

LAKE *neighbor* LOVE



BRANDI BLISS

LAKE NEIGHBOR LOVE

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ONE

Olivia

Olivia had settled in for the evening and was quickly feeling herself losing the battle to read anymore pages of her book. She put her book down on her nightstand and got up to close the blinds. About halfway to the window she stopped. She could hear something out of place but couldn't quite decipher the sound. She could tell it was coming from outside, so she went to the window and looked down the road. Much to her surprise, she watched as a motorcycle slowly drove by her house and pulled into her neighbor's driveway. She could see there was one person on the bike, a male, but she couldn't make out many details with it being so dark. She never saw a motorcycle on the road, and she knew her neighbor, Cara, was not home and she certainly didn't ride a motorcycle. Olivia paused for a moment and then quickly grabbed her cell phone to call Cara. They were best friends after all and even though Olivia knew Cara was trying to find renters there was no way Cara would have rented out the house without letting Olivia know. The phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail.

“Ugh, pick up Cara! Pick up!”. Olivia glanced over at Frankie as he wagged his tail and tilted his head as if he was unsure if she was speaking to him.

Olivia quickly ended the call and sent Cara a text. After a few minutes with no response, Olivia went out on the back deck to get a better view of Cara’s house and saw there were lights on inside.

“Ok, so she found renters. I don’t hear anything like robbers and if you were breaking into a house, you probably wouldn’t put the lights on right Frankie?” Frankie gave her a whine.

With only a few houses at the far end of the lake it was always quiet. That’s why Olivia loved it. It was about an hour from town, and it was peaceful bliss. No city noises, less people and hardly any traffic on the road. There was barely any noise down at this end of the lake compared to the far north end where there were a few shops, restaurants and day use areas. She liked the solitude the lake house offered, and the quiet surroundings were ideal for her getting work done and where she could take Frankie outside and not worry about being run over by some distracted driver.

Olivia pondered what to do next. She stood still. It was back to being quiet. She couldn’t see anybody moving around in the house. All she could see was one light on and she assumed the guy must have parked the motorcycle in the garage because she couldn’t see it in the driveway. Olivia looked at Frankie. “Alright bud let’s try to get settled for the night. We can call Cara as soon as we get up in the morning.” Frankie gave her a

quick bark. Olivia picked up Frankie and went back to the bedroom. She got in bed and lifted the covers so Frankie could crawl under and curl up next to her. She sat up listening for a while but didn't hear anything out of the ordinary and eventually drifted off.

Olivia was up early the next morning and immediately went out on the deck to get a view of Cara's house. All she could hear were the birds making their morning calls and the lake waves softly coming ashore. There was nothing in sight or out of place that she could tell. She knew it was early and Cara generally liked to sleep in, but Olivia knew if Cara saw it was her calling this early, Cara would know something was going on and pick up the phone. Olivia grabbed her phone and called Cara.

Cara picked up on the second ring. "Hey Liv, you ok? Why are you calling me so early? You know I like to sleep in."

"I'm sorry. I thought I waited long enough. I tried you last night, but you didn't answer."

"Sorry, we were out to dinner with Craig's friends, and I left my phone in the car. Are you ok?"

"I'm ok, but I wish you had told me you rented the house out."

"Um, "I didn't."

Olivia paused and her voice grew concerned. "Um...well, someone stayed there last night. You might have a squatter."

"Oh my God. I'm on my way."

Olivia was unsure Cara should come without backup and quickly blurted out “Cara, maybe you should bring Craig.”

Cara softly laughed. “I love Craig and all, but he’s not the guy you want during a confrontation and he’s out on a run anyway. I’m coming, let me know if they leave.”

“Okay.”

Olivia hung up and went back on the deck. She felt like she was on a stakeout. This was the most excitement she had experienced in a long time. She wished she had a pair of binoculars or something to make her look more like a professional spy.

She called to Frankie. “Frankie, what do you think? Should I go tip toe around and peek in the windows?”

Frankie jumped up on her. She gave him a head scratch. “Ok, ok I’ll stay right here with you until Cara gets here.”

Cara arrived in what seemed record time.

Olivia met her on the lawn. “It’s been very quiet, and I haven’t seen anything this morning.”

Olivia could tell Cara was in her ‘taking care of business mode’. She was never one to back down to anybody.

Olivia followed Cara around to the trunk of her car.

Cara opened her trunk and pulled out a baseball bat. “I’ve got this.”

Olivia chuckled at her. “No, you don’t. Look, fine, take the bat but we will go in together. For all we know there’s

someone dead in there not some psychopath with a chainsaw.”

Cara stiffened. “Ok, you might be right, but the bat is coming with us.”

They headed across the lawn and approached the house with caution.

Cara pulled out her key and quietly unlocked the front door. She glanced at Olivia and whispered, “How the hell did they get in? The door is locked.”

Olivia shrugged. “Maybe through a window? Look, let’s be as quiet as possible. I’m pretty sure there’s only one person in here because all I saw was one guy on a motorcycle drive down and pull into the driveway.”

Cara took a step away from the door and back on to the step. “A motorcycle?”

“Yeah, looked like a guy on a motorcycle. It was dark and I didn’t get to see much detail, but it was definitely a motorcycle.”

Cara closed her eyes and sighed. “I think I know who it is.”

Olivia gave her a surprised look. “Really? Who?”

“My brother Luke.”

Olivia threw her head back in relief. “Your brother the wrestler?”

Cara gave her a stern look. “Boxer. Don’t ever call him a wrestler.”

“Ok then.” Olivia let out some sarcasm. “This is good though right? At least it’s someone you know.”

“Well, you never know with him. Luke is sometimes a mystery. He might be in trouble.”

Olivia still felt relieved knowing that it was someone close to Cara and not some random person breaking in and squatting. She never heard too much about Luke, only that he was a boxer and that he was out in the world doing his own thing, but when Cara did speak of him it was with sisterly love.

Cara smiled at her. “Let’s go give him a surprise.”

Olivia grinned back. “I’m in.”

They walked quietly across the living room. They glanced in the kitchen and didn’t see anyone. Then they made their way to the bedroom.

As they entered the bedroom all they could see was a muscular bare back turned away from them. It was definitely a guy, and he was snoring.

Cara looked at Olivia and mouthed the words “It’s him.”

Olivia put her hands up and mouthed back “Now what?”

Cara smirked and out of nowhere let out a boisterous yell “WAKE UP, WAKE UP YOU SLEEPY HEAD. WAKE UP, WAKE UP AND GET OUT OF BED!”

Olivia broke out into laughter.

All the noise stirred him awake. He turned to them and squinted. “What the heck is going on? Oh, hey sis.”

Cara cocked her head. “Seriously Luke. Are you kidding me right now?”

Luke sat up and glanced at Olivia. “Who are you?”

Olivia was taken aback by his question. “Um, well, I’m Olivia and Cara’s neighbor and her best friend. Should you really be asking me questions right now?”

Olivia could see his face was bruised and he had a gash above his eye. She immediately grew curious about why he looked like he got run over by a truck. Being a former nurse, she could tell his gash needed stitches.

Cara chimed in. “Yeah, I think I should be the one asking the questions. You look like hell. What happened? You need to get up and get some medical attention.”

Olivia nodded. “Yeah, that cut doesn’t look so hot.”

Cara quickly volunteered Olivia. “Liv is a former nurse. Let her stitch you up.”

Luke shook his head. “I’m fine. I had a fight last night, it’s not that bad.”

Cara sighed. “I thought you stopped boxing.”

Luke groaned and rubbed his side. “I thought about it. But I needed some money.”

Cara’s tone was growing impatient. “You could have asked me.”

“You don’t have the kind of money I need.”

“Are you in trouble?”

Olivia was growing uncomfortable and felt like a third wheel. “Maybe I should go and let you two catch up.”

Luke and Cara kept on going and pretended not to hear Olivia.

Luke gingerly felt around his eye. “No. I just need to find someplace to live.”

“Did Steph kick you out? Cara asked in a not-so-caring tone.

“No. I left. Two months ago.”

Cara sat on the edge of the bed and Luke groaned at the pain it caused when the bed moved. “Do I need to take you to the hospital?”

“No. I just need some bourbon.”

“There’s no alcohol in the house.”

“In my bag.”

Cara got to her feet, and he groaned again.

“You brought some with you?”

He gave her a thumbs up.

Cara went to his black canvas bag, as Luke tried to get comfortable. When she pulled out a bottle of bourbon, he said, “Aspirin, too.”

“Well, at least you’re prepared.” She set the bottle down and went to the bag. “Do you want to give me a clue, or should I keep rummaging through your underwear to find them?”

“Outside pocket.”

Cara went through the indicated pocket and took out a bottle of aspirin.

“Bring me four.”

Olivia raised her voice. “You really shouldn’t be taking aspirin with alcohol.”

Luke laughed. “I know this isn’t really medically approved, but I’ve been doing it for years now, and I’m still alive”.

Cara huffed and took out three pills and put them in his hand.

Luke gave her an annoyed look. “Did you forget how to count?”

“You’re only getting three. Liv is right, this isn’t a good combination.”

He shook his head, popped the pills in his mouth and drank from the bottle. He handed it to her, then laid down with another groan and grabbed his side again.

Olivia couldn’t help but stare at his chest. It was impressive. “Did you get punched in the side?”

“No. When I came through the bathroom window, I fell into the bathtub and landed on the side of it.”

Cara started laughing.

Luke was not amused. “You think that’s funny?”

“Yes. Did you break anything? Cara’s sarcasm was hard at play now.

Luke felt around his side. “I doubt it. But I did break half of your bathroom window and some stupid little cat figurine sitting on your sink.”

Cara gasped. “You broke Hugo?”

“If he’s so special to you, why’d you leave him here?”

“Because he’s a lucky house cat.”

“He wasn’t so lucky for me.”

Cara giggled. “Poor Hugo.”

Olivia was growing concerned about his gash. It needed to be cleaned and it needed stitching. She wondered if it was the former nurse in her wanting to take care of him or if she just was trying to figure out a way to get closer to him.

Olivia decided to break up their banter. “Ok, look, you need to get your head stitched up. I have a kit and I can do it here if you want, but I don’t have anything to numb you, so it’s up to you if you want to go to the hospital instead.”

Luke sighed at her. “Fine, you can do it, but let me go shower first.”

Olivia let that image soak in for a moment. She cleared her throat. “Sounds good.”

Cara and Olivia went into the kitchen and put on some coffee and waited for Luke to emerge from the shower. Within

fifteen minutes he came into the kitchen in a pink towel with 'Cara' embroidered on the end around his waist.

Cara let out a sigh. "Really Luke. Do you have any manners? And those are good towels."

Olivia's breath became shallow. She had to look at him. His body was athletic, and she saw he had a tattoo of what appeared to be his initials on his left bicep and one across his chest she couldn't quite read. She saw he noticed her checking him out and quickly glanced down. Luke grabbed a cup of coffee and smiled at her. "Let me get dressed and you can sew up my head."

Olivia was getting nervous. She put down her coffee and decided to ask Cara about the wedding plans for a distraction. "So, is everything going ok for the wedding?"

"Yup so far so good! Craig and I have everything set at this point. Can't believe how quickly the time has passed. Pretty soon the day will be here."

Luke came back into the kitchen wearing jeans and t-shirt with a faded 'North Side Gym' logo on it. His hair was still wet, but his face was freshly shaven. "Ok, let me grab my suture kit."

Olivia was unsure what he meant. "You have your own kit?"

"Well yeah. This isn't the first time, and I don't have a grand to dish out to have some hospital resident stitch me up. I've done it myself before."

“Well you can do it yourself if you don’t want me doing it.”
Olivia’s nerves were getting the best of her.

Luke paused and smiled. “I think it’s best a medical professional, or a former one do it.”

Olivia followed him into the bedroom. She hadn’t put stitches in anyone since she left nursing about two years ago.

He sat on the bed and looked at Olivia. “So you were a nurse?”

“Until two years ago, yes.”

He raised an eyebrow, then seemed to be sorry he did. He rubbed his forehead, then squinted at her. “Did you get fired? Or disbarred? Or whatever you call it when you lose a job in the medical field?”

“No. I quit.”

“Why? I thought that was a pretty good gig.”

Olivia sighed. “Are you going to keep asking me questions? Or am I going to sew up your head?”

He smiled, “I’m all yours.”

Something about those words made Olivia’s stomach fluttery and weird. Maybe she had too much coffee. She remembered she hadn’t eaten anything that morning, so she made a mental note to grab a bite after she was done performing her stitching duties.



Luke

Luke handed Olivia the needle and suture kit.

Olivia looked at the needle. “Is this sterile?”

“It was five minutes ago when I opened the package.”

She moved close to him. “This is going to hurt.”

“I know.”

“You need to stay still. It’ll hurt more if you move.”

“Got it. Just get on with it.” He could faintly smell strawberries and assumed it was either her shampoo or perfume. He tried to concentrate on that instead of the needle going into his skin. He felt it and closed his eyes.

“Are you okay?”

He took a moment to answer. “Keep going.”

She took another stitch, and he clutched the bedspread on either side of his legs. The next stitch hurt a little less, and he took a deep breath. He watched her focus on his head. Her tongue stuck out a little as she was getting ready to put in the other stitches which he thought was kind of sexy, and then her long blonde hair fell over her shoulder as she was getting ready to put in the other stitches. She took a step back and tossed her head from side to side to get her hair to fall back off her shoulders. He closed his eyes with that visual in mind.

Olivia went back to the wound. “Ok, just two more should do it.”

Luke counted them in his head as she took the last two stitches.

“Okay. All done.”

Luke felt Olivia’s hand slowly slide down the side of his face and pause at his jawline. He opened his eyes and saw her staring at him. Her eyes were sky blue and he could feel the tension in her touch.

He could see her breathe in deeply as she pulled her hand away from his face.

“Well, as a former nurse, I can say I’ve never done that without getting numb before.”

Luke got to his feet. “For you or the patient?” He gave her a sarcastic grin as he walked around the room until the pain subsided, or more so to shake off whatever tension he just felt.

When Olivia went to wash her hands, Cara went to Luke.

“You’re crazy.”

“Yeah. But you love me anyway.”

She gave him a gentle hug. “Yes, I do. Come to the living room and sit.”

Two

Olivia

Luke followed Cara into the living room and sat on the couch with a groan.

Cara sat in a chair. “You must be hungry. I know you don’t eat too soon before a fight, so what’s it been twenty-four hours since you ate?”

“Probably.”

Olivia came into the room and sat in the other chair. “Do you want me to make some sandwiches or something, it’s getting close to lunch time?”

Cara sighed. “Too much trouble. How about pizza?”

Luke leaned back on the couch. “You know I love pizza, but who delivers all the way out here?”

“The place next to the beach on the other side of the lake.”

“I thought that place sucked?”

“No. It used to suck. There are new owners now. It’s really good. Liv and I used to order from them all the time.”

“Is it as good as Big Ernie’s?”

Cara smiled. “No one’s as good as Big Ernie’s.” When Olivia looked confused, Cara said, “Let me order. Then I’ll tell you all about it.”

While Cara was placing the pizza order, Olivia tried not to stare at Luke, but it was hard. He was kind of hard not to notice. He was leaning back on the couch with his eyes closed, so she felt safe taking a glance or two. She’d never been drawn to super athletic or ‘hunky’ guys, and she wasn’t even sure that’s how she would describe him. He was heavily muscled, without a hint of fat anywhere. He had dark eyes and dark hair, just like Cara. Olivia could only see the one visible tattoo on his bicep peeking out from the sleeve of his t-shirt. She never dated a guy with tattoos and was curious if the one on his bicep and the one on his chest were the only two he had.

He opened his eyes, and she looked away, then glanced back and gave him a small smile.

He nodded towards her. “Thanks, by the way.”

“Sure. No problem. I guess it’s good to dust off my skills once in a while.”

“So. Why aren’t you a nurse anymore?”

Even though he was asking a simple question, his eyes were so dark and intense, she had to look away. It seemed even when he was relaxed, he was on edge.

She looked at her hands and answered his question. “Because testing software pays a lot better. Plus, I don’t need

to commute.”

“You’re a computer geek?”

She ventured a look at him again. He was smiling, which made him seem much less intense. “I prefer computer nerd.”

“Gotcha.”

Cara finished placing their order, then returned to the chair. “Okay. Twenty minutes. Just enough time to tell you the Big Ernie’s story.” Cara leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. “Starting when I was about twelve and Luke was thirteen, we pretty much raised ourselves. When Luke was fifteen, he got a job at Big Ernie’s in the kitchen making pizzas, doing prep, stuff like that.”

Olivia was intrigued. “Where was this?”

“Santa Fe. Before we moved up here. So, anyway, Ernie got wind of our situation, and he started letting Luke bring home pizza or bread sticks, or sometimes wings on the nights he worked.”

Olivia glanced at Luke. “That was generous of him.”

Luke laughed. “It wasn’t so much generosity as it was bribery. He knew I was into his daughter, so he told me as long as I left her alone, I could bring home food.”

Cara smiled at him. “Isn’t he so sweet? He gave up a girl so I could eat.”

“So *we* could eat.” Luke sat forward, putting a hand on his side as he did so. “Fortunately, it was damn good pizza, and I

actually spent some time with his daughter. Ernie just never found out.”

Olivia figured Luke had been with plenty of women. He seemed like he was the type of guy who drew women towards him. Even she was curious about him, though he was not anything she could picture herself with. He was attractive, with a great body, and she guessed most women would like his gentle bad boy aura, but she wondered if it was for real or if it was a façade.

Olivia looked at Luke and then at Cara. “How is that a good story? It’s kind of sad.”

Luke picked up a pillow and put it behind his back. “It’s a good story because we got to eat. Otherwise, we would’ve been eating ramen and cans of soup. Cara was a terrible cook and I never really tried.”

When Cara noticed Olivia’s reaction, she went to her and gave her a hug. “Oh, honey. It’s okay. We had each other, and honestly, we had a blast growing up.”

Olivia didn’t believe her. “It doesn’t sound like it.”

Cara stood. “Well, we did. Look how well adjusted we—” She grinned at Luke. “How well adjusted *I* am.”

Luke picked up another pillow and threw it at her. It seemed to cause him pain, and Cara laughed.

“Serves you right.”

“Totally worth it.”

While they waited for the pizza to arrive, Cara and Luke reminisced some more about Big Ernie's, but Olivia wanted to know why they lived liked that. Cara never talked about anyone in her family except Luke. She assumed it was because her parents had passed, so she didn't want to ask too many questions, but now Cara was hinting at a troubled family situation, and Olivia wanted to know what it was.

The pizza arrived along with breadsticks, hot wings, and a two liter of soda. Cara set it all on the coffee table between the chairs and the couch, passed out paper plates and napkins, then got three glasses from the kitchen.

Luke took a slice of pizza and several wings, then settled back on the couch to eat.

Olivia took a slice of pizza. "Okay. I'm sorry, and maybe it's not my business. But why were you two left to raise yourselves?"

Cara glanced at Luke, who shrugged. "Our dad, if you want to call him that, left when we were seven and eight."

Luke mumbled. "Good riddance."

"And Mom did her best. She actually did fine for a while, or maybe we were too young to notice, but anyway, she started losing it when Luke was in eighth grade."

Olivia wasn't sure what that meant. "Losing it?"

Luke spoke up. "She went...well... crazy."

Cara rolled her eyes. "Luke."

“It’s the truth.”

“She started spending more and more time away from home. She’d bring home a boyfriend now and then. Fortunately, they were harmless and somehow, she kept the bills paid.”

Luke tilted his head and Cara added, “The power would get turned off once in a while, but she always managed to find the money to get it turned back on.”

Olivia shook her head. “What do you think she was doing? Was she working?”

“I don’t know Liv. We never wanted to know. We were much happier when she was gone. She was—”

“Frickin’ crazy,” Luke mumbled through a mouth full of food.

Olivia had no idea about any of this. “Gosh, you guys. I’m so sorry.”

Cara looked over at Olivia. “Like I said, it was fine. She never mistreated us. We were just ignored. Which was okay. We had each other.”

Olivia still had questions and directed them at Cara. “How did you end up here?”

“When I was a senior in high school, she stopped coming home at all. We laid low, and got by until I turned eighteen, and then we walked away from the house and from Santa Fe.”

Luke smiled. “We didn’t walk away from Santa Fe. We took my car.”

“We took your car halfway.” Cara laughed.

“Right. We left it on the side of the road somewhere in the middle of Nevada.”

“I wonder if it’s still there?”

“Probably not. It’d be fun to go find out, though. Road trip?” Luke looked at Olivia. “You could come too.”

Olivia was caught off guard by his invitation. Before she could respond Cara chimed in.

“No road trips this close to the wedding!” Cara looked at Olivia. “That’s why Luke is walking me down the aisle. He’s my only family.” She looked at Luke. “Which means no fighting when it gets close. I don’t want you looking like that on my wedding day.”

“Handsome?” He flexed a bicep. “Manly?”

Olivia gave a hard look at his arms. They were sexy, and she knew he knew it.

Cara laughed at him. “Put that away. More like you were hit by a bus.”

“The guy did hit pretty hard.” He felt his bruised cheekbone. “When is it again?”

“Luke!”

He laughed. “I know. I know. Don’t worry. I’ll take a few weeks off before we fly to Hawaii and have your dream

wedding.” He cocked his head at her. “When you were a kid, and you dreamt about your perfect wedding, did you picture someone like Craig standing next to you?”

“Shut up.”

Olivia enjoyed watching their sibling bickering. It was nothing like her relationship with her brother. As much as she loved her brother, they didn’t talk too much, and they certainly didn’t have a childhood like Luke and Cara’s.

Luke took a third piece of pizza, then looked around the living room. “So, another question. Why is this place empty?”

“I’m trying to find some tenants, but nobody wants to live out here.” He smiled at her and she shook her head. “No. You can’t afford it. I need to at least get my mortgage payment paid.”

“How much is that?”

“Fifteen hundred” she said matter-of-factly.

“Ouch.” He set his plate down, wiped his hands on a napkin, then got to his feet. “I’ll be right back.”

Olivia glanced at Cara. “Fifteen hundred? No wonder why the house is empty. Maybe you should lower the rent if you’re so eager to get tenants.”

Cara paused. “I can’t go any lower, I have to pay this mortgage.”

Olivia looked up and saw Luke coming back in the room. His walk was even hard not to watch.

Luke handed an envelope to Cara. She looked inside and gasped.

“Oh my gosh. How much is in here?”

“Seven grand.”

She stared at him. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. How much time will that get me if you figure in the sweet brother discount?”

“Luke.”

“Come on. I know you could use the money for your wedding. I’ll even fix the bathroom window.”

“You’ll fix the bathroom window, regardless.” She sighed. “Fine. You can stay. But this is only going to get you a few months. You need to keep it coming. And the utilities are on you.”

“No problem.”

“And don’t trash the place.”

“I would never.”

Cara smiled at Olivia. “Looks like you have a neighbor now.”

Olivia wasn’t sure if she was happy about it or not. He seemed harmless enough, and Cara certainly seemed to care a lot about him. She had gotten used to being by herself at the end of the lake, and she wasn’t sure she really wanted a new neighbor, but she figured she could at least keep an eye on him

and let Cara know his comings and goings so she could feel at ease.

Olivia returned Cara's smile, "It'll be like you never left."

THREE

Luke

Luke was never one to collect stuff, so moving into Cara's house was pretty simple. He'd left a couple of things at his ex-girlfriend's house, and she was all too eager for him to pick them up.

He borrowed a car from a friend and went to collect the two boxes she'd packed and were ready for him outside the front door. He then went to the three places he'd stayed between leaving her and breaking into Cara's house which resulted in two full plastic grocery bags and another box.

He looked at the sum of his belongings in the trunk of the borrowed car.

'Wow. This is kind of pathetic. You've lived twenty-eight years and all you have to show for it is a couple boxes of junk and a motorcycle.'

He shrugged. He had a place to stay, at least temporarily.

He drove to the lake and pulled in front of the house. Cara had given him a key, so he didn't need to use the bathroom

window again. When he spotted Olivia coming outside with a dog on a leash, he gave her a wave.

She waved back, then walked over to him. He was looking a little disheveled and had beads of sweat on his brow. Sweat had started running down over his stitches. His bruise was looking a little better, but it was still purple and swollen and he knew she would notice.

She came up beside him. “How’s your head feeling? You still look pretty swollen.”

He gingerly touched his wound. “It feels fine. No complaints.” It hurt still but he didn’t want to say it.

“Is today your official moving in day?”

“Yeah.” He opened the trunk and took out a box. “Should take about five minutes.”

Olivia peered into the trunk. “Wow. That’s it?”

“That’s it” he said slightly embarrassed.

“Good thing the house is furnished, or you’d be sleeping on the floor.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” He glanced at the box in his arms. “I should...”

“Oh, of course. Don’t let me keep you. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

He looked around. “Is that what this is?”

She took a few steps back. “I’ll see you around. Happy unpacking day.”

“Thanks.”

He watched as she turned and walked away with her fancy little dog that he was sure cost more than his monthly pay. He couldn't quite figure her out, but he assumed she'd be quiet and keep to herself. He didn't need to be distracted, even though he found her quite attractive in a computer nerd sort of way. Her hair was long and shiny blonde, and he noticed how her skin was perfectly freckled. Her blue eyes were captivating. When she walked away, he got the faint smell of strawberries. He liked strawberries.

He brought the boxes and bags into the bedroom and put them in the closet. He had no intention of unpacking them. The only thing he needed were his clothes, which didn't amount to much. A couple pairs of jeans, a few t-shirts, and his workout gear. He had one nice shirt that Cara bought him last year for his birthday. He'd yet to wear it. Feeling guilty, he hung up his shirts and put his pants, gym shorts, and underwear on the built in shelf.

He stood back and took a look. *'Okay. All moved in.'*

He started a pot of coffee, one of the few groceries he bought yesterday, then went out on the deck. It was a big space with a beautiful view of the lake. There was a long set of steps leading down to a twenty-foot dock on the water. The drop from the house to the lake was fairly steep, so the steps could prove to be a challenge to someone who wasn't in shape, but it was the only access to the lake from the house. On either side of the steps was thick brush with a few pine trees.

He looked over at Olivia's house. Her incline was a little less steep, and there was a twelve-foot sailboat tied to her dock. He wondered how often she took it out, or if she ever took it out. He'd only been on a boat a few times and had never sailed. He liked the water, though, and he was definitely ready to take a swim in the lake.

