I missed it." Lia pouts as she sits down beside Peter again. "And we practiced for this all week. I was ready."

Peter slides his arm around her shoulder and gives her a comforting kiss on the cheek. "Maybe next time, dollface."

She rests her head against his chest. "I hope my prince charming comes to whisk me away very soon. I can't be living with you for extended periods of time."

"Why? You scared you might end up liking me?"

"Ugh!" She pulls a face as if just the thought repulses her. "No. That will never happen."

What in the world is going on between these two? Their dynamic is so confusing and I'm not sure if this is just a

manipulation tactic, a way to get Peter hooked because she knows he likes the chase.

The crowd cheers again as Dylan slides a pink garter off Isabella's leg. He twirls it around his finger, trying to build the anticipation. However, his plan backfires because the garter flies off his finger, sails across the room, and lands...right on my lap.

I'm still staring at it when Tommy sits down beside me again. "See what happens when you tempt fate, Scotty?"

"Well, we all know marriage isn't in the cards for me." I hand it over to Lia. "I think you should have it."

Her eyes light up. "Really?"

"Of course," I reply with a chuckle. "I hope this gets you one step closer to your Prince Charming."

"You're being cynical again," JP says from across the table. "What makes you so sure marriage isn't in the cards for you?"

"I just know. And I'm not being cynical. It's simply the reality of the situation."

"Reality is but mere perception. What our eyes see and our ears hear is how our brain perceives reality. Your cynicism taints your perception, which, in turn alters your view of reality."

I smile because I really want to strangle him. "JP, I am not drunk enough for this conversation, but you and I can have a beer together later and continue this discussion."

"I'll hold you to that."

Tommy and Peter are good buffers for the awkwardness, and the topics remain fun and light as we eat dinner. JP asks to meet the rest of her family and Cat reluctantly agrees. They leave for a good hour or so, mingling with the other guests, only returning when Dylan announces that Peter, Tommy, and I need to meet him in the middle of the dance floor.

I stand up. "This is it, gentlemen."

Tommy guzzles down his glass of champagne then reaches for the bottle again.

“Pour a glass for me and Peter, too,” I say. “God knows we need some alcohol for what’s coming up next.”

Peter takes a glass from Tommy before he looks over at Lia. “Please promise me that you’ll still have sex with me after this. Whenever I do activities with Dylan, my dick tends to invert, so it might take a while to find it, but as soon as we do, we’re having sex.”

Lia turns bright red and has to confirm the promise with a nod because she can’t stop giggling.

Peter takes a deep breath before reluctantly standing up. We strip off our suit jackets and loosen our ties as we walk to the center of the room.

“I can’t believe we’re actually gonna go through with this.”

I tap him on the back. “Just find a happy place. It’ll be over soon.”

Dylan’s grin is stretched from ear to ear as he leads Isabella to a chair set up in front of us. He’s such a corny bastard. We take our positions like we did in the dance studio and the room goes silent. The lights dim, with only a single spotlight shining on Dylan.

I cringe when I hear the first notes of Justin Bieber’s *Baby*, but Isa lets out a boisterous scream of excitement.

Oh wooooah

“Sing your little heart out for me, De Lorenzo,” she yells.

Oh wooooah

“Oh, I plan to.”

Oh wooooah-o-o

Pete and I have already died by the time the lyrics drop because the choreography Dylan put together is full-on boy band shit mixed with the quick footwork of a TikTok

challenge. We're doing the slide and tap. We're shimmying across the floor.

Dyl sings along the whole time and does a solid job on the rap, even improvising some of the lyrics with Isa as if they've done this before.

"And you know who got me dazin'?" he asks.

She laughs but plays along. "Is it me?"

"And you know who's so amazin'?"

"I think it's still me. And now your heart is breaking?"

"Yeah...so, we just keep on sayin'..."

"Baby, baby, baby *o-o-o-h*."

Now if that wasn't bad enough, right after the rap, the song mixes into One Direction's *What Makes You Beautiful*. The choreography for this one is even worse with flick kicks and running steps. I don't think I've ever felt so emasculated in my life, but the joy on Isa and Dylan's faces makes it all worth it.

"We hop on two," I remind Tommy, because this is the part where he kept messing up during rehearsals.

He nails it this time, looking pretty damn proud of himself. The medley continues and shifts into Bruno Mars *Marry You*. This bit is more theatrical, more Broadway inspired with long arms and jazz hands. My boy gives it his all, and Isa is killing it at this point. Red in the face and she's laughing so hard she has to wipe away tears so they ruin her mascara.

Eventually, it slows down, and he's breathing hard when Ed Sheeran's *Perfect* comes through the speakers.

Isa raises an eyebrow at him. "Really, De Lorenzo? Ed Sheeran?"

He takes her hand and lifts her off the chair. "Sort of reminds me of a little adventure we had on a rooftop one night."

She smiles and loops her arms around his neck. "Nothing like some R and Brie to set the mood."

Pete and I are still huffing as we walk off the dance floor, but Aunt Maria stops me before I get to the table and takes me right back. Without saying a word, she places her hand on my shoulder and leads me into step. After a minute or so, Peter is right next to me, swaying with Lia in his arms.

Cat's family has a weird custom when it comes to dancing. No one is allowed to simply have one partner. No, we all have to rotate every few minutes, even if the song isn't finished. People shuffle, we swap partners, and I'm dancing with Aunt Verónica next for half a song. It happens again and Mrs. H is in my arms.

"Hey, Mrs. H. Have I told you that you look beautiful today?"

"You haven't, but thank you. I'm surprised I managed to keep my makeup on. My baby is all grown up." She sighs. "And my other baby leaves tomorrow. I haven't been able to stop crying. I'm not okay, *Mijo*." She looks up at me. "And I don't think you're okay, either. I can see it, you know."

"I know."

"But you don't want to talk about it?"

"Not today."

"Okay, *Mijo*. Just promise me that you won't be leaving me after today, too."

"I promise I'll still come over every second Saturday."

"Yes, but you come over for Keith now," she snaps playfully. "It's like I'm not your favorite anymore."

"How can you say that? You'll always be my favorite."

Peter steps in between us, pushing me aside to curl his arm around Mrs. H's waist. "I want to make it very clear that I have *never* come over for Keith...not even *once*."

Keith is behind us dancing with Isa. "I heard that, Peter."

Peter rolls his eyes with indignation. "Keith, why do you always have to be this constant obstacle on my path to love?"

"Because that's my wife you're holding."

“A fact I can easily overlook.”

Keith chuckles, shaking his head. “You know, I honestly thought you’d be different around your date.”

“I’ve been very open with her. She knows where my heart lies.” He winks at Lia to let her know he’s kidding. “Now, if we disappear, don’t come looking for us.”

Mrs. H giggles as he whisks her away, and I find myself standing next to Lia. She’s a little awkward around me but gives me a warm smile, regardless.

“Peter is really something,” she says, with the slightest hint of affection in her voice.

“He is.” Keeping in line with the current rules of the dance floor. I hold out my hand, silently asking for a dance, and she accepts. “So, Peter tells me that your dad owns the Bayview Country Club?”

She stiffens but doesn’t confirm or deny the statement.

“My dad knows Robert very well, and I gotta be honest, he’s never mentioned you. I didn’t even know he had a daughter.”

After a long pause, she finally answers. “I’m more of a scandal than a *legitimate* child. I’m the mistake he tries to deny ever happened, so yeah...he doesn’t talk about me much.”

I can hear the pain in her voice, and it’s obvious that this is a personal issue, so I don’t push further. Instead, I just cut through the bullshit and voice my concerns. “Something’s amiss with you. I feel like you’re hiding something.”

She’s unfazed by this comment. “Am I supposed to walk around with my whole life story on display for all the world to see?”

I grin because she seems to have an answer for everything. “All I’m saying is that Pete’s really into you. He doesn’t take kindly to lies and manipulation, so...tread carefully.”

Again, she doesn’t deny this. She doesn’t adamantly state that she isn’t lying or manipulating Peter, and I find that so

odd.

I want to probe a little further, but my mini-interrogation is halted when Peter grabs her wrist and pulls her into his arms. “Can I have my date back?”

“Sure, Pete,” I answer before realizing that he was partnered with Cat.

With a quick twirl, he takes Lia off my hands, and I’m left with the woman my heart is aching for.

“May I have this dance?”

She casts a quick look over to the table where JP is chatting with Tommy, guilt and uncertainty playing with the expression on her face. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“C’mon, one last dance. There’s been a lot of tension these last few days, and I don’t want you to leave tomorrow with all this animosity hanging between us.”

“Okay.”

Her arms slide around my neck, and our feet find their usual rhythm. Even though a smile is plastered on her face, I can feel the rigidness of her body.

“You stressed?” I ask.

“Yeah...” It comes out as a breathy whisper, as if she’s scared of admitting it out loud. “I don’t know how I’m going to...confess everything that I’ve done.”

“When are you going to tell him?”

“When we get back home. I don’t want him to have to face my family feeling ashamed. But it’s going to be even worse that way because he’s going to be packing, getting ready to start the next chapter of our lives together, and I’m going to drop this bomb on him.” She blinks rapidly, desperate to keep tears at bay. “And it’s not just him that I’ve hurt. It’s you, too. I’m so sorry for everything, Soldier. I made such a mess of this, and□”

I discreetly tighten my grip around her. “Don’t do that to yourself, Cat. I’m just as much to blame as you are.”

“It feels like my whole world is crumbling around me and I don’t even know how I’m going to pick up the pieces.”

“Why don’t we let the world fall apart tomorrow? For tonight, let’s just enjoy this special day with Dylan and Isa and focus on all the laughter and happiness around us. Let’s just live in this moment. It’s gonna be over before we know it and then we’ll never have it again.”

She nods and looks up at me with a watery smile. “The highlight of today will forever be you dancing to Justin Bieber.”

“Please don’t bring that up again. Actually, you should just Men-In-Black that entire chunk of the night out of your memory.”

We continue to talk as we move across the floor. She tells me about the few close calls she had with some family members who almost let it slip that we were engaged in front of JP and how she managed to change the topic before it was revealed. I don’t say much. I just listen, finding solace in her voice.

“Oh, and I also spoke to Dr. Burkman.” she says.

“Who’s that?”

“She was Dylan and Isa’s anger management therapist, so they invited her because she played such a big role in them getting back together. She was also the crazy doctor who recommended to the school that you were the one who broke me down, so you should be the one to help me heal.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember her.”

She smiles, looking at me differently. “She remembers you, too, which was a surprise to me because I didn’t know that you two had ever met. I asked her why she would ever make such a recommendation. Surely, she should’ve known that it could be dangerous to put me in situations where I’d be alone with a guy who bullied me. And do you know what her answer was?”

I have an idea but don’t voice it. “What?”

