



# KISSES

ME

*Forever*

A Blairwood  
University Novella

ANNA B. DOE

# KISS ME FOREVER

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BLAIRWOOD UNIVERSITY NOVELLA

ANNA B. DOE

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## BLURB

Life is changing fast for some of Blairwood's hottest football players. With just two more months until the end of their junior year, Hayden, Nixon, and their friends decide to spend their spring break in Hawaii and enjoy the last moments they have as college students. Their lives might soon change forever, but the bond they made at Blairwood will last a lifetime and so will their love. But when one of the boys decides to propose on vacation, the group will find themselves organizing an impromptu wedding.

*Kiss Me Forever* is a novella in the Blairwood University series. Told from different points of view, you'll get to see your favorite characters and find out what the future holds for them. To fully enjoy this novella, *Kiss Me Forever* has to be read in series order.

Dear reader,

Are you familiar with the Blairwood University series? If not, I suggest going back to the beginning and starting from [Kiss Me First](#) since Kiss Me Forever is an extended epilogue novella told from *eight* points of view that follows characters from the first three books in the Blairwood University series during their vacation in Hawaii.

For all of you who have read and loved Blairwood University so far, I hope you enjoy this little novella that I wrote as a thank you to YOU, my readers, for loving these characters as much as I do.

Happy reading!

With my love,

Anna

# CHAPTER ONE

---



HAYDEN

“You sure you don’t want to go?” I ask, looking at Zane, who’s still working on his legs. The sweat is dripping from his forehead; his jaw pressed tight as he finishes his fifth rep.

Getting to a standing position, he gets the bar off his shoulders and onto the rack with a loud *bang*.

“Nope.” Zane grabs the towel off the bench and wipes his face. “Rei has to be back in Boston to practice. No way can she lose a week now in Hawaii.”

Prescott bumps his shoulder into Zane’s as he passes him by. “Hades didn’t ask about your girlfriend, asshole. He asked about you.”

Prescott barely glances at the weights before he sinks onto a leg press machine.

Zane swears softly. “That’s too much for you, dickhead.”

He goes to adjust the weight, removing half of it while Prescott scowls at him. “That’s how much I can press.”

“Maybe before the injury. Didn’t Doctor Snow tell you to take it easy on the legs?”

If it’s possible, Prescott’s expression darkens even more. “Easy won’t get me back on the field by the time training camp starts.”

“Neither will reinjuring yourself, which is a high possibility if you push too much too soon.”

“Whatever.”

As soon as Zane secures the weights, Prescott starts with the workout, a deep frown between his brows.

Zane and I exchange a silent look. Prescott’s been acting all broody and shit ever since he injured his leg last November during the game, and it didn’t help that his injury wasn’t healing as well as everybody hoped it would.

Nobody wanted to say it out loud, but the more time passes, the more likely it seems that he'll never be at one hundred percent again, which means no more football. Even thinking about it has a shiver running down my spine.

It's not something any athlete who's a step away from going pro wants to think about.

"You could still come with us," Emmett suggests from the bench where he's working on his arms.

Zane shrugs. "Sun and beach are not really my thing."

Emmett gives him a side glance. "Sun and beach are everybody's thing."

"I'd take the ice any day of the week."

"I think it has more to do with your ice princess than with the ice itself." Prescott shakes his head. "I never thought I'd see you pussy-whipped, West."

"I'm not pussy-whipped."

Prescott raises his brows. "Then why don't you go with us?"

"Because I'd rather spend a week with my girlfriend than watch your ugly mug and listen to you complain."

"Like I said, pussy-whipped. But I guess that means more girls for me." Prescott grits his teeth, the sweat dripping down his forehead as he pushes through. The stubborn asshole. "Who's all going in the end?"

"Nixon, Yasmin, Callie, and me. Emmett, Kate, and her sister. Chloe and Jade. I'm not sure if Jade's friend is going or not." I shrug. "I guess we'll see tomorrow. Oh, and Spencer."

"It's like a damn couple's retreat," Prescott grunts, getting off the leg press machine.

"It's not a couple's retreat. The numbers are pretty evened out. Besides, you and Spencer in one place are more than enough. The last thing I need is to babysit more guys from the team and prevent them from doing something stupid while on vacation."

“Hey now!” Prescott starts to protest, but I give him a pointed look.

“And please, for all that’s holy, don’t try to sleep with anybody from the group. We don’t need that kind of mess.”

Prescott snorts. “As if I’d look at the smartass Cole chick twice.”

I shake my head, not even bothering to point out that she’s not the only single girl on the trip.

I rub my hand over my face.

Why does it feel like this has disaster written all over it?

“You still good about dropping us at the airport?” I ask Zane, more than happy to change the subject.

“Sure thing.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket; I pull it out and read Nixon’s message. I grab my towel and throw it over my shoulder. “I’ve gotta go.” I glare at Prescott. “Try not to end up in a hospital before leaving tomorrow.”

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“DAMN, how is one supposed to choose?”

“I have no damn idea.” I shake my head. My eyes are firmly fixed on all the rings laid out in front of us. They sparkle under the fluorescent lights, blinding me.

There are so many of them: from different colors, to different diamond shapes, to different stones altogether, it’s almost intimidating. Okay, let’s be honest; it *is* intimidating. There’s no almost about it.

“We should have asked Emmett to come with us,” Nixon mutters. Pulling another ring out, I examine it for a moment before putting it back in place.

I give him a side glance. “I think he gave Kate his mother’s ring.”

Nixon stops for a moment, a dark shadow falling over his face. Instantly, I feel shitty for mentioning it at all. In a few short days, it's going to be the one-year anniversary of his mom's death from breast cancer. This time last year, he spent spring break at his house with his younger sister Jade and Yasmin, taking care of his mom. I couldn't even imagine how hard that was for him. He kept it all to himself, and we only found out after his mother passed away because Yasmin called us and asked us to come.

"Yeah, well," Nixon rubs his hand over his face. "I saved that one for Jade one day. Not that any asshole will be good enough for her, but..." He shrugs, picking yet another ring. "It felt right that she had it."

"I guess that makes sense. Not that I have that problem."

It wasn't a secret that my mother ran away just before my dad was sent to jail for fraud. She just picked up her things and left, not once bothering to look back, which is how I ended up with my grandmother.

"Did you young men find what you're looking for?" the clerk asks as he joins us once again.

"These are all really nice, but..." Nixon rubs the back of his neck. "Do you maybe have something different?"

The man pulls his brows together over the rim of his glasses. "Different?"

"Yes, different." Nixon looks to me as if I know what the hell he's talking about. "Less bling. Kind of like old school. Delicate. Unique."

The man nods his head. "I see." He turns around and starts pulling a few other drawers open until he finds what he's looking for. "How about something like this?"

We look over the new selection.

"I'm not sure..."

"Or..." The guy pulls open one of the drawers and gets out a single box. He opens the box and gives the ring that's inside

a thoughtful look before turning it toward us. “How about this one?”

# CHAPTER TWO

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EMMETT

“No, Mabel,” Kate sighs in frustration. “I said sunflowers and daisies, with a little bit of greenery. That’s it.”

Kate listens intently to whatever her aunt is telling her on the other side of the line. She places the cup of coffee on the counter and rubs her temples.

“Talk to her. I don’t want anything extravagant. It’s a backyard wedding, for God’s sake.”

She sounds tired and frustrated. I wish I could say this is the first time she’s been like that, but I’d be lying. Ever since I proposed to her, and we—and by we, what I really mean is *she*—started planning the wedding, she’s been overwhelmed by everything. And while both her aunt and my mom had the best of intentions, they only brought more of the same—drama. At this point, I won’t be surprised if Kitty dumps my ass before the wedding.

“No, two-tiers are more than enough.” Mabel says something on the other side of the line. I can’t decipher what, but it has Kate shaking her head. “I know, but...”

*Fuck that.*

Crossing the kitchen, I wrap my arm around Kate’s middle, leaning my head on her shoulder. She relaxes into me, and I pry her fingers from her phone, bringing it to my ear.

“Hey, Mabel,” I greet, interrupting her mid-sentence.

There’s a beat of silence.

“Emmett, hey. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing good, ma’am. How about you? How are things back home?”

Kate looks over her shoulder at me, a small smile on her lips.

“Same ol’, same ol’. Without you kids home every day, it’s almost always the same.”

“I highly doubt Bradley is keeping you bored like that.”

Mabel chuckles happily like she always does at the mention of her boyfriend.

“I didn’t say that. Organizing the wedding does keep things interesting. And while I’m on that, I should really talk to Kate about that cake. I really worry that two-tiers isn’t going to—”

“Mabel,” I interrupt her gently. “Two-tiers is going to be more than enough. We’re having a small wedding. Kate sent you the picture of how she wants it, right?”

I’m pretty sure I remember her showing me a photo or two of what the cake will look like, among other things. Not that it actually matters; the only thing I care about is finally calling Kate mine. Forever.

“Yes, she sent the photo.”

“Great! Then this is taken care of. Now, if you’ll excuse us, Kate still has to finish packing because we’re leaving for the airport in a few hours.”

“I still can’t believe you’re not coming home for spring break. None of you,” Mabel sighs, although I don’t miss the slight accusation in her tone.

“Well, this is our final chance to relax before the last few weeks of college hit us. Then you’ll have us back home for good.” I brush my lips against Kate’s temple, inhaling her sweet scent.

“I guess there’s that.” I chuckle at her dry and clearly unhappy tone. “Take care of my girls, Emmett.”

“I always do, ma’am.”

We say our goodbyes, and I hang up the phone. Kate turns in my arms, wrapping them around my neck.

“Thank you.”

“No thanks needed, Kitty.”

I place the phone on the counter and pull her closer to me—her body molds to mine perfectly, just like it always does.



Katherine Adams was made for me in every way possible, and I wasn't about to lose her over our maddening families.

"I love her, but God, she drives me nuts sometimes."

"Well, it's all taken care of..."

"For now."

"For now," I agree. I've heard too many conversations like this to be naïve enough to believe this is the final one. There won't be a final one until the wedding is over, but the crisis has been temporarily averted. "So why don't you finish your coffee and pack?"

Kate nibbles at her lip nervously, her finger playing with the hair peeking from under my ball cap. "Do you seriously think this is the best plan? Maybe we should go home instead and..."

I press my finger against her lips, shushing her. "This is the best plan. Between school and organizing this wedding, you're in need of some downtime, and that's exactly what this is. Downtime. Sand, beach, ocean, and cocktails. What better way to decompress?"

Kate shakes her head. "I still can't believe we're going to Hawaii."

"Believe it, baby."

Leaning down, my mouth captures hers. Gently, my lips move over hers, teasing her mouth with small kisses. Kate moans softly, the throaty sound making me growl as I deepen the kiss. I wrap her ponytail around my wrist, tugging her head back just the way she likes it, my tongue twining with hers.

Kissing her is my undoing. It has been ever since she planted that first kiss on me our junior year of high school, and I was a goner for her. I might have been just a seventeen-year-old kid, but I knew even then that Kate was somebody special, and I'd do anything to have her in my life. Ever since then, she's been mine, and I've been hers.

Once in a lifetime.

With one last swipe of my tongue, I pull back, breaking the kiss.

“Go pack,” I slide my hands down to her ass and give her a playful smack. “Before I drag you to our bedroom and have my way with you.”

Kate smiles, a wicked glint in her irises, her cheeks pink. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

My dick throbs in agreement, making me groan. “You’re killing me, woman. Go.”

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes and starts walking toward our bedroom. “Go check with Penny?”

“Sure.”

And then I need a cold shower. No, an *icy* shower.

Shaking my head to clear my mind, I go to the sink and splash some cold water on my face, and then I rearrange the situation in my pants before I go down the hallway.

After I finally managed to get Kate to agree to move in together off-campus, I knew we’d have to obtain a bigger place with Penny and Henry, of course, coming to Blairwood. When it comes to housing, they made an exception for Penny to help her acclimate to her surroundings while we’re still here. Because moving to a new home when you’re blind and using a guide dog is no easy feat. It was either that or changing one of the dorm rooms into a suite to accommodate her and Henry.

I knock lightly, and at a soft “come in,” I push open the door.

“Hey, Emmett,” Penny turns around in her chair to face the door, slowly closing a tube of one or another makeup thingy. Henry looks up at me from his spot at the bottom of the bed, his tail up in the air, wiggling happily.

“You know that’s freaky, right?” I ask, only half-joking and lean against the doorway.

She tilts her head to the side, pushing a strand of her platinum hair behind her ear. “What is?”

“You knowing it’s me before I say a word?”

Penny laughs softly. “It’s your footsteps. They’re heavier than Kate’s, so it’s not like it’s really a surprise.”

“Still, freaky.” I take in the room, noticing the carry-on sitting on her bed. “You ready to go?”

“Just about. Better question is, is Kate ready?”

I chuckle lightly, “I just sent her to finish packing.”

“Aunt Mabel?” she asks knowingly.

“Yeah, there was something about the cake. Or flowers? God knows.”

Penny rolls her eyes. “I’m sure it was very important.”

“Smartass,” I chastise but can’t help the smile curling my lips. I lift my ball cap and run my fingers through my hair. “Although, if anybody asks one more time about some bullshit like that, I would be tempted to just elope.”

“You could do that.” She lifts her finger and wiggles it in my direction in warning. “But only if you take me. No eloping without the sister of the bride.”

Laughing, I go to her and ruffle her hair. She might be a freshman in college, but to me, she’ll always be Little Adams. “No way would we leave you and Henry behind.”

Penny tilts her head back, blue eyes that match her sister’s perfectly staring right into me, wide but unseeing. “I’m not a baby any longer, you know? You don’t have to take me with you everywhere you go. Well, *except* if you’re eloping.”

Some days it’s hard for me to believe how much she’s grown up since I first met her. She wasn’t a little girl any longer but a beautiful young woman. Not like it’ll make leaving her here any easier next year. She was the younger sister I never had and didn’t even realize I needed until the moment she walked into my life and stole my heart.

“I’ve never said you were, but you are like a little sister to me.”

I run my thumb under her eye, removing a black smudge over her eyelid.

“Do I have something on my face?” She raises her hand and slides the tip of her finger over the same spot I just did.

“Just a tiny bit, but it’s gone now. And to answer your question, of course, we had to take you. It’s a group thing. Everybody’s going.”

“Not everybody. Your *friends* are going.”

“And you’re our family. If that doesn’t count, what does?”

The song changes, and a deep sultry voice fills the room. I groan out loud. “Are you still listening to this?”

Penny’s cheeks flush. “Maybe. It’s a good song.”

“More like you still have a crush on the main singer.”

“I don’t have a crush,” she protests, ducking her head, but not before I can see color rising into her cheeks. “I just like the song.”

“Mhmm... what was his name again? Stefan?”

“Sebastian Black,” Penny corrects instantly. “He’s a Grammy winner, so it’s not like I’m the only one who likes him. He’s just that good.”

“Debatable,” I huff. “You’re way better than any of them, and I don’t see any Grammys in this room.”

Not only is Penelope amazing on the piano, she has a great voice too, something I didn’t even realize until recently, since she rarely sings, but every time she does it, it gives me chills. That’s how good she is.

“I don’t know about that.” Penny gets to her feet. She stashes the makeup in a little bag and takes it to the open suitcase. I watch as she makes sure everything is packed properly before closing and zipping the suitcase.

As soon as the zip is in place, I gently move her aside and put the suitcase on the floor.

“I could have done that, you know.” Penny goes to Henry and gently rubs him behind his ears.

“What do you keep me around for?”

“Gee, I don’t really know.”

I roll my eyes, although I know the effect is lost on her. “Gee, thanks. Are you all packed?”

“Yup.”

“Henry’s passport too?”

That earns me another eye roll. For somebody who can’t see it, she damn well knows when and how to use it. “Henry’s passport too.”

“Just checking.”

A few years back, their mom tried to take them out of Texas, but thanks to Penny not having the dog’s passport, they weren’t able to leave the state, which came in handy then because their aunt and I managed to get to them just in time; however, I still have trauma from that day.

“Don’t worry. Kate helped me yesterday. Besides, this is one vacation I actually want to go on. I can’t wait to feel the sand under my feet and swim in the ocean.”

“Just as long as you promise not to go wandering around on your own.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Don’t be sassy with me, young lady.” I poke her playfully in the side, making her giggle.

“Me?” She blinks innocently. “Never.”

I shake my head as I leave the room. She’ll be the death of me, I swear it.

# CHAPTER THREE

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## CALLIE

“This place is sweet,” Emmett grins as he turns around, taking in the cottage we rented for the week. He’s right, though. Since we decided on this vacation last minute, we lucked out to find a place big enough for all of us that’s close to the beach. And this one wasn’t just close to the beach. It was basically *on* the beach itself. It was also a little farther from the town, but we were here for sun, sand, and ocean anyway.

“Right?” I ask, picking up a little mermaid statue from the coffee table. “I can’t believe nobody snatched it before us.”

The cottage-style house looks even better in real life than in the photos. It has a bohemian look, with mismatched furniture and ocean-themed trinkets scattered through the house. Downstairs is one big open-space plan with a kitchen, living, and dining room all-in-one. A narrow staircase on the other side leads to the top floor, where there are bedrooms. A small hallway leads to the back, where there should be a small bathroom and two additional bedrooms.

“Our win,” Yasmin grins at me over her shoulder as she walks further into the room. Then she turns around and faces the floor-to-ceiling windows. “Oh my God, look at that view.”

She pulls Nixon after her toward the windows, Jade and Chloe behind them.

“Seriously, how stunning is that?”

They’re not wrong. The wall that runs up the back of the house and leads to the back porch is covered in windows. It gives a stunning look at the ocean.

Hayden wraps his arms around me from the back and pulls me into his chest, his mouth brushing against my forehead. I glance at him over my shoulder. “Can you imagine how it looks when the sun sets?”

“Breathtaking.”

The way he says it has a shiver running down my spine. There's a mischievous twinkle in his eyes that I know all too well.

Before I can say anything, somebody whistles.

"Sweet." I turn around just in time to see Spencer and Prescott enter the house. "Let's get our shit sorted out and get out to the beach."

"Sounds like a plan," Emmett nods. "We'll take the downstairs rooms. You good, Little Adams?"

Kate's sister shakes her head at him. "We're fine, aren't we, Henry?" She pats the dog's fur gently. "Let's go find the room, Henry."

"Now that's sorted." Hayden pulls back, his hand wrapping around mine. "Last one sleeps on the couch!"

"Hayden!" I protest as he pulls me toward the stairs with the rest of our friends right on our heels. "What about our stuff?"

"I'll go grab it later," he says as he opens the door to the first room, but apparently, that one's not good enough because he continues pulling me down the hallway. We pass two more rooms before he finally finds the one he likes. "This one."

"And how is this one different from the rest?" I ask, laughing.

Every room is unique in its own way, but I highly doubt that Hayden picked it because of its decor.

Hayden turns me around so I'm facing the window. "Because of this."

"Oh, wow..." I move closer to the window to get the full effect of the stunning view in front of me. If I thought the one from downstairs was gorgeous, I was utterly wrong. The additional height makes it possible to see for miles; miles and miles of the vast ocean and beaches—Heaven on Earth. "This is something else entirely."

"I told you so." Hayden pulls me into his chest, his arms tightening around my middle.



“This was the best idea ever,” I say, grinning.

Hayden rolls his eyes at me. “You only say that because it was *your* idea.”

“Maybe.” I turn in his embrace, looping my arms around his shoulders. “But you can’t say I wasn’t right. This was exactly what we needed.”

“Fine,” he admits reluctantly. “You’re right.”

“I know I am.” I slide my fingers into his hair. Rising on the tips of my toes, I press my mouth against his in a soft kiss that soon turns heated. His hands cup my cheeks as he tilts my head back, his tongue dipping into my mouth as his body rubs against mine, and I can feel his hard cock pre—

“Seriously, you guys? Already?”

With a low growl, Hayden breaks the kiss, his forehead pressing against mine. “Get the hell out of here, Wentworth.”

“Hey, now...”

“Get the fuck out,” Hayden repeats.

“I’m going. I’m going.”

He lets out a shaky breath and gently brushes my hair behind my ears. “Remind me, why didn’t we go on vacation alone?”

I chuckle. “You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t say it twice.” With a soft kiss to my lips, he takes a step back. “I’ll go and pick up our things so we can change and go to the beach.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I watch him leave the bedroom; only when I’m alone do I let out a shaky breath and turn my attention back to the scenery in front of me. Pushing open the balcony door, I go out and inhale the salty air, letting it fill my lungs. The excitement at the prospect of spending the next few days with Hayden and my friends is spreading through my body.

It takes Hayden a few minutes to bring our suitcases up. I let him go to the bathroom first to change while I find my swimsuit in the mess that's my suitcase. I basically just dumped all the things inside this morning before we went to the airport, and it shows.

"Did the suitcase explode?" Hayden asks, his arms wrapping around me as he presses his lips to my neck.

"Umm... no."

"It looks like it did."

I turn in his arms. "It's called suitcase malfunction." I give him a little shove. "Look it up."

Laughing, I walk to the bathroom. I quickly take off my clothes and put on the bikini I picked up for this trip. I haven't worn a bikini in forever. Not since the accident, and the reflection in the mirror reminds me exactly why.

My mouth turns dry as I stare at myself.

*God, what was I thinking?*

I glance toward the counter, picking up a simple cover-up I packed along with the suit and put it on. There's still too much of my skin exposed even with that on.

A soft knock on the door startles me. "Hey, Angel, are you ready?"

"Y-yeah," I stutter, my eyes widening. "Just a minute."

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and suck in my lower lip, my eyes glued to my reflection in the mirror. My fingers curl around the bottom of the cover-up and tug at it, but it's useless.

*Why did I think this was going to be a good idea?*

My heart speeds up as panic spreads through my body.

I thought I was over it. I thought...

"Callie?" The door pushes open, and Hayden's head peeks through. His brows are pulled together as he takes me in from

head to toe and opens the door wider, stepping inside. “What’s wrong?”

“I...” I meet his gaze in the mirror, my tongue darting out to wet my dry lips. “Maybe this isn’t the best idea.”

Hayden quietly watches me for a moment. Closing the door behind him, he walks toward me and turns me to face him. He cups my face and brushes his finger over my cheek. “What isn’t?”

Unable to resist it, I lean into his touch. “This,” I wave my free hand at my body.

He looks at me, his green eyes darkening a fraction. “It looks like a really good idea to me. A *really* good idea.”

I shove him away. “Don’t tease.”

“I’m not teasing.” He grabs my other hand, his fingers tightening around mine. “You look sexy as hell in that bikini.”