He went down the steps and onto the dock. There was a cool breeze, but it was just warm enough. He knelt and put his hand in the water. It was cold, but he stood, took off his t-shirt, and jeans, then dove into the water.



Olivia

Olivia's desk faced a window giving her a beautiful view of the lake. She could also see Cara's dock, so when she saw Luke walk out onto it, she stopped working and watched him. When he started taking his clothes off, she looked away, but then couldn't help herself. When he stepped out of his jeans, she held her breath. He was clearly in shape, and the only thing that looked out of place on him was his bruised and stitched cut above his eye, but other than that she figured he could be a model in some fitness magazine.

"Please stop there." She turned to Frankie expecting a response.

Luke did stop there, and then dove into the water with just his boxers on. She couldn't help but watch.

“It might be a little difficult to get work done with you living next door. I might have to move my desk. Frankie, should I move it?” Frankie looked up at her and whined. “You're right, this is like getting a free show. I'm going to leave it just where it is.”

She continued watching him swim away from the dock until she could barely see him anymore.

“Please don't drown out there. I don't want to have to call Cara and give her the bad news.” She returned her attention to her computer screen.

“I'm sure he's fine. He wouldn't have jumped into the lake if he wasn't a strong swimmer. I imagine he's a strong... everything.”

After a few minutes, she looked at the lake again and was relieved to see he was headed back. She watched him approach the dock and climb up the ladder. He shook his head, which reminded her of a grizzly bear video she watched once, then he picked up his clothes and jogged up the steps. She could hear her heart racing. *'Wow. Okay. Back to work.'*

Olivia tried to work the rest of the day and into the evening, but her thoughts kept looping back to Luke and how he looked standing shirtless on the dock. Eventually she gave up trying to work and went to bed sleeping restlessly until morning.

Olivia got up early and took Frankie outside. She saw Luke's garage door open, and she watched him back his bike out and turn it around in the driveway. He closed the door, then started the bike and took off down the road. As he passed her, he gave her a wave.

'Wonder where he's off to this morning?' Cara told her he worked at the gym in town, so she assumed maybe that's where he was headed.

Olivia worked most of the day without the interruption of any hunky guys taking off their clothes and jumping into the lake, and by four, she realized she hadn't eaten since breakfast. She shut down her laptop and went to the kitchen.

She searched her refrigerator, then looked through the cupboards. Nothing looked good. When she noticed her sink had dishes from yesterday in it, she sighed. "Dishes first, then food. If you can figure out what you want to eat." She looked at Frankie, who was wagging his tail.

"No. I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to myself, which is a really bad habit of mine."

She patted his head. "I could pretend I'm talking to you, so I don't appear to be crazy."

She turned on the faucet and the sink started filling with water. She waited until it slowly drained, then checked the cover over the drain. It was clear.

"What's wrong with you?" She looked at Frankie. "No, buddy. Still not talking to you."

She knew from experience that a plumber would charge her a lot to come all the way to the lake. When she heard Luke's motorcycle drive by the house, she looked at Frankie.

“What do you think? Should I ask him if he knows anything about plumbing?”

Frankie cocked his head and barked once.

“I'll take that as a yes.”

She decided to let Luke get settled in, or whatever he did when he got home, before going to knock on his door. While she waited, she made some toast and spread peanut butter on it. She washed it down with orange juice and figured she'd covered most of the food groups. She then stashed all the dirty dishes in the dishwasher she never used.

'You don't want him to think you're a slob.'

After an hour, she went over to the house and knocked on the door.

When he opened it, he didn't seem surprised to see her.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” She suddenly felt stupid for going over and almost changed her mind. “I ah... I don't suppose you know anything about plumbing?”

He shook his head. “Not a thing. Well, I know how to work a plunger, but that's about it.”

“Oh. Okay. Never mind, then.” She turned to go, and he closed the door. She glanced back, then went down the porch

steps. She was somewhat disappointed but not even sure why. She got the impression she was bothering him and realized he probably didn't want any friendly neighbor contact. She started to walk more swiftly towards her house.

She then heard the door open, and she stopped and turned back.

Luke ran a hand through his hair. "I could take a look if you want. No promises, though."

"It's fine. I'll call a plumber tomorrow."

"Okay." He closed the door again.

She crossed the yard and went onto her porch, then glanced back at the house.

'What were you expecting? Cara said he was socially inept.'

She went inside and sat on the couch, then picked up the book she'd been reading. Frankie whined to get up, so she picked him up and watched him circle twice before laying down and putting his head on her lap. She got through one chapter when she heard a knock on the door. It could only be one person.

She went to the door and opened it. Luke had an awkward look on his face. He glanced at her then looked down at the porch floor. He put his hand on the doorframe. Olivia could tell he had no idea what to say and she thought she better say something first.

"Hey."

“Yeah. Um... I figured you helped me with the stitches and all. The least I could do would be to try to help you out. I don't imagine a plumber is cheap.”

“Not at all. Are you sure you don't mind?”

“I'm here, aren't I?”

She opened the door, and he came in, which caused Frankie to bark from his position on the couch.

“Frankie shush.”

Frankie barked once more, whined, then laid back down.

The layout of her house was identical to Cara's, only a mirror image.

Luke looked around. “This is weird.”

“They were built by the same man.”

“Hmm. Where's the...?”

“In here.” Olivia headed for the kitchen.

Luke followed her and seemed relieved it wasn't a toilet issue. She turned on the water.

“See, it's not going down.”

“Do you have a flashlight, or...?”

“Sure.” She searched through her junk drawer and pulled out a flashlight, then handed it to him.

He turned it on, but it didn't light up. He tapped it a few times, then glanced at Olivia. “Batteries?”

“Um...yes. I think so.” She searched another drawer and took out a pack of batteries, then handed them to him. He replaced the batteries in the flashlight, then turned it on. He shone it down the drain once the water receded. “Don’t see anything on this end.”

He pointed at the cupboard under the sink. “Do you mind if I...”

She opened the cupboard doors while she wondered if he always had trouble finishing his sentences. She removed a box of dishwasher soap, a bucket with cleaning supplies, and a small toolbox.

Luke knelt in front of the open cupboard, studied the pipes for a moment, then looked up at her and smiled. “Honestly, I don’t know what the hell I’m looking at.”

Olivia started laughing. “Why did you come over then?”

He stood and leaned against the sink. “I don’t know. I felt like I should at least try.”

“Well, it was sweet of you to pretend you knew what you were doing.”

“I *am* Cara’s sweet brother.”

“I guess you are.”

He turned to the sink and turned the water on again. “It’s not completely clogged. Have you tried drain cleaner?”

“No. I guess I should’ve done that first before bothering you.”

“You didn’t bother me. I was over there staring at the walls. It’s really quiet around here.”

“It takes some getting used to.”

“Do you have some drain cleaner? I *do* know how to use that.”

Olivia shook her head. “No. But I’ll get some tomorrow, before I call a plumber.”

Luke thought for a moment. “I think Cara might have some in the bathroom. I’ll go check.”

He took off before she had a chance to answer. She called out to him “Okay. Thanks.” Olivia had no idea what she had just gotten herself into. She looked over at Frankie who was watching the birds out the sliding door. “Frankie, he is one weird man.”

Luke returned a few minutes later with a bottle of drain cleaner in his hand. He came through the door she’d left open and held it up. “It’s not full. Hopefully it’s enough.”

“Let’s give it a try.”

When he started to pour it in, she put a hand on his arm. She could feel every muscle in his forearm and his veins pulsing.

“Should you read the directions first?”

“Directions? Nah.” He poured the contents of the bottle down the drain, then tossed the empty bottle into her garbage can.

“Okay, so I guess you’re one of those guys who never asks for directions.”

He shrugged. “No need. I never get lost.” He took his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the time. “Do you have this? I need to get going.”

“Sure. Of course. Thank you.”

He walked to the door and went back to his house. A few minutes later, she heard his motorcycle start up and drive away.

She went to the sink and turned on the water. It pooled for a moment, then started draining properly.

‘Thank you, Luke. I guess.’

She sat down and thought about touching his arm. She had never felt pulsing veins like that even when she was a nurse. It was like he had more than blood running through his veins. It was as if his thoughts and words were flowing through them too, and they were trying to make their way out.

FOUR

Olivia

On nights when the sky was clear and there wasn't much of a breeze, Olivia liked to sit at the end of her dock with a glass of wine and relax. It was beautiful, quiet, and calm. Tonight, there was a full moon, and it lit up the middle of the lake.

The silence was soon broken by something or someone splashing toward Luke's dock. She glanced over in that direction and saw him reach up and grab the ladder.

As he started up, she called out. "Whoa there, cowboy. Please tell me you're wearing a swimsuit."

He looked at her. "Sorry. Afraid not."

She stood and turned her back to him. "Do what you have to do." She heard him laugh as he got out of the water.

A few minutes later, he said, "It's safe. You can turn around."

She glanced over her shoulder and saw him pull his t-shirt over his head. She sat back down and picked up her wine.

He smiled at her. “Seems you’re a bit shy, Olivia.”

“I’m not shy. I just don’t want to see you in all your... whatever-ness. You obviously aren’t shy.”

“You think I’m a showoff?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“If I wanted to show off, I wouldn’t be swimming at night on the private side of the lake.”

“I’m afraid if you swam anywhere else without a suit, you might be arrested.”

“That’s a factor, too.” He picked up his towel and rubbed his hair. “If I knew you were going to be out here, I would’ve dug up some trunks.”

“I’d appreciate that. Next time.”

“How’s the sink?”

“It’s great. Draining properly. Thank you.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t do anything but loan you a bottle of drain cleaner.”

“Still.”

“Which you owe me, by the way.”

Olivia let out a long sigh. “Oh, for what? The plumbing you didn’t do?”

“No. For the drain cleaner. I don’t want to be stuck here with a clogged drain and have to go all the way into town to buy some.”

“Right. I’ll get you a bottle the next time I’m in town. In the meantime, watch what you put down your drain.” She was feeling good with her comebacks.

“Will do.” He gave her a nod and started toward the steps, then stopped and glanced at her. “Do you ever swim in the lake?”

She shook her head. “I don’t like to swim in water I can’t see the bottom of.”

“It’s pretty refreshing. Let me guess- it’s the monster, right?”

She turned in her seat and looked at him. “You mean the Lake Tiberon monster?”

“Yeah.”

“Please don’t tell me you believe.”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. I’ve heard stuff. I think Tibby might be out there.”

“Tibby?”

“That’s what the locals call him. Which you are. A local.”

“I guess I don’t get out enough.”

He started walking again, and she got to her feet. “I take the boat out sometimes.”

He stopped and looked at her again. “It’s a nice little sailboat.”

“Do you sail?”

“Nah. Never really had the opportunity.”

“I never did much either, but my dad bought it for me. You know dads.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted it. “I’m sorry. That was really insensitive.”

Luke glanced down at the water. “No worries. I may not know how dads are supposed to be, but I know how they’re not supposed to be.”

She sat back down as he started walking again.

“I’ll see you around, neighbor.”

“Have a good night, Luke.”

She watched him jog up the steps, taking two at a time.

She whispered out loud “There is a monster around here. But he doesn’t live in the lake. He lives next door.”

She glanced over at Luke’s house. “He’s not a bad monster. He’s actually kind of sweet.”

She took a sip of wine.

“Yeah, in a gruff, muscly sort of way.”

She mimicked him. “If I knew you were out here, I would’ve dug up some trunks.”

She leaned back and crossed her legs. “Tibby. Please.”

When she heard splashing in the lake below the dock, she came to attention, then sighed.

When she heard another splash, she stood.

“Ok, I’m done. Time to go in.”



Luke

With offers for two fights in the next six weeks, Luke upped his daily workouts to get ready. The second one would be two weeks before Cara's wedding, which would give him time to recover. Of course, ideally, he wouldn't need time to recover.

He enjoyed swimming in the lake, as it gave him something new to add to his training. It could replace some running, which was his least favorite thing to do. Although, running along the lake was better than running in town, so he decided to swim at night and run in the morning, followed by stuff he could do at the house without a weight room. On the four days he worked at the gym, he could use their equipment.

He'd just finished a morning run, and was halfway through a hundred sit-ups, when someone knocked on the door. He tried to ignore it. It was either someone he didn't know, or it was his neighbor. He stopped. He wouldn't mind opening the door for Olivia.

He went to the door and looked through the peephole as Olivia was walking away. Her hair was glistening in the sun, and she had on tank top and he could see her freckled skinned shoulders.

Luke opened the door, and she turned to face him. He saw her take in his sweaty, shirtless torso, then glance at the

ground.

“Um. Sorry.” She held up a bottle of drain cleaner. “Just returning this.”

“Oh. Thanks.” He used his forearm to wipe some sweat from his eyes. “Sorry. I was working out.”

“Yeah. I gathered that.”

“I have a fight coming up.”

“Not too close to the wedding, I hope.”

Luke noticed she was having a hard time making eye contact. “Do I look scary or something?”

“Oh, um, no not at all. Why do you ask?”

He smiled at her. “Because you look at the ground. A lot.”

Olivia looked up. “Sorry, it’s just a bad habit. Your cut is looking a bit better.”

He loved seeing her blue eyes. It made his heart race. “Yeah, it’s getting there. Thanks to you.”

Olivia laughed. “Well, I should let you get back to it.”

“Right. See ya.” He held up the bottle. “Thanks. I was actually mostly kidding about you replacing it.” He wanted to invite her in, but with nothing to do and no food in the house he thought otherwise.

“Then I won’t feel too bad if I need to borrow it again.”

Luke wanted to keep the conversation going. “Technically, you only owe me half a bottle, so half of this is yours,

anyway.”

“Hopefully, I won’t need to use it.” She gave him a little wave. “See ya.”

“Bye, Olivia.”

He closed the door, then went to the window and watched her cross the yard.

‘Women aren’t on your training schedule, and she is not the type to be interested in you. She’s beautiful and her skin is soft with pretty little freckles, and she smells like strawberries. You date edgy firecrackers who smell like a bottle of mixed perfumes.’

He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. He then spent another two hours working out and decided he would take the rest of the day off after a quick swim.

He dug through his boxes and found a pair of swim trunks, then went into the kitchen pantry to find something to eat. He still hadn’t done much grocery shopping, but Cara had left a few canned goods in the pantry. He found a can of tuna, which he was about to open, when he spotted a fishing pole in the back corner. He picked up the pole and looked at the can of tuna.

“There has to be bass in this lake.”

He set the tuna on the shelf and picked up the tackle box next to the fishing pole, but he was hungry now and it might take him a while to catch his dinner.

He took a can of peaches and poured them into a blender. He added milk, three eggs, and some protein powder. He tossed in an apple for good measure, then turned on the blender. When it seemed everything was blended sufficiently, he drank the concoction straight from the mixing container.

When he was finished, he set the container in the sink, ran some water in it, then took a large bottle of water from the refrigerator, grabbed the fishing pole and headed down to the dock.



Olivia

Olivia put in a few hours of work after her trip to town, but by mid-afternoon, she was ready to take a break. Since it was warm again, with a clear sky and no breeze, she decided to get some sun. She put on her bikini top and some shorts, then went to the end of the dock and set herself up in a chaise lounge. She had a bottle of water and a good book, and she was ready to relax.

She'd just settled in and opened her book when she saw Luke coming down his steps in swim trunks holding fishing gear.

He gave her a wave. "Too nice of a day to spend inside."

“Yes. It is.” She watched as his muscles moved with every step he took.

He set his gear down, along with a bottle of water and a towel. “I’m going to take a quick swim first.”

“Have fun.” Luke dove into the lake and began swimming.

“At least he’s wearing trunks this time”.

She watched him swim out a few hundred feet, then turn around and come back to the dock. His athleticism was obvious with every stroke he took and Olivia enjoyed watching him.

“He is something to watch isn’t he?” She bit her lip.

Luke climbed out, dried off with the towel, then sat on the edge of the dock and opened the tackle box.

He yelled over to her. “How’s the fishing?”

Olivia shrugged. “I don’t know. Never tried.”

“You live on the lake and don’t take advantage of what it has to offer.”

“Sitting here, taking in the view, works for me.” She smiled to herself. The view she meant was him, but she knew he didn’t have a clue what she meant.

He seemed to find what he was looking for and he tied a lure onto his line, then got to his feet and cast it into the lake. He reeled it in slowly, then cast it out again. Olivia returned to her book as Luke continued the process for the next thirty minutes.

When he sat to change lures, she set her book down. “No luck?”

“I might’ve scared them away when I went in the water. That or I’m using the wrong lure.”

“Do you fish a lot?”

“No. My dad took me out once when I was eight. Then skipped town a few days later.”

“You’ve only fished that one time?” Olivia was surprised.

“Yeah.” He looked at her and smiled. “How hard can it be?”

“From what I know, which isn’t much, I think it requires a bit of skill and finesse.” She had no idea really but thought that sounded like she knew what she was talking about.

Luke gave her side smile. “Are you saying you don’t think I’m going to catch anything.?”

“I’m saying you’ll be lucky if you do.”

He held up a lure. “I think I just heard a challenge.”

Olivia laughed. “Fishing is supposed to be fun and relaxing. So, no. I’m not challenging you. Just enjoy yourself.”

Luke wouldn’t let it go. “No. No. No. You don’t think I can do it.”

“I never said that.”

He took a long drink of water. “Tell you what. I bet you I’ll be eating fish for dinner tonight.”

Olivia took a long pause. She was finding this fun. “And what happens if you do? Because I assume you think I’m betting you can’t.”

“If I catch more than five fish, you need to come help me eat them.”

“I’m thinking it might be a pretty safe bet on my part. What do I win if you don’t catch five fish?”

“Then we’ll be eating tuna sandwiches for dinner, and I’ll supply the beer.”

Olivia was getting more curious. “What makes you think I want to eat dinner with you? Because either way, that seems to be the end result.”

“Consider it the neighborly thing to do.”

“Okay. I accept. You better stop talking and start fishing because I’m not really a fan of canned tuna.”

Olivia liked his banter. She wondered if he could see her staring at him through her sunglasses. She pushed her sunglasses down her nose slightly so she could see over the top of them. She wanted to make it clear she was staring at him, and she wanted him to know.

FIVE

Olivia

Olivia stepped out of the shower and dried herself off. When her skin felt tender, she went to the mirror and looked at her shoulders. Even though she'd used sunscreen, she was sunburned on her shoulders and upper arms.

“Ugh, darn it. Frankie I look like a rosy colored lobster.”

She never reapplied any sunscreen because she was too busy chatting with Luke. Once they'd agreed on the terms of their bet, he started catching fish. When he got to five, she wasn't sure if she wanted him to catch another or not. He got a sixth and then a seventh. At that point, he stopped and told her dinner would be at six and she should bring her appetite and a bottle of white wine.

She didn't know what to expect. She thought to cancel. It was a stupid bet, but she knew she couldn't. She also knew, but didn't want to admit, she was curious what time alone with him might be like.

She went to her closet and stared at her clothes.

“What do I wear to dinner with my best friend’s brother, who happens to be a hunk, a little ill-mannered, but kind of cute and charming, too? Why do I care about this? He’s not my type, and I have no interest investing any time in him.”

It was true that she didn’t have any interest in investing time in any man at this point. The last two guys she dated were high maintenance. They always wanted her to be some type of trophy girlfriend and wanted her to come to every social or work event just so they could tell their friends she was a nurse, even though she had left the profession. They always had some stupid guy fantasy about nurses, and it made her sick to her stomach. While the guys she dated were smart, she never felt attracted to them fully. They tended to have lives that revolved around their work and didn’t leave much time for fun. Personality wise, they were kind of dry and uninteresting which spilled over into any intimate activities. She grew uninterested in dating and just stopped trying, but Luke was making her interested again.

Frankie came in and wagged his tail.

“What do you think? Super casual, right? I don’t want him to think I believe it’s anything more than two people who really don’t know each other, getting together for dinner.”

She decided on a pair of olive capris and a black tank top. She then put a black cotton shirt over the tank. She buttoned it up all the way, then went to the mirror.

“Too schoolmarm.”

She unbuttoned the top three buttons, then shook her head and unbuttoned it all the way.

“Okay. Whatever. It’s fine.”

She slipped on some sandals, then looked at the time. It was only five-thirty.



Luke

Luke took a quick shower to wash the lake off, then ran a comb through his hair and slipped on some jeans and a plain white t-shirt. He then put on some tennis shoes and considered himself ready.

He knew he shouldn’t have invited Olivia over. It was going to be weird. He wasn’t much of a conversationalist, and she wasn’t all that chatty either. He wondered if this was a dumb idea.

He sighed. “Why do you care? She’s just your neighbor. Cara’s friend.”

He shook his head. “She’s Cara’s *best* friend.”

Cara would have a fit if he started anything with Olivia. Cara was very protective of her friends and had always told him to steer clear. Not that she thought he was a bad guy. She knew he wasn’t, but he wasn’t dating material. He didn’t know how he managed to stay with Stephanie for six months. They

were fine until he moved in with her. That was the beginning of the end. He wasn't easy to live with and he knew that.

He went to the kitchen and cleaned the fish the best he could. They were nice sized bass and would grill up fine. Even though he wasn't much of a cook, he could man a grill. He put together a salad, which was something else he knew how to do. He'd usually need to lose a few pounds right before a fight, so salads were in his repertoire. He'd learned to make them taste like he wasn't eating nothing.

He checked his watch. "Five to six. Let's see how prompt she is."

He glanced out the window toward her house. "My guess is, you'll show up right on time."

At six o'clock, Olivia knocked on the door and he went to open it.

Luke answered the door and gave a smirky grin. He noticed her fair skin was highlighted by her black tank top and he could tell she got some sun. She looked like she was glowing.

"Welcome. Looks like someone got some sun today."

Olivia smiled at him and handed him the bottle of wine. "Hope this is okay?"

"Sure. Not a big wine connoisseur. I just know you drink white wine with fish."

"This should be fine, then." She looked around and seemed surprised it was still neat.

He saw her look around. “Did you think I’d trash the place?”

“No. Of course not.”

“One advantage of not having much is there’s nothing to leave lying around.” He headed for the kitchen, and she followed him. “Do you want a glass now?”

“Sure.”

Luke opened the bottle of wine and poured it into two glasses. He handed one to her and raised his glass. “To new neighbors.”

She raised her glass as well. “Welcome to the lake.”

They both took a sip, and he picked up a platter with the filleted fish on it. “I’m going to cook these on the grill. I’m not much good in the kitchen.”

“Sounds good. For a non-fisherman, those look perfect.”

“I spent a summer on the coast and worked in a fish mart. I may not know how to catch them, but I know how to clean and fillet them.”

“After today, I’d say you know how to catch them as well.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

They went onto the deck and Luke started the propane grill. It looked brand new, and he assumed Cara probably never used it. He nodded toward a chair.

“Take a seat.”

Olivia sat and took a sip of wine, while Luke set the fillets on the grill. He squeezed some lemon on them, then seasoned them with salt and pepper.

He sat in the other chair and drank some wine. “So, what exactly do you do on the computer?”

“I test new software and look for any weaknesses or bugs. I’m the last eyes on it before it goes to market.”

“How the hell did you fall into that? Seems a bit obscure.”

“I have a degree in computer science and one of my professors gave my name to a company looking for someone to test their new software. I got the job and then started freelancing.”

“I thought you had a nursing degree.”

“I have that, too. I was a double major.”

“Hmm. I barely graduated from high school. Not because I’m stupid. I was working full-time and playing football. Didn’t leave a lot of time to study. I got just good enough grades to stay on the team.” He drank some more wine. “Of course, now that I’ve been hit in the head so many times I’m probably a little bit more stupid than I was in high school.”

He got up and turned the fish over.

“So Luke, why do you do it? Why boxing? Why punish your body like that?”

He shrugged and sat back down. “I don’t know. I guess I love the rush. It’s exhilarating going toe to toe with another

athlete. Giving it all you've got."

"And coming out on top?"

"So far, yeah. I haven't lost a fight in eight years" he said confidently.

"Wow."

"But I probably only have a few years left. Assuming I don't get hurt too badly."

"You're too old at twenty-seven?"

"Twenty-eight. I hope to make it to thirty. Then I'll retire."

"And then what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Coach, I guess. That's what I do now at the gym. I've got about ten kids I coach. Nine boys and one tough sixteen-year-old girl." He stood and checked the fish. "I think these are ready. Do you want to eat out here? I can drag the table over."

She nodded. "Yeah, it's really nice. Let's eat out here."

He went into the house to get plates, napkins, silverware, the salad, and the bottle of wine. He set everything on the table, then pulled it over to Olivia's chair. He moved his chair closer to hers, then put the fish on a plate and set it on the table.

"It's not fancy, but it'll be good." He was hoping he was right.

"Mmm. Thank you. It smells wonderful."

They ate for a few moments in silence. Luke was happy with how the fish turned out. He was kind of winging it, even though he tried to appear as though he knew what he was doing. Olivia seemed to be enjoying it.

He was attracted to her, even though they had nothing in common. She was a smart double major, computer nerd who probably made pretty good money. He worked part time and got beat up on a regular basis. It'd be stupid to even try to have a relationship with her. Cara would kill him. He wondered what Olivia thought of him. She seemed to be having a good time. She didn't act like she wanted to run out of there. He didn't think she was just being polite. Of course, maybe she was just bored and miserable and he just didn't want to see it. He wasn't sure what to do next.

He gave her a small smile and held up the bottle of wine. "Would you like a little more?"

"Hmm. I shouldn't. But sure. Why not?"

He filled her glass and his. "So, what do you think? Is the fish okay?"

"It's wonderful. This salad is interesting, too."

Luke tried his best French accent. "I *am* a salad connoisseur. I know twenty ways to make lettuce not taste like lettuce."

Olivia laughed. "I imagine you eat pretty healthy."

"When I'm not eating pizza, yeah. Pizza and beer are my weaknesses."

"You could have worse ones."

He smiled. “What’s your weakness? Foodwise.”

“Chocolate and vanilla ice cream. Preferably at the same time.”

“So you have a sweet-tooth I see.”

“Kinda. When I’m upset or sad I usually take a big bowl of vanilla ice cream and pour a copious amount of chocolate syrup on it. It makes everything better.”

“Sounds like something girls do when they break up with a guy.”

“It works for that too.”

“Do you have a boyfriend stashed away in town?” he asked casually.

“Um...”

“Sorry. That’s...none of my business.” He picked up his glass and drank some wine.

“It’s fine. No. I’m not dating anyone. I’ve sort of sworn off men for a while.”

“Why is that?”

