

MAN ON A MISSION: *Book Three*



*Miss*  
**FORTUNE**

A CURVY GIRL AGE GAP INSTALOVE ROMANCE

LIA PRESTON

*miss fortune*

A CURVY GIRL AGE GAP INSTALOVE ROMANCE

MAN ON A MISSION

BOOK 3

LIA PRESTON

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BRIDGET

“ARE you sure you want to do this?” Roxy scrolled through the acceptance email before handing my phone back to me.

I dropped it into my apron pocket and started making her order of two spiced mochas while I contemplated her question. The sweet aroma of crushed chocolate with a hint of warm cinnamon filled the air.

“What’s not to be sure about? There’s a prize of \$250,000 and—”

“If you win.”

“Yes, if I win, but if I don’t, at least I’ll see if there’s anything left worth saving between Joel and me.”

“Ugh,” Roxy shook her head with a sour look on her face worse than the time a trainee gave her a black, dark roast instead of the caramel macchiato she’d ordered. “I wish you’d forget about him.”

“He’s working now.”

“For how long?”

She had a point. I didn’t know how permanent the changes Joel had made were. And, given his history, there was a good chance he wouldn’t be sticking to them, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t go on Lucked Up Love and find out.

Maybe a reality television show wasn't the most conventional way to reconcile with an ex, but the chance at \$250,000, if things worked out, sweetened the deal.

She drummed her fingers on the countertop. "You know those shows are staged, right?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no."

"I've heard horror stories about them making people look bad for ratings. It doesn't seem worth it."

I leaned in closer to her so that the other coffee shop patrons couldn't overhear me. "It's a risk, but I have to try." I sighed. "Mr. Gable is close to throwing in the towel and shutting down the coffee shop."

"He's like eight-hundred years old. Maybe he's just ready to retire?"

"Okay, fine, but I'm not. I love it here. You know that."

"You always used to talk about starting your own business. I think this is a sign that it's time to make a move toward that goal."

I smiled at my best friend. She knew me so well after eight years of friendship and she was right about it being time for a change.

"That's what I plan to do. I've been saving up some capital over the years, but I don't have enough. I need more if I'm going to put in an offer on this business."

"No way. That's a great idea!" Just then, Roxy's co-worker, Paige, pushed open the door to the shop.

"We'll talk more about this later," I said before I finished making their drinks and setting them on the counter.

She picked up a cup, handed it to Paige, and took the other for herself. "What if you end up falling for someone else on the show?"

"I won't fall for someone else."

"Why not? Joel sucks."



Paige crinkled her nose. “What show?” I rinsed the espresso maker and wiped the counters while Roxy got her up to speed on my plan.

“Anyway, I have to try,” I added, leaving out the fact that this was my best and maybe only hope of saving the shop.

Roxy knew how hard I’d worked to turn Whole Latte Love around when I started working for Mr. Gable. I’d even handmade a lot of the decor to update it on a budget hoping to make it more inviting for customers.

It had paid off.

We were busier than ever, which is why it shocked me when Mr. Gable announced we’d be closing down.

The door to the shop clanged, and I looked up, sucking in a sharp breath as Hunter, Roxy’s older brother, walked through it.

It’d been a couple of years since I’d last seen him.

Hunter stopped in the doorway, his amber eyes locked on mine. The black t-shirt he wore fit tight enough to make my heart beat a little faster when I pictured his hard chest beneath it. The hem of his shirt skimmed the waistband of his dark and distressed jeans. His hair was black as midnight and was longer than he used to keep it. Tattoos covered both of his arms to the wrist.

It was a reminder of the time that stood between us. Because neither sleeve was complete the last time we saw one another.

He might have looked like a bad boy with his tousled hair and inked skin outside the office, but I’m sure he looked nothing but professional at work.

I guess living a double life made deception come easy to him because he sure had me fooled. Then again, convincing people was his job. He was a lawyer, after all.

I still hadn’t forgiven him for how badly he’d fooled me.

But Roxy didn’t know that, and if I had anything to do with it, she never would.

To me, Hunter Grand was *that* guy.

The one I thought about way too often and avoided talking about. But sometimes, as my best friend's only sibling, he was unavoidable both in conversation and *apparently* in reality too. And even though I'd play it cool and act aloof, a sickening sense of longing rose from deep within me any time she brought him up.

*Most people have someone like that, don't they?*

The one person that, despite having every reason not to want, you're mad about. That was Hunter. My untouchable temptation.

I leaned forward as he made his way toward us at the back of the shop. "Rox, what's he doing here?"

She looked over her shoulder. "Oh, I asked him to meet me because I forgot my lunch. I'm sure I told you he was back in Seattle."

"I would have remembered that," I said in a near whisper. An icy chill cascaded over my shoulders, creeping up my neck.

"I didn't tell you? He moved back and is staying at my place for a few weeks while they finish renovating his house."

This was all news to me. Bad news. "Oh, okay."

*Great. Just great.*

It was one thing having him all the way in Los Angeles, but it was another having him back in Seattle.

But I'd have to endure it.

Paige grabbed Roxy's arm just as Hunter held out the lunch bag. "We've got to go. Rhys just texted me that the client arrived early, and the meeting starts now."

"Shit," Roxy turned to her brother, taking the lunch bag from him. "Thanks, Hunt, I'll see you at home," she said before she and Paige hurried out of the shop.

He stroked his stubble and gave me a sly half-smile. "It's been a while, Bridge."

*Yes, Hunt, it's been two years since you left me in your bed and didn't return—until now.*

“Has it?” I shrugged. “Who’s keeping track?”

He let out a short huff of a laugh. “Me.”

Hunter was a windfall and a pool hall all wrapped into one. Because if any woman dared to gamble on him and actually gained his affection for more than a brief period, she’d have won the lottery. But I wasn’t that girl. The one time I bet my heart on Hunter, I lost, and that was enough rejection for me.

Still, he was hot, smart, successful, and had an even better personality when he wasn’t being a self-absorbed jerk. But it was the last bit that canceled out all the rest of his finer traits for me.

“Where’s the restroom in this place?”

I shook my head. “It’s for paying customers only.”

He was full-on smiling before he leaned over to look at the baked goods display.

“Okay. I’ll take a slice of the chocolate raspberry torte.”

I reached for the case before I realized something and dropped my hand. “You can’t. It has walnuts in it.”

He raised a brow at me. “And here I thought you hated me. But you remembered my food allergy. That’s... sweet.”

“Yeah, *too* sweet, considering you wouldn’t do the same for me.”

“Aww, doll, I’m sensing some unresolved hostility.” He put his hand to his chest. “Have you missed me?”

I scoffed. “Don’t flatter yourself. Just because I don’t like you doesn’t mean I want you dead.”

“I think we both know there’s more to it than that.” He winked at me.

I held back a laugh, he could never know how right he was. Pointing toward the men’s room I said, “Just go. I’ve got work to do.”

“No. Rules are rules. Pick me something and I’ll pay when I get back.”

I watched as he sauntered toward the bathroom, annoyed that neither time nor experience was enough to make Hunter any less sexy.

Once he was out of sight, I scanned the pastries and settled on the orange marmalade oat bar and dropped it into a paper bag.

He’d be taking his treat to go.

Because five minutes once every two years was about all I could handle of his presence.

He returned, paid for the bar, slipped it out of the bag, and took a generous bite. I watched with bated breath as he chewed. His face twisted once his palate hit the bitter zest.

He lifted the bag to his mouth and spat the mouthful back in it. “That’s fucking disgusting. You *know* I hate marmalade.”

“Of course.”

“Then why?”

“Because I may not want you dead, Hunt, but that doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy dishing up a little slice of misery for you.”

He furrowed his brow, a question forming on his lips, but I didn’t give him enough time to ask it before I turned and disappeared into the back room.

Hunter had already taken more than enough from me, more than I’d ever let him know, and I wasn’t about to waste my day on him.

I leaned against the kitchen counter and took a deep breath. My pulse raced, as my captive heart struggled against the chains I’d secured it with.

As much as I couldn’t stand him.

Or wanted nothing to do with him.

It only took me minutes to realize that, despite everything...

I still loved Hunter Grand.

HUNTER

“WHAT’S THIS FOR AGAIN?” I asked while pouring a coffee as I stood in Roxy’s apartment kitchen.

I’d moved back the week before to start work at a Seattle law firm, but there were some delays in renovating my house and my little sister had insisted that I stay with her.

Had I known that the very next week a camera crew and their equipment would invade her tiny apartment, I’d have thought twice about getting a hotel suite instead.

“A reality dating show called Lucked up Love.”

“Sounds... stupid. Why would you want to go on a show like that?”

“No, not me.” She waved her hand. “Bridget is going. I nominated her for it, so they want to interview me.”

I chuckled into my mug. “She’s going to hate that.”

*Maybe even more than she hates me.*

She smirked at me and glanced around the corner at the crew setting up the cameras in the living room to make sure they were all out of earshot. “She asked me to,” she said, keeping her voice low.

Bridget had asked my sister to sign her up for a reality dating show?

Now I’d heard it all.

“Why?”

“She wants to get back together with her ex-boyfriend Josh.”

My stomach knotted at the thought. Though I had no business being jealous, I was always more comfortable knowing Bridget was single. I kept my face neutral. “I see. Why did she break up with him in the first place?”

“When they were dating, he moved in soon after they met, lost his job, and spent all day gaming until she got fed up and kicked him out.”

“And she wants him back?”

She nodded, stealing my cup of coffee and taking a sip from it. “I guess he’s working again. But, I think it’s just good for her to do something out of the norm. How does my hair look?”

There wasn’t a single red hair out of place on her head.

“Great.” My tone came out flatter than intended, and Roxy tipped her head at me. I waved her off. “Your hair is fine. They look like they’re ready for you.”

There was nothing great about this situation. The idea of my much younger sister’s best friend reuniting with an ex cut deep.

“I’ll be quick.” She gave me a pat on the shoulder and was gone. The moment she left, I downed the rest of my coffee and rinsed out the cup, setting it on the drying rack.

I made a mental note to pick up a French press coffee maker for tomorrow. Drip coffee just didn’t do it for me anymore.

I poked around the rest of her apartment. It was smaller than the master bedroom in my new house and cluttered, except for her studio, where she kept her streaming equipment.

Roxy worked at a marketing firm by day but was an influencer by night. Though she wasn’t a musician she took after our mother, an original Seattle Riot Grrrl, in the political

sense. She had made it her job to take on fashion corporations for their lack of size inclusion.

I doubled back to the living room where she sat on her couch. There was a chenille blanket thrown over it to hide how old and worn it was.

I leaned against a bookshelf, folding my arms over my chest as I stared across the room at the high school graduation picture of her and Bridget, the best friend that had roped her into this harebrained scheme. Her long, brown hair fell over the black gown she wore for the ceremony.

Memories of running my fingers through her wavy locks the one weekend we crossed the line from acquaintances to more came flooding back.

Bridget was as stunning and curvaceous as she was hard-willed. A challenge wrapped up in a woman but I craved her more than any other—in silence, anyhow.

I'd tried to flirt with Bridget in the coffee shop that first day and she wasn't very receptive, but I still had hope. That is, until, I heard about *her* plans.

The crew was joking with one another as they tried to get the lighting just right.

I walked back to the kitchen and pulled my phone out of my pocket and phoned the only person that could help me with this situation.

“Hi, Mom,” I said, low enough to avoid being overheard. She knew how I felt about Bridget and what had happened between us.

“Hunt? What’s wrong?”

I let out a huff before explaining the situation to her. About Bridget being single and going on the reality show to reunite with her ex.

“She’s getting back together with that idiot? No way. I’ll have a talk with her.” Mom knew I planned this move back to Seattle to get close to Bridget, but I couldn’t let her do my dirty work for me.



After all, I was the idiot that had spent too long pining for a woman whose kisses lingered like pure honey on my tongue. But she could sting like a bee if the mood struck her, and when she was around me, it often did. But if I was going to have a chance with her, I had to make it happen on my own.

“You need to stay out of it,” I told my mother.

“And *you* need to make a move before it’s too late,” she bit back.

“I think it’s already too late. And what am I going to do? I can’t tell Bridget I love her without proving to her I’m worth loving in return first.”

“Ahem.” A throat cleared behind me.

*Shit.*

I turned, expecting my sister had caught me red-handed in the middle of a love confessional.

But I sighed in relief when a woman from the crew stood there instead.

“Can I help you?” I asked her.

“Roxanne said there is coffee.”

“Uh, okay. Mom, I’ve got to go.” I hung up my phone and dropped it back into my pocket. Then I pulled a mug from the cupboard. “How do you take it?”

“Black.”

I poured her a cup and handed it over before leaning against the counter and folding my arms.

“Thanks for the help,” she said, taking a sip.

“Anytime.” I looked across the room at the smiling photo of Bridget. “Maybe you could help me with something.”

She squinted at me, before breaking out into a smile, crinkling her brow. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

BRIDGET

“WELCOME TO LUCKED UP LOVE, the hot new show that puts singles on an island for two weeks to reconnect with past lovers. We have exes. We have enemies. Some of these couples have no business being anywhere near each other, and others should have restraining orders, but we’re smashing them together for your entertainment. Will our couples get lucky in love or will they get burned worse than my pale skin in this tropical sun? Let’s find out, shall we!”

The host, Kylie, introduced one contestant after another, the look of disappointment clear on each one of their faces when their partner appeared. Well, almost everyone, there was a bubbly blonde that bounced on the balls of her feet the moment a muscular guy the host called Ryan rounded the corner.

I held back a grin. Even though I wouldn’t be as excited as she was, I wouldn’t be as disappointed as some others. I knew who was coming for me so it could’ve been worse.

It had been six months since I had seen Josh. He’d moved out of the city and back to his mom’s house after the breakup. I wasn’t convinced that a fresh start with him was possible. But maybe the time apart had done us both some good.

I didn’t know exactly what to expect on the show. It was a reality show for reuniting lost loves, but since it was the first season the rest was left up to chance. They were filming in the

Bahamas. And I knew cameras would be following everyone around and that they'd be watching us in our private moments.