“I look horrible.” My throat bobs as I swallow. “If there are kids at the beach, they’ll probably be scared shitless when they see me.”

Hayden’s face turns serious. “Is that what this is about? Your scars?”

I look away guiltily. It’s silly, I know, but I can’t help myself.

Hayden slides his finger under my chin and forces me to look at him. “Callie, you look beautiful. You’re a survivor, and if somebody can’t see it, it’s their problem, not yours.”

“It’s just... I’ve never worn something so revealing out in the open. Not since the accident.”

No matter how much time has passed, the scars I carry on the left side of my body are still very much visible. The red and white lines cover everything from my face to my legs, and the damage on some parts is pretty horrible.

For the most part, I’ve done my best to hide my scars by wearing long sleeves, and while, yes, dating Hayden has given me some of my old confidence back, wearing a bikini to a

public beach is on a whole other level I haven't even realized up until now.

"You're beautiful, Callie." His thumb grazes my cheek, his green eyes staring into mine intently. "Every single part of you is beautiful. Including your scars. They're nothing to be ashamed of."

My heart does a little flip inside my chest at his words, the way he looks at me. It's like he doesn't see anybody else, just me.

"Hayden..."

I slide my hand to the back of his neck and pull him down, my mouth brushing against his.

You'd think that the intensity of the love I feel for this man would dull with time, but no. No matter how many times I've kissed him, it always feels like that first time. My knees still turn weak when Hayden kisses me, and my heart speeds up, making my head dizzy and leaving me breathless.

Hayden nibbles at my lower lip. I let out a soft sigh, and his tongue slides into my mouth, tangling with mine. Hayden growls, his hands grip my face tighter, tilting my head to the side as the kiss deepens, growing more intense. He pushes me back until my ass touches the counter. Hayden's hands fall down, gripping my hips and hoisting me up.

I suck in a sharp breath as my ass touches the granite counter, my legs falling open.

"I need you, baby," he breathes as he settles between my legs. "Let me show you just how beautiful you are."

His hands run down the side of my legs, sliding under the hem of my cover-up and pushing it upward.

"We don't have time," I protest as I run my fingers through his hair, pulling his head down so he can suck on my neck. "They're waiting for us."

Hayden nibbles at my earlobe, making the fine hair at my nape rise as he makes his way down. "They can wait for a little bit longer."

“They’ll know what we were doing,” I say weakly.

“So what?” His hand cups my sex, his palm pressing against my clit. “You think Emmett and Kate or Nixon and Yasmin won’t have sex this week?”

“Ugh, I love my friends, but I try not to think about them having sex.”

“See? I’m a hundred percent certain the feeling is mutual.” His fingers tug at the strings holding my bottoms in place. “Fuck, you’re like a present made just for me.” His mouth presses against mine. “Let me make you feel good, baby.”

*Damn, I never stood a chance.*

“Fine,” I tug his shirt over his shoulder and let it drop to the floor as my fingers slide over his naked chest. He was built before, but in the last few months, every single muscle on his body has become more defined. “But we better be fast.”

Hayden grins at me. “Fast is my middle name.”

He pulls me to the very edge of the counter, so close I can feel his hard dick pressed against me. He thrusts forward, rubbing his hardness against my aching clit.

“But tonight…” His voice trails off as he grazes his teeth over my neck. “Tonight, I’ll go extra slow until you scream my name.”

I close my eyes, letting the sensation wash over me. “Deal.”

I slide my hand between our bodies and push his trunks down just enough so I can free his erection. “Now fuck me.”

His pupils dilate, and his mouth attacks mine. His long fingers wrap around mine, and slowly we guide him into me until he’s pressed to the hilt.

“Fuck, there’s nothing better than sliding inside you like this.” He pushes my hair back, his mouth brushing against mine. “Feeling your hot heat without anything between us.”

A few months back, I decided to get an IUD. We didn’t need any surprises, not with him entering the draft and me

with two years of college left, so it felt like the safest option, and the sex has been insane ever since.

“I know.” I wrap my legs around his waist and lift my hips to pull him deeper. “Fuck me, Hayden.”

He presses his mouth against mine as he starts to move, swallowing my groan as he hits just the right spot.

“I need you deeper.”

“Fuck,” Hayden mutters.

Before I know what’s happening, he takes me off the counter and pulls out of me.

“Hayden...” I protest, but he’s already spinning me around, so I’m facing the mirror.

“Brace your hands against the counter,” he grumbles, as his hand presses against the small of my back, pushing me forward.

My fingers tighten around the counter as Hayden’s hand slides to my belly. His thigh slips between my legs and pushes them apart before he slides into me from behind.

“Shit...” My eyes fall closed as a shudder runs through me, my pussy tightening around him. “Harder.”

He pulls almost all the way out before thrusting back inside, harder this time. His hand slides lower, his fingers tweaking my clit and sending a jolt of energy through my body.

“Open those eyes, Angel,” he hisses into my ear, his warm breath making goosebumps appear on my skin. “I want you to see the look on your face when I make you come.”

I blink my eyes open, barely, and meet his intense stare in the mirror. His chest is pressed against my back, one of his hands disappears beneath my cover-up, the other one holding onto my hip as his thrusts grow harder.

“Hayden...” I breathe. “I’m so close.”

Just a little bit...

Somebody knocks on the door. “Hayden? Callie?” Yasmin asks, knocking once again. “Are you guys coming?”

My body freezes, eyes widening as I bite the inside of my cheek to stop any sounds from coming. Not Hayden though.

“Just about,” Hayden grunts, pushing deeper. My eyes fall closed as my body shudders.

*Fuck, I’m so close.*

“Open your eyes, Angel,” Hayden demands, pulling out of me.

I moan in protest, suddenly feeling empty.

“Callie?” Yasmin asks. “Are you okay?”

My eyes snap open. *Shit, Yasmin.*

“F-fine.” I look over my shoulder at Hayden. “Did you lock the door?”

“Nope.”

*He can’t be serious.*

“What if she comes inside?” I hiss softly, so Yasmin can’t hear us.

Hayden’s eyes twinkle with amusement. “Then she’ll get an eyeful.”

“It’s not funny,” I protest, trying to turn around, but Hayden’s grip on me is unyielding.

“We’re going to the beach. You guys coming?”

“Eyes on the mirror,” Hayden murmurs to me.

Instinctively, I do as he asked, and then he pushes back inside of me. Hard. The air is kicked out of my lungs at the fullness of him in this position, making me moan.

“Good girl,” Hayden praises. And there’s something about his words, about the tone of his voice, that has my whole body shuddering.

“Callie?”

“In a m-minute.”

Hayden pushes my hair out of his way and presses his mouth against the nape of my neck. “More like thirty seconds.”

“Fine. We’re waiting downstairs. Come when you’re ready.”

“You heard her, Angel. Come for me.” He pulls back and thrusts inside me; his fingers are back at my clit, rubbing the small bud as his thrusts grow harder, more desperate.

My head falls back, resting against Hayden’s chest. His fingers dig into my hips as he thrusts faster, diving deeper and deeper.

“Hay—”

He captures my mouth with his, swallowing my moan as I come hard, my pussy tightening around him and holding him with a vice grip. His chest rumbles as he thrusts one last time, bending us both over the counter as he comes inside of me.

Something falls on the floor, but neither of us cares. We’re both panting, a sweaty mess. Hayden loosens his fingers on my hip and skims his fingers over my skin as he presses his mouth against mine.

“Beautiful.” Another kiss. “Just the way you are.”

I push a strand of his sweaty hair out of his face. “Is it strange that I love it when you go all caveman on me?”

“You won’t hear me complain.”

“I didn’t think so.” I glance toward the door. “We should probably go downstairs.”

Hayden slowly pulls us back into the standing position, and I catch a full glimpse of us in the mirror. My hair is all messy, lips red and puffy from the kisses, and there are scratches, and probably teeth marks, too, all over my neck.

“They’re so going to know what we were up to.”

Hayden grins, not in the least bit fazed by it. “They’ll be sorry they didn’t think of it sooner.”



# CHAPTER FOUR

---

KATHERINE

“Let’s go to the beach,” Yasmin yells as she comes down the stairs.

I peek through the doorway of the bathroom only to find her alone. “Where are Callie and Hayden?”

She said she’d check in on them since they were the last ones still upstairs.

Yasmin rolls her eyes. “Otherwise, busy.”

I pull my brows together. “Otherwise... Oh!”

“Yup,” the p pops as Yasmin shakes her head. “Lucky bitch.” Yasmin looks around the house, propping her hands on her hips. “Where’s everybody?”

“They didn’t want to wait, so they left a minute ago.”

“Of course they didn’t. I swear sometimes I think these guys are big kids, not grown men.”

“I know!” I shake my head. “I hate to say it because it’s such a bullshit excuse, but boys will be boys.”

“I guess so.” Yasmin looks at me. “You ready to go? I’ll text Callie to come down to the beach when they’re ready.”

“Yeah, just let me take this off.” I pull my engagement ring off my finger and grab my toiletries bag to put it inside. “The last thing I need is to lose it in the ocean.”

“That’s a smart move.”

I slip the ring into the bag and zip it. “Okay, all ready to go.”

Grabbing my beach tote, I exit the bathroom and join Yasmin, who’s already at the door, typing on her phone.

“Done.”

I give one last glance at the house before we start walking to the beach. “Do you think they’ll come?”

“Probably, after they get some alone time. Thankfully, Nixon and I took the master bathroom, so I at least don’t have to think about them getting it on in the public space.”

I start to laugh. “Seriously? Weren’t you two roommates when they first got together?”

Yasmin groans, “Don’t remind me, there was this one time...” She shakes her head. “Nope, not going there.”

“I mean, can you blame her?” I shake my head. “I can’t even imagine what it would be like to go through the draft process knowing you’ll have to let him go to whatever team picks him up, and you still have two years of school left.”

Emmett could have done it too. He was that good, and his college career further proved what I knew when we first met back when we were only seventeen; Emmett Santiago was born to play football. I’m not sure if I could have done it, though. Moving away just after I found my home. The endless football season. All the away games and traveling. All the women throwing themselves at him. I would have, for him, I would have done anything, but I think a part of me would have died a little too, so I was grateful he chose to go back home instead to work with his dad on the ranch.

“I guess not.”

I glance toward Yasmin. “Nixon is still entering the draft next year?”

“That’s the plan.” Her attention is on the beach in front of us and our friends who are already in the ocean. “I refuse to even think that far in the future. After everything that happened last year, we’re just trying to take it one day at a time.”

This time last year, Nixon’s mom died from cancer. It came as a shock to everybody when Yasmin called, letting the guys know Nixon’s mom had passed away.

“How is he doing?”

“Pushing through,” Yasmin shrugs. “He says he’s fine, but there are these moments when he just... spaces out? With the anniversary coming up soon, I guess it’s not that surprising.”

“No, I guess it’s not.”

“I think coming here was a good thing.” Yasmin slows her step as we near our friends. “Both Nixon and Jade need some time away from Blairwood, so they’re not suffocated by the painful memories, just counting down to the anniversary.”

Jade and Chloe are lying down on the towels, their skin shining from the oil they put on under the bright afternoon sun. Nixon, Spencer, and Prescott are throwing around a ball in the ocean while Emmett slowly helps Penelope into the Pacific, Henry lying down on the beach, eyes on the two of them.

“I think so, too,” I say absentmindedly, tucking a strand of hair that slipped from my ponytail behind my ear. “It’s what we all needed, really.”

Yasmin turns to me. “Wedding still giving you a hard time?”

“It’s not the wedding; that I have figured out.” We walk up to the girls, and I let my bag drop to the ground, pulling my towel out and spreading it over the sand. “My aunt and Emmett’s mom are the real problems. Those two keep trying to make it into this grand thing when we just want a simple backyard wedding surrounded by our closest family and friends.”

“Gotta love your family. You can’t live without them, but you can’t live with them either.”

“Something like that.” I pull my cover-up off before dropping it on the towel. “I swear, I’ll breathe out a sigh of relief once this whole thing is done.”

Chloe tilts her head back; her pink strand gleams in the sunlight, big sunglasses perched on the bridge of her nose. “Wedding?”

“Yeah, but I’m not talking about that. We came here to have fun and not to stress.” I turn to Chloe and change the subject. “What’s up with you? Still dating that guy from your Global Diplomacy class?”

Chloe frowns. “No.”

“Why?” Yasmin tilts forward so she can see Chloe. “What happened?”

“Turns out the douchebag has a girlfriend he forgot to mention. I saw them in the cafeteria one day.”

“What?” Jade sits upright. “And he cheated on her? When both of you could run into each other at any time?”

“Apparently, he wasn’t the brightest fish in the sea,” Chloe grits her teeth. “I think that’s the most disappointing part. Thankfully, we only went on a few dates because otherwise, I’d feel shitty as hell.”

“What did you do about it?” Yasmin asks, plopping down on her stomach. “Did you confront him?”

Chloe slips her glasses down the bridge of her nose, amusement twinkling in her irises as a smirk works its way on her lips. “What do you think?”

Yasmin shakes her head, chuckling. “What did you do?”

“I walked up to him and threw the bowl of pasta over his head.”

We all burst into laughter.

“You did not!” I protest through giggles.

“Oh, yes I did,” Chloe nods her head, just as Yasmin says: “Yes, she did.”

They exchange a knowing look. “Nobody is messing with me. While he was trying to come up with some reasonable explanation for my outburst, I informed his girlfriend she should leave his cheating ass and find somebody better before I got out of there.”

Jade shakes her head. “I wanna be you when I grow up, Chloe. You’re savage.”

“Hey now.” Yasmin pokes her leg. “I thought you wanted to be me.”

“Don’t get your panties in a twist, Yas.” Jade rolls her eyes. “How about a mix of you and Chloe? Better?”

“I’ll give you pa—”

“Yo, Hayden!” Nixon yells.

We turn around to see Hayden and Callie walk toward us hand in hand, matching smiles on their faces. Hayden looks up just as the ball comes flying his way. He pushes Callie to the side and jumps in the air to catch the football.

Callie stumbles a little, almost losing her balance, but Hayden grabs her at the last second.

“Seriously, one day somebody will get a concussion from that,” I mutter, huffing a strand of hair out of my face.

“Boys and their balls.”

Hayden says something, making sure she’s alright before he joins the guys. Callie watches him for a moment before walking toward us.

“Oh, look who finally decided to show up,” Yasmin props on her elbows as Callie joins the group. “You seem a little bit flushed.”

Callie tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, pulling her legs underneath her. “Sorry, we were rushing to meet you here.”

“Mhmm... That blush just *screams* we’ve been rushing to cross the few feet from the house to the beach and not we were having wild sex in the bathroom.”

Callie’s cheeks grow even redder. “Don’t tell me you heard that.”

“It was hard not to. You know that door isn’t that thick, right?”

Callie closes her eyes and burrows her head in her hands. “Oh-my-God.”

“Yas,” I chastise, nudging her with my foot. “Don’t tease her.”

“Wait, you were having sex in the bathroom we all use?” Jade asks, looking between Yasmin and Callie.

Chloe groans, “Please at least tell us you cleaned everything afterward.”

“Of course we did!”

“I’m just asking.” Chloe lifts her arms in defense. “Seriously, you girls don’t need to throw in our faces how good of a boyfriend and sex life you have. Some of us are still single and trying to find the right guy, you know. Some of us still have to deal with sleazy, cheating bastards.”

“Sleazy, cheating bastards?” Callie repeats, her brows pulling together.

I look at her. “Don’t even ask. It’ll only get her more aggrieved.”

“Oh-kay. I obviously missed something.”

Chloe frowns. “Nothing worth mentioning.”

“Exactly, screw him.” Jade leans on her elbows and tilts her head back, letting out a long sigh. “For my part, I don’t care about the boyfriends, but I wouldn’t mind the good sex part.”

Yasmin chuckles. “Don’t let your brother hear you.”

Jade scoffs, “As if he can do anything about it. He’s not my handler.”

“Try telling him that. The last time he saw you flirting with that guy in the cafeteria, I had to sit in his lap to stop him from rearranging his face.”

A bark has me looking up, my heart beating a mile a minute. My throat tightens, making it hard to breathe as my eyes go straight to where I last saw Emmett and Penelope.

I let out a sigh of relief, my body relaxing when I find Emmett teaching Penny how to swim with Henry lying on the beach and watching them carefully.

“He’s so good with her,” Callie says, tilting her head toward the two of them.

“He always was,” I whisper, a small smile forming on my lips. The sweet ache making my heart squeeze.

“Seriously, if his opponents ever saw him like this, nobody would be afraid of him the way they are.”

She’s right about that one. Emmett was a sight to behold when he was on the football field, but there wasn’t a more caring and gentler man than him.

“Emmett has a soft spot for Penny—always has. He’s the big brother she always needed. He loves me to pieces, but I swear that man would die before he let anything happen to my sister.”

Just then, Emmett says something to Penny as he lets go of her. I can see his lips move, although I can’t hear the words. My tummy clenches with nerves as I watch Penny swim all on her own with Emmett’s watchful eyes on her. “And he never, ever thinks of her as less for her blindness. She wants to ride a horse? He takes her riding. She wants to learn how to swim? He’ll hold her hand until she can do it on her own, always carefully watching from the back and cheering her on.”

“He’s a good man.”

I turn to Callie. “One of the best.”

I wasn’t blind to the fact that I’m extremely lucky to have Emmett in my life. He’s one of a kind, and I never take him for granted.

“Can you imagine him once you guys have kids?” Yasmin asks, wiggling her brows.

Kids?

I’m pretty sure my eyes bug out at her question. It’s not that we haven’t talked about it, but for the most part, it seemed like a dream. Something that we’ll eventually get to, a fantasy of sorts.

“Emmett as a daddy?” Callie asks. “Damn, that’s going to be a sight to behold.”

But now, an image of a little boy with Emmett’s unruly hair and his dark eyes running around the fields back in our hometown pops into my head. The picture is so vivid I’d fall on my ass if I weren’t already sitting down.



Before I can say anything, a few droplets of water fall on my feet, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Kitty, why are you still here?”

I look up just in time to catch Emmett shaking his head, making the water splatter everywhere. “Just talking to the girls.”

And thinking about having your babies. No biggie.

I look over his shoulder and see my sister sitting in the shallow part, Henry standing by her side and licking her face, making her laugh.

“She’s fine,” Emmett reassures me. He knows me too damn well for my own good. “And what do you mean you’re talking with the girls? You could have done that back at Blairwood.” Emmett wraps his fingers around my wrist and pulls me to my feet. “Let’s go swimming.”

“Emmett!” I protest as my warm body crashes into his cold one. I look over my shoulder at my friends. “A little help here?”

Callie smiles sweetly. “Oh, we’re not getting in between that.”

“So much for friends.” I shift my attention to Emmett. “Can you put me down?”

“Do I really have to throw you over my shoulder and drop you in the ocean?” He lifts his eyebrows at me, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “You know I’ll do it.”

I look tentatively over his shoulder. “I don’t know about the ocean.”

Emmett was the one who taught me how to swim back home. I never swam before, but in Bluebonnet, things were different. Kids gathered during the summer at Emmett’s place for parties because there was a lake on his family’s property. It’s there that I learned how to swim in the first place, but this, this is something different, bigger, scarier.

“You know how to swim,” Emmett says as if he can read my mind and pulls me toward the ocean.

“It’s just so big. And God knows what’s inside. Probably sharks.” *God, sharks. Why didn’t I think about that earlier?* “I don’t want to be eaten by a shark.”

Emmett gives me his ‘are you shitting me?’ look over his shoulder. “You’re not going to be eaten by a shark.”

“You can’t know that.”

He snorts, “Chances of a shark attack are minimal.”

“They’re none existent if I stay out on the beach and catch some sun,” I counter.

“Don’t be a chicken.”

“Who’s a chicken?” Penny asks, tilting her head back.

Emmett tousles Penny’s damp hair as he pulls me into the ocean. “Your sister is afraid a shark will come and eat her.”

“Are there sharks?” Penny asks, her eyes turning big as saucers.

“There are no sharks, Little Adams. Kitty is just being one big scaredy-cat.” Emmett lets go of my hand and walks backward further into the ocean. “Are you coming or what?”

“Do you promise there are no sharks?”

Emmett lifts his brows. “Have I ever lied to you?”

No, no, he hasn’t.

I take a step forward and then another one until I’m finally in Emmett’s arms, the water reaching my waist. I suck in a sharp breath as the cool ocean touches my heated skin, making goosebumps appear.

“Damn, this is cold.”

“C’mon, Kitty. You can do better than that.”

I frown up at him. “Sometimes, I really hate you.”

Emmett chuckles like only a man as confident as he can. “No, you don’t.”

“When you make me do things like this, I wish I could hate you.”

Emmett's finger slides under my chin, and he tilts my head back. "Forcing you to go swimming, so you don't get sunstroke is that big of a crime?"

I pinch his side, which is no easy feat since the guy barely has any fat on his body. "Yes!"

"How about this? Next time I'll just grab a bucket of water and pour it over your head. Would that be better?"

My mouth falls open. "You wouldn't dare."

The smirk Emmett throws my way makes my knees weak. "Wouldn't I?"

Before I know it, Emmett's arms are around me, and we're both falling down. There's a loud splash, and the next thing I know, I'm underwater.

*Holy hell, it's cold.*

I tighten my arms around Emmett, holding onto him for dear life. He pulls us up to the surface. I suck in a sharp breath, my wet hair falling into my face.

"You good?" Emmett pushes my hair out of my face. The asshole has the audacity to laugh—*laugh!*—right in my face.

"I'll give you good!" I say, jumping him just as Callie lets out a loud shriek. I turn around in time to see Hayden throwing her over his shoulder and running toward the ocean. With Nixon dragging Yasmin hot on his heels.

It's that split second of distraction that has me swallowing more salty water as Emmett pulls me underwater along with him.

His hands are around my waist, fingers slipping to the nape of my neck as his mouth presses against mine as we come back up to the surface. I suck in a breath, trying to gulp more air.

"Are you trying to kill me? Because seriously, if you don't want to go through with the wedding..."

Emmett's hands go to my ass, and he lifts me up, his mouth crashing against mine, effectively shushing me. I brace

my hands against his broad shoulders as he deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding inside my mouth and tangling with mine.

Somebody whistles loudly, breaking us out of our daze.

“Oh, we’re going through with it.” Emmett pushes my hair back, cupping my cheeks. “Once in a lifetime, Kitty. Nothing will ever change that.” He presses his lips gently against mine before whispering once again—a promise: “Once in a lifetime.”