“Men... Well, no offense. But men tend to need to be taken care of, and I just want to take care of myself right now.”

“That sounds reasonable, and no offense taken. Men can be needy, but so can women.”

Luke wanted to press more on the subject but wasn’t sure she would offer up any more information on why she felt men were needy.

Olivia glanced over at him. “That’s true. I guess you shouldn’t go into a relationship unless you’re ready to be there one hundred percent for the other person.”

Luke looked at her dead in the eyes. “A hundred percent, huh?”

“Well, maybe that’s asking too much. Maybe seventy-five percent.”

Luke started laughing. “You’re talking bullshit now, right?”

“Perhaps a little. How do you think relationships should work? No bull.”

He took a breath. “I think you meet someone and you either click or you don’t. I think the first attraction is physical, and when you’re with that person, all you want to do is... Well, you can’t keep your hands off each other.”

Olivia didn’t seem surprised at his comments. “Wow. That’s a very male perspective.”

Luke shrugged. “You asked.”

“Yes I did.”

He liked how she didn’t get offended by his response. He thought she might. He was becoming more intrigued with her, and he could tell her mind was churning.

“I’ve always dated intellectual guys and the physical part of the relationship was—”

“Boring?”

She laughed. “No. Just not first and foremost.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks.”

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“Sure it is. Being intimate with someone is the most intellectual thing you can do with somebody.”

“How so?”

“It’s an intimate conversation. It’s trust. It shouldn’t be a mindless act, or the next step.”

“So, you’re saying you should be in love before—”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying.” He rubbed his face. “I don’t know what I’m saying. Now *I’m* talking bullshit.”

He felt like an idiot saying what he did. He was never good with words and he hoped she didn’t misconstrue what he said.

Olivia took a sip of some wine. “One minute we’re talking about chocolate and ice cream and the next we’re talking about sleeping with people.”

“It’s not a topic I expected to come up tonight.”

“Since we’re getting so personal. What happened to you and your girlfriend?”

He pushed his plate aside and leaned back in his chair. “I guess the biggest problem was I wasn’t there for her seventy-five percent of the time.”

“Did you have trouble keeping your hands off of each other?”

“No. That was another problem.”

“Then, according to your view on relationships, she wasn’t the right one.”

“She definitely wasn’t the right one, which I figured out pretty early on. It just took me a while to figure out how to leave.”

“Did you part friends?”

Luke was honest in his answer. “Oh, no. Not friends. Not even a little bit.”

The wind had picked up as the sun went down, and the temperature dropped enough to make it chilly. Luke looked at Olivia. “You must be cold.”

“A little. Yeah.”

He stood. “Let’s go inside.”

They gathered the dishes and the bottle of wine and went inside.

“I can make coffee if you like.”

“No, thank you. I can’t drink coffee this late. It’ll keep me up.”

“Okay.” He put the dishes in the sink.

“Do you want me to help you clean up?”

“No. I’ll do them tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Now it was awkward. They had a bizarre conversation about their relationship views, and now they had nothing to

say. Luke was trying to think of something to do. He wanted her to stay. He gave her a small smile. “Do you want to sit?”

“I should go. I’m sure you have things to do.”

“Sure. Okay.” Luke said with disappointment.

She headed for the door. “Thanks so much for dinner. It was great. I’m glad I lost the bet.”

“You’re welcome.”

She held out her hand, and he took it in his and gave it a quick shake, then held onto it longer than he should have. He let go and took a step back. “See ya, neighbor.”

“Good night, Luke.”



Olivia

Olivia took the short walk back to her house all the while thinking about their conversation. Intimate relationships were somewhat foreign to her. She had been physical with a few guys she dated, but definitely not in the way Luke had just described. She thought about the words he used, ‘*a conversation.*’ Apparently, the boxer had some intellectual thoughts about intimacy, but she had no idea what his words even meant. A kiss was just a kiss, and being intimate with someone was just getting physical needs out of the way, right? She felt frustrated she couldn’t decipher his meaning. This is

partly why she had sworn off men. She hated games, and she felt like guys just used words to tell women what they wanted to hear.

She walked inside where she was met by Frankie who was anxiously awaiting her arrival. “Hey bud, let’s go sit in the living room for a bit.” She sat on the couch and let out a big sigh. Luke’s words were eating at her.

She made her way over to her laptop. Since the evening ended early, and quite abruptly, she’d decided to get some work done. Two hours later, she hadn’t accomplished anything. With a sigh, she closed the program she was working on and turned off the computer.

She went onto the deck and glanced at Luke’s house. The lights were off.

“At least someone is sleeping.”

She was still trying to figure out what happened after dinner. They were getting along fine, even though the conversation had turned a little personal. But as soon as they went inside, she felt a wave of panic and basically ran out of the house.

Being inside with him, in a semi-intimate situation, scared her. Or at the very least made her nervous. Not that she didn’t trust him. Instinctively, she did. She couldn’t stop thinking about his ‘intimate conversation’ comment. He was nothing like any guy she had dated. He wasn’t her type. She wasn’t even sure she had a type, but Luke was everything she had never been with or thought about before. She was getting frustrated with herself. She had to stop analyzing the situation

because there was no way this was going to go anywhere. It was a dinner and conversation, not a date by any means and she needed to stop thinking it was anything more than that.



Luke

Luke awoke a few hours after Olivia had left. He'd been dreaming about Olivia. He never dreamt about girls much and was surprised by this occurrence. He rubbed his face and swung his legs over the edge of the couch. After she had left, he had turned on an old detective movie and dozed off before it was over. He picked up the remote and switched off the television.

“You have two fights in the next six weeks. You don't have time to start anything with Olivia.”

He thought about the possibility.

“A casual, friendship kind of thing would be okay. No pressure.”

He shook his head. He was pretty sure Olivia wasn't the casual friendship, no pressure kind of person.

He stood and headed for the bedroom. “She's sworn off men. So there's that to consider.”

With a groan, he dropped onto the bed.

“Forget about it. Too many reasons not to get involved with her. Did you not learn anything from your last busted relationship?”

But Olivia wasn't Stephanie. He was interested in Olivia, not just in an intimate way. He was curious about *her*. He felt conflicted. He knew they were completely different in every way, and he knew his lifestyle was a challenge for any woman, but he just couldn't get Olivia out of his head. He thought about their conversation. He meant what he said about being intimate with someone. He never felt it was just an act and, in his head, it was like having a conversation with the other person. He wasn't a great conversationalist verbally, but he felt confident in expressing himself physically. He wondered if he would ever get the opportunity to show Olivia what he meant.

Six

Olivia

Olivia didn't see Luke for a couple of days. It seemed every day he was gone early and out late. She assumed he was in training mode for his next fight. Then on Wednesday afternoon, as she was watering her flowerbeds in front of the house, she heard his motorcycle coming down the road.

She turned and gave him a wave as he passed her house. He beeped his horn in response and she watched him drive into the garage.

'Okay. If he comes to talk, then everything's okay. If he doesn't, then...'

Luke came out of the garage and shut the door, then dropped his black canvas bag on the driveway before he crossed the lawn and came to her.

She smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." He looked at her flowers, then at the wilted ones in the garden at his house. "I thought the automatic sprinklers hit the flower beds.?"

“Not all of them. Those in front of your porch look a little thirsty.”

“And Cara will have my ass if they die.”

“Probably.” Olivia knew he was right. Cara would kill him.

He looked at the grass under his boots. “I suppose I need to mow soon, too.”

She held up the hose and sprayed water into the air. “The thrill of living in a house is there’s always something to do.”

“How about a trade? I’ll mow both lawns if you make sure Cara’s flowers don’t die.”

She studied him for a moment. “You’d rather mow than water?”

“Any day. Watering is tedious. Mowing is relaxing.”

She didn’t believe him. “Walking back and forth with a loud mower, spitting grass at you?”

He grinned “Yeah. It’s like noisy meditation.”

“Alright. Deal. I happen to find watering relaxing.”

“To each his own.”

He didn’t seem like he was in any hurry to leave, which made Olivia feel better.

“So, I guess I owe you a dinner” she blurted out.

The statement surprised herself almost as much as it seemed to surprise him.

“Um...sure.”

Olivia thought he might feel obligated. “Only if you want to.”

“No. It’s not that I don’t want to. I’m just surprised. It seemed you were in a hurry to leave the other night.”

She went to the spigot and turned off the water. “I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. I get it. Sort of.”

Olivia put her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. “I know it seemed like I ran out of there.”

“I thought maybe your house was on fire.”

She laughed. “It wasn’t *that* fast. Anyway, can we forget that and let me cook you dinner?”

“Yes. When?”

“Whenever you’re free. Seems you’ve been pretty busy these last few days.”

He smiled. “Have you been keeping tabs on me?”

“No.” She looked at the grass for a moment. “There’s not a lot of traffic on the road, and your bike’s kind of loud.”

“I’ve been training for a fight on Saturday.”

“Oh. Maybe we should do it before then. You may not be in a condition to hang out with your neighbor for a few days after the fight.”

“Are you saying I’m going to get my ass kicked?”

“No. I know you’re undefeated. But I did sew up your head after the last fight you won.”

“True. I need to watch what I eat for the next couple of days, so would tonight work?”

“Tonight’s fine.”

“Are you sure? It’s kind of short notice.”

“I’m sure. Do you have any diet restrictions I need to worry about?”

“No. Tonight I can eat anything.”

“Lasagna?”

He moaned and put a hand on his stomach. “Another one of my weaknesses.”

“I’ll warm up a loaf of French bread too” she added.

He took a step back. “Now you’re trying to kill me. I’ll need to spend some extra time working it off tomorrow, but it’ll be totally worth it.”

“Does six o’clock work?”

“I’ll be there.” He took a couple more steps back. “No alcohol, though.”

“No alcohol.”

“See ya in a couple of hours.”

She watched him walk away toward his house. When he stopped to pick up his bag, he glanced back at her and gave her a wave.

She waved back. *'You sure are hard not to look at.'*



Luke

Luke walked to his house and went onto the porch.

“Okay. Alright. Maybe we can be friendly neighbors. Dinner. No alcohol. How can that lead to anything?”

He went inside and took his sweaty gym clothes to the laundry room. He needed to do laundry or he wouldn't have anything to wear tonight. He gathered his dirty clothes, then started the washer. He hated doing laundry, but with his limited wardrobe, it was necessary to do it every couple of days. He leaned against the washer and thought about Olivia, again.

'Wow. Doing laundry makes you think of her. You're screwed, man.'

He went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He was hungry, but he wanted to enjoy the lasagna later. Finding nothing in the refrigerator, he went to the cupboard and retrieved a can of almonds. He then picked up a banana, went to the living room, and sat on the couch. When his phone rang, he took it from his pocket and saw it was his trainer calling.

“Hey Rach. Didn't I just leave you like an hour ago?”

“I want to make sure you stay on track for the next three days. No slacking off now.”

“Of course. I always follow the rules.” He peeled the banana half-way down.

“No carbs, no alcohol, lots of protein and water.”

“I know the drill.”

“And no....well you know.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend, Rachel. I think that one will be easy.” He took a bite of banana. “Why are you so wired up? What’s going on?”

“I just watched a tape of Richie Iverson. He looks good.”

“Rachel, I can beat Richie. He can’t take a punch. It won’t even go six rounds.”

“I don’t know. I heard he’s gotten better since you fought him.”

“Is this a pep talk? Because if it is, you suck at it.”

“Sorry. Pep talk over. I have complete faith in your ability to kick Richie’s ass for the second time.”

“Thank you.”

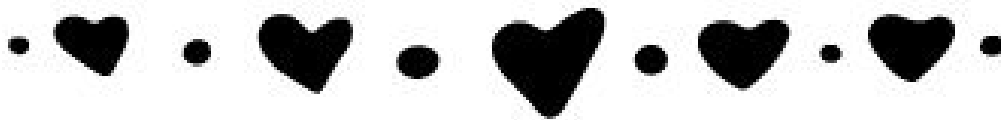
“Just go to bed early. Eat light. And be ready to train hard tomorrow.”

“Check, check, and check.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Luke ended the call and tossed his phone on the couch. As he took another bite of the banana, he sighed. “Eat light? Not happening tonight. Going to bed early probably won’t be an issue.”

He set the banana peel on the coffee table and poured out a handful of almonds. He didn’t appreciate her comment. When they were together, they sometimes were intimate the day of the fight. It didn’t seem to be a problem then.



Olivia

Olivia had everything she needed to make the lasagna except parmesan cheese, so she drove to the small market on the far side of the lake. It was there for the tourists, and they sold mostly snacks, beer, soda, ice, and bait, but they carried a few essentials for the residents who lived around the lake. Fortunately, they had parmesan cheese.

It was over-priced, but she paid it. She didn’t have time to run into town for it. She made her way to the register and as she was checking out, she spotted a t-shirt with the Lake Tiberon monster on it.

She looked at the cashier. “I have to get that.”

The cashier handed it to her, and assuming she was a tourist, started telling her about Tibby. She listened for a moment, then

smiled politely.

“I live on the lake. I’m familiar with the story.”

“Oh. Right.”

She felt the need to explain her purchase. “It’s sort of a joke. For a friend.”

“Oh, you’re one of those.”

“Excuse me?”

“A non-believer.”

“Can I get my change please?”

“Sure thing.”

She wasn’t interested in having a conversation about Tibby’s existence with the cashier. She had a lasagna to make. She took her change and hurried for the door.

She got back home and built the lasagna, fretting over every layer to make sure it was perfect, then left it in the refrigerator until it was time to put it in the oven.

She glanced around the house. It was relatively clean, and she doubted he’d notice if it wasn’t. Satisfied it was at least presentable, she headed to the bedroom to shower and get dressed. She put on some jeans and her new t-shirt which she figured Luke would appreciate. It would at least be a conversation starter.

She looked at herself in the mirror. “I should’ve gotten him one. They probably don’t come in size hunky biceps and broad

chest, though huh Frankie?” Frankie wagged his tail jumped on the bed.

Olivia went over and kissed Frankie on the head, “Listen, we are having company and you need to be a good boy.” Frankie nuzzled her. “Love you buddy. Let’s see how this goes.”

She timed the cooking of the lasagna so it’d be ready at six-thirty. That would give them a little time before dinner to talk.

Luke knocked on the door at five after, and Frankie barked, then growled. “Hush, Frankie.” She opened the door and he smiled.

“Sorry. I got lost on the way over.”

She opened the door wider and waved him in, causing Frankie to growl again.

Luke looked at the dog. “Your dog hates me.”

“I think hate’s the wrong word. He’s more scared to death of you.” She snapped her fingers. “Frankie, go lay down.” The dog growled again, then went to his bed in the corner.

Luke turned back to Olivia and spotted her t-shirt then started laughing. “Only a true believer would actually buy the t-shirt.”

“What? You mean you don’t have one?”

“I just might have to get one.”

She looked at his white t-shirt and jeans. “I mean, you rock the whole plain t-shirt and jeans thing but the cool kids wear

graphic tees these days.”

“Graphic like-inappropriate?”

“No. Come sit. Graphic like it has graphics on it. A design. A logo. Words.”

“Monsters?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll look into that.” He glanced at his t-shirt. “Plain?”

“No offense.”

“I’m not offended. I just have a limited wardrobe. It’s this or a t-shirt I wear to work with Northside Gym on it.” He sat on the couch. “I do have a dark blue t-shirt. I’ll wear that next time.”

‘So there’s going to be next time’ Olivia thought. “Can I get you something to drink? I have iced tea, a soda...?”

“Water would be great.”

“Okay.” She headed for the kitchen. “Ice?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

Olivia peeked at the lasagna, then fixed a glass of ice water for Luke and some iced tea for herself. She brought the glasses into the living room and set them on the coffee table, then sat across from Luke in a chair.

He took a sip of water. “Thanks.”

“So, do you train on your own? Or do you have a trainer like in the movies?”

“I have a trainer. She’s young and grumpy.”

“She? You have a woman trainer?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.”

“Why is that weird?”

Olivia shrugged. “It’s not.”

“Go ahead and ask me.”

“What?”

“The question you’re dying to ask. Yes, she’s attractive. And yes, we dated briefly when she first started training me.”

“I wasn’t going to ask either of those questions.”

He pointed at her. “Liar.”

She leaned back in her chair. “So, she must not hate you then.”

“Not anymore.” He drank some more water. “Not all my exes hate me.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest they do.” She took a sip of tea. “Is that a big number?”

“Of exes?”

She looked over at him as she put her glass down. She was curious but wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

“Not really.” He cocked his head. “Are you asking me to give you a number?”

“No. It’s none of my business.”

“Well, good. Because discussing how many exes we’ve had is a third or fourth date conversation.”

She looked at him for a moment. “Is that what this is?”

“What?”

“A date?”

He hesitated before answering. “I don’t know. Do you want it to be?”

She felt herself blush, and she got to her feet. “I should go check the lasagna.”

She was relieved to find it was ready, and she took it out of the oven and put the bread into the oven to warm. Then she set the table.

After a few minutes, Luke came up behind her. “Are you hiding out in here?”

She turned to face him, finding him only a foot in front of her. “No. The lasagna was ready. I’m just warming up the bread.” She stepped around him and went to the oven. As she took a breath to calm herself, she removed the bread and put it on a bread board with a knife. “We can slice as we go. Is that alright?”

“Sure. You don’t need to try and impress me. I’m easy to please.”

She nodded with a smirk and he took the bread from her and set it on the table.

He turned around and stepped closer to her. “I want to get something out of the way.”

“What’s that?”

He leaned in and gave her short soft kiss on the lips. As he took a step back, he said, “There.”

Olivia’s eyes were wide. “There?”

“Now we don’t have to sit through dinner and wonder if the night’s going to end with a kiss.”

She was trembling.

‘Well ok, what the hell do I do now. Pretend you are unphased. Just continue on’. “Um. Okay. Have a seat, dinner is ready.”

He sat across the table from her and grinned. “I bet you’ve never been really kissed. Like seriously kissed.”

Olivia was an internal mess. *‘Oh good, more awkward conversation. Just play the game, it is kinda fun.’*

She cleared her throat. “Of course I have.”

“By one of your ‘physical intimacy is an afterthought’ intellectuals?”

“No. By my high school boyfriend, Paul and one guy I dated in college.”

“Did you and Paul make out in his father’s car?”

“Actually, Paul had his own car.”

“And was he your first?”

“Kiss?”

Luke shook his head ‘no’ as he sliced a piece of bread.

“Yes. Paul was my first.” She served him a slice of lasagna.
“Since we’re getting personal again, who was your first?”

“Big Ernie’s daughter.”

“I thought you stayed away from her, per her father’s request.”

Luke shrugged. “We managed to sneak away a couple of times.”

“A couple?”

“Five. Could’ve been ten. It was a long time ago.”

“And you were fifteen?”

“She was an older woman. No fifteen-year-old boy is going to say no to an older woman.”

“How old was she?”

“Sixteen.”

Olivia chuckled. This time the awkward conversation felt fun and light and she began to relax a bit.

Luke took a bite of the lasagna. “Mmm.” He nodded as he chewed. “Damn. This is good.”

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t figure you for a cook.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged and took another bite, then chewed before answering her. “I don’t know. Being so smart and all. Studying, working.” He held up a hand. “Sorry. I’ll stop talking now.”

“I’ll admit. I don’t cook often, and I don’t have a wide variety of things I cook well. But lasagna is one of them.”

He cut off another bite with the edge of his fork. “Rachel would have a stroke if she saw me eating this tonight.”

“Rachel?”

“My trainer.”

“Right.”

“She told me to eat light tonight and get to bed early.”

“Why is this bad for you?”

“Carbs. Fats. Sugar. Pretty much anything that tastes good is bad for you.”

“Well, we won’t let Rachel know, then.”

He buttered his bread. “Tell me more about what you do on the computer.”

Olivia spent the next half hour explaining to him what she spent her days doing. He seemed to understand most of it and he seemed genuinely interested. He ate two pieces of lasagna and three slices of bread before he pushed his plate away.

“Oh, my God. I haven’t eaten like that in a while.”

“Is it going to be my fault if you lose your first fight on Saturday?”

“I’m not going to lose. I’m fighting Richie Iverson. He has dreams of going pro. I’m going to do my best to dash them to hell.”

“I almost feel sorry for Richie.”

“Don’t. He’s a jerk. And if he went pro, he wouldn’t last six months. He doesn’t have what it takes.”

“Do you?” she asked with directness in her voice.

He took a minute. “Yeah. At least I did a few years ago. I just never wanted to.”

“Why not?”

“It’d take all the fun out of it.”

She stood and picked up their plates. “Fun isn’t what comes to my mind when I think of boxing. Or what it takes to be a good fighter.”

“Well, sitting at the computer all day would bore the hell out of me. Everyone has something that gets them up in the morning. For me, it’s fighting or getting ready to fight.”

“Or recovering from a fight?”

“That’s not so much fun.”

She finished clearing the table and held up his glass. “More water?”

“I don’t suppose you have a beer in the fridge?”

“I might.” She opened the refrigerator and dug around for a moment, then held up a bottle of beer. “Would you like it?”

He took the bottle from her. "I've already broken most of the rules tonight. One beer won't hurt." He opened the bottle and took a sip. "Is this leftover from the last smart guy you dated?"

"No. My brother visits once in a while. I bought it for him."

He took another sip. "You don't drink beer?"

"Never developed a taste for it."

"What does your brother do?"

"He's a game developer."

"Like board games?"

She smiled. "No. Video games."

"Oh, right. Never played any."

"You can't be serious." Olivia thought he was lying to her.

He raised his hand. "I swear. How do you get into that? Doesn't sound like a grown-up job."

"It's a very grown-up job. It takes a lot of skill, and he's very smart."

"Smarter than you?" he joked with her.

"Yes. And he makes a lot more money than I do."

Luke looked out the sliding door. "Can we go out on the deck?"

"Sure. Go ahead, I just want to rinse these dishes off."

He nodded, then headed for the sliding glass door that opened onto the back deck. Olivia watched him go out the

door.

'You're headed for trouble, girl. 'I just wanted to get that out of the way'.

Like, who does that?

She touched her lips, closed her eyes and relived that brief moment one more time.

SEVEN

Olivia

Olivia rinsed the plates and stacked them in the sink, then put away the leftover lasagna and the half loaf of bread. She looked around the kitchen. She was stalling and she knew it. She slipped on a sweater and went to the deck.

Luke was standing at the railing, looking at the lake. The sky was clear again, and the moon was shining off the water. She came up next to him.

“I really love nights like this.”

He glanced at her. “It’s beautiful. I’ve visited Cara a few times, but I never took the time to enjoy the view.”

“The few times I know of when you visited, she seemed to keep you hidden away.”

“Yeah. She doesn’t like to introduce me to her girlfriends.”

“Why not? She obviously loves you.”

“Yeah. She does. She just doesn’t trust me not to...you know.”

“Hook up with her friends?”

“Not hook up, necessarily.” He turned around and leaned against the rail. “I don’t have the best track record with women.”

“Have you left a trail of broken hearts?”

“No. That’s not it. It’s more frustration and ‘what the hell was I thinking going out with him?’”

“You seem relatively harmless.”

“I am. I’m not a bad guy. “I just...” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

She leaned against the rail next to him. “Well, I think you just haven’t found the right one yet. Someone who realizes she needs to take you as you are, and that boxing and training are a big part of your life.”

He set his bottle on top of the rail and turned to her. “Can I kiss you again?”

“You’re asking permission this time?”

“Yeah, I probably should have the first time. Consider this a redo.”

“Are you going to show me what it’s like to be really kissed?”

He smiled. “I just might.”

He leaned in, wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her close and kissed her with just the right amount of tenderness

and confidence. He let it linger just long enough. He slowly parted his lips from hers and took a step back.

“What’d you think?”

Olivia was rattled. She had never been kissed like that.

In a shaky voice, she said “Do you want me to rate you?”

“Yeah, on a scale of one to ten. Ten being the best kiss you’ve ever had.”

Her brain was ahead of her, and she wanted more.

“Can I get another sample? You know so—”

He didn’t let her finish her sentence. He stepped over to her again, placed his hand behind her neck and gently pulled her to him. He kissed her again and he felt her lift up on her tippy toes. He held her a little longer making sure her feet landed flat on the deck before letting go.

She opened her eyes and looked directly into his. “Twelve.”

“Take that, Paul.” Luke gave her a satisfied grin.

Luke picked up his beer and took another sip. “You know, if you’re as smart as I think you are, you’ll send me packing right now.”

She took a moment to respond. She decided to ignore his statement. “Do you want to go down to the dock?”

He set his bottle on the rail again. “I’m right behind you.”

Luke followed Olivia down the steps, then walked beside her as they got to the dock. They went to the end, and he peered into the water.

“Nice night for a swim.”

“I’m not swimming in the lake with you.”

“Will you at least stick your toes in the water?”

“It depends on whether Tibby can come and nibble on them.”

Luke laughed. “I thought you didn’t believe in Tibby.”

“Well, you can never be too careful.” She glanced at her t-shirt. “And I did buy the shirt.”

“I think we’re safe. Tibby would have to walk in this shallow water and we’d probably see him coming.”

He took off his shoes and socks, then rolled his pants up a few inches. He sat on the edge of the dock to hang his legs over, then looked up at her.

“Fine.” She took off her sandals and sat next to him. “My feet don’t even reach the water.”

“Then you’re double safe from Tibby.”

They sat for a few moments, then Luke took her hand.

Olivia glanced at him. “What time is the fight, Saturday?”

“Seven. Why? Do you want to come?”

“No. I don’t want to go watch you get hit in the head. Or watch you hit poor Richie in the head.”

“I get it.”

“But if you need a nurse afterwards, give me a call.”

Luke took out his phone. “I don’t have your number.”

She took his phone and entered her number into his contact list, then handed it back to him.

He looked at it. “Nurse Olivia?” He tucked the phone back in his pocket and looked at the stars. “Damn, that’s a lot of stars.”

“Do you know any of the constellations?”

“No. I can find the North Star sometimes.” He looked at her. “Do you?”

“I know a couple. I dated an astronomer briefly.”

“Of course you did.”

“He told me what all of them were. But we weren’t looking at them like this. We were inside a dome and the stars were fake.”

Luke laid back on the deck. “So show me a few.”

Olivia laid next to him and studied the stars for a moment. “I only see one I recognize.” She pointed to a set of stars. “That’s Cassiopeia.”

“I knew a girl named Cassiopeia once.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “Another one of your exes?”

“No. Third grade. She did hate me though.”

