

OFF-DUTY
Saint

ZEE IRWIN

OFF-DUTY
Joint

Off-Duty Saint

A MILITARY HOLIDAY ROMANCE

OFF-DUTY HOLIDAY

BOOK ONE

ZEE IRWIN

CER CREATIVE COMPANY PUBLISHING

Off-Duty Saint

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*To shirtless guys on paperback covers.
Thank you for always being there for us.*

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[What to read next:](#)

[Welcome to Kissing Springs](#)

[Steele Valley Billionaires Duo](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also By Zee Irwin](#)

CHAPTER

One

I TYPED out the two words every author loved to see: The End ... of another hopefully best-selling novel.

There. Another happily ever after ending. And another tear jerker. I grabbed a tissue, and I hit enter. I saved it even though it saved automatically to the cloud. I downloaded it to my hard drive. And I emailed the file to myself. All the bases covered in case I lose a file. Whew.

After losing one whole book in the past, I learned to never be too careful when saving my precious work. I fingered over the cover of my latest romance paperback, so proud of it. I admired the abs on the over model, Miguel from Mexico. Mm.

My fans went crazy over him on my social media account. Yes, they loved a good-looking man on their romance book covers. While it was nice knowing what readers wanted, the pressure was on for each cover to outdo the next. But it was an aspect of my job I wouldn't change. I loved being an author and in charge of my own business and life.

My career was simple. At one end of the spectrum, I strung words into phrases, into sentences, into descriptions that thrilled my readers and locked them into the emotional life of my characters. The words filled them with joy, with angst, and love.

Yes, there was a balance to finding the sweet spot where my couples finally connected, bonded, and settled in for their first kiss or more. After twenty books in four years, you'd

think I was a master at this. I sent a text off to my editor informing her of my progress.

Me: The book is done. I'll do a final read through before sending it to you for edits.

Brenda: Whatever. I'd rather focus on the fact that you'll be here tomorrow! I'm so excited and cannot wait for some girl time.

I smiled at all the hats Brenda wore besides the editor. We've co-written a romance series together, and over the past few years, she quickly became my best friend. We chatted daily and thought a lot alike with similar interests. The only difference was, she was lucky enough to have found her true love before me. And she was a mom.

Oh, I was happy for her—her husband, Thompson and son, Eddy were amazing. But I wanted my own family. In the worst way.

Me: Me too. Can't wait. Remind me again why we live so far apart?

Brenda: Umm because you're an idiot who loves the four seasons and won't move to Key West?

It was true. I lived in Buffalo, New York, where I had a view of the Niagara falls on my walking trail every day, even lately while trampling through the snow. I loved the outdoors, although not an outdoorsy person, simply someone who needed to be in nature daily for a walk.

Me: You know I can't handle the humidity of Florida. Why do you think I only visit in winter?

I never visited in summer—jeez, the humidity killed me and frizzed my hair. But I loved Key West, where they lived. It was my second favorite place to be.

Brenda: Thompson has a new friend from the gym we're inviting to the company Christmas party. You're coming too. Bring a cute outfit!

I rolled my eyes.

Me: Not packing cute stuff. Just sweats, sweaters, scarves, and jammies. Don't try to fix me up. You know those never work out for me.

Brenda: James is sweet. Trust me. You'll like him.

Me: This is me going now to avoid this conversation.

Brenda: Pack the cute stuff. See you tomorrow!

Of course I'd pack cute stuff. My stomach lurched. Already, a nervous bunch of butterflies fluttered around. Meeting people wasn't easy for me. I wasn't a bar patron. I wasn't a dancer, and I wasn't much of a drinker. Although when visiting Brenda, we'd been known to empty a bottle of wine or two.

In truth, I wasn't much fun because day in and day out I lived and breathed my books and the books of all my romance writer friends. For someone who had her head stuck in the clouds of meet cutes, angst, first kisses, and steamy scenes all day, you'd think I'd like a little human interaction with a good-looking man. But no.

I hadn't had much luck in meeting or keeping a real man over the years. And my ex, Drake, was a disaster. Instead of wallowing in thoughts about that asshole of the century, I packed for the trip.

After adding the last few things into my suitcase, I yanked out of my drawer one sexy lace bralette and panty set, the red colored one I hadn't worn yet. And the red dress I had recently purchased without any idea of where I'd wear it. With a slit up to there and a neckline plunged down to there, it accentuated the best of my everything.

But my hopes were not getting up about James. These cute things would come along for the trip, so I'd look good at the party. And just in case he ended up being the one man in the universe who could possibly live up to my perfect book boyfriend expectations, I'd at least be ready.

Yes, I did this to myself. I created my own monster. I helped my readers escape into a world of perfect angsty, lusty, loving couples. I wrote men with buff bodies, with money,

with jobs or fiery passions they pursued, who knew how to hold flirty banter while also listening to the heroine's needs, who found the perfect moment to lay a first kiss on her, and take her breath away. And who loved with all the heated passion of a man who would perish without her.

Sorry, but it's a tall order for any real human regular man to live up to. I hadn't found the one for me who could meet my expectations. *Yet*. But I didn't get my hopes up. I was looking forward to getting away, seeing Brenda, and having some girl time. That was it.