# CHAPTER FIVE

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YASMIN

A soft tickle slowly wakes me up from a deep sleep and brings me to awareness. I keep my eyes closed as it repeats—a feather-light brush against my temples, cheek, corner of my mouth, then my lips.

I sigh softly, reaching for Nixon. My fingers tangle in his hair just as he brushes his mouth against my neck, and a shiver runs down my spine.

“Nixon.” His name comes out in a rasp, my voice low from sleep.

He nuzzles his nose against the hollow in my shoulder, his hot breath making goosebumps appear on my skin. “Yes, babe?”

“You promised you’d let me sleep.”

“I changed my mind.”

I pry my eyes open. Faint morning light is peeking through the curtains that are moving with the light breeze coming through the open window. The clock on the nightstand catches my attention. I sit upright, bumping into Nixon. “Are you crazy? It’s not even five in the morning!”

He rubs at his chin. “I thought we could go out and watch the sunrise.”

“At five in the freaking morning?”

Incredulous. This man is simply incredulous.

“That’s when the sun usually rises. C’mon, Yas. Live a little.”

“I live a lot.” I poke him in the chest. “After a decent wake-up time. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

I start to turn around to go back to sleep, but Nixon grabs my hand and tugs me up. “You’re up now, might as well use the early hour and go to the beach when there won’t be anybody around.”

“That’s because all the sane people are sleeping,” I point out uselessly.

Nixon bats his eyelashes and purses his lips. “Pretty please?”

A soft smile is playing on his lips, making the corner of his mouth twitch upward no matter how much he tries to keep a straight face.

Seriously, this man.

“Fine, but you better have coffee ready when I come down.”

Nixon grins and leans down to press his mouth against mine. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Miss Hernandez.”

---

“CAN you seriously tell me you’d rather be in bed now?” Nixon asks as we walk down the beach hand in hand.

“Maybe,” I grumble, taking a sip from my coffee cup.

I hate to admit it, but he might have been right. The first rays of the sun are rising over the horizon, coloring the sky in pretty shades of orange and red. The beach is empty except for the two of us.

Nixon looks down at me, a smirk on his lips and a mischievous twinkle shining in his bright blue irises. “You know I’m right.”

I shove him away, but with our hands linked, he only pulls me along with him, laughing. “Don’t get all smug about it. Is it pretty? Yes. Would I still rather be in bed? Hell, yes.”

He twirls me, my back hitting his chest as his arms wrap around my middle and turn us so we’re looking at the horizon. “But if you stayed in bed, you wouldn’t have all this. Now would you?”

His chin leans against my shoulder, and together we watch the waves slowly roll toward the shore as the sun rises in the

sky.

“I guess you’re right,” I admit softly, placing my hands over his. “It’s beautiful out here.”

The way the sun chases away the clouds. Oranges, reds, and pinks mesh on the blue background. The soft morning breeze makes my curls fly wildly around my face. It’s stunning and somehow peaceful at the same time.

“It is,” he agrees. “She would have loved it here.”

I don’t have to ask which she Nixon’s talking about. I know. Although Nixon has been doing better lately, living just like his mother asked him to, there are still moments that he gets lost in the memories, lost in his pain and grief.

Thanksgiving was hard, Christmas even harder, just like his mom’s birthday. With the first anniversary of his mother’s death just around the corner, he’s been growing more distant once again.

I didn’t blame him. That was the thing about grief. You couldn’t control it, you couldn’t conquer it, you can just learn how to live with it, taking it one day at a time. Some days will be easier, some harder. The pain will dull with time, but it’ll never go away.

“She would,” I whisper, giving his hand a squeeze.

I was grateful I got a chance to meet his mother, no matter how short of a time it was. She was an exceptional woman, caring and so full of life that was unfortunately cut too short by a terrible disease.

Nixon’s arms tighten around me. “She should have lived more,” he says as if he can read my mind. “There was so much life left for her, so many things that she was robbed of. If last year taught me anything, it’s that life is too short, and we have to live every moment as if it’s our last.”

“And you’re doing exactly that.” I rub my thumb over the back of his hand and look over my shoulder at him. “She would have been so proud of you, Nixon.”



“I hope so.” He nods his head; his eyes still fixed on the ocean. “*I’m not asking you to leave. I’m asking you to live,*” he says softly before looking down at me. “That’s what she told me before...” his words trail off, throat bobbing as he swallows. “While she still felt well enough.”

“I didn’t know that,” I admit. Those last few days were a blur. I tried to be there for Nixon and Jade, offering them any support I could while at the same time giving them space so they could spend those last moments as a family.

“Talking about her is still hard, but I’ve been thinking about those words for the past year. Some days it feels like they ring in my mind on repeat.”

Nixon takes a step back.

I turn around, my brows pulling together at the serious expression on his face. I can feel my heart start to race as my stomach clenches uncomfortably. “Nixon, wh—”

“I love you, Yasmin Hernandez.” He cups my cheeks and just stares at me with those eyes the color of the sky. “A little part of me fell for you the moment I met you. There was never any choice, not really. I couldn’t resist your stubbornness or fiery temper. But I fell completely that first time you came to my place and showed me just how big your heart was, and since then, my love for you has only grown stronger.”

A smile curls my lips, as the knot in my stomach loosens a little bit at his words.

“I love you, too, Nixon,” I sigh, placing my hand over his, leaning into his touch.

“That’s good, because...” With a sweep of his thumb over my cheek, he takes a step back.

I frown in confusion.

*What the hell is he doing?*

“Nixon...”

I watch his hand slip into the pocket of his shorts.

“I don’t want to wait, Yas,” he says before I can utter a word. “I love you, and I don’t want to wait a second longer, live another moment without having you by my side.”

Then he does the most unexpected thing.

He drops down to one knee.

My mouth falls open as I watch the man I love kneel before me, a velvet box in his hand. Completely and utterly speechless.

“I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. From today to however long we might have. Whether it’s a day, a year, or an eternity, it’s all yours.” He opens the box, the stone shining brightly under the morning sun.

“Nixon...” I lift my trembling fingers to cover my gaping mouth. My heart is beating hard against my ribcage as I try to think of the words to say, but nothing comes to me.

*He’s proposing.*

And this is the moment my mind decides to shut down on me?

Nixon smirks as if he can read the panic on my face.

“It might be too soon.” He grabs my hand in his, giving it a soft squeeze. “Some might even tell us we’re crazy, but I love you more than anything, Yas, and I don’t want to lose any more time. Yasmin Hernandez, will you marry me?”

It’s real.

Nixon is actually *proposing*.

My legs give out on me, and I fall down to the sand. A sob rips out of my lungs.

“Yasmin?” Nixon asks, a trace of worry in his tone.

I shake my head and throw my arms around his neck, burrowing my head into his shoulder.

“Sí.” I pull back, cupping his cheeks. “Sí, sí, sí. I’ll marry.”

Then I press my lips against his, kissing with all the strength I have. He loses his balance, and we both fall to the

beach, but we don't stop kissing. I nibble at his lower lip as his hands run down my back.

His mouth falls open, our tongues tangling together as his palms grip my ass and pull me closer.

Nixon just asked me to marry him, and I said yes.

He pushes me back, shifting, so he's looming over me, his hands roaming my body as we continue kissing.

The sand feels warm under my back, the little particles rubbing against my skin.

I run my fingers through his hair, pulling his head back. We break our kiss, both of us breathing hard. I press my lips against his chin and then work my way down, peppering the kisses down the column of his neck when a wave crashes over us.

"Holy shit," Nixon curses, his mouth falling open. "That's freezing."

I can't help myself. I start to laugh as another wave comes rushing at us.

Nixon's eyes grow wide, water dripping from him. "Shit, the ring."

He pulls back, panic flashing on his face. "Shit, shit, shit..."

He leans against his heels and looks around, and for a moment, I wonder if he'll have a panic attack, but then his face relaxes when he spots the box stuck in the sand. He lets out a long breath, running his fingers through his hair. "Fuck, for a moment there I thought I lost it."

Nixon pushes to his feet and grabs the box, dusting off the sand before joining me.

"I don't need a ring." Then something occurs to me. "Please tell me it's not your mother's ring."

He opens the box and looks down at the ring.

"No," he shakes his head. "It's not my mother's ring."

I let out a sigh of relief. Nixon looks up at me. “It’s not that I wouldn’t love to have it...” I start to explain, but he just shakes his head, a small smile forming on his lips.

“I get it. It’s your ring, and it would be fucking inconvenient if I lost it to the ocean. I wanted a fresh start for us. And I think it’s more fitting if Jade has it.”

“She’ll love that.”

“Well, I hope you’ll like this one.” He pulls the ring out of the box and takes my hand in his.

I suck in a breath, holding his gaze as the anticipation sizzles under my skin. He slips the ring on my finger, the fit perfect. Nixon lifts my hand, bringing it to his mouth. His lips brush against my knuckles. “What do you think?”

It’s torture to remove my gaze from him, but I do. I look down at our clasped hands. He lifts them, tilting it slightly, so the sun bounces off the gem making it sparkle.

“Nixon, this is...” Tears prickle my eyes as I stare at the ring on my finger. A lump forms in my throat, making it hard to breathe.

The pale pinkish oval stone glimmers in the sunlight. It’s set in a rose gold band and surrounded by tiny diamonds. Simple and elegant.

“I wanted something different. Something unique and beautiful just like you are.”

“It’s stunning.” I slide my finger over the ring, glancing up at him. “And too much.”

Nixon brushes his mouth against mine. “It’s not too much if you love it.”

Love it? I adore it.

“I do. It’s perfect. What is it? It’s not a pink diamond, is it?”

Those things cost a fortune. But I can’t deny how pretty it is.

“No, it’s called morganite. At least that’s what the jeweler told us. And apparently, it’s rarer than diamonds.”

*Rarer than diamonds?* My whole body stiffens. *That doesn’t scream cheaper to me.*

“Wait, us?” I look up at him.

“Hayden went with me to buy the ring.”

My brows shoot up. “Is he...?”

Nixon chuckles and shakes his head. “Not yet, but I wouldn’t be surprised if that changes sooner rather than later.” Nixon caresses my cheek. “This is our moment.”

“Our moment,” I repeat, liking the sound of it. “It still feels surreal. I didn’t see it coming at all.”

“At all?”

I roll my eyes at the slightly horrified note in his voice. “Well, I could see us together down the road, but I never imagined you’d propose now. Not in my wildest dreams.”

“Good thing you’re not dreaming.”

He leans down and presses his mouth against mine in a soft kiss. I lift my hand, sliding it to the back of his neck and pulling him closer. He nips at my lower lip, and I let out a soft sigh as my fingers at his nape tighten.

“If I am, I don’t want to stop. Like ever.”

We might have had a rocky start, but in the past year, Nixon has become the second half of my heart. Not just my boyfriend but also my best friend. Somebody I confide in and would go anywhere with no matter what. Some days he frustrates me, others he makes me laugh, but either way, I couldn’t imagine my life without him.

I press my forehead against his. “Te amo, Nixon.”

His whole face lights up at the words. “I love you too, Yasmin.”

I look down at the ring and let out a little squeal. How is this real? How is this my life?

“I can’t wait to see the girls’ faces when they find out.” I shake my head, chuckling. “Kate will laugh her ass off. We’ve barely finished planning her wedding, and now we have a new one to plan.”

The venue, the colors, the flowers, the food, and the cake. *Díos*, just thinking about it has my head spinning.

Nixon nuzzles his face into my neck. “What if we didn’t do it?”

“What do you mean ‘what if we didn’t do it?’” I pull back and look at him. “Weddings take planning.”

“Not if we do it here.”

“Here as in... *here* here?” I blink, confused by where he’s going with this. “Hawaii?”

“Yes, we could get married here. Before we go home.”

*Before we go home.*

My heart starts beating faster as his words echo in my mind. He stares at me with a serious face.

“You’re joking.”

*He has to be because the alternative...* I shake my head. *No, he can’t be for real.*

Getting married here? Before we leave? But that would mean...

“I meant what I said. I don’t want to spend a single moment without you, Yas.” He pushes my hair behind my ears as he stares into my eyes with such intensity it rocks me to my very core. “I don’t want to have any regrets, and if the world was to burn tomorrow, and I didn’t make you mine before that, I would regret it.”

“Get married here,” I repeat softly.

My mind tells me it’s an utterly crazy idea. We could never pull it off. Not so fast and so far away from home.

It’s insane to even attempt it, or is it?

“Get married here, and go back home as husband and wife.”

“B-but...” I stutter, trying to brace my mind. “We’re still in college. I live in the dorms, and you live with Maddox. It’s...”

“It’s crazy. I know,” he chuckles. “But I want it. I want you by my side. I want you to have my last name. I want to call you my wife. But I get it if you’d rather have a big wedding. In a church, surrounded by people you love...”

I shake my head. “I don’t want a big wedding, and most of the people I love are already here, but... it’s just...”

“Insane?” he offers.

I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear, letting out a nervous chuckle. “Just a little bit. We’ll never be able to pull it off...”

“But what if we did?”

I bite my lower lip, his words ringing in my mind.

*But what if we did?*

Nixon kisses me softly. “Mrs. Yasmin Cole. It has a nice ring to it.”

Yes, yes it does.

# CHAPTER SIX

---



JADE

Soft laughing wakes me up from my slumber. I groan in protest, burrowing my head into the pillow, but it doesn't help shut down the noises or the bright light coming from behind the curtains.

*What time is it, anyway?*

I peek open one eye, only to find the other bed empty.

I slide my hand under the pillow and pull out my phone. Turning to my back, I rub my eyes and check the time.

Barely eight in the morning.

*Why are they up so damn early? And so chipper too?*

I was exhausted between traveling and spending the whole day and part of the night at the beach. Still, we were only here for a few days, so I forced myself to get up.

Pulling my shirt off, I grab my swimsuit and quickly slip it on, throwing a dress over it before calling it a day. Slipping into my flip-flops, I go across the hall to the bathroom, quickly doing my business before joining the rest of the group in the kitchen.

The slide door and windows are wide open—the reason why I could hear them all the way upstairs. Although the house was pretty cute and tidy, it missed one thing, air conditioning, so we had to leave the windows open since it was pretty warm even during the night.

“Morning,” I mutter, going straight for the coffee pot and pouring myself a big cup.

“You look like a train ran over you,” Chloe comments from her spot at the table, where she's happily munching on her cereal.

I narrow my eyes at her and comment dryly: “Thank you.” I look around the room. “Where's everybody else?”

“Hayden went jogging,” Callie rolls her eyes. “Spencer and Prescott are still sleeping. And Nixon and Yasmin’s room was empty when we woke up.”

That gets my attention. “Empty?”

“I heard somebody walking around the kitchen.” Penny looks up from the porch where she’s sitting and combing her dog. “But they were talking too softly for me to decipher who it might be. If they’re not here, I guess it could have been them.”

Kate grabs the plates and hands them to Emmett. “Where would they go?”

“Maybe to the beach?” he suggests.

I guess that’s possible. We used to get up early to go to the beach and watch the sunrise, but we haven’t done that since...

“Didn’t they get a memo that we’re on vacation?” Chloe shakes her head.

“Apparently not,” Kate shrugs, turning to me. “Jade, you okay with eggs and bacon?”

“I’m fine with anything that I don’t have to cook,” I say absentmindedly, my mind still on my brother, that familiar ache that I’ve been pushing back rising back to the surface.

Kate chuckles, “That’s always the best part.”

Emmett places the last of the utensils on the table and walks back to the stove, wrapping his arms around her from the back. “So, you’d like breakfast in bed?”

“You won’t hear me complain about it, cowboy.”

“Good to know.”

Deciding it’s best to retreat, I walk toward the terrace and sit down on the swing, pulling my legs underneath me. “What are you up to, Penny?”

“Detangling Henry’s fur.” In one hand, she holds the brush and uses her free hand as a guide where she needs to brush. “He had too much fun yesterday swimming in the ocean, so today he’s one big, tangled mess. Aren’t you, boy?”

Penelope nuzzles her head into the dog's neck, and he licks her face.

It was fascinating to watch them together. He was so cool and composed whenever he was in the harness, which, as we were warned, was his 'working' time and shouldn't be disturbed, but the moment the harness was off, he turned into a goofball that loved to play and tease.

"How long have you two worked together?"

Penny tilts her head to the side. "Since I was thirteen, so about five years now."

"Wow, that's a lot. How long can service dogs work, anyway?"

"I don't think there's a specific time frame," Penny shrugs. "Whenever you feel like he's ready to retire. Some dogs retire after a few years for various reasons, but some work for eight or nine years. It all depends on the dog. Henry doesn't seem to be slowing down, though."

I take a sip of coffee, carefully listening to her. "That's amazing. I don't think I've ever seen a guide dog before. At least not up close like this."

"I'm not really surprised. Service animals are extremely difficult to come by and usually really expensive. I've been using a cane for a better part of my life, and it's still more useful when I'm going to certain places, but having a guide dog gives me a completely different level of freedom." Placing the brush on the floor by her side, she extends her hand and reaches for the cup. I'm about to hand it to her, but before I can even move a muscle, her fingers wrap around it, and she takes a sip of her coffee. "Coming to Blairwood took some adjustment, I won't lie, but overall, he handled it pretty well. And now, we can go to most places without any issues, which will help me immensely in convincing Emmett and Kate to go home and let me be."

Sometimes it was really hard to remember that Penny couldn't see. She is so self-sufficient and independent that if it

weren't for Henry always by her side, I don't think I would even realize it.

"They're not really fans of leaving you alone, are they?"

"Not in the slightest." Penny shakes her head, a fond smile on her lips. "But I can't even really be angry with them, you know? They're just worried."

"That's older siblings for you. Sometimes you can't stand how annoying they are, but you love them regardless."

Penny lets out a soft chuckle. "Something like that."

"Are you going to stay in their apartment?"

"That's the idea, but I would need to find a roommate." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "Know of somebody who needs a place to stay but doesn't mind dogs?"

"I don't mind dogs, but I come with two roommates of my own."

Rei, Grace, and I have already been talking about finding a place off-campus for us before the school year is over, so we can settle in first thing in the fall.

"But finding a three-bedroom apartment has been a challenge. And we need a three-bedroom apartment. They're both dating, and it's bad enough that I have to listen to them getting it on."

"I feel you." Penny's cheeks flush. "That's one part I won't be missing with Emmett and Kate gone."

"What aren't you going to miss with Emmett and Kate gone?" the man in question asks, leaning against the doorway.

"Nothing," she answers, smiling innocently.

Emmett narrows his eyes at Penny. "It didn't sound like nothing."

"You don't really want to know," I say, chuckling.

"On that note... Emmett, do you maybe know if the apartment next to ours is a three-bedroom?"

“I think so?” He rubs the back of his neck. “Or it could be the one at the end of the hallway? Why? I already told you I talked to the owner...”

“It’s not for me.” She rolls her eyes. “Jade and her friends are looking for an apartment next year, and I think I heard about someone moving out?”

“I could ask around if you want,” Emmett shrugs, pushing away from the door.

“Thanks, we’d really appreciate it. The three of us have a great dynamic, but we need a three-bedroom apartment.”

“Sure thing.” Emmett ruffles Penny’s hair. “Plus, it’ll be good to know that Penny has familiar people close by.”

Penelope tsks, “So little faith in me.”

“It’s not...”

Before he can finish, Henry looks up, his whole body going on alert. “What’s up, Henry?” Penny tilts her head to the side, her hand still stroking the dog’s fur. “Is somebody coming?”

I lift my gaze, and sure enough, two figures are slowly walking toward the house.

“Yasmin and Nixon.” I turn my attention to her. “You’re good at this.”

“Just years of practice.” Penny smiles and gets to her feet, picking up her coffee mug. “I need a refill.”

Henry gets to his feet immediately, and she places her hand on his back. “House.”

He leads her around the table and lounge chair until she’s safely inside.

Shaking my head. “She’s amazing.”

Emmett looks after Penelope, a small smile on his lips. “She baffles me every single day.” He places a hand on my shoulder and gives me a squeeze. “I’ll ask around about an apartment.”

“Thanks, Emmett.”

He slips into the house, and I turn my attention back to the beach. Taking a sip of my coffee, I lift my hand to shield my eyes from the sun and watch Nixon and Yasmin whisper and laugh as they make their way toward the house.

I never imagined I'd see my brother so in love with somebody as he's with Yasmin. But they're so right for each other. I could see it the first time she came to our house. She was the calm to Nixon's storm, and I was so happy that my brother found somebody who could love him the way Yasmin did.

Nixon pulls her to a stop and plants a kiss on her lips. I blink and look away, my stomach twisting with a mix of jealousy and longing.

“What the hell, dude? I didn't sign up for this shit this early in the morning,” Prescott yells loud enough that they can hear him.

My back stiffens like it always does when he's around. The dude is a grumpy asshole unlike any other I've ever met. And I've met my fair share of those both back home and in Blairwood since I got here.

Slowly I turn around and glare at him. “Are you always such an asshole, or are we just lucky to get that side of you?”

Those cold, dark eyes of his turn to me. The lines of his face are hard, stubble covering his chin as he glares at me. “I save it especially for you, doll.”

I open my mouth to tell him exactly what I think about his patronizing nickname, but my brother interrupts me.

“You're just jealous your grumpy ass will stay alone forever, Wentworth,” Nixon ribs as he and Yasmin climb to the porch.

Prescott holds my gaze for a heartbeat longer before switching his attention to Nixon. “Better to be alone than have a woman constantly nag.”

Yasmin crosses her arms over her chest and raises her brow. “Are you saying I’m nagging him, Prescott?”

“Not you, but...”

I scoff. “He’d first have to find a woman who’d be willing to stand his grumpy ass long enough to stay.”

Prescott’s frown deepens. He opens his mouth, and I can feel my tummy clench in anticipation.

“Where were you?” Callie asks, exiting to the porch.

Prescott presses his lips in a firm line, and I feel the corner of my mouth rise. The dude needs some serious ass-whooping.

“Nixon dragged me out of bed at an ungodly hour, so we could watch the sunrise.”

Callie shakes her head. “Did you guys not get the memo that we’re on *vacation*?”

“That’s what I said!” Yasmin agrees readily.

“What’s ‘what you said?’” Hayden pants as he joins us on the porch, pants hanging low on his hips, hair disheveled, sweat glistening on his defined muscles.

Hanging out with my brother and his friends, I’ve seen my fair share of built guys, but hot damn. Every time I see Hayden shirtless, I can’t help but look. No harm in that, right? A little eye candy never hurt anyone.

“She said that we’re on vacation. You know, the same thing I told you this morning when you woke me up to go jog —”

Callie shrieks. Loudly.