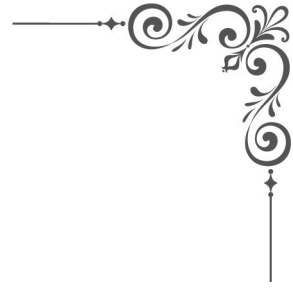
“She told me that she spoke to you at the hospital. Apparently, you came to check on me twice, but you didn’t want her or the nurses to tell anyone about it. She said that you sounded remorseful and ready to make amends, so she wanted to give us both the opportunity to heal from that. Did you do that?”

“Yeah.” I feel a little sheepish admitting this because I did some next-level begging to make sure my mother and my friends never found out about that. I especially didn’t want Cat to find out because I was so embarrassed that I actually *cared* about what happened to her. Fuck, I was such a jerk. “How does she even remember that?”

“She said that Isa mentioned me breaking my arm in therapy, and the name and situation sounded familiar, so she went back and checked my file and those were the notes she had about you.”

Listening to that makes my brain swing back to the beginning. It all started outside that diner, and after everything we’ve been through, I hate that this is how it has to end. I don’t know how I’m feeling right now. I’m conflicted, bouncing between happiness and anger and joy and frustration.

Two weeks have come and gone. She came back into my life and changed everything. She’s leaving tomorrow, and that thought allows me to zone into exactly the emotion that’s plaguing me. It’s disappointment. Overwhelming disappointment.



19. Catalina

“My feet are killing me,” I say groggily as I slide the key card into the holder. The light flashes green, I walk into our hotel room, and kick off my heels. It’s three in the morning. I’m very tipsy, and all I want to do is drop straight into bed.

Isa and Dylan left the party ages ago, but my family never knows when to call it quits at a party. My aunt Maria, my cousin Sophia, and I were the last people on the dance floor. The DJ slowed the music so we would leave, but all that did was slow our steps and force us to throw in some drunken karaoke. I’m no singer, but I know for a fact that I did the *Greatest Love of All* justice even though Scott said that he heard Whitney turn in her grave during my last chorus.

Lia and Peter left after midnight, but Scott and Tommy stayed until the bitter end as well. Tommy and I bawled our eyes out when Isa left in her *Just Married* car. He didn’t want to be alone, so he clung to me for the rest of the night. We even did a duet together. So, despite the many tears, the uncomfortably high-stress levels that made me feel like I was on the verge of vomiting all the time, and the guilt feeding on my insides like a parasitic amoeba, the night turned out to be fun.

Well, until JP decided to call an end to the night. I still had at least another four songs in me. I reluctantly left my aunts on the dance floor, Scott and Tommy went to the bar, and JP escorted me to our room.

Now that I’m alone with him, my body tenses up because I don’t know how to be around him. I don’t know what the rules are anymore. My divided loyalty, which is still leaning heavily to the *wrong* side, is making me physically recoil at the thought of sharing a bed with him. How am I supposed to get out of this?

I sit down on the edge of the bed and pull the pins out of my hair one by one. He kneels in front of me and starts massaging my feet.

“It’s always the dancing with you,” he teases playfully. “That’s why your feet are so sore.”

I wince when his thumb gently presses against the arch of my foot. “It’s okay, JP. You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s no trouble.” He rotates my ankle, then stretches out my foot. “I had a lot of fun this week. I enjoyed every minute with your family. They are so welcoming. I’m sad that we’re leaving tomorrow. We must make an effort to visit more often.”

That sentence instantly sobers me. How am I going to tell him? He’s so invested in my family, this relationship, *me*. It’s going to tear him apart. He’s going to hate me as much as I hate myself.

My thoughts come to a screeching halt when his hands move up from my foot and onto my calf. I sense his intention and my spine stiffens in response. His hand travels up my leg and I shut my eyes, trying not to cringe. His touch should feel familiar, yet my body is rejecting every sensation it creates.

Slowly, he rises off the floor, his lips gently landing on my cheek. “I missed you so much. I loved staying with your parents, but I couldn’t wait to get you alone.”

Soft kisses travel down my neck and my body becomes as rigid as a board. “I’m really tired, Bon-bon,” I mutter shakily. “I’m just not in the mood tonight.”

“I’m sure I can change that.”

It feels like my skin is crawling when his tongue circles the tender spot at the base of my throat, and it’s not because I’m repulsed by him. I’m repulsed by me, and him touching me, kissing me – it just doesn’t feel right. “JP...I...” I whisper, my voice trembling. My mind is scrambling for another excuse, anything to get me out of this situation. His lips move back to my neck, sweet and tender like he always is, and I have to shut my eyes to stop tears from escaping.

“JP...”

“Tell me what you want, *ma cherie*. The night is ours, and I want to make up for all the kisses we lost over the last two

weeks.”

“I...uh...I...”

“Yes.”

His body weight gets heavier, and I place my hand on his chest to stop him from pushing me back against the bed. His mouth moves at a glacial pace across my jawbone and onto my cheek.

“I slept with Scott.”

Time stops. He freezes. I have no idea how long it takes before either of us draws breath again.

He slowly pulls back, hurt and betrayal etched on his features. “What?”

I feel no need to repeat it. I know he heard me, and I can’t bear to put him through hearing it a second time. “I’m sorry.” The tears I’ve been keeping at bay since he arrived splutter ungraciously. “I’m so sorry, JP.”

“Scott?” He backs away from me, his fingers plunging into his hair. “I thought you were just friends.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Scott...Scott is my ex...fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” He chokes on the word. His eyebrows crease and his eyes zone in on me, looking like he doesn’t know who I am anymore. He stumbles back a few steps, leaning against the wall for support as he tries to absorb the shock. The light fades from his eyes. They used to glimmer with affection for me, twinkle with the love he had, and it breaks my heart as I watch how that flame slowly dies. “Fiancé, Catalina? How could you not tell me? You didn’t think that was something I needed to know?”

“You told me...you said you didn’t want to know about my past...or the man who broke my heart, remember?”

“And the fact that he was the best man at your sister’s wedding didn’t make you reconsider that decision? You still didn’t think that maybe it was something worth breaking the rules for?” By the change in his expression, I can tell that the events of the last few days begin to play on his mind. “The

two of you sat there, talking to me like nothing happened. How could you betray me like that? Make me a fool in front of all your friends?"

"Nobody thinks you're a fool."

His face hardens instantly. "Don't," he warns. "Don't even try to make it seem less bad than it is. Why didn't you just tell me when I got here instead of humiliating me like that?"

"I wasn't trying to humiliate you. I would never do that."

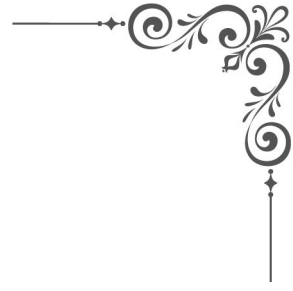
"You were dancing with him tonight...in front of everyone, in front of *me*! You don't think that's humiliating? That's rubbing the betrayal in my face!"

"I'm sorry. It was never my intention to hurt you."

"Like it wasn't your intention to sleep with him? I trusted you. Every time I called, and you were with him..." The betrayal seems to sink in further and he looks at me like he's utterly repulsed. "I didn't think anything of it because I trusted you. And I thought you loved me. And I didn't know he was your fiancé!"

"JP"

"Save it for someone who cares." He turns and storms out of the hotel room.



20. Scott

“‘I zzyB is finally married, Scotty,” Tommy says, his thick tongue causing his speech to slur. He finishes another shot and slams his glass on the bar. “I’m so happy I could cry.”

I groan tiredly. “Please don’t. I just want us to enjoy our drinks without getting emotional.”

“Fine. Then let’s go pick up some chicks. We’re the only ones in this bar and it’s depressing. I’m sure there are other places still open.”

“I’ll pass.” I pull the bottle of rum closer to me like it’s my date for the night. “Captain Morgan and I are just starting to get to know each other.”

I’m generally not a rum drinker. That shit is potent on a normal day, but I’m looking for a mind-numbing partner to spend the rest of my night with, and the Cap is delivering on his promise.

“Scotty, if an empty bottle of Captain Morgan is the only thing you take home tonight, then you have a very sad life, my friend.”

“Tell me about it. I think maybe□”

I’m cut off when my barstool is spun around. I don’t even see it coming. A fist comes at my face with so much force my head flies back on impact. It gets me in the left eye, and I have to blink a few times to adjust my vision.

“The fuck?” And that’s when I see who it is.

“Gah!” JP groans in pain, then covers his right hand with his left.

It becomes apparent then that he’s never been in a fight before. I’m also taller and broader than him, so the fact that he’s coming at me with another right can only mean one thing. She told him. It’s for that reason and that reason only that I take the next hit. This one is less forceful because his untrained hand can’t take the pressure of the contact.

Tommy grabs his arm and pulls him away from me. “Dude, what is wrong with you?”

“It’s alright, Tom.” I stand up, readying to have this confrontation man to man.

“You...you slept with her.” He’s exasperated. Just by the way his body shakes and his voice trembles, I can tell how devastated he is. “Where are your morals? Where are your values? What kind of man sleeps with another man’s woman?”

“Ah, Scotty.” And now I can hear the unconcealed disappointment in Tommy’s voice as well. “How could you do that?”

“Because he has no respect for other people’s relationships.” JP shoves me hard, but I stand my ground. “And then you sat there smiling at me, talking to me like nothing happened, you lying, manipulative snake! Both of you are so deceitful. Instead of being a man about it and telling me to my face that you had *sex* with my girlfriend...” He shoves me again. “...you decide to befriend me to humiliate me further. Did you get some kind of kick out of that?”

“Whoa, wait, hold up. That’s not how it played out. Cat wanted to tell you before you got here. Why do you think she kept calling you? But once you were here...we didn’t want our mistake to...to ruin the wedding. And no, I did not get a kick out of it because I would’ve rather told you the truth than see you anywhere near her.”

Tommy sucks in a breath as a sign that I may be toeing the line, and JP confirms it when he shoves me again.

“You didn’t want to see *me* with her? She’s *my* girlfriend. You had your chance. It didn’t work and instead of accepting it and leaving it be, you just had to□” He shakes his head before his pain-filled eyes focus on me. “How many times?”

“What?”

“I can forgive her if it was just once.”

I don’t regret pursuing Catalina, and I won’t deny that I want her for myself. If given the chance to do these last two weeks over, I would do the same thing again, but it’s at this

moment that I feel genuine remorse for what I've done because this dude is about to break down, and I hate that I'm the cause of that.

"Just tell me it was only once and then...and then everything will be okay."

He looks at me for confirmation and I can't bring myself to lie, so I just slowly shake my head.

"Twice?"

Again, I shake my head.

"Three times?"

"Just hit me again. Just...just hit me as many times as you want."

I don't expect him to take me up on the offer, but he does. Another punch is flung at me, and then two slaps, probably because his knuckles have reached their limit for violence. He groans in pain again, and when he steps back, I turn to the bartender who's leaning against the bar, watching the whole scene like it's a Telenovela.

"Can you get me some ice, please?"

JP is breathing hard when I face him again. He stumbles unsteadily, and then his head drops onto my chest. I'm not a hundred percent certain, but I think he may be crying. I look over at Tommy, feeling awkward as fuck because a grown-ass man is weeping on me over the woman *I'm* in love with.