“What’d you do to her?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t want to play with her.” He covered a yawn, then clasped his hands on his chest. “I shouldn’t have had that half of a beer. On top of all the food, it made me sleepy.”

“You should go home and go to bed. I imagine you have an early day tomorrow.”

“I’ll go soon.”

Olivia studied the stars some more and tried to find another constellation. Apparently, she hadn’t been paying attention to her astronomer. When she heard Luke’s breathing slow and grow regular, she glanced at him and realized he’d fallen asleep.

She sat and watched him for a moment. She had no idea what was happening or where this was going, if anywhere. All she knew is that he lighted a fire in her she never felt before and those last kisses were etched in her mind, but she knew he needed to go home and get some sleep for his fight. She put a hand on his chest.

“Luke?”

He opened his eyes, then sat up. “Did I just fall asleep?”

“Yes.”

He rubbed his face. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s no problem.”

He pulled his feet out of the water and sat cross-legged. “Do you know what I don’t get?”

“I have no idea.”

“Cara’s wedding. Why am I wearing a tux to a wedding on the beach? Shouldn’t we be in shorts and Hawaiian shirts?”

She loved how his mind jumped from one subject to another with no warning. “That’s after the ceremony.”

“After?”

“Yes. The church is right on the beach, but it has a floor. No sand. Then you can change into whatever you want for the luau.”

“There’s going to be a luau?”

“Yes.”

“How many people are going to be at this thing? How many people can afford to fly to Hawaii for a wedding?”

“Cara says there’ll be ten of us flying there. But Craig’s from Hawaii, so his family and friends will add another twenty to thirty.”

“Great. I get to spend the weekend with a bunch of people I don’t know.”

“You know me. And Cara and Craig.”

“Craig. I’d rather spend time with strangers, then with him.”

Olivia pulled her legs up and turned to face him. “What’s wrong with Craig?”

Luke took a moment to answer. “He’s just so...boring.”

“Because he doesn’t ride a motorcycle and punch people for fun?”

He grinned. “No. I don’t know. He’s not the kind of guy I thought Cara would end up with.”

“Well, he’s very sweet, and he loves her. You can’t ask for more than that.”

“I guess.” He reached for Olivia’s hand and intertwined his fingers through hers. “He’s a runner.”

She started laughing. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Boring. He runs like five miles a day.”

“He likes to run. I’ve seen you take off running in the mornings.”

“Yeah. But I don’t do it for fun. It’s part of my training.”

Olivia crossed her arms. “Well, I guess that’s a strike against me. Because I like to run.”

“No way.”

“Yep. Not five miles a day. And not every day. But a couple of times a week. When I get stuck on a problem I’m working on, it clears my head.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Maybe we could run together sometime.”

Olivia thought about the possibility of running next to him. She got chills. “I’d like that.”

“I’m not very fast, though.”

“I’m sure you won’t have any trouble keeping up with me.”

He yawned again. “Man. I guess I need to go.” He got to his feet and stretched.

Olivia stood, too. “I guess you’ll be busy the next few days.”

He took her hand, and they started walking toward the steps. “Yeah. You probably won’t see too much of me.”

He let go of her hand and she went up the steps in front of him. When she glanced back at him, she saw he was smiling. “What are you smiling at?”

“Just enjoying the view.”

She reached the deck, and he came up beside her and took both her hands. “This was a very interesting evening.”

“Good, interesting?”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely, good.” He leaned in and kissed her. “And...I need to go before it gets even more interesting.”

When he opened the door and went inside, Frankie left his bed and ran toward him, stopping a safe distance away to bark. Luke held out his hand and Frankie growled.

Olivia put a hand on Luke’s shoulder. “He’ll come around.” She followed him through the house to the front door, and he stopped before he opened it.

“So, what else can you cook?”

“Chili. Enchilada casserole. Tacos.”

“Love it all. Maybe next week...”

“You just tell me when.”

“See ya, neighbor.”

“Goodnight, Luke.”

Olivia closed the door and walked over to her couch. She threw her head back on the cushion.

‘I don’t know what just happened, but this is getting interesting.’

EIGHT

Luke

Luke slept well thanks to all the carbs and the half a beer, and when his alarm went off at seven-thirty, he got right up. Rachel was expecting him by nine. He had time for a quick run before he headed into town. As he jogged down his driveway and turned on the road, away from Olivia's house, he thought about running with her.

Running might not be so bad after all.

He had a really good time last night and there was no mistaking it. He liked her. A lot. And he was pretty sure she liked him, too. He didn't know any girl that would ask for a second kiss if she didn't like the guy. He broke into a run.

'Just keep it simple and move slowly. That way, maybe you won't screw it up'.

He went what he figured was about a mile, then went home, made a protein drink in his blender and drank it all, before packing his bag and leaving the house. He enjoyed the ride to town on his bike. There wasn't much traffic most of the way,

and the road was just curvy enough to make it fun. He arrived at the gym a few minutes before nine.

Rachel studied him when he came out of the locker room in his workout shorts and tank.

“You look puffy.”

“Excuse me?”

“What did you eat last night?”

He shook his head. “There’s no way you can tell if I ate something I shouldn’t have.”

She put her hands on her hips and he thought about how much he should confess.

“Fine. I had a slice of bread and butter and a half of a beer.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m human. I’m not a friggin’ robot.”

“You’re weak.”

“That too.”

“Drop and give me a hundred.”

“Only a hundred?”

“For the first set, yes.”

Rachel was tough on him, but he didn’t care. Breaking the rules last night was totally worth it. He dropped to his hands and toes and started doing pushups. At the half-way point, he looked up at her.

“I’m not sure if you do this for my training, or if you just like watching me.”

“A little of both.”

After two hours of sprints, jumping rope, and lifting weights, he stopped for a water break and she sat next to him.

“Jesse Rio wants a match with you.”

“When?”

“Right after your next fight.”

“I can’t. I’ve got my sister’s wedding.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“She doesn’t want me walking her down the aisle looking like I’m...a boxer.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Two weeks after the next fight. I figure I’ll be recovered from whatever damage I might suffer.”

“Fine. I’ll see if I can hold him off.”

Luke shrugged. “If he doesn’t want to wait, it’s fine.”

Rachel turned and looked at him. “What are you talking about? You’ve been wanting to fight him for a year.”

He took a drink from his water bottle.

She put a hand on his arm. “Dammit, you’ve met someone.”

“What?”

“Every time you start dating someone, you reassess your life choices.”

“That’s not true.”

“Luke. I know you. Probably better than anyone else. You start slacking off to try to make them happy. Then you end up miserable and you sabotage the relationship to get out of it.”

Luke thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. “No. I don’t do that. I didn’t do that with you.”

“That’s because I’m your trainer and I understand you. Besides, we were never in love. Or even hoped to be. We were just enjoying each other.”

Luke laughed. “Until you decided it was interfering with my training.”

She patted his chest. “Because I understand you. I know boxing is number one in your life. Which leaves little room for anything else.” She got to her feet. “Now, get off your ass and get to work.”

He emptied his bottle, then stood up. “Just for the record, I’m not dating anyone.”

Luke worked out until mid-afternoon, then spent some time in the sauna before taking a shower. He felt strong and ready for Saturday night. Now, if he could stay away from Olivia until Sunday, he’d be good to go.

As he was leaving the gym, his phone rang. He looked down and saw it was Cara.

“Hey, sis.”

“Are you in town, by any chance?”

“Yeah. Just leaving the gym.” He reached his bike and straddled it. “Why?”

“Do you want to meet me for a quick bite?”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing. I just miss you.”

“Hmm. Not buying that.”

“No really. And I need to give you the information on the tux guy.”

“What information?”

“Where? When?”

“Why?”

“You know why. Because I want my handsome brother looking like the handsome devil I know he is on my wedding day.”

“Handsome devil?”

“A very buff, handsome devil.”

“Fine. Where? I need to watch what I eat.”

“How about the place with those gross cabbage things you like to eat?”

“You make it sound so appetizing. It’s called a Buddha bowl and I can be there in about fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. See you there.”

Luke rode to the restaurant and went inside. Cara was already there at a table, and he sat across from her.

She studied him for a moment. “You look all...energized.”

“I just spent the last five hours working out.”

“How does that make you feel good? I’d be dead after five hours of doing what you do.”

“So, are you buying, or what?”

“Don’t I always? What do you want in your disgusting bowl thingy?”

He laughed. “Um... Kale, quinoa, tofu, carrots, snap peas, and walnuts.”

“Ew. Like I said, gross.”

“What are you going to eat?”

She read the wall-mounted menu. “A Caesar salad, I guess.” She looked at him. “With extra dressing just to make you suffer.” She got up. “Do you want a drink?”

“Water.”

She placed the order at the counter, then returned to the table with two waters.

He took a drink, then nodded toward her glass. “You’re drinking water?”

“I’m getting married in seven weeks. I need to fit into my dress and look fabulous.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have extra dressing on your salad, then.” He took another drink. “So what do I need to do with the tux guy?”

Cara looked him up and down. “Well, I’m pretty sure you won’t fit into something off the rack, so you’ll need to be fitted.”

“Fitted?”

“Yes. Measured.”

Luke didn’t like the sound of this. “You mean have my personal space violated?”

“Just behave and cooperate please.”

“Ok, Ok, I will sis.”

She took a card out of her purse and handed it to him. “Call him soon. Don’t wait until the last minute.”

“What does this tux look like?”

“Classic black. No ruffles on the shirt. No colored cummerbund. Just black and white.”

“Like a penguin.” Luke joked.

“Exactly. A very impressive penguin.”

“I’ll call your tux guy on Monday.”

Their food was delivered, and Cara frowned at the container of extra dressing, then pushed it to the middle of the table. “Now you made me feel guilty.”

“Well, if you want to get into fighting shape for your wedding, just let me know.”

Cara smiled. “Thanks. But no. I’m just not going to eat for the week before.”

“Don’t do that. It’s not healthy.”

She took a bite of her salad. “I won’t. I don’t have that much self-control.”

Luke dug into his Buddha bowl. “So, I hear there’s going to be a luau.”

“Yes. Fun, huh?”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Super fun.”

“Did Olivia tell you?”

“Yeah.”

Cara was surprised. “So you’ve been hanging out together?”

He wasn’t quite ready to have that conversation with her. “Not hanging out.” But he couldn’t lie to her either. “We had dinner. A couple times.”

“Dinner. You went out with her?”

“Not out. I caught some bass and cooked them on the grill. Then she had me over last night and made me lasagna.”

Cara leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “Dammit, Luke.”

“What?”

“You can’t start dating her.”

“We’re not dating. And why not?”

“You know why not.”

“Tell me.”

She put her hands on the table and leaned forward. “Because you suck at relationships. And I don’t want my best friend hating my brother.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

Cara aggressively ate some salad. “By the look on your face, I think it already has.” She took a sip of water. “Have you slept with her?”

“No. I swear. All we’ve done is eat dinner.”

She pointed her fork at him. “If you’re lying to me...”

“I’m not lying.”

“Because I’m going to talk to her. She’ll tell me the truth.”

He set down his fork. “Cara, I’m a grown man. And she’s a grown woman. If we want to get into a relationship that has little chance of lasting, it’s our decision, not yours. So, please. Stay out of it.”

Cara swallowed slowly. “Wow. You really like her.”

“Just eat your salad and change the subject.”

Cara didn’t want to push it. “Fine. You’re obviously getting ready for a fight. When is it?”

“On Saturday.”

“Do I need to come check on you on Sunday?”

“I’ll be fine.”

Cara couldn’t help but point out the obvious. “Right, because you have your own personal nurse now.”

“Drop it Cara, or I’m leaving.”

“Who are you fighting?”

“Richie Iverson.”

“That guy you knocked out in two rounds last year?”

“Yep.” Luke was growing impatient.

“So...no worries, then.”

They finished lunch without Cara bringing up Olivia again and parted on good terms. But Luke knew his sister wouldn’t be able to stay out his business for long. Her next move would be to confront Olivia.

On his way home, he decided he better give Olivia a heads up. When he got to his house, he went inside, then out to the deck. Olivia was out on hers.

“Hey, neighbor.”

“You’re back early.”

“Actually, I was finished a while ago, but I met with Cara for a late lunch.”

“How’s she doing? I haven’t talked to her in a few days.”

“She’s in wedding mode.” He rested a foot on the bottom railing and put his hands on the support beam above his head.

“I sort of let it slip we had dinner a couple of times.”

“I didn’t know it was a secret.”

“It’s not. But like I said, she’s not happy with me spending time with her best friend.”

“Well, she’s just going to have to get over that. We’re adults. We can decide what’s best for us.”

He smiled and lowered his arms. “That’s exactly what I told her.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“I’m pretty sure she’ll talk to you first.”

Olivia peered over the top of her sunglasses. “So what does the rest of your day look like?”

“I’m going to take a swim, then watch some tapes of Richie in the ring.”

“Sounds fun.”

Luke was losing willpower just standing there. “I’d much rather come eat chili with you. But I can’t. I’ve got to stay on track.”

“I understand.”

“Alright. I’m going to go jump in the lake.”

“Don’t forget your swimsuit.”

He thought about saying something smart but he had to focus. “I won’t. What are you going to do?”

“Well, for the next little while, I’m going to watch my neighbor swim in the lake.”

Luke smiled. He liked her directness. Staying away from her might be harder than he thought.

NINE

Olivia

Olivia was sitting on her dock with a book and a cold drink when she spotted Luke coming down his stairs.

He looked at her. “You know, you sitting there makes the whole, staying on track thing a little hard.”

“Do you want me to go inside?”

“No. I guess I can use a cheerleader.”

Olivia raised her hands and pumped them a few times. “Go, Luke!”

She watched as he dropped his towel on the dock, then dove into the water.

There were no motors allowed on the lake. If you wanted to leave the shore, you had to do it in a sailboat or a rowboat, so it was quiet and clean, and she knew he was in no danger of getting runover by a drunk fisherman.

Olivia grew a little concerned when Luke went out so far, but she knew he was a strong swimmer, and he’d probably be

fine. None the less, she was relieved when she spotted him heading back. When he got closer, he veered toward her dock and swam to the end of it.

“Permission to come aboard.”

“Permission granted.”

He climbed up the steps and she handed him the towel she was sitting on. He patted himself, rubbed his hair, then hung the towel around his neck. As he was rubbing his hair with the towel, she could finally see his chest tattoo. It was words. *‘Love is given and received, but never taken.’*

She thought that was pretty deep and wanted to know more about it but thought it might be too personal to ask.

Luke glanced down at her. “What’re you reading?”

“I have no idea.” She looked at the cover. “Oh, right.” She showed it to him.

“Is that a romance book?”

“No. Well, it has romance in it.”

Luke put his hands on his hips. “Judging from the cover. I’d say that guy’s main focus is more than just romance.”

“Shut up. At least he’s wearing a shirt.” She studied the photo on the cover of the book. “Sort of.”

He knelt next to her. “What are you doing later?”

Olivia wanted to pull him into her but instead she sat back in her chair. “Not interfering with your training.”

“Do you play cards?”

She set the book on her lap. “You mean like, Old Maid? Go Fish? Rummy?”

“I mean like Poker.”

She laughed. “My brother tried to teach me several years ago. It was sort of interesting, but it never really stuck.”

He stood. “How about I refresh your memory tonight around eight?”

“Won’t that interfere with your staying on track?”

“No snacks, no alcohol. Just cards.”

“Okay. Eight o’clock.”

He nodded toward her house. “Do you mind if I go through your house? I rather not jump back in the lake.”

“Of course.”

“Is your dog going to eat me?”

“Frankie is afraid of you; I think you’ll be okay.”



Luke

After getting dressed, Luke spent the next two hours watching videos of Richie Iverson in the ring, including their previous match. Rachel was right. Richie had improved some and had won three of the five matches since he got in the ring

with Luke. But he still wasn't good enough to win their rematch. And he'd never make it as a pro. Richie was young and impulsive and didn't have the patience to train like he should. He seemed to run out a gas half-way through the match, so if he hadn't won by then, Richie got overpowered by his opponent.

“If nothing else, Richie, I just need to wait it out. Then you'll lose the fight all on your own.”

He checked the clock and decided it was time to get ready for Olivia. He knew it was probably a mistake, but what else was he going to do tonight? He'd trained all day, ran this morning, swam in the lake, and ate properly all day. Playing cards with Olivia wouldn't interfere with his concentration.

He found a deck of cards and a box of Poker chips that belonged to Cara. They'd get into a death match a couple times a year. It was the thing they did when they were growing up and they were evenly matched. Their games were intense, with a lot of bluffing, a little under-handedness, and it was always a toss-up who'd win when they played.

Olivia showed up right at eight and followed him into the kitchen, where he'd set up the cards and chips. There was also a plate with celery, carrots, and cucumber sticks around a bowl of dip.

Olivia stared at the food. “I thought we weren't eating.”

Luke shrugged. “Can't play cards without snacks.” He went to a cupboard. “I might have some tortilla chips if you want.”

“Will you eat them?”

“No.”

“Then I’m good.” She looked at the dip. “What’s in the dip?”

“Black beans, onion, garlic, jalapenos, a little olive oil. That’s about it.”

“So you *can* cook?”

“I blend. I’m a hell of a blender.”

She laughed and sat down at the table. “Okay. Well, let’s get to the Poker lesson.”

Luke filled two glasses with ice and water, and set them on the table, then sat across from Olivia. He picked up the cards and shuffled them. “So, how much do you remember?”

She looked at the cards. “Let’s start from scratch.”

He spent some time explaining the rules and the theory behind betting, bluffing, and reading the other player. When she told him she mostly understood, he dealt the cards.

“Okay. The best way to get it is to actually play. So let’s jump in.”

They played for an hour and Luke was impressed by how fast she picked it up. She wouldn’t win a Poker tournament any time soon, but she understood the basics and managed to successfully bluff him a couple times.

He gathered the cards after a finished game and shuffled them. “Okay. I don’t want you to get burned out.” He dipped a

piece of celery in the dip, which was almost gone. “So, let’s play something that takes a little less thought.”

He started dealing until the deck was split evenly between them.

She smiled at him. “War?”

He nodded. “Cara and I spent a lot of time playing cards when we were growing up. Poker was our favorite. But War was number two.”

“Poker takes skill. But War is a matter of luck.”

“We’ll see.”

“You either have the higher card or you don’t.”

He put a card face-up in the middle of the table.

She put a card down and won the hand. “Pure luck.”

“Just keep going.”

She set another card down. “You’re such a guy.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“You’re so competitive.”

“If you don’t think women are competitive, you’ve never played cards with Cara.”

Olivia laughed. “She is quite aggressive. But men, get off on it.”

Luke pulled in the two cards he’d just won. “I’m... not going to respond to that.”

She took the last carrot and scraped out the last of the bean dip, then looked at him for a moment. “Do I have a shot, Luke?”

“Of beating me at War?”

“No. Of being in your life and not end up hating you.”

He got to his feet and refilled his water glass, then leaned on the counter. “Honestly, I don’t know. But I’d sure as hell like to find out.”

She stood and went to him, stopping a foot in front of him. “Me, too.”

He looked at her piercingly. “Are you sure?”

She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. “I’m sure.”

He grinned then quickly put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back, then stepped around her. “Okay. Then we need to do it right.”

“How do we do that?”

“We take our time. Not rush into it too fast, too soon.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“Which means we finish our game of War and then you go home.”

She went back to the table and sat. “And here I thought I’d be the one pulling on the reins.”

He sat across from her. “Believe me. I want you pulling on the reins.” He tossed a card into the middle of the table. “I just don’t want to screw this up.”

She smiled and laughed. “I believe that’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.”



Olivia

Even though she was pretty sure he didn’t want her too, and she definitely didn’t want to, Olivia went home after the game of War. They kissed at the door and kept it PG, which made it easier to leave.

She liked Luke. She liked him a lot, and she appreciated that he wanted to take it slow. It was the right thing to do. She thought about how her brain turned off when she was around him. She didn’t analyze anything, instead she felt her instincts take over and she didn’t feel weird about it with him.

She tried to settle down with her book, but she was a little jealous the heroine was having an unbridled love session with the hot guy on the cover, without a care in the world. She tossed the book aside.

“Whatever. You guys probably won’t last a month past the end of the book.”

Frankie put his front paws on the couch and whined. She lifted him and put him on the cushion, and he curled up beside her. She petted him as she thought about Luke standing on her

dock today and reading his tattoo. She was still lost in thought when her phone rang.

“Hello?”

It was Cara. “Liv? I was worried. I’ve called several times.”

“I’m sorry. I left my phone at home.” As soon as she’d said it, she knew what Cara’s next question would be.

“Where were you?”

“Um...” She couldn’t lie to her friend. “I was playing cards with Luke.”

Cara was quiet for a moment. “I know it’s none of my business—”

“Then don’t say what you’re going to say. I like him, Cara. I like him a lot.”

“I’m sure you do. He’s cute and can be sweet. And even though he’s my brother, I know he’s a woman magnet. But he’s not good at relationships. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know. But Luke is impulsive. He jumps in with both feet, then finds himself in over his head. And the women are so mesmerized by him, they don’t realize he can’t be there for them. Until it’s too late, that is. Boxing is his life, and it will always be on top of his priority list.”

“I know how important boxing is to Luke. I’ve seen it firsthand. I understand what he goes through and how much it

means to him. I have no intention of interfering with that.”

“So you can share him with his boxing gloves?”

“I think I can.” She got to her feet and walked around the room.

“Cara, you know my past relationships. The guys I dated have been too needy and fake. Luke is very real, and I like that he has something he is so focused on other than me.”

“Okay. I just worry about you. Have you slept with him?”

“No.”

“That’s what he said, too. But I figured he might lie to me about it, seeing as he knows how I feel about him and my friends.”

She went onto the deck and glanced at Luke’s house.
“We’re taking it slow.”

“Well, that’s a new approach for him. He must really like you.”

“I hope he does.”

“Honestly, I’d like nothing better than to see him settled down with someone like you.”

“Then give us your support. Give him your support. He respects you and cares about what you think.”

“Alright, I’ll do my best to get onboard with it.”

“Thank you.” Olivia went to the top of the stairs and looked at the lake. “How are the wedding plans coming?”

“That’s the reason I was calling. I have an appointment with the dressmaker on Wednesday. I want you to come with me.”

“I’d love to. Just text me the details.”

“And we should do lunch, too.”

“Sounds great.”

Olivia ended the call, then glanced at Luke’s house again. It was dark.

She’d told Cara she could share Luke with boxing. She hoped it was true.

TEN

Olivia

Olivia didn't see Luke on Friday. She heard his bike leave before nine, and he didn't return until after dark. He was in heavy preparation for his fight, and she didn't want to bother him.

On Saturday, she was in the front yard walking Frankie, when he came out of the house and opened the garage door. He spotted her and walked across the grass. When he got within five feet, Frankie started barking.

Luke knelt and held out his hand. "It's about time we became friends."

Frankie growled and backed up a step. Then tentatively took a few steps toward Luke.

"Come on. I'm not going to hurt you or your human."

Frankie moved closer, then touched his nose to Luke's fingers. When he wagged his tail, Luke patted his head. "See. We can get along."

He stood and smiled at Olivia. "I'm off to beat the hell out of Richie."

"I figured." She gave him a hug. "Come back in one piece."

"That's the plan." He kissed her lightly, then kissed her again. He stepped back. "Sorry. I just needed some motivation to come back in one piece."

She put a hand on his cheek. His wound had just finished healing and his bruise was faded. "Don't let Richie mess up your pretty face."

"I'll do my best." He took a few more steps back. "I need to go."

"Good luck."

Olivia tried to do some work, then she tried to read. Finally, she decided to rearrange her bookshelf to take her mind off of Luke. When it got to be ten o'clock and he hadn't come home yet, she started to worry. At ten-thirty, she went to the window and looked out. She sighed and left the window. She'd hear his bike when he came home.

"Maybe he's out celebrating his win with Rachel, his pretty ex-girlfriend trainer".

'Okay. So you're jealous of the woman he spends hours a day with. Who wouldn't be?'

She dropped onto the couch next to Frankie.

"I just want to hear his bike. That's all. I don't think it's asking too much."

When Frankie growled and then barked, Olivia got up and went to the window. A car she didn't recognize, drove slowly by her house and pulled into Luke's driveway. When a woman stepped out of the driver's door, then went around to open the passenger door, Olivia went out to her porch.

The woman helped Luke out of the car, and it looked like he wasn't in very good shape. Olivia stepped off the porch and crossed the yard, to join them at the car.

"Luke?"

He gave her a small smile. "Hey, neighbor."

"Oh, my gosh. You're hurt."

"Just a little concussed."

The woman glanced at Olivia. "He's more than a little concussed. He got his bell rung." She studied Olivia for a moment, then glanced at Luke before returning to Olivia. "You must be the woman he's not dating."

Rachel was exactly what Olivia pictured. She was tall, pretty, and in perfect shape. She was dressed a little edgy, but in a sexy, powerful way.

Olivia sparred back. "And you must be his ex-girlfriend-slash-trainer."

Luke cleared his throat and stood a little straighter. "Olivia, the neighbor. Rachel, the trainer."

The women nodded at each other, then Rachel handed Luke off to Olivia. She retrieved his bag from the backseat and

handed it to him. “I didn’t want him to ride his bike home. And I wasn’t going to leave him alone tonight. But it seems that won’t be an issue.”

Olivia smiled at her. “I’ll take care of him.”

Rachel put a hand on Luke’s shoulder. “Take it easy for a few days. We’ll get together on Wednesday.”

“Okay.”

Rachel got into the car and backed down the driveway. Luke gave her a wave, then looked at Olivia. “That was a bit... catty.”

“Sorry.”

He laughed, then stopped and rubbed his temple. “No. It was rather enjoyable, actually. Two beautiful women fighting over me.”

“We weren’t exactly fighting over you.”

“Just establishing your territory?”

“Something like that.” She took his arm. “Come on. Let’s get you into the house. It’s so late. I was worried about you.”

“Well, we argued for an hour about whether or not I could ride my bike home.”

“I’m glad you lost the argument.”

They went up the two steps to the porch, then through the front door. She took him to the couch, and he sat with a groan, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

Olivia sat on the coffee table examining him. “What can I do?”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. “First, you can ask me if I won.”

“Did you?”

“Of course I did. How dare you ask.”

She laughed. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Kitchen cupboard above the coffeemaker. Bottle of bourbon and some aspirin. I’ll need at least three.”

Olivia went to the kitchen and took out the bourbon, then took out the aspirin. She took out three, then poured a shot into a glass and returned to the couch.