*What the...*

“There’s a ring on your finger,” Callie says, grabbing Yasmin’s hand to inspect it up close. Her gaze darts from Yasmin’s hand to her face and back. “Why is there a ring on your finger?”

I pull my brows together. “A ring?”

Yasmin just grins, amusement dancing in her eyes as she bites the inside of her cheek.

“What’s going on here?” Kate asks as she joins us on the porch.

Callie looks at her and then back at Yasmin’s hand. “She’s wearing a ring.”

“A ring?” Kate peeks over Callie’s shoulder. “Oh my...”

*Ring? She can’t mean...*

I walk toward them, and sure enough, there’s a ring—a gorgeous, ginormous rose gold ring—sitting on my brother’s girlfriend’s ring finger.

“You proposed?” My mouth gapes open as I look from my brother to Yasmin and back. “You freaking *proposed*?!”

A smug grin appears on my brother’s face as he puffs out his chest. “Yes.”

My heart starts beating faster as I look at the two of them, almost in a daze. I’m happy for them. I really am. If somebody deserves to be happy, it’s Nixon and Yasmin. Then why is this knot in my stomach growing tighter?

“Congrats, you guys!” Callie yells, throwing her arms around both of them.

Kate is the next to pull Yasmin into a hug, as Emmett gets up and slaps Nixon on the shoulder before giving Yasmin a hug.

All the while, I just stand there and stare.

Things are changing once again, and I’m not ready.

*But this isn’t about you, Jade, I chastise myself. It’s about Nixon and Yasmin, so get a grip.*

“Smalls?” Nixon asks tentatively, taking a step closer.

“You got engaged without telling me anything?” I ask, still trying to wrap my head around it.

“Not everything is about you, doll.”



I turn around and almost crash into Prescott. Bracing myself, I jab my finger into his chest. “He’s my brother. And call me doll one more time, and I swear I’ll shave your head next time you drink yourself to sleep, *doll*.”

“Jade,” Nixon warns, putting his hands on my shoulders.

Without another glance at the asshole, I slowly turn around to face my brother. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

My brother is engaged.

“I’m sorry, Jade, but you can’t keep secrets for shit.”

He has me there, I guess. Although, seriously...

“Holy shit, you guys.” I go to Yasmin and wrap my arms around her tightly. “We’re going to be sisters.” I pull back, a smile slowly working its way to my lips. “Are you sure you’re up for it? Marriage is forever, and that’s a hell of a long time to spend with this monkey.”

Yasmin laughs, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m sure. There’s nobody else I’d rather spend forever with than Nixon.”

“Which is good because we’re getting married.” Nixon wraps his arms around Yasmin and pulls her closer.

“That’s usually what follows after getting engaged, man,” Emmett laughs.

“Do you guys have a date in mind?” Callie asks. “I could see you as a spring bride.”

Nixon and Yasmin exchange a look.

“That’s good because we’re getting married.” Yasmin takes in the group, her face turning serious. “This week.”

The room falls quiet.

I blink, trying to process the words, thinking I’ve heard them wrong because they can’t possibly mean...

Then everybody starts talking at once.

“Did he just say...”

“You can’t be serious.”

“This week?”

“We’re serious,” Nixon says loud enough so he can be heard over the noises. “We don’t want to waste any more time.”

“Yas, please tell me he’s joking,” Callie says. “You can’t get married here.”

“It makes sense,” Yasmin shrugs. “We don’t really want a big wedding, and most of the people we love are here anyway.”

“You’re really serious about this?” Kate asks.

“We are,” Nixon nods. “We’re planning to go to the registration office after we eat and shower, so we can arrange everything.”

“But what about the dress and the party and cake and...”

Yasmin grabs Callie’s hands in hers. “This is exactly why we want to do this here. We want this to be just for us. About our love for each other and sharing it with the people we love, not about organizing a huge party.”

“Yasmin Hernandez, you’re getting a wedding dress whether you want it or not. I’m not letting you look awful on the most important day of your life. I’ll look for some boutiques or something. There has to be a dress on this island for you.”

Yasmin shakes her head. “And that’s why I want you to be my maid of honor.”

Callie opens her mouth but closes it quickly. She blinks, her tongue darting out to slide over her lips. “You for real?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Callie throws her arms around Yasmin. “I’ll find you the dress of your freaking dreams.”

“I have no doubt.”

“Okay, no crying.” Kate waves her hands in front of her face as Penny pats her on the shoulder. “If you start crying, I’ll start crying.”

“You can’t cry.” Emmett pulls her into a hug from the other side. “C’mon, let’s go eat before they cry a river, and we all drown.”

Slowly, people start going through the kitchen chatting about the upcoming wedding, while I stay rooted to the spot, my mind still reeling from what just happened.

Hayden claps Nixon on the shoulder, and they laugh about something, following after their girlfriends.

No, not a girlfriend.

A fiancé.

A lump forms in my throat, making it hard for me to breathe.

I sit down on the step.

I’m happy for Nixon. I really am. And I wasn’t joking when I told Yasmin we’d be sisters. After everything we’ve been through, she was already my sister in a way.

Still...

Nixon looks over his shoulder, his eyes meeting mine. He says something to Yasmin and waits while everybody enters the house.

“You’ve been quiet,” Nixon says as he sits down next to me.

“Sorry, it’s just a lot to take in; that’s all.”

Nixon nods. We’re both quiet for a while.

I shift my attention to the ocean. We have so many memories from the beach, good and bad ones. I thought it would be harder, but coming here’s different. There’s still an ache in my heart, but it’s not as strong as I thought it would be.

“Are you okay? With all of...”

I turn around to look at him. “Of course I’m okay! I’m happy for you guys truly. It’s just... a lot. I didn’t expect it to happen so soon. The engagement maybe, but not the wedding.”

“We didn’t either, but it just seemed... right.” He looks down at me. “Fitting, you know?”

“I know.” I lean my head against his shoulder and let out a sigh. “You did good, Nixon.”

“You think?”

“Yeah,” I rasp, the emotions bubbling inside me. Sniffing softly, I pull back and jab him in the chest. “Still doesn’t mean I’ll forgive you for not telling me you were going to *propose!*”

Nixon rubs the back of his neck, smiling sheepishly. “In my defense, I was trying to come up with something nice, but we were out on the beach, and I realized that if I waited for the right moment, it could take months. *Years*. And I don’t want to wait, Smalls. I don’t want to wait because I know she’s it for me. I want to live just like...”

His words trail off, his eyes growing distant for a second.

I know that look well.

It’s the same look I get when I think about our mother.

I place my hand over his forearm, giving him a reassuring squeeze.

“She loved her. She would have been over the moon about this.”

Nixon’s throat bobs as he swallows. “She would have, wouldn’t she?”

“She would,” I agree softly. “I can’t believe she’s going to miss this.”

Nixon takes my hand and presses it against the middle of his chest. “She’s going to be here. She always is.”

“I know.”

I don’t have to tell him it’s not the same. He knows it all too well.

“So what are you up to today?”

“Off with Chloe to a surfing lesson.”

His brows shoot up. “Surfing lesson?”

“When in Hawaii...” I shrug, getting to my feet.

Nixon stands up too. “Jade, would you...”

“The camera is upstairs. Now go figure out when you’re getting hitched because want it or not, Callie is throwing you a real wedding. You’re aware of that, right?”

Nixon lets out a sigh. “I guess so.” He cups my face, his thumb brushing away the tear that slipped earlier. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, big brother. Anytime.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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CALLIE

I scroll down my phone with a frown between my brows when I see a shadow fall over me. Before I can react, Hayden's hard, cold body presses against my back as he sits behind me, his arms wrapping around my middle.

"Hayden!" I hiss, sucking in a breath.

Goosebumps rise on my flesh from the difference in temperature, a shiver running down my spine.

"You're cold."

"That's not what you said last night," he chuckles, nuzzling his head into the crook of my neck and pressing a kiss against my shoulder. "What are you up to?"

"Trying to organize this wedding." I glare at him over my shoulder. "Something I might have had time to prepare for if somebody told me that his best friend was planning to propose to my best friend."

"In my defense, I didn't know he'd do it here."

"That's no excuse! You knew he was thinking about it. How am I supposed to do my best-friend duties if I don't know about it?"

"Best-friend duties?" Hayden asks, his brows pulling together.

"Yes!"

"Like what?"

"Have her dress nicely. Get her hair and nails done. Take a photo, so she has it as a memory."

Hayden chuckles. "You girls are weird."

I elbow him. "We're not weird. Getting engaged to the love of your life is one of the top five moments of your life. You want it to be perfect. They won't have any photos to look back on."

“They’ll have each other, though. Isn’t that the most important part?”

I think over his words for a moment. I guess he’s right, and Yasmin definitely isn’t a flashy kind of girl, but I don’t want her to have any regrets about hurrying this later on.

“I guess there’s that. I get why she would want a smaller wedding, but I don’t want her to one day look back and regret it either, you know? Just because she wants a small wedding doesn’t mean she has to get married in a swimming suit or something like that.”

Hayden nods. “Is that why you’re googling wedding shops in Hawaii?”

“Yes. It’s one to get hitched, but she deserves better than that. They both do.”

Just then, my phone chimes. I open the message and look at the photo of our two best friends holding a marriage license in their hands.

“I guess it’s official.” I shake my head. “They’re actually doing this.”

Both of them have matching, beaming smiles on their faces, and all I can do is feel happy for them. If anybody deserved a little bit of happiness, it’s Yasmin and Nixon.

“Things are slowly changing, and we have to use every moment we have together.”

Hayden leans his chin on my shoulder. “Are you worried?”

I bite the inside of my cheek.

I don’t have to ask him what he means. We’ve talked about Hayden’s desire to enter the draft this year. I understood why he chose it even though he has another year left of college to finish. And although I loved him for his courage and respected his decision, I’d lie if I said the other part of me didn’t feel anxious about what was going to happen in the next few weeks.

“A little,” I admit.



Hayden's arms around me tighten. "We're going to be okay."

"You can't know that," I protest, turning in his arms. "They could send you to the other side of the country."

*And what would happen to me? To us?* I wonder silently, not wanting to voice the words out loud.

I tried my best not to show how much the upcoming weeks are worrying me, but the closer it comes to the draft day, the more my nervousness gets the better of me. I'm happy for Hayden. I really am. Nobody knows better than me how hard he has worked and how far he's come from that scrawny boy I knew back in high school, but a part of me is worried about the changes this will bring.

For him. For me. For *us*.

I know he loves me, but...

"Or one of the teams closer to home could pick me. We won't know that until the very last moment, so there's no sense in worrying about it. Whatever happens, we're not going to change. I love you, Angel. You know that, right?"

"I do." I wrap my arms around his middle and bury my head into his chest, inhaling his familiar scent. "I love you too, Hayden. Always."

That's the only thing that's holding me together in this whole situation.

He pulls back and looks down at me, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "Better?"

"Yeah, sorry for freaking out. I guess I'm not good with change."

"Things might change, but we're not." His mouth captures mine in a soft kiss. "You and me, we're forever, Callie."

"Well, that's good because you're going to hate me when I tell you this."

Hayden's brows furrow. "What now?"

“Since you’re the best man, you have to figure out what you’re going to do for the bachelor’s party.”

“Bachelor’s party?”

“It’s a tradition. So we’re having it, and you have to organize it.”

“But I’m so bad at this,” Hayden groans.

“Don’t be a crybaby.” I jab him playfully in his stomach, feeling those hard muscles under my touch. “Besides, you didn’t have issues organizing parties in the past.”

I start to get up, but he doesn’t let me go.

“I haven’t been partying in ages, *and* it was usually other people who organized it. I was just there to party.”

“Then you better figure it out and fast.” I wiggle my finger like a clock is ticking. “Tick-tock. Oh, and no strip clubs.”

Hayden scoffs, “Why would I need a strip club when I can get you to strip for me.” He grins at me. “How about we go...”

“Nope.” I push his hands back and get to my feet. “No way, mister. I’m going for a swim since you got me all wet anyway...”

“Oh, I got you all wet, huh?” Hayden wiggles his brows as he pushes to his feet. “See? I think that’s the sign to...”

He tries to pull me into him, but I slip out of his reach at the last moment. “That’s the sign to get your mind out of the gutter.”

“You’re no fun, Angel.”

“I have a wedding to plan.” I open the group chat with the girls.

**Me: Meet me at the bar on the beach in an hour. We’ve got some serious work to do.**

**Chloe: Azure Pearl?**

**Me: Yeah, that’s the one.**

**Me: Might as well get some cocktails while we plot.**

**Jade: I'm so down for that.**

“Are you going to get this bossy when you're planning our wedding?”

My fingers stop over the keyboard as his question registers in my mind.

My tummy tingles with nerves at his question. Slowly, I turn to look over my shoulder. “Is there something you want to ask me, Watson?”

I hold my breath as he just stares at me for what feels like an eternity.

“Not just yet.”

Hayden wraps his arms around my middle and throws me over his shoulder. “Hayden!”

“You said we're going swimming, so better drop that phone before I throw you into the ocean.”

“You wouldn't do that.”

“Wouldn't I?”

He starts to walk toward the ocean, leaving me just enough time to drop my phone into my bag.

“You act like such a Neanderthal sometimes.”

As if to confirm my statement, he swats me on the ass. “I didn't hear you complain before.”

“You're unbelievable,” I protest.

My skin tingles from his touch; his hand skims over my exposed flesh, soothing away the pain, before he pulls me down into his arms, guiding my hands around his hips as he enters the ocean with me in tow.

“But you like it.”

I press my lips into a tight line. I might like it the tiniest bit, but I'll never admit it out loud.

Hayden skims his mouth over the corner of mine, his finger sliding under the elastic of my bottoms and gripping my ass. “Admit it,” he whispers against my mouth, his eyes

twinkling with amusement. “You like it when I go all Neanderthal on you. It makes you all wet for me.”

“Hayden!” I protest, my eyes turning wide at his dirty words. “We’re on a public beach.”

His grin widens, amusement twinkling in his green irises. “And nobody has to know what we’re doing underwater, now do they?”

My cheeks heat as I look around. There are people both swimming and sunbathing on the beach, but nobody is paying us any attention. Yet. “They’ll know.”

He presses his mouth against my ear. “Want to find out?”

His fingers dig into my ass as he pulls me closer so I can feel his rigid length rub against my pussy.

*Damn that, man.*

“I know you want it. I swear I can feel how hot you are for me even now.”

“If somebody sees us...”

He nips at my lip. “They won’t.”

---

“OKAY, I’M HERE,” I pant as I take the last available seat.

Azure Pearl is this cute little café situated on the beach closer to the town center. It has these cool lounges and swings situated under the palm trees, and the best damn cocktails I’ve had in my life.

“Slow down, Cals,” Kate chuckles. “You’re like a steam engine.”

Yasmin gives me a worried look. “Please tell me you won’t have a heart attack. I don’t really have time to look for a new maid of honor.”

“Thanks,” I huff. “No, I won’t have a heart attack. And I can’t slow down. There’s no time.” I look around the table.

“We have four days to get everything organized to give Nixon and Yasmin the perfect wedding day.”

“I thought the point of this whole thing now was so it’s as chill as possible,” Jade says, looking from Yasmin to me.

“That was the idea. We could simply get married at the registration of—”

“Registration office?” my voice hitches. She can’t be serious.

Yasmin pulls back and tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Well, yeah.”

“Please tell me you’re not serious.”

Yasmin opens her mouth, but before she can say anything else, a waitress comes to our table.

“Hey there, what can I getcha?”

“Marissa!” Jade turns around and faces the girl.

She’s around our age, dressed in a pale pink shirt with the café’s logo on it and a pair of cutoff shorts. Her golden-brown hair is pulled in a high ponytail with a few runaway locks surrounding her face and a pair of the most striking blue-green eyes I’ve ever seen before.

“Jade, so nice to see you here.”

Yasmin looks at Jade. “You guys know each other?”

“We met earlier today. Her boyfriend is the one who’s teaching us how to surf.”

My brows shoot up. “Your boyfriend is a surfer?”

Marissa chuckles, “Yes, he’s competing professionally, but he wanted to get a job over the summer here, so it made the most sense.”

“That’s cool,” Kate smiles.

“Isn’t it?” Penny turns to her sister. “What do you...”

“No.”

“But you didn’t even listen to what I wanted to say!” Penny protests.

“I don’t have to listen to you. I know you well enough. And no, I don’t think surfing is the best activity for you.”

“But it would be so much fun.”

“Not for me, it wouldn’t. Surfing isn’t riding, Penny. There’s no safety net to help you if things go south, just a big wide ocean ready to swallow you whole.”

“That is true,” Marissa agrees.

Penny pouts, “I hate it when you’re being so rational.”

Kate puts her arm over Penny’s shoulder and pulls her into her side. “I hate to be rational sometimes, but I’d rather be overprotective than risk losing you.”

“Did you guys have fun in class?” Marissa asks Jade and Chloe.

“Yes, I loved it,” Jade beams. “I’m trying to convince this one to go with me another day.”

“Of course, you liked it,” Chloe rolls her eyes. “You weren’t the one who kept falling off the board every couple of minutes.”

I could see what happened vividly in my mind. Chloe was a lot of things, but athletic wasn’t one of them. I seriously don’t know why she even decided to try it in the first place.

“Do you know how to surf?” I ask Marissa.

“I’m not nearly as good as Caleb, but I can manage well enough.” She smiles at Chloe. “And don’t worry too much about it. You’ll get the hang of it soon enough.”

Just then, somebody calls her name. She looks up at the woman standing in the doorway and shakes her head. “That’d be my mom. I better get your order before she strangles me since I should be helping, not chatting with customers.”

We all place our orders, and then Marissa goes on her way, stopping at another table.

“Okay,” I pull out a notepad I found stashed in the junk drawer in the kitchen from my bag and put it on the table, clasping my hands together. “Back to the topic...”

Yasmin opens her mouth, but I lift my finger to stop her from saying whatever’s on her mind.

“There’s chill—which I can one hundred percent get behind—and then there’s a disaster-in-waiting. You’re having the most perfect rushed wedding we can give you because you and Nixon deserve it.”

“Well, that’s true,” Kate agrees. “Take it from somebody who’s been going through it the last few months. No matter how much my family drives me nuts with their suggestions, I think I’d regret not having a proper wedding.”

Yasmin thinks about it for a moment. “Okay, so what are you suggesting?”

“I actually had an idea.” Jade bites her lips when we all turn to look at her.

“What kind of idea?” I ask, happy to finally have them look at this my way.

Jade nibbles at her lips for a moment before letting them pop. “How about you have a ceremony on the beach? At sunset?”

Yasmin’s lips slowly spread in a smile. She puts her hand over Jade’s and gives her a squeeze. “I actually like that.”

“I’ll take your photos, so you don’t have to worry about that, either.”

“That’s going to be perfect.”

I nod, writing down notes next to my already prepared to-do list. “Okay, now that’s settled. I figured we might throw the party later in the house’s backyard. Maybe try to find somebody who’d cater some simple food, so we don’t have to stress about that.”

I look up at Yasmin, and she nods. “Sounds good.”

I make a note on my list before going to the next item. “I’ll take care of the bachelorette party, and I already told Hayden to organize a bachelor’s party. Onto the ne—”

“Wait, what?”

I let out a sigh. Of course it wouldn’t be that easy.

“Oh yeah, I’m totally down for that,” Jade says excitedly.

“Me too! You can’t get married without a proper sendoff. We’ll dress up, get cocktails, and dance until our feet hurt so bad we can’t stand,” Chloe agrees. “There’s this one club I’ve seen...”

“Perfect!” I jot down the notes just as our cocktails arrive. A big glass of pale green alcohol appears in front of me. The glass is full of ice and mint, and there’s a little umbrella perched on top of it. “Now, if only I could find a shop that sells wedding dresses or something that resembles it.”

“Have you tried *The Siren*?”

Marissa shifts her tray from one hand to the other and rubs the back of her neck. “Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear you talking.”

“No worries. We’re on a tight schedule, and we would appreciate any help we can get. So what’s *The Siren*?”

“It’s this little boutique in one of the side alleys off the main streets. It’s pretty secluded, so mostly only locals know about it. It has different kinds of clothes, and sometimes they have dresses for special occasions. Not necessarily a wedding dress, but...”

“I don’t really want a traditional wedding dress,” Yasmin chimes in. “Maybe a fancier dress? It doesn’t even have to be white.”

“Then I’d definitely check it out,” Marissa nods, putting the rest of our drinks on the table. “My best friend and I found a few gems there over the years.”

I grab my little notepad and write down the name of the shop. “Thank you. We’ll definitely check it out. Do you mind giving me the address?”



Marissa smiles and rattles off the address that I carefully jot down. “Amazing. Thanks.”

“Anytime. Are you the bride?”

I look up from my notebook and notice she’s referring to me. “Oh no,” I shake my head and point at Yas. “She’s the one getting married. I’m just the maid of honor.”

Yasmin kicks me under the table.

“Ouch! That hurts.”

“There’s no *just* anything.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Where are you guys having the ceremony?” Marissa asks.

“Jade just suggested we should do it on the beach,” Yasmin says, taking a sip of her cocktail. “We rented this cute cottage that’s just on the sand. We have a big back porch, so we thought we’d just have a party there afterward. Cater some food.”

Marissa nods. “You should check La’akea. They do some amazing catering on the island. And Shelly’s Bakery if you want to have a cake done. Tell her Marissa sent you.”

I glance at her, my hand furiously scribbling over the paper. “That’s so nice of you.”

“Not a problem. We can’t have you leaving Hawaii without an *epic* wedding, now can we?”

I give Yasmin a pointed look. “That’s what I said.” I turn to Marissa. “Can you stay and have a drink with us?”

She looks around the café and lets out a sigh. “Not if I want to have a place to sleep tonight. Raincheck? You should come here another day. I’ll be working most of the afternoons, and I’d be more than happy to help if you have any other questions.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Have fun and holler if you need anything.” With one last smile, Marissa walks to the next customer.

I grab my mojito and lift my glass. “To an amazing wedding.”

“Even better friends,” Yasmin chimes in.

“And stellar memories,” Kate says, lifting her glass.

The rest of the group joins, and we clink our glasses together, and I know I’ll remember this very moment, surrounded by a group of amazing women I’d do anything for, forever.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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JADE

“I can’t believe you actually made me do this,” Chloe looks at me, her lips pressed in an unamused line. “Again.”

I laugh, grabbing my surfboard from the ocean as we make our way to the beach. “Admit it. You liked it.”

“I’ll admit no such thing.”