But I'd have to deal with that. I wanted to see if there was still something worth pursuing between us and if there wasn't, I'd get him out of my system.

When I heard my name, I straightened my back and waited for Josh to come around the corner.

My jaw dropped when I saw *him*. "Hunter?" I squeaked out.

*What was he doing here?*

There had to be some sort of mistake.

This couldn't be happening.

As he crossed the courtyard toward me, my heart was beating in my ears, like a storm of wild drumming, or the winds of a hurricane.

His eyes were almost golden in the sunlight. The blue shirt and light cotton pants he wore fit his athletic frame so well I could have cried. He was so damn sexy but an *ex* he was not.

"There's been a mistake," I said.

He laughed as he moved to stand beside me. "Has there, doll?" The sound of his voice was familiar, deep, and as smooth as velvet. And it made my skin prickle because I ached to hear it again.

"Yes. You're my best friend's brother. We've never dated."

He was about to respond when the host cut in. "Hunter informed us that you two connected a couple of years ago and fell out. Is that incorrect?"

"Well, no, but—" The words fell from my lips before I thought about the consequences.

The host shrugged. "Then I see no problem here."

"But I think there is. We're not good together. Hunter is..." A little older, a lot more experienced, and way over my head.

“He’s my best friend’s brother. We don’t have feelings for each other. It was one silly weekend.”

The host pursed her lips. My protests were annoying her and I could tell.

Shut your damn mouth, Bridget. You weren’t just here for the reunion. There’s \$250,000 on the line.

Could I tolerate spending two weeks with Hunter Grand for that amount of money?

I glanced over at him. He had a few days’ worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin. On others, it might have looked disheveled, but not on him—on him—it looked hot.

But our immediate situation was nothing but a *hot mess*.

Hunter’s fingers caressed my arm, sending shivers down my spine. “It’s all good,” he said, a smile on his lips as he reached up to brush my hair away from my face.

I sighed after I inhaled his scent. He smelled fresh, clean and a little spicy.

He was so close his presence was overwhelming my senses one-by-one. I wanted to step away, but we’d been instructed to stay on our marks.

He draped his arm around my shoulders and when we were done with the show’s introduction, he led me to a lounge where he sat down and pulled me to sit next to him.

“I guess we need to have a talk,” he said, running his hand through his wavy hair.

A camera crew I hadn’t realized followed us, was right in our faces.

“No, that’s okay. We can talk later. In private.”

He followed my gaze to the camera crew.

“Now or later, I don’t think it’ll make much of a difference.” I knew he was right. I’d signed up for this. To be followed throughout the duration of this experience.

Only this wasn’t the experience I’d expected to have.

Not. Even. Close.

I shook my head. “That you’re capable of something this... this... *devious* shouldn’t surprise me. But it does. I don’t even know what to say to you right now.”

For a show called Lucked Up Love, this was just about the most unfortunate scenario I could have imagined.

He leaned toward me, holding my gaze. “You think I’m *devious*?”

I laughed, unsure of what else to do. “Isn’t that what *trickery* is?”

He brushed my hair behind my ear. “Well, I guess by definition, yes.”

I wished he would stop it with the casual touches. They felt amazing but if I wasn’t careful I might start to think they weren’t just for the camera.

The only other time he’d been so forward with me was two years ago, and it was that same weekend fling that made this whole thing so intolerable.

He frowned at me. “We need to talk about what happened between us. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Don’t, Hunter.” I put my hand on his arm not wanting to hear his apologies. Nor the details of how he’d been wrong, or how he’d made a mistake when he’d left. He’d made his choice.

I didn’t want to think about how much I missed him while he was gone.

I stood, shaking my head, and taking a step back. “We can’t do this.” I should’ve walked off the set the moment I saw Hunter approaching me. But even though I convinced myself to stay for the money, for my goals, I knew it was more than that. Only, I didn’t know what ‘more’ it was yet.

I crossed the courtyard, heading deeper into the shade. I blinked against the sunlight, needing to escape the cameras and Hunter’s advances.

He wasn't my boyfriend.

He wasn't even a friend.

He was just my best friend's brother. I didn't need his apology. He had done nothing to me.

Yes, he had hurt me, but he'd made his choices based on what *he* wanted. It wasn't like he'd broken up with me. We'd never been together.

Any hurt I harbored was *my* fault because I'd entertained a silly fantasy. And even though I couldn't seem to get away from it, or him, he was still my best friend's brother and a liability to my heart.

I stopped at the edge of the courtyard and stared out at the ocean. My heart sank as the breeze washed over my face. I sighed and hugged my arms to my chest as a light breeze blew through the palm trees. The day was warm, but the wind was cool on my skin.

My eyes fell closed blocking out the world, and I inhaled.

I hated that I couldn't just let go of what had happened.

I hated how many times I'd thought about him throughout the years when I knew I had no business to.

But that weekend between us was special. It was Roxanne's twentieth birthday and, after a few drinks, I'd called him hot.

That's all it took.

Before I knew it, we'd snuck off together, and we were making out on the back deck. The following night, things escalated from more than a few stolen kisses, and I woke up naked in Hunter's bed the next morning.

While I was sitting up in his bed, attempting to process things, Hunter came back into his bedroom and climbed back in to cuddle me.

It was the happiest day of my life. He held me until we fell back to sleep. But when I woke up again, I was alone.

When Roxy told me he'd returned to Los Angeles, my heart splintered in irreparable ways.

He didn't say goodbye. He didn't even send me a text. I thought about it for months, trying to figure out how I could have misinterpreted our night together.

I'd have to find the strength to face this situation. After all, I'd gotten myself into this mess and I'd have to get myself out of it.

When I opened my eyes, Hunter stood in front of me, two bottles of water in his hands. I just stared at him, unsure what to say.

He took a tentative step forward, then another, the cameras following his approach, as he moved closer to me.

I put my hand up. "Stop. You need to give me some time to process things."

He handed me a bottle of water. "There's an icebreaker game soon and I overheard that we have couple's therapy in the morning."

I rolled my eyes. "Are you serious? I'm not here to analyze our relationship, Hunter. There is no relationship to repair."

"Then why don't you leave?"

"I—I uh..." I couldn't answer him. Not in front of the cameras.

His gaze narrowed. "As long as we're both here there's a chance." He turned and walked away, heading to the opposite side of the courtyard, and disappeared into the house.

I turned my back on the cameras. Because if I stared in his direction any longer I might do something foolish like follow him.

Staying meant I was giving him the go-ahead to carry on with his plan. Whatever it was. But was leaving an option?

No. Not if I wanted to save Whole Latte Love.

BRIDGET

AN HOUR LATER, we were back in the courtyard to play some dumb game. The first of many I assumed.

Hunter snaked his arm around my waist and leaned in, dropping his voice. “They’re going to send us home if you can’t at least pretend to like me a little bit, doll.”

“I’m not good at faking things.”

He smirked. “And I prefer it when you’re genuine. But in this scenario, I’d settle for you faking it.”

I slapped his chest, knowing that his mind went back to that one stupid night, the one where we’d ended up in bed together.

What he didn’t know was that it wasn’t just a casual hookup. He’d taken my virginity that night. And while we’d both gone our separate ways and done our own thing for years, it stung knowing he had such an intimate part of me.

Being at a resort with him, and being subjected to these silly games that were supposed to prove our compatibility, seemed like some sort of cruel joke.

If he wasn’t into me for more than a couple of nights back then, why had his interests changed now?

Not only that, what would Roxy think about me if I ended up with her brother on national television?



Though we never discussed it, I felt like siblings were off-limits in a friendship like the one I had with Roxanne. Besides, it would have been a foolish discussion to have with her since he'd given me zero impression that what we shared was anything more than one mistake of a night.

A mistake that resulted in the best sex of my life.

I sighed, glancing up at him and startled when I realized his eyes were still on me. "What are you staring at?"

He scanned my body with such intensity my skin tingled. "What are you thinking about?"

We approached the station assigned to us and waited for the host to finish priming. I scanned the row of liquor bottles on the table. "Looks like we're mixing cocktails."

"Smooth change of topic. But yeah, it does."

There was a shamrock-shaped sign that resembled a metallic piñata off to the side that read Sham on the Rocks.

Kylie approached us all. "Welcome couples. Are you ready to play Sham on the Rocks?"

The other couples hooted and hollered.

Kylie continued, "It's like truth or dare. Except your partner asks a question and if you refuse to answer as the 'sham', you'll need to take a shot to continue in the game. The truth will get you to the finish line, contestants, and the most honest couple wins. The winners will crack open the shamrock piñata to reveal the prize within. It's a big one, so play to win."

A drinking game? *Great.*

Hunter leaned toward me. "This could end well for us. After all, it did last time."

I had a track record of being a little too truthful with liquid courage in my veins. It's what resulted in Hunter finding his way into my pants that weekend at their family lake house.

He had enough tact to wait until we were both sober, but the drunk confessional about how hot I found him spurred him on.

I elbowed him in the ribs. “Quiet. And no crazy questions.”

“Then how are we going to win? You heard her. It’s a big prize.”

I sighed. “Whatever’s in there isn’t meant for us.”

The other couples went first. Their questions were sickly sweet. ‘What’s my best trait?’ ‘Do you still love me?’ ‘How much have you missed me?’ Were these people even exes at all? Or were they all losing their minds and getting caught up in the game already?

“Bridget, it’s your turn to ask Hunter a question,” Kylie said.

I turned to him. There wasn’t anything I wanted to know. I knew he didn’t love me. I didn’t want to hear what he thought about me. That only left one question. “Have you ever cared about anyone aside from yourself?”

His jaw tensed. “You know the answer to that.”

“Do I? Because the way I see it, as soon as your family was in crisis, you ran off to law school on the opposite coast. Your sister was homeless for a few months. Did you know that?”

His jaw went slack. “No, but I left—”

“Of course, you didn’t, because I can answer the question for you, Hunter. No, you don’t care about anyone except yourself—”

He slapped the tabletop. “Would you let me answer your fucking question, Bridget?”

“Cut!” the producer, Max, yelled.

I stumbled back. I’d been so caught up in the moment that I’d forgotten all about the camera and crew.

“Let’s go again from ‘would you let me answer your question’, but leave out the profanity. We don’t want the FCC breathing down our necks.”

“Just don’t air it,” I said.

Max chuckled. “Darlin’, that was pure rating gold. Now, take it from where I told you, Hunter.”

Hunter glanced at me. His face mirrored the internal shock I was feeling as he repeated himself without the swear.

Rating gold?

How could that be?

We weren’t even a couple.

I guess it didn’t matter as long as we were making a spectacle of ourselves.

Well, that wouldn’t be happening again. Not if I could help it.

“Fine, go ahead,” I said.

He frowned at me. “I knew my sister’s situation. My mother’s situation. But I also knew that the best way I could help them out was by taking advantage of the opportunities my father offered me. I went to law school so I could help them better in the long run. Roxy doesn’t need me anymore, but I still help my mother any time she needs me to. So, next time you want to pass judgment on me, Bridget, I’d suggest knowing before speaking.”

There were audible ‘oohs’ from the other contestants.

I knew things had improved for their mother, but I didn’t know that was Hunter’s doing. Was I so blinded by the distaste I’d developed toward him I failed to notice?

It seemed so.

“It’s your turn to ask Bridget a question, Hunter. Are you ready?”

He nodded. “Why do you hate me? It’s not because of Roxy or my mom. I know that. I suspect it has something to do with the night we spent together. But I can’t figure it out. So tell me, Bridget, why do you hate me so much?”

My face heated and I knew I had to be blushing. Telling him the truth wasn’t an option. I already felt foolish enough.

“Because you’re spoiled and don’t think about the consequences of your actions as long as you get what you want.”

He squinted. “I know when someone is withholding crucial information.” He poured a shot into the glass and held it out to me. “Why do you hate me? Forthcoming answer only or drink up, Princess.”

Kylie rushed over to us. “Answer his question, sweetie. But I’ll take that.” She snatched the shot from Hunter’s hands.

I looked over at her. “I’ll take the shot.”

She tipped her head. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes.” Why wouldn’t I take a shot rather than spill my deepest, darkest secret to Hunter on national t.v.? Were these people nuts? “Yes, of course.” I reiterated.

“Okay, then let the true game begin,” Kylie said with a chuckle.

A production assistant rolled a cart toward us. Whipped cream, limes, salt, cherries, and a few other items were lined up on it.

“Since you didn’t answer Hunter’s question, you need to take a body shot.” She picked up a stack of cards from the cart and fanned them out. “Pick one. Whatever it says, you have to do.”

I hesitated before drawing one from her hands and looked down at it. “Partner’s choice?” I said, reading the card aloud.

Kylie clapped her hands together. “You drew the wild card. What an exciting start!” She looked over at Hunter. “What would you like her to do?”

He stepped toward the cart, looking at all the options. He picked up the can of whip cream first and set it on our table. Then the bowl of cherries. “Is that your final decision?”

“No,” he said. “There’s one more thing.”

I dreaded to hear what his sick mind would come up with.

“It’s all up to you, Hunter. Go on,” Kylie urged.

“I want to take the shot...” He looked back at me. “Off her.”

I scoffed. “Leave it to you to change the game to suit you.” I didn’t know if this was worse, better, or just as bad.

He picked up the can and started shaking it. “If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself, Bridge.”

He approached me and squirted a line of cream, arching over one breast and then the other, connecting them right in the middle of my cleavage.

Kylie handed him the shot glass. He wiped away the smile that was threatening to overtake his face with his free hand.

I took a step back. “Don’t you dare.”

“I’m sorry, doll, to make it a proper body shot, it has to be hands-free.” He nestled the glass between my pushed-up breasts. His confidence was doing a number on me.

I sucked in a breath when he grabbed the pitted cherry from the bowl and I shook my head. “Be careful where you put that. I bite.”

I’d be lying if a small part of me wasn’t giddy with anticipation of his touch.

He raked his teeth over his bottom lip. “I was going to take it easy on you and just have you feed it to me. But after that comment, I think I’ll take my chances instead.” He held the cherry to my lips. “Bite down on it, babe. This won’t hurt a bit.” Before I could protest, he popped the cherry between my lips and I held it there.