My flight would leave midday tomorrow, with one stopover in Charlotte and then a flight to Florida. By this time tomorrow night, I'd have drinks with my bestie looking out at the sunset over Key West and leave the snowy town of Buffalo far behind for a week.

CHAPTER

Two

WILL

I WAS DELICIOUSLY in the middle of a feverish dream so real it had me on edge. And hard. A woman in red went down on me, and my hands muddled up in her hair, guiding her pace.

Then she was riding my cock, twerking on it, and the view of her there was stunning, with the straps of her red dress and black bra hanging loosely around her elbows. The cups of the garments pulled down revealed ample tits with hard nipples, which she tugged at during her ride.

The velveteen of her red dress caressed my skin while my hands held tight around her waist. A perfect explosion was coming. I was almost too huge for the condom I put on. It'd been so long for me since being with a woman.

Despite the morning light burning into my eyelids, I lingered in the sexual trance of my fantasy. My cock twitched, begging for my hand and a release.

But wait. Someone shifted next to me. I wasn't alone.

The aroma of a female, a scintillating scent of sugary sweetness, lingered and tickled my nostrils. I tucked in closer to her, my hand warmed on smooth skin contact, and her hair tickled my chin. My last girlfriend, Amy, never liked morning sex. The brief thought produced a temporary halt to my further movement.

She'd always complain about morning breath or her hair upon waking. No matter how much I tried to convince her, she never believed that guys waking with stiff wood in the morning wanted one thing and didn't care about knotted hair

and monster breath. Despite my insisting she was beautiful, she never gave in to my morning needs. Denied—every time.

This morning, however, was one of those rarities. My hand paused on the delicate dip of her waist before her skin ascended the upward curve of her hips. I waited for a rejection, but there was none. Taking that as a sign to push the boundaries further, my heart skipped faster. My hand explored up to the roundness of her breast, circling her erect nipple.

Strange, but this breast was a decent handful, but Amy's was typically small. Palming it caused a slight moan escaping her lips and aroused me more. When she pushed my hand down her stomach to her mound, she opened her legs for me to let my fingers into her slit. Was this my Christmas present?

Hell yes. Morning sex like this was a real treat.

Her wetness slicked my fingers. "Mm," Amy moaned, which confused the hell out of me even more. Amy would never have let me get this far in the mornings, and besides, I had received a breakup letter from her eight months ago in the desert. It was over between us, which meant only one thing: I was still dreaming.

It was a damned pleasant dream, and a very realistic one too, since the feel of her ass pressed against my cock elicited a groan from my parched throat. My skin heated on contact, and I burned next to her sexy body.

I found her earlobe to suck, flicking my tongue along the lobe's edge. "Mm," she moaned again. I was beyond turned on. Forget waking. I'd stay in this dream.

After joining the Army and marching into combat zones for so long, I wasn't the only guy longing for a homecoming moment like this. The heat and sun created all kinds of mirages, but this dream in my bed was definitely fucking real. When she arched and reached behind her to pet my neglected cock and balls, it was my turn to groan. More of this, please.

A pounding came at the door, suddenly matching the pounding of my head.

"Breakfast is almost ready."

It startled me hearing my sister's voice.

“Okay, be right there.” A woman's vocals cracked beside me.

I jerked awake. She jumped up and off the bed, taking the sheet with her to cover up.

My eyes focused just in time to see her bent over, reaching for her clothes on the floor. The sheet fell and the view of her ass in the air was one I wouldn't mind admiring again.

I groaned at the sight before me.

“Oh!” She twisted and gathered the sheet tight around her again. She scurried over to the opened closet door and stood behind it while getting dressed out of my view. She wasn't Amy.

“Uh ... hello?” The first nervous words out of my mouth were very original. I cleared my throat. “Who are you?”

“I should ask you the same question. I'm Brenda's friend visiting for the holiday. Who are you?”

I leaned back down and rubbed my temples at the headache already formed. How did I not know there was a woman in my bed all night? Then again, when I landed in Key West, it was late. I'd already had a good buzz going on the plane, and closing down the bar a few streets from my sister's house meant I could stumble home wasted.

The last thing I remembered was using the hidden key to get into the house. Trying to be quiet, I had made my way to the guest bedroom where I always slept when I visited. I tossed off my clothes in the dark, and when my head hit the pillow, I was out. Oblivious to the female I could have fucked all night in my bed.

Said female reemerged, dressed in a red string bikini. I panned down the sexy blonde's body and noted every curve and inch of her luscious, golden skin. I'd like to take a lifetime to lick off the adorable little freckles on her shoulders. My cock remained stiff, watching her get dressed in a pair of faded denim shorts.

“I’m Brenda’s brother,” I said.

She faltered in her movements, then glanced down, taking in my manhood. No sense covering up now. She’d seen it all. She sucked on her bottom lip. Hope she wasn’t disappointed.

Then our eyes met. While catching a sliver of sunshine peeking through the blinds, her eyes sparkled wide like smoldering blue-green jewels. Holy hell. Unforgettable eyes.

“Does Brenda know you’re here?” she whispered.

“No.” I reluctantly pulled the blanket over me. “Sorry. I was shit-faced drunk and tired when I arrived last night. This bed is usually mine when I visit. I didn’t expect to wake up to —” I motioned my hand toward her body, “you.”