Tommy gestures for me to put my arms around him. "Hug him," he mouths.

"Fuck no!" I mouth back.

"Just do it."

I release a slow breath, trying to swallow all my cringe, and one arm slowly goes around his shoulder. I give him a quick *there, there* tap before slowly urging him away from me. "C'mon, sit down."

He sits down, and Tommy and I sit on either side of him. I reach over and pluck the pink handkerchief from Tommy's suit

jacket that's hanging on the back of the barstool. Toppling a few ice cubes into it, I wrap it up and place it on JP's swollen hand. Tommy pours us all a shot of rum as he throws a comforting arm around JP's shoulder.

"You're bleeding, too," he says, pointing to the gash on my eyebrow.

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine." I sigh heavily because this is a total cluster fuck. "Look, I'm sorry that I pursued Cat □"

"No, you're not."

"Okay, I'm not...but I am genuinely sorry that you had to get caught in the middle of this. I wasn't trying to humiliate you by befriending you. If I had to be totally honest, I was trying to hate you. I still am. But you make hating you damn near impossible with your French charm and philosophical views on life."

He nods, taking a slow sip of the brown liquor. "Catalina told me that those are my best qualities."

"They are, but trust me, you and your qualities were the furthest things from my mind when I picked Cat up from the airport. I wasn't thinking about trying to make a fool of you. I was only thinking about *me*...and can you blame me? I've been in love with this woman since I was eighteen years old. We were *engaged*, man. We dated for three years...four and a half, if you ask her, and I was in no way ready to let that go."

"Then, why did you?"

I shrug, taking a sip of the bitter liquid. "I didn't want to end it, but...but she, uh, she didn't want to come back home. She still doesn't. She wants more out of life, much more than I can give her, and nothing I can do is going to convince her to stay."

"Tell her you're with child," JP responds with a straight face. He says it like a joke but there are undertones of genuine anger in his voice. "God knows you've slept with her enough to make that plausible. And a baby always prolongs a failing relationship."

I chuckle. “That’s a solid plan. She might figure out the truth in nine months, though.”

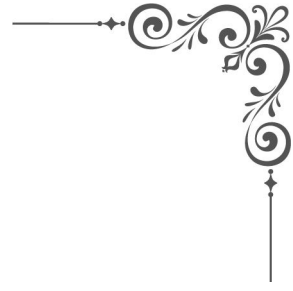
He knocks back his rum in one hard swallow, the smidge of humor fading from his eyes. “Why did you have to sleep with my girlfriend?” He flings his left hand back and slaps my arm, still trying to hurt me. And again, I take it. “Couldn’t you just be happy for her, happy that she moved on and made such a success of her life? Now, you’ve ruined my relationship, and for what? She’s still not staying.” He takes another sip of rum. “I guess you were right. Women are like roses. Beautiful to the trusting eye, but there are sharp thorns beneath the surface that can wound so deeply if you’re not careful.”

“So deep.”

After a long pause, he finally looks at me again. “So, what now? A few weeks ago, Catalina and I were happy, and you were miserable and alone. Now all three of us are miserable and alone? You gave us your disease like it was contagious, so how do you recommend we treat it?”

I sigh heavily, my feeling of disappointment once again renewed. “Unfortunately, I don’t have a long-term cure for that disease, but right now, in the short term...we can drink.”

He nods, raising his glass to click it against mine. “Then let’s drink.”



21. Catalina

Keith releases a deep sigh and scrubs a hand over his jaw. “Well, that wasn’t what I was expecting when I asked where JP was. I thought you were going to say he’s in the gents.”

I shift on the uncomfortable metal chair because it appears that my left ass cheek has gone numb. My flight is only in a few hours, but I had nothing to do and was too depressed to stay at the hotel, so I decided to come to the airport. JP didn’t come back to the hotel room last night. I don’t know where he went. He hasn’t answered any of my calls. I haven’t slept at all, so I blame the exhaustion and my highly charged emotions for me blurting out the whole truth to my parents. They just came to say goodbye and wish me a safe flight. Keith asked where JP was and worry turned me into a blubbering mess. I confessed everything. Not in explicit detail, but they know the gist of it.

“Are you disappointed in me?” I ask with a sniffle.

My mother pulls me into a hug. “No. Everyone makes mistakes, and you made sure none of this impacted your sister when I know it must have taken all your strength to put on a brave face. Oh, my baby girl. I don’t want you flying like this. Can’t you leave tomorrow? Let me see that you’re okay first before you leave here.”

I shake my head. “I’m going to feel the same tomorrow and the next day and the next day. Besides, there’s so much I still need to do when I get back. I need to pack and...figure out what to do with JP’s things.” Tears spill from my eyes again. “I’m going to go to hell for what I did to him.”

“I’m a good lawyer,” Keith says, curling his arm around me. “Maybe I can negotiate a lower sentence for you.”

I nod. “Or parole?”

He grips my head and pulls me closer to kiss my forehead. “You’ll be okay, kiddo. And we may not be there physically, but you can call us whenever you need to talk.”

Keith is such a good dad, and it seems like every time we start to bond, I have to leave again, so our relationship just sort of remains static. We chat for a few more minutes before he eventually looks at his watch.

“We’ve gotta get going,” he says, standing up. “Your aunts are coming over for a post-wedding lunch, which they’re probably going to turn into a mini-party.”

I giggle. “Sounds about right.”

My mother holds me for a little longer, and she’s crying when she pulls away. “With as much time as you’ve been away, you would think that I’d be used to this by now, but it breaks my heart every time you leave. I love you. Please call me as soon as your flight lands.”

“Love you, too, mom.”

I watch them walk away before I sit back down again, alone with my thoughts once more. My chest feels so heavy I can barely breathe. I check my phone, waiting for the last possible minute to go through to the departures section.

“Hi, beautiful.”

The familiar voice makes my head snap up. “Scott. Hi!” The cut on his eyebrow and the purplish bruise under his eye is what I notice first. I stand up, closing the gap between us to trace my finger over the cut. “Oh, my God. What happened to you?”

He chuckles. “JP and I...sort of got into it earlier.”

“Shit! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Is...is he okay? If *you* look like this, what does he look like?”

“He’s fine. His hand is swollen, but he’ll survive.”

My anxiety settles a little. “And what happened after that?”

“Well, JP, Tom, and I bonded over a bottle of rum, and we talked until he decided he wanted to come to the airport...I

went home, but I couldn't stop thinking about you, so I decided to come...and say goodbye."

"You got here just in time. I was just about to go through the gates."

We stare awkwardly at each other, not really knowing what to say, and the empty space seems to fill with all the things we're saying goodbye to. The kisses. The cuddles. The laughter. The silly conversations. The future that was never meant to be ours.

"This is feeling a little weird," he says, shifting closer to me. "Let's just hug instead."

He doesn't wait for a response. He simply wraps his arms around me one last time, giving me a final reminder of the warmth of his body, the smell of his cologne, the strength of his arms. The tension I've been feeling since yesterday leaves my shoulders and I just melt into him. I don't know how long he holds me. It feels like an eternity and an instant at the same time, but eventually, he steps back.

"You know, Cat..." He pauses for a moment, debating with himself if he wants to say what's on his mind, and he still seems uncertain when he continues. "You know, we were meant to be more than just memories."

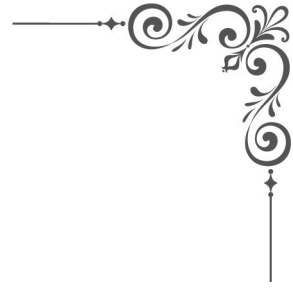
My eyebrows crease. "What do you mean?"

"When you leave, all we'll have are memories, and we were meant to be more than that. We have a love that most people spend their whole lives chasing. This is a love meant for growing old together, a love that can stand the test of time. We've already proven that. It's five years later and look at us." He sucks in a breath and forces a smile. "And I get it. Sometimes love isn't enough. You need more, and I won't stand in the way of that, but I want you to be fully aware that giving this up is your choice, not mine. In a few seconds, you're gonna turn and take one step away from me. In the grander scheme of things, one step seems insignificant, like choosing clay at a toy store or saying hi to the new kid at school. But that one step will lead to another...and then another. Our paths will diverge, and we'll get further and

further apart. Time will continue to move forward at a steady rate of one second per second and eventually, you'll find yourself one day in the future feeling the true butterfly effect of this choice." He grips the back of my head, shutting his eyes as he presses his lips against my forehead. "I love you, baby. And I wish you everything of the best. I know great things are ahead for you, even if this is where it ends for us. Maybe...maybe the place where we are more than just memories only exists in an alternate form of reality."

He takes another step back, and I have to summon strength from the deepest part of my soul to not cry. I want to tell him I love him. I want to tell him I'm sorry. I want to pour out my whole heart to him, but I can't because it only makes this harder. I sum up all my conflict, my heartache, my dreams, my *everything* into just two words. "Goodbye, Scott."

He says nothing and just waits. He doesn't attempt to move because he wants me to acknowledge that I'm the one walking away. And I do. I turn and take that first step. One foot in front of the other. One second per second. One choice in a series of choices...until I eventually get on the plane.



22. Scott

“So, what happened?” Peter asks as soon as I close the door of his car.

I hadn't wanted the company, but I'm still semi-drunk and didn't want to drive in this state. I don't want to entertain his question, but I don't have a choice in the matter. “She left.”

He stares at me with a mixture of disbelief and indignation. “Even after you asked her to stay.”

“I didn't ask her to stay.”

“You didn't?”

“Why would I do that, Pete? She's already made up her mind.”

He slowly pulls away from the curb. “So...how are you feeling?”

Like my soul is collapsing into a black hole. “Fine.”

A cautious side glance is cast my way. “You want to go out later? Take your mind off it.”

Nothing is going to take my mind off it. “Nah, I didn't sleep last night. I'm tired. I just want to get my puppy, go home, and□”

“Cry into your pillow?”

“Something like that. Besides, don't you have to get back to *Clementine*?”

“Lia,” he corrects with enough firmness to let me know he's not playing around. “She told me what you said to her at the wedding yesterday.”

This surprises me. “Did she now?”

“Yeah, and I don't appreciate you talking to her like that. She was very offended by what you said.”

“I'm sure she was.”

“Scott.”

Another warning, but I ignore it because this is going to be a disastrous mess if he doesn't end this now. "Pete, something is not adding up with this chick, and□"

"Stop. I don't want to hear it. If you harass her like that again, you and I are going to have words."

"We're having words now."

"*More* words."

I sigh, too tired to argue this even though I absolutely should because he's falling for her trickery. "Fine. All I'm saying is that I called it with Dylan and Fran. I'm calling it with Lia. I will be waiting in the shadows with my *I-told-you-so* voice note for you too."

"You're a dick."