He wrapped his arm around my waist, holding me steady before he bent down and lapped at the whipped cream.

I held my breath, willing myself not to moan as the lashing flutters of his tongue met my skin. Having his mouth on my body for the first time in years felt deliciously forbidden. He looked up at me, his eyes fixed on mine as he cleaned off my chest.

I bit down more on the cherry, letting the sweet, but tart, juice flood my mouth, drawing some much-needed attention

away from the heat that pooled between my thighs.

He let out a low rumble of pleasure in his throat. The other contestants' squeals, hoots, and hollers seemed miles away as he splayed his hand against my back, stroking a bare patch of my skin with his thumb.

It was the most intimate part of the entire experience. Intimate because while the rest of it was for show, that little gesture was for me alone.

Was he trying to comfort me?

When he finished licking the cream off me, I exhaled, a moment before I felt the brush of his lips on my breasts when he grabbed the glass and tipped his head back, downing it. He spat the little plastic cup out on the ground and leaned in.

The deafening roar of my heart was in my ears the closer he got to my lips.

When he was only an inch away I tipped my head back to evade him, rolled the cherry the rest of the way into my mouth, chewed and swallowed it before I said, "Sorry to disappoint you, but that's where I draw the line, Hunt. You've had more than enough fun for one day."

He let out a low growl and released me. "It's your game, baby girl. I'm only playing it."

I exhaled, trying to calm my wild heart. Was he taking a dig at the fact that I'd asked his sister to sign me up for Lucked Up Love?

It was true, but how dare he call it my game? After all, he was the one that changed everything when he arrived.

HUNTER

I MEANT to pack my bags that night and tell the show's producers I'd made a mistake. To plead a case for Bridget and hope they let her have a second chance with her ex and give her the opportunity to stay.

But the more I thought about it, the more I couldn't fucking handle the idea of her being with anyone except me.

I had to plead my case, all right, but not to the producers.

I had to talk to Bridget one on one. Without an audience. There were only two places they told us would be off-limits to filming, and they were the shower and toilet stalls. Even the sink area was recorded with sound-activated cameras. The idea of trying to convince her in the toilet was out of the question. So that only left me with the shower.

Somehow, I had to get her to join me but voluntarily seemed out of the question. She'd looked at me like I was a complete prick the day before.

I'd have to pull a risky move and hope it was the right one because I only had one shot to get through to her. My chance of failure was high, and if I didn't succeed at veering her down a different path, she was going to end up hating me forever.

Fuck, I'd hate myself if I failed too.

Because if I did, it would mean that I was wrong about us being able to overcome our past. When I saw her leaving the

courtyard for the restroom that morning, I hurried through a side door, and ducked into the shower stall only moments before Bridget's flip-flops slapped against the tile floor, signaling her approach.

What I was about to do felt wrong and under any other circumstances, I never would have done it. But her opinion of me was already so low it couldn't get any worse, could it?

I wasn't sure what I was going to say, but I had seconds to figure it out. Should I tell her I was the biggest jackass in the world for walking away? And that I'd do anything to prove I didn't deserve her hate?

Or maybe I just needed to tell her that I fucking loved her and I didn't care if she loved me back yet. That she was worth the fight, and in time she'd see the truth.

I waited until I heard her steps stop at the sink, just outside the shower door. She turned on the water, and I knew my chance had arrived.

I jumped out and grabbed her, my one hand over her mouth, to muffle anything she might say or do to trigger the audio sensor on the camera. I spun with her in my arms and led her into the shower before reaching out and turning on the tap full blast with my free hand. With any luck, the rush of the water would drown us out.

She struggled against my hold, but I held her tighter. "Stop, Bridget, I just want to talk in private." She stilled, twisting her neck to look back at me with wide eyes.

Her confusion was evident, but when her body relaxed against mine I could tell she was going to cooperate. I moved my hands so she could speak. "What's left to talk about?"

"Why did you come to this show?"

"You know why I did. I wanted to reunite with my ex."

"Is that the only reason? Because if that were true, then why didn't you leave yesterday?"

The way she licked her lip made me want to steal a kiss from her. It'd been far too long since I'd had a taste of her and



she was all I craved. Yesterday had just been a tease.

“I almost did. But if you must know, I need the money.”

“Are you in some kind of financial trouble because if you need help I’ll—”

“No, I’ve got something I’m working on and...” She paused, shaking her head. “I don’t need to justify why I need the money I just do, okay?”

In order for her to see a dime we had to win. Did that mean she thought we had a chance? I bit back a smile, not wanting my hopes to run away with me. What I needed to do was formulate a plan, and fast.

“Okay, so let’s win this together.”

“What makes you think we can pull that off? This is a show about people falling in love. We are closer to hating each other than we are loving each other. People won’t be fooled by us.”

“So we play nice for the cameras. We can win over the viewers together. I don’t like losing and I suspect you don’t either, so let’s do this.”

Never mind that my actual plan was to make her fall in love with me. The groveling love confession I had planned morphed into a scheme in an instant but at least I had a better chance of her agreeing to my proposal. Maybe I *was* as deviant as she said.

But it didn’t matter as long as I walked away with the respect of the woman that I loved and she got what she wanted in the process.

A win.

It would be a step in the right direction toward regaining her trust if nothing else.

“You don’t even have to split the winnings with me,” I continued, hoping to sweeten the pot. “You can keep every cent. What do you say?”

“So, you want me to fake date you for two hundred and fifty grand?”

“When you put it that way, it sounds dirty, but yeah, why not? Reality television is a scam anyhow. Everyone knows that. So it’s not like when we go our separate ways after this anyone will be surprised.” Not that if I had it my way we’d be doing that.

She frowned. “You’re right. It makes me feel like a fool for even thinking this was a good idea at all. But we’re not terrible people for trying to make the most of it, right?”

“Of course not, Bridge. And I’ve got your back.”

She scoffed. “Now I know we’re doomed.”

“We’re not. I wouldn’t let you down again.” And it was true. I’d learned my lesson from the last time. This was my last chance to make it work with her and I was going to push. “There’s one last thing we need to do, though, but you’re not going to like it.”

She sighed. “What’s that?” I could tell by her tone I was pushing my luck, but I was about to go all the way.

“Kiss on it.”

BRIDGET

“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?”

If he thought I was going to do that, he'd gone completely insane.

“We need it to look natural for the cameras. The aim is to wow them, remember?”

Damn it. He was right. There was no way we were going to pull this off without some public displays of intimacy.

“Fine, do it then.”

He chuckled. “You make it seem like I've just offered you a root canal.” He slid his hand between my hair and neck, cupping the back of my head.

“It is about that pleasurable for me.”

“Come on, Bridget, you act like I wasn't there that weekend. You confessed your desires for me once before, can't you just admit to them again?”

“Confessed my desires? Don't flatter yourself. All I did was call you hot.”

“Those weren't just ‘you're hot’ morning after cuddles.”

If he knew that, why did he run?

No. No more questions. This was strictly business. “Hunt, just kiss me already.”

“Not until you answer me.”

I'd had just about enough of this game. I pushed him back. “On second thought, I might just pack my suitcase—”

I didn't finish my sentence before his lips were on mine, vaporizing any intention to run in an instant. Who was I kidding? There was never a day when I didn't want to kiss Hunter. My eyes slid shut as I leaned into the kiss, savoring the contact as I slid my hands over his shoulders. I could feel the power in his muscles as he backed me against the wall until my body was flush with his. Despite myself, I moaned into his mouth as he deepened the kiss.

This was not good.

No, this was very bad

I couldn't give in to this. To him.

This was not a game, it was my life.

He couldn't sway me.

I placed my hands on his chest, pushing him back. “That's enough, Hunter. I think we've proved we can share a convincing kiss, don't you?”

He stepped under the shower water. “We have.” He squirted some of the body wash from the row of bottles the studio had provided. “But that's because it was real.”

“It was not.”

“Oh, Bridget, you moaned, baby. If you think it wasn't as real for you as it was for me, the only person you're fooling is yourself.”

Maybe he was right.

But maybe I needed to fool myself.

Or maybe I didn't want to be tumbling down a hill head-first with Hunter so soon after being exposed to this harebrained scheme. Because, as history told me, there was an inherent risk of rushing into things with him.

We had a one-night stand that resulted in us not talking for years and a bunch of hurt feelings on my end. But what I didn't know was how he felt about the whole thing.

Why had he walked away? I was itching to ask him, but it seemed like I'd be opening up a can of worms that we could do without.

The truth seemed a tad too intimate, and I wasn't ready to share it with him. Because if I asked him about his feelings, then he might ask me about mine and then I'd have to tell him the one thing I never wanted him to know about that night—that he was my first.

“See, you can't even deny it.”

“Deny what?” I'd rabbit-holed, chasing down thoughts about a past I had no business revisiting. But I had, and the result was me having zero clue what he'd said in the present.

“That it was real for you.”

I sighed. “My attraction toward you is real, okay? I moaned because the kiss was hot. But don't confuse attraction for chemistry or compatibility.”

His smile was so bright I could've slapped him. “We'll see about that, doll. Why don't we test this chemistry out before our dirty day of deception begins?” He placed his palms on the shower wall, caging me in.

I felt the heat emanating from him. His eyes were aggressive and luscious as they searched mine for signs of surrender.

Given his track record with me, this wasn't a good idea, but something inside of me urged me to go through with it.

His lips were parted, inviting me to kiss him again, but I knew that wasn't all he was asking. What he wanted was for me to let my guard down and admit that there was something real between us.

It was much too soon for that. But knowing that did nothing to quell the growing ache between my thighs.

Years of longing bubbled to the surface. My breathing felt shallow, and my head a touch light as a war broke out within me.

Do I give in or fight?

Forever passed before I spoke again.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s test it out.”

He grinned, dropping his one hand to my waist as he stepped closer so our bodies were only inches apart. He brushed a strand of hair away from my face before tracing the outline of my jaw with his fingertips.

A sensation unlike anything I’d ever felt before raced through me and the air between us seemed charged with electricity. His gaze dropped to my lips and without thinking, I bit the bottom one, giving him an invitation that he accepted.

Without a word, he leaned in to kiss me again, his lips smoldering with an unmistakable fire that lit me up from within. Every nerve in my body screamed for him to take it further, and I felt the weight of wanting him more than anything else in the world crashing down around me.

Unable to resist his advances any longer, I wound my arms around his neck again and kissed him back with abandon. Swept away by the intensity of our connection, I had no other choice but to succumb to his touch, allowing myself to be engulfed by his embrace.

His hand slipped beneath my cover-up and toyed with the hem of my bathing suit bottoms. His voice was low and husky when he said, “You’re sure of this? You don’t want me to stop?”

“I—wait. Do you want to stop?”

“No, doll, I’ve fucking dreamed of this moment for years. Stopping is the last thing I want.”

“Why did you ask then?”

He buried his face in my neck, and between kisses said, “Because what I want isn’t all that matters. It’s not as important as what *you* want.”

I didn't know how to respond to that. That Hunter cared about my feelings in any way was so new and foreign to me it was hard to process.

He pulled his hand away, and I blurted out, "No. Don't stop."

He smirked, reaching back out and flipping his hand behind the fabric, and slipped two fingers into my slit. My clit throbbed, begging for him to apply the pressure that he was holding back. "You're sure you want me to touch you like this?" He circled it a few times, and I sucked in a breath from the surge of pleasure that cascaded through my body.

"Y—yes. Touch me."

He groaned into my ear. "Beg me, Bridget. Beg me to make you cum. Let me know how much you fucking want this—want me."

I could feel his hard cock pressed against my belly. I shook my head as I slipped my hand down his swim shorts and laughed. "Not a chance, Hunter. I want you, you beast, but I'm not your prey. I won't beg." I wrapped my hand around his thick shaft, squeezing it. "Why don't you show me what you've got? And, maybe, I'll return the favor."

He laughed. "You're always so fucking difficult. But I love yo—it. I love it."

My heart seized in my chest. Did he almost slip and tell me he loved me?

Hunter began a steady rhythm of light circles around my clit, scrambling my thoughts. I moaned as pure pleasure reverberated through me from his touch.

He brought his mouth to my ear. "Does that feel good, baby girl?" His fingers explored me, pushing me closer to the edge each time before he pulled back, teasing me.

The pleasure was almost too much, and I let out a soft whimper. "Please don't stop."

"I thought you were too proud to beg, doll."

I ignored the jeer. Hunter increased the intensity of each movement as waves of euphoria raced through my body, threatening to break me. He stopped.

“No.” I dug my nails into the flesh of his back.

“Beg for it,” he barked out.

I tightened my grip on his cock to take back control.

A wide grin spread across his face. “You’re even more fun than I remembered.”

“Well, you’re not.” Okay, that was a lie, but he deserved it, cutting off my orgasm like he had.

“I don’t lose, Bridget. It’s what makes me a good lawyer. But I’m not beyond a pivot. If you want to be stubborn, let’s see if you can resist cumming for me instead.”

“That’s easy.” I tried to push away from the wall, but he stopped me.

Hunter tutted. “That’s not playing fair. No running away.”

He applied the same delicious pressure to my clit. I bit my inner cheek to try to will away the surges of ecstasy that threatened to overtake me.

The want to refuse his order faded into the distance until I couldn’t hold back any longer and broke under his expert touch. Energy radiated between us, bursting out in all directions from the point of contact, spreading over my entire body. Every muscle tensed as pleasure took over followed by a deep sense of relaxation.

“Good girl.” Hunter gave me a quick kiss before pulling my hand from his shorts.

He paused before wrapping his arms around my hips, supporting me.

“From now on, we meet here every morning to plan our day. Today, your job is to pretend you’re warming up to me for the cameras. We don’t want to play too nice too soon.”

“So, I get to dislike you still?”



I still did, didn't I? Dislike him, I meant.

A sick feeling overcame me as I realized I didn't know where my feelings stood with Hunter anymore now than I did yesterday.

"Yes, pretend you don't like me."

"Easy enough. That's the best news you've given me all day." And it was. There was comfort in pretending I still knew where I stood with him. Comfort in the cushion of resentment that was wedged between us.