“Um. I don’t-I mean, it’s not like me to jump right into sex with a stranger. I hope you don’t think ... um,” she faltered, and pulled on a sweatshirt, hiding a body made for sin from my gaping eyes.

“Right, no, I don’t think anything. Just—yeah.”

She put one hand on the door to leave, but smiled back at me in a shy but sultry way. “Nice to meet you.”

Cute. I liked her already. Now, what could I do to get her in my bed again?

CHAPTER

Three

TEN MINUTES LATER, Will appeared in the kitchen, scaring Brenda half to death. She jumped up and hugged him, screaming right away.

“Will! You’re back! You were gone so long this time. I was so worried not to have heard from you for the past several months.”

“Sorry, sis.” He looked at me while hugging Brenda, hugging her so hard her feet lifted from the ground.

“Oh hey, this is my friend Ava. We’ve been working together on several books over the past few years. She’s visiting for the week.”

He wore only shorts, with an exposed chest and six-pack abs. I flushed, knowing the kind of package he possessed under those shorts, but managed a feeble smile during the awkward pause.

A look of recognition hit Brenda when she glanced over at the couch, then between us. Her eyes turned to slits. “Wait a minute. When did you get in, and where did you sleep?”

Will scratched his neck. “Yeah. About that. I kind of stumbled drunk off my ass last night, right into bed without noticing anyone else was in it.”

“What?” She reached up and smacked the back of Will’s head. It seemed playful, but what would I know? I never had a sibling to beat up on.

“Yes, and I must have had too much wine with you last night. I slept like a baby. Honestly, I never noticed him in bed with me until you pounded on the door this morning.” The heat on my cheeks was unbearable.

“Well, you two can’t sleep in the same bed. I’m so sorry, Ava. I didn’t realize he was coming home.” Brenda glared at Will. “If he would write to us once in a while, I could put important dates like this on my calendar.”

“I like surprising you, though. Fuck, I’m starving. Where’s the cereal?” His attempt at dropping the conversation didn’t work by the scowl on Brenda’s face.

A few minutes later, we sat around the breakfast table, chewing cereal loudly, and trying to handle this situation like mature adults.

I snuck a glance at him from across the breakfast table. He snuck one back at me—and winked. Brenda sat with arms crossed in front of her like she was the mother who’d caught us *in the act*.

What could I say at this moment, anyway? *Gee Brenda, your brother’s fingers felt amazing inside of me* was probably not something she wanted to hear.

“I’ll get a hotel room,” I offered.

“No. Absolutely not,” Brenda insisted. “You’re my guest, and you get the guest room.”

“*I’ll* get a hotel room then,” said Will.

“No. You could go stay with Mom and Dad.”

“No fucking way, and you know why.” He shook his head side to side with eyes wide like saucers.

Brenda sighed. “Okay, okay. You can have the top bunk in Eddy’s room. He’ll be happy to see his uncle after he wakes up, by the way.”

My heart skipped a little dance, knowing I might be around Will a bit more this week. But a change of topics was in order.

“So, do you think we can visit the beach today?” Spending as much time on sand and in water this trip was pretty much everything on my list I wanted for this holiday. Although the view of Will’s cock tempting me to all sorts of deeds fought for consideration on my list, too.

“Yes, the weather is supposed to cooperate.” Turning to her brother, Brenda explained, “We’re going to check out potential scenery for our next novel.”

“Can I come?” The shirtless guy took his bowl to the sink and rinsed it. My belly fluttered again as I toured his backside. When Brenda cleared her throat, my eyes snapped back to her.

“Sure, Will, I think we’d like the company, wouldn’t we, Ava?”

Turning red, I nodded and resumed eating my cereal. I hoped filling my mouth with the crunchy morsels wouldn’t give away my excitement.



STILL FEELING the pinch of the embarrassing “meet cute” from the morning, I was in a self-imposed quiet mood while we walked to the beach. I kept pace a few feet behind them. Brenda and Will swung Eddy by the hands between them until he became too heavy for her to lift.

They had similar mannerisms between them, looks too. Only Brenda had long, dark waves, while Will had thick, straight hair in a tight military cut. The top of his hair was a few inches longer, sometimes drawing into his eyes. The move he made with his hand swiping his hair back off his forehead had left me breathless a few times since breakfast.

What exactly was I doing ogling my best friend’s brother? Sure, one of my best-selling books contained a plot about this. Now here I was in real life, finding Brenda’s sibling rather sexy. But it would never work between us.

For one thing, I was completely shit at attracting the right men. They were always one way on the surface, but by the

time I'd find out who they were underneath, it was too late. As if I had a sign around my neck saying "Use Me," I couldn't trust my instincts.

Besides, a long-distance military relationship wasn't something I craved. And there was Brenda to consider. Let's say Will and I go out. Heck, even fall in love. If we broke up, and I lost Brenda in the process, I'd lose possibly one of the dearest friends I'd ever had. No man was worth that.

"I miss you, Uncle Will. Are you staying this time?" Eddy's ten-year-old voice called out as we walked.

I noticed Brenda's eyes appeared tender, watching her brother and son bonding.