Before she handed him the pills and the glass, she said, “This goes against all of my training.”

“I know. But it’s my cure all. A shot of bourbon and two or three pills. It gets me through the first few hours. Then I’m good to go.”

She handed him the pills and the glass, then watched him swallow them with the shot. He handed the glass back to her.

She leaned toward him. “Let me see your eyes.” He looked at her. “I think you have a concussion.”

“It’s not my first. Won’t be my last.”

“It’s nothing to joke about, Luke. Multiple concussions can lead to permanent brain damage.”

“I’m aware.” He sat up. “Seriously. I’m okay. I know what a concussion feels like, and this isn’t one. It’s just a headache and it’ll go away after I get some sleep.”

“So, you won’t let me take you to the hospital?”

“No hospital.”

“Luke.”

He studied her for a moment. “You need to trust that I know how to take care of myself. Hospitals cost money, and they’re not going to tell me anything I don’t already know. I can’t afford to delve out a grand to get an order of ‘Take it easy and get some rest.’

Olivia was annoyed. “So, I’m guessing boxing doesn’t come with medical insurance.”

He smiled. “No. It barely comes with a paycheck, either. I make a few hundred dollars a week at the gym. Paid under the table.”

“Didn’t you give Cara several thousand dollars?”

“Yes. It was all the money I had.”

“No money in the bank?”

“No bank.” He leaned back again and closed his eyes. “Can we stop talking about this now?”

“Yes.”

He tilted his head and looked at her for a second. “If you want to reconsider this whole relationship thing now that you know how broke I am, I’d completely understand.”

She moved to the couch and put a hand on his thigh. “I don’t care about how much money you do or don’t have.” She picked up a pillow and put it on her lap. “Lie down.”

He slid over, then laid his head on her lap and pulled his legs up onto the couch.

“I just never cared about making money. If I did, I would’ve gone pro a long time ago.”

Olivia stroked his hair. “Shh. Close your eyes and let your cure-all get to work.” She was quiet for a moment, then asked, “Where’d he hit you? You’re not bruised anywhere.”

“In the head.” He opened his eyes. “Repeatedly. Just not in the face.”

“And how badly hurt is Richie?”

“I don’t know. Last I saw, he was lying on the mat.” He closed his eyes again. “Didn’t you just tell me to stop talking?”

“Yes. Shh.”

“You, shh.” He opened his eyes again. “But first, give me a kiss.”

She bent down and kissed him gently.

“If that doesn’t cure me, nothing will.”

It didn’t take long for Luke to fall asleep, but Olivia didn’t have the heart to wake him and she figured she should stay with him and monitor his condition so she laid back on the couch and closed her eyes.

When Luke rolled onto his side with a groan and a mumbled curse, Olivia opened her eyes. The room was light. They'd slept all night. She put a hand on Luke's shoulder, and he glanced at her.

"You stayed all night."

"I fell asleep."

"It figures."

"What?"

"Our first night together and we both slept through it."

Olivia smiled. "I didn't want to disturb you, but now I need to get up. Both Frankie and I need to pee."

Luke raised up onto his elbow and Olivia got to her feet. Then he rearranged the pillow and laid back down, as he watched her cross the room.

"Wrong way."

She stopped. "Stupid backwards house." She switched directions and made her way to the bathroom.

When she came back out, Luke seemed to be dozing again, so she slipped out and went to her house to get Frankie. When she opened the door, she was met with a bark, then a whine when he realized it was her. He then crouched down and rolled onto his back.

"Oh, sweetie. I'm sorry I left you alone all night." She rubbed his belly, then picked him up. "Let's go outside and go potty." She took him out front and let him run around for a

minute. While she was waiting for Frankie to do his business, Cara drove by and pulled into Luke's driveway. She got out of the car and walked to Olivia.

"Have you seen my brother since last night?"

"Yes. I stayed with him."

Cara looked at her quizzically.

"Not like that. His trainer brought him home, and I sat on the couch with him until he fell asleep. Next thing I knew, it was morning."

Cara glanced at the house. "So, he's, okay?"

"I guess. He looks fine. But he was pretty rattled last night. I think he has a mild concussion. But he swears he doesn't. We haven't really talked yet this morning. I just got up to walk poor Frankie."

Cara knelt and rubbed the dog's ears. "Poor baby. Left alone all night."

"I'm sure he thought I was never coming back."

"So where's Luke now?"

"I left him on the couch." She put Frankie back inside. "Let's go see how he's doing."

They went into the house and found the couch empty. Cara went to the bedroom and looked in, then turned back to Olivia.

"He must be in the bathroom."

Olivia headed for the kitchen. "How about some coffee?"

“I’d love it. I left the house without having any.”

Olivia started a pot of coffee and took three cups out of the cupboard.

Cara nodded at the bottle of bourbon and the aspirin. “You gave that to him last night?”

“Yeah. That’s what he wanted. It’s not exactly a medically approved remedy.”

“I know it sounds excessive. But it works for him.”

Luke walked into the kitchen. “What works for me?”

“Your cure-all.”

“Oh.” He went to the table and sat. “Coffee is the next step.”

Olivia smiled. “Coming right up.”

Cara went to Luke and tilted his head up toward her, then studied him for a moment. “I hate this, you know.”

“I know.” She let go of his chin and tousled his hair.

“Ouch.”

She sat in a chair. “So is this it until the wedding?”

Olivia set coffee in front of them, then took the seat between them.

Luke took a sip. “No. One more in a couple weeks.”

“Luke!”

“It’s two weeks before the wedding. I’ll be fine.”

Cara looked at Olivia. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

Olivia ignored the question and drank some coffee. “You never sent me the info on the dress fitting.”

Cara shook her head, then looked at Luke. “Did you call the tux guy?”

“I told you I’d call him on Monday.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

She glanced at Olivia. “You should take Olivia with you.”

“Why?”

“So she can make sure you behave.”

“Why wouldn’t I behave?” Luke’s sarcasm was palpable.

“Because some man is going to be invading your personal space.”

Luke drank some more coffee. “I went seven rounds with Richie last night and most of the time he was hugging me so I wouldn’t hit him. I think I can handle your tux guy and his tape measure.” He looked at Olivia. “But feel free to join me.”

ELEVEN

Luke

After two cups of coffee, the women left Luke to recuperate for the rest of the day. By late afternoon, he was feeling pretty good, and he decided to take a quick swim. As he went to the dock, he hoped to see Olivia on her deck or by the water, but she wasn't there, nor did she show up as he reached the end of the dock.

He took off his t-shirt and jumped into the water feet first this time, as he felt going in headfirst with still a hint of a headache wouldn't be a good idea. He took a moment to adjust to the shock of the cold water before starting his swim.

He went out about half as far as he usually did, then floated for a few minutes. He enjoyed this time of day when the sun was still up, but on its way to disappearing into the horizon. He bobbed around for few more minutes, then headed back toward the dock. When he got to it and started to climb up, he heard Olivia.

“What're you doing? You're supposed to be convalescing.”

“I am. This is part of the recovery process. Getting back at it.”

“How’s your head?”

“Eighty-five percent.”

“Good or bad?”

He smiled as he dried off. “Good. Normal is about ninety-five percent. So eighty-five isn’t bad the day after a fight.”

“How long has it been since you were one hundred percent?”

He thought about the question, then shrugged. “Can’t remember.”

“Go rest some more.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“And don’t forget to call the tux guy tomorrow.”

“I won’t.” He put his t-shirt back on. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Do you want me to?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“Yes. I’d like to come with you. But not to make sure you behave. I’m sure you will. I just want to see you in a tux.”

“First time for everything.”

“You’ve never worn a tux?”

“Nope.”

“Not even to high school prom?”

He cocked his head.

“Right. Of course you didn’t go to prom.”

He wanted to spend time with her, and wanted to get her to come over. “You sure you don’t want to come over to help me take it easy?”

“I think it’d be best if I didn’t.”

“Fine. I’ll call you in the morning and let you know what the tux guy says.”

“Okay. Anytime is fine. Being self-employed has its perks.”

Luke put on the television but couldn’t pay attention. He kept wondering if this whole thing with Olivia was a bad idea. It had already gone too far, and he really didn’t want to hurt her. He dozed off on the couch and dreamt about Olivia walking on a beach holding hands with him.

The following morning, Luke called the tuxedo store and got an appointment for one o’clock. He then dialed Olivia.

Olivia picked up on the first ring. “I hope you’re calling to tell me you’re closing in on ninety-five percent.”

“No. I’m calling to see if you still want to go to the tux place with me at one today.”

“Sure.”

“And if you’re up for it, there’s someplace I’d like to take you afterwards.”

“Are you going to tell me what it is?”

Luke hid his enthusiasm “No. I also need you to take me to my bike when we’re done.”

“Oh, sure. I forgot you were wheelless.”

“You don’t mind driving, do you?”

“It’s fine. Even if you had your bike, I’d be driving.”

“So, I’m not going to get you on the back of my bike someday?”

“No.”

“Alright. Leave at noon?”

“Sounds good.”

Dressed in his newest pair of jeans and his blue t-shirt, Luke knocked on Olivia’s door a few minutes before noon. She opened the door, then took a step back.

“Wow. Formal Luke.”

“This is as good as it gets.”

“I’ll take it.” She picked up her purse and came through the door.

He stepped close and put his arms around her waist. “I believe I missed you.”

“You saw me last night.”

“From afar.” He leaned in and kissed her. She smelled like strawberries again. He couldn’t get enough of it. He stopped for a moment but kept his lips on hers and let out a light groan.

She put her arms around his neck and smiled. “Mmm. You did miss me.”

“We could skip this whole tux thing and—”

“No.” She stepped back and took his hand. “Cara will kill you if you don’t get this done.”

He sighed loudly. “Fine. But if she wasn’t my sister...”

“Come on. I’m eager for the mystery destination after the fitting.”

“Don’t set your sights too high. I’m poor, remember.”

They headed for the garage, and Luke opened the door. He waited for her to back the car out, then closed the door and got in beside her. On the drive, he told her more than she probably wanted to know about motorcycles and his training sessions. Then they switched to movies, which didn’t last long, as Luke rarely watched any. As they neared town, they discussed books, and she seemed surprised he liked to read.

“Why does that surprise you?” he asked.

“It doesn’t.” She glanced at him. “I don’t know. It seems out of character.”

“I’ve always been a reader. It helped me in school, for sure.” He glanced at her. “But I draw the line at books with half-naked guys on the front.”

“I won’t loan you any of my books, then.”

“I don’t get it. What’s the point?”

“To live vicariously.”

He put a hand on her thigh. “Wouldn’t you rather experience it than read about it?”

She glanced at him. “Well, sure.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that.” He saw her blush. He loved her natural fair freckled skin. From what he could tell she didn’t wear make-up. He didn’t mind make-up, but she looked so perfectly pretty just as she was in that moment. He saw her shoot him a glance that could only be discerned as somewhat scared or unsure of his comment. He felt bad that he had said it.

They arrived at the store and found a spot to park a block away. As they headed down the sidewalk, Luke took her hand, then leaned in close to her ear. “Nothing’s going to happen until you want it to.”

She bumped him with her shoulder. “I trust you, Luke. You scare me a little. But I trust you.” Two women walking in the opposite direction walked by and gave Luke a once-over.

“Huh,” Olivia said softly.

“What?”

“I’ve never been the woman other women are envious of.”

“What are you talking about?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Those two women just scoped you out.”

Luke looked back at the women. “You’re crazy.”

“No. I don’t think so.”

They reached the tuxedo store and Luke opened the door for her. “So your intellectual guys didn’t attract attention?”

“No.”

“Why did you date them?”

“Looks aren’t everything.” She put a hand on his chest. “Although...it doesn’t hurt to have something nice to look at across the table.”

“Wow. Ms. Shallow.” Now Luke was blushing.

A clerk approached them. “May I help you?”

“Yes. I have an appointment.”

“Name?”

“Luke Amhurst.”

The clerk went to the computer and typed in his name. “Perfect. Right on time. Have a seat and André will be with you shortly.”

Luke and Olivia went to the couch the clerk directed them to.

Luke sighed. “If we’re right on time, why are we sitting on this couch?”

“Shush. Maybe I will need to make sure you behave.”

André arrived five minutes later with a flourish and a French accent. “Mr. Amhurst? Please, follow me.” He looked at Olivia. “You’re the other half?”

“Um... No.” Luke glanced at Olivia. “She’s here to give final approval.”

André waved at Olivia. “Come then.”

They went into a room with a large, curved mirror taking up one corner. Across the room from it was a red velvet couch. André pointed at Olivia. “You sit.” He then stepped back and eyed Luke. “You’re very athletic.” He circled around, making Luke uncomfortable. “Okay, you come with me.”

Luke looked back at Olivia, who seemed to enjoy his discomfort, then followed André to the dressing room.

André took a few moments to go through several jackets on a rack. He finally picked one, then went to another rack with shirts. Once he chose one of those, he went to a table with folded pants.

He eyed Luke again. “What’s your pant size?”

Luke shrugged.

André hurried his words. “What is the waist measurement on your...jeans.”

“Thirty-six.”

“Okay, we’ll start with that.” He selected a pair of pants, handed everything to Luke, then pointed to a dressing area. “Go put on, please.”

Luke went into the room, then closed the door and mumbled some incoherent words. He got undressed and put on the pants first. Other than being a little too long, they fit well. The shirt

was next, and he put it over his t-shirt, assuming he'd be wearing a tee under it for the wedding. It was tight on the chest and arms.

He stuck his head out the door. "This shirt isn't going to cut it."

"Take off, please."

Luke removed the shirt and handed it to André, who picked another for him.

After going a few rounds with the shirt and jacket, Luke followed him to the fitting room. He was tucking his shirt into his pants when he looked at Olivia. She didn't say anything, but she seemed pleased with what she saw.

André directed Luke to the mirror, then stood back and studied him. "Turn please."

Luke scowled at Olivia, then turned slowly around.

André turned to her. "What do you think?"

She nodded. "Um..." She smiled and gave a thumbs up.

"Yes. He is quite dashing." He went to Luke and started fussing with the jacket. "Just a few adjustments."

The few adjustments took forty-five minutes, and by the time André was finished, Luke was more than ready to get out of the store. After changing, he took Olivia's arm and hurried to the door.

When they were a block from the store, he slowed down and looked at her. "You didn't have much to say in there."

“I was kind of speechless.”

“Why?”

“Because....well... *damn.*”

He stopped walking. “I looked good, damn? Or I looked like an idiot, damn?”

“Good. Definitely good. Really, really good.” She fanned herself.

He took her hand and laughed. “Okay, walk it off.”

They got to the car, and he gave her directions to the next stop. They left the car in a parking garage and took the stairs to the street below. When they got to a sign that read, Laser World, Luke stopped and opened it.

She looked at him. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I told you not to set your expectations too high.”

He followed her into the store, then stepped around her and went to the man behind the counter.

“Will. How are you?”

Will shook hands with Luke. “Hey! I haven’t seen you in a while. Are you here to play?”

“If you can get us into a room. That’d be great.” He reached for Olivia’s hand. “This is Olivia.”

Will shook her hand. “Will Benson. Nice to meet you.” He buzzed them past the counter and led them to a room with gear. “There’s no one in room three. I have a party coming in about an hour. But until then, it’s all yours.”

“Thanks, Will.” Luke looked at Olivia. “What do you think?”

“Never played.”

“Well then, it’s about time you did.”

“Are you going to take it easy on me?”

He thought for a moment as he handed her a vest. “Maybe for the first round.”

“Okay. But I’m going to make you work for it.”

“I’d expect no less.”

They played for forty-five minutes, and Olivia seemed to have a blast. She even started making some good shots after a few games. Luke was impressed, and it further cemented how much he liked her. She seemed to be having a good time, and he liked that she just went with the flow.

As they headed to the car, she took his arm. “Well, that was fun. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Why do you get to play for free?”

“I bring the kids here after our training sessions a couple of times a month. The gym pays for it, so it’s a nice bit of income for Will.”

“I’d like to meet the kids one of these days.”

“You should come watch. We meet Tuesdays and Thursdays. But this week I’m taking tomorrow off.”

“Can I come on Thursday?”

“Yeah.”

“The kids aren’t hitting you, right?”

“They’re not even hitting each other. It’s more about technique and training. When they spar, they’re completely padded up.”

“Okay, good.”

He put his arm around her shoulder. “I wish we could hang out longer.”

“Do you need to be somewhere?”

“I’m meeting up with Rachel.”

“Training already?”

“No. Going over strategy for the next fight. Although, it wouldn’t surprise me if she had me drop and do a hundred, just to be mean.”

“A hundred what?”

“Push-ups.”

“That explains your super manly arms.”

He stopped her from walking and held her close.

“For someone so intellectual you seem to notice my body a lot.”

She blushed. “It’s hard not to.”

He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss. “That’s ok. I like it. It makes me feel good.”

She looked deeply at him and then rested her chin against his chest.

“You make me feel alive Luke.”

Those words made Luke feel electric. It was like the feeling he got just before going into a fight.

TWELVE

Olivia

Olivia dropped Luke off at his bike, and they parted after a long goodbye. They agreed to spend the day together tomorrow before Luke started training on Wednesday. She suggested they take the sailboat out, and he readily agreed.

Tuesday morning came, and Olivia worked a few hours then got ready for her day with Luke. She went onto her deck to check the weather. It was sunny and clear, with a light breeze. She went down to the boat to make sure it was ready to go.

It was a twelve-footer with a small cabin consisting of a berth in the bow and a tiny galley with minimal storage. But there was no stove or refrigerator. The boat was meant for day sailing and not much more.

When it was close to their planned departure time, she made three turkey sandwiches and put them into a cooler, along with some water bottles and a few sodas. After she put on her swimsuit and covered it with shorts and a white cotton shirt, she sat and waited for Luke to arrive.

He arrived a few minutes after eleven and knocked on the door. Olivia opened it with a smile, and he came through the door and hugged her, then leaned back and looked at her.

“You look like you’re all ready for a day of sailing.”

“I am.” She checked out his swim trunks, t-shirt, and the sixpack of beer in his hand. “And you as well.”

He held up the beer. “I figured the day called for beer.”

“Let’s put it in the cooler.”

He put three beers in the cooler, then left the other three in her refrigerator. After making sure they had everything they could possibly need, they went to the dock and boarded the sailboat.

Luke looked at the lines and sails. “I know absolutely nothing about sailing.”

“That’s okay. I know just enough to get us out to the middle of the lake.”

“But can you get us back?”

She laughed. “I guess we’ll find out.”

She gave Luke some instructions, and they pushed off and raised the sail. It caught the wind, and they moved away from the dock. The wind was still light, so the progress was slow, but it was a beautiful day, and they were alone together on the lake and neither one of them cared how fast they were going. Luke sat next to Olivia, who was holding the tiller and keeping them on a straight course. They sailed for an hour, then

lowered the sail in the middle of the lake. The boat bobbed for a moment, then settled into the water. It was quiet with not many boats around. The stillness was relaxing.

Luke helped Olivia secure the sail, then they returned to the teak bench and sat together.

Olivia looked at him. "Are you hungry?"

"Almost. Let's sit for a minute." He put his arm around her and she leaned into him. "This was a very good idea."

"It's so peaceful out here."

He kissed her on the top of her head, then looked around. "Not a soul in sight."

"Seems like we're alone in the world."

"Not a bad position to be in." He held up his hand. "I think the wind stopped."

Olivia sat up. "You're right. It's completely calm."

"What was the forecast?"

"Hmm. Seems I was so worried about getting everything ready that I forgot to check the weather."

Luke started laughing. "Are we going to row this thing back?"

"It'd be kind of hard with no paddles."

He leaned against the side of the boat. "I don't need to be anywhere until tomorrow morning. It's bound to pick up before then."

Olivia leaned against him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. This is great. I'm sure we can think of something to do."

She quickly chimed in. "I brought lunch."

"Yeah. That's not exactly what I was talking about."

She got to her feet. Her knees were shaky. "I'll get the cooler." She went below and leaned on the counter, then took a deep breath.

'Just relax. Nothing is going to happen unless you want it to'.

She picked up the cooler.

'Let's just eat lunch and go from there.'

She went back on deck and opened the cooler. She stumbled a bit as she was getting things out of the cooler. She glanced at him. "Sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry."

"I just need a minute. I'm a little out of practice. I don't have my sea legs yet."

"Hand me one of those beers."

She took out a beer and handed it to him. After he opened it and took a drink, she gave him a sandwich.

"I hope you like turkey."

"Love it."

"I didn't put cheese on it. Just lettuce and tomatoes."

“Perfect.” He took a bite. “Mmm. Good.” He washed it down with a swallow of beer.

She knew he could sense she was tense.

“Olivia.”

“Yeah?”

“Relax.”

She nodded and gave him a small grin. “I’m good.”

Olivia’s thoughts were racing. She had been thinking about what might happen if their relationship progressed. Maybe it would just be a quick fling and that would be it. Maybe the experience would be less than enjoyable, and they both would forget it ever happened and move on with their separate lives. Maybe he was playing her. She stopped that thought. There was no way he was playing her, after all, if he was, and Cara found out he knew he’d be dead. She wanted to know what his intentions were, but she didn’t ask because she wasn’t even sure what hers were. She calmed herself down and sat next to him.

They both ate a sandwich and Luke ate half of the second one and finished his beer. Olivia put everything away and set the cooler aside.

“Do you want to go sit on the bow?”

“Sure.”

She picked up two towels and handed a cushion to Luke, then they walked along the side of the boat to the bow. Olivia

laid down the towels, and they leaned the cushion against the front of the cabin. Luke sat down and put his arm around Olivia when she sat next to him. She put her head on his shoulder and a hand on his thigh.

“So how’d you get to be such a good kisser? Lots of practice?”

“Olivia. I get the feeling you think I’m some sort of Lothario. I’m not at all. The number you were curious about that night we had dinner at your house, is four.”

She tilted her head up to look at him. “Really?”

“Yes. And that’s going all the way back to Big Ernie’s daughter.”

“What was her name?”

“Michelle.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Does it really matter?”

“No.”

“You’ve gotten a glimpse of what my life is like. Not a lot of time for women.”

Olivia wanted his time, and this was a new feeling for her. “Will you have time for me?”

Luke didn’t hesitate. “I’ll make time for you.”

She was quiet for a few moments. She didn’t want to think. She just wanted to feel.

“Luke. Kiss me.”

“I can do that.”

He kissed her deeply, and without hesitation or thinking she pulled away. “Luke.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go down below.”

“Olivia...are you sure?”

She nodded. “I’m ready to have an intimate conversation with you.”

He grabbed her hand and led her down the steps into the galley area.



Luke

Luke stared at the top of the berth two feet above him. “I believe this is a first.”

Olivia snuggled in next to him and kissed his neck. “A first for what?”

“Doing what we just did...on a boat.”

She laughed. “Well, I must say. If this was a first, you did pretty good.”

“*Pretty good?*”

“Really, really good. Like A plus, plus, plus—”

He interrupted her with a kiss. “I think I get it.” He sighed. “I believe this is about as happy as I’ve ever been. Right here. Right now. Right next to you.”

She put an arm over his chest. “I guess I can throw all my romance books away.”

He kissed her forehead. “With my track record, maybe you should just box them up and put them in the back of your closet.”

She raised up onto her elbow. “Don’t put that out into the universe. This one is going to stick.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.” She paused, then added, “If you want it to, that is.”

“Of course I want it to.”

“Well, then stop being a Negative Nancy.”

He laughed. “Yes, ma’am.” He backed out of the berth. “I am getting a little claustrophobic, though.”

She climbed out, too. “Let’s go check on the wind.”

Luke put on his shorts and as Olivia was trying to tie her bikini top Luke found it hilarious to keep untying it.

After the second time, she slapped his hand. “Behave.”

“So now you want me to behave? Pretty sure that’s not what you wanted about an hour ago.”

She pointed to the hatch. “Go. I’ll be up in a minute.”

He went onto the deck and felt a slight wind blowing, which was disappointing. He wouldn't have minded being stuck on the lake a while longer. He opened the cooler and took out a beer, then sat on the bench next to the tiller.

He took a drink. He hoped Olivia was right. He wanted this one to stick more than anything he'd ever wanted. For the first time in his life, he knew he was falling for her.



Olivia

Olivia took a few minutes to gather her thoughts.

'So much for not going head over heels.'

She put her shirt on over her swim top and tied the bottom into a knot. Then she went to a mirror hanging on one of the storage cupboards and ran her fingers through her hair. She dug through a drawer and came up with an elastic tie, then put her hair in a loose bun.

She studied her reflection.

'I'm pretty sure at this point he doesn't care how you look.'

When she heard Luke call something down to her, she stood on the first step below the hatch and looked at him. "What?"

"I was just wondering if you're ever coming out of there."

“One sec.” She stepped down, checked the mirror one more time, then went up to join him. She sat next to him, and he put his arm around her and kissed her temple.

She looked at him. “Did you miss me?”

“Yeah. And I’m regretting the fact I need to start training tomorrow.”

“I don’t want Rachel coming after me for interfering with your schedule.”

He took a drink of his beer. “Don’t worry about Rachel. I can handle her.”

Olivia turned and looked at him. “I also don’t want to be responsible for you getting hurt because you aren’t at full capacity.”

“Olivia.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Quit apologizing to me. I’ll do what I have to do. No matter how hard it may be. I’ll miss the hell out of you when I’m gone, but that just means we take advantage of the time we do have. And by advantage, I don’t mean just...”

“I know what you mean. And I’m up for the challenge.”

“Good.” He held up his beer bottle. “You really don’t like beer?”

“I really don’t.”

“What else don’t you like? Give me three things.”

Olivia thought for a moment. “Beets.”

“Well, sure. They’re gross.”

“Mushrooms and liver.”

“I love liver. If it’s cooked right and you have mashed potatoes and gravy with it.”

“So, what don’t you like? And you can’t use beets because that’s already been established.”

He took another drink. “Cauliflower, chocolate, and vanilla ice cream.”

She sat forward. “This will never work. I love vanilla ice cream and chocolate.”

“Preferably together. I remember.”

She leaned into him again. “Well, I guess I can overlook that one thing.” She glanced at his chest tattoo and put her hand on it. “Tell me about this.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, those are deep words, *“Love is given and received but never taken.”*”

“And let me guess, you think it’s strange that I, a boxer, have it on my chest?”

“No, I just want to know *why* you got it.”