He shook his head and sighed like he had no clue what he was going to do with me. But the hint of a smile on his lips told me he enjoyed it. "We'll take the rest day-by-day."

With that, he stepped out of the shower and left me alone.

I turned the tap all the way to cold, hoping the frozen water would ground me. Since my mind was failing to.

I wasn't sure I was ready for this.

I wasn't sure I was ready for him.

Hunter had no clue what he was dabbling with. He didn't know the depth of my feelings for him. Or how much it would crush me if he let me down again.

I would have to work extra hard to keep it light between us and not let him know how I felt until I had enough time to make sense of it all.

Because I felt like I was right on track headed for an emotional train wreck and I owed it to myself to do everything in my power to stop it.

HUNTER

I'M NOT sure how finger painting on each other's bodies qualified as couple's therapy, but that's what the show wanted us to do.

They sent in a couple's guru to guide us through the exercise. He was an attractive dude, with a chiseled jaw and defined abs. I looked over at Bridget whose eyes were on the sand while he instructed us to write words on our partner's bodies. Words we associated with them.

My turn came up first.

I looked down at the brunette beauty standing before me. Her curves were on full display in her two-piece bathing suit. A man could get used to seeing this: a beautiful woman nearly naked in front of him.

I let my hand trace down her back. They had given me an opportunity to touch her, and I was going to take full advantage of it.

Maybe, just maybe, I could let her know how much I missed her without having to say the words. I dipped my finger in the cool paint and held it to her skin to write while I said the word aloud to her. "Strong."

She frowned. "Strong?"

I nodded. "You have a good grip." It's not what I meant, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to tease her after that

reaction.

She was always ready to assume the worst of me. But that was something we were working on, whether or not she knew it. By the end of these two weeks, I hoped she would realize just how honest my feelings for her were.

Her eyes widened as she looked at the paint on her arm “Yeah, I’m a regular He-Man.”

I chuckled, “Maybe not, but you exude inner strength and it’s sexy.”

She shrugged. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Okay, your turn.”

She smiled up at me, a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. This was about to be bad. “Confusing.” She wrote out the word in red paint.

The feel of the paint was as cool on my skin as her intentions toward me were. I felt like she hadn’t chosen the color at random. She wanted to send me a subliminal message with the red that despite the morning, she was still angry over things.

And I couldn’t blame her.

I’d mishandled things in the past. She had no reason to trust that now that we’d been intimate again, I wouldn’t do the exact same thing.

They’d instructed us not to comment too much on the words that the other had written because we’d be addressing them later on. What they had planned to accomplish, I wasn’t sure, but if it helped me crack through Bridget’s defenses a little more, I was all for it. But I couldn’t help myself. “The only person who is confusing my intentions is you, doll.”

She huffed out a laugh. “Thanks for helping me figure out what my next word is.”

Oh no.

I dipped my finger in the blue paint.

Two could play this game.

While I wrote, nervous energy bubbled within me. I was about to strike out at her for the first time since we started this journey, but if she was going to call me out for my flaws, I was going to call her out for hers. “Cold,” I said as I finished writing it on her chest, just above her cleavage over her heart.

I knew it wasn’t true. Bridget wasn’t cold underneath it all, but she worked very hard to maintain an icy exterior with me and I wanted to see if I could melt her a little by calling her out on it.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.” But her eyes didn’t match her protest.

A pang of guilt struck me. Bridget was stubborn and a perfectionist. There was no way I could point out a character flaw without her doing everything in her power to correct it. Besides, she started the honesty game. She was going to get as well as she gave.

“I think it is—for now.”

Her eyes narrowed, but if I knew her at all, underneath that glare, her gears were engaged and overthinking every implication of my words. “And I think if you just allow yourself to see the truth in what I’m saying, you might realize that it’s okay to give us a chance to prove otherwise.” I had a hard time not reaching out to pull her close to me. But I had to do this.

Her next word surprised me. “Fraud.”

I felt like she’d just kicked me in the stomach.

I looked up to see her face. It was unreadable.

“That’s not fair.”

“It is. You play with people’s heads. You trick them into thinking you’re the good guy when you’re not.”

Where was all of this coming from? We’d only spent one night together. But if you didn’t know that, you’d think we’d spent years together, and I’d somehow ruined her life. There was a rawness behind her attack that I’d have to figure out the source of.

I lifted my hand and let my finger slide down her arm, crossing out the word 'strong'. Letting the blue paint drip down her skin, her eyes watched the trail it left behind. I didn't let myself think twice before I said, "You're a fraud, too."

"What?"

I leaned in closer, my words slow and deliberate. "You're a fraud too." She raked her teeth over her bottom lip.

Fuck what I would have given to set aside our argument and claim her mouth. "You pretend to be this strong, independent woman who doesn't need a guy. But deep down, you are a scared little girl dying to hand over control. And God, do you ever look sexy walking around with that control. But every time I go to reach for it, you push me away."

I felt her shiver as my breath brushed over her ear. Her eyes looked into mine, a mix of confusion and desire. She wanted this. Wanted me. She was just so afraid of getting her heart broken that she'd shut the door on us.

"I'm trying to give you everything you need, Bridget. To show you that I'm the man to provide for you in all the ways you want. That I can lighten your load if you'll allow me to. And even when you don't need to lean on me, you're going to learn that you can. You just have to stop fearing me."

She glanced around and I followed her gaze. Everyone else had paused their game and their eyes were all on us. The cameras were pointed in our direction.

Shit.

I'd just said way too much.

Mr. Guru was the only one that was smiling. "I think you two are ready."

"Ready for what?" Bridget and I both said in unison.

"To wash away your past and open yourself up to a new beginning." He gestured out toward the ocean.

That was his grand solution. A dip in the water? It wasn't that simple.

I looked over at Bridget, and her face exhibited the same skepticism that I was feeling.

But looking at her covered with words that filled me with regret made me want to get them off of her as soon as I could.

*Fuck it.*

I turned, scooped her into my arms and jogged toward the water.

“Hunt!” she squealed, clinging to me.

I smiled down at her and she was so caught up in the moment that she couldn’t help but smile back.

If the ocean water could get us one step closer to letting go of the past, I wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity.

I splashed into the sea until I was far enough out that I could fall back into a seated position with her in my lap.

I sighed. The water was the perfect temperature. Cool enough to be refreshing, but warm enough that the tension of the activity melted away and drifted out to sea. “I’m ready for a fresh start. Are you?”

She chewed at her lip before dipping her hand in the briny water and wiping the word fraud from my chest. “Don’t make me regret this,” she said, her voice quiet.

“You won’t, doll, I promise.”

BRIDGET

THE REST of the day was downtime. I sat by the pool, eyes closed, soaking in the rays with Jolene.

She and her partner came from Seattle too. But she was born in Alabama and had the sweetest southern accent and was everything I was not.

She had long, bright blonde hair; her skin was tan and she wore a skimpy bikini on her athletic frame. Jo was the kind of girl you'd see on the cover of magazines. It surprised me to learn she and Ryan were both police officers.

Officer Davis, as Jolene liked to call him, had the body of Hercules but a clean-cut image. How they ended up on a show like this when they seemed so perfect for each other, I couldn't begin to guess.

We were the last two people in the pool area. It was nice to relax after such an intense morning.

"I think we should play a game," Jolene said.

I lifted my head up from the lounge chair, shielding my eyes with my hand while I fumbled for my shades.

There was a camera crew on us.

"What kind of game?"

"Well, let's get our fellas over here and I'll tell ya."

We waved the guys over. And neither of them wasted a moment before crossing the courtyard. Hunter came to sit on the chair next to me. He was close enough that the smell of him carried on the breeze. He smelled like a mix of the ocean and sunscreen. There was something about having him close that always made my heart go wild.

*I should get that checked out.*

But as much as I would like it not to be caused by my attraction toward him—it was.

Hunter had a body women drooled over. He was muscular and tanned. His swim trunks rode low on his waist with his abs showing. I wanted to reach out and touch his smooth skin and trace the cut lines from his muscles.

Everything about him was perfect. Even his brown eyes were more like molten honey. They were so warm and inviting.

“What is it, baby?” Hunter asked, noticing me staring. The playful, teasing tone of his voice was intoxicating. Everything about him was inviting me in. Since when had he become so hospitable?

“Nothing,” I blurted before looking away.

“So, what game did you want to play?” I asked Jolene, hoping she’d take notice.

“Well,” she began. “We noticed how heated things got between you two in the game earlier. And we want to help lighten the mood.”

“You can’t lighten the mood between us,” Hunter spoke up.

“No,” I said. “Besides, we are so done with all the games.”

“No,” Hunter said, shaking his head. “We can’t end it yet. We’ve got to keep up appearances, baby, remember?”

I tipped my head at him. Why was he bringing that up right now? That was shower talk only, I thought. I decided the best course of action was to play dumb.



“Oh, and what appearance would that be?” I asked.

“The appearance that we don’t want to rip each other’s clothes off and fuck every time we’re near one another.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

Jolene clasped her hand over her smile, and Ryan extended his hand to her. “Come on, Jo. You can save your game for another time. I think you may have misjudged these two.”

“I did?” she said as she allowed her slight frame to be pulled into a powerful hug. “Shoot, I sure did.”

Ryan smiled. “Yeah, darlin’ we did. I think arguing is foreplay for these two.”

She smiled at us. “Shoot, now why hadn’t I thought about that? I think you’re right.”

“No—I—uh, it’s not really, we just—” I stammered, glancing over at Hunter for help.

He put up his hands in surrender. “They’ve caught us red-handed. They should promote you two to detectives.”

Jolene and Ryan laughed before they took their leave.

When they were out of earshot, I turned to him. “What is wrong with you?”

He shrugged. “What? Are you mad I let the cat out of the bag?”

“You let it out of the bag?”

“We’re in a game, aren’t we? I’m just making sure we stay in it.”

I inhaled a sharp, deep breath and regretted it. That was a mistake. He smelled divine. “But the whole ‘I’ll fuck you’ thing? Don’t you think that’s taking things too far?”

He leaned in close, smothering our mics in his palms. “Too far for the FCC, yes, that was the idea. Meet me in the shower in ten minutes and I’ll show you just how far I’ll take things for *us*.”

## HUNTER

I DIDN'T GIVE her enough time to protest before I walked away. Either her curiosity would get the better of her and she would join me, or I'd be showering off my salty skin alone.

A few minutes after stepping into the shower stall, the door creaked open behind me.

I looked over my shoulder to see that she was still wearing her suit. Her joining me already had me half-hard.

Unless I wanted to scare her off, turning wasn't an option.

"Hunt," she said, her eyes trailing down, taking in my nakedness. "You weren't joking, were you?"

"What would make you think I was joking? You were here this morning, right?"

She shrugged as she shut the frosted glass door behind her. "Yeah. I'm just concerned that it's all an act. That you don't want me as bad as you claim."

I flashed her my erect cock. "Does this look like an act?"

She gasped and let out a quick laugh. "No, that looks..."

"Tempting?" I tried to finish her sentence.

"Uh, I was thinking more like painful."

I arched my brow at her. "Did I hurt you last time?"

“No. It’s just really hard. And I haven’t even touched you yet.”

Yet? Did that mean she was going to touch me?

I groaned, clenching at my chest for dramatic effect. “Oh yes, Bridge, it’s the worst. Would you like to help ease my misery?”

She took a tentative step toward me while laughing at my theatrics. “I might give you a hand.”

I don’t know if I hallucinated or if she consented to us, but I turned around to look at her.

Her parted lips, and the slight raise of her eyebrows made her look like she was waiting for permission to open a present.

I didn’t want to keep her waiting. I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her to me. My hard cock pressed between us as I kissed her.

Her lips tasted sweet and felt even sweeter. I met zero resistance from her when I deepened our kiss. She gave it to me without a fight because my tongue demanded it. She made me smile with her soft sigh.

The sound of her made me wish she wasn’t wearing her suit. I wanted to plunge myself deep into her and feel her pussy again.

It seemed like our love was a tragedy yesterday. But today was different. We’d had a successful but tough morning that left one thing clear.

She wanted me just as badly as I wanted her.

And I couldn’t decide which of us was more surprised about that. She was shell-shocked, and it was clear. And maybe I should have pumped the brakes, but I wanted her more than my lungs needed oxygen. With her in my arms, I could breathe again after two years of suffocation.

I brushed the bottom of her hidden breasts after her hands crept up around my neck. Then dipped my fingers under the band and traced the curve.

“I want to see you. All of you.” I groaned against her mouth.

She nodded, and I broke our kiss, pulling back to let her know I wouldn't kiss her again until she was naked. Her bikini was just a few thin pieces of material, but it might as well have been a full suit of armor between us.

Her breath hitched in her chest as I pulled the tie that kept her from me loose. Slipping the straps off her shoulders had been enough to give her goosebumps. I bent down to kiss the hollow of her collarbone before trailing my lips up her neck.

My hands wandered down to her bare breasts, reveling at the weight of them in my palm and the feel of her nipples as they puckered beneath my touch.

Her back arched, and I pulled down her bottoms as she shimmed her ass so I could slide the soaked suit down to her thighs. She helped me the rest of the way by stepping out of the suit and kicking it aside. I bent down and lifted her breast and sucked her nipple into my mouth as my other hand slipped between her thighs.

I don't know what was wetter, the shower or her pussy. She was slick and ready for me. I knew I should have been taking it slow with her. But my self-control disappeared in the presence of her allure. It had only been a few hours, but I wanted to feel her come again.

“No. Hunter. Stop.” She shifted her hips back.

I jerked my hand away. “What's wrong?” Cupping her cheek in my hand, I searched her eyes for answers. I knew I shouldn't have pushed her so far, so soon.

*Fucking greedy idiot.*

A smile played on her lips and without a word, she reached out and curled her fingers around my cock and lowered to her knees. “It's your turn.”

I let out a deep exhale and looked down at her while shaking my head. She looked so sexy with her soaking wet hair that appeared almost black while wet and clinging to her

pale flesh. Her mascara was giving way and darkening the underside of her eyes, making her look like a gothic princess.

Her tongue ran the length of my shaft and my head spun. I groaned and grabbed onto her hair with both hands as she took me deeper into her mouth. It was taking every ounce of self-control I had not to fuck her face.