"Maybe buddy. I'm scouting the area, looking at jobs and places to live while I'm here. Thinking I'll stay put awhile if I don't reenlist for another four years. And I missed you too, kid." Will ruffled Eddy's hair before he ran up ahead of us. "Kid's got some energy."

"I hope you'll stay. It'd be nice to have a big brother again. You've been gone so long, I forgot how to have one around."

"Come on. I'm still me and I'm here for you." He double pumped his fist against his heart and pointed at her.

She laughed and linked elbows with him. "I hope so. I'd love to see you settle down in one place, find a girl to marry, and have kids. Eddy needs cousins."

"Now you sound like Mom."

"How would you know? Have you been in touch with her?"

He pushed against her with his shoulder and let go. "Ouch. Don't go there. You know why I kept away. Now let's drop it. I'm here to enjoy time with you and Eddy. And look at that surf." He took off running with Eddy through the sand as we arrived at the beach.

We found an empty cabana, and Brenda remained quiet as we set up the towels, books, water, and sunscreen.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

“Hm? Oh, sure. You know it’s Christmas. Time for family gatherings and homecomings. Only while I’m happy Will is home, I don’t know what to expect when my mother finds out. Bring on the family holiday drama. Eh, nothing to fret about now. Besides, when are we going to talk about the fact that you woke up in my brother’s arms today?”

I put my hands on my hips and cocked my head at her. “Nice deflection, but it wasn’t like that.”

“Really? But I know you sleep in the nude. You’ve mentioned it before.”

“Well, yes, but um, we didn’t uh ...”

Brenda shot me a knowing smile and glanced at Will in the water with Eddy. He put his laced fingers down for the boy to step in. Then he launched him up and out into the water where he landed with a splash. They repeated it a few times. I’d never seen a smile so broad on a kid’s face before.

We both laughed, and she looked me over. “You know, Will is actually a great catch. Someone would have a lot of fun with him someday as his wife.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged.

“Maybe you?”

“Oh. No.” I pinked. Although from the looks of his cock this morning, he’d definitely make a wife happy someday.

“Why not? What, my brother isn’t good enough for you?”

“He’s your brother. You’re my best friend. That’s not awkward?”

She reached for the cooler and started setting out things for lunch. “Admittedly at first this morning, yes, it was. But the idea has grown on me. I know him very well. I know you well. I believe it could be a perfect match. And maybe then I’d have both the people I love most living close to me and Eddy.”

Her smile grew so big, but I didn’t have time to argue back because my best friend’s brother stalked toward us.

Dripping wet, his arm muscles flexed when he slicked his hair back with his hands. The waistband of his board shorts fell to the end of his happy trail. I stared harder, shielded by my sunglasses, up his torso with ripped muscles, broadened out through his chest, and ended at his strong shoulders. He was tan, gorgeous and cover-model-perfect for my next book. I wondered if he'd be willing to pose.

“Mama, come play with me.” Eddy called to Brenda.

She stood up to leave. “I’m going to go play for a while. Go ahead and eat without me.”

Her departure made it so I would have no choice but to be alone with Will. Watching him towel off his body in front of me—maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing.

CHAPTER

Four

WILL

FINALLY, a moment alone with Ava, but we ate in silence until I broke the ice. “Look, I’m sorry about this morning. At first, I thought you were someone else.” I popped a few raspberries in my mouth, playing them over on my tongue, letting the sweet taste linger in my mouth.

“Oh, so if you realized who I was, you wouldn’t have put the moves on me?”

“No. I mean yes. Um ... Can we start over? Hi. I’m Brenda’s significantly handsome, intelligent, awesome older brother, William. You can call me Will. And you are?”

She flirted with a smile and batting eyes. “Very funny.”

I already knew who she was—the closest female eligible to be fucked since my return home. Okay, maybe more than a fuck. All I knew was I held her in my arms in bed and I’d kind of like to feel her there again before I leave.

I had no idea what she said next because I put on my sunglasses and checked out her figure ruthlessly for the second time today. I nodded my head, pretending interest, when in reality her red bikini top held my attention.

Holding up the perfect handfuls of breasts, my God, one tug at the string around her neck and the entire top would have a wardrobe malfunction for my viewing pleasure.

She showed off a tanned stomach with a glint of a belly button piercing. The low waistband of a pair of cut high up the thigh denim shorts rested on her hips, and when she turned bending over to put lunch away into the cooler, the shorts

barely covered her ass. Fuck me. I'd been away too long from females and western civilization.

She turned back toward me and froze, staring me down, fixating on my junk. Which Ho. Lee. Hell. My little friend gave away how much her body excited me. For the second time today.

Then she had to go and bite her lip. My shorts grew too tight, and my cock needed breathing room. I scrambled for a towel to cover myself up, but if Eddy and my sister weren't twenty feet away, I'd wrap her up in my arms and stuff her with my banana in the cabana.

"Whoa, get a hold of yourself there, soldier." Those were the words she said, but it must not have been their meaning because the next thing she did tortured me. She slid those shorts down her thighs and kicked them off, along with her sandals. I swallowed super hard watching this show.

She tugged at her bikini bottoms to straighten them. With one pull of a string, those would fall right off her body too.

"I'm going swimming to give you a few minutes to calm yourself down. Maybe later we can have a reasonable conversation without that thing poking at me. Hm?" She giggled and wiggled her fingers, then took off to the water's edge.