I don't know where the time goes. I must be on autopilot because I don't remember Pete dropping me off. I don't remember picking up Rocky from one of my neighbors. But I snap out of it pretty quickly when I walk into my apartment. I take a second to just breathe through the pain in my chest. It feels like I've been impaled, the pressure so strong it may just suck me into the black hole my soul disappeared into. She fucking tainted everything. Memories of her are just scattered around my kitchen, my bedroom, my rooftop, my whole fucking life.

"You know what the definition of crazy is, Rock?"

He looks up at me, and he must sense my mood because he licks my nose.

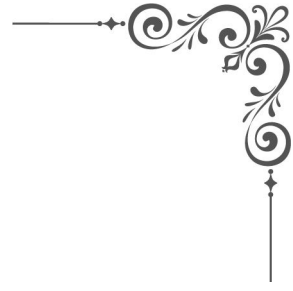
"Crazy is when you do the same thing repeatedly, expecting a different result. And didn't she tell me not to have expectations...but I didn't listen. Part of me thought she would stay this time. Crazy, right?"

I walk into my bedroom and set him down on the floor before I kick off my sneakers. Crossing the room to the chest of drawers, I take out a clean T-shirt and there she is, smiling at me from behind the glass. Memories trapped in a photograph, and we were meant to be so much more than memories.

Maybe it's just the leftover emotion from the wedding, and now that the tension has deescalated, I starting to feel the true loss of the moments I was supposed to have, too. The kiss on the altar. The first dance. The start of our lives together. That's what I wanted. It's the reason I proposed. I wanted that since I was eighteen years old. And there she is, in my arms on the beach, smiling against my lips after saying yes. She promised me forever with that kiss, and it was all a fucking lie!

I don't know what comes over me, but I grab the frame and fling it across the room, the glass shattering into a million pieces. Rocky yelps and runs out of the room.

"Fuck!" I go out after him. "Sorry, Rock." I find him in the kitchen and lift him up. "I'm sorry. That was a stupid thing to do." He lets me know he forgives me by nuzzling his nose against my cheek. "Sorry. I'm just going through a thing. It's going to be a rough few days around here. There's gonna be some moping. Maybe even some drinking, depending on how bad it gets. But I'll tell you what we're not going to do. We're not watching Sharknado, that's for sure."



23. Catalina

It feels like there's a boulder pressing down on my chest as I make my way down the narrow aisle to my seat at the back of the plane. I'm just about to pack my hand luggage into the overhead compartment when I see JP sitting in the seat next to the window. I was so preoccupied that I completely forgot that we were on the same flight back to Paris.

"Uh..." We stare at each other awkwardly. "Let me ask the flight attendant if I can swap seats with someone."

"It's okay," he says softly. "You can sit here."

He turns to look out the window as I sit down and strap on my seatbelt. I want to talk to him, but I'm not sure what to say. He's facing away from me, which shows he has no desire to talk to me, so I don't initiate a conversation. The flight attendants take us through the safety protocol as the plane makes its way down the runway.

There's a little patch of turbulence that we hit just after takeoff and out of habit, my left hand grips the handrest separating our seats. JP and I have traveled together often, so he knows that this is the part of the flight I hate the most. Even though it only lasts a few seconds, it scares the hell out of me because I'm always expecting some *Final Destination* shit to happen. JP usually takes my hand and holds it tight until the plane stabilizes. I'm not sure why, but he does it now, too. A gentle hand covers mine, the bruises and swelling on his knuckles reminding me how reckless my actions were. He silently waits for the slight rocking to stop.

I expect him to remove his hand right after, but he doesn't. Instead, he lifts my hand, staring at the ring on my finger like he's looking at it for the first time. I watch how pain etches itself onto his forehead as the realization hits him.

He looks at me for a moment, then his attention goes back to the ring. "You know...I was, um, I was going to buy you a ring once we got to London. New contract. New city. New chapter of our lives. And I thought to myself...I have to make

sure it's white gold or platinum, so it doesn't clash with this one...because you never take it off." He shakes his head, shutting his eyes. "You could've just told me, Catalina. Now it feels like our entire relationship was a lie...because his ring on your finger proves that your heart was never really in it."

I don't make any effort to stop my tears. They roll down my cheeks in a steady stream. "JP...I'm sorry for everything I did that hurt you, and you might not believe me, but our relationship wasn't a lie. I wanted a future with you. I wanted to build a life with you, and I didn't feel like anything was lacking...ever. You made me so happy. My life with you was perfect, and I want you to know that I didn't come here with any intention of reconciling with Scott because I truly believed I was over him. But...I wasn't. The feelings I still have for him...made me act[]" I don't even know how to explain it, so my sentence stops short. "And now I've messed up everything we had. It wasn't because I don't love you...I do. I just[]" I stop short once again because nothing I say is ever going to be good enough. Nothing is going to make this situation better. "I'm so sorry, JP. I never meant to hurt you."

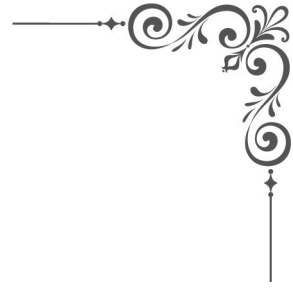
"There's no need to apologize anymore. I understand. The heart wants what it wants. And I knew what I was getting myself into. I knew someone had hurt you. You kept telling me you weren't ready, and I should've listened because I knew you weren't over him, even though I didn't know who *he* was. But I thought...I thought if you just gave us a chance, I could make you forget about him. I could make you love again."

"JP, I didn't[]"

He's not interested in anything I have to say because he cuts me off. "I knew you weren't ready, but I still pursued you. I disregarded obvious facts, I overlooked all the red flags, and I followed my heart instead...because the heart wants what it wants. And it wanted you so badly." For a brief moment, he meets my eyes, but it's like he can't stand the sight of me because he looks away the next second. "You know, out of all the organs, the heart is the most senseless. All the others work with some sort of logic. If you drink too much alcohol, your stomach will reject it by throwing up. If you breathe in smoke,

your lungs will try to get rid of it by coughing. But the heart is a stupid organ. It pines, and it yearns. It doesn't matter if the brain is trying to convince it that things are over, or that you shouldn't pursue something anymore. You can't reason with it because it's stupid. You can try to deny it, keep it from what it yearns for, but the blasted thing will ruthlessly follow its desires, destroying any obstacle in its path that tries to stop it. And without warning, the perfect life you were building implodes. I listened to my heart, and the traitor led me down *this* wretched path." He sets my hand back down on the handrest. "So, I can only wish you the best of luck, Catalina, because even after all this time, you are still insisting on what *you* want. You are trying to use logic arguing with this fool, but it won't listen to you. It's *stupid!* Your brain and your heart didn't make the same decision today, so I suggest you brace yourself for the next implosion. Who knows what the damn thing will destroy next?"

He leaves me with that, turns back toward the window, and doesn't speak to me for the rest of the flight.



24. Catalina

“So, who’s meeting me at the airport?” I ask Gerald.

He is the operations manager of the Golden Sands Hotel Group, and I have been working very closely with him during my stay here in London. We’ve been mapping out all the details and designs of the pieces they want at each hotel. It’s been a grueling process. Long hours at the company’s head office with many different people to finalize a full itinerary, costs, budgets, and all those fun things before I officially start at the first hotel. I didn’t mind the endless meetings. They were welcomed distractions, a way to keep my thoughts from straying too far away.

JP was right about this stupid heart of mine. It aches all the time. Even when the excitement built inside me discussing my ideas for the poolside sculptures, the pain was there, ripping me apart behind my smile. Even when I was in awe while they turned my designs into holograms so I could have a visual of how they would look in 3D, the pain was hiding in the tears I refused to let fall.

I fly out to Dubai today, and I’m almost bursting with anticipation. Almost. While there is a genuine joy that my life is going exactly how I want it to, that joy is empty somehow. Nothing feels like it used to. I switch on the radio every morning, fully expecting to hear Isa and Tommy and I’m left disappointed with the prim and proper hosts who are incapable of filling my day with that level of laughter. I go for a run and there’s...no one running beside me. It just seems like there are so many things missing from my life. It’s been turned upside down and I can’t seem to find anything. My future was meticulously mapped out, yet I feel so lost. I keep thinking it will get better, but three weeks have passed, and it just keeps getting worse. I miss him so much.

Phi. The golden ratio depicted by the perfect spiral. Scott compared it to the beauty found in nature. Roses. Nautilus shells. And he saw the same beauty in me. But phi can also be seen in the destruction caused by nature. The spiral of a

tornado. The eye of a hurricane. And I see the same destruction in him. My life was perfect, and just like a hurricane, he barreled through it with high-speed winds and destroyed everything, stripping me of all I hold dear.

The initial gust took away my boyfriend, damaging my relationship beyond repair. Then came a howling gale that dampened my need for adventure. The bright lights of the cities I'm going to be living in seem a little dull now, their appeal not as extravagant as they used to be. I've been wracking my brain these last few weeks trying to figure out why I'm so depressed. I've been living without Scott just fine for years now. I did it once. I can do it again.

Only this time is a million times harder. The first time I left, I had every intention of going back. The fact that I knew there was a time limit on how long I'd be away from him made the pain bearable. I could tell myself: *just a few months and then we'll be together again*. But I can't do that now. There's no time limit, so nothing is making this pain bearable. I just have to live through this wreckage left behind after the hurricane.

Phi. The golden ratio. The spiral that symbolizes perfection. That was Scott Carter. My perfect storm. The storm that upended my entire life and now I'm left with nothing... not even him.

"The lady's name is Fathima," Gerald replies as the cab driver and I try to stuff my suitcases into the trunk. "She'll pick you up and take you to your apartment. You're going to love it! It's right on Jumeirah Beach. I went there when we opened the hotel last year. It's beautiful." I hear some shuffling of papers before his voice comes through the phone again. "So, tomorrow, Fathima will pick you up at eight and take you to Golden Sands Hotel. You're going to meet Shafiq, and he'll show you around and take you to the area where you'll be working. Anything you need, you just ask him, and he'll sort it out for you, okay?"

"Great. I can't wait to get started."

"Are you already on your way to the airport?"

“Getting into the cab right now,” I reply, sliding into the backseat.

“Alright. Call me when you settle in there.”

“Will do. Thanks for all the assistance, Gerald. Chat soon.”

I hang up and slip my phone into my purse.

“Where to, Ma’am?” the driver asks, tilting his head so he can look at me in the rear-view mirror.

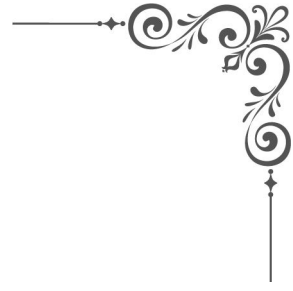
“The airport.”

“Where are you going?”

I smile, but the pain is still there beneath it. I suppose I have to get used to it sometime. “Dubai.”

“Oh, that’s nice. I’m sure you’re going to have a great holiday.”

“It’s not a holiday. It’s the beginning of the new chapter of my life.”



25. Scott

“You’re judging me, Rocky.”

He gives me a disinterested look then places his little face on my lap and focuses on the TV again.