This only has me laughing harder. “Suit yourself.”

“That was really great, ladies,” Caleb grins at us. “I h—”

“Flirting with the tourists, Lawrence?” a blonde guy asks as he meets us at the beach, a surfboard in hand, a pair of swim trunks hanging low on his hips.

*Damn*, a girl could get used to this.

“Why didn’t I go to college somewhere close to the ocean?” Chloe mutters softly, so only I can hear her.

I give her a side glance. “Girl, my thoughts exactly.”

Caleb props his hand on his hip, his surfboard tucked under his other arm. “Hey, they asked you to give surfing lessons too, but your Ivy League-school ass was too preppy to take the job. No need to be jealous now.”

“I’d like to see you work a summer job and prepare for the law school entrance exams,” the blondie throws right back.

“Well, that’s your problem. Not everybody wants to be a fancy lawyer.”

“Screw off, Lawrence.”

Caleb laughs as he pulls the other guy in a half-hug. “It’s good to see you too, asshole.”

“A friend?” Chloe asks as the two men pull back.

“Yes, Tayler and I go *way* back.”

“You’re making us sound old,” Tayler grumbles. “We went to high school together.”

“Until Ty here decided to go all fancy on us and go to the mainland for college.”

“Something they’ll never let me live down,” Ty rolls his eyes.

“No chance in hell,” Caleb grins, tilting his head toward us. “These ladies are Chloe and Jade. They’re taking surfing lessons.”

“More like falling lessons,” Chloe corrects.

“You’re getting there. You got up on the board.”

“For like three seconds.” Chloe’s brows pull together, her face twisting in an ugly grimace.

“Well, that’s three seconds longer than last time.”

“Tell that to the other three thousand five hundred, and ninety-seven seconds I spent in the water.”

I shake my head at her and look at the guys. “In case you didn’t notice, Chloe doesn’t like when she’s not good at something.”

“I’m not *that* obsessive. All I’m saying is...” her words trail off when I lift my brow at her. “You know what? Just forget it. It’s all good.”

“Yup,” I nod, trying to hold in my laughter.

“I’m fine sucking at surfing.”

Caleb’s eyes meet mine. “Totally.”

“Totally and completely fine.”

We burst into laughter. Chloe glares at us and drops down to her towel. “I hate you guys.”

I give her a little shove. “No you don’t.”

“That’s what you’d like to think.”

“Well, as much as I’d like to stay and watch you surf a little bit longer, I have to get going. I have another client coming up in a few minutes. And then I promised Marissa I’d drive her grandpa grocery shopping.”

“That’s fine. Thank you so much for teaching us.” I look at the boards. “You need any help carrying those?”

“Nah,” Caleb waves me off. “Ty will help me. I’ll see you, girls, later? Marissa said she invited you to Azure Pearl.”

“Yeah, we were there yesterday. It’s a nice bar.”

“It is. Marissa’s family works really hard.” Somebody calls out Caleb’s name. He looks up at the guy and nods before turning his attention to us. “I’ll see you later.”

We watch them leave.

“Damn, if he weren’t so into Marissa, I’d totally hook up with him,” I say with a longing in my voice.

“Touché, girl.”

“Who’s the dude?”

I jolt at the sudden question coming from just behind me. Before I can think too much, my body goes into an offensive stance. My fingers clench into a fist as I lift my leg and swiftly turn around, ready to kick. The motion is instinctual, drilled into me from years of training.

A hand grabs my leg, my eyes meeting the cold brown ones staring at me with that perpetually bored expression on his face. Prescott lifts his brows. “Kickboxing?”

My heart is beating a mile a minute, and I’m breathing hard, still ready to attack.

“What the hell, dude? She almost cut your head off,” Spencer says, his eyes huge as he stares at my leg as if he’s seeing it for the very first time.

“She didn’t cut my head off.”

I try to tug my leg out of Prescott’s grip, but he’s not budging. “Can I have my leg back now?”

Prescott’s fingers grip my leg tighter. “Next time you try to do that, you’ll land on your ass.”

I feel the nerve in my jaw tick. “Well, next time, don’t come sneaking up on me, and I won’t have a reason to,” I

throw right back at him, tugging harder just as he lets go of my leg.

Freaking asshole.

“I didn’t know you’re into kickboxing,” Chloe comments.

“I’m not. Well, not any longer anyway. I trained for a little while back in high school.” I give Prescott a pointed look. “Nixon wanted me to learn how to defend myself from any possible assholes that might come my way.”

Prescott’s lips press in a tight line.

“That’s cool. Why’d you stop?”

Letting out a slow breath, I turn my attention to Spencer. “I…” Memories of the year before come rushing back. I lick my suddenly dry lips. “I guess I just outgrew it.”

Prescott crosses his arms over his chest. “That kick didn’t seem like you outgrew it at all.”

It was one thing to ignore him while he was just brooding silently, but completely different when he actually opened his mouth. It’s like I couldn’t help myself. I had to bite back. It was an instinct I couldn’t ignore, very similar to the kickboxing move.

I swear, there’s nobody else out there who drives me as crazy as Prescott Wentworth does.

“You surprised me.” I narrow my eyes on him. “You shouldn’t corner women like that and expect to get out of the interaction intact.”

Spencer throws his arm over my shoulders. “No need for a blood bath. He’ll behave. Right, Prescott?”

The man in question just keeps his mouth shut.

What a surprise.

Not.

“So what were you two up to, anyway? Who was the guy?”

I give Spencer a pointed look and shrug from under his arm. “Not that it’s any of your business, but Caleb was teaching us how to surf.”

“Yeah, right,” Prescott scoffs.

My back stiffens. “Do you have something to say, Wentworth?”

“Not a thing.”

“Because it seemed like you did.”

“We’re just trying to look out for our best friend’s little sister,” Spencer interferes once again.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.” I lift my chin a bit higher. “I have one big brother, and that’s enough. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have to change before going wedding dress shopping.”

I start to walk around Prescott, but he grabs my forearm. “Then you know Nixon wouldn’t like it.”

“What Nixon likes or doesn’t like is his issue, not mine.” I look down at his fingers. They glide down my skin all the way to my wrist, making the goosebumps rise on my flesh. “Now get your hands off of me, or I’ll do it for you. Your choice.”

The time seems to slow down as we just stare at one another. Not breathing. Not blinking.

Finally, after what seems like forever, Prescott uncurls his fingers. Before he can let go completely, I pull my arm out of his and walk away.

My skin tingles from where he touched me, the need to rub the spot overwhelming, but I rein it in.

“What was that all about?” Chloe asks as she rushes to catch up to me. And although I know I should probably slow down, I can’t bring myself to do it. I have to get away from him.

“No idea,” I shrug, trying to play nonchalant, although I’m not sure I’m fooling anybody. “He obviously has a problem.”

“It didn’t look like that to me.”



I roll my eyes at her. “Whatever.”

---

PRESCOTT

“What the hell was that, dude?” Spencer asks, clearly irritated. “Do you really have to push her like that?”

My gaze is still glued to the spot where Jade Cole disappeared to. The image of her retreating ass in that tiny-ass red bikini etched into my mind.

Blinking, I turn around and face Spencer. “I’m not pushing.”

The dude gives me a ‘who are you trying to bullshit’ look.

I shift my attention to the ocean, not in the mood to discuss this now. Or ever.

“What’s your deal with her anyway?”

But, of course, he won’t let it slide just like that.

“No deal.” I shrug and start walking toward the bar where we’re meeting the rest of the guys. Nixon and Hayden went suit shopping and stopped by the store to get more booze, while Emmett went only God knows where with Kate and her sister. Now we were all meeting up for drinks. If you asked me, they couldn’t come fast enough.

“Yeah, right,” Spencer scoffs, catching up to me. “Tell that to somebody else.”

He’s quiet for a moment as if he’s expecting me to say something, but I keep my mouth shut.

Spencer shakes his head. “You know Nixon will kill you if you even look at his sister funny, right?”

“I’m not looking at her at all.”

Except when she’s wearing barely any clothes, and all those curves are right out in the open. I couldn’t help myself but look.

*Yeah, right.*

“Didn’t look like that from where I was standing earlier.”

“Maybe you should find a different position then. Seriously, Spence, drop it.”

He lifts his arms in surrender. “I’m just warning you.”

“I don’t need warnings. There’s nothing going on between Cole’s little sister and me.”

Not only would it be crossing every single bro line, but she’s infuriating, overly opinionated, and a stubborn little thing that has complicated written on her forehead.

I don’t do complicated.

Never did, and I’m not going to start now that I’m about to enter the most challenging year of my life, where everything’s on the line.

*I can’t disappoint him.*

*I won’t disappoint him.*

“Took you long enough,” Nixon mutters as we sit at their table.

I give him a side glance. “What has your panties in a twist? Shouldn’t you be a picture of bliss? After all, you’re getting the girl you want.”

“I would be if Callie didn’t send us to the shop to rent the suits for the wedding. The guy poked and probed us for the last couple of hours.”

“Hey now, it was your idea to get married in a haste,” Spencer chuckles.

“I know,” Nixon groans. “How do we still have time to get fitted for suits then? It makes no sense.”

“Never underestimate the power of females when it comes to getting shit done,” Hayden shakes his head. “*Especially* if it revolves around weddings and babies.”

Just then, the waitress comes over with our beers. She places them on our table and straightens, giving us a flirty smile as she flips her blond hair behind her. “Can I get you anything else?”

“We’re good for now, love,” I say, giving her a once-over.

“Sure thing, just holler if you need anything.”

She turns back, and my eyes fall down to the curve of her ass peeking from under the line of her shorts.

*Talk about tiny.*

Somebody slaps me on the shoulder.

“Do you really have to be such a pig?” Emmett asks.

“What?” I rub my chin before slowly turning my attention to my best friends. “I’m just looking.”

“You’re gawking.”

“No harm in that. Gotta show my appreciation for the lady’s choice of clothes.”

Emmett shakes his head. “You’re seriously unbelievable.”

“She does look fine,” Spencer agrees, looking after the waitress.

“See? I’m not the only one who thinks that.” I grab my beer and take a long pull. The cold liquid slides down my throat effortlessly. “You guys have turned into monks since you’ve started dating. You need to chill.”

Emmett starts to open his mouth, probably to chastise me again, but Spencer is faster. “So, did you get the monkey suits?”

“Yeah,” Nixon runs his fingers through his hair before grabbing his beer. “After two excruciatingly long hours, Callie finally gave her blessing to the one she thought was best.”

“Suits for a beach wedding.” Seriously, what’s wrong with these people?

“Suits for a beach wedding,” Hayden nods. “At least she agreed that having dress shoes would be too much.”

*You think? Seriously, how did we get ourselves in this situation? This was supposed to be a fun vacation. What about weddings screams fun to people?*

“Where are the girls now, anyway?” Spencer asks.

Hayden checks his phone. “Wedding dress shopping.”

“More shopping?” I shake my head, feeling so lucky I don’t have to deal with any of this. Well, not really. There’s one part about this whole thing I’m interested in. “What I want to know is what are we doing for the bachelor’s party?!”

“We got some more booze and food, so just chill at the beach house?” Nixon shrugs.

“Just chill at the beach house?” Spencer looks at him. “Are you insane?”

*Finally! Somebody that agrees with me.*

“Dude, it’s your last few days as a free man,” I point out. “You should enjoy it.”

“I’ll enjoy it even more...”

I shake my head before he can even finish. No way are we staying in like some old ladies. Hell, at this point, I’d bet even old ladies have more fun than us. “We should find a strip club. Have some good ol’ fashioned guy fun.”

Hayden’s head snaps up at that. Good to know there is something that can get his attention. “Nope, no way. Callie specifically said not to go to any strip clubs.”

I lift my brows. “Do you listen to everything Callie says?”

“When I agree with her? Hell, yes. I don’t need to watch naked chicks when I have a sexy girlfriend waiting for me in my bed every night.”

“Pussy whipped,” Spencer coughs, smirking.

Couldn’t agree more.

“Think whatever you want, but I’ve been having the best sex of my life since Callie and I started dating. There’s just something about being with one girl who knows you completely, inside and out.”

“Cheers to that,” Emmett lifts his beer.

“Well, call it whatever you want. We’re not staying home like some losers on your last night as a free man.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest, thinking. “I think I might have an idea.”

# CHAPTER NINE

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YASMIN

I purse my lips as I look at my reflection, all the while Callie works the dress's back zipper.

“All done.” Callie takes a step back, our gazes meeting in the reflection in the mirror. “What do you think?”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, the material rustling as it moves. “I don't know.”

Which has really been my go-to answer for any of the dresses I've tried on today, so yeah. Not really helpful.

My gaze shifts to the other three dresses I asked to try out. They were all gorgeous, but none of them felt like... me.

“Are you done?” Jade yells from the waiting room.

“Yes, we wanna see,” Chloe joins her, the two of them giggling. “Hurry up!”

I let out a sigh. The two of them have loved every single dress, and considering we're short on time, I feel like I'm being difficult for no reason whatsoever. I should probably just decide on one of the dresses and call it a day so everybody can get back to the beach and the fun part of this vacation.

“I know what you're thinking.” Callie places her hands on my shoulders, snapping me out of my thoughts. “At least show it off. You don't have to get any of these if you don't love them.”

“We've already been to three stores,” I point out.

Callie turns me around and gives me a reassuring squeeze. “And there's one left. If you don't find something you love, we'll figure it out.”

My tongue darts over my lower lip as I nod.

“Okay, let's show them this one.” I drop my hands, and they disappear in the puffy fabric of the skirt. “I swear this didn't look that puffy when we were looking at it out in the store.”



“It’s a princess style. What did you expect?”

“Yasmin!” Jade bellows.

“Coming!” I yell loud enough so they can hear me. “I’m coming!”

Callie pulls open the curtain, and we walk into the waiting area. The girls look up, still chuckling between themselves.

I lift my hands in the air and do a little spin. Or at least I try to, but all the tulle makes it hard to move. Seriously, why would somebody choose to spend a day in this?

Kate gives me a once-over and purses her lips. “It looks... interesting.”

I snort, “That’s one way of putting it.”

“It’s pretty,” Jade counters. “I love the little details.”

She’s right. Those would be nice if there weren’t so much material. “I feel like that roll of toilet paper that slips out of your fingers, and it unrolls, but when you try to roll it back together, it’s just a mess.”

Jade pulls her brows together and bursts into laughter. “That was very specific.”

“Well, that’s how I feel.” I let my hands drop by my sides. “Why is this so hard? It’s just a dress.”

“Because it’s not just a dress.” Callie wraps her arm around me. “It’s a dress in which you’re going to get married to the love of your life. And even if you think it doesn’t matter, deep down, it does. Tell me you don’t want to go down the aisle...”

“Beach,” I correct.

“And have Nixon turn around and just stare at you because he can’t believe this stunning goddess is going to be his wife.”

“Stunning goddess?” I give her a side glance. “Now you’re exaggerating.”

“Am not.” She nudges me with an elbow. “Admit it.”

I open my mouth to protest, for the sake of it, if nothing else, but just then, the attendant joins us.

“What do you think?” the attendant asks, a polite smile on her mouth.

“They’re all nice, but I’ll have to think about it.”

Her smile drops, but she schools her features quickly. “Of course. You have to love the dress in which you’ll get married. Would you like to see some other models?”

Jade steps closer. “Unfortunately, we’re late for a...” she looks around as if searching for an answer. “Thing.”

I hold back my groan.

*Smooth, Jade. Really smooth.*

“Of course. Let me help you undress.”

I go back into the dressing room, where the attendant helps me get out of the fluffy dress. Seriously, how is one supposed to pee in that thing? Forget sexy lingerie; I’d need a diaper. Nope, not happening.

I quickly change into my sundress, and then we leave the shop.

“That was so uneventful,” Jade sighs, tilting her head back, the hot afternoon sun grazing her already tanned skin. “And now I can’t get the image of you wrapped in toilet paper out of my head. Can you imagine Nixon’s face if you were to show up like that?”

We all burst into giggles at that, which is exactly what I needed right about now.

“I’m so sorry for making you spend your afternoon trying to help me with this. I know this isn’t what you had in mind when we decided to come here.”

“Oh, please,” Chloe drawls. “What better things do we have to do?”

“Sunbathe and flirt with cute boys?” I give her and Jade a pointed look. “And I think that’s a direct quote.”

Jade waves me off. “Boys are more trouble than they’re worth, anyway.”

Chloe grins. “Besides, there’s always the bachelorette party. We’ll get our flirting in soon enough. Don’t worry.”

Callie loops her arm through mine. “But first, we’ll find you the perfect dress.”

“There were a few pretty ones. I like that tight-fitting dress she tried on first. It looked elegant,” Kate chimes as we walk down the street. “Which one did you like the best?”

I purse my lips, thinking about it for a moment before I shrug. “They were all fine, I guess.”

“Nope.” Chloe shakes her head. “You need more than fine! After all, you’re only getting married once.”

Callie looks up from her phone. “We still have The Siren to check out.”

“Can we get ice cream before?” I ask. My whole skin is sticky from sweat, and changing from dress to dress didn’t help in the least. “It’s so hot today.”

“No,” Callie tugs me closer. “First dress shopping, and then if you find something you like, we can celebrate with ice cream.”

I purse my lips. “You’re just trying to bribe me to play along.”

Callie smiles. “Is it working?”

“Did you do the same thing with the boys this morning?”

When Callie said she’d give me a real wedding, even though we barely had a few days to plan, I figured she’d get some balloons, maybe order a cake, but the girl went all out. And I do mean *all* out. Thanks to Marissa’s help, she already had the catering and the cake ordered for the wedding day, and she spent all of today shopping for the wedding attire.

“I threatened them with bodily harm, which seemed to be scary enough. They were even so good that we managed to

stop by the flower shop and buy decorations for both the bachelorette party and the wedding.”

I give her a side glance. “Sometimes you scare me, Cals.”

“That’s good to know.” She gives me a wicked smile and tugs me closer. “C’mon, you’ve gotta earn that ice cream.”

Callie leads the way, following the directions on her phone. Marissa wasn’t joking when she said the shop was hidden from the main street. A big sign with a mermaid hangs over the wall, in a side alley, away from the prying tourists’ eyes.

Callie checks her phone before looking around. “Looks like this is it,” she shrugs, pushing the door open.

The bell chimes softly as we enter, the cool air hitting me in the face and making goosebumps rise on my skin.

“This looks promising,” Jade says, already checking out a rack of clothes.

A young woman comes from the back room, wiping her hand on a towel. She gives us a tentative smile as she takes us in. “Hello. How can I help you?”

“Hey there,” Callie smiles back as she makes her way toward the woman. “A friend of ours recommended your shop since we have an impromptu wedding this weekend.”

The girls have scattered around the shop, looking over the different dresses, so I follow suit. The shop is organized by color, so I go straight for the lighter section. White and cream are mixed with pale peach and pink shades. I look over each hanger, still half-listening to Callie’s conversation.

“But this isn’t a wedding shop,” the woman points out.

“I know, but we’re not looking for a traditional wedding dress. More like a sundress, but more elegant?”

“Don’t forget about the dresses for us. Which I think I might have just found.” I turn around to see Jade holding a navy-blue dress against her body. “What do you think?”

Chloe nods her head in approval. “It’ll look crazy good with your eyes. You should go and try it.”

“Sounds fine by me,” she throws the dress over her forearm. “Did you find anything you like, Yas?”

“I’m not...” I start, but a tentative touch on my forearm stops me. I turn around to find no other than Penny standing next to me. She’s been quiet for the most part, listening but not really participating. I guess it makes sense since she couldn’t actually see the dresses.

“How about this one?” she asks, and for the first time, I notice the dress she’s holding in her hand. “Kate told me these are lighter colors, but I just like the pattern.”

“Penny, this is...” I shake my head, my fingers sliding over the delicate lace pattern of the dress.

“Yas?”

I turn around, hanger in hand, to find Callie standing by my side, the attendant right behind her.

“Did you find something?”

“If you don’t like it...” Penny starts, but I stop her.

“No, it’s beautiful. Thank you so much, Penelope.” I pull the young girl into a side hug before turning to the rest of our friends. “Maybe I did.”

# CHAPTER TEN

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HAYDEN

“Why can’t we do this thing together?” Slipping the last button in place, I look over my shoulder at Callie. She’s standing in front of the dresser, leaning into the little mirror so she can apply some of that shimmery stuff on her eyelids. The breeze coming from the open window makes her dress sway around her legs.

“What do you mean, ‘why can’t we do this together?’” Putting the box onto the dresser, she grabs one of the tubes and leans in once again, her lips pursing as she starts drawing a thin line just above her eyelid.

I lean against the wall and watch in fascination as she works with surgical precision. “I mean, why don’t we all just go out together and have fun?”

Finally happy with the look, Callie straightens and turns to me. And okay, damn, the results are sexy as hell. The shimmery stuff makes the blue of her irises stand out, and that line makes her eyes seem wider somehow.

“Because it’s a bachelor and bachelorette party!”

“So?”

I still didn’t see the issue there. We could all go out together as a group, drink, dance, keep an eye on the girls, so some douchebag doesn’t cross the line. You know, the usual.

“So the bachelor and bachelorette parties are designed so the bride and groom can spend one last night as single people with their friends and have fun.”

Pushing from the wall, I slowly make my way to her until we’re standing toe to toe. “See, that’s where you’re wrong.”

Callie tilts her head back. “How so?”

“They’re not really single.” I trace my hand over her exposed collarbone. The dress has the tiniest straps I’ve ever seen, and they’re barely clinging to her shoulder. Callie’s eyes

fall shut for a moment, goosebumps rising on her skin. “Are they?”

“Semantics,” Callie breathes, her voice barely audible.

“Very important semantics.” I lean down and press a soft kiss at the crook of her neck. “Besides, how am I just supposed to let you go out dressed like this?”

Callie pulls back, suddenly completely sober. “What’s wrong with my dress?”

My eyes run down her body, my tongue sliding over my lower lip. “Abso-fucking-lutely nothing. That’s the whole issue. You look sexy as hell.”

I wrap my arms around her, sliding them all the way down to her ass and pulling her closer, so she can feel exactly what she does to me as I lean down to crush my mouth against hers. Or I would if she didn’t press her finger against my lips, stopping me just before my lips can touch hers.

“Oh, no, you don’t.”

“What do you mean, ‘no, I don’t?’” I frown. “I can’t even kiss my girlfriend?”

Callie shakes her head, putting even more distance between us. “I just put on this lipstick, and you’re not messing it up for me.”

“Why not? You look sexy when you’re all messed up.”