Jeez, get a grip, dude. I was acting like a teenage boy overflowing with testosterone. I needed a distraction. I checked my phone for messages.

One was from Mom. I deleted her message. There's no way she'd know I was back in Key West. The other was about a job. I emailed back to set up an initial phone interview. I needed to move on with my life. Some interviews and apartment searching over the next week would help me decide if I wanted to reenlist in the military or if I was ready to reenter civilian life.

I hated admitting my sister was right, but I needed grounding, a new job, a new career, a place of my own, and figuring shit out like an adult.

Ava and my sister knocked an inflatable beach ball around with Eddy. As much as I was attracted to Ava, she was my sister's best friend. That alone should make her off limits. Besides, there was little sense in getting involved with someone until I had a plan for my life.



TWO NIGHTS LATER, I awoke with a scream in my ears. Was that from me, or did I hear someone else in the room scream like that? When I came to, I focused on Ava's face, gazing down at me.

“Hey, Will, are you all right? You must have had a nightmare. I don't think you woke up anyone else, only me.”

I bolted upright. My shirt stuck to my skin.

“Let me get you some water.” She padded off to the kitchen.

I peeled my shirt off. The rest would have to wait until Ava went back to bed. I joined her in the kitchen where she had a glass of ice water for me and a hand towel running under cold water. When she turned, she almost startled and dropped the towel, not hearing me come up behind her.

“Oh, here. I thought you'd like the towel to wash off from all the sweat.”

“Thanks.”

She turned to the sink and rinsed a few dishes. I finished off the water in a few gulps. Letting the cold liquid travel down my throat cooled me off.

I went to the adjoining laundry room and dug out a shirt to put on.

She dried her hands on a towel. “Do you often get nightmares?”

“I saw a lot of shit when I was overseas. It's stuff I'd like to forget, but can't.”

Her eyes took a downturn. “Maybe you need to see someone about that?”

“Like a therapist? Yeah, maybe. Part of being back here is trying to get my life in order. Therapist is somewhere in the top ten list of things to do. Until then, I self-medicate to calm my anxiety.”

“Pills?”

“No.”

“Drinking?”

“Now and then. Getting shit-faced the other night was the exception.”

I went to the bookshelf in the family room and reached behind the books on the tallest shelf where I knew only I could reach because Brenda had me build them there two years ago. I found what I came for and went back to the kitchen.

“I smoke once in a while. Join me on the back porch?”

Her eyes softened when she turned me down. “If you’re okay, I think I’ll head back to bed.”

“I’m fine.”

“Hey, if you need someone to talk to, I’m a good listener. Night.” She left my sight, and I waited until I heard the bedroom door close behind her before quietly stepping out onto the porch.

It was probably for the better that we didn’t spend time alone together in the middle of the night again, anyway. Not sure how much control I had left around her.



ANOTHER SHRIEK WOKE ME UP. This time, the noise belonged to Brenda.

“Will, wake up. Mom found out you’re in town and is on her way here.” Perched on the edge of the couch seat, she shook me with one hand and scrolled her phone in the other.

“What?” I wiped the sleep out of my eyes. “How’d she find out?”

“Okay, don’t be mad. I was telling her about yesterday and wasn’t thinking and let it slip how much of a good time Eddy had with you at the beach.”

I rolled over, turning my back to her, and groaned. “Leave me alone. But wake me the minute her tires hit your driveway, so I have time to hide.”

“What’s happening? Is everything okay?” I heard Ava’s voice and her footsteps treading toward us. Damn, I turned away too soon. Facing the couch, I couldn’t lay eyes on her to see what she was wearing.

Brenda heaved a huge sigh. “Our mom’s on her way over here. Congratulations. You get to meet *The Mrs. Maggie Heighton*. And whatever she says or does, don’t hold it against Will and I, okay?”

“Wow, I’m a little scared now. Maybe Will and I should hide together,” she quipped.

“Great idea.” I bolted upright and launched off the couch, nearly knocking Brenda on her ass.

I took Ava by the hand and walked out the front door, leaving my sister’s protests behind. My pulse raced until we reached the end of the driveway and turned left toward the private community beach.

“Talk to me, Will. Tell me why you’re avoiding your mom.”

I dropped her hand and shoved mine into my pockets. Not that I wanted to drop hers. Soft and small, they fit inside mine like—*Crap, stop thinking about her this way.*

CHAPTER

Five

MY HAND BURNED from Will's touch. When we reached the beach, I could have doused my hand in the seawater and watched steam rise off of it. Now I knew exactly what it felt like when I wrote about the electricity between characters at their first touch in my books. No man had ever heated me up like this before, not even Drake.

Since the moment I'd woken up beside him yesterday, the pull of the attraction to him grew. At least it did for me—did it for him? But my quiet, simple life was back in Buffalo. He was here.

Keep it together, Ava, was the warning playing in my head even though I became unhinged watching him pick up errant rocks here and there and throwing them out to sea. *Oh, his tanned muscles ...*

Beautiful blue skies already graced the morning. The tide was out, and without crowds of people, the only sound was that of the waves rolling in. We were nearly alone, save for a few runners passing us. Slaving away for their health, they kicked up sand in their wake while surfers dotted the water. I took a deep breath of sea air, something I'd miss when I returned next week to Buffalo.