Her hands grasped around my thighs and pulled me closer, my cock sliding deep in her, coaxing a moan from me that echoed off the bathroom walls.

Shit. That was too loud.

She shifted backward and I could feel her hot breath on my tip before she sucked the dome of my head.

I looked down just in time to see her devour every inch of me once again and couldn't help but marvel at how incredible she was.

How much I wanted her, and this, forever.

Well, more than this. But damn if her expert blow job skills didn't make the unchained desire I already felt for her all that more intense.

My body was on full alert.

Everywhere her tongue touched, it felt like I was being zapped with electricity and all I wanted to do was slam into her, but I held back and savored every second of her teasing.

As she picked up the pace, her head bobbed while she circled her tongue along the underside of my shaft. "I'm going to come, doll."

She moaned and the vibration of her sweet permission pushed me over the edge. A moment later I had reached my breaking point and erupted against her lips, spilling all of myself into her mouth as I tangled both hands in her sopping wet hair.

She swallowed back my offering, and when I released her, sat back on her heels with a satisfied smile on her face before she kissed up my stomach and returned to her feet.

I spun her around so her back was against the wall. I'd come, but the ache for her hadn't subsided.

*Would it ever?*

I palmed the back of her thighs and was about to hitch her legs up and bury my still-hard cock deep inside when there was a knock on the shower glass and we both jumped.

"Fun time is over." The gruff voice called through the glass. "Max wants you in his trailer in five."

*Fuck.*

They'd caught us, and the producer wanted to talk.

Bridget's eyes were wide with fear as I stepped back from her.

I hoped for her sake our brief trip to the shower wasn't about to result in us being kicked off the show, but I was hard-pressed to regret a single moment of it.

Because I would already walk away a winner.

Bridget was the only prize I was interested in.

BRIDGET

THE PRODUCER, Max, looked between Hunter and me. “I thought you hated each other?”

Hunter shrugged. “You thought wrong.” He looked at me for confirmation.

I didn’t know what the correct answer was to that question because so much had happened in such a short time. Before I’d even had a chance to process anything.

I wasn’t upset over what we’d just done. It was the best sex I’d ever had, and we hadn’t even made it to the sex part because of the interruption. It was even better than our first time, because there was a lot of nervous fumbling that went on because of me. But now, I was more self-assured, and able to enjoy him better.

“So here’s the deal, kids.” It was odd for him to call Hunter a kid since he was also in his thirties. “We caught you two sneaking in and out of the shower on camera, and it’s usable, but not yet. You two won last night’s poll for favorite couple. People love the conflict, and we can’t afford the rating drop that would ensue if you reconcile so soon.”

Favorite couple? The words ruminated in my mind. We weren’t even a couple and we were winning the popular vote?

Hunter frowned. “Meaning?”

“Keep the fight alive,” Max said. “For the fans.”

I would have been in favor of this plan only an hour before. But not anymore. I'd wanted Hunter for a long time.

At first, I'd held back because of the age gap and he didn't seem interested. And then I held back because I was worried about how Roxy would react. But despite myself, I couldn't hold back anymore.

*Wait, what?* What was I thinking?

I forgot about my best friend. What would she think about this? How much of what we'd just done would air? She would be watching.

I may have lost my best friend because of one poor decision. I sighed when I looked over at Hunter. We seemed close to a breakthrough, but at what cost?

Hunter's eyes flashed with anger as he asked, "How do you expect us to keep it alive?"

Max shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "You two will figure it out. Don't be too obvious about it. You know what I mean?" He motioned between Hunter's and my lips. "The intrigue will dry up if they don't believe there is genuine hate between you. We want you two at the finale. Make it happen." He turned around to leave the trailer.

"What about the other contestants? That's not fair to them," I called out to him.

Max shrugged. "I don't care about fairness. Ratings matter most and the viewers like you as you are, so keep it up." He walked out of the room.

Hunter and I stood facing each other in Max's trailer. "What just happened?" I asked.

"It seems we have a job to do," he said, his eyes flashing with anger once again. "I don't want you to get involved in this sort of thing."

"Before we go back to that *zoo*, let's go for a walk. To clear our heads a bit," I suggested.

"That's a good idea."



He draped his arm across my shoulders as we stepped out onto the property behind the villa that served as a backstage area for the show.

I looked up at him. Did he look...sad? “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I’m the one that’s confused now, doll. You hated me, I thought.” Hunter ran his hand through his hair. “Or disliked me too much for there to be honest hope.” He pinned me with his intense eyes.

I traced the outline of a skull tattoo on his forearm with my fingertip. “That’s not true or you never would have come here. But, no, I never hated you,” I said and shook my head. “Never.”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

“Because I was trying to. Sure, I’ve been upset with you for years. I wanted to hate you. But I think the past couple of days have proved just how good I am at doing that.”

He pulled me close, and I didn’t resist even a little. “And now that I know you’re open to exploring things, I can’t imagine sacrificing even a moment of it. You’re more than some fucking game to me.”

His lips brushed over mine, sending a chill down my spine. They were soft and made me pliable, and I didn’t want him to stop kissing me. There was something so satisfying about losing myself in Hunter Grand.

I always wanted to feel his body against mine again. And now, away from the cameras, there was an urgency behind it. We were uncaged birds desperate to fly.

His stubble scratched against my cheeks and chin as we continued our kiss.

When he broke it, I silently protested the loss of connection. “I guess we could just tell Max to go fuck himself and do it our way,” he said.

I nodded. “I think that’s a good idea.”

He cupped my face in his hands. “There’s only one problem with that plan.”

“What?”

“If we do it our way and our popularity drops, we could walk away with nothing.”

That was true.

But I felt being honest about our journey. However, Lucked Up Love wasn’t the only loss I faced following that plan. And losing my best friend would be a far greater tragedy. “How do you think Roxy would feel about us doing what we’re doing? Did she know that they sent you as a replacement?”

He shook his head. “No, but you can’t worry about that. We’re in too deep to come out unscathed if she has a problem with us. She’ll know about the one-night stand. She’ll know about my feelings for you. And if they air any part of what happened between us in the showers, she’ll know that we’ve crossed the line again.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“But you’re not alone in this, Bridget. Don’t forget that. It may come as a shock to my sister, but I know she wants us both to be happy and if that means being together, I think she’ll accept us.”

“But you don’t know that for sure.”

“You’re right and neither will you until we navigate the first problem at hand. So you need to decide. Do we try for the win? Or do we leave?”

“Oh, Hunter, you can’t put that decision on me. Decide for us? You said I could lean on you when I needed to and I’m calling in the favor.”

He looked up to the sky like the clouds had the answers. “Then we stay. We try to win this thing. But we play the game *our* way. We can walk the line and keep things exciting if we want to. But you’re concerned about fairness, and I don’t think you’ll be happy with yourself if we aren’t honest.”

I smiled at him. “You’re not as deceptive as I thought.”

“I hope that’s not the only deception you find me innocent of.”

Laughing, I shook my head at him. “I’m getting there.”

“Good, now let’s go get the charade started.”

We walked back to the villa where our fellow contestants were gathered around one another and the chatter among them fell silent when they spotted us.

Hunter reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. “Remember to lean on me, doll. Whenever you need to.”

HUNTER

THE NEXT MORNING, I waited for Bridget to meet me in the shower, but she didn't come.

She was already with some of the other girls when I caught up with her.

I leaned over her shoulder, kissing the nape of her neck. "We have an agreement," I growled into her ear.

She shivered a little. I'd never tire of watching how her body reacted to me. It was the hottest thing *ever*.

"Sorry, I took a quick one alone because Jolene wanted my help to get ready for the date they won as a prize from that shamrock game."

I extended my hand, and she took it before I pulled her from her chair. "Well, you owe me some alone time, then." I led her from the group to a cabana on the opposite side of the courtyard.

The sheer drapes surrounding it billowed in the breeze, providing light shelter from the heat. But the true paradise was nestled in my arms.

"I wonder what they have planned for us today?"

"Whatever it is, I hope I get to touch you more."

I stroked her arm with my hand as she looked up at me.

She laughed. “Because we’re doing such a great job of staying away from one another.”

A camera crew drifted our way.

I sighed. We may have only had two weeks at this place, but I couldn’t wait to get Bridget home and alone.

There was so much more that I wanted to do with her that required complete privacy. The shower had been fun, but I wanted so much more.

Max walked through the set and took a double take at us, cuddled up together on the lounge. I waved, and he frowned before continuing.

Bridget’s eyes went wide, but I squeezed her tighter.

I refused to be ashamed of showing the woman that I loved affection.

“Hunt?”

I kissed her forehead. “What is it?”

“Why didn’t you contact me after what happened at Roxy’s birthday?”

I sighed, knowing that anything I had to offer her as an excuse for how I acted wasn’t good enough. “Two years ago, you have to realize where my head was at. I hadn’t expected to come to visit and find that my kid sister’s best friend had grown into this stunning woman. Nor had I planned on anything happening between us—but it did. I was so laser-focused on my career that when I woke that afternoon, still cuddled up against you, I realized how quickly things could progress between us if allowed. And I had to mitigate the fallout. I didn’t have time for a relationship. Had we attempted one back then I can guarantee you would have disliked me a lot more than you did. So I walked away.”

“It was that simple, huh?”

“Simple isn’t the word I would use to describe it, babe, but I knew you deserved more time and attention than I could offer you.”

“I see.”

“I didn’t expect you to be so hurt by it. But I should have. Not everyone’s cut out for a casual encounter and we should’ve discussed things more than we did before we allowed each other to get caught up in the moment.”

“The reason I was so upset was that—”

Just then, someone else from the crew approached us to inform us we needed to get changed for another activity in a few minutes.

I groaned in annoyance, frustrated that we’d been interrupted, when I had her out of her head and back into my arms, and we were unearthing the things that had long stood between us.

I kissed her on the forehead again. “Hold on to that thought, Bridge, because I want to hear every word and have the time to respond. We’ll pick up where we left off after, okay?”

She nodded, and I pressed a quick kiss to her lips before we parted ways to get dressed for the afternoon’s events.

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For the activity, we had to make our way to the beach, where they had set up individual picnics for each of the couples. Bridget and I made our way to ours.

She looked out at the water and took a deep breath as the waves crashed in the distance, gulls squawking overhead.

They’d spread a white and blue checkered cloth out and provided a beach umbrella for shade.

It was easily the hottest day since we’d arrived. Why did I get the feeling I’d just entered a pressure cooker in more ways than one?

A meal of grilled chicken, steak, and crab, with two fresh salads and a platter with a variety of bread and cheese, and fruit was spread out before us.

Bridget leaned against my arm. “I have to admit, I was a little nervous about what they would have planned for us. But this seems nice.”

The same had crossed my mind, especially after the way Max looked at us earlier that day.

There was a tablet on the blanket, and Bridget picked it up, tapping at the screen after seeing that some of the other couples had already done so.

Kylie’s face popped up. “Couples! Welcome to Ex on the Beach. Enjoy your lunch and the view. But when you’re ready, each of you has a video waiting to be watched. Make sure you use the headphones provided. What you’re going to hear is for your ears only.”

Bridget and I exchanged glances before she set the tablet back down on the blanket.

“So much for a relaxing day at the beach,” I said.

Then again, with any luck, maybe it was just some videos from family back home or something. But if that was the case, why the secrecy?

We were both quiet throughout the meal. After this, we’d have to have a serious talk about whether the stress that this show was putting us under was worthwhile.

A notification flashed on the screen that instructed me to watch my video first, and I put the headphones on and pressed play on the tablet.

A young guy popped up on the screen.

“Hey Bridget, It’s Joel. Of course, you know that already.” He let out a dopey laugh, and I side-eyed her.

*This* was the guy she was thinking about reuniting with?

He had surf bum written all over him. But it was obvious the show had told these people that they would send videos to their ex and not who their ex was partnered up with.

A dirty trick.

“Like, I won’t lie, bro,” he continued. “When I heard you were on a show shakin’ up with some other dude, I was mad bummed for a minute. But then when I saw he’s a lawyer, it made sense. You were always naggin’ for me to get a job, so yeah, you should totally be with a guy like him. That’s just not my path, you know? I’m working because Jay and I are saving up to hitchhike to Cali to catch some festivals, waves, and whatever else comes our way. Good luck with your lawyer, Bri. He seems like a good dude.” He saluted the camera. “Peace.”

I exited the video and set down the device. Bridget had started a dessert of her fingernail while waiting for me to finish watching.

I pulled her hand away from her mouth. “Nervous, babe?”

She let out a little laugh. “Who was it? Roxy?”

I shook my head. “No, it was Joel with a message for you. He said he’s saving up to hitchhike to Cali and that I seem like a ‘good dude, bro’.”

She laughed. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Do you?”

“You’re thinking that I’m crazy for ever wanting to reconcile with him?”

“No, doll.” I gave her a kiss. “But I overestimated the competition. I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I wasn’t intimidated knowing you wanted to be here with another man instead of me.”

She shrugged. “What can I say? The heart wants what the heart wants.” It was a tease and a confessional, all rolled into one. While pretending to speak about him, she was, in fact, talking about how much she wanted me.

Was she biding her time with guys that she didn’t see a future with while she waited for me? That seemed like a bit of a stretch, but not out of the realm of possibility. One thing was for sure, none of that mattered anymore. She was mine now and forever more if I had it my way.



I tickled her rib before tackling her in an embrace and smothering her neck with kisses until I felt the tablet vibrate against my side and pulled it out for her.

It was her turn, but I wasn't worried about it anymore. They'd have to dig pretty far back into my past to find a girlfriend of mine. Since I hadn't dated in years.

She put the headphones on, still smiling from my kiss attack, while I stretched out, resting my hands behind my head as I watched her.

Her smile faded, and I propped myself up. She glanced at me, tears pooling in her eyes before I reached out to her. "Bridge."

"Don't," she almost shouted because she was still wearing the headphones until she ripped them off and tossed down the tablet. "Don't touch me ever again."

She scrambled to her feet and stormed toward the stairs that led back up to the villa.