“It’s a reminder. You can give love and receive love, but you can never take love. It’s not part of that conversation. Olivia, I may seem like a guy who doesn’t feel too many things, and I may not know what love is exactly, but growing up it was clear to me what love wasn’t. I know I’m not great

with words, but I like to think my actions speak for themselves.”

Olivia chose her next words carefully. “So do you consider what just happened was you giving your love?”

“Yes.”

She looked him in eyes, almost through him. “And do you think I received your love?”

He looked at her with intensity. “I’d say you gladly received it.”

Olivia blushed. “You know what I think?”

“What’s that?”

“I think we should go below and have another conversation.”

Luke kissed her on the head, took her hand and led her down the stairs into the galley. He held her tight and kissed her with such veracity she almost fell backwards. Her blood rushed. Luke placed her hand on his chest, and she could feel his heart pounding, and right then, she felt like she knew more about Luke than any other person in the world.

THIRTEEN

Luke

The day on the sailboat was soon over and the next few weeks flew by for Luke as he was training all day with Rachel and spending his evenings with Olivia. They didn't go out much. Neither of them wanted to share the limited time they had together with anyone else.

Luke came home a few times with minor injuries, which Olivia always took care of, but it seemed to him, each time she was a little quieter tending to him. He was beginning to wonder if this was her starting to resent the fact that he depended on her to keep him in fighting shape. He hoped not. He liked Olivia more than he'd ever liked anyone. He'd never been in love, but he was pretty sure this was it, or pretty darn close. All he knew for sure was he couldn't wait to come home to her every night, and he hated leaving her every morning.

A week before his fight, he came home with an injured finger. He came into Olivia's house and spotted her on the deck. Frankie, who'd long since stopped barking at Luke—they were now best buddies—thumped his tail on the couch.

Luke put a finger to his lips. “Shh-quiet Frankie.” He went to the couch and rubbed Frankie’s ears, then crept to the open door and stepped through it. He came up behind Olivia and put his arms around her waist.

She jumped, then turned to him and smiled. “I hate when you do that.”

“No, you don’t.” He kissed her.

“Maybe hate is too strong of a word. You’re home early.”

“I know. The sun’s still up.” When she tried to take his hand, he grimaced and pulled it away from her. “Sorry.” He held up his crooked finger. “I had a slight incident with the weight machine.”

She took his wrist and examined his finger. “That’s not slight, Luke. It looks like it’s broken.”

He pulled his hand away from her again and put his arms around her. “Good thing my neighbor is an ex-nurse.”

She kissed him, then stepped away. “Let’s go take care of it.”

Luke followed her into the kitchen and sat at the table. “It’s probably just dislocated.”

She took his hand again. “It’s not bent at the joint, it’s bent between joints. They’re not supposed to bend there.”

“You could be right. Can you set it?”

“I like how you assume I have all the skills of a physician.”

“How hard can it be? Just tug on it.”

Without responding, she got some ice from the freezer and put it into a bag, then sat next to him. “It’s not quite that simple.” She took his hand and put the ice on his finger. After a few moments, she said, “Hold that on there while I get the tape.”

Luke watched her go to the drawer that had become the medical supplies drawer and take out a roll of white tape. She sat back down and took his hand again. “This is going to hurt.”

“Just do it.”

She took hold of the end of his finger and his wrist, then applied a steady pulling pressure. The finger straightened as the bones realigned and Luke mumbled a few choice words he saved for this type of situation.

“Okay. Hold still until I get it taped to your middle finger.”

He watched her tape the two fingers together. “I’m sorry.”

She looked at him. “For what?”

“For coming home hurt again.”

She shrugged. “What concerns me the most is that I’m getting used to it. I don’t want to get used to it, Luke. I hate putting you back together.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Be more careful.”

“I’ll try.”

She handed him the ice pack. “Keep the ice on it for a while.” She got to her feet. “Do you need some aspirin?”

He shook his head. “Just a beer.”

She handed him a beer, then leaned against the counter. “How are you going to fight with that?”

“I’ve got a week to heal.”

“It takes six for a bone to heal completely.”

“Rachel can numb it up before the fight. I won’t feel a thing.”

She turned away from him and looked out the window. He stood and went to her, then turned her to face him. “It’s what I do.”

“I know. I can accept that. But I don’t have to like it.”

“It won’t be forever.”

She nodded and hugged him. “Are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

She put her hands on his chest. “Go sit, ice your hand, and drink your beer.”

“I love it when you’re bossy.”

“Shut up. Tacos or spaghetti?”

“Tacos.”

“Chicken or beef?”

“Let’s go with chicken.”

Luke ate more tacos than he should’ve. Then they went onto the deck and watched the sun go down. When Luke’s phone rang, he looked at the number and sighed.

He held it up. “Rachel.”

“She had you all day. This is my time.”

He smiled. “Let me see what she wants. I’ll keep it short.”
He answered the call. “Rachel. Didn’t I just leave you a couple of hours ago?”

“Yes. Sorry to intrude on your Olivia time. But I heard a rumor today.

“I thought we didn’t listen to rumors.”

“We don’t. So I did some research and turns out it’s true.”

“Lay it on me.”

“Richie Iverson is through. He’s out.”

“He quit?”

“He was forced to quit.”

Luke stood and went to the railing. “What happened?”

“Seems during your fight he got a detached retina.”

“Oh geez.”

“But that’s not why I’m calling. His groupies, most of which he’s related to, are making a lot of noise about payback.”

“What kind of payback?”

“I don’t know. I just want you to be careful.”

“They’re a bunch of loudmouthed thugs. They’re harmless.”

“Maybe. But maybe not. Just don’t hang around any dark alleys for a while.”

“Okay. Street parking only.”

“How’s the finger?”

Luke held up his hand and looked at it. “Thanks to my nurse, it’s on the mend.”

“Don’t screw this up. She’s handy to have around.”

“That’s not...why..... I’ll see you tomorrow, Rachel.” He ended the call.

Olivia came to him. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Apparently, Richie got a career-ending injury during our fight and his buddies are mouthing off about making me pay.”

She took his arm. “Luke. Do you think they’re serious?”

“No. I don’t want you to worry about it.” He turned to her. “I feel like a swim in the lake.”

“Hmm. With or without trunks?”

He smiled. “Your choice.”

She answered immediately. “Without.”

He headed for the stairs, and she followed him down. As he walked along the dock, he started removing his clothes. By the time he reached the end of it, he was in his birthday suit. “Anything for you.” He dove into the water and started swimming.



Olivia

Olivia watched him swim away from the dock.

‘Anything for me except not coming home hurt every few days and giving up the thing you love more than anything’.

She sighed and shook her head.

‘You knew what you were getting into. I just didn’t know it’d be so hard.’

Olivia was beginning to realize Luke was just as needy as her previous boyfriends but just in a different way. He needed her to put him back together in a very real sort of way. She wasn’t sure how she would handle this in the long run.

While Luke swam, Olivia went to get him a towel, then returned to the end of the dock and sat to wait for him. He’d turned around and was headed back.

She thought about the last couple of weeks. She was falling in love with him, and she suspected he was falling in love with her, too. But they hadn’t talked about it. She got the feeling he thought putting it into words would somehow ruin it. He’d repeatedly told her he was the happiest he’d ever been.

‘Don’t rush things. Everything is great. Or as great as it can be when you’re dating a boxer.’

Luke came to the end of the dock and climbed the ladder.

“Wow, that was refreshing.” He stepped onto the deck, and Olivia handed him the towel.

“I think you’re a little bit crazy, Luke.”

“Just a little bit?”

“Come on, you’re shivering. I don’t want you to catch pneumonia before the big fight.”

“It wouldn’t slow me down much.”

“I know. That’s why I don’t want it to happen.”

“I had the flu once during a fight. It was rough. Damn near lost the match. Throwing up between rounds. Great fun.”

“Sounds like a blast.” She took his arm and led him to the stairs. “Go take a hot shower and get warmed up.”

“That sounds like it would be more fun if you would join me.”

She grinned. “Stop. Just go—then we can relax.”

After his shower, they settled on the couch. Olivia had tried to get Luke interested in watching movies, but he wasn’t able to sit still for two hours staring at the television. He only made it all the way through one movie, and they had to take a break in the middle so he could get up and move around. It wasn’t in his nature to sit still and do nothing.

They spent most of their evenings talking or playing cards. He also started teaching her some self-defense moves and had talked her into working out with him on a less strenuous level.

They ran a few mornings a week, but he'd yet to get her into the lake.

Olivia took his injured hand. "Does it hurt?"

"Nah."

She studied him for a moment. "I don't know if you have a crazy high pain tolerance, or if you're in denial and refuse to give into it."

He put a hand on her cheek. "A little of both. If I let the pain stop me, I'd never fight or workout. It's part of the game."

"How long do you plan on playing the game? No pressure. Just a question."

"I always figured I'd stop when I hit thirty."

"Two more years."

"Yeah."

"Then what will you do?"

"Probably go full time at the gym. Coach, train, hangout a little. The guy who owns the place keeps asking me to take on more kids. He's even mentioned teaching another self-defense class."

"That sounds like a lot less stress on your body."

"I'll miss getting into the ring. But in two years, I'll be ready."

Olivia was quiet. *'Two more years of punishing your body'*.

He was in great shape, but he wasn't twenty anymore. Olivia knew each injury he sustained probably took a little longer to get over the older he got. It was just the way it was. The human body could only take so much. He'd been pushing his body to the limit for ten years. She wished he'd quit before he got an injury he couldn't come back from. It was only a matter of time.

She laid her head on his shoulder and he kissed the top of her head.

“What're you thinking about?”

She looked at him. “I'm thinking I haven't beat you at War in a while.”

“What are you talking about? You've never beat me.”

“That's so not true.”

“I may have let you win a few times.”

She sat up. “You're such a liar.”

“Go get the cards.”

FOURTEEN

Luke

During his training the following day, Luke stayed away from the heavy bag and sparring to give his finger a little more time to heal. He spent his time doing calisthenics and lifting weights. Since he and Olivia slept in a little too late, and he didn't get a run in, he ran fast and on a steep incline on the treadmill for thirty minutes.

When he took a break mid-afternoon, Rachel came to sit with him.

"I'm surprised." She gave him a once over.

"By what?"

"Your concentration. You haven't missed a beat since you started dating Olivia."

"I told you it wouldn't be a problem."

"I know. And in the past, it never has been. But Olivia's different."

Luke glanced at her. "How so?"

“I think you’ve finally found the one.”

He drank some water and got to his feet. “It’s a little too soon to come to that conclusion, don’t you think?”

“Hey when it hit, it hits.”

“When what hits?”

“Love.”

He went to a bench and laid under a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound barbell. “It’s a little too soon for that, too.”

“Don’t lift that without a spotter.”

“You can spot me.”

“I’m not lifting that off of you if you lose control.” She looked around the gym. “Mike, come spot Luke. You’re so stubborn.”

“I’m just doing what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Luke spent another two hours at the gym, then showered and went to his bike. He’d parked out front, per Rachel’s request, and made sure no one was lurking nearby. He wasn’t worried about Richie’s buddies, because he knew he could take any one of them. He straddled the bike, put on his helmet, and left the parking lot.

As he left town and headed down the more deserted road to the lake, he noticed a truck coming up on him fast. When he realized the truck wasn’t going to slow down or go around him, he considered his options. With a car approaching from the other direction, there was only one. He veered off the road

and into the ditch as the truck roared by. Luke was able to maintain control for a few seconds as he downshifted and hit the brakes. A big rock loomed in front of him.

“Shit.”

It was going to be his body or his bike, and he chose his bike. At the last second he laid the bike down so it missed the rock. Luke’s body then flew into the air. He felt himself crash into the rock.

He had managed to turn himself around, so he hit with his feet instead of his head, but as he hit, he felt a sharp pain in his left ankle. The impact swung him around and the side of his body bounced off the rock again before he skidded another few feet and landed on the side of the roadway. He laid there for a moment, then all went black.

He knew he was alive, and he could hear everything around him. He thought about Olivia. He thought about if he was going to be able to fight again. He moved his legs. He moved his arms. He felt some relief knowing he could at least move his extremities. He felt a wave a panic wash over him, and before he could do anything about it, he opened his eyes to see a face he didn’t recognize.

“Hold on, buddy. The cops and an ambulance are on the way.”

Luke tried to sit. “No. I’m fine.”

“You’ve been unconscious for ten minutes. You’re not fine.”

Luke laid back in the dirt and closed his eyes. “Okay. I’m not fine.”

The stranger looked down at him. “I was passing you when that jerk ran you off the road. I got his license plate number.”

Luke’s voice cracked. “How’s my bike?”

The man glanced at the bike. “A little scratched, but not wrecked. It might be okay.”

Luke tried to take his cell phone from his pocket. The man helped him and then held it up. “It’s busted, man. You can use mine.”

“I need you to call my trainer.” He gave the man the number and after he dialed, he held the phone to Luke’s ear.

“Hello?”

Luke gasped for air. “Rachel. It’s Luke.”

“What happened? What’s wrong with you?”

“Can you send someone to pick up my bike? I’m about a mile out of town.”

“Did you break down?”

“No. Some bastard forced me off the road.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Meet me at the hospital.” Luke was getting scared. He knew he was injured. He needed to end the call before Rachel sensed his fear.

“Luke?”

“Just meet me there, but make sure you get my bike picked up first.”

He handed the phone to the man. “Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Matt.”

“Thank you, Matt”.

Luke tried to joke, but inside he was petrified. “Do I still have all my body parts?”

“Yes. I don’t know what kind of condition they’re in. But they’re all still there. Why do you have a trainer?”

“I’m a boxer.”

“Are you a pro?”

“No. Never went pro. I’m a scrapper. I do it for the fun of it.”

Two cops arrived before the ambulance, and as one got a statement from Matt, the other checked on Luke.

The officer looked at Luke. “The ambulance is two minutes out. Just hang in there.”

“Not going anywhere at the moment” Luke tried to cover his fear.

The officer recognized him. “You’re Luke Amhurst, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve seen you fight a few times.”

“Well, hopefully you’ll see me fight again.”

The officer patted his shoulder. “We’ll get you to the hospital and checked out. You’ll be up and around in no time.”

Luke wasn’t so sure. He was afraid to move too much. His arms seemed okay, but he was pretty sure his ankle was broken. He knew he hit the rock hard, and he was afraid there could be some internal injuries as well. He tried not to think about it. He would come back from this, like he always did. It was just taking more convincing this time than usual.

The ambulance arrived, and the paramedics checked his vitals, then put on a neck brace and stabilized his ankle. As they were headed for the ambulance, he asked them to wait.

“My bike. Someone’s coming for it.”

“We need to get you to the hospital, sir.”

“Yeah, but just wait until—

“I’ll stay with your bike until your friend arrives.” Matt patted his arm.

“Thanks, man.”

They loaded Luke into the ambulance, and with sirens blaring, headed for the hospital. On the way, the paramedic inserted an IV and gave him something to ease the pain. He thought about Olivia. He thought about what if it was her putting in the IV and what pain this would cause her. He regretted not calling her.

When they arrived at the hospital, Rachel was there waiting for him.

“Luke. Oh my God!”

He smiled at her. His head was foggy, and he couldn't think too clearly. “Do I look that bad?”

“No, you look damn good, considering.”

A doctor stepped up to the gurney. “We need to get him into a room.”

Rachel patted Luke's chest. “I'll be in the waiting room.” She looked at the doctor. “Come get me as soon as I can come into the room.”

“Will do.”

Over the next two hours, Luke was poked and prodded. They drew his blood, x-rayed his ankle and did an ultrasound on his stomach and chest. The final step was to make sure he hadn't suffered a traumatic head injury.

They were still waiting on a few tests, but the conclusion seemed to be a broken ankle, two broken ribs, no internal injuries, and a concussion.

When Rachel came into the room, Luke could tell she'd been filled in.

She stood next to the bed. “What the hell happened?”

Luke rubbed his forehead. The pain meds were subsiding, and his head was beginning to throb. “Big truck, going fast, ran me off the road.”

“On purpose?”

“Unless he was drunk or asleep. But he seemed to be in control.”

“Do you think it was one of Richie’s guys?”

“I don’t know who else it’d be. I haven’t pissed anyone else off lately.”

She put a hand on his chest. “Besides me, you mean?”

“What time is it?”

“Almost ten.”

“Shit. I need to call Olivia.”

Rachel frowned. “You haven’t called her yet?”

“The first thing I did was call you. Then I’ve been here for however long.”

“It’s sweet I was your first call, but you should’ve called her next.” She took out her phone. “What’s her number?”

“No, let me do it. You got my bike, right?”

“Yes. Mike brought it to his house. He’s going to take a look at it tomorrow. He said it started, so it might be okay.” Rachel handed him the phone. “I’m going to go get another cup of coffee. Make the call.”



Olivia

Luke was generally home by seven. Olivia didn't start to worry until eight. At eight-thirty she called his cell. It went straight to voicemail.

'Okay. So his phone died... But he could've used Rachel's phone to let me know.'

Even though she knew it was useless, she tried to call Luke several more times. By ten she was in a panic. She decided to get on the computer to try to find Rachel somehow, but it wasn't going well without a last name. She then thought about calling Cara.

As she went to grab her phone it rang. She answered the number she didn't recognize.

"Hello?"

Luke's voice came across in a whimper. "Hey."

"Luke? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry it's so late. I had a little accident."

"On your bike?"

"Yeah."

Olivia held back tears. "How bad?"

"Still trying to figure that out. I'm at the hospital."

Olivia sat on the couch. If Luke was in the hospital, she knew it was bad.

"Oh my God, Luke. I'll be there as soon as I can."

“You don’t need to drive all the way here. I’ll have Rachel bring me home.”

“Rachel’s there?”

“Um...yeah. She was closer, and she could call someone to pick up my bike so it didn’t get towed.”

Olivia tried not to let the fact he called Rachel instead of her bother her, but it did. “When did this happen?”

He took a moment to answer. “About two hours ago.”

She was upset and wasn’t sure how to respond.

Luke’s voice was cracking. “I’m sorry. I should’ve called you sooner. They’ve been working on me since I got here.”

Olivia didn’t like any of this. “I’m coming to the hospital. I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Olivia...you...don’t...I’m...”

She interrupted. “I’m coming. If they let you go home, I’ll take you.”

“Okay. Don’t drive too fast.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

Olivia ended the call and leaned back on the couch. She looked over at Frankie. “Two hours? He waited two hours to call me Frankie, what the actual hell!”

Olivia quickly changed out of her pajamas, threw on a t-shirt and some jeans then got into her car and headed for the hospital. On the drive all she could think about was how Luke didn’t call her first, then she tried to rationalize it knowing he

was right, Rachel was closer and knew who could get his bike. It didn't make her feel any better. She wanted him to *want* to call her, she wanted him to *need* her. She paused and immediately thought about how she hated needy guys. That was the exact problem she had with her previous boyfriends. Then it dawned on her. She wasn't in love in with any of them, and they needed her in a way she wasn't willing to give. She wanted to give Luke everything she had. She pulled into the hospital parking lot not even sure how she got there.

When she went to the admittance window, and asked to see Luke Amhurst, the woman looked him up on her computer.

“Right. Mr. Amhurst. He's only allowed one visitor at a time, and currently his girlfriend is in with him.”

Olivia put her hands on the counter. “I'm his girlfriend. Can you ask the woman with him to come see me, please?”

The receptionist seemed at a loss for words. “Of course. Have a seat. I'll send someone to the room to get her.”

Olivia sat in a plastic chair, trying to get as far away from the sick people in the room as she could. Five minutes later, Rachel came through the swinging doors.

Olivia got to her feet as Rachel came to her. “How is he?”

“He's going to be okay. You know Luke. He won't let anything slow him down.” She took Olivia's hand. “I'm sorry about the girlfriend thing. It's the only way they'd let me in the room with him.”

“It’s fine.” It wasn’t fine. But this wasn’t the time to let it get to her. “Can I go see him now?”

“Yes. Room ten. He’s trying to get them to release him, but they want to keep him overnight. Maybe you can talk some sense into him.”

“I’ll try.”

“I’m going to go home now. He called from my phone before, so you have my number. Call me if anything changes.”

“I will.”

Olivia went through the doors and found room ten. It was closed off with a curtain and she called through it. “Luke?”

“Yeah. Come in.”

He was on a small bed with the head raised and a cotton blanket over his legs. His left ankle was in a cast, and he was hooked to an IV, but other than that, he looked pretty good considering.

She went to him and took his hand. “I was so worried.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, Luke.”

“Well, maybe not now, but I will be fine.”

She looked at his foot. “Is it broken?”

“Yep.”

“What else?”

“Two ribs. Concussion.”

She sat in a chair next to the bed. “What happened?”

“A truck ran me off the road.”

“On purpose?”

He sighed. “Yeah. Pretty sure it was one of Richie’s guys getting revenge.”

Olivia leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes for a moment. “Stuff like this doesn’t happen in the real world, Luke.”

“Unfortunately, it does in my world.”

Those words made Olivia feel uneasy. It was clear they really were living in two distinctly different realities. She wasn’t sure if they, well she, could keep going on like this. It was becoming mentally exhausting and painful to watch.



Luke

As Luke’s pain started becoming more than he wanted to deal with, the nurse came in and gave him another dose of medication.

The doctor returned a few minutes later. “I got the rest of your test results in. You don’t have any internal injuries, but you have two broken bones in your ankle and a hairline fracture in your tibia. You also have two broken ribs, with a lot

of bruising in the area. Your skull and your brain are intact, but you have a concussion.”

He then studied Luke for a moment. “You look like an athlete. Do you play football?”

“I’m a boxer.”

“I imagine your ankle will keep you out for a while. But I don’t want you sparring, or anything close to it, as long as you have symptoms from your concussion. Headache, blurry vision, ringing in your ears, and dizziness. You might experience vomiting over the next few days. If any of these symptoms persist beyond a week, or get worse, you need to see your health care provider.”

The doctor looked at Olivia. “If he seems disoriented, forgetful, or in a continuous foggy state past the next few days, bring him back to the ER.”

“Okay.”

Luke rubbed his head. “Can I go home now?”

“I’m going to admit you for the night. We’ll see how you are tomorrow.”

Luke pleaded. “I really don’t want to stay.”

Olivia turned to him. “Please, Luke. He wouldn’t want to admit you if he didn’t think it was necessary.”

Luke looked at her with desperate eyes. “Olivia...please..”

“Please, Luke. Just do it for me.”

Luke sighed. He wanted to go home, but more importantly he didn't want her to see him scared. "Fine. But I'm going home tomorrow."

The doctor nodded. "Someone will be here shortly to move you upstairs."

The doctor left, and Luke frowned at Olivia. "I'll be paying for this for the rest of my life."

"Let's not worry about that right now. You just need to get better."

The pain medication was starting to work and Luke felt himself drifting. He tried to shake it off.

Olivia patted his arm. "Don't fight it. Relax and go to sleep."

"I hate hospitals."

"I know."

"And not because..." He lost track of what he was going to say. "Because..." He closed his eyes and let the lights and sound of the hospital lull him to sleep.

FIFTEEN

Olivia

Olivia watched Luke sleep and wondered how long it'd be before he'd try to return to the gym. She was finding it harder and harder to understand his obsession with fighting and ignoring the pain and the injuries. Having trained as a nurse and being aware of the limitations of the human body, it was becoming hard to accept and live with his lifestyle.

Even though he was sleeping, she softly spoke aloud, because that was easier than saying her words to him directly.

"I don't know what to do, Luke." She took his hand.

"I love you, but it kills me to see you hurt, and now there's people running you off the road. This is crazy. I don't know if I can stand by and see you destroy yourself and your future."

She wiped away a tear rolling down her cheek. She exhaled deeply and decided to just take one small step at a time. The first step was just getting him out of the hospital.

Nurses came and took Luke to a room upstairs and Olivia slept in a chair next to the bed. She was drained and even

though the chair was uncomfortable she managed to drift off for a few hours. When she woke up, Luke was watching her.

She sat up and ran a hand through her hair. “How’re you feeling?”

“I need to get out of here.”

“Luke.”

“You know I don’t like to be confined or restrained. I’ll go crazy if I’m here much longer.”

Olivia got to her feet. She knew if Luke stayed any longer he would just unhook himself from the IV and walk out, and she didn’t want that to happen. She needed to act quickly.

“Let me go see when the doctor is coming.” She kissed him. “Please try to relax.”

He sighed. “Just see what you can do.”

Olivia went to the nurse’s station and inquired about the doctor. She was told he should be by soon. She was pretty sure Luke wouldn’t be happy with ‘soon.’ But as she headed back to the room, she saw the doctor approaching, and she waited for him down the hall from Luke’s room.

The doctor gave her a smile. “How’s our patient?”

“He’s not. Patient, that is. He’ll do a lot better at home.”

“Not a fan of hospitals?”

“No.”

The doctor looked at Luke’s chart. “No changes since last night. No new developments. I’ll go talk to him and we’ll see

about sending him home.”

“Thank you.”

Olivia waited outside the room while the doctor went in to talk to Luke.

When he came out of the room, he smiled. “We’ll get him discharged. Will you be staying with him?”

“Yes. And I was a nurse. So I know what to look for.”

“Okay, good. Anyone else I’d keep for a few more hours. But I believe you’re right about him getting better faster at home. He’s seems to be a restless one.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “You have no idea.”

When Olivia went back into the room, Luke was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Luke! What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to leave.”

“It’ll take a while. There’s paperwork, and they certainly won’t let you WALK out of here.”

“I need some crutches.”

“I know. But even so, they’re going to make you take a wheelchair to the car.”

He scowled. “I hate hospitals.”

“Please lay down.” He did so, reluctantly.

“They cut my clothes off.”

“I brought you some pants and a t-shirt.” She looked at a plastic bag with his belongings. “Your helmet and leather jacket are in the bag.”

“Fortunately, they spared my jacket. Can I see my helmet?”

Olivia took it out of the bag and handed it to him.

He checked it out, then showed her a crack in the side of it. “That could’ve been my head.”

She closed her eyes thinking about what could have happened. “Your helmet might’ve saved your life.”

He handed it back to her. “I need to call Rachel.”

Olivia was feeling frustrated. “Really?”

Olivia reluctantly handed him her cell phone, and he dialed the number.

“Hey Rachel...I’m headed home soon...Did you reschedule...Dammit. Set it up...Right after the wedding, I should be good to go.”

He finished his conversation and handed the phone to Olivia.

Olivia was afraid to ask. “What is she rescheduling right after the wedding?”

“The fight.”

Olivia sat in the chair and glared at him. “You want to go back in the ring in three and a half weeks? That’s too soon with a concussion. Not to mention five broken bones. Six if you count your finger.”