“Curiosity just got the better of me, that’s all. It’s not like I like these stupid movies...”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, I liked the first one.”

I grab the remote and switch the TV off. I’ve binged watched the first four Sharknado movies and I’m low-key ashamed of myself, but I still can’t get her off my mind. They say that it takes three weeks to develop a habit. Well, she’s been gone for three weeks now, twenty-three days to be exact, and I still can’t get used to her not being around.

I’ve taken three drives up toward Corral Canyon, hoping each time that I’d find the peace and solitude I once found there. But no. She fucked that up, too. Dylan and Isa came back from their honeymoon two days ago and invited me over for dinner. I declined. I know I should get out of this goddamn apartment, give myself a break from the relentless attack of all the memories she left here, but I just want to be alone.

“C’mon, let’s go for a walk.”

I put him on a leash, and we take a stroll down the beach. I breathe in the salty air, taking in the sound of the waves and the sunset in the distance. I try to focus on every detail to distract me, but the pain is so embedded in me, rooted in the pit of my stomach, spreading up into my lungs, so I can feel it every time I breathe. I’ve been carrying it around since we broke up, so I should be used to the weight of it, but today it’s so heavy, I think I may just collapse under the pressure.

I return to my apartment, and it’s empty like it always is. Like a vacuum, it sucks me into the depths of it. I thought the emptiness was around me, but it’s not. It’s within me and I can’t escape it. Except for my eight-month emotionally

unavailable stint with Courtney, I've been single for five years, and yet I've never felt more alone.

Rocky and I have a quiet dinner. I try to cheer myself up by watching videos of kids falling down, but it doesn't work, and eventually, I reach a point of exhaustion where I can't fight sleep anymore.

"I think we should call it a night, Rock. And you're sleeping in your own bed again tonight."

Apart from moping and making questionable decisions about which movies to watch, I have managed to train Rocky to sleep by himself. I'm pretty proud of myself because it may be the only productive thing I've done in three weeks. I make sure he's settled in for the night, then drop straight into bed. I'm asleep in seconds.

A rustling sound startles me awake a few hours later and then I feel the mattress drop beside me. I bolt upright, ready to knock the intruder the fuck out, but even in the dim light, I recognize her small frame.

"Jesus, Cat! What are you doing here?" Adrenaline is still pumping through my veins, and I take a few deep breaths to bring down my rapid heart rate. She doesn't answer, and it confuses me more. Part of me feels like I may be dreaming. "Cat, are you alright?"

A snuffle is the only thing I get as a response, so I reach over to turn on the bedside lamp. She's shaking. Her eyes are red and swollen, like she's been crying for hours. My confusion turns to worry because I've seen her cry a thousand times, but I've never seen her look so devastated.

"Hey...Hey, c'mere." I sit up and pull her into my arms. "Are you okay?"

She shakes her head against my chest, and I hold her tighter.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" I brace myself, expecting her to tell me someone died, but she doesn't say anything. "Cat, please tell me what's going on. You're freaking me out."

“Why do you always do that?” The question comes out with a hint of exasperation. She pulls away from me and wipes the tears off her cheeks. “I hurt you. I know I hurt you, and yet you’ll still put my feelings first, you’ll still make sure I’m okay. Why do you do that?”

“I...” I’m unable to answer for a moment. “I don’t know. Look at you. You’re a fucking mess. Of course, I wanna make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m not just talking about now. Do you remember when I broke up with you over text? You still made sure I didn’t walk home in the rain. You still made sure Kyle didn’t bother me. Why do you do that?”

I’m confused as hell. She’s acting so weird. “Have you been drinking?”

“Do you know you always open the car door for me? It started in school and you still do it now. It doesn’t matter if you’re angry or upset, you do it every time. Do you know that you do that?”

“The fuck?” I run an irritable hand down my face because she’s not giving me a straight answer, so I can’t figure out what’s wrong or why she’s acting so weird. “Cat, it’s three in the morning. Why are you in my bed asking me these random questions?”

“Do you know that in the seventeen days I was here; you told me you love me thirty-three times? I counted. That’s an average of about twice a day. And I didn’t say it back once. You just throw it out during conversations. Do you know why you do that?”

“You’re...you’re asking *more* random questions instead of telling me *why* you’re asking them.”

And it’s like she didn’t hear any of that because she continues as if I’ve said nothing. “You do that because that’s how you love. You love without any expectations. You love with no fear of exposing your weaknesses or vulnerabilities. You love wholeheartedly despite all the hurt and pain I’ve caused. And I can’t believe that I took that love for granted.”

“Cat, I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying...I’m saying I want to try again. I’m saying that I want to put the past behind us and start over.”

My heart stops. That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear this whole time, but even though she’s finally said it, it still feels impossible. I half-smile and shrug because I know how this conversation goes. We’ll talk in circles just to conclude that we want different things. I decide to save time and jump straight to the end result. “We can’t make it work. Maybe we could do the long-distance thing for a few months, but we’re just going to end up right back here at the same impasse because long-distance is not a long-term solution, Cat.”

She shifts on the bed and reaches for her bag on the floor. She takes out a sealed deck of cards with two sharpies and hands one to me.

“Do you remember how to play this game?” she asks, removing the plastic sheathing.

I glare at her. “This was my game. Of course, I remember how to play it.”

“Let’s change the rules a little. This time *you* only have to give me three and I’ll give double.”

She takes the cards out of the box, hands me three, then takes the rest for herself. We take a few minutes to write everything we think and feel about each other. I write my three quite quickly, but she’s still scribbling her way through half the deck. She kicks off her shoes and moves to sit opposite me with her legs crossed.

“I’ll go first.” She flips over a card that says: *I love you*. “Just in case you didn’t know.” She flips over another: *I’ve been wanting to say that to you for so long*.

It’s my turn, and I put down: *I don’t see a way for us to make this work*. “I can’t do what I love if we’re moving around all the time, so I can’t move to where you are. And you’re chasing adventure, Catalina. You want more than I can give you, so if you move back here, you’ll be bored within a year...and you’ll leave again.”

As if sensing I was going to say that, she immediately puts down another card: *I want to trade the big adventures for the little ones.*

I look up from the card, my brows knitting with confusion. “I have no idea what that means.”

Again, it’s like she was waiting for me to say that and she puts down another card: *I want to watch sunsets with you in an inflatable pool on your rooftop.*

And then another: *I want to drive to the mountain tops to see shooting stars from the back of your SUV.*

And she just keeps them coming. *I want impromptu dances on the beach with no music.*

I want impromptu dances in the kitchen while I cook.

I want early morning runs with three sets of burpees.

I want jelly bellies and popcorn while we watch movies together.

I stare at the cards for a long time, my eyes glossing over the words before I look up at her again. “Those aren’t adventures, Cat.”

“They are, though. See, the thing is I got so caught up in chasing the big adventures that I forgot that life with you is a continuous series of little ones. The definition of adventure is an unusual or exciting experience, and excitement entails your heart pounding and pulse beating rapidly. It gets your endorphins pumping and adrenalin zipping through your veins. That’s how I feel every second that I’m with you. Life with you *is* the adventure, Scott. Somewhere along the line, I lost sight of that. And I was never looking for more than you. I was just...trying to find *me*. I needed to figure out who *I* was...as a person, as an artist. And I wanted you by my side through all of it, but that’s not the way it worked out.”

A moment is needed to take in everything she’s told me, and I take a deep, steady breath before resuming the game. That was more than double, so I assume it’s my turn again and place another card on the bed: *I won’t survive you leaving me a third time.*

“I won’t leave you again.” She quickly crawls across the bed and straddles my lap. Cupping my face with both hands, she forces me to look up at her. “I promise. I won’t leave you again. I’ll never take you – or what we have – for granted again.”

“You can’t make a promise like that. It’s *impossible* to keep a promise like that. You signed a contract. You have to go back at some point and finish it, and when you do□”

I’m silenced when she lifts my hand and places another card on my palm. *I pulled out of the contract.*

My eyes shoot up to meet hers. “What?” Tears brim in her eyes, and I can tell it’s bad news. “What happened?”

“It...it didn’t go well. I was supposed to fly to Dubai yesterday...and then I got to the airport, and I checked in my luggage...but then I couldn’t get on the plane. I called Gerald and...” She bursts into tears, sobbing so hard her shoulders quake. “He was so mad. I explained the whole situation and I think he understands but...but he says – shit, it’s so bad – he says Golden Sands might sue me for breach of contract, and I’m sure they’re going to blacklist me...so that’s my career pretty much gone.”

My mouth drops open in shock and I’m speechless. She told me this could happen, but now that it has, it seems more severe than I imagined. “Cat, you didn’t have to do that.”

“No, I did...because the heart wants what it wants. The stupid thing doesn’t listen to reason and will destroy any obstacle in its path that tries to stop it from getting what it wants. My career just happened to be another obstacle.”

“You sound like JP,” I say with a small smile.

“He was the one who told me that. He said I should brace myself for the next implosion. I didn’t think it would happen so soon, but...fuck, I just missed you, Scott.” She drops her forehead against mine. “Do you know what it’s like to love someone so much that you’d give up everything for them?”

I chuckle. “I have a vague idea.”

“So that’s what I did. I chose to give it all up, a choice in a series of choices that inevitably led me back to you.” Her arms slide around my neck and she hugs me tight.

I hold on to her for a long time, breathing her in and just absorbing the heaviness of the choice she’s made. She chose me. In *this* version of our history. In *this* form of our reality. She chose me. “So, what do we do now?”

“Well, first I have to find out how to get my luggage back, and then... considering that I’m poor now, I was wondering if I could move in with you.”

I laugh, but this feels too surreal, and I still have doubts. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes.” She lifts my hand again and starts placing cards on my palm one by one.

I want to listen to Isa and Tommy’s show every morning.

I want to be there for her if they decide to adopt.

I want to have lunch every week with you and your dad.

I want to help Connor test new games.

I want to get to the point where I can call Keith dad.

I want a lifetime of you holding me in your arms.

I want every one of your kisses.

I want to come home...and home is where you are.

I want to start a family with you.

“But before any of that...”

I want you to marry me.

She waits for me to look up at her. “Will you?”

And then the widest grin takes over my face. “Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“Today?”

That smacks the smile right off my face. “Uh...no. Are you crazy? We can’t get married today. How are we going to pull a wedding together so fast? It’s a *Tuesday*. We need a priest, and you need a dress...and there are so many other things to consider.”

“That’s why you’re the logical one. You’re right.” She nods. “I’m sorry. That was impulsive. What about tomorrow?”

I smile. “Yeah, I can do tomorrow.” I drop the cards and take her hand in mine. “But first...let’s put this back on the right finger.” I slowly pull the ring off her middle finger and slide it onto her ring finger, where it belongs.

“I love you, Soldier.” She looks down at the card still on my chest. “What does your last card say?”

I toss her onto the bed and roll on top of her, the force of movement causing the cards to flutter to the floor. I flick the card to show her what I wrote: *A future for us isn’t in the cards.*

“Nice play on words.” Her face scrunches in the cutest way. “But that didn’t age well, did it?”