I picked up the tablet to see who the message was from before I darted after her.

It was gone.

I didn't know what she saw that had upset her, but I had to find out.

Before she walked away from me.

Forever.

BRIDGET

BY THE TIME I reached the top of the steep steps, I couldn't breathe. Only I didn't know if it was because there were too many stairs or if what I'd just watched was sending me into a full-blown panic attack. The world around me became muffled, indistinct, but loud and laced with shouts at the same time.

I couldn't believe what a fool I'd been. Hunter had opened up my heart again in record time and now all I had was even more feelings and the same old disappointment.

But it was worse this time because I may not have known any better before, but now I did.

I chose this pain.

"Bridget!" I heard Hunter's voice call out from behind me, followed by the pounding of footsteps.

I looked in his direction. He was jogging toward me with a camera crew hot on his heels.

I sprinted for the villa. There was only one place I knew of where I could get some privacy and melt down without the world watching. I raced into the house, up the stairs, and straight to the bathroom shower.

*Who was Danica?*

He'd never mentioned her before.

No, he'd conveniently left out the fact that right after he disappeared on me, he went back to L.A. and went on a date with a gorgeous co-worker of his. And from the sounds of it, they had an incredible time.

I could've retched.

I could hear Hunter and the crew behind me. There was no time to waste undressing, so I stepped into the shower in my sundress and turned the water on full-blast before sinking to the floor and hugging my knees.

All that talk about not having the time for a relationship or not being able to give me the attention I deserved was just that... talk. Because he'd given her his time just fine.

This was unforgivable.

I needed to pack my bags and go. The money wasn't worth this amount of humiliation and heartache.

I needed to go tend to my wounds in private and hope that I still had a best friend to go home to after this, because I needed her more than ever.

"Stay the fuck out of here." I heard Hunter shout at what had to be the camera crew. The shower door flew open with such force that it surprised me when it didn't shatter into a million little pieces on impact with the wall.

"Doll," he said, dropping to his knees as he lunged toward me, arms outstretched.

When he reached me, he pulled me into a powerful hug, and the moment he did, my dam burst. I'd held back the tears until that moment. But having his arms around me broke me in ways I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to repair.

"I don't know what you saw, baby, but you have to believe me. There's no way it could be true."

I sucked in a shaky breath. "Danica. Ring a bell?"

He furrowed his brow. "Yeah, we worked together at the Los Angeles firm. But I'm confused because we never dated."

"She said that you took her as your date to some event."

“Oh, right. I did that.”

He held me tight to him as I tried to push him away. “Bridget, stop. I took her with me because she was an intern at the time and it was a great opportunity for her to meet and greet. It wasn’t a date. There were no feelings between us.”

“She thought otherwise. She said, ‘when you’re done playing with the barista’ to call her. Do you see why you can’t just go around fucking women and expecting them not to catch feelings, Hunter?”

He shook his head. “I never fucked her. We never even kissed. Fuck, I don’t even think we ever hugged. So if she thought there was something more between us, then that’s on her. But I never entertained the idea, and it has nothing to do with us, understand me? Especially not now. So if you thought I hooked up with you and then went to be with her, get that nonsense right out of your mind.”

His nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed. “Max has to be behind this. We haven’t given him the drama he was looking for over the past few days and he’s fucking with us to force it. Danica was never into me. If she had been, I would have known. She wasn’t shy about anything.”

I stared into his eyes. Could I trust Hunter after years of deeming him untrustworthy? But what had I based that distrust on? Assumptions.

In the past week, we’d connected. I had no reason to believe that what he told me wasn’t true. Our problems came from a lack of communication about intent, but by surprising me on Lucked Up Love he’d made his intentions clear from the start.

He wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

And everything he had said or done since then had upheld the motive he claimed to have.

I sniffled and gave him a slight smile. “Reality television does have a reputation for causing drama.”

His shoulders fell in relief. “Yes, exactly. The last thing I want to do is hurt you because I...” He paused. “Bridget, is it

too soon to tell you I'm falling for you? Because I am.”

I smiled at him. “Me too.”

It was a white lie. I never stopped loving him, but it felt good to have some reassurance that he was feeling similarly. Even though I suspected his feelings for me ran deeper than he'd expressed too, if not as deep as mine for him.

BRIDGET

A HAND CLASPED over my mouth waking me with a start. My heart was pounding as my eyes shot open and in the moonlight that filtered through the sheer curtains, I could make out Hunter's face and I smiled against his palm.

He put his finger to his lips, signaling for me to remain quiet, and removed his hand, running it down my arm threading his fingers through mine.

I sat up, looking around. Everyone else was asleep. Well, *almost* everyone. Jolene's bed was empty.

He pulled me from the bed into his arms and we made a quiet but hurried exit. He didn't stop until we were at the front doors of the building, making a near-silent escape. Once outside, he jogged, and I kept pace with him.

I wanted to ask him where we were going, but this was his secret mission and I figured I'd wait to speak until he spoke first, not wanting to spoil it for us.

He turned down a path that led into the brush. A warm breeze rustled through the palms, as the moon shone overhead, lighting a path that led to a clearing on the beach.

He crouched down, slipping the backpack I hadn't noticed he was carrying off his shoulder and unzipping it. "I figured we could use some privacy."

"We could. But is this allowed?"

He looked over his shoulder and smirked at me. “If they can bend the rules, so can we.”

I rubbed at my arms and he frowned and stood, pinching my chin between his thumb and forefinger to tip my head up.

“You always look stunning, but in this light, you look downright ethereal, doll.” His lips were hot on mine before I could even formulate a response. When he broke the kiss, I leaned forward, pressing my head to his chest. “Set aside your nerves and let me be in control tonight. I’ve been waiting to get you alone for way too long. The crew was talking about this spot on the beach and I knew it was our chance. There’s no surveillance here, and it’s where they come to get away.”

“What if one of them decides they need to do that tonight?”

“Why do you think I waited until the middle of the night to abduct you?”

“Oh, that’s what this is? An abduction?”

He grabbed both of my wrists, forcing them behind my back as my body pressed against his. I could feel the hard outline of his cock against me. “I said I’m in control tonight. Now, are you going to be a good girl and behave, or do I need to tie you up?”

I bit my lip as my body ignited against his. “I’ll behave.”

“Good girl.” He kissed my forehead and spun back around, releasing me to fan out a blanket over the sand for us.

He sat, and I followed suit. When he reached for me, I climbed into his lap, facing him.

He ran his hands up my back and over my shoulders. “I love these pajamas.”

It was nothing more than a camisole and shorts.

He gathered my hair to one side, holding it in his fist. “And this hair.” He kissed a trail along my collarbone to my ear. “Everything about you is perfect.” He used the same finger to trace my bottom lip. “It’s like they’ve designed you just for me. I fucking love everything about you.”

I tried to speak, but my throat closed up. All the raw desire he directed at me overwhelmed my body in the best of ways. Even though I knew how Hunter felt about me, I'd spent so long pining for him that in moments like these, everything felt surreal. Like a too-vivid dream that I might wake up from at any moment.

He pulled me forward, and my breasts crushed against his chest. His hands tangled in my hair as his lips descended onto mine again. His tongue probed my mouth before plunging inside, and I could feel his teeth against my lower lip. I pulled away, gasping for air, and he chuckled.

"Now that we're alone, what was it you wanted to tell me earlier?"

"It seems so pointless for me to tell you now that we've been through everything we have. But the reason I was so upset with you after that night we spent together was because you were my first."

He raised a brow at me. "First one-night stand? Or first—first?"

"My first ever."

"Oh, baby girl. I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would it have changed anything?"

He pulled me closer to him. "I'm not sure that it could've. Baby, I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. You had me turned around, and I was just... I never expected to feel like I did—or do—about you."

"What do you mean?"

"You're it. You're everything I've ever wanted. I never thought I'd find someone I couldn't live without. I've tried to pretend I could, but I can't."

"Hunter, I feel the same way."

"Then it's settled."

"What is?"



He ran his hand underneath the thin fabric of my camisole.  
“You’re mine.”

I laughed.

“I’m serious, Bridge.” His hand crept further up my shirt.  
“It’s kind of hot, you know?”

My skin tingled from the light brushing touch of his fingertips on my back. “What is?”

“That I was your first.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I couldn’t help but smile and run my fingers through his hair. “Mmmm... I guess. But...”

He looked into my eyes. “Stop. Take a moment to appreciate the good things. Pay attention to the things that make you happy *now*.”

“Not when you could have been my only if—”

He flipped me over so that he was hovering over me, his hardness pressing between my legs. “I’ll be your last. How about that?”

I sucked in a breath. “Do you promise?”

“You’re mine now. I’m not letting you slip through my fingers again, understand me?”

“If I’m yours, why don’t you act like it?”

His eyes narrowed as he pushed aside the crotch of my shorts and plunged two fingers inside me. I moaned at the sudden penetration. “Fuck, baby, you’re soaking wet.”

His fingers worked in and out of me. It felt good, but I wanted more. I hadn’t spent two years craving his fingers.

He pushed up my camisole and his mouth descended on my nipple and I gasped.

“Have you missed me, Bridget?” He licked and sucked at my nipple as his fingers trailed out of my pussy and up toward my clit, rubbing it.

“Yes, Hunter.”

“Has it been hard for you, being so far away from me?”

I shuddered under his fingertips. I wanted to feel him inside me, so much that the desire for him alone was going to push me over the edge. “Yes.”

“Did you miss this?” He nipped at my nipple and gave it a rough tug.

I writhed beneath him. “I did.”

Hunter’s whispering voice in my ear, hot breath on my skin, and impassioned groans against my mouth were almost too much to bear.

The rush of blood in my head, the panting of his breath, and the rustle of fabric as it moved against our skins overwhelmed my senses.

His voice, a low growl of satisfaction, of need, mirrored my own desire. “Do you want my cock inside you, baby?”

My pussy throbbed with need at the thought. “Yes.”

“Do you want me to fuck you until you’re begging me for more?” His free hand pulled at my shorts until I was bare-bottomed on the beach, and he freed himself from his lounge pants. His hard cock pressed against my wetness as he kissed my neck and I moaned. “Do you want me to come inside you?”

“Yes, please.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. Hunter’s eyes darkened as he gripped his cock and he pressed the head of it against my entrance. He leaned forward and bit down on my shoulder so hard he might’ve left indentations on my skin as he slid into me. But I didn’t care. No, in fact, I loved it.

Being pinned to the beach under the weight of his muscular body as his cock slammed in and out of me while his fingers still worked at my swollen clit was divine.

It’d been so long since I’d felt him inside me, but something about it felt like coming home. That the very man who’d been off-limits to me for so long and then had evaded me was mine should have felt foreign, but it felt so right.

I'd never understood what it meant to give yourself to someone until that moment because that's what I was doing. Any ounce of fight I may have had left in me fled my body in surrender.

As though he could sense that I'd just given myself to him, he gathered my wrists, holding my arms above my head and dropped his head with a groan.

Hunter's mouth found mine, catching a whimper of pleasure as it escaped me. He kissed me as I ran my hands down his back. I scraped my nails over his skin, pulling at him. I wanted him to fuck me harder. He moved his hand from my clit to my throat. He squeezed, and I moaned, shuddering at his touch.

"You feel so fucking good, baby. Your pussy was made for my cock." He thrust into me harder and faster until I was panting, my body begging for release. "God, Bridge, just when I think you've taken everything I have to give, I fall deeper into you. I can't hold back with you anymore." He buried himself inside me again and I felt him swell even more. "I won't last much longer, baby."

He pulled out of me and when I thought maybe he was going to pull away, he flipped me over instead. I expected him to thrust back into me, but he didn't. Hunter ran his fingers down my spine before lifting my hips so that I was kneeling in front of him. He brought his face between my legs, dragging his tongue over my clit. There was something extra dirty about having him face-planted there and before I knew it, the orgasm that had been coiling in my core exploded and my fingers dug into the blanket at the sand beneath it.

I felt his face move away, and his arm hooked around my hips, pulling me toward him as he thrust into me once again.

Our flesh slapped in rhythm with the waves lapping at the shore until he let out a loud groan and I felt his cock spasm as he unloaded inside me.

We both collapsed onto the blanket and dressed before Hunter pulled me into his arms. We lay there, appreciating the starry night and the salty smell of the sea.

It was so peaceful, just the two of us. Just then, there was a rustle in the bushes and the sound of a woman's giggle interrupted our serenity.

Hunter shot me a look before hopping to his feet and gathering our things. He took my hand, pulling me into the bushes opposite of the voices, and we crouched down.

I had to suppress a gasp when I saw who had appeared in the clearing.

HUNTER

“LOOK, Gorgeous, you’ve got the popular vote in my book, but I’m going to need a bit more convincing if you wanna win the whole shebang.” Max smacked Jolene on the ass.

*Fuck.*

Jolene giggled and leaned in to kiss him and I looked away. Just when I thought this guy couldn’t get any more corrupt, he was screwing around with a contestant while screwing over the rest of us. Was anything real about this show aside from Bridget and me?

I shook my head.

This was a disaster.

Ryan would lose his shit when he found out about this. I peeked at Bridget out of the corner of my eye. Her jaw was slack as she looked on. If there was one thing I knew about my girl, it was that she had zero tolerance for this sort of foul play, so I could only imagine the thoughts that were running through her mind.

Not to mention this was confirmation that we were about to lose despite our popularity. I should have known the game was rigged, and deep down I did, but I hoped someone had somehow rigged it in our favor. Since we’d won the popular vote.

Apparently, that wasn’t enough.

I leaned over to Bridget, keeping my voice low. “Are you okay?” I felt her shiver as my breath brushed over her ear.

She pressed her lips into a firm line, her expression pinched. I wanted to shield her from this. Jolene was her closest ally, apart from me, on the show. I needed to distract her. To break her focus on the corruption in front of us, but my options were limited.

Her eyes looked into mine, a mix of confusion and upset. She mouthed, “This is crazy.”

She’d seen too much already.

I took her hand and, still crouching, crept away from the beach, Bridget in tow. Until there was enough distance between us and we could stand without being spotted.

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I know it’s hard to see something like that, but we need to stay out of it. The finish line is in sight.”