In the rush of leaving the house, Will had left barefoot and with shorts on, which I had no problem with his chest and abs and arms being visible again. But I'd left the house without sunglasses. My glances at him had to be quick before he noticed.

At least I had mostly dressed and put sandals on, ready for the day until I heard Brenda's shrieking about their mom. My turquoise spaghetti strap dress covered me up, but left little to the imagination since I hadn't yet put on my bikini top. My nipples poked out thanks to the cool sea breeze whipping by.

After giving him a few more minutes of silence, I asked again. "Come on, talk to me. Brenda has never mentioned anything about your parents. What's the big deal?"

He turned ahead of me, walking backwards so we saw eye to eye. The whites of his eyes with deep blue centers stood out against his tan.

"The big deal is they wanted me to get involved with the business. But running the east coast's major hotel chain wasn't my idea of a fun career. Growing up, I'd watched my father slave away in an office building all day, turning him into a grade A asshole. No thanks."

He stopped and plopped down on the sand. I followed suit, landing only a few inches away from him. Hyper aware of his close presence and his movements, my pulse sped up. I gathered my knees to my chest as if trying to hold myself back from tackling his body.

He leaned back on his elbows and sighed out. "Ten years ago, I wanted to travel, to see the world. I didn't want to go to college and face four more years of school, not yet anyway. And I certainly wasn't ready for a corporate office next to Dad's. Of course, it didn't sit well with him."

"He really expected you to commit to the business so young?"

Will nodded, sitting up. He dug into the sand between his legs. "Yep. And Mom and Mary, a local girl I'd dated in school, had my future mapped out for me. The pressure was on me to propose. The wedding was practically planned between them, and the date even set, while waiting for me to ask the question."

He brushed the sand from his hands and snickered. "The union had little to do with love. It would have joined two of

Key West's most prominent families. I remember feeling so much pressure from everyone around me. I wasn't in control of my life. They were. So I ran away from it all, eventually joining up with the Army. Didn't tell anyone until I was all done with boot camp."

"Oh man. Let me guess. Your parents haven't forgiven you since?" The perfect romance plot formed in my head based on Will's life. I'd jot some notes down later.

"Dad and I sort of made up. Mom and I, well, she was always one to hold grudges. Even against her only son. You'd think after ten years she'd come around, but it worsened once Mary married my best friend."

I reached out and touched his arm, immediately regretting it for the heat between us. "It's a shame you had to deal with all of that at such a young age." I dropped my hand before it burned again.

"Eh. Whatever. If I decide to be done with the military, I get to create a new life for myself all over again. But then this morning, all I wanted was to run away again, hearing how Mom was on her way to the house."

"I understand the pull of wanting to move on. But sometimes the law of the vacuum needs to be heeded."

He laughed at me. "The law of what?"

I elaborated. "You know, life is like a vacuum. You have to make room for what you want in your life, so you vacuum up the old stuff."

He laughed at me more and ribbed me with his elbow. "Are you saying when we get back to the house, I should grab out Brenda's vacuum and go to town on her carpet?"

I nudged him with my shoulder back. "Not literally. Talk to your parents and clear the air. Let go of the past to make room for the future." A big lump formed in my throat, making it hard to swallow. "Do it now. You never know how long you have left with them."

His head shot to mine. "Are you speaking from experience?"

A lone tear streamed down my cheek. I swiped at it. “My parents died in a freak car accident years ago. So, yeah, I guess I am.”

The weight and heat of his arm on my back soothed me, and he pulled me to his side. “Hey, come here. I’m sorry to hear this.” His chin rested on top of my head. Why did the way I fit there feel so right?

Damn, all I ever wanted from my ex, Drake, was a little understanding. In one day, Will bestowed more tenderness on me than all my days added up with Drake.

“I’m okay. Really. But time is fleeting and uncontrollable. Promise me you’ll figure out how to let go of the past so you can move on.”

He sighed, but got up, removing his warmth from my side. “I know, and you’re right.” He held out his hands to pull me up.

Our tanned skin color almost matched as his big hands enveloped mine. His strength pulled me up too hard, and I fell against his pecs. My hands warmed to his skin and the hard muscles underneath.

Our eyes met when he caught me. My breathing paused. He held me there, and I didn’t mind, as my nipples warmed against his chest.

“Thank you for listening.” His voice held a sultry tone while his fingertips pushed a lock of my hair behind my ear.

He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. I didn’t flinch, letting him test the waters. The beach dissolved away around us, like we were the only two people on earth. If a shark jumped out of the water, I wouldn’t move from this spot, in the sweet moment of a first kiss.

“I shouldn’t want you, but fuck, I totally do,” he whispered against my lips.

“But—Brenda,” I barely croaked out, gasping for breath again. It was the only thing I could think of to say. My mind was hijacked by what he was doing to me.

“I know. My sister—But your lips are so full and tempting. I’m desperate to feel them again.” Our lips crashed together. The second kiss carried with it more meaning and intention than the first.

His arms encircled my waist. His hands raked up my back, pressing me hard into him. And I caved, running my hands up his chest and locking fingers behind his neck.