“You need to stop worrying about me. I know what I’m capable of.”

Olivia’s words rushed out of her. “I don’t think you do. You can’t go back in the ring so soon. You just can’t. You won’t be ready.”

Luke stared at the ceiling. “I think what you’re saying is, *you* won’t be ready.”

“Luke. It’s so hard. I didn’t think it’d be this hard. I can’t keep putting you back together. I can’t wait for the phone to ring after a fight and have someone tell me you’re not coming home. One wrong hit is all it takes. And now you’re being run off the road.”

She couldn’t hold it back any longer and started to cry. “I’m sorry. I’m just tired.”

“I get it.”

“No. I’m sorry I said anything.”

“Olivia. The last thing I want is for you to worry about me all the time. I couldn’t handle it if you ended up hating me. I seriously couldn’t take it.”

“I could never hate you, Luke.”

“Let me see your phone again.”

“Why?”

“I’ll go stay with Rachel for a few days.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“What do you want, Olivia?”

She shook her head. Her voice was trembling, “I can’t....I don’t....”

“Just tell me.”

She swiped at a tear and took a breath. “I want to be the most important thing in your life.”

He held out his hand, and she took it. “I can’t be that person, Olivia.”

She looked down at the floor. Making eye contact was too hard. “I know.”

“Let me see your phone.”

She handed him the phone and watched him call Rachel and ask her to come pick him up. When he ended the call, he looked at her for a moment. “Come here.”

She stood and went to the bed. He held out his arms and he hugged her.

“Olivia, I’m so sorry. This isn’t how I wanted things to happen, but it’s for the best.”

Olivia was breathing heavily. Tears were still falling down her cheeks. “I don’t know. It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Go on home. I’ll be back in a few days, and I’ll see you around.”

Olivia kissed him, then turned away and left the room. She wanted to hear him call to her to come back. But he didn’t. Her head hurt. Her heart hurt. She walked swiftly across the parking lot and cried as she got in her car. Then a wave of

anger took over. She smacked the steering wheel, “this isn’t fair!” She sat awhile longer in her car calming herself down. She never experienced such strong emotions before, and it made her uncomfortable.



Luke

Luke was still trying to process what had happened with Olivia when Rachel came into his room.

“What’s going on, Luke? Where’s Olivia?”

“She’s gone.”

“Gone home?”

“Gone home and gone, gone.”

“What happened?”

“I really don’t want to talk about it.” He struggled to sit, and she helped him. “Just help me get dressed.”

She helped him into his t-shirt. “You’re an asshole.”

“Thanks for that. And I know I am.”

She sat next to him. “I can’t believe I’m saying this to you. But if ever there was a woman for you to hang your gloves up for, it’s Olivia.”

He pretended not to hear her.

“So did you reschedule the fight?”

“Five weeks.”

He squinted at her. “I said right after the wedding.”

“Five weeks. That’s the soonest I’ll let you back into the ring.”

He sighed. “Fine.”

“But no one would blame you if you wanted to retire after this incident.”

“I’m not retiring. Boxing is all I have now.”

“You can make a different decision, no one would question it.”

Luke sat silent. His head was pounding, and his stomach was in his throat. He realized he was repeating history by tossing another woman aside for boxing, and even though he was used to it, this felt different. It felt like he was letting go of something he always wanted, but had no idea he wanted it until now, and now was too late.

SIXTEEN

Olivia

Luke didn't come home after a few days, and after a week, Olivia called Cara to find out where he was.

"My stupid brother is staying with Rachel."

"How's he doing?"

"I don't know. I'm too mad at him to find out."

"I don't want you to be mad at him."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I'm not. It's my fault. I knew what his priorities were. I just thought I'd be able to live with them."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. I'm dealing with it. And I don't want you to worry about the wedding. I won't let it affect anything."

"You're going to be spending the weekend with him."

Olivia choked on her words. "It'll be fine."

Olivia spent another few minutes convincing Cara not to worry about her and Luke. They were adults. They could spend a weekend in Hawaii together.

She hung up the phone and sat on the couch.

'Who am I kidding? It's going to be torture.'

She wanted to know how Luke felt about spending a weekend with her, but also knew getting into a conversation about it was probably not a good idea. She figured she could handle a weekend being around him, and there was going to be plenty of other people around as distractions. This was for Cara's wedding and there wasn't going to be any time to be upset.



Luke

Luke went to the sauna after his heavily modified workout. His ribs were still too sore to do much, and his headache from the concussion had only been gone for two days. He wrapped a towel around his waist and put his injured leg on the bench. He leaned against the wall trying to relax for a few minutes.

He looked over at the window in the door and saw Cara's face. She opened the door and stuck her head in. He sat up and frowned at her.

“What the hell, Cara?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“I have ten more minutes. Either come in or wait out there. But either way, close the damn door.”

Cara stepped into the sauna and closed the door.

“I didn’t really mean for you to come in.”

“You invited me.” She fanned her face. “How can you stand it in here?”

“What’s so important it can’t wait ten minutes?”

“I’m on my way to my final dress fitting.” She sat on a bench across from him. “I want to talk to you about the wedding.”

“What about it?”

“You and Olivia.”

He sighed. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

“That’s what she said, but I’m not so sure.”

“Neither one of us wants to ruin your wedding. We’re not fighting. We’re just not together anymore. It’ll be fine.”

She looked at his foot, which was wrapped in an ace bandage and still swollen. “Are you going to be on crutches when you walk me down the aisle?”

“No. I’ll be walking next to you. I may be limping, but no crutches.”

“It’s okay if you need them.”

“I won’t.”

“Okay.” She stood. “I need to get out of this oven. What’s this supposed to do for you?”

“It relaxes my muscles and helps them recover from my workout.”

“Isn’t it a little soon to be working out?”

“This is my first day back. I was...careful.”

“You don’t know what the word means.” She went to the door. “I’ll call you in a few days with the flight information.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Luke.”

“I’m kidding. I’m super excited about spending six hours on an airplane.”

When they were children, they came up with their own secret version of flipping someone off. Cara flashed him the sign before going out the door.

“Love you too, sis.”

He’d only flown a few times, and they were short flights to matches. The thought of sitting on a plane for six hours was a bit overwhelming. The fact Olivia would be onboard would make it even harder.

He missed her. More than he’d ever missed anyone.

A week before the wedding, Luke asked Rachel to drive him to the house. He wanted to stay, but he couldn't yet ride his bike with his broken ankle, so he'd be an hour from town with no transportation.

When they pulled up to the house, he could tell Olivia had been keeping Cara's flowers watered, and the grass was freshly mowed. He sat in the car for a moment before getting out. Rachel handed him his crutches, and they went inside. He was going to stay with Rachel another week, then after the wedding, move back. He figured by then, he'd be out of the walking boot and able to ride his bike, safely. He'd still need a single crutch or a cane for another couple of weeks.

He was only there to gather more clothes and throw out any food that'd gone bad over the last two weeks. Rachel went to the kitchen while Luke went to his room. He sat on the unmade bed and thought about the last time he'd slept in it. Olivia had been with him.

He missed her. Now that he was home, it was even more apparent. He wasn't over her. Maybe he never would be. He wished now he'd told her how he felt. He was in love with her.

Rachel appeared in the doorway. "You're not going to get much done sitting on your ass."

He looked at her, and she came and sat next to him. "Go see her."

"I can't. It'd be too hard."

"You're about to spend a weekend with her."

“I know. But there’ll be a lot of people around. We’ll be busy. Cara has every minute planned.”

“Yeah. I know how much you love people.”

He smiled. “Shut up.” He got to his feet, taking only one crutch with him to leave his right hand free. He took his few remaining clothes to the bag he’d brought and tossed them inside. “I guess that’s it.”

She tilted her head at him. “We drove all the way here for a couple of t-shirts and some underwear?”

“And to make sure the house was okay.”

“Right. Because your neighbor, who is also your sister’s best friend, probably isn’t keeping an eye on it.”

“Did you clean out the fridge?”

“Yes. Not much in there. What do you eat?”

“I’d get home late every night and Olivia would make me dinner.”

“Wow, that sounds so horrible.”

“Rachel. Don’t.”

“I just don’t understand what happened. You haven’t told me a thing.”

“And I’m not going to.” He picked up his bag and his other crutch. “Let’s get out of here.”

They went outside and as they got to the car, Rachel said, “Last chance to say hi.”

“I’ll see her on the plane.” He got into the car.

Rachel got in behind the wheel and looked at him. “You’re being stubborn and stupid.”

“Not the first time. Will you please start the car?” Luke held back his emotions.

Rachel started the car and backed out of the driveway, while Luke laid back against the headrest and closed his eyes. He knew if he saw Olivia come outside, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from going to see her. He didn’t dare look.

SEVENTEEN

Olivia

After Olivia dropped Frankie off to stay with her brother, she headed to the airport. She made her way to the correct terminal and found she was the last to arrive. Cara and Craig were there, along with her two bridesmaids, Jen and Kate. There were also two couples who were friends Olivia didn't know. Luke was sitting at the end of a row of seats by himself, and he didn't look very happy.

Olivia went to Cara and gave her a hug. "Sorry. Am I late?"

"The plane hasn't left yet, so I guess you're fine." She glanced at Luke. "I'm surprised Luke beat you here, though."

"He doesn't look too excited about the trip."

"He's being a brat. He hates to fly. And he hates to sit still. So a six-hour flight is pretty much the worse thing I could do to him."

"How's he feeling?"

Cara shrugged. "Stoic Luke. Who knows? He's still wearing the boot, but he says he'll take it off for the wedding. One perk

of him being hurt though, they're going to let us board first."

"Well, that's something, I guess." Luke looked at her and she gave him a small smile, which he returned along with a wave.

Cara took her arm. "I changed the seats around so you don't have to sit by him. Jen was all too happy to switch seats with you."

Olivia looked at Jen. She was pretty and perky and would probably drive Luke crazy.

"That's kind of mean, isn't it?"

Cara laughed. "He deserves a lot worse for breaking my friend's heart."

"He didn't break my heart. I think we broke each other's hearts."

Cara hugged her. "We'll get through the weekend. Right?"

"Yes."

When it was time to board the plane, Luke went first on his crutches and the rest of the party followed. Olivia brought up the rear, trying to keep her distance. She knew sooner or later she'd need to talk to him, but she wanted to delay it as long as possible. Their seats were scattered among other passengers. Luke and Jen were on the opposite side of the plane from Olivia and Kate so she figured it would be an uneventful six hours and would save any conversation until they landed.



Luke

An hour into the flight, Luke couldn't take anymore of Jen's incessant talking.

He gave her a small smile. "Excuse me. I need to talk to Cara."

"Sure thing" she whispered to him. "Don't be gone too long."

Luke removed his seat belt and stood. Since they took his crutches from him, he used the seats backs for support, and got more than one look of annoyance from other passengers. When he got to Cara and Craig, he knelt in the aisle.

"If one of you doesn't change seats with me, I swear I'll throw either Jen or myself off this plane."

Cara laughed. "I'll go sit with her. You sit here with Craig."

Luke and Craig exchanged looks. Craig didn't want his future brother-in-law sitting next to him any more than Luke wanted to sit next to Craig.

Cara kissed Craig, then stood, and Luke sat. Luke leaned his head back and glanced at Craig.

"Do you mind if we don't talk?"

"Not at all."

The new seat worked for a while, but now, without any conversation, the time was crawling by. After another hour, Luke got up again.

Craig looked at him. “Now where’re you going?”

“I need to stretch my legs.”

He stood for a moment, then looked at Olivia, who was watching him. With a breath of resolve, he went to her row. She was by the window, leaving Kate on the aisle.

Kate looked at him. “What’s up, Luke?”

“Um... I think Cara wants to sit with Craig, but she’s sitting with Jen, because she didn’t want me to throw Jen out the emergency exit door. Would you mind sitting with Jen so Cara can sit with her almost husband?”

Kate glanced at Olivia. “Is that okay with you?”

Olivia glanced at Luke. “Sure. It’s fine.”

Kate got to her feet and Luke sat down. “Sorry. I know this is awkward, but you’re the only person on this plane I want to talk to.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want you to throw Jen out the emergency exit. It’d probably put a damper on the wedding, and Cara would be down one bridesmaid.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too.”

“What did you and Craig talk about?”

“Not a thing. Complete silence for an hour.”

Olivia started to laugh. “You’re going to be miserable this weekend, aren’t you?”

“Anything for my sister.” He glanced back at Cara. “But she owes me.”

“I’m sure she’ll make it up to you.”

He looked out the window for a moment. “I can’t believe we’re going to be on this plane for four more hours.”

Olivia glanced at him with a smile. “How about something to pass the time?”

He looked at her and with all seriousness said, “Do you really think joining the mile high club is a good idea?”

Olivia nudged him, then pulled a deck of cards out of her purse. “I was thinking more about a few hands of War.”

Luke smiled. “Deal the cards.”



Olivia

Luke and Olivia spent the next four hours playing War, a subdued version of Slap Jack, and several hands of Rummy. It passed the time and got them through the awkwardness of being together again. She enjoyed it immensely, even though it reminded her how much fun they had together, and how much she missed him, she was glad he sat down next to her.

When they landed, Luke was allowed to go off first before the other passengers. He was waiting in the terminal for the rest of them, who had to wait for their turn to deplane. Once they were all together, Cara took charge.

“Okay. Who doesn’t have luggage?”

Luke and Olivia raised their hands.

Cara looked at Olivia. “Really? You have everything you need in that carryon?”

“You shipped my two dresses with yours. That didn’t leave much, seeing as we’re in Hawaii.” She glanced at Luke. “Swimsuit. A couple pairs of shorts.”

“Alright. Then you two can meet us down in the main terminal. Cara looked at Olivia. “Can you make sure our injured party here gets downstairs okay?”

“Sure.”

When the others headed toward the baggage claim area, Olivia looked at Luke. “Let’s go find an elevator.”

They started walking down a corridor with various restaurants on either side of it. Luke stopped in front of one selling slices of pizza.

“I’m starving.”

“The rehearsal dinner is tonight.”

“Yeah, in four hours.” He got in line. “Do you want one?”

Olivia shook her head. “No thanks.”

“How are you going to eat and control your crutches?”

He bought a slice of pizza, then handed Olivia one of his crutches.

“Oh. Okay.”

They continued down the corridor until they spotted an elevator. Luke watched Olivia push the down button.

“I could’ve managed the escalator.”

“I’m sure you could’ve.” She handed him back his crutch, and took a napkin from him, then threw it away. They got into the elevator and took it to the main concourse. When they stepped out, Olivia looked around. “Cara said to wait at the private transportation desk.”

“We’re getting private transportation?”

“The hotel is sending a limo for us.”

“You’re kidding right?”

“Just go with it Luke.”

“I’m trying my best.”

The others appeared with a cart full of suitcases as the hotel limo arrived. When they got into the vehicle, Luke somehow ended up sitting between Jen and Kate. Olivia watched Cara smile at him, to which Luke gave her their secret sign.

Olivia heard Jen ask him what it meant, and he whispered something into her ear. Jen put a hand to her mouth and giggled. Olivia knew what it meant, and she was sure Luke didn’t hold back in telling her exactly what he was conveying to his sister. His intention to shock her backfired, though, and

it seemed Jen was even more enamored than ever by Cara's hunky brother with the foul mouth. Olivia was slightly jealous that Jen was getting to interact with Luke. She looked out the window and hoped they were close the hotel.

The hotel was right on the beach. Olivia got out of the limo and looked at the beautiful blue water. Luke came up beside her.

“You probably won't swim in that water either, right?”

“Right. I'll wade in it, though. Up to my knees.”

“Mm hmm. You're so brave.”

“I suppose you want to go swim in it.”

“As soon as I get settled into my room.”

“There might be another Tibby out there. You should be careful.”

Luke gave her a smile and laughed. She loved his laugh. She thought about joining him and she was even half tempted to make an effort to swim just so she could be near him, but she knew that wouldn't be a good idea, and instead gave him a smile and headed to her room.



Luke

Cara had sent Luke's tux ahead, so all he brought was swim trunks, a couple t-shirts, his one good dress shirt, and some shorts. The dinner tonight was informal, and Cara told him he'd be fine with his button up shirt and his jeans.

He took off his boot, and unwrapped his foot, then changed into his trunks. With one crutch, he left the hotel and headed for the water. It was slow going through the sand, but once he got near the water, he dropped his crutch and carefully hopped in on one foot. When he was knee-deep, the water supported his foot better and he limped a few more feet, then dove into the surf.

It was cold and refreshing, and after a long day of sitting, it was just what he needed. He swam out quite a way before he stopped and looked back toward the shore. It hurt his ankle to tread water, so he floated for a few minutes and let the waves hit him. He hadn't spent too much time in the ocean, but he loved it when he did. As he bobbed around all he could think about was holding Olivia. He wanted to be on the beach sitting with her in his arms. He wanted to make things better. He hated that he hurt her and wanted to apologize to her but he figured an apology probably wasn't enough. He wanted to stay longer and just be by himself and his thoughts, away from everything and everybody, but he had a rehearsal dinner to go to and he didn't want to disappoint Cara. He decided to head in.

When he got back to shore and stood up in the water, he spotted Jen in a very small bikini, holding his crutch. She waded out and attempted to help him.

“I’m fine, thanks.” He got to the sand unassisted and took the crutch from her.

“You went out so far. You scared me.”

“I’m a strong swimmer.”

She took his arm. “I’m sure you are.”

As they headed for the hotel, Luke was trying to figure out how to extricate himself from Jen’s grasp without being too rude. As he was about to pull his arm free from her clutches, he saw Cara coming toward them.

“Hey, guys.” She grinned at Luke, then looked at Jen. “Dinner is in an hour.”

“Oh, my. I lost track of the time.” Jen let go of Luke and headed for the hotel.

Luke watched her go, then looked at Cara. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I think she likes you.”

“No shit.”

Cara started laughing.

“Stop. It’s not funny.”

“No, Luke. It’s hilarious.” She took his arm. “Come on. You need to get ready for dinner, too.”

“It’ll take me five minutes.”

“You really should shower the salt water off your skin.”

“Okay. Ten minutes.”

She steered him toward an outdoor bar. “How about a Mai Tai?”

“Sure.”

They sat on stools and ordered the drinks. When they were delivered, Luke raised his glass.

“To my little sister. Ten years ago, when we were leaving Santa Fe with everything we owned in the trunk of my old car, I never would’ve believed we’d be sitting on a beach in Hawaii drinking Mai Tais one day.”

She touched his glass, then took a sip. “Thank you for being here.”

“I’d do anything for you. You know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“So you’re really going to go through with it, huh?”

Cara punched him in the shoulder. “I can’t believe you sat next to Craig for a whole hour.” She took another drink. “Then you sat with Olivia for the next four.”

“We played cards.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It was.”

Cara refrained from asking anything further. She knew he wouldn’t budge on giving any information and it wasn’t worth getting in an argument during her wedding weekend.

EIGHTEEN

Luke

The bridal party took the limo to the church, and once again, Luke was stuck sitting next to Jen. Cara was on his other side and he whispered in her ear.

“Please make sure I don’t sit next to Jen at dinner.”

Cara patted his arm. “I got you.”

The church was only a mile away, so Luke didn’t have to sit by Jen for very long, but she did manage to touch him twice, and whisper something inappropriate in his ear. Luke smiled while he internally cringed. He needed to get out of there. When the limo stopped, he was the first one out the door. Cara handed him his crutches and took his arm.

“I’ll put you in between me and Olivia. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine.”

“I’m going to sit Jen next to Craig’s cousin. He’s no Luke Amhurst, but he might provide a distraction. He told Craig he thought she was hot when he saw a picture of her.”

“Sounds like a great guy.”

“Shush.”

The bridal party from the hotel consisted of Cara, Craig, Olivia, Luke, Jen, and Kate. Waiting for them at the church were Craig’s two brothers, Ryan and Kyle, and his cousin, Jeff.

After making introductions, the minister ran through the ceremony twice to make sure everyone knew their places. Since Luke’s job was simply to walk Cara down the aisle, he got to sit for most of it. He used only one crutch for their practice run which consisted of going two times down the aisle. He wanted to save the walk without help, for tomorrow.

After the rehearsal, the party walked the half-mile to the restaurant which was between the church and the hotel. Luke was just glad to not be smushed in a limo sitting next to Jen.

The restaurant was a tourist trap with hula dancers for entertainment. The wedding party sat at a long table facing the stage, giving them a front row view. As promised, Cara sat Luke between herself and Olivia.

Luke leaned into Olivia’s ear when she sat down. “Sorry. Still trying to avoid Jen.”

She touched his arm briefly. “Don’t worry. Cara and I will protect you.”

When the waiter set Mai Tais in front of everyone, Luke tried to hand his back.

“Can I trade this in for a beer, please.”

Cara intercepted the exchange. "I'll take that. Bring my brother whatever he wants."

The waiter nodded. "What kind of beer would you like?"

"Anything in a bottle."

"Coming right up."

The show started, and it became too loud to hold a conversation. When Luke felt Olivia touch his arm again, he leaned toward her and she whispered in his ear. "You're watching those hula dancers pretty closely."

"It's kind of fascinating. How do they move like that?"

Olivia shook her hair back and forth. "I could do that with some practice."

Luke thought about Olivia in a hula skirt and it made his blood hot.

The dancers left with a promise to return in thirty minutes, giving the party a chance to order without yelling over the music. Cara had pre-arranged a choice between mahi-mahi and lobster. Olivia and Luke both chose the fish.

Luke glanced at her. "Not a fan of crustaceans?"

"I just don't like that they drop them into the boiling water alive."

"Seems a bit harsh, but you realize the mahi-mahi were happily swimming in the ocean before getting caught, thrown into a box, and then having their brains bashed in right?"

“Oh my God. Stop. Don’t ruin it for me. I’ve been looking forward to this for weeks.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure these fish were humanely killed by lethal injection after a last meal of their favorite food.” She glared at him and he grinned. “Hungry?”

The food arrived right before the next show started, and they ate to the sound of drums, watching the men Hawaiian dancers do their thing.

Luke spoke into Olivia’s ear. “Something for the ladies.”

She looked around him at Cara, who seemed to be enjoying the dancers. “The bride likes them.”

Luke nudged his sister. “You probably shouldn’t be drooling over those guys right in front of your fiancé.”

She smiled at him. “You’ve got to admit. They’re pretty good at what they do.”

“So you admire their dancing skills?”

“Totally.”

“So the fact they’re handsome, muscular, and wearing practically nothing, is of no interest to you?”

“Not in the least.” She took a drink from her third Mai Tai.

“You might want to slow down on those. You’re getting married tomorrow.”

“Am I really? I totally forgot.” She took another drink then resumed watching the dancers.

Olivia watched Cara for a moment. “She’s going to be so sick tomorrow. I think we might need to hold an intervention.”

Craig seemed to be way ahead of them. When the show ended and Cara left to go to the restroom, he called the waiter over, handed him a twenty, and told him to stop the flow of alcohol to the table.

Luke nodded. “Good call, Craig.”

“She might be mad tonight, but she’ll thank me in the morning.”

Cara took the intervention well, and they all stayed through one more show, then left the restaurant. Even though they were only a half-mile from the hotel, Craig called for the limo. Cara and her two bridesmaids were in no shape to make the walk.

Luke went to Cara and Craig while they were waiting for the limo.

“I’m going to walk.”

Cara put a hand on his arm. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I need some fresh air.” He kissed her cheek and shook hands with Craig. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Don’t stay up too late.”

“Yes, Dad. We’ll go right to bed.” Cara looked at Olivia. “Liv, will you walk with Luke and make sure he gets back to the hotel safely?”

Olivia smiled. "I'm pretty sure he doesn't need my protection."

Luke looked at her. "I wouldn't mind the company."

Olivia obliged. "Sure. Sounds nice."

They said their goodbyes, then started down the sidewalk bordering the beach. The waves were breaking about five hundred feet away, making a pleasant backdrop, and they walked slowly to accommodate Luke's crutches, and enjoy their surroundings.

Luke felt compelled to talk. "Hey, guess what I got them for a wedding gift?"

Olivia couldn't even guess. "I hope it was something nice."

"A new cat figurine. To replace Hugo."

They both started laughing. Olivia put her hand on Luke's arm. "That was actually very thoughtful".

He took a moment. "I want to say something to you Olivia."

"Okay."

"I know nothing has changed. But I wanted to let you know today has been great."

"Yes, it has."

"Anyway. That's it, I guess."

They started walking again.

"So I'm only saying this because you're still on crutches. Please don't tell me you're still fighting in a week."

“No. The week after. Rachel insisted on scheduling it five weeks from the accident.”

“Speaking of the accident. Did they figure out who ran you off the road?”

“Yes. The guy who stopped to help me got the license plate number. Turns out it was Richie’s cousin. A nineteen-year-old kid in his dad’s truck.”

“Is he going to jail?”

“He pleaded down from attempted murder to assault with a deadly weapon. He’s most likely looking at three years. Plus, all my medical expenses will be covered.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“Yeah. Also, Craig’s lawyer friend is filing a civil suit against the kid’s family. They apparently are quite wealthy.”

“So you might get a settlement?”

“Pretty likely a decent settlement.”

“Wow. Luke with money. What’s that going to look like?”

Luke shrugged. “I have no idea. It’s not like I’m going to go out and spend it. There’s nothing I want.” He glanced at her. “At least nothing money can buy.”

They came to a bench and Luke stopped, then sat.

Olivia sat next to him. “Do you need a break?”

“It’s just so nice out here. I’ve always loved the ocean, but I’ve only been a few times.”

“Did you get your swim in?”

“I did. It was great. Until I got back to shore.”

“What happened?”

“Jen.”

“Uh oh.”

“She was waiting for me in an extremely small bikini showcasing her... assets.”

Olivia laughed. “I’m pretty sure Jen’s assets aren’t...well... natural.”

Luke turned on the bench and grinned at Olivia. “You’re probably right.” He turned back to face the ocean. “I’ve never really been an...asset man.”

“What does Luke’s ideal woman look like?”

He chose his words carefully. “Hmm. Five-four. Smart. Pretty long blonde hair. Freckled skin. A little saucy.”

“Luke.”

“You asked.” He got to his feet and started walking again.

Olivia came up beside him. “I think Cara’s type is a six-foot plus, Hawaiian dancer.”

“Yet, she’s marrying Craig. Kidding. He’s a good guy.”

They arrived at the hotel and took the elevator to the floor with their rooms. They came to Luke’s room and he stopped at the door.