“I guess not.”

She reaches up to gently stroke my cheek. “I made you feel that way. I made you feel like you took a backseat to everything else, and I’m sorry. I should’ve come home five years ago, but I was so hurt after you ended it...then you refused to talk to me, and I just forced myself to move on. I lied to myself. I kept saying that I had a full, happy life when I felt so empty inside. I had too much pride to admit the truth and because of that, I ended up hurting someone who in no way deserved it. So stupid.”

“I was stupid too, and now we’ve lost so much time that we can’t get back.”

“Well, how about we start trying to make up for it right now?”

Her arms slip around my neck and my mouth lands on hers. Soft, sensual, all-consuming – the unmistakable kiss of Catalina Diaz. My love. My life. And in twenty-four hours,

my wife. The boundaries of time and distance collapse. The clothes separating us are slowly discarded. I take my time savoring everything about her. The soft curve of her hips. The smooth skin of her thighs. The plump swell of her breasts. This body is mine and will always come back to me.

Her legs wrap around my waist, urging me closer, and then I'm pushing inside her, her wet heat utterly intoxicating me. My tongue explores her mouth, languidly caressing hers.

"I love you," I murmur, my lips dragging against hers with every up-and-down thrust.

Her fingers rake over my head, pulling me closer until my chest is flush against hers. She's panting, lost in ecstasy, whispering my name, and her ragged breaths mingle with mine. Her hips start to rock, taking me in deeper. Even with the slow rhythm of my thrusts, the urgency builds at a phenomenal pace. Desperate moans fill the space between us, and her back arches as we climax. I drop butterfly kisses on her neck and collarbone as we try to steady our breathing.

And in that moment, I feel safe enough to suck in my pride and confess to her what happened while she was gone. "I watched Sharknado." And it feels like a weight off my shoulders. "I want you to know that after everything that's happened – you breaking my heart, you leaving me – that is the one thing I will never forgive you for."

"I'm sorry." She giggles, wrapping her arms and legs tighter around me. "The first one was pretty good, though."

"Fucking legendary!"

She laughs, then kisses me again.



A SMALL YELP WAKES me up later that morning. I try to get up and realize Cat's head is nestled in the crook of my neck. Her arm is slung across my chest. The feeling of waking up beside her still feels surreal. I carefully remove my arm from beneath her head and reach over to lift Rocky.

“Hey. Morning, bud,” I whisper. “Look who’s here. She came back. I think I’m going to tie her to the bed so she doesn’t leave again. What do you think? It’s a plan, right?”

“I can hear you,” she murmurs, her voice groggy with sleep. “I already told you I’m not leaving.”

I lean over to pluck a quick kiss on her lips. “Well then, in that case, how about we rustle up some breakfast?”

“In an hour.” She flips over, pulling the covers over her head. “I’m exhausted, so I’m going back to sleep.”

I stare at Rocky in disbelief. “Now, that’s just selfish. Do you know how many times she woke me up at a quarter to seven in the morning when I wanted to sleep in?” I toss off the covers and get out of bed. “C’mon, let’s get you fed.”

I feed Rocky, then video call Pete. He answers after two rings. “Pete!” I yell as soon as his face appears on the screen, because I can’t contain my excitement.

“Scott?” He squints, still trying to wake up. “What in God’s name are you doing calling me at this hour?”

“Hang on. Let me get Dyl on this call.” I go through my contact list, then dial Dylan’s number and wait for his face to pop up on the screen too.

“Hey, Scott.”

“What’s up, Dyl?”

“Why are you calling so early?”

“So, I wanted to know if you guys are free today and tomorrow.”

“I’m unemployed,” Pete responds. “I’m always free.”

“I could spare a few hours. What do you need, Scott?”

“Well...I’m sorta getting married tomorrow, and I wanted you guys to be there.”

“What?!”

“What?” Dylan’s eyes widen. “To whom exactly?”

I roll my eyes. “Cat. Duh! Who else would I marry?”

“What?!”

“What? When did she get back?”

“She crept into my apartment at three this morning. We talked. She asked me to marry her. I said yes.”

“Well, I’m in,” Pete chirps. “But why are you asking for today and tomorrow?”

“Do you guys remember when Cat and I were planning our wedding the first time, and I had that thing I wanted to do?”

Dylan groans. “That’s hard manual labor, Scott.”

“Tough shit. Do you remember what Pete and I had to do for you?”

“We stole a fucking horse for you, Dylan.”

“It wasn’t a real horse, and we put it back right after,” he argues.

“That’s not the point. The point is we helped you and you owe me.”

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Me too.” Those two words make me realize that Peter has always been the one who was most supportive of all our relationships over the years. Even if he didn’t agree with our choices, he was always supportive, and I make a mental note to try to be the same type of friend to him.

I swallow my reservations and take the plunge. “Why don’t you bring Lia as your plus one?”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I think maybe I judged her too soon. It looks like she’s going to be in your life for at least the next few months, and”

“Next few years,” Peter corrects. The breath he lets out seems to be weighed down by his anxiousness. “Uh...she’s pregnant.”

It’s dead quiet for a solid minute. I just told Pete that I may have misjudged her, but this almost confirms my assumptions.

Isn't this gold-digger 101? Trapping a rich man by getting pregnant? A million thoughts are racing through my head, but I don't voice any of my concerns.

Dylan eventually breaks the silence. "Wow, Pete. That's... that's great. Congratulations. You must be so excited."

"I'm not."

"Maybe that's just because you're thinking about the point when you have to stop having sex...and the diaper changes... and the vomit...and staying up all night..."

"Just so you know. None of what you're saying makes me feel any better."

"...but once you get over the feeling of losing all your freedom and taking on this *enormous* responsibility, you are going to be so fired up to have this kid."

"You are literally the worst friend in the world, Dyl."

"Some people would love to be in your position, Pete. Never forget how lucky you are to be blessed with such a gift." Dylan's been poking fun this whole time, but his tone becomes serious, and I'm guessing it's because of his own issues when it comes to having kids. "I'm just pointing out that there are multiple reasons to celebrate today."

"Yeah, you're right, Dyl." Peter releases a heavy sigh. "So let's not be somber and focus on Scott's special day. Congratulations, boy! I'm so happy that you and Cat managed to work it out."

"Thanks," I reply. "And don't stress, alright? Dylan's an ass sometimes, but you know we always have your back, and we'll be there for whatever you need."

"I know. So, listen, give me half an hour and I'll come over. Dylan, bring your toolset. We've got some DIY building to do."

"Cool. See you guys later." I call my dad as soon as the call ends. "Hey, Dad."

"Good morning, Scott."

“Listen, you busy tomorrow?”

“It’s jam-packed tomorrow. I have a board meeting and then□”

“I’m getting married.”

“Well, would you look at that? My schedule just magically cleared up.”

His excitement makes him go off on a tangent. He offers to pay for the wedding and my suit. After my parents cut me off, I’ve never taken a single cent from them, but he’s so insistent that I eventually cave. He doesn’t seem at all surprised by my announcement, though, and when I question him about it, he simply says that he knew from the second I left to pick Cat up from the airport that we would find our way back to each other.

After I hang up, I walk back to the bedroom, stopping at the door when I see Cat on the phone.

“Yes...yes, I understand...Okay...Thank you for getting back to me, Gerald. I appreciate it...You, too. Thanks. Bye.” She hangs up and exhales a slow breath.

“Bad news?”

She turns to look at me. “So, they are going to blacklist me, which means I can’t do any work for any of the Golden Sands Hotels or any of their subsidiaries, but once word gets out, it will extend much further than that group, I’m sure. The good news is that Gerald convinced them to not sue me for breach of contract, but I have to reimburse all costs incurred. So, that’s the cost of my apartment in Dubai, the hotel costs while I was in London, which was a five-star hotel, and the costs of my flights. The cost of JP’s flights as well. That’s gonna eat up most of my savings...and then I’ll be broke.”

“Ah, shit, Cat. I’m sorry. So, after you pay all that, you’ll have nothing?”

She smiles, walks across the room, and loops her arms around my neck. “I’ll have you. That’s what matters, and we’ll find a way to make it work, Soldier.”

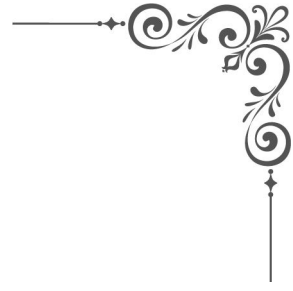
I grip her waist, lifting her until she wraps her legs around me. “It will be hard...but we’re going tibia just fine.”

She giggles, recognizing the first joke I ever made in front of her.

“At least you laughed this time. You were such a salty bitch before. You didn’t even smile for that.”

“I had good reason to be a salty bitch to you.” A reminiscent smile curves on her perfect lips. “What a journey we’ve been on, Scott Carter.”

“That was just a teaser. Now the real journey begins,” I say, before bringing her mouth down to mine.



26. Catalina

“Well, this was very unexpected,” Isa says, walking into my old bedroom at my mother’s house. She’s already stripping off her clothes and pulling on her dress. She came straight from the station, but she assured me she could get ready in fifteen minutes.

“Are you still mad at me?” I ask.

She shrugs. “It’s overshadowed by the fact that I just got my sister back.”

My smile dies on my lips when I feel a sharp scrape on my scalp. “Ow! Mom, you’re hurting me.”

“Hold still.” My mother grips my head with more force than necessary to shove a pin into my hair. “I couldn’t be happier for them. I’ve been waiting for this for many years. And I’m even happier that you’re here to stay, *Mija*.”

By the change in her voice, I can tell she’s crying, and Isa walks over to hug the both of us. “I’m so happy you’re staying too, Cat.”

Not that I needed any, but that was confirmation that I made the right choice.

Keith appears in the doorway, pulling on his black suit jacket. “Well, I don’t know who decided to get married on a *Wednesday*, but I’m ready.”

Isa gives a low whistle. “Looking so snazzy, Dad.”

“Hmmm...” my mother agrees with a naughty smile. “You better keep that suit on later because□”

“MOM!” Isa and I yell in unison.

“We did not need to hear that,” I say, still trying to suppress a gag.

Isa’s face contorts with disgust. “No one wants to hear about old sex.”

My mother curses in Spanish, giving Isa a light slap upside the head. “We’re not that old. Doesn’t mean you’re married, you can’t get slapped.”

Isa adds the final touches to my makeup and then I’m ready. Butterflies flutter manically in my stomach and my hands are clammy. I straighten my dress, a plain round-neck sheath wedding dress. The thin straps, plunging V at the back, and short train make it elegant while still being sexy. I breathe out a nervous breath and take one last look in the mirror. This is it. Today is the day I marry Scott Carter. It feels like an eternity has passed since the day he proposed, and I cannot contain my excitement. I can’t wait one more second.

I step outside and see the limo Peter arranged to take the four of us to the church. I’m not sure if it’s urgent anticipation that distracted me, but I only realize ten minutes into the trip that we’re headed in the wrong direction.