She rolls her baby blues at me. “The only person who thinks that is you. And that’s because it’s one territorial bullshit or another.”

I groan in protest as Callie slips from my arms. “It’s not bullshit. I’m just making sure people are aware that you’re taken. That’s all.”

She gives me a coy look over her shoulder. “Maybe you should find other ways to do that?”

I just stare at her for a moment, unsure of what she means, but before I can wrap my head around it, there’s a knock on the door.



“Guys,” Prescott opens the door, a hand covering his eyes. “Uber is here.”

I blink, but he’s still standing there like an idiot with a hand over his eyes. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Hey, I’m not walking in on you again. Once was more than enough.”

“We’re dressed, asshole,” I mutter, crossing my arms over my chest.

“That doesn’t mean shit, and you know it.” He spreads his fingers so he can take a peek, only opening his eyes when he’s content with what he sees or doesn’t see, I guess. “You coming or what?”

I turn to Callie, but she waves her hand, dismissing me. “Off with you. Have fun tonight.” She starts to turn around, but then her attention shifts back to us, eyes narrowing. “But not *too* much fun. I’m looking at you, Wentworth.”

“Me? Why me?” Prescott asks, blinking innocently. As if anybody would fall for that.

“Because I know you. I want you to be on your best behavior.” Her brow quirks upward. “Capeesh?”

“What do you think I’ll do?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Callie taps her finger against her chin, pretending to think about it. “Take them to the closest strip club?”

Prescott presses his hand against his chest. “You wound me, Callie.”

“Let’s go.” I push him toward the door, my gaze darting over my shoulder. “That same thing goes both ways. Don’t have too much fun.”

Callie blows me a kiss. “I’ll see you later, Hades.”

The rest of the guys are already waiting for us downstairs. We huddle all into the Uber, and I give the driver the name of the casino I found online. The drive to the city lasts some

twenty minutes, which we spend discussing the upcoming draft and all the possibilities. It was hard to believe that after all these months, *years* really, it's come down to just weeks before I'll finally know if all the hard work has been worth it.

The drivers pull up in front of the casino. Thanking him, we get out into the brightly lit street.

Prescott rubs his hands together. "So about that strip club..."

"Don't even think about it," Nixon glares at him. "I'm not spending my last night as a single man looking at other women's tits."

"What if they're a really nice pair of tits?"

Nixon shakes his head adamantly. "I don't care how nice they are. There's only one pair that interests me."

"You're getting boring in your old age, Cole."

"We're the same age, dude," Nixon points out as we make our way across the street where the casino is.

"Whatever. Who knows, maybe I'll get lucky tonight."

Emmett chuckles. "Yeah, yeah, keep on dreaming."

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## CALLIE

“To the last fling before the ring!” Chloe yells, lifting her cocktail glass in the air. Everybody joins in, clinking our glasses together as we cheer loud enough so we can be heard over the loud beat of the bass.

Shortly after the guys left, our Uber arrived to pick us up. Chloe and Jade found this club they wanted to visit while here, so they took it upon themselves to book a booth for us to have a bachelorette party. Something I was grateful for since it was one less thing on my very long to-do list.

“You sure you’re doing this?” Jade asks, taking a sip of her drink. “There’s still time to back down.”

“Positive,” Yasmin smiles, fixing her sash with “Bride to be” boldly written over the pale pink material.

“I mean, I guess I should be happy you’ll be the one responsible for my brother starting tomorrow.”

Yas shoves her away. “He’s not that bad.”

“Talk to me after you’ve lived with him for *nineteen* years.”

“While we’re on the topic of living arrangements. Where are you two going to live when you get back?” Kate asks suddenly.

Yasmin’s hand stops with her straw just shy of her mouth as she thinks about it. “We haven’t actually talked about it.” There’s a beat of silence as she thinks it through. “I guess he could always stay with me?”

“In the dorm?” Chloe gives her a skeptical look. “I’d love to see how that goes.”

“I guess you could always move in with us,” I shrug, taking a sip of my Mai Tai. The sweet, cool liquid sliding down my dry throat. Yummy. This was exactly what the doctor prescribed after the mayhem of the last few days.

“Us?” Penny asks. “How many of you live together?”

“Umm... let’s see.” I place my glass on the table and lift a finger with each name I tick off. “Hayden and I, Nixon, Zane, Maddox and Alyssa, and well, I guess soon the baby will be there too.”

Damn, I didn’t even realize up until this point how many people actually live in our house. It’s a big place, but still. I’m surprised we all function so well.

“That’s not including everybody that comes and goes on a daily basis,” Kate points out.

“True,” I agree. The house has been extremely loud lately, but honestly, I didn’t mind it. After my parents died, I lived with my aunt, and it had been very lonely, so I didn’t mind all the company. “What do you say, Yas? One last time being roommates before you guys find an apartment of your own next year, so you can have all the wild newly-wed sex you want?”

Jade groans, “TMI, girls. T-motherfucking-MI.”

“Oh, please,” Yasmin laughs. “As if you’re a prude.”

“I’m no prude. I’m just not interested in seeing you guys going at it.” Jade visibly shudders. “I think I need my brain bleached.”

My phone vibrates in my purse. I pull it out and check the message.

“What are you smiling about?” Chloe asks, looking over my shoulder.

“Hayden sent a picture of the guys.”

“Let me see.”

Yasmin tries to grab the phone out of my hand, but Jade is faster.

“Nope. We’re not doing this now. This is a bachelorette party. No men allowed,” she turns around, making sure to meet Kate, Yas, and my eyes. “In any way, shape, or form.”

Yasmin purses her lips. “You’re no fun.”

“Well, you’ll be having fun.” She locks the phone and slips it into her purse, tugging Yasmin to her feet. “On the dance floor. C’mon, all of you.”

Finishing what’s left in my glass, I get to my feet, and together we go to the dance floor just as the music changes to the familiar beat of reggaeton. Yasmin squeals loudly and grabs my hand, lifting it in the air as she sings along. There’s nothing like a good beat to get this girl moving.

Closing my eyes, I let the music pull me in, that sweet ache waking in my heart like it always does when I dance. The alcohol helps dull the pain in my ruined leg, if only slightly, but any sudden move, and I can feel that zap of pain spread through the limb, making my muscles clench.

Song after song, we stay on the dance floor. And although the club is out in the open, I can barely feel the breeze from all the people surrounding us. The place is packed, although I’m not sure why that surprises me.

Chloe and Kate take it upon themselves to supply us with drinks as we dance the night away, giggling like a group of school girls.

I’m not sure how long we’re at it, just that a sheer layer of sweat clings to my skin, and my head is all fuzzy from drinking too much when I had barely anything to eat.

“You’re so drunk,” Yas laughs as I stumble forward and knock into her.

“Am not!” I protest way too loudly. “Somebody pushed me.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re just a lightweight.”

“Nobody can be a lightweight after being your friend for a year. I swear I don’t even flinch when drinking tequila, and that shit’s awful.”

“Hey,” Yas jabs her finger into my collarbone. “Don’t you dare insult tequila. It’s the best drink ever.”

“It does its purpose, I guess.”

“You two are funny when you’re drunk,” Kate laughs, shaking her head.

“We’re not drunk,” I protest once again.

Yas nods her head in agreement. “Just positively buzzed. Which is the whole point of tonight.”

“You do know you’re getting married tomorrow, right?” Kate asks. “You don’t really want to look all green in your wedding photos.”

Yasmin huffs, “I’m not going to look green since I’m not drunk. Just buzzed.”

“I think we should get you more to drink, huh?” I wiggle my brows, which only makes Kate laugh harder.

I want to ask her what’s so funny when hands slide around my waist, pulling me back. I start to turn around and tell the guy to leave me alone when I’m met with a familiar pair of bright green eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Prescott might have lost a little too much money, so we decided to leave while we were ahead,” Hayden says, taking me in.

I narrow my eyes at him. “And how did you find us?”

Hayden grins, rubbing the back of his neck. “Nixon might have stalked your social media, and apparently, Jade’s been busy posting all night.”

“So you decided to come here and get us?”

“Hey, in my defense, it was either that or the strip club. Prescott insisted he needed some consolation after losing. The dude’s poker face is for shit.”

“Why am I not surprised?” I mutter to myself and poke him in the chest. “No strippers for you, mister.”

Hayden leans closer, his lips brushing against my ear, his fingers tightening on my waist. “Only if you’re the one stripping for me.”

I feel my core clench at his words, the huskiness in his voice.

Hayden pulls back just enough so he can look into my face. “What do you say, Angel?” His hand slides to the small of my back, pulling me closer to him. His leg slips between my thighs, pressing just against my clit, every move of his body making me rub against his leg to the sultry beat of the song. “Will you dance for me?”

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, fingers digging into his neck and pulling him so our foreheads are touching. “When you do things like this, you’re making it so hard to say no.”

“Then don’t...”

“Callie, that’s our song!” Yasmin throws herself at me, giggling as the new song starts playing.

“Is it?” I ask, my whole body still buzzing with all the pent-up energy.

“Yes!” she tugs at my hand. “We have to dance.”

“Didn’t we agree it’s time to go?” Nixon asks, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at his fiancée.

“After this song.” Yasmin pulls me away from Hayden. We join the girls who’ve already formed a group of sorts, and we dance like crazy to Beyonce’s *Run The World*. So crazy that both Yasmin and I almost fall to our asses at one point. Or we would have if there weren’t two hulking football players watching over us and catching us at the very last minute, but even that doesn’t stop us from giggling like crazy.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Hayden slips his hands under my arms and pulls me to my feet. “It’s time to go home.”

“My legs feel wobbly,” I say, letting him carry most of my weight. “Or is the world shaking?”

Hayden chuckles. “It’s definitely your legs.”

I blink, focusing my attention on him. “I think you’ll have to do the stripping tonight.”

“Don’t worry, Angel. I’ve gotcha.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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YASMIN

I groan loudly as the sun hits me in the face. My head is pounding as if somebody took drumsticks and is banging them against my skull.

*Damn, what did I do last night?*

I run my hand over my face, rubbing my fingers over the pulsing temples, not that it helps alleviate the pain or the loud echo of my blood rushing through my veins. I'm so fixed on the probing pain in my head it takes me a moment to remember what happened last night.

Bachelorette party.

Cocktails.

Dancing.

*Wedding.*

I blink my eyes open, slower this time, only to find Nixon lying on his side, already awake and watching me silently.

"Morning," I croak, my throat so dry I can barely speak.

"Morning." He pushes a strand of hair away from my face. "You good?"

*Good?* If I had it in me, I'd scoff at the absurdity of that question, but it feels like that requires more strength than I currently have. *Not even close.*

"How bad was last night?"

Nixon chuckles. "It wasn't that bad."

"The pounding in my head begs to differ." I bury my face into his chest, his warm body enveloping mine perfectly.

"I tried giving you some Tylenol before going to sleep, but you were out as soon as you sat down."

*Damn, talk about a wild night.*

“What about your night? Why are you so chipper when I’m ready to puke?”

“We definitely didn’t have as much fun as you girls did. Played some poker, lost money, had a few drinks, the usual.” He takes my hand in his, our fingers intertwining. Then he brings our joined hands to his mouth, his lips brushing against my ring finger. “Tonight, though...”

I graze my teeth over my lower lip as I stare into his clear blue eyes, a shiver running down my spine.

“Tonight,” I promise softly.

He leans down, his mouth pressing against mine. I let out a soft sigh at the touch of his lips over mine, my fingers digging into his neck and pulling him closer.

Just as his tongue slides into my mouth, there’s a sharp knock on the door, the only warning before Callie peeks her head through the crack. “Good, you’re awake.”

She pushes the door open and enters without a care in the world.

“What are you doing?” I ask, pulling the sheet higher over my chest, although Nixon helped me change into a loose-fitting tee before putting me to bed.

“Getting your ass out of bed.” As if to confirm it, she tugs the sheet off and grabs my hand pulling me to my feet. “It’s already after ten. We have to get you ready.”

“But the wedding isn’t until late afternoon,” I protest, looking longingly at the bed.

“Perfection takes time.” Callie rolls her eyes and pushes me toward the door. “C’mon, there’s a lot of work to be done.”

I look over my shoulder at her. “How are you so chipper this morning?” I give her a once over. “And how is it that you’re already dressed?”

“Because I made Hayden wake me up with him and had like three coffees since.”

“That would explain the twitch in your jaw.”

Callie glares at me. “My jaw doesn’t twitch. Anyhow...” she drawls, giving me another push toward the door. “Chop, chop. The day’s short, and we still have a lot to accomplish.”

“Still?” I glance over my shoulder at her. “What were you up to?”

“Getting everything ready for tonight, of course,” she says as if it’s obvious. “Off with you to my room. We’ve converted it into a bridal suite for the day. And you...” she turns her attention to Nixon. “Get your ass out of bed, I need you to go help the guys downstairs with something, and then you have to get ready, too. It’s game time, people. It’s game time.”

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“ARE WE DONE?” I ask, shifting in my seat.

The girls decided it would be so much fun if I didn’t see myself until I put my dress on so I could get the full effect of my look, and I readily agreed since I was too tired and too hungover to protest. Especially since Callie agreed I should take a long bath first, where I got to doze off for a little while longer, followed by a coffee, breakfast, and a mimosa. In exactly that order, but after hours of having my hair pulled and being poked with different makeup brushes, I’m done.

*Why didn’t we get married at sunrise?*

“Stay still for just a little bit longer,” Chloe says as she leans over me, tickling my eyelids with one of her many makeup brushes. “Okay, done.”

I blink my eyes open and look up at my friends, who have all gathered behind Chloe and are staring at me.

“What do you think?” I ask, smiling tentatively.

“You look gorgeous, Yas,” Callie snuffles softly, pulling me up for a hug.

There’s a soft *click* as Jade snaps the photo like she’s been doing ever since we all gathered in the make-shift bridal suite to get ready for the wedding.

“Hey, no crying!” Chloe chastises. “I didn’t spend the last hour doing her makeup for nothing.”

“I told you to use waterproof mascara,” Callie chuckles, pulling away.

Jade lowers the camera and checks the screen for a second before looking up at us. “You look amazing, Yas. Nixon won’t know what hit him.”

The excitement that’s been slowly building inside of me ever since Nixon proposed finally reached its boiling point. It’s like my whole body is one big nerve ending and every little touch or move makes my whole body erupt.

I haven’t seen Nixon since Callie pulled me out of bed this morning and ushered me into her room that was transformed into the bride’s dressing room. While the other girls were coming and going, helping Callie set everything up for the wedding.

“We have some thirty minutes before go-time,” Kate says, the curling iron in her hand. Penny is sitting in front of her, her blonde hair almost completely curled.

Callie nods and turns to me. “Ready for the dress?”

All the girls are already dressed. They’re all wearing different colors and styles of dresses since I didn’t want to bother with bridesmaids considering the wedding is small as it is. I take them in, drinking in the moment.

This is it.

In half an hour, I’m going to walk out of this room down to the man I love, and we’re going to get married.

My throat bobs as the nerves make my belly roll. I bite the inside of my cheek and nod. “Let’s do this.”

Callie goes to the closet and pulls the last dress out of it. I slip out of my robe, leaving me only in a matching pair of lacy bra and panties. The excitement in the room is almost palpable as Callie unbuttons the back of the dress before giving it to me so I can slip inside.

“Why does this feel different?” I breathe, slipping my arms into the sheer material. “It’s just a dress.”

“Because it’s not *just* a dress,” Callie says, moving closer. I pull my hair over my shoulder, so it’s not getting in the way as Callie slowly starts to slip each button in its place. “This dress, today, it’s different as it should be. Would it have been the same if you and Nixon just went to the registry office and got it done there? Probably, but I wanted you to have this moment because you guys deserve nothing less.”

My throat grows tighter with each word she says. How can it not? Saying yes to Nixon was so easy, effortless in so many ways, but this... this feels monumental. Like I’m on a rollercoaster, and once I get through the ride, everything will be different.

The final button in place, Callie turns me around just as Kate pulls the sheet off the mirror, and I see myself for the very first time. They curled my hair and let it fall in loose waves down my shoulders. Chloe went for a natural smokey eye look, a mix of chocolate brown and champagne to compliment my coloring and the dress. And the dress, God, it fits even more perfectly than it did the day we tried it on in the shop, if that’s even possible.

*This is it.*

“You deserve it, Yas,” Callie whispers, her fingers curling around my middle. “You deserve to have the best day of your life.”

I meet her gaze in the mirror, my eyes filling with tears. “Thank you for making it possible, Cals.”

That *click-click-clicking* sound keeps going off in the background, and I’m pretty sure I heard somebody sniffle.

“It’s in my job description,” Callie winks, pulling back. “But I’d do it either way.”

And she would. Maid of honor or not, she’d have made sure I have the day I didn’t even realize I wanted.

I turn around, grabbing her hands in mine. “We’ve come a long way from those two girls at the beginning of our

freshman year, haven't we?"

"We have," Callie agrees, her fingers tightening around mine, matching sentimental smiles spreading over our mouths.

If you asked me the day I moved into my dorm if I could ever be friends with Callie, I'd have called you crazy. She was full of pain, and I resentment, but somehow we've overgrown it, and found a best friend in the most unlikely person.

"I love you, Cals."

My best friend chuckles, brushing the corner of her eye. "Right back at ya."

Then we're hugging once again.

"Oh, please, stop. You're making me feel all mushy and stuff," Chloe protests, pulling us both in a hug. "You look gorgeous, Yas, truly."

She lifts our joined hands in the air, and I spin dutifully so she can get the full effect. "Somebody will have a fun time tonight." Chloe wiggles her brows.

"Eww, can we not?" Jade lowers the camera, a frown between her brows. "I do not need to hear about my brother's sex life."

Chloe laughs. "Well, then you better hope you got yourself earplugs because you'll need them tonight."

"Actually..."

I turn my head to Callie to find her nibbling at the inside of her cheek, a sheepish expression on her face. "What did you do?" I ask warily.

"I booked you guys a room in a hotel not far from here. So you and Nixon can have your wedding night. Later tonight, when you're ready to leave, let me know, and I'll contact the car service to come and pick you up."

My heart squeezes tightly, tears blurring my vision. "Callie, you didn't have to."

"Yes, I did. It's a present from Hayden and me as your best man and maid of honor."

Since I know better than to protest, I just hug her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She runs her hand over my back. “Now, please, no more mushy conversation because you’ll make me cry.”

She’s not the only one either. Tears burn my eyes, and my throat feels all thick from all the emotions coursing through me. Letting out a shaky breath, I look at my friends. “Is this crazy? Am I crazy for doing this?”

Kate nibbles at her lip. “Umm...”

“You’ve decided to think about it now?” Callie asks.

“Well, it just occurred to me!” I protest, burying my face in my hands as my breathing turns ragged.

*Dios mío, ¿qué estoy haciendo?*

“Oh, no you don’t.” Callie grabs my wrists and gently removes them from my face so as not to mess up my makeup. “We haven’t spent the last hour on your makeup for you to ruin it like this,” she chastises. “What is this about?”

Jade stops by Callie’s side, those blue eyes that are so similar to her brother’s fixing on me. “Did you change your mind or something?”

“What?” I look up, shaking my head instantly. “No, of course not! I want to marry Nixon. It’s just... everything happened so fast, and it’s just now hitting me that we’re actually doing this.”

I’m minutes—*minutes!*—away from saying yes to the man I love more than I ever thought possible. I want to say yes to him, not like there was ever another option, but...

“Sorry to inform you, Yas, but that’s usually how it works.” Callie wiggles her brows playfully. “You get engaged, you get married, and then, if you want, you have kids, and you become boring.”

“Stop it.” I shove her away. “It’s just...” I shake my head. “Maybe it’s stupid. I’m so happy to have you all with us today,

but...” My tongue darts out, wetting my dry lips. “I miss my parents,” I whisper softly.

Both Callie and Jade let out a soft oh.

It feels selfish saying it out loud. Knowing that both of them have lost their parents, and one day when it’s their turn to get married, they won’t get a chance to have their parents stand by their side, but it’s true. Mom was so excited when Nixon and I called her from the beach the day he asked me to marry him, and Dad was... well, Dad. Gruff, although I secretly think he’s pleased. He likes Nixon, has from day one.

“Yas...”

I shrug, trying to play it off as not to worry them. “I wish they were here, that’s all. And it all just hit me.”

Before I even finish my sentence, there’s a soft knock on the door. We all turn toward it, but it’s Jade who reacts first. “Get back so he can’t see you.”

I don’t fight it when Callie gives me a small push toward the corner of the room, her, Penny, and Kate all coming in front of me to shield me from Nixon’s gaze.

“Nixon, we already told you, you can’t see her...” the words die on Jade’s lips as she peeks through the crack in the door, her mouth falling open. “Oh.”

I look at Jade and then at Callie, who has the same confused expression on her face. “What? What’s...”

Jade takes a step back, and the door opens fully. The air is knocked out of my lungs when I see the two people standing in the doorway.

“*Mamá?*” My hand trembles as I lift it to cover my gaping mouth.

Mom’s eyes are filled with tears as she just stands there in the doorway and looks at me.

“*Estás preciosa, hija,*” she says, brushing away the tears.

“*Má!*” I rush toward her, throwing my arms around her neck. The force of the impact is so strong she would have



fallen back if Dad wasn't standing behind her, his hands on her shoulder. "Easy now."

I look up at him before turning my attention back to my mom. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We'll give you a moment," Callie murmurs, and all the girls slowly start heading out of the room, leaving me alone with my parents.

"You don't think we would have missed our only daughter getting married, now do you?"

"But how..."

Mom pushes me back, her hands cradling my cheeks gently. "Nixon called us to let us know what you two were planning. He sent us tickets. We were supposed to be here last night, but there was a delay." She waves her hand. "No importa. We're here now."

Nixon called them.

Of course, he did. Of course, he knew what I'd need even before I realized it myself because that's just the kind of man he is.

"You didn't really think you'd do this all on your own, did you?" Dad huffs, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Please tell me you didn't threaten him."

"I just explained to him nicely what's in his best interest, that's all."

"You're the worst." I shake my head but can't help but smile. "I still can't believe you're here."

"We wouldn't miss it for the world." Mom gives me another once over. "Mi niña se va a casar!"

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Dad asks, taking my hand in his. "If not, we can still get you..."

"Dad," I give him a pointed look. "I love Nixon, and I want to marry him."

“Hey, I’m just giving you an out in case you changed your mind.”

Changed my mind? As if that was ever a possibility.

“No,” I smile, taking in both of my parents. “No, I haven’t changed my mind. And with you here... There’s nothing more I could have asked for.”