His kiss deepened, his tongue demanded entry. I was caught in his storm, out to sea, with no lifeline. And I’d be perfectly happy dying right here in his arms.

If we had a little dalliance this week, okay, but could I do it without falling for him? I’d never been involved with a man so insanely intense and quickly before now.

But wait. Brenda ... and my home is in Buffalo ... and no chance of any future together between Will and I.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, making the perfect excuse and exit from his arms. My head swam. I needed time to think about what was happening between us so fast.

“It-it’s Brenda.” I clicked the call onto the speaker. “Hi, we’re at the beach. We’re okay.” I hoped she couldn’t tell how breathless I was.

“Oh good. Mom left. It’s safe to come home. But there’s something Will needs to know, and he’s not going to like it.”

CHAPTER

Six

“SHE WHAT? Hell no. Mom’s gone way too fucking far this time,” my voice growled deep, a skill I’d picked up in the Army.

Eddy stared at me wide-eyed and pointed to the cursing jar half-filled with coins on the counter.

Brenda back tracked. “You know how Mom is. She works fast when she gets an idea in her head. Mary is divorcing, so she figures you two can get back together. She’s already extended an invitation to Mary and her parents. They’ll be at the Heighton party tomorrow night.”

“Well, I know where I *won’t* be. Shit, I should just head back to my unit and spend Christmas in Germany with them. I didn’t come back here for Mom to meddle in my affairs.” I stuffed a dollar bill into the swear jar, and stormed into Eddy’s room to pack my bags.

Of course, Brenda followed. “Don’t leave. I’ve missed you. Stay—for me, for Eddy—please?” She put her hand on my arm as I leaned it against the bunk bed. I blew out a long breath as if that’d control my anger level.

Ava paused in the doorway, looking as concerned as my sister. A half hour ago she had me convinced I should talk with Mom to clear the air, what seemed like a step forward. Now, with this news about the holiday party, it’s two steps backward into the same old shit.

“You don’t *have* to go to the party. We can stay here and watch Eddy while Brenda and Thompson go.” Ava shattered

me with an encouraging smile.

I didn't know what it was about her. But when I woke up next to her, she'd turned me on more than any woman ever before. When I woke up from a nightmare seeing her beautiful face, she'd soothed me.

Ava even convinced me to talk to Mom, an incredible feat. Something about her being here had brought me nothing but a feeling of—peace.

“What? Ava, what about James?” Brenda turned on her friend.

“James who?” Ava and I asked at the same time. Although I shouldn't. Not like I had any claim to her. But my jaw tightened nonetheless.

“My husband's friend who we invited to the party to meet you?”

“Aha. I knew it. You *were* trying to fix me up with him.” Ava pointed at my sister all accusatory like.

Chuckling actually helped me let out a little steam. “Like mother, like daughter. Why can't you and Mom stay out of other people's love lives?”

She lifted her chin in the air to shoot back at me. “Anyway, Eddy is coming with us to the party, so there goes your babysitting excuse. Listen, you are not leaving here. I want a nice Christmas with my brother. You *are* coming to the party to at least make an appearance. Be an adult and deal with it. And that's all there is to it.”

She stormed out of the room and brushed past Ava on the way to her bedroom. The door slamming behind her was a good indication I should avoid her the rest of the day.

The look on Ava's face wasn't too happy either. And then Eddy pushed past her into the room. He flung his arms around my middle.

“Don't leave Uncle Will. You promised to teach me how to surf. Dad's too busy at work all the time. You promised.” His little voice shook and tugged at my heartstrings.

I hugged him back. “I’m not leaving, buddy. I keep my promises. In fact, how about we go to the beach now? Go ask your mom if it’s okay?”

His face brightened at the news, and he left the room to find her. I relaxed—a little. I still didn’t want to face off with mom at the party, but I didn’t want to let my sister and nephew down either.



AFTER A COUPLE OF HOURS, Eddy and I walked back to the house. Brenda opened the door just as we arrived, smiling as if nothing had happened before. Ava came out onto the porch as well.

“How was surfing, you two?”

“It was great! I fell off the board a lot,” Eddy giggled.

“You did fine, buddy. It’s a good start. We’ll let your bruises heal, then hit the surf again in a couple of days.” I mussed up his wet hair.

Brenda put an arm around his shoulders, walking him to the front door. “Go in and change into the clothes on your bed. Scottie’s mom will be here in a few minutes to pick you up for a play date.”

“Yippee! This day keeps getting better and better.” We heard him giggling all through the house.

I eyed my sister at her one-eighty turn of emotions. “Are we okay?”

She drew me in for a hug. “Yes. I gave it some thought, and I understand. I know none of this has been easy for you. Besides, I think Ava and I have come up with a solution. Why don’t you go in and shower? We’ll talk over lunch.”

My forehead scrunched. Ava sent me a reassuring smile as I followed Eddy into the house.



“OKAY, WHAT’S THIS ABOUT?” I entered the kitchen in gray sweats, shirtless, and scrubbed a towel through my wet hair. When I sat down, Brenda placed a sandwich, milk, and cookies in front of me. Now I knew something was up. She was being way too nice.

She took the seat across from me and folded her hands on the table. “Ava and I talked, and, well, drawing from one of our romance novels, we think your situation is perfect for a fake dating trope.”