I look out the window, trying to figure out what route we’re taking. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” Keith replies with a shrug. He leans forward to ask the driver. “Sorry, do you mind telling me where you’re taking us?”

“Not allowed to say, sir.” And with that, he closes the window between the front and the back.

“I hope Peter isn’t playing a prank on us,” I say, slightly irritated.

“I think that’s low even for Pete,” Isabella assures me.

A few minutes later, we finally stop and I see that we’re outside Scott’s apartment building. “What’s going on? Are we picking Scott up? It’s bad luck if he sees me before the wedding. That’s why I stayed over at your house last night, mom.”

The driver opens the door and holds out his hand to assist me. It’s only once I get outside that I see a temporary light wood deck that wasn’t there when I left yesterday morning to get my dress. It’s not too big, and the interlocking pieces make me think that he may have constructed it himself.

Chairs are neatly lined up on either side of the aisle that leads to a dome covered in sheer drapes. Flowers and fairy lights spiral up each pillar holding up the dome, and the late afternoon sun gives the entire scene just the right amount of romance. I'm awestruck for a moment, taking in the beauty of the sight before me. This is exactly what I wanted. A small, intimate wedding on the beach. I can't believe he put this all together for me...and in a day, no less.

Connor, Dylan, Peter, Lia, Eddy, and Tommy are already seated, and they watch me in anticipation. Keith holds out his arm and I loop mine through it before we take slow steps along the wooden beams toward the priest and the man I'm about to marry. The grin on his face is a mile wide. He's gorgeous, dressed in a black suit that looks like it was custom-made to fit his broad shoulders.

I have to bite my lip to stop myself from crying. Memories flood my head, our entire history unfolding as I take each step closer to him.

"These abs – they're sexy as fuck! You're telling me they don't even tickle your lady boner?"

Step.

"I do like you, Soldier. I like you a lot. So much it scares me. This is my level of trust right now." And then I gave him my number.

Step.

"You know, Cat, we were meant to be more than just memories."

Step.

"If I just think of the size of you, two hands are an absolute necessity. I need one hand for the microscope and the other for the tweezers."

Step.

"You don't feel it? I'm dying to kiss you right now."

Step.

“I didn’t Men-In-Black you out of my life, Asshole.”

Step.

“Out of all the people in the world, I could’ve fallen in love with anyone else and this wouldn’t be so hard, but...fuck, it just had to be you.”

Step.

“I got so caught up in chasing the big adventures that I forgot that life with you is a continuous series of little ones.”

Step.

“No, Catalina, I’m not giving you up for anything.”

And all those memories culminate into this one moment, the moment when I take his hand and exchange our wedding vows. Scott is holding a single flower with peach-colored petals. It’s odd in its appearance. The petals on the inside look like three conjoined hearts arranged in a circular fashion, but they’re cupped and enclosed by the petals on the outside.

“This is a Juliet rose,” he says, sliding it into the middle of my bouquet of plain white roses. “It’s named after Shakespeare’s Juliet, and it’s the rarest and most beautiful rose in the world. It has ninety-six petals, which is more than most roses. And because they’re compressed into these little hearts, when it blooms, the petals don’t create a single spiral. This one is unique, so I guess it’s unfair to say that one rose is just like another.”

I smile. “And how do you feel about that?”

“Like the luckiest guy in the world.”

Scott and I exchange our vows with waves crashing in the background and random strangers taking pictures as they walk past. He barely waits for the priest to finish the last prayer before he pulls me into his arms and kisses me. We get a round of applause from our small band of guests before they all come up to congratulate us.

“So, the garter was right,” Dylan says as he shakes Scott’s hand. “You were the next one to get married...but then you went and gave it to Lia.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see what happens next.” Scott chuckles and winks at Peter. “Pete’s in it for the long haul now, ain’t that right, Pete?”

Peter doesn’t answer and instead gives a disinterested eye-roll before he slips a protective arm around Lia to pull her closer.

Because they’re right there, I can’t ask Scott what he means by that. I make a mental note to get to the bottom of the weird smirks these three men are exchanging later. Right now, I just want to bask in the bliss of being around all the people I love.

The slow, sexy beat of CNCO’s *El Amor de Mi Vida* starts to play, and the lyrics are the perfect depiction of our love story. The ambiance in the early evening air, the flickering of the candles in the dimming light, and the tempo of the song fill me with inexplicable joy as Scott reaches his hand out to me. “Catalina Carter, may I have this dance?”

And then hearing his last name at the end of mine – my smile stretches so wide, my cheeks start to hurt. I take his hand and he scoops me up with one arm, twirling me around before setting me on my feet again. I loop my arms around his neck and kiss him.

“Hi, beautiful.”

“Hi.” I still can’t get this stupid grin off my face. “We finally did it.”

“I love the symmetry of this moment.” He nuzzles his face into my neck, whispering softly in my ear. “Eight years ago, on this very beach, I proposed to you. And we danced to CNCO as we watched the sunset. And now, after all this time, you finally said I do. And we’re dancing to CNCO as we watch the sunset.”

“It’s been a long time, Soldier. Wanna know something weird?”

“What?”

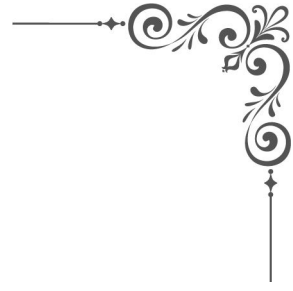
“You proposed to me eight years ago, but I’ve actually known you for about thirteen. You just weren’t very kind to

me those first few years in high school. Both those numbers are part of the Fibonacci sequence, so *technically*, the perfection of this moment is not symmetry...it's phi."

He chuckles. "You're such a smart-ass. I can't believe I willingly signed up to do this for the rest of my life."

"Yep, your *whole* life, Soldier...and it all starts today."

Hurricane Carter. My perfect storm. It swooped in and took everything from me. The last gust of wind demolished my career. I look at the debris of what's left of my life that was bright and glamorous a mere six weeks ago, and just like a hurricane, an utter wreckage is left in its wake. I barely recognize it. But now that the storm has passed, the water will start to recede, the clouds will dissipate and then I can rebuild. The prospect excites me. The possibilities seem endless because this time I'll be building a new, incredible life with *him*.



27. Scott

Six years later....

Today's the day. Today's the day I break the news to Cat. I have always kept my promises to her, but this was a promise I just couldn't keep. I tried...and I failed miserably. Though, in my defense, I was ignorant when I made the promise. At the time, I was so in love with Cat that I couldn't even conceive that thought that I could love someone more. But I was wrong. I can and do love someone else more. In fact, she brings me joy in a way Cat could never.

When she holds me, I'm putty in her hands. When she tells me she loves me, it fulfills something in my soul. Cat has never made me feel that way. Well, she has, but this is different somehow.

"Anji, you are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen." And even as I say it, I'm filled with guilt because there was a time when words like that were reserved only for my wife.

She turns away from the mirror to face me, focusing those big blue eyes on mine. "Thanks, daddy."

"She gets it from me," Cat says from the entrance of the bathroom.

It's not a lie. Apart from her eyes, she's the spitting image of her mother with the same bronzed skin and unruly curls.

"Now, can you get her ready?" Cat hands me a hairbrush. "We need to leave in ten minutes."

"And that's mommy ruining another perfect moment." My annoyance overrides my guilt, and I blurt out my confession right then and there. "Cat, I want you to know that my love for you now ranks second. I know I promised that you would always be my number one, but you aren't anymore. I'm sorry, but Anji has taken your place."

She sighs with a mixture of disinterest and playfulness. "And what else is new, Scott? You're confessing this like it's some big secret. I've known this for three years now."

“Did I make it that obvious?”

“You made it known while I was still pregnant.”

Getting to the point where we were ready to start a family took some time. Cat initially struggled to generate a client base. She worked in a bakery for a while, using her talents on fondant instead of clay. After that, she moved to a luxury car company. The prototype of any car is usually made from clay because it's a cheaper way to play with ideas as they perfect the design. I thought that was a pretty cool job, but my wife enjoys her freedom too much and is incapable of working for a boss.

She eventually resigned and started giving art classes. But that just barely paid the bills. It's ironic. As individuals, there were points in each of our lives where Cat and I had money to burn, yet as a newly married couple, we were dirt-broke. It took about a year before we found our feet. I renegotiated the repayment terms of my loan with Pete so I could have more disposable income. She started a YouTube channel to show off her talents, which led to her trading online, and that changed the game for her. Because she has to ship her sculptures to overseas clients, it's still restrictive in terms of how big the project can be, but it gave her access to a bigger market.

Once her business took off, we started traveling because that's another thing that is ingrained in her now. Being a teacher means that I have my whole summer vacation off, so it was easy for me to feed into her travel addiction. Technically, the big adventures haven't stopped, they're just on a schedule now. I still refuse to jump off of anything, but the compromise was that I'd be open to anything else, so I, too, have now eaten bugs – it was not my finest moment. Needless to say, we found a way to make it work. We managed to get to a point where our respective passions complemented each other instead of conflicting with each other.

And when we finally reached that happy equilibrium, I was ready to have kids. Cat lagged a few steps behind, still uncertain about taking such a big step. She was a little broody, but when Dylan and Isabella adopted their second child, it sealed the deal. I don't know why she had so many

reservations. She's an amazing mother, and now our daughter has the same passion to explore, the same insatiable zest for life.

Anjanique has changed our lives so much. We sort of made it a family tradition to have little adventures at least three times a week. Anji is creative, like her mother, and I love the way her mind works. We've had camping trips on my rooftop, complete with a small portable fire and marshmallows for roasting. We've had masquerade balls in our living room. We've even had dance competitions, but it's rigged because she wins every time. I guess that's what happens when you have both parents wrapped around your finger.

"Now, please get her ready," Cat says before she walks out of the bathroom.

"Well, you certainly got your mother's hair," I say once we're alone again. The brush and I have an epic battle, trying to tame her curls until I eventually wrestle them into a hair-tie. "And spin, spin, spin." I hold on to her hair, twisting it as she twirls in front of me before securing it into a bun.

"Daddy, I want to change my name," Anji says as I slide in another clip.

That gets my attention. "Why do you want to change your name?"

"Charlie says it's too hard to say?"

"Who's Charlie?"

"He's the new kid at daycare," Cat shouts from the bedroom.

"Yes, he's my boyvren."

"Your boyfriend? Your boyfriend got a job that he's running his mouth like that, cupcake?"

"Um...I don't think so."

"That's what I thought. So, why don't you tell Charlie?"

"Scott," Cat warns.

I grit my teeth. “Your name is very special, so you can tell Charlie that we won’t be changing it.”

“Why is my name special?”

“Well, mommy chose your name because Anjanique means gift of God’s favor,” I explain. “But daddy chose it because it’s a mixture of Anjae and unique. Anjae means butterfly, which is perfect for you.” I rub my nose against hers. “Because you are the butterfly effect of a single choice.”