I move closer, wrapping my arms around both of them. After a moment, there’s a soft knock on the door, and Callie peeks inside. “The marriage officiant is here.”

We break apart, and I turn to my best friend.

“Are you ready?” Callie asks, her attention shifting from me to my parents.

I turn toward my parents, taking each of their hands in one of mine. “Will you walk me down the aisle?” I shift my attention from my mom to my dad. “Both of you? Together?”

Dad’s jaw tightens, and his throat bobs as he swallows. “Are you sure? I can...”

I tighten my grip on his arm. “Both of you.”

We’ve been through so much, and if it were a year ago, the thought wouldn’t have even crossed my mind, but Callie and I aren’t the only ones who’ve come a long way. My dad and I did too. We still have our disagreements, but overall we were doing better. Healing. “It’s only fitting.”

Another hard swallow and I swear I can see tears glimmer in his eyes as he nods. “It’ll be an honor, Yasmin.”

“C’mon, mija.” Mom wraps her arm around my middle, her lips brushing against the side of my forehead. “You can’t keep your man waiting.”

# CHAPTER TWELVE

---

NIXON

I look up the stairs, a smile spreading over my lips as Yasmin yells in excitement at seeing her parents. For a moment there, I genuinely thought we were screwed and they wouldn't make it, but they came just in time.

"She seems happy," Prescott comments, glancing toward the staircase.

"She does." I slap him on the back. "Thanks for going to pick them up."

"No problem, man. I'm just happy it's not me who's marrying the coach's daughter. Talk about conflict of interest."

Just then, Jade appears on top of the stairs. She's dressed in a royal blue dress; her hair pulled in a high ponytail and a camera in her hand.

"You do set pretty high standards, you know that?" she asks, shaking her head as she makes her way down the stairs. I offer her my hand to help her with that final step, although she's barefoot like the rest of us.

"Good. Not like any other guy will ever be worthy of you."

Jade rolls her eyes. "Don't start with that again."

"I'm just telling the truth." I give her a little twirl. "You look gorgeous."

"Now you're just trying to sweet-talk me."

"Am not." I throw my hand over her shoulder and pull her into my side. "I'm just saying it as I see it."

"Thanks, Nixon. Now can you please stop squishing me?" she protests, her nose frowning. "Seriously, sometimes I think you're fi—"

Whatever she wanted to say is interrupted by a loud knock on the door.

"I'll get it," Callie says, already halfway to the door.

Using the opportunity that Jade's distracted, I flick her nose. "Just be happy that I haven't messed up your hair."

"Hey!" she protests, trying to swat my hand, but I've already put distance between us.

Before she can do any damage, Callie says: "Marissa and Caleb are here."

I turn around to find a pretty brunette holding hands with a tall, dark-haired guy that brought the twinkling lights earlier.

Giving one final look to my sister to make sure she won't attack, I move closer.

"Nixon," I offer my hand to the girl before slapping the guy over the shoulder. "So nice to see you again, dude. Thanks for all the help."

"Hey, it was all Marissa," Caleb looks down at his girlfriend, a smile spreading over his lips. "I'm just the delivery guy."

"Either way, we really appreciate it."

"Not a problem at all," Marissa smiles. "Just like I told the girls, we can't have you guys leaving Hawaii without a stellar wedding. It'd be bad for our tourism."

Just then, the doorbell rings, and once again, Callie hurries to open the door. "You guys, Mr. Ryker is here." Her gaze darts to me. "He'll be officiating the wedding."

I give the two of them an apologetic look. "Feel free to take a seat."

"Sure thing."

With one final smile at the duo, I turn my attention to the older guy, offering him my hand. "Thank you so much for coming here on such short notice, Mr. Ryker."

"The pleasure is all mine. Where will the wedding be?"

Kate steps in from the back of the house where she disappeared earlier. "How about I take you to where we set everything up?"

The guy looks between us before nodding. “Sounds like a plan.”

“C’mon, Penny,” she takes her sister’s hand. “Let’s find Emmett and take our seat.”

*This is it.*

My stomach clenches and my heart starts to beat faster as I watch the three of them leave.

Jade comes to my side, her hand slipping into mine and giving it a firm squeeze. “It’s time.”

“Yeah, it is.” I glance toward the stairs where Yas is still hiding with her parents.

“How about I let them know it’s time while you find your seats?”

I nod but don’t move a muscle. Callie comes to me and pulls me in for a hug. “Hayden is already outside. I gave him one final task.”

“Did you now?”

“Yup. But don’t mind that.” She smooths her hand over my dress shirt. “You better make sure my friend is happy. Are we clear?”

I lift my brow at her. “Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise.” Callie pulls back and gives me a once over. She raises her hands and fixes my tie before nodding and taking a step back. “You’re all good to go.”

“You scare me sometimes, Cals.”

She slaps me over the chest. “Good. Make my friend happy, and you won’t have to deal with the scary Callie.” With a smile, she turns around. “I’ll see you in a few.”

I watch her slowly walk up the stairs before letting out a long breath.

“This is it, man.” Prescott nudges me with his elbow. “Any last thoughts?”

“You make it seem like I’m standing on death row.”

“Might as well be,” he nudges me with his elbow and offers me his beer, which I decline with a shake of my head.

“Don’t be an asshole, Wentworth.” Jade tugs me toward the terrace. “Just because you’re jaded doesn’t mean the rest of the world won’t find their happily ever after.”

“All I’m saying is, this is it. His life will never be the same after today.”

“My life hasn’t been the same since I met Yas. I think I’m good.”

I stop in the doorway, looking out at the beach. I don’t know how, but Callie managed to snatch a wooden arch. They set it up just at the beach’s edge, where the sand meets the ocean and the sun sets in the middle. Some kind of fabric is draped over it, along with flowers and chairs placed on both sides of the make-shift aisle. Emmett, Kate, and Penny, along with her guide dog, are already sitting on one side of the aisle, talking about something.

“Nervous?” Spencer asks, offering me a bottle of Jack.

“Nah,” I shake my head, and I return my attention to the beach, where in just a few minutes, I’ll be saying my vows to the woman I love. “I just can’t wait to see her.”

Jade looks over her shoulder. “And on that note, you should probably get down there. Or do you need me to walk you down the aisle too?”

I pinch her arm. “Don’t be a smartass.”

She lifts her camera and points it at my face. “Go. I have a job to do, and you have a girl to marry.”

“That’s the idea.”

Rubbing my palms together, I make my way down the aisle as my friends take their seats. Hayden places something on the chair in the first row and goes to the arch, where I join him.

“Ready?” he asks, brushing his hands against the side of his leg.

“Yeah. What kind of job did Callie give you?”

Before he can answer, I turn around and see it. That first chair has a framed photo of my mother on it with one lone lily sitting next to it.

My throat goes tight as I just stare at it.

“Callie thought you might like it since she can’t be here, but if you’d rather...”

“It’s perfect,” I rasp and clear my throat. “She really thought of everything.”

“That’s Callie.”

Just then, somebody, Callie most likely, turns on the music, and John Legend’s *Never Break* starts playing.

I look up just in time to see Callie walking down the stairs and toward us. She looks gorgeous. Her blond hair is curled, half of it pulled in some kind of twist or something—a small bouquet of lilies in her hands.

“You going to lock that in?” I ask softly, so only Hayden can hear me.

Hayden lets out a shaky breath, his eyes glued to his girlfriend, who’s grinning, watching him as she slowly makes her way down the path we marked with jar lanterns and flowers. Even the wind knew better than to mess with Callie’s plans, and not a petal had been moved from its designated spot. “Damn sure I will.”

“You better hurry up, or somebody might snatch her.”

“Screw you, Cole.”

I chuckle softly, but my laughter slowly dies as the song reaches the chorus, and Yasmin appears on the terrace.

It’s like the air is kicked out of my lungs.

I can’t breathe. I can barely think.

God, she looks more gorgeous than I could have ever imagined. Yasmin’s hair is falling down in those wild dark curls of hers that I love so much. They stand out against the



light dress. It's not one of those traditional over-the-top wedding dresses girls usually go for. No, it's simple, just like Yasmin, with lace covering her torso, the skirt falling down her legs with a cut on one side that makes her leg peek out with every step she takes. The pale, almost champagne color looks beautiful against her tanned skin. A big smile spreads over her lips as her parents, one at each side, walk her down the make-shift aisle toward me.

"Breathe," Hayden whispers, but I can barely hear him from the pounding in my ears. "You don't want to faint at your own wedding."

"Shut up," I mutter, not moving my eyes from Yasmin, drinking her in. Counting every step, every second she takes until she's right in front of me.

Her parents let go of her. She gives them both a hug before finally turning to me, and then, it's just her and me. And the world could fall apart, but it wouldn't matter because it's her. And she's mine.

I extend my hand, neither of us saying a word as she places it in mine. Energy sizzles between us as soon as her fingers touch mine, and I pull her to me, my mouth brushing against hers.

Our friends hoot and holler in agreement or protest; I don't know, nor do I care. The only thing I do know is that I couldn't take one more second without kissing her.

"That usually comes after the ceremony is done," Yas breathes, pink spreading through her cheeks.

"I don't care. I'll kiss you before and after the ceremony and every single day after for the rest of our lives," I promise, more than ready to keep it. "You look gorgeous," I whisper, pulling her in front of Mr. Ryker.

"You're not so shabby yourself," she says, her hand sliding over the sleeve of my jacket.

Mr. Ryker looks between the two of us, his brow raised in a silent question.

"Last chance to back out."

Yas shakes her head. “For the rest of our lives, Nix.”

The officiant must hear it too because he starts the ceremony. “Dearly beloved...”

His voice trails off, lost to the ocean and soft music playing in the background, lost to the most stunning woman standing in front of me. She’s the only thing that matters at this moment, and as we recite our vows in front of our family and friends, it’s like the final piece, the one that’s been missing all this time, falls into place with the rings we slide on each other’s fingers.

“I pronounce you husband and wife. You can now kiss your bride.”

“It’s about damn time,” I mutter, tugging Yasmin into my body. I hold her gaze as I dip her backward and press my mouth against hers.

My best friend. My lover. My anchor. My world. My wife.

And through the cheers and yelling, I heard the officiant say: “I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Nixon Cole.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

HAYDEN

The twinkling lights shine brightly, illuminating the night sky. I'm not sure where she found them. She just told the guys and me to spread them over the trees and terrace and then came back to check out the final results. I had to admit, I was a little skeptical, but she was right. Between the light and candles placed into lanterns scattered over the beach, the place looks pretty cool.

"You did an amazing job with this wedding," I whisper, wrapping my arms tightly around her middle as we softly sway.

Finally.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for Nixon and Yasmin, but damn, this week has been a lot. And between all the preparations, I barely got to spend any time with my girl because she was constantly running to one place or the other, but now that I finally have her in my arms, I'm not letting go.

"It looks nice, doesn't it?" She turns around as if taking it in for the first time. "I hope Yasmin likes it."

"Likes it?" I huff, twirling her around, so her back is pressed against my chest. "She loves it."

I lean my head against her shoulder while watching our two best friends slow dance in the middle of the backyard, completely oblivious to anything or anybody else.

"I'm glad. They deserve it."

"They do," I whisper, pressing my lips against her forehead. "Nixon loved the way you honored his mom."

Her body relaxes into mine, and I tighten my arms around her, inhaling her sweet scent.

*Yes, definitely not letting go.*

"I'm happy Jade found a photo."

“It was a nice detail.” I shake my head. “I can’t believe the week’s over, and we’re going home tomorrow.”

Callie chuckles and turns in my arms. “It wasn’t really a relaxing week, was it?”

“No.” I cup her cheeks, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. “No, it wasn’t. But I’m happy we got to spend it together. And even as hectic as it was, I’ll always be grateful to come home to you and have you sleep in my arms.”

Leaning forward, I press my mouth against the top of her head, brushing my lips just over the scar running down her face.

“Me too,” Callie sighs, wrapping her arms around my middle.

We don’t say anything more as we continue slow dancing.

Very soon, moments like this will be few and far between, and I want to soak up every single second I can. Every single touch. Every single kiss. Because far too soon, I might not have them at all. I’m not sorry for choosing this path, but some days... Some days it’s hard. Knowing that I might be forced to leave Callie behind, so I can follow my dreams.

The idea of being without her for the next two years while she finishes at Blairwood is scary as fuck. Not because I think the distance will break us apart. We’ve found our way to each other once before, so I know we’re stronger than distance. But just the fact that I won’t see her every day, won’t get to fall asleep or wake up with her snuggled into my side, won’t get to kiss her at any time I want, is scary.

If she notices I’m holding onto her tighter, she doesn’t comment.

One song turns into two, which turns into three. I’m not sure how long we’re at it when Yasmin and Nixon come toward us, hand in hand, matching smiles on their faces.

“We figured we might help you clean up and then leave for the night?”

Callie rolls her eyes. “You’re not helping with anything.” She walks to one of the tables to grab her phone. After a few clicks, she’s back. “Your suitcases are down by the door, and your Uber should be here shortly.”

“Are you sure?” Yasmin nibbles at her lower lip, clearly conflicted about leaving.

“Of course I’m sure! It’s your wedding night. Go and have fun.”

Dropping Nixon’s hand, Yasmin pulls Callie in for a hug. “You’re the best, Cals. You’ve given us a day we couldn’t have even imagined. Thank you.”

Yasmin’s tear-stained eyes meet mine over Callie’s shoulder. “Both of you.”

“Hey, don’t look at me. This is all on her. I was just a lackey.”

Callie jabs her elbow into my stomach. “You were not.”

“That’s not how I remember it.”

“Either way, we’re really grateful for everything you’ve done this week.” Nixon gives me a knowing look. “I know it wasn’t really relaxing.”

There’s a loud honk coming from the street.

“Oh, well,” I slap him on the shoulder. “I guess we’ll have to try another time.”

“That’s your ride,” Callie says, just as Yasmin pulls her into a hug. “Enjoy your night. Be careful of what you’re doing, you hear me?”

“Don’t worry, Cals,” Nixon throws his arm around Callie’s shoulder and pulls her into his side. “Thank you,” he says, his voice hoarse as he leans down and presses his mouth against her forehead. “For everything.”

He holds her for a moment longer. A year ago, I’d have kicked his ass for it, but now I see it for what it really is, a friendship between two people who matter the most to me.

Still, I can't help but rib him. "Don't you have your own wife to kiss?"

"Damn right I do," Nixon laughs. Pulling away from Callie, he takes Yasmin's hand and brings it to his mouth. "What do you say, *wife*? Let's get out of here?"

We watch them say goodbye to the rest of our friends before disappearing inside.

Callie starts to walk away, but I wrap my fingers around her wrist and tug her back to me. "And where do you think you're going?"

"I figured I could..."

I shake my head. "No."

She gives me a confused look. "No? But you didn't eve—"

"Nope," I don't even let her finish. "You've done enough for today. It's time for you to relax."

The corner of Callie's mouth quirks upward. "Does that mean I'll get a foot massage?"

"That wasn't what I had in mind." I glance at our friends before returning my attention to Callie. "Let's get out of here."

Those pretty blue eyes widen. "We can't..."

I press my mouth against hers to stop her from saying whatever she wanted to say.

"Yas and Nix are gone, and you've done enough. Let's have this last night. Just the two of us."

I watch her teeth sink into her lower lip, her eyes glancing toward the party at our back. Finally, she nods.

Slipping her hand into mine, I tug her toward the beach.

We don't say anything as we make our way through the sand, the light of the moon illuminating our way. In the distance, we can hear the soft music still playing in our backyard, but it grows duller the further away we walk.

At one point, Callie stops and looks out at the ocean. The waves slowly roll toward the beach, the full moon reflecting

over the surface.

“You’re awfully quiet.” I wrap my arms around Callie and pull her into my chest. Brushing her hair to the side, I press my lips against her neck.

She hmms happily, tilting her head back, so her eyes meet mine, a soft smile curving her lips. And just like always, it’s like I’ve been sucker-punched.

“Just thinking.”

“About?”

“Things.” She shrugs, turning in my arms, so she’s facing me. She places her hands on my chest, her palms slowly working their way to my shoulders and around my neck.

“What things?”

“Just things... and how they’re changing, but I guess that’s life, huh?”

“I guess...”

The light breeze coming from the ocean shoves a strand of hair into Callie’s face. I gently push it back, my fingers grazing her cheek.

“Are you disappointed?” I ask softly, finally voicing the question that’s been bugging me for the last few days.

A frown appears between her brows. “Disappointed? Why would I be disappointed?”

I watch her for a moment, trying to read her thoughts, but she looks genuinely perplexed by the question.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “Because Nix and Yas tied the knot first?”

“What?” Callie pulls back. “Why would you think that?”

I rub the back of my neck, feeling uncomfortable. “I don’t know because we’ve been together longer, and they got married first?”

“Are you serious right now?” Callie shakes her head, but when I don’t say anything, her eyes widen. “Oh my god, you



*are* serious! What the hell, Hayden? I'm happy for them! If anybody deserves to be happy, it's the two of them."

"So you're not disappointed it's not us?" I ask once again, just to be on the safe side.

"Of course I'm not."

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Callie crosses her hands over her chest and cocks a brow at me. "Is there something you want to ask me, Watson?"

"No. I just..." I let out a sigh. "There's a lot going on."

"There is," she agrees readily.

"Things will be different soon. With the draft just around the corner, and..." I shake my head, my words trailing off.

Callie places her hands over mine, giving me a reassuring squeeze. "I know."

"I don't know where I might go."

"Wherever it is, it's going to be okay."

"Is it?" I ask. Up until this moment, I haven't even realized that a part of me wondered. That part of me might even be afraid of what the future holds for us. "I know this was the right choice, but damn it, some days I wish I just waited."

"That wouldn't have changed anything. You'd still enter the draft, and I'd still have to stay at Blairwood."

"I know, but it would have been only one year."

"One year, two years..." Callie shrugs. "Does it even matter?"

"No." I take her hand in mine, swiping my thumb over her ring finger—a finger where one day I'll put my ring. "No, it doesn't. One, two, hell, even ten years, you're it for me, Callie. You're my forever."

"And you're mine." Callie smiles softly, her fingers grazing my cheek. "Whatever happens, Hayden, we'll get through it. It might be hard, but I believe in us."

I lean down, pressing a gentle kiss against her lips. Only it doesn't stay gentle for long. A low moan rips from Callie's throat, making my whole body harden. My fingers slide into her hair, pulling her closer as I deepen the kiss, my tongue meeting hers as I claim her in the most primal way possible.

We're both breathing hard when we break the kiss.

I press my forehead against hers, tucking her hair behind her ears. "One day, I'm going to make an honest woman out of you."

Callie laughs, the sound ringing in the night. "Maybe one day I'll make an honest man out of you." She pokes me playfully in the chest and starts walking backward. "Ever thought of that?"

"What?" Make an honest man out of *me*? "You're going to propose to me?"

*She can't be serious.*

"Why not? Don't think I could do it?" She wiggles her brows. "You better hurry up, Watson, or I might beat you to it. What will all your new teammates say then, huh? You'll never hear the end of it. I can already see the signs. Hayden "Hades" Watson, the best wide receiver in the league, proposed to by his girlfriend on national television."

But she is. She freaking is.

"Angel!" I call after her, but she just keeps walking backward, still laughing.

*Crazy, crazy woman.*

"Callie!" I run after her. "Wait a minute now." I wrap my hand around her wrist and pull her into my body. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Maybe, maybe not." She shrugs. "Wait too long, and you might just find out."

She thinks she's funny, doesn't she? Well, she has another thing coming for her.

“Oh, it’s game on.” I wrap my arms around her middle and throw her over my shoulder. “We’ll see who’ll come out the winner.”

Then I run into the ocean, a screaming Callie in tow.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

JADE

“Damn, I’m beat,” Chloe says, her hand rising to cover her yawn.

Caleb pulls out his phone, the bright light illuminating his face. “Shit, how is it already three in the morning?”

“What?” Marissa shakes her head. “Where did the time go?”

“It’s all about the good company,” I wink at her.

Straightening in my lounge chair, I look around, noticing that we’re the only ones left. Kate, Emmett, and Penny retired around one; shortly after, Uber picked up Nixon and Yas to take them to the hotel Callie booked them for the night. Around the same time, Callie and Hayden disappeared, too, leaving Chloe and me with Prescott and Spencer, Caleb and Marissa.

“It was damn good company, but it’s time for bed.” Marissa gets up and pulls me in a hug. “You guys are leaving tomorrow, right?”

“We are,” I agree, hugging her back.

“I can’t believe the week is already over. Like how?” Chloe shakes her head.

“Right?” Marissa takes a step back, and Caleb throws his arm over her shoulder, pulling her into his side. “We’re going to miss you! Promise me you’ll come again.”

“We’ll try, that’s for sure.”

Chloe nods in agreement. “I’m always down for a vacation.”

“Not that we got to rest much this time around. I think we deserve a re-do. Thank you so much for helping us with the wedding.”

“Anytime.” Marissa waves me off before tilting her head back to look at her boyfriend. “C’mon, surfer boy, let’s

hustle.”

I push to my feet. “I’ll walk you out.”

Before I can even finish, Marissa is shaking her head. “No worries, you guys should try and rest before your flight tomorrow. Or, well, today.”

I guess she has us there. With one final hug and goodbye, we watch Marissa and Caleb leave.

“I’m beat.” Chloe looks to the guys. “You going up to bed?”

“Hell yes.” Spencer gets to his feet, raising his arms over his head as he yawns loudly. “I think I’ll crash before I even get to the bed.”

Although we’ve been going at it hard for the past week, I’m still wide awake. I should be sleepy, but there is this restless energy sizzling under my skin that I can’t shake off, and I know if I lie down, it’ll only be worse.

“Jade?” Chloe asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Over her shoulder, I see Spencer and Prescott go inside the house. “You go on ahead.” I shake my head. “I’ll stay here for a little while longer.”

Chloe’s brows shoot up. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m not that tired yet. All the excitement, I guess,” I give her a reassuring smile. “You go on. I’ll come inside in a bit.”

“Okay.”

I turn my attention to the beach, taking a small sip of cocktail from my glass. I can hear the shuffle of their bare feet, the wooden stairs creek as they climb inside the house. And then, blessed silence.

Letting out a soft sigh, I tilt my head back and close my eyes, enjoying the feel of the soft breeze on my skin. Goosebumps cover my exposed arms, making me shudder.

Blinking my eyes open, I focus on the night sky. The full moon is shining brightly, thousands of stars are scattered

across the inky sky. Makes me wish I had the right equipment for night shooting.

Next time.