Bridget shrugged and turned toward me, hugging me and tucking her head under my chin. “What’s the point? We’ve already lost. And I feel so bad for Ryan. He deserves to know. I can’t believe Jo would do this to him.”

“I’ve got his number. When we’re done with the show, I’ll take him out for a beer and tell him, okay?”

She looked up at me. “You’d do that?”

“Of course.” I shrugged. “You never know how receptive someone will be to information like this, but I’ll give him the heads up. He’s too nice of a guy not to.”

We’d be done with Sham Island by the end of the week and I was so looking forward to getting Bridget all to myself. It seemed like we wouldn’t be walking away as winners, but that was irrelevant to me because, in my mind, we’d already won. Tonight was just a taste, and I wanted more.

I couldn’t wait to start the rest of my life with her.

A beam of light caught me right in the eyes, and I winced, avoiding the glare. “What are you two doing out here?” The security guard asked before dropping the flashlight to his side.

“We just wanted a minute or two of privacy. We’re headed back now,” I said.

He folded his arms across his chest. The beam of light shone onto the ground behind him. “I’m on strict orders to take any escapees to Max’s office.”

I nodded toward the beach. “He’s got his hands pretty full right now. It seems we aren’t the only ones not playing by the rules tonight.”

The security guard dropped his arms to his side and he nodded.

“Fine. Just follow the path back to the house, and don’t let it happen again.” He winked at us both before turning his flashlight toward Max and Jolene, letting out a low whistle as he walked away, leaving us be.

We hugged each other tight, grateful for our lucky break, and I let Bridget go so we could make the trek back to our respective bedrooms, wishing we could forget what had transpired and spend tonight in each other’s arms instead.

“Hunt?” I turned back to Bridget.

“Yes?”

“Even though things didn’t end so well. Tonight was amazing. I want you to know that.”

Three long strides were all it took for my hands to be on her again, running them down her back, tracing the dip of her waist before skimming over her round hips.

I wanted out of this fucking place. “No, you’re amazing,”

She reached her hand up and stroked my cheek before resting it over my heart. “We only have a few more days to go. But—” she paused. “Let’s just go home. There’s no point anymore you heard what Max said.”

There wasn’t even a hint of a smile on her full lips. It bothered me to see her so shaken. “It’s only a few more days. Who knows if what he told her is true? I think we need to ride this one out and see what happens.”

She sighed. "I can't wait for it to be the two of us. It's too toxic here."

I brushed my thumb over her bottom lip. The sultry pout she wore beckoned me to her. I claimed her lips with mine once more before saying, "A few more days before our forever begins. We've made it through everything they've tossed at us. We'll make it to the end of this, together, I'm sure of it."

And if I had my way, the game wasn't over yet.

She smiled up at me, but it didn't reach her eyes. They were dim and little bags were forming under them. Of course they were. I'd stolen her from her bed in the middle of the night and with the Max drama on top of everything, it'd been a long outing. "Think about it overnight. We need some rest, baby. Dealing with this place after a good night's sleep is hard enough, never mind without any at all. I don't want you suffering too bad come morning."

She sighed. "Okay, you're right, I love you," she said before giving me a peck on the cheek. Those three all-important words sounded at home on her lips.

"I love you too, doll."

She was my woman.

And considering where we started, it was incredible that she was comfortable saying it at all.

As I watched her walk away, I knew full well she had my heart with her. I knew my night wasn't over yet.

I'd do anything for her.

And I was about to.



HUNTER

BY THE TIME I got to Max's trailer, the light was on, and I assumed he was back inside. I never crossed paths with Jolene on my way back out of the villa. Either she was still with Max or had used a different door to get back to her suite.

I listened in for a few moments before knocking, and there was an immediate crash followed by the scuff of feet on the linoleum floor before the door swung open and a spooked-looking Max appeared. "Hunter? Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"I do," I said as I pushed my way past him into the trailer. "This won't take long."

Max scowled. "Or how about I have security remove you?"

"That's an option." I rubbed at my chin. "I wonder who I should go to with your indiscretions first. The media? The network? You don't strike me as so important that you're irreplaceable. Not to mention while the other contestants may not have read the contract thoroughly before signing up, I did, and there's a fair play clause."

He shrugged. "I'm playing fair."

"Promising a contestant a win because you want to fuck her isn't playing fair."

His eyes narrowed. "Prove it."

I laughed. “This isn’t a courtroom, man. I don’t need to prove it. All I have to do is feed the information to the media and they’ll take it from there. How confident are you that a woman starved enough for a win to fuck you won’t turn on you? Are you certain she won’t crumble the moment someone flashes her some cash?”

His jaw was slack, and the cogs in his brain no doubt jammed the moment I pointed out the obvious.

“I rest my case.”

He sighed. “So what is it you want? A guaranteed win?”

I shook my head. “Nothing so drastic. A fair chance at a win. That’s all.”

Bridget would lose her mind if I asked for anything more than that.

“Fine.”

A shriek came from the closet and a moment later the door flew open, revealing Jolene. “You’re kidding me, right? You made me a promise. I sucked your dick to win. And there’s sand in places that just shouldn’t have sand in them, Max. I expect a win.”

That was an image I wanted out of my head immediately. “Well, I’m done here. I’ll leave you two to your lover’s quarrel.”

Jolene stepped in front of me, blocking my exit. “No, you don’t get to walk away. I want a win and I won’t accept anything less,” she said, facing off against me.

Taking a deep breath, I addressed them both, “Max will continue running the show, but in a just manner. There will be no bias towards any party throughout the rest of the season nor at the finale. Otherwise, things will backfire for him. And Jolene, you’ll have your fair shot at victory. The same as anyone else. Am I making myself clear?”

Through gritted teeth, Max agreed, but Jolene stood pointed at me with a frown. “And what do you get out of all this?”

I let out a huff of a laugh. “The respect and admiration of the woman that I love. And maybe that wouldn’t mean much to either of you, but to me, it’s the only prize I’m after.”

Bridget was my universe, and when we were out of this place, I planned on making her my wife.

Max shook his head. “You’re fucking bluffing. Every man has his price. You’re no exception.”

“You’re wrong about that.”

Max leaned back, resting his weight on the edge of his desk. “That’s it!” He snapped his fingers.

I tipped my head at him.

“You win, Hunter. We’ll all play by the rules.” He looked from me to Jolene, then back at me again before breaking out into a wide grin. “This has been an interesting night.”

Jolene stepped past me and slapped Max’s cheek before she turned toward the door, motioning for me to go first with a scowl plastered on her face.

I frowned. Max was giving me what I wanted. What I’d asked him for. But I didn’t trust him at all.

Something felt off.

But what other choice did I have other than to hope that he was going to keep his word?

I didn’t have one. “I hope you keep your word and let whoever wins the public vote win as this show promised.”

He smiled. “Oh, I will, Hunter. Don’t worry about that.”

BRIDGET

THE NEXT COUPLE of days passed by with little issue. We played a couple of games, but they were more fun than dramatic and the finale had arrived.

We'd spent most of the day preparing for it. I knew there was no chance of us winning as I watched Kylie pop the seal on the envelope, but at least Hunter and I could go home and start our *real* life together.

She pulled the card from within and read it. Either she was the slowest reader ever, or she was instructed to take her time for the suspense.

"Congratulations, Bridget and Hunter!" Kylie finally shouted, waving the card in the air.

I spun to face Hunter and launched myself at him. He caught me, raising me up until my legs were locked around his hips. "We won!"

"I knew we could do it, doll." He paused, gazing into my eyes. "I love you so much."

We'd played an honest game and won. I couldn't believe it. I kissed Hunter. "I love you too."

Not only was I walking away from this experience with enough money to put in an offer on Whole Latte Love, but I'd be leaving with Hunter, the man who'd held my heart for years. We still had Roxy to deal with, but the way everything

else was coming together, I had high hopes that would fall into place for us.

*Us.*

There was officially an 'us'.

We'd gone through this experience together. We'd survived every challenge they'd thrown our way.

Hunter coated my face in a dozen kisses.

Kylie cleared her throat behind us. "When you're done celebrating, we have another surprise."

My heart dropped. Surprises on this show weren't like surprises in real life and I'd come to dread them. I turned around in Hunter's arms and he held me to his chest, his arms clasped around my waist.

Kylie continued, knowing she had our attention. "Now you know that there's a chance to walk away with \$250,000."

A chance? What was she talking about?

A grin spread across her face. "Now you have a hard decision to make. Are you leaving together or will one of you walk away from the relationship with the cash?"

I slumped back into Hunter's arms. This couldn't be happening. All the battling. The challenges. Everything we'd endured to rise to the top together and here they were, trying to undermine our bond once again.

We had such a great thing going. It wasn't like they were trying to break us up at the beginning. They invited us in together. But reality TV wasn't real. It was an orchestrated script designed to shatter your heart and make you wish you'd never signed up.

They didn't want us to win. It was one slap in the face after another on this show and I was done playing games.

I looked at Hunter. There was no question about what I was going to do. I'd given my whole heart to this man, and I wouldn't let him walk away from me for any amount of

money. He was mine, and I wasn't letting him go. "I want to walk away with Hunter."

They'd already sent us through challenges that could've disrupted the balance of our relationship, but we stuck together. The game was rigged. To win, you had to lose, but it was up to you to decide the prize.

Hunter kissed me on the cheek and gazed into my eyes for a few moments. "Forgive me, doll," he said before turning to Kylie and sucking in a deep breath, "I'll take the money."

My knees buckled, but his arms were still locked around me.

There were gasps before the crowd broke out into chatter.

Had the earth tilted on its axis at that moment? Or had those words been too much for me to hear coming from his lips? His traitorous body was still pressed against mine. I stumbled away from him.

"You—you can't be serious." I couldn't stop shaking my head.

His lips pressed into a grim line as he nodded at me. "I don't lose."

My worst fears were confirmed at that moment.

But he already had money. He didn't need it. Why did he do this? This was just an act of pure greed, and a callous one at that.

His face was unreadable. The soft, warm place I'd basked in for two weeks was gone.

It was all so incredulous. He'd spent two weeks doing everything in his power to earn my trust. I'd let him in. I'd allowed myself to believe him.

Every part of my mind and body was his for the taking, and he took it. Now, in the eleventh hour, he'd revealed that it was all a ruse.

My stomach churned as I hurried my way off the stage, a camera crew in hot pursuit, hoping to catch every moment of

my full breakdown.

As much as I tried to suppress my emotions, I couldn't. Not now, and perhaps not ever. As the seconds ticked by, my body gave in to the urge to run. To hide. To do anything to get away from Hunter.

Jolene hurried around the corner behind me. "My goodness, Bridget, are you all right?"

My head snapped up. "Go away, please."

She was the last person I wanted trying to comfort me. After all, I had a far better understanding of what she and Ryan were up against and why they'd ended up on a show like this anyhow. Yet she was more than happy to keep up the act. Ryan deserved to know what he was up against, just like I deserved to know what I was up against.

"Girl, you need a friend. Let's talk this out."

I scoffed. "I would never take advice from you. You're a cheater. You're no better than Hunter and his lies. Ryan deserves better."

She put her hand to her chest. "I know you're upset, Bridget, but you need to leave my relationship out of it. Ryan and I may not have won, but we made it through the show together. And we're stronger for it." She glanced over at the camera.

She made me sick.

"Together? I wonder how he'll feel when he finds out you're screwing the show's producer?"

The words vomited out of my mouth and I regretted them because it hit me at that moment I'd always bucked against the show any time they tried to make a spectacle out of Hunter and me. But here I was throwing another couple in the limelight, and maybe Jolene deserved to be exposed for the fraud that she was, but Ryan didn't deserve to learn about it this way.

Until that moment, I still had my dignity, but with a run of my mouth, that too was lost.

Lucked up Love. More like fucked up love.

Of course, that's why they called it that, wasn't it?

The show would never be about people getting lucky in love the second time around. No. It was about airing baggage, creating conflict and destroying lives for entertainment.

And I was right in the middle of it all.

My regrets were piling one right on top of the other at a phenomenal rate. I couldn't think straight. Every memory of Hunter haunted me at that moment. How expertly he'd deceived me. My stomach churned violently. All I wanted to do was get the hell out of there before they sucked even more life out of me.

I ignored the camera crew as I packed my bags. They were trying to prompt me to talk about my feelings. About Hunter's betrayal. But I wouldn't say a word.

I'd given all I had to give to this experience, to Hunter, and I wouldn't let them have anything more.

I'd already lost it all.



BRIDGET

THE BUZZER to my apartment sounded. It had been a day and a half since the show ended and they flew us home. Hunter was on a different flight than the rest of the contestants. Maybe they held him back to finalize his win.

*Who knew?*

But I hadn't seen him at all since I walked away during the finale.

The buzzer sounded again three times in a row.

It was Roxy, so I just pressed the key on the pad that unlocked the door without a word.

I'd called her as soon as I got home and we made plans to get together today. I hoped I could at least salvage my relationship with her.

Plus, my heart hurt so bad and as awkward as it was that she was my now ex-boyfriend's sister—if I could even call him that—I hoped she would forgive me because I needed her more than ever.

I'd suffered break-ups before. I was even aiming to go on Lucked Up Love with a different guy. That felt like a parallel universe.

Nothing I'd ever experienced with any other man even held a candle to the two weeks I spent with Hunter. Every part of me ached knowing it was all a show for the cameras.

There was a knock at my door and I rushed to unlock it to let Roxy in.

She frowned at me. “You look awful.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, even though I felt awful too. It’d been a long flight and sleepless night as I replayed everything that had happened between Hunter and me.

She crossed the threshold and opened her arms as I let the door fall closed behind her to accept her hug.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

She stepped back. “I won’t lie. It floored me when I figured out that the guy you told me about losing your virginity to was my brother. But, wow, Bridget. I was glued to the television every night, watching the two of you. Rooting for you both. You should have told me the whole truth.”

I moved to my sofa and flopped down. “He left. There was nothing to tell. He doesn’t care about me.”

I was relieved to know that I hadn’t lost my best friend, but it stung knowing she approved and Hunter had still done what he had.