My eyes darted between them. “Can you clarify that for me? I’m a dumb man without the first clue about romance novels.”

Ava cleared her throat. “It’s where two people pretend they are dating.”

“Or even in love,” Brenda interrupted.

“Yes, and you know, they fool everyone around them. Sometimes for convenience, sometimes to throw off a meddling family member.”

An aha moment infiltrated my brain. My lips twitched. “Are you suggesting Ava and I pose as a couple for the Christmas party tomorrow night?”

“Yes.” Both women nodded.

I turned to Ava. Her blue eyes were bright and her lips softly curved. I wanted to taste those lips again. Damn, what her lips could do to me wrapped around my hard sha—

Fake or not, there was only one proper way to do this. “Ava, would you like to be my date for the Christmas party tomorrow night?”

“Why yes I would. I thought you’d never ask.” She beamed from ear to ear.

Brenda chuckled and clapped her hands. “Wonderful. We’ll throw Mom off her plans, and we’ll have a great time.”

I locked eyes with Ava. The easy part was over. The asking, and her saying yes. But I had my own dirty plans formatting in my brain to add to the farce.

“Well, with Eddy on a play date, I hope you two don’t mind if I rush out for a hair appointment and I might get my nails done, too. Oh heck, even a pedicure. Mama doesn’t get enough me time.” She laughed and stood and touched Ava’s shoulder. “Have you changed your mind about coming with me?”

“No. I’m sort of inspired by this situation. I thought I might grab my laptop and write on the porch overlooking the ocean view.”

Ava and me alone in the house? Yes. I fought back a maniacal laugh.

“Okay then, I’m off. We’ll have dinner when I get back.”

We stayed at the table, eyes locked until the last remnant of noise from my sister’s vehicle was nothing but a whisper.

“So we’re fake dating, with my sister’s full approval.” I finally spoke and winked at her.

“Yep. Fake boyfriend and girlfriend.” Her knowing smile was too much for my cock to handle.

“Fake lovers.”

She swallowed. The sweetest pink hue overcame her cheeks.

“There’s something Brenda didn’t take into consideration, though. My mom is a pretty astute woman. She’ll smell a lie a mile away.”

“Is that right?”

“Hm. Yes. So I think we’d better get pretty intimate with each other fast, so tomorrow night will go off without a hitch.”

Her breath shattered, and she peered at me with half-lidded domes. “What do you suggest we do to get intimate?”

I stood and took her hand, bringing it to my lips, planting kisses across her knuckles. “Step one, we’ll finish what we

started the other morning.”

“Will, it-it’s been a while for me.”

“Me too. Not a lot of opportunities to meet women while fighting overseas.” I pulled her upright, curving my body to hers. I kissed down her cheek to her neck, and up to her earlobe. She trembled in my arms. “You don’t have to be nervous with me.”

“I’ve been told I’m cold in bed,” she blurted out in a rush.

I jerked my head back. “Who told you that? The other morning in bed you were fucking sexy.” My finger tips trailed down her sides, tracing her delicious curves, and all I desired was to feast on every inch of her.

She sniffled and cast her eyes down. “My ex, Drake, told me I was like a cold fish. He said I saved all the best parts for my books and never shared any of my sexy thoughts with him.”

I hooked my thumb under her chin, lifting her face up to me. “I don’t know who this asshole was, but he was dead wrong. You’re hot, Ava. Maybe he was the wrong guy for you. And that’ll be the last time another man’s name slips past your pouty, sweet lips. While we’re in this little arrangement, W-I-L-L better be the only name you mutter. Or scream. Got it?”

Her body relaxed in my arms. I touched my forehead to hers. “Good girl. Now, I need to know if you’re all in on this with me.”

She squeezed her eyes closed.

“Need a little coaxing, Ava? How about a preview of what’s ahead for us?”

My lips melted on hers. And I kissed her again, and again, with a gentle persistence, warming her up. Finally, her tongue darted out and parted my lips, fully joining me on the fun. Exploring deeper, something ignited between us. She couldn’t have missed it.

I paused to catch a breath. “Was this your way of saying yes?”

She kissed along my jawline. “Yes, Will. Take me to the bedroom.”

“Thank fuck.” I cupped her ass and lifted her. She wrapped her limbs around me, and we continued kissing on the way.

Nothing in this world would stop me from getting to know every sexy secret in Ava’s brain while *I* was her fake boyfriend.

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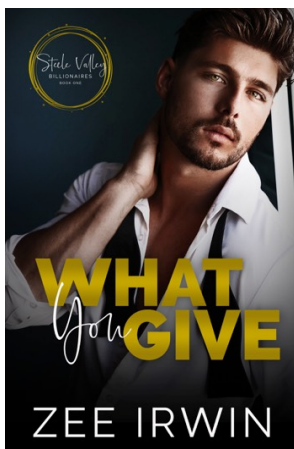
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ZEE IRWIN



Hello from Zee!

Zee is a bit of sunshine, living in Pennsylvania with her own grumpy alpha guy, two teenagers, and a faithful golden retriever. While writing in a cottage on her property, she believes luck is just a four-letter word for work and takes pride in building her self-publishing empire.

Visit her at ZeeIrwinAuthor.com to keep up to date on her latest work in progress.



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