Putting my glass on the table, I push to my feet. The cool sand scratches my feet as I slowly make my way down to the beach, my dress floating around me.

I can't believe that in just a few hours we'll be leaving this place. At first, I didn't know how I'd feel. The last time I was at the beach was almost a year ago when Nixon took mom and me to see the ocean one last time. But being here, it's bittersweet.

"I miss you," I whisper softly to the night sky, hoping wherever she might be, she'll hear it. There are so many things I wish I could tell her, so many moments in the last year alone, where I picked up my phone ready to call my mom and tell her about them, but she wasn't here with us. Not any longer.

Wrapping my hands around myself, I rub at my exposed forearms.

"You're not planning to jump into the ocean, are you?"

The fine hairs at the back of my neck rise at the sound of his husky voice.

I tilt my head to the side, the only acknowledgment I'll give him. "I'm contemplating it."

Prescott stops next to me. "Should I point out what a stupid idea that would be, or are you already aware of it?"

The corner of my mouth twitches. "I figured you're all for stupid ideas."

"Not when they can get my best friend's little sister killed on my watch."

*That* gets my attention.

I turn to face him, my eyes narrowing. "Don't flatter yourself. Nobody asked you to watch over me, Wentworth."

"Maybe," he shrugs, the movement making the plain white shirt shift over those firm muscles. "But I know Nixon would

kill me if anything happened to you.”

At that, I can't help but laugh. The nerve of the man. “I think Nixon is otherwise preoccupied.”

Turning on the balls of my feet, I start walking toward the ocean. A wave comes crashing, the cool water tickling my toes.

“Are you crazy?” Prescott hisses behind me.

“I'm not crazy. I figured I might have one last dip before we leave tomorrow.”

“You don't even have a swimsuit!”

My mouth curves in a grin as I look over my shoulder. “Who needs a swimsuit anyway?”

Before he can say anything, I grab the hem of my dress and pull it up. Prescott's eyes widen in surprise, which only makes me chuckle harder.

“W-what the...”

The dress obscures my vision for a moment, but then it's off. Cool night air caresses my naked skin. I make my way further up the beach and let the material slip through my fingers, falling onto the sand in a heap of silk. Since the dress was backless and form-fitting, I didn't bother putting on a bra, just the tiniest pair of lace panties, which I also removed and dropped on top of the dress. My nipples harden, goosebumps rising on my flesh.

Prescott's eyes are closed, a hand covering them like we're back in first grade.

“Really? How old are you? Five?” I quirk my brow and prop my hand on my hips, although I know he can't see me.

“Are you insane?” he hisses, eyes still closed. “Everybody can see you!”

“There's nobody around to see me. Besides, it's the middle of the night, and everybody is asleep. I don't know who that *everybody* you're talking about is?”

“What if they wake up?”



“Their problem, not mine.” I shrug. “You coming?”

“You’re my best friend’s little sister.”

As if I needed that reminder.

Since he’s still refusing to look at me, I take a moment to get my fill. The way that white dress shirt clings to his wide shoulders—the patch of golden skin peeking through the gap where he left the first few buttons undone. Prescott Wentworth might be a pain in my ass, but he’s a fine-looking specimen. Not that I’d ever admit it out loud. The guy is cocky as hell as it is. Somebody has to take him down a notch or two.

“Not so *little*.” I shrug. “Fine, suit yourself.”

With that, I turn around and run straight into the ocean.

---

PRESCOTT

*Splash.*

My hands fall down instantly, eyes scanning the ocean for any sign of Jade-fucking-Cole, but there are only a few bubbles left where she jumped in. No Jade.

For the most part, she hasn't been drinking, that is, until her brother left, and she finally put down her camera so she could actually kick back and relax. She didn't look drunk earlier, but then again, why would a sane person go out swimming in the ocean in the middle of the night?

The longer she stays underwater, the harder my heart pounds against my chest. It's as if I just got an adrenaline shot straight into it. My palms turn sweaty as I frantically look around for her, but even with the full moon, it's hard to make out her shape underwater.

“What in the ever-loving...”

Just then, Jade comes to the surface a few feet away, her wet hair plastered to her head in a sleek line. She lifts her hands, rubbing at her face, before turning around to face me, a wicked smile curling her lips.

“You sure you don't want to join me?”

“Are you insane?” I ask, looking at her—a wrong move. Shadows and moonlight play on her skin, hiding most of her body but not all of it. I feel my body tighten in response.

*What the actual fuck?*

Droplets of water slide down her skin; her tanned, soft, *naked* skin. My dick goes from zero to one hundred in two seconds flat.

*God.* I rub my hands over my face. *I'm going to go to hell for this.*

Jade laughs. “Chicken.”

“Seriously? Who's a five-year-old now?”

She swims closer, those bright blue-gray eyes shining with amusement. “What are you so afraid of, Wentworth? I don’t bite.”

*I wouldn’t mind if you did.*

The thought comes out of nowhere, blindsiding me.

*Fuck no.*

No, no, no.

I didn’t just think about my best friend’s little sister, my *teammate’s* little sister, annoying as fuck too, like that.

“You’re drunk. I don’t want you to drown on my watch, or I’ll have to explain to your brother what happened.”

There. In case she needed a reminder.

If we *both* needed one.

“Is that what worries you?” She chuckles, one of her brows raising. “My brother?”

“Didn’t you hear? Nothing worries me.”

Jade huffs, “That’s why you have a stick perpetually stuck up your ass.”

“I…” My throat goes dry as she stops mere feet away, barely deep enough for water to hide her nipples. My throat bobs as I swallow.

Damn, this woman will be the end of me.

Stubborn, infuriating, tempting… so fucking tempting.

Then she’s right there, her hands folded against the sand—waves slowly brushing against the curve of her back, her ass—chin resting on them as she stares right at me with those blue eyes of hers: the sky, ice, and a storm, all in one.

“Cat got your tongue?” she giggles. “I had way higher expectations of you, Wentworth. I have to say I’m disappointed.”

“Oh really?” I rasp, my voice low and rough.

“Really,” she drawls lazily. “But apparently, the big, bad football player is afraid of little ol’ me.”

*Screw it.*

Gritting my teeth, I pull my shirt off and toss it on the sand behind me, my hands falling to my belt buckle. Those blue eyes are still on me as I undo my belt and unbutton my pants, my hands halting for a split second.

Then, that damn brow raises slowly once again—daring me to continue. Apparently, little Jade Cole doesn’t know shit about modesty. But if she’s not going to look away, I’m sure as hell not going to tell her to. Holding her gaze head-on, I slide my fingers under the waistband, pulling my pants and briefs down in one go.

The corner of her mouth tilts, the little minx.

I step out of the heap of clothes and walk toward the ocean, jumping in in one swift movement. The cool water hugs my limbs as I glide through it, holding my breath for as long as I can before coming back to the surface. I shake my head as I get out and rub my hands over my face before turning to face her.

“Happy now?”

She tilts her head to the side. “The better question is, are you?”

With that, she ducks underwater, tiny bubbles rising to the surface as she dives.

It takes me a moment to realize what she’s talking about—my leg. It doesn’t hurt as much as it did out there. There’s still that familiar ache in my knee, but it doesn’t feel as stiff as it did earlier.

I watch Jade swim away from me with leisurely strokes. That dark hair spreads as she dives under and sleeks down her back every time she comes up for air. The way water droplets cling to her skin as if they don’t want to let go.

Finally, I step in her path as she comes up for air. Her hand connects with my abs, fingers tracing with the tips as she

comes to her feet. My body reacts almost instantly, my cock hardening. I'm grateful we're underwater, so she can't see the way my body responds to hers.

Her head is tilted back, so her hair falls away from her face. The swells of her tits peek above the surface, and I can see an outline of her hard nipples through the water. She blinks, those blue eyes fixing on mine as she comes to her full height, the top of her head falling just shy of my shoulders.

"You're something else. You know that?"

I take one of her dark strands, sliding it under my fingertips. She sucks in a breath as the back of my fingers brush over her collarbone, gooseflesh rising over her skin.

"Is that a good thing?" she asks softly. Her teeth sink into her lower lip, grazing at the soft flesh.

"I have no idea," I answer truthfully.

For a moment, we just stand there and stare at one another, neither of us saying anything. She's actually not half bad. As long as she keeps her smart mouth shut, that is.

*She's your best friend's little sister.*

"I'm going to get out now."

I clear my throat and take a step back. "Sure."

Jade swims toward the beach. It's tempting, so freaking tempting to turn around, but I know if I do, there will be no undoing it.

So instead, I dive under. It's far from a cold shower, but it'll have to do because I'm not one hundred percent sure if I get out now, I'd be able to hold back.

"You coming?" Jade asks once I get back to the surface.

*Only in my dreams.*

"You go on ahead," I rasp, my throat growing tight. "I'll be there in a bit."

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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YASMIN

“Why are they not here yet?” I look down at my watch for what feels like the hundredth time in the last ten minutes. “I knew we should have gone to the house before coming here.”

Nixon places his hand over mine, the wedding band gleaming on his finger under the sunlight. Seeing it makes my heart beat faster. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the fact that the man standing in front of me is my husband. Mine. In every way, shape, and form.

“They’ll be here.” His fingers interlock with mine, giving them a firm squeeze. “Don’t stress.”

“How can you be so chill? We have to board the plane in less than thirty minutes, and they’re nowhere to be found. And, of course, nobody is answering their damn phone.”

“They’re probably around here somewhere, trying to get to the gate. Besides, your parents were sleeping in the house too last night. Do you really think Coach would let them miss the plane?”

“Dad?” I scoff. “The one they should be worried about is my mom.”

If they think Coach is the drill sergeant out of the two, then they haven’t met a Latina with her mind set on something.

“See? They’ll be here.” He rubs his thumb over my knuckles. “Besides, not everybody had the amazing wake-up call like some of us did.” His eyes twinkle as he grazes his teeth over his lips, his voice dropping an octave. “*Wife.*”

A shiver runs down my spine like it does every time I’ve heard him say that word. And trust me, he’s been saying it—a lot.

A blush rises up my neck at the innuendo, and I give him a little shove to the chest with my free hand. “Stop it.”

“Why?” he lets out a chuckle. “Can’t I just be happy that you’re finally mine?”

“You can, but...”

“How are you this fine morning, Mrs. Cole?”

At the sound of a familiar voice, I turn around to find my friends there. “Finally! I thought we’d have to leave you here.”

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid,” Penny says, smoothing her hand down Henry’s neck.

“Why?” I look over at my friends. “What happened?”

“Some asshole thought it’s his right to tell us how unsanitary traveling with a dog is and demand we leave,” Emmett grumbles, a frown etched between his eyebrows.

I’m pretty sure my eyes about fell out. “What?”

“It happens,” Penny shrugs nonchalantly. I guess this isn’t her first rodeo with something like this.

“It shouldn’t be happening, Penny!” Emmett shouts, making us all pause. He lets out a sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose before pulling the girl to his side, more for his benefit than for hers, I think. “I’m sorry for yelling. It just makes me so frustrated that people are uneducated assholes. You shouldn’t have to apologize or explain yourself to people.”

Penny leans into him for a moment, her arm sliding around his waist and rubbing over his tense back. “I know, and I appreciate it, but you can’t kick the ass of every uneducated person out there.”

“I could try.”

Penny shakes her head, her face turning serious. “I’d rather you don’t end up in jail if I can help it.”

Kate jabs her finger into Emmett’s side. “I second that.”

Emmett groans, letting go of Penelope. “What did I do to deserve to end up with three bossy women in my life?”

“Hey, it was your choice. Now there is no going back.”

Emmett grabs Kate’s hand and pulls her to him. “As if I’d ever want to go back. I’d be bored out of my mind without



having you to boss me around, Kitty.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Don’t you Kitty-me, Emmett Santiago. You know damn well I don’t boss anybody.”

“And so it goes,” Callie chuckles by my side.

“So, it goes.” I look at her, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. “Did you get any sleep?”

“A little,” Callie shrugs. “I woke up early so I could clean up before we left only to find the house spotless and breakfast waiting for us at the table.” She shakes her head. “Your mom is something else.”

The woman in question lifts her head at the mention of her. “Oh, please! You’ve done so much to set everything up. The least I could do is help clean it up and feed you. You are all too skinny!”

Callie and I exchange a look before bursting into laughter. Just then, the speakers creak, and the boarding for our flight is announced.

I let out a sigh. “I guess it’s time to go home.”

Callie gives me a side glance as we start walking toward the gate. “Did you get to talk with Alyssa and Maddox at all?”

“Not really. Wonder what they’ve been up to these last few days.”

“Oh, I’m sure they found something to occupy their time,” Prescott snickers, which earns him a slap over the head as Jade passes him by.

“Don’t be an asshole.”

He glares at her retreating back, rubbing the back of his head but doesn’t say anything.

“What’s that all about?” I ask, tipping my chin toward them.

“Beats me.” Callie shrugs. “Everything was okay when Hayden and I left last night. Well, as much as things can be okay between those two. I swear they’re like a cat and dog.”

“You and Hayden left?” I give her a pointed look.

Callie smiles coyly. “Hey, just because you’re now a married woman doesn’t mean you get to keep all the fun to yourself.”

“I guess not.” Looking over my shoulder, I find Nixon and Hayden talking about something. “On a scale of one to ten, how much do you think Aly will freak once she finds out?”

“Ummm... eleven?”

I grin. “I can’t wait to see her face.”

A hand lands on my shoulder. “Ready to go home, wife?”

I tilt my head back, looking into the eyes the color of the clear summer sky that I love so much. “Ready, husband.”

“Are they going to be corny like that all the time now?” Prescott fake-whispers, giving us a side glance.

“I sure hope not,” Spencer says, sliding his phone into his pocket.

Nixon shakes his head at the two of them. “You laugh all you want. I’ll see who’ll be the last one laughing when a woman brings you two idiots to your knees.”

Callie nudges me with her elbow. “I feel like we have an interesting couple of years ahead of us.”

“Yeah,” I agree, my eyes meeting Nixon’s as he gives me that half-grin of his. Not just a couple of years. *A lifetime.*

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Thank you so much for reading Kiss Me Forever! I hope you enjoyed this extended epilogue novella for your favorite characters in the Blairwood University series. If you have a moment, please consider leaving a short review.

Want to know why Alyssa and Maddox stayed at Blairwood? You can now read their story in [Kiss To Belong](#). Coming next is an emotional brother’s best friend college romance featuring

Jade and Prescott in [Kiss To Salvage](#). [Pre-order your copy now.](#)

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Want to know more about Marissa, Caleb and their friends?  
You can read their story in *Underwater*, a modern fairytail  
retelling. Turn the page to read the first chapter.

# CHAPTER 1

MARISSA

“You should really pick that tongue up off the floor, Marissa.”

I turn my gaze to my giggling best friend. I’m going to strangle her one of these days, and I’m not even going to feel sorry about it.

“My tongue isn’t anywhere near the floor, Noel.” I shove her away playfully. No matter how annoying she can get sometimes, Noelani is still my best friend.

My sister.

We both start laughing, but my eyes find a way to sneak a peek at the ocean.

The endless azure surface has always been my home. Living in the small beach town on the island of Hawaii my whole life, I grew up at the ocean and I wouldn’t change it for anything in the world.

I learned how to swim even before I could stand on my own two feet, and there was nothing quite like it. The lightness of my body cutting through the waves. The saltiness dancing on my skin. Diving underwater only to feel the chilly kiss of the ocean on my cheeks, lifting my hair all around me as I go deeper inside.

It’s simply magical.

Watching Taylor Reed surf is just a bonus. His wetsuit-covered body taming the waves beneath his board. His blond hair, messy and wet, a shade darker than usual. The look of complete concentration crossing his handsome face as his blue eyes scan his surroundings, always expecting the unexpected.

“You’re looking at him again, Risa.” Noel jabs me in the side with her elbow. “He’ll notice.”

“We’re friends. It’s not strange if I look at him.”

“Friends don’t look at each other the way you look at Ty,” Noel contradicts.

It's all in a playful manner, but I know somewhere deep down, under all this cheer, she's worried about me. If the situation were reversed, I know I'd be worried about her, too.

“And how is that?”

“Like he's your favorite dessert, and you're in need of a sugar fix.”

I roll my eyes, trying to play it off.

We've been friends since diapers. We grew up together, living next door to each other. And although we come from different families, we are more sisters than some blood relations.

“Noel!” I scold, hiding my bright red cheeks behind the wall of golden brown hair. We went swimming earlier, and after my hair air-dries, it always gets this kind of crazy curly look that only a day at the beach can give you.

“Don't 'Noel' me, missy! I say it like I see it.” A light breeze picks up, messing Noel's pale, blond hair. Sighing, she pulls up the long strands and ties them to the top of her head in a ponytail. “This weather is no joke.”

“They did say the storm is coming,” I agree, happy with the change of subject.

The crush I have going on for my friend isn't news or anything like that, but Noelani likes to tease me any chance she gets.

I've been crushing on Ty since kindergarten, but he looks at me as a friend only. On various occasions, I debated whether to confess my feelings or keep quiet but, in the end, the need to have Ty in my life, if only as a friend, won over. We've known each other almost as long as I've known Noel, and I don't want to ruin it by confessing that my feelings for him have changed.

“Maybe we should go back. When that dark cloud comes, I don't want to be present.”

I nod in agreement.

It's not strange to have big storms pass through our town. Usually, they come out of nowhere, fast and furious. A bright, sunny day is quickly exchanged for dark clouds, cold, hard winds and rain. The ocean darkens, too, losing its usual bright blue shine. The smooth surface ruffles, and the waves rise high toward the sky.

Angry and untamable.

We collect our things in a hurry and start walking back inland with a few other people who lingered on the beach.

"Oh, shit!" I tap the top of my head. "I left my sunglasses on the beach."

Noelani looks at me before her brown eyes lift to the sky. It's even darker than it was only a few minutes ago. "Do you really have to go back now?"

"If I don't, I'll probably never find them again. And you know they are my favorite."

Sighing in surrender, Noel turns toward the beach. "Let's go then."

"No, you go home." I wave my hand. "I'll just run and grab them and be home in no time."

Noel nervously bites at her lower lip. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." I smile reassuringly. "You go home. I'm right behind you."

"Text me when you get back, okay?"

"Will do!" I throw over my shoulder, then start jogging down the beach to the spot where we were sitting earlier.

The whole beach is deserted. Nobody wants to mess with the force of nature thunderstorm can be. Islanders learn it early on, and when tourists come around, they're always warned. Not that they all listen. Every once in a while, some crazy tourist would show up and decide the storm is the best day to go out on a boat or something equally crazy. So far, we were lucky because in our town everybody returned home safely, but I knew it wasn't always the case.



Once I get to the spot, I bend down, my hands gripping my knees. I'm panting hard from exertion, since the biggest workout I get is riding a bicycle a couple of times a year.

Taking a few deep breaths to calm my racing heart, I start looking for my sunglasses.

"Gotcha!" Grabbing them from their hiding place behind a rock, I pop them on top of my head.

The first drops of rain start falling and, after a few more, it's a real downpour.

Turning on the heels of my feet to go back home, I notice one lone figure in the ocean.

"Ty?"

I narrow my eyes, trying to see through the heavy rain if it's really him or not. I call out to him, but my voice is lost in the wind. He's getting out of the water, his board close to his side so he doesn't lose it to the waves, but he's still far from the safety of the beach.

Then I see it. As if in slow motion, a wave starts lifting high in the sky.

"Ty!" I scream, but it's no use. Angry raindrops crash on the sand, and the howl of the wind makes it impossible to hear my own voice.

Running toward the ocean, I hope Taylor will see me coming so I can warn him in time, but he's too focused on getting out of the tempestuous ocean to look around.

"No, Ty!"

A wave crashes over him hard and fast, pulling him underwater. The force of the impact suppresses my loud scream.

Running faster than I thought possible, I scan the surface of the ocean, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, but Ty's blond head is nowhere to be found. Only waves upon waves, crushing and colliding against each other.

My flip-flops fall off, and my bare feet touch the water.

Struggling against the angry nature, I look around, searching for him.

“TY!”

Waves crash against me, pulling me here and there, impeding me from moving farther into the water. I continue to fight against the force, trying to keep calm when all I can feel is desperation.

“Where are you, dammit?!”

One wave rises higher than others and crashes against my back, making me stumble on my own feet. I feel myself lose balance, so I take one deep breath and let myself be pulled under.

The current is strong, even beneath the water, but Taylor isn't anywhere near the surface.

I have to find him. The ocean can't take him away.

Forcing my eyes open, I fight against the blurriness clouding my sight. Something on the right catches my attention, but the need to inhale fresh air is strong. Too strong to resist it. Giving up, I start swimming toward the surface. If I don't get some oxygen into my lungs, I'll be of no use to Ty.

Only it's not the air I find when I break the surface. Without a second to compose myself, another wave is waiting for me. Falling over me and pulling me under.

Deep, deep under.

What happens next? Will Marissa be able to save Ty? Or will the ocean swallow them both? [Find out in Underwater, available now!](#)

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never planned to write this novella, but the first time I heard John Legend's *Never Break* I knew it told the story of Nixon and Yasmin. This idea bloomed in my mind, and if you know me, you know that once my mind starts working there's no stopping it, and once the story is born, I can't *not* write it. So, I found a way to incorporate it into a timeline I had for other Blairwood books and give you this additional happily ever after for them. God knows they deserve it.

I honestly hope you enjoyed this extended epilogue, and seeing your favorite characters once again, as well as getting a glimpse into what I have in store for you when it comes to Jade and Prescott. I know a lot of you wanted Jade to end up with Spencer, but trust me, Jade's one true pair has always been Prescott. They're two halves of a whole and I can't wait for you to read their story in fall of 2022. It's sexy. It's dark. It's heartbreaking. But I live and breathe for these two to the point I swear they just might take a spot of my #1 couple, and you know that I never say that lightly considering Andrew and Jeanette have been in that spot since 2018!

Thank you so much for going on this journey with me and loving the Blairwood University as much as I do. These characters have become like my family, and I can't get enough of their stories. If you have a moment, please consider leaving a short review online.

Until the next book,

Anna

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna B. Doe is a young adult and new adult contemporary romance author. She writes real-life romance that is equal parts sweet and sexy. She's a coffee and chocolate addict. Like her characters, she loves those two things dark, sweet and with little extra spice.

When she's not working for a living or writing her newest book you can find her reading books or binge-watching TV shows. Originally from Croatia, she is always planning her next trip because wanderlust is in her blood.

She is currently working on various projects. Some more secret than others.

Find more about Anna on her website: [www.annabdoe.com](http://www.annabdoe.com)

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