“Oh, he cares about you. There’s no doubt about that.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Did you not see the finale?”

“I did. But I spoke with Hunter and you two need to talk.”

I shook my head. “I’m not ready for that conversation. He broke my heart, Rox. I can’t face him.”

I jumped as the door to my apartment opened and Hunter stepped in. “You have to, doll.”

I leaped from the couch and started crossing the room. Tears threatened to escape me. I couldn’t cry in front of him.

Not now. Never again.

He rushed to stop me. “Hear me out, babe. Please. I promise you it’s not what you think.”

“So you didn’t forfeit our entire relationship for \$250,000? Speaking of which, are you even allowed to be here? We

wouldn't want you to lose your precious money by talking to me."

He sighed. "Did you read the contract you signed for the show?"

"Of course I did! Well, I skimmed it. But I fail to see the relevance of that, Hunt. What does that have to do with you being a back-stabbing bastard?"

He smiled at me. "Everything, Bridget. Because had you read it, you'd realize that despite Max's best efforts to rob us of our win. We won, baby."

I looked over my shoulder at Roxy, then back at him. "We did?"

"Yes. They didn't write the contract with the new ending Max came up with. I went to speak with him after I sent you to bed that night at the beach when we—" He glanced at his sister.

Roxy lifted her hands in surrender. "Okay, I was just here to mediate the reunion. Now that I'm confident she won't kill you, I'll leave you two to sort this out. Alone."

Before I even responded, she ducked out of my apartment.

Although I'm not sure what I would have said, I was still in shock.

Hunter moved closer to me, took hold of my arm, and led me to the couch. "Sit."

I did as I was told, trying not to get my hopes up, but it had to be a good sign that he was here so soon after.

"As I was saying. I went to see him. He wasn't playing fair and I couldn't stand it. By the time I left his office, he had agreed to let the rightful couple win. But he seemed too easygoing about it. There was even a point where he appeared to have had an epiphany. I didn't tell you about it because I knew we were still walking into the unknown. Your hopes were already so dashed that I didn't want to get them up, only to have him let you down again. I thought expecting a loss was easier at that point."

“Okay, but how have we won? You mentioned the contract.”

“That’s right. For his little twist to have any kind of real-world impact, the contract would have needed consequences written in. Say a no-contact clause should the winner choose the money. But because the show never intended for that twist, they didn’t write it into the contract. I could tell by your face that you didn’t realize taking the money had zero impact on our relationship. But I did and after everything they put us through, there was no way I was letting us walk away empty-handed.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a check, and handed it to me. They addressed it to him alone in the amount of \$250,000.

“I’m endorsing it to you. It’ll take a while to clear, but once it does. It’s all yours, doll.”

“Hunt, I—” Tears welled in my eyes at the realization that he’d kept his word. That everything he told me was true.

He kneeled before me. “It killed me inside to do that to you. But with the last-minute change, I couldn’t talk to you about it. I had to react fast. I wanted to chase after you and explain everything, but they said if I did I’d forfeit the money. I knew how much you said the money would help you out. So I did what I had to do for you. For us.”

I was still staring at the check in my hands when he lifted my chin. “Am I forgiven?”

No one had ever been so generous to me before.

“I can’t accept this,” I said, attempting to hand him the check back. “It’s too much. Why would you give this to me?”

“Because I would give you the fucking shirt off my back, even if it was my last one, Bridget. I’d give you anything in this world that I could without hesitation. No, scratch that, I will. I will give you everything I can. You have my heart, baby girl. There’s no going back on that.”

He kneeled down on one knee and took the check from my hand, setting it on the side table. “Fine, if you don’t want to

accept the money, will you accept my ring?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled a black velvet box from it and inside there was an emerald with diamond baguette sides set in a platinum band.

The air escaped my lungs as my mind was overcome by the many times I'd fantasized about dating Hunter, but I never dared set my hopes any higher than that. Now he was down on one knee and about to offer me everything I'd ever wanted and more.

The untouchable temptation was mine, but the longing for him was even stronger for it. There would never be a day when I wouldn't want this man. There was only one answer to the question that he was about to ask.

"Marry me, Bridget. Let's give each other the world. Every day. For the rest of our lives. What do you say?"

HUNTER

BRIDGET'S bottom lip trembled as she reached out for me. "Yes, Hunt, of course. I'll marry you." I slipped the ring onto her finger and moved to sit beside her, pulling her into my lap. She was my woman and soon she'd be my wife.

I smiled down at her as I whispered, "You're my fiancée now. You have no choice but to accept the check. We can start our journey together. But I want you to know you won't ever have to worry about money again. What we endured to gain this little nest egg will never happen again. Your struggles are over, baby. If you want anything, let me know and we'll get it."

Her eyes flashed with happiness as she stretched up on impulse slanting my mouth with hers in an unexpected kiss. Electricity coursed between us, like it was pursuing its natural path home toward its source.

I groaned before deepening it, soaking in every inch of her warmth until we were both lost in one another, forgetting everything else outside of this moment—our newfound engagement.

Bridget's soft body pressed against mine heightened every single emotion coursing through me, making it almost impossible to contain myself anymore. The realization that I didn't have to hide anything anymore washed over me, followed by a clawing heat as the need to claim her took over.

I flipped her back onto the sofa. There was only one way I could think to celebrate our new promise, and that was by burying my cock so deep inside her that I became an everlasting part of her.

I kissed a steamy trail from her lips down to her neck, and then back up again. Bridget's skin was ablaze as I moved my hands over every hill and curve of her body—loving it more than anything else in existence.

Then I grabbed the hem of her shirt-dress, lifting it over her head, revealing her lace panties and already bare breasts.

Bridget squirmed beneath me in anticipation as I pulled her panties away from her perfect cunt.

*Mine. All mine.*

She watched with heavy lids as I descended on her already-hardening nipple. Her soft moans made my cock twitch, begging to be unearthed from my jeans. I pulled back, stripped down and returned to her full tits, pressing my length against the wet warmth of her pussy.

“Don't tease me, Hunt,” she pleaded.

“Not this time, baby.” I buried myself inside of her trembling warmth until we were one. Our incandescent desire burned bright. As though fireworks were erupting into the beautiful chaos around us on the couch.

I laced my fingers through hers and held her hands up over her head, kissing her cheek, hoping my lips could wipe away every memory of the tears that she's no doubt shed over me.

They would be her last. “You're the woman of my dreams, Bridge.”

Bridget's moans reached a fevered pitch, echoing off the walls as I thrust ever deeper into her. She drew in a breath to respond, but I silenced her with another passionate kiss.

And in that moment, I knew this was where true bliss existed, and close to Bridget was where I wanted to remain. I held her tight as her body quivered and tensed beneath me. She arched her back as the peak of pleasure washed over her.

I followed soon after, spilling my hot seed inside her and finishing with a satisfied groan that reverberated through our now-connected bodies.

I brushed back her hair, allowing the sun streaming through the windows to catch her green eyes, illuminating them.

We both smiled at one another, knowing whatever journey life was about to take us on would be filled with laughter and love.

Reality television may have almost broken us, but in the real world, we were stronger than ever.

I knew in that moment, as luck would have it, our story was only just beginning and that there was no limit for us.



## *epilogue*

BRIDGET

“YOU LOOK STUNNING,” Roxy said as she adjusted my veil, draping it over my shoulders.

Hunter and I had been engaged for only eight months, but we both knew it was past time to make things official. I took a deep breath and regarded myself while wearing the wedding dress I’d picked out soon after his proposal in the mirror.

My hair was down, falling in loose waves over the ivory silk dress. It had a deep V-neckline, with cap sleeves finished with delicate lace trim, and the fabric was light and flowy. Perfect for a beach wedding.

We kept the reception small.

The network behind Lucked Up Love had offered to pay for a more elaborate celebration if we agreed to let them air it as a special. But we declined. We didn’t need their money for a dream wedding. This was our dream wedding. Besides, we’d endured enough press after the show when the media caught wind of the behind-the-scenes scandals.

Life out of the public eye was what we both wanted. The only public I wanted to be a part of my life were the patrons of my coffee shop. I had done what I planned to do with the money from the show thanks to Hunter.

All trauma from the show had dissipated the day Hunt came to clear the air and propose to me. I moved in with him

right after he proposed, and once the media interest blew over, our life together had been uncomplicated ever since.

We chose a beach just south of my hometown for the ceremony. With the sun setting, I was tucked away in a dressing room with Roxy when the wedding planner poked her head in the room to tell us the ceremony had started.

Nerves bubbled within me. Suddenly, even our small ceremony felt too big. Roxy gave me a side hug and a push through the door. “You’ve got this, sis.”

As I made my way down the aisle, the sound of waves crashing against the shore created a soothing melody as I approached Hunter, who waited at the altar wearing his finest suit and a smile.

With every step closer I took toward him, my heart swelled with love and excitement. He beamed at me when I arrived and I held his gaze, knowing that an entire life of adventure lay ahead for us.

The ceremony was quick and ended with hugs, kisses, and congratulations, from our closest friends and family followed by a small reception filled with delicious food, a cake cutting, and the toasts had begun. I stood beside Hunter, his arm wrapped around me, his hand clutching my hip under the clear night sky. Dozens of white lanterns illuminated our outdoor reception area.

Roxy rose from her seat at the long table set in the sand. “When I first found out about Hunter and Bridget in their very public love affair, I was stunned. But as the days went on, and I full-on binged their romance nightly, cheering them on... Although there were some parts I could have done without knowing about.” Laughter came from the crowd. “I realized I couldn’t have imagined a better partner for either of them. Bridget has been my best friend for years and I always knew she deserved the best and the same goes for my brother. I love you both and I like to think that maybe my meeting Bridge was fate, uniting two people that are without a doubt perfect for one another...”

I glanced around and spotted Ryan approaching the beach in his police uniform. Jolene left Seattle after the show ended when her involvement in the scandalous affairs behind the scene came to light.

We'd invited him to our wedding, but he couldn't get the night off. But Hunter had become quite close friends with him, so I guess he couldn't miss it completely.

I tapped Hunter on the shoulder and pointed at Ryan.

We headed toward him just as Roxy's speech came to a close.

"Hey," Hunter said, "Glad you could make it."

"Congratulations, you two," Ryan said before frowning. "Unfortunately, I'm here on official business."

Hunter furrowed his brow. "Was there a complaint? It's still early and we'll be clearing out, so—"

"No, that's not it." He glanced over at Roxy. Ryan's presence had captured the attention of the attendees. He looked over at me. "Can you have Roxanne meet me inside the venue, please? I don't want to make a scene out here."

I nodded, my heart seizing in my chest. Roxy was controversial, but never criminal. Once I reached her, I whispered in her ear to come with me.

She looked around and chewed at her lip. "Umm, okay."

Was there something she hadn't told me? Was she expecting this or had it come as a complete surprise to her as well? I couldn't tell by her reaction, as she kept her expression neutral.

Once we were all inside the building, Ryan pulled his cuffs from his belt. "Roxanne Grand, you're under arrest for inciting a riot. You have the right to remain silent, anything you say—"

"What?" she squawked. "I didn't incite anything. Hunter!" She looked over at her brother, my husband, the lawyer with a pleading in her eyes.

“Are you certain there hasn’t been some kind of mistake?” Hunter said to Ryan.

“I can’t go into details, but I will be taking her into my custody tonight.”

Hunter looked at Roxy. “Don’t say a word. I’ll be right behind you.” He glanced over at me for silent approval, and I nodded.

Ryan continued to read Roxy her rights. “Bridget, I didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t get it.”

She reached out, but Ryan pulled her hand back and I placed my hand on her shoulder instead while he cuffed her. “I know. You wouldn’t.”

Ryan led her out of the building, and I turned to Hunter.

He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry about this babe, but she’s my sister and I have to—”

I cut him off. “Go. Sort this out. She needs you.”

He shook his head. “I won’t send you back in there alone to face the questioning. We’ll announce our departure together, then I’ll go from there and meet you at home later.”

---

It was after midnight when Hunter arrived home.

I met him in the foyer where he sat on the bench, removing his dress shoes. “How did it go?”

He let out a huff. “She’s in trouble, babe. But I can’t say much because of client confidentiality.”

I stepped toward him, fitting myself between his parted legs. “Well then, it’s a good thing she has Seattle’s best lawyer to represent her,” I said, while loosening his tie and pulling it away. He placed his hands on my hips, but there was a faraway look in his eyes.

“Where is she now?”

“They’re holding her overnight. I have to go back in the morning to see about getting her bail.” His gaze locked on mine and he pressed his lips into a grim line. We were flying out the next day for our honeymoon. “I’m sorry, doll.”

I shook my head, cupping his cheek in my hand. “Don’t be. Life’s unpredictable, Hunter. But it doesn’t matter as long as we have each other. Family comes first.”

He tipped his head. “Baby, you are my family.”

I smiled. “I know. But I also know that’s why you’ll make an incredible father someday.” I rubbed my hand over my abdomen. Imagining the day when we’d grow a family of our own.

His eyes darkened. “Bridget are you...”

“No, Hunt,” I chuckled, “I’m not pregnant.”

“You’re about to be.” He swept me off the floor into his lap, stood, and carried me toward our bedroom.

As he kicked open the door, I smiled up at him. “You’re that sure about it, are you?”

He set me on the bed and hovered over me, his arms caging me in on our mattress. “I’m feeling lucky.”

**Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed Bridget and Hunter’s second chance at love.**

**Not done with them yet? Return to the lake house where it all began two years later for some steamy fun from these two. Exclusively available on my website, [Literary Love Potions](#).**

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**Endless Love,**

**Lia**

*also by lia preston*

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## *about lia preston*

Lia Preston is a new author of short contemporary instalove romance. She loves writing body-positive stories about curvy heroines in forbidden romance scenarios with their sizzling hot alpha heroes.

She was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult and aims to provide readers with entertaining romance stories that cater to shorter attention spans, busy lifestyles, or those who need a palate cleanser between longer reads.

She has much more in store for her readers and can't wait to share it all over the coming years. If you're a fan of paranormal romance, Lia has a fantasy fanatic alter ego, Luna Preston, who'll be releasing her debut in 2023.

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