She giggles. “Daddy, sometimes you talk funny.”

“*You* talk funny.”

We walk out of the bathroom, and she heads straight to the tiny kitchen down the hall. Ever since we started traveling with a child, Cat always books these small self-catering chalets instead of hotel rooms. Anji is a fussy eater, so it just makes our lives easier.

Scooping her up, I place her on the counter. “So, what do you want for breakfast?”

“Cookies!”

“What did mom say about sugar before ten a.m.?”

“But she’s not the boss. You’re the boss.”

I’ve read a lot of dad books, so I’m very aware of the manipulation tactics kids use. From the moment I found out Cat was pregnant, I swore to myself that I would never be the type of dad that becomes a victim of such trickery. “I *am* the boss, and I’m saying no cookies before ten a.m.”

“*Please*, Daddy.” The puppy-dog face makes an appearance and the way she says Daddy is a known weakness of mine. “I’ll give you three kisses and a hug.”

How insulting. “Are you really trying to bribe me? And with three kisses and a hug? Like I’m going to fall for that. What do you take me for?”

She thinks about it for a second, then starts counting on her fingers. “How about... *four* kisses and a hug?”

“Okay. Deal.”

“Scott!” Cat yells from the bathroom.

“What?” I yell back. “She made a solid counteroffer.”

Cat walks to the kitchen and kisses Anji on the forehead. “Cookies after breakfast,” she says firmly.

Today is our last day in Vietnam. In the six weeks we’ve been here, we’ve been nomadic, moving from place to place to see as many sights as possible. From the Ban Gioc Waterfall to the cave in Phong Nha National Park. Today we’re closing off with a trip to the Golden Hands Bridge in Da Nang. Buying a special backpack with a baby carrier was probably the best investment I’ve ever made because seeing all these amazing things with my daughter literally attached to me is an experience I can’t put a price on.

“Can we have wasunya for dinner tonight?” Anjanique asks.

“Wasunya?” She’s in a phase where we don’t understand what she’s saying half the time. I look over at Cat to see if she could decipher that. “What’s wasunya?”

“Lasagna.”

Well, that makes more sense. “Sure. We can have lasagna, cupcake.”

“And after dinner, maybe we can build a fort and□”

“Tell ghost stories?” I suggest.

“No, silly. Prisiss sories.”

“Princess stories?” Cat gasps as if she’s so excited. “Daddy loves princess stories. Especially *Sleeping Beauty* because he does the voice of Maleficent so well. You love doing that high-pitched evil laugh, don’t you, Scott?”

I give this traitor a death stare because she knows that it’s the most unmanly sound that has ever left my lips, but I only do it to get a laugh out of my daughter. “Of course, I love princess stories. Yay!” I am dying inside. “Those are...just as good as ghost stories. Who doesn’t love a good princess story?” I glance at Cat, and the look on my face causes laughter to bubble out of her.

“The only thing that will be missing is Rocky,” Anji says. “I miss him.”

“Me, too,” Cat concurs. “But we’ll be back home tomorrow. And then you and Rocky and your cousins can get right back to terrorizing uncle Dylan.” She smiles at me. “I’m actually so homesick. I can’t wait to get back and see my parents...and sleep in our bed.”

She always gets like this close to the end of each trip. She used to say she wanted more than Pasadena. She didn’t want the mediocre suburban life and carpooling the kids to school. To an extent, she stayed true to her word. We now live the beach life in Santa Monica, I take care of carpooling our kid to school, and our lives are anything but mediocre, which is why she can’t wait to get back home. But home is still a day away. Right now, we still have one more stop left on our bucket list.

I’m glad we saved our trip to the Golden Hands Bridge for last. The bridge appears to be held up by two giant hands. That in itself is a spectacular sight, but the greenery of the endless Ba Na Hills makes being there feel like I’m a witness to the workings of a higher being. It’s that majestic.

Cat unstraps Anji from my backpack and takes her to the edge of the railing, pointing to the glorious expanse stretching out in front of us. I move to stand behind them, wrapping my arms around my wife to kiss her on the cheek.

Cat was right. Life together has been a series of adventures, big ones and little ones alike. Time moved forward into the future at a steady rate of one second per second and in those seconds I have:

Become a permanent member of the academic committee.

Struggled to make ends meet.

Won teacher of the year award four times.

Fixed leaking pipes.

Fought with my wife.

Made up with my wife (that part is always more fun).

Saw my daughter’s heartbeat on a sonogram.

Spent endless hours rocking her when she refused to fall asleep.

Kissed the boo-boos on her knee.

Had more fights with my wife.

Made up with her again (still more fun).

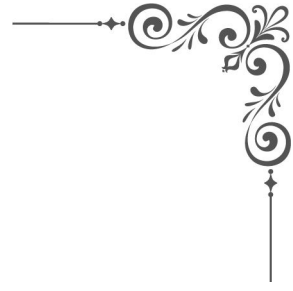
Built sandcastles on the beach.

Read princess bedtime stories.

The ordinariness of all those seconds is what makes my life so extraordinary, and this amazing woman in my arms has been at my side through it all. I fall in love with her a little more each day. In the years we were apart, I always had that aching feeling inside me that it should've been me. It should've been me who woke up beside her every morning. It should've been me who shared life's most amazing moments with her. And now it is me. Fate realigned our paths, and I'm so grateful that I'm the one who gets to savor these incredible moments with not just her, but my daughter, too.

"I love you," I whisper, holding them both a little tighter.

"I love you, too, Scott Carter." She smiles, leaning her head back against my chest as we watch the sun get swallowed by the mountains in the distance. "I always will."



Get in My Head

So, once again, I just want to apologize for the emotional turmoil I inflicted on some readers. I also want to apologize for how late I published this. I completed my masters at the end of November, and I wanted to go hard on this and get it out before Christmas. The nerd in me had the goal of writing a mini-dissertation and publishing 3 books in one year. But with the energy crisis, I've had to contend with rolling blackouts for about eight hours a day, which delayed the editing and release of this book. I hope it was worth the wait.

Now, moving on to this book. This is my eighth book and never have I experienced this much anxiety. I was so scared that people would think I ruined Scottalina's love story, so I had a few panic attacks before publishing this one. I wrote this book before book 2 and 3, and before I published book 3, I really bounced around whether I should go through with Cat and Scott's break up. But as I said in book 3, I knew their full story, so I couldn't rewrite that path for them. Also, so much of the other stories came through in this book that helped me get a glimpse of the other characters' stories.

Dylan's failed marriage to Fran and his overprotectiveness over his sister came through in this book. The Queen of Spades also came out for the first time at their wedding, so I went and did some research on what the Queen of Spades meant, and that ended up playing such a big part in their story. Tommy was only mentioned in book 1 and in this one I got to really see his personality and Isa's career choice, so you can see how this book built their entire story. This also had the entire build up to Peter's book and was the inspiration for his love story. But the main reason I decided to go through with the break up was because there were TWO weddings in this book. TWO! If you know me by now, you know that I could not sacrifice the corniness of TWO weddings in one book. So, yes, I was selfish (and I'm sorry), but after everything this book did for me, I had to do it justice and let it live outside my computer.

That being said, though, this book was so hard for me. Firstly, I was crying all the time. I know it's not as emotionally charged as my other books, but I was so sad that they broke up that I left my tears on every interaction they had. Secondly, this book was not plotted out beforehand, so I had no idea what to expect. I started writing it as a short novella because many readers had asked for an epilogue. Now, the reason there wasn't an epilogue in the first one was because already then, I wanted a very bright future for Cat, but I didn't know how to give her that *and* her happily ever after with Scott based on the fact that he was set on being a teacher. So, instead of wracking my brain trying to figure it out, I just ended the book there and decided to leave it to the reader's imagination.

However, this was clearly at the back of my mind when I started writing this because that uncertainty came out in the first chapter and the introduction of JP in it upset me very much. I wanted to stop writing and pretend it never happened, but in my head they were now broken up and I couldn't leave that story unfinished. Again, this was selfish of me because I dragged you into my suffering. That's why this book is 0.99c. You didn't ask for this. Most of you just wanted an epilogue, and I gave you heartache instead.

Anyway, Cat now had a boyfriend and I didn't know how to navigate this. I HATE cheating, so I wanted to only have them hook-up right at the end. Maybe one kiss before JP flew over, but nothing unforgiveable. That was pure stupidity on my side because as soon as I put Cat and Scott alone in a room together, I just saw flames. And then they ended up having full-on sex so early in the book, and I was like: Oh, fuck! I can't fix this. I've written myself into a corner, but it's fine. I'll just have it be this *one* time.

Then it happened again the next day...and again when she goes to apologize and at that point, I'm freaking out because I don't know how to fix this story. I couldn't deal with the lies and betrayal anymore, so I just made JP fly over early. Now, my sister really liked JP and made me promise that I wouldn't cop out and make him the bad guy to justify Cat's actions, so when JP finally came to Pasadena, I just decided to put all three of them in the same place and see how they interacted

with each other. The whole way it played out made me even more panicked to publish this book because the cheating really bothered me, and I know a lot of other readers hate it, too.

But this is the story they gave me, so I just decided to throw caution to the wind and hit publish. I've surrendered to the fact that this is what I get when I write character-driven books with no plotline. The thing I'm most proud of, though, is that I didn't mention Christmas once. The magic of the festive season was all around me when I started writing and now while I was finalizing it, and I managed to keep this book Christmas-free (Jackie gives herself a pat on the back). I am winning at life!

To wrap up, even though this book put me through a lot and took its toll on my mental health, I am so pumped to start with Pete's book. I told you I was going to give him the tropiest trope of all. I'm going to go back in time to before the wedding to see exactly how their relationship progressed from their first meeting to what we saw at the end of this book, so his story will run on the same timeline at the beginning, but there is a baby involved (yay!), so there is going to be some time jumps. I'm still trying to think of a creative way to do it (without a therapist), but just thinking about that is getting me so pumped up.

I'm so excited I could burst. This is going to sound weird, but one of the reasons is because the physical intimacy is going to happen quite early. I have been trying for a while now to write a book where the couple hooks up in the first few chapters, but in all of them, the first kiss happens at, like, 50% and the first sex scene is only at 70% or so. So, this is going to be a challenge for me to *not* write a slow-burn while still trying to have enough character development to make it believable. I can't wait to see what Pete and Lia give me!

Now, regarding their book, I know on Amazon, I stated the date it will be released is April/ May 2023, but I'm thinking of taking this author gig seriously, so I'm actually going to try promoting Pete's book with cover reveals and the whole shebang. You probably would never guess, but Pete's cover is

going to have a sexy man on it showing his abs. I know. Revolutionary to the romance genre. I am *so* creative.

But back to my point, because I want to market it and send out arcs and all that jazz, it might delay the release date because apparently they need a ten-week window before publication to do all this. I am very new to this game, so please be patient with me. I will update on the blurbs of the rest of the books in this series if the expected publication date changes.

But until then...I wish you and your loved ones all the prosperity for 2023. Keep well and stay safe.