“This is me.”

“Seems I got you back safely.”

“Thanks.” He took the keycard from his pocket. “You have a good night, Olivia.”

“I will. Sleep well, Luke.”

“See ya, neighbor.”

Luke went into the room, closed the door, then sat on the bed. After a moment, he dropped back and closed his eyes. He was frustrated with himself, with the situation that he created, and he didn't know what he was going to do about it. Olivia gave him everything he could need, and he knew that, but he couldn't figure out a way where he could continue boxing and not hurt Olivia. His lifestyle was suffocating him, and he was starting to feel it.

NINETEEN

Olivia

Olivia got up early to meet the women for breakfast in the hotel restaurant. After breakfast they all went to Cara's suite, where a hairstylist and makeup artist were waiting. Olivia was happy to see Cara looking rested considering all the Mai Tais. She seemed to be excited, nervous and scared all at the same time.

Olivia sat next to her on the couch in the sitting room.

"You're getting married today."

"I can't believe the day is actually here. I've been so anxious for it to arrive, and now..." she let out a little squeal.

"I don't know. Please tell me I'm doing the right thing."

Olivia took her hand. "Of course you are. You love Craig. He loves you. You belong together."

"As a kid growing up with Luke, we both said we were never going to get married. That it was he and I against the world and no one could ever be as important as the two of us."

“You were kids. Growing up alone with no support. You only had each other. But now, you’re adults. You deserve to be happy, get married and start a new life.”

“So does Luke.”

“I think once Luke finds the right woman...” Olivia took a moment. “She’ll replace his all-consuming love of boxing.”

Cara hugged Olivia. “He has found the right woman. He’s just too stubborn to admit it. You hang in there. He’ll come around.”

“I wish that were true.”

Cara leaned back against the cushions. “I can’t help feeling I’m abandoning him.”

“Oh, Cara-he doesn’t feel that way.”

“He hates Craig. And I think it’s because he resents him.”

Olivia smiled. “Luke doesn’t hate Craig. He’s protective of you. There’s no man in this world he would consider good enough for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” She stood and pulled on Cara’s hand. “Come on. Let’s get you ready to get married.”

Olivia meant her words. Luke was protective of Cara and it didn’t matter if Cara married a prince, he would never be quite good enough in Luke’s eyes. She knew that Luke would eventually come around to Craig, it was just a matter of time. Maybe that’s what her and Luke needed too. Time. She

thought time might make Luke realize they were good together; she just wasn't sure how much time they had before it all completely fizzled and there was nothing left but memories of a few wonderful weeks together.



Luke

Luke got up early and went to the beach. He took a swim, then sat in the sand and talked to a group of young surfers who were waiting for the waves to pick up. They offered to let him take a board out while the waves were mild and give him a few lessons. He was tempted but couldn't take the chance of re-injuring his ankle. They told him if he was ever back, to look them up and they'd catch some waves together.

Luke told them he would, but he knew the chances of him ever getting back to Hawaii were slim. When the group moved further down the beach, he laid back in the sand and soaked in some sun. Sitting on the beach and swimming in the ocean was something he could see himself doing every day. He wished Olivia was with him. He was getting tired thinking about her all the time. He got up and made his way back to the hotel to get ready.

When he got back to his room, he called Rachel. He needed a distraction.

“Hey. How's Hawaii?”

“It’s beautiful. If I knew you wouldn’t come here and drag me back home, I’d seriously consider staying.”

She laughed. “I don’t think it’d take much to convince me to move there. I wonder what the boxing scene is like.”

“Don’t look into it. I don’t want to be any more tempted than I already am.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Two hours.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

“All I need to do is comb my hair, shave, and put on my tux.”

“Men are so lucky. I bet the women have been getting ready for hours already.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“Go do something. Pretend it doesn’t take you twenty minutes to get ready.”

“I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Wait. How goes it with Olivia?”

He sighed. “It’s good. We’ve been hanging out.”

“Really?”

“Not that kind of hanging out. Just...hanging out.”

“Okay. Whatever that means. See you in a couple of days.”

Luke spent the next hour doing some push-ups and sit-ups, then showered, shaved, and put on his tuxedo pants and a t-

shirt. He still didn't need to be at the church for thirty minutes. He went onto the small patio overlooking the ocean. When he saw movement a few patios down, he looked over and saw Olivia.

“Hey, neighbor.”

She waved at him. He could tell that she had her hair and makeup done but he was surprised to see her in a robe.

Olivia looked over at him. “Just taking in this view. It's beautiful.”

“Is that what you're wearing to the wedding?”

She looked at her robe. “Pretty stylish, right?”

“I love it.”

“Everyone else left. Maybe we can catch a ride together.”

“Sure. I just need to put on my shirt and jacket.”

“I'll meet you in the hall in ten minutes.”

Luke went inside and finished getting dressed. He couldn't quite recognize himself in the mirror. “Handsome devil huh? Whatever, Cara.”

He took his wallet, cell phone, and crutches, and went out the door. Olivia came out a couple of minutes later. She looked beautiful in a dark green strapless dress that hit her mid-calf. Her hair was up with some flowy curls left down and her eyes were as blue as he had ever seen them. He could smell strawberries again. He couldn't find his words.

“Uh...ok.....so...wow. Like...wow. Wow.”

He wanted to grab her and hold her close. He was in a trance looking at her.

Olivia chuckled. “Wow, yourself.”

He went to her, and she looked at his injured foot. “You have a real shoe on.”

“Yeah. Not sure how long it’ll last, but I told Cara I’d walk her down the aisle, not hobble along beside her.”

They went down the elevator and asked at the desk for a ride to the church. While they were waiting outside for the driver to arrive, Cara called Luke’s phone.

“Where the hell are you? And is Liv with you?”

“Yes. We’re on our way.” The car pulled up to the curb. “Our car is here. Be there in five.”

Olivia got in first, then Luke laid his crutches on the floor and got in.

She looked at him. “Is Cara freaking out?”

“Just a little. Why didn’t you go with her and the other ladies?”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Jen and Kate talk non-stop. I’ve been with them all morning. I needed a break.”

Luke laughed. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who’s bothered by it.”

They arrived at the church and went inside. The pastor’s wife hustled Olivia off to the room Cara was in, then came back to Luke.

“You’re the brother?”

“Yes.” She frowned at his crutches, and he handed them to her. “Can you put these in the front row for me? I’ll need them after the ceremony.”

“Of course. You can sit there. We should be ready to go in about twenty minutes.”

Luke sat on the indicated bench. He could hear the women talking and laughing in the room. This was it. His sister was getting married. He was happy for her. Even though she was marrying Craig. He shook his head. Craig was an okay guy. Olivia was right when she said he loved Cara. Luke could see that. Craig would be good to her, and if he wasn’t he knew he could take him in a fight.

The door opened and Luke got to his feet, when Olivia, Jen, and Kate came into the hall. They were all dressed in dark green, but each dress was a little different. Jen’s, of course, was low cut. Her eyes lit up when she saw Luke in his tux, but then her attention was drawn to the groomsmen, who joined them. She smiled at Cousin Jeff, and Luke knew he’d been replaced. He was fine with that. *‘She’s all yours, Jeff’*.

The bridesmaids and groomsmen lined up at the door to the sanctuary, and Luke went into the room. He stopped and took a breath when he saw Cara.

“Wow, you look beautiful sis.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

He went to her and took her hand. His ankle hurt, but he tried not to limp.

“Remember what we said when we were kids?”

Cara nodded. “Yes.”

“We were wrong. We can’t face the world alone. We need to give love and receive love. I’m glad you found someone who will do that with you.”

She hugged him. “Don’t make me cry.”

“Sorry.”

She ran a hand down his lapel. “I was wrong about looking like a handsome devil. You look so much better than that. Thank you for going along with this.”

“What else could I do? It’s your wedding.”

“I love you, Luke.”

“Love you too, sis.”

The music started and Cara tightened her grip on his hand. “Oh my goodness. This is it.”

“Come on. Let’s go get you married.”

Luke managed to make it to the front of the church without giving into the pain, but after he handed Cara off to Craig, he was glad to sit down. He watched from the front row as his little sister got married. It was a nice ceremony in front of a small audience, most of whom were friends and family of the groom.

When Cara and Craig walked back down the aisle as husband and wife, she stopped and gave him a hug before continuing on. They were followed by the wedding party, but Luke held back and let the guests leave first. Then he used his crutches and joined them in the foyer.

He shook hands with a bunch of people he didn't know, then went outside to get some air. After a few minutes, Olivia came out and joined him.

“Well, they did it.”

“They sure did. Can I get out of this tux now?”

“No. Pictures first.”

“Crap.”

“It shouldn't take more than an hour or so.”

“More crap.”

Cara and Craig came out of the church with the rest of the wedding party, and Cara raised her hands.

“Okay, everyone. We're taking some pictures in the church, then the rest on the beach. Our lovely guests, you can get changed for the luau and gather at the cabana. Have yourselves a Mai Tai and we'll join you as soon as we can. The pig has been roasting all day, and they promised me it'd be ready for dinner at six.”

As the guests departed, Luke whispered to Olivia.

“Pig?”

“It's going to be so good.”

“I wonder what he had for his last meal.”

“Shut up. Do not ruin dinner for me again.”

“What do you mean again? Seems you cleaned your plate last night.”

“Well sure. But mahi-mahi aren’t as cute as pigs.”

They followed Cara into the church and spent thirty minutes taking pictures. Even though Luke wasn’t officially in the wedding party, Cara insisted he was in most of the photos. After they were finished in the church, they went to the beach and spent another hour taking more photos. He couldn’t stop looking at Olivia. She looked radiant and he wanted to take her that second and just go somewhere where no one would find them. He could feel emotions starting to churn in his stomach and quickly departed to go get ready for the luau.

TWENTY

Olivia

By the time the wedding party changed and arrived at the beach, the luau was in full swing. The dancers had arrived, the guests had started drinking, and the sun was going down. Olivia got there before Luke, and she sat in a chair by the bonfire and watched the festivities around her. It wouldn't be a party for her until Luke arrived.

He showed up about fifteen minutes later in his swim trunks and a t-shirt, wearing his walking boot along with his crutches. After he greeted Cara and Craig, he sat down next to Olivia.

He gave her a smile as he set his crutches on the sand. He looked at her bikini top and shorts.

“I liked the dress, but this is pretty nice, too.”

“Well, it is a luau.”

Olivia noticed Jen getting cozy with Jeff. “Looks like you've been replaced.”

“Thank God”, Luke said with relief in his voice.

They talked until dinner, which was served island-style on a long tablecloth laid on the sand. Everyone sat in the sand and ate copious amounts of roasted pig, fresh fruits and vegetables, and fruity drinks.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the music started. Along with the Hawaiian entertainers, there was a band playing music for dancing. When Luke looked like he needed a break from the festivities, Olivia suggested they take a walk down to the water.

He left one crutch behind to make it easier to navigate the sand, and they went to the water's edge and walked along the wet sand. Olivia went to the surf a few times and got her feet wet.

She looked out to the ocean. "It is so beautiful here."

"I know. It's tempting to stay."

"Don't you think you'd miss the lake?"

Luke smiled. "I'd miss Tibby, for sure."

"Will you be coming back to the house?"

"Yeah. This week. As soon as I can ride my bike. I'll be back."

"Good. I kind of miss having a neighbor." She choked back more words trying to keep the conversation light.

"If I get some sort of settlement, I might even be able to start paying Cara rent."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

They walked until they could no longer hear the sounds from the luau, then stopped and sat in the sand.

They were completely alone and Olivia wished she could preserve the moment forever, just her, Luke, and the ocean waves. She glanced at him and wondered what he was thinking.

When he got to his feet, she was disappointed as she looked up at him. He gave her a small smile. “We should get back. Cara will think we got lost.”

He held out a hand and helped her to her feet. “Thanks.” She brushed the sand off her shorts. She wanted him to kiss her, but she knew they couldn’t go there. One thing this trip had proven is that they could be friends. But friends with benefits, wouldn’t work and she didn’t want to be just his friend. She wanted to have a fairytale moment. Right there on that beach and when they got home.

He reached over and took her hand. “I’m glad you don’t hate me. I couldn’t live with myself if you hated me.”

“I could never, Luke. I’m not even mad at you.”

“You should be.”

“Why should I be mad at you?”

He stopped walking and turned to her. “Because I screwed up. I never should’ve let it go as far as it did. I don’t know what I was thinking. I wanted to be with you so badly, I lost my head.”

“I’m pretty sure we both let it go to where it went. I don’t regret a minute of it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I wish I was able to share you, but it was just so hard.”

“I know. And I completely understand. I wish I could be that guy for you, Olivia. I really do. Boxing has been my whole life for so long. I don’t know how to live any other way.” He looked at her and leaned in and kissed her. He straightened up and took a step back. “Ugh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay.”

“No it’s not.”

She looked at him with want in her eyes. “Really. It is.”

He touched her face for a moment. “We should get back.”

Olivia was fighting back tears. She wanted more. She wanted Luke. She bit her tongue and continued to walk back to the party.

When they got back to the luau, it was pretty apparent nobody missed them. Luke got a beer, and Olivia got a Mai Tai, and they sat by the fire again.

When Cara came and asked Luke to dance with her, he seemed reluctant, but he agreed. He left his crutches behind and let her lead him to the dance area.

Olivia watched them. She envied their relationship. She and her brother were close, but they didn't have the connection Luke and Cara had. She was glad Luke had his sister. Without her, he'd be a lost soul.

After another hour, Olivia could tell Luke was getting restless again.

“Do you need to take another walk?”

“I think I need to call it a night. All this partying is new to me.”

“Can I walk you back to the hotel?”

“Sure.”

They said their goodbyes to Cara and Craig, then headed for the hotel. Luke was quiet in the elevator, and Olivia, once more, couldn't help wonder what he was thinking about. When they got to his room, he stopped and looked intently at her.

“This was a good night.”

“Yes. It was.”

He looked at the carpet for a moment. “I...ah. I really want to kiss you.”

She stepped close to him. “I want to kiss you, too.”

“We shouldn't.”

“I know.” She shrugged, then put a hand on his chest and kissed him on the cheek. “Good night, Luke.”

She started to walk away, and he put a hand on her arm to stop her. She turned into him and he pulled her close and

kissed her. She could feel the hotness of his skin and his pulse racing. She knew their passion for each other wasn't dead.

He backed away slowly and looked at her. "You really should go, now. Good night."

Olivia couldn't find words and let out a whimper. "G'night."

She headed for her room, with tears starting to form in her eyes. She was hoping he'd stop her, but he didn't. When she got to her door, she looked back at him and he gave her a small wave. She nodded and quickly went into her room. She closed the door and leaned against it and wiped away the few tears that made their way down her cheek. This was too hard. There had to be a better way, and the better way would be for her to either move away so she never saw him again or hope he would realize they were good together and choose their relationship over boxing.

It wasn't even two minutes later when she heard a knock on her door. She hesitated, wiped the tear from her cheek and slowly opened the door.

Luke was leaning against the doorframe. "I.....I... Olivia....."

She reached for him and pulled him into the room. "I know Luke."



Luke

When Luke woke in the morning, he looked at Olivia asleep next to him. He sighed.

'You're such an idiot. Look at her. She's beautiful.'

He touched her face, and she opened her eyes.

“Good morning.”

“Hey.”

She took his hand. “Don't look so worried. I know what you're thinking.”

“We shouldn't be here like this.”

“It felt so right though...”

“I agree. But...”

“Shhh. We have a few more hours until we need to catch the plane back to home and reality. Let's just enjoy this moment.”

He smiled. “What'd you have in mind?”

“Well, like I said. We've got a few more hours in the hotel.”

“It'd be a shame to waste this opportunity.”

“I totally agree.”

Luke grabbed Olivia and held her tight in his arms and he enjoyed just being there with her. He didn't want to leave. He

saw Olivia glance at the clock.

“Don’t look. Not yet. Let’s pretend for a few more minutes it’s just you and me and this bed.”

“Nothing else exists?”

“We don’t need anything else. Maybe the beach. The beach can exist.”

“Okay.”

He kissed her forehead. “Maybe I’ll get an ungodly amount of cash from the settlement. I’ll buy an island where we can live. Just the two of us. We’ll have our supplies delivered once a month by airplane, so we never have to leave. We’ll swim and sun all day and make love all night.”

“Sounds perfect. What if you don’t get an ungodly amount of money?”

“Then I’ll buy a smaller island and we’ll go to the nearest town once a month to shop.”

“I’d like that. Then I could get some ice cream.”

“You could get anything you wanted.”

She sighed and kissed his neck. “We really need to get dressed or we’re going to miss our plane.”

Luke groaned. “Fine.” He let her go, and she headed for the bathroom. “Would you like to join me for a quick shower?”

He smiled at her. “If I joined you, it wouldn’t be quick, and we’d definitely miss the plane.” He sat up. “I’ll go shower in my room.”

As Luke came out of Olivia's room, Cara and Craig were coming down the hall from their room.

Cara looked quizzically at him. "I'm pretty sure you were registered in room three-twelve."

"Right." He tried to walk past her, but she stopped him with a hand to his arm.

"Luke. Are you guys back together?"

He sighed. "No."

"Then what the hell are you doing?"

"Just enjoying a few hours of wishful thinking."

He pulled away from her and headed down the hall. "I'll see you when you get back from paradise."

She caught up to him and gave him a hug outside his door. "I wish I could convince you to quit being so stubborn about this."

"I wish you could, too." He unlocked his door. "Stop worrying about me and enjoy your honeymoon. Olivia and I will figure this out one way or another."

"Luke, you got a lot of love to give, and Olivia wants to receive it. I'd take her up on that offer because boxing isn't loving you back anytime soon."

He knew she was right, but he still had a lot of fight in him, he just wasn't sure if all the fight was boxing. He got to his room and hopped in the shower thinking about what life might be like without boxing. It scared him. He was good at it, and

other than Cara, it was the only thing that never let him down, but neither did Olivia. He was letting her down, and it felt horrible.

Luke and Olivia barely made it to the airport on time. Cara and Craig were staying in Hawaii for two weeks, and Jen and Kate had later flights. Luke was relieved it was just the two of them flying back together.

They got to board ahead of the other passengers again, and they sat together. He gave her the window seat. Once they got to the open water, she turned to him.

“I want you to know what happened last night doesn’t change anything. I won’t let it interfere with your life. I hope we can be neighbors and friends, and occasionally hang out together.”

“Olivia, I don’t know if that’s possible, but I’ll sure give it a try.”

“We need to make it work. One thing this weekend made clear to me is I love hanging out with you.”

“I am pretty cool.”

“I’m serious Luke.”

“I’d love to be your neighbor and your friend. And hanging out occasionally, or maybe more than occasionally, would be great.”

Luke couldn’t think about it anymore. It was torturing him. Before he could figure out what to say next he saw Olivia holding something in her hands.

She held up a deck of cards. “So, what’s your poison, War or Slap Jack?”

He smiled and took the cards from her hand. This plane ride was going to be ok.

TWENTY ONE

Luke

Even though Luke told Olivia he'd be moving back to the house after the wedding, he just couldn't bring himself to do it. The weekend with her had been great, and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to maintain friend status if he saw her every day.

Instead, he spent the next two weeks getting ready for the fight. He knew he was overdoing it and pushing himself too far, too soon, but he'd convinced himself he just needed to get past this fight to get his head back in the game. He'd spent way too much time sitting around thinking of Olivia while he was recuperating.

Three days before the fight he'd been in the gym all day, and he was tired and sore. His ankle was throbbing, but he didn't want to stop. If he stopped, his mind would wander to Olivia.

As he sat at a weight machine, Rachel came to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Time to call it.”

“Just a few more minutes.”

“You said that an hour ago.” She put a hand on the machine to stop the movement. “Luke. Call it a day. If you get hurt now, we’ll have to cancel the fight.”

He scowled at her. “Fine. I need to go spend some time in the sauna.” He stood, and Rachel noticed he was favoring his ankle.

“Why are you pushing yourself like this? You’re obviously still in pain.”

He glanced at his foot, which was swollen. “I just need to get past this fight.”

“And then what?”

“Then, I’ll be back.”

She tilted her head. “Come sit for a moment.”

“I need to hit the sauna.”

“Just give me a minute.”

He returned to her and sat on a bench.

Rachel sighed at him. “It’s Olivia, isn’t it? You haven’t moved back to the house. You’re killing yourself every day in the gym. What’s going on? What happened in Hawaii?”

He ran his hands through his hair and then rubbed his face. “I can’t get her out of my head.”

“So you’re trying to sweat her out?”

“Something like that.”

“Is it working?”

He shook his head. “Not at all.”

She thought for a moment. “Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to chill a little the next two days, so you’re capable of getting into the ring on Saturday. We’re going to modify your workouts. Less muscle building and more swimming and bag work. Give your muscles a break.”

“Then what?”

“After this fight, you need to see where your head’s at and see if it isn’t in the ring anymore. If you aren’t one hundred percent focused on the game, then it might be time to reassess.”

“Reassess?”

“I think your priorities have changed.”

“No. That’s not what this is.”

“We’ll see. If you’re not completely committed, you’re going to get hurt.” She stood. “Go hit the sauna, then come home. I might even make dinner for you.”

“Please. Don’t. You’re a terrible cook.”

Luke thought about Olivia’s lasagna and that night out on her deck. His stomach started to ache.

Fight day arrived and Luke spent the day trying to stay focused on beating his opponent. Jesse Rio was someone he’d wanted to fight for a long time. Like Luke, Jesse was

undefeated, and he was just a few fights away from going pro. Jesse needed to win this fight. Luke was determined to give Jesse his first loss. The fighter was rumored to be in great shape, and he was six years younger than Luke. Those two factors were going to make him hard to beat.

Luke swam at the gym, spent some time in the whirlpool, and then the sauna. He was as ready as he could be, considering he was almost run over by a truck five weeks ago. He was dressed for the fight, and sitting on a bench thirty minutes before he was due in the ring, when Rachel came in.

She checked his ankle. When he involuntarily tightened his calf when she touched a sore spot, she looked at him. “It still hurts?”

“I knew it would.”

She wrapped his ankle in gauze, then taped over it. “Do you need me to numb it?”

“Yeah.”

She took out her medical kit and gave him two shots to dull the pain. “How’s your head?”

“It hasn’t hurt for a while now.”

“I don’t mean pain wise. I mean mentally.”

“I’m good. All in.”

“One hundred percent?”

“Yep.”

“If you’re lying to me, you’re going to get hurt. Jesse’s good.”

“Not as good as me.”

“Not as good as you when you’re at the top of your game. I’m not so sure that’s where you’re at.”

“Another great pep talk from my trainer.”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. I care more about you than I do about you winning.”

“I’m fine.” He took a couple of deep breaths. “Let me have a few minutes alone.”

“I’ll be back in five to put your gloves on.”

Rachel left and Luke cracked his neck, stretched out his shoulder muscles, then got to his feet to check the pain in his ankle. At the moment, he was pain-free, but if the fight went beyond five or six rounds, he’d start to feel it again.

‘I’ll just have to knock him out before then.’

He heard the crowd cheer, and he opened the door and watched Jesse enter the ring. The man was cocky and had a big mouth. He was doing his best to rile the crowd.

Luke watched him for a moment. He wasn’t feeling his normal pumped self, and he didn’t care about Jesse Rio badmouthing him in the ring. He also didn’t care about defending his undefeated status. He sat down again. He needed to get his head straight.

‘What is wrong with you-you need to go win.’

He always figured he'd know when it was time to hang up his gloves. He just didn't realize it'd hit him five minutes before he was due to get into the ring.

Rachel came into the room, and when he looked at her, he could tell she knew something had changed.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m done” he said in a breathless whisper.

“What’s that mean?”

“It means, I’m done Rachel.” He picked up his clothes and went into the restroom to change.

“Luke, what are you doing?”

He came out dressed and put his gloves into his bag. “I’m going home.”

“Luke?”

“Tell them I forfeit the fight.” He left the room and didn't stop when she followed him into the hall and called after him.

He left through a back entrance to avoid running into anyone, then got onto his bike and sped away.



Olivia

Olivia was sitting on the couch reading a book when she heard Luke's motorcycle. She knew he should've been in the middle of his fight. She set her book down and went to the window. She saw him drive into Cara's driveway, take off his helmet, and start across the grass toward her door.

She opened the door and went onto the porch.

"Luke?"

"Hey." He joined her on the porch.

"What are you doing here?"

"Olivia, I quit."

She was confused. "The match?"

"No, I quit boxing. At least competitively."

"When did you decide this?"

"About an hour ago. It hit me right before I was supposed to get into the ring. Jesse Rio was dancing around, running his mouth off, and I just didn't care anymore."

"You're saying you're done with boxing?"

"Yeah."

She took a step toward him. "I don't want you to quit for me, Luke. I don't want to be the reason."

He shook his head and closed the gap between them. "I didn't do it for you. I did it for me."

"Are you sure?"

“I’ve been trying to get you out of my head since we got back.” He took her hand. “I couldn’t do it. At first I was pissed I let myself be distracted by you. But on the ride here, I realized I wasn’t pissed you were interfering with my training. I was pissed my training was interfering with you. With us.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you feel the same way about me as I feel about you. Say we don’t need to hide away on an island to be together. We can be together right here. Right now. Nothing else matters.”

Olivia smiled. “I believe those are the most words you’ve ever spoken to me in such a short amount of time.”

He laughed. “I guess I’ve been saving them for this moment.”

“Luke?”

“Hmm?”

“I need a kiss that will make up for all the kisses we missed out on these last few weeks.”

“I can do that.” He kissed her deeply, giving her exactly what she asked for. When he took a step back, he asked, “What now?”

“Well, since you’re in such a talkative mood. Let’s go into the bedroom and have an intimate conversation.”

“You are really good at throwing my words in my face, and I love that, and I love...you.”

Olivia was choked for words. “Luke.....I....um...I... really...”

“Looks like you’re stuck for words for once?”

“I just didn’t expect you to say that. I love you too, more than you know.”

“You know what else? He held her face in his hands and looked in her eyes. “I want to go back to Hawaii someday and instead of a green dress, you could be in a white dress.”

She grabbed his hand and began walking to the bedroom. “This conversation is about to get lengthy.”

Luke stopped her at the doorway and picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed and gently laid her down. He kissed her neck softly.

Olivia felt warmth come over her body and she knew she wanted to receive his love for the rest of her life.

THE END

THANK YOU PAGE

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Looking forward to seeing you at the next release and keep reading what you love!

Brandi