

MAYBE ONCE WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH



Onetime
LOVERS

LOVERS IN THE CITY BOOK THREE

CATE LANE

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*In memory of Tash,
whose talent will live on in beautiful cover designs,
including my Lovers in the City series.*

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CHAPTER 1

JASMINE

*S*hit, *Shit, Shit!* What the hell was I thinking, sleeping with a groomsman at my best friend's wedding. I blame it on there being too much love in the air and the man in question being way too yummy.

Seriously, it's such a cliché. The single bridesmaid and the hot unattached groomsman getting it on.

It's not like it wasn't fun. Honestly, it was spectacular, satisfying sex. Undoubtedly, the best I've had in years, and at twenty-nine I'm not without experience. No regrets. No misgivings.

Just a niggly worry that things could get messy, very messy.

With a slight turn of my head, I gaze shamelessly at the perfect specimen of a naked man lying next to me in the bed. Careful not to wake the sleeping giant, I run my eyes shamelessly over every single inch of his tanned skin, lingering on his firm sculptured abs. All tantalizingly within reach.

I have a strong desire to trace a finger over the small collection of stars tattooed on the left side of his chest as I wonder at the significance of them. Then I want to run my tongue over every single one of the ridges, which ripple down his washboard stomach. I want to dig my nails again into his biceps as I moan in pleasure. And drink in the sight of the veins in his forearms which are barely visible now, but last night were so goddam sexy as he braced himself above me. Oh yes, veins in a guy's muscled arms are hot.

I'm even turned on by the way he's sprawled out on top of all the bedding, one of those muscled arms, with its light dusting of fair hair currently resting casually across his chest, and the other flung out beside his body.

On the inside of his forearm, I can see an intricate wave tattoo with the words *Live, Love, Surf* scrolled underneath. I hadn't noticed the words last night when we were up close and personal, I guess I was a little preoccupied with other magnificent things to look at.

I like the sound of his motto and particularly how it's etched permanently onto him. Tattoos on muscled arms are a little bit bad boy, and another of my favorite things.

Hmm ... maybe I have a previously unrealized arm fetish.

My eyes travel further south over more toned bronzed skin, stopping to stare longingly at a delicious prominent hard seven inches.

"You see anything you like?" the naked man rumbles in his sexy Australian drawl.

Reluctantly, I drag my eyes slowly back up to meet the deep blue of his, and I'm again captivated by his chiseled features, scruffy jawline, and messy blond hair.

"Maybe," I tease. There's no point denying my obvious attraction to him. We moved way beyond that point last night.

Scott, the gorgeous naked man stretches long and wide, then folds both arms behind his neck before turning his broadly grinning face toward me. "I don't think there is any maybe about it. I think you want my body again ... and again."

I do like how comfortable he is reclining naked before me.

"Oh, please—that's a big ego you got there." My eyes trail slowly over his body again.

He chuckles. "You seemed to like *my big ego* last night."

Damn the arrogant frustrating man! I can't believe some of the trash coming out of his mouth. I'd much prefer him to stop using his mouth for words and instead give me a repeat of some of the things he did last night. But really would that be wise? It's going to be awkward if we meet up again through our friends.

Soberly, I tell him, "You do realize this was a very bad idea." It's too late, but it needs to be said.

"Probably, but bad ideas can sometimes be the most fun ... Jasmine, we were inevitable." He rolls completely onto his side to face me. The full-frontal Scott view is difficult to ignore.

“That may be true, but it doesn’t mean we should repeat those bad ideas. This was a one-time-only thing between us,” I point out, even though in my heart of hearts, I’m still hoping for a repeat.

Scott raises his hand and slowly drags his index finger down my arm. “Well, if this is a one-time-only thing, I think we blew that out the water last night. If memory serves me right, it was a couple of times for both of us.”

I can’t resist clarifying, “Correction—it was definitely three times for me.”

Scott smiles smugly as he continues, “Anyway, the way I see it, we are still in bed together, so the one-time is not officially over yet.”

His finger trails up then back down my arm, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

It’s a stupid argument and I attempt to counter his logic. “But a one-night stand usually means one night, not one night plus a morning.”

Frowning, he chides me firmly, “I never thought of us as a one-night stand, Jas. A one-night stand to me usually means a casual hookup, but I met you three days ago. Three days I’ve spent getting to know you, trading kisses, and seeing your ravishing flesh in skimpy bikinis. I love your bikini body as much as I enjoy your quick wit.”

Scott is right, we aren’t strangers, and we were inevitable. Last night felt like the culmination of three days of foreplay

between us. We've been slowly getting to know each other, and while it's obvious he wanted me, I still like hearing him say he finds me sexy.

With his penetrating blue eyes following the path of his finger, he admits, "It's been a hard three days, if you know what I mean."

"It looks like you're still having a hard time," I tease, staring directly at his morning erection.

Scott groans. "A painfully hard time and it's not helping you staring like that at my cock." His finger moves from my arm to hook on the sheet covering my breasts and slowly drags it down. "Now it's fair, I get to look at your gorgeous tits."

I like his sexy morning pillow talk. I absolutely want more of this hot man, but I'm keeping that to myself as I wonder what other persuasive tactics he may be going to use.

"Personally, I think we deserve some amazing morning sex. Just like last night was amazing night sex. What do you think?" Scott's finger is now seeking a new path across the domes of my breasts and the heat of his touch is convincing.

"Maybe you're right. If this is a one-time only thing, then it should be the full experience."

My body succumbs to the pleasure tingling up my spine and I edge closer within easier reach of those clever traveling fingers. His touch is doing all kinds of wonderful things to me.

Scott's eyes turn a deeper blue as he asks cheekily, "Now, where would the pretty lady like the full experience? In her

mouth,” his finger traces over my lower lip, “... or down here,” his finger moving down my body to slip between my thighs “... or maybe you have somewhere else in mind?”

It’s official, I’m seriously in trouble.

Scott Hargrave’s dirty words are driving me wild and sending spikes of desire to all the places he is pointing out in the most delicious way.

CHAPTER 2

JASMINE

Three Days Before

“**H**ere comes the bride,” I sing loudly as I watch Cassie unpack her gorgeous wedding gown from the carrier. The silky white dress is a simple halter neck style with a sexy backless sweep. She will be perfect in it.

Cassie, Lily, and I are busy emptying our suitcases after having arrived on the luxurious private island in the Bahamas a short while ago. This is where Cassie’s wedding to Luke will take place in just over two days’ time.

I flop back onto one of the three beds in our large bungalow, looking up at the vaulted ceiling with its slowly spinning fan. “This reminds me of our dorm sharing days but on a much bigger scale.”

“Absolutely,” Lily agrees as she places a neatly folded stack of T-shirts into one of the sets of drawers that run along half of the back wall.

Cassie pokes her head out from the doorway of the shared walk-in closet. “This closet alone is as big as our dorm was. The whole place is amazing.” She skips a few steps back into the room. “I just can’t believe we’re finally here. I’m so excited.”

In unison, Lily and I say, “We know.” Which has us all laughing.

The three of us will be sharing this large bungalow till Cassie’s wedding day when she’ll move with her new husband to the Honeymoon suite in the main building.

From my prone position on the bed, I turn my head to look out the set of large sliding glass doors. A stretch of green lawn appears to fall away to a thin strip of white sandy beach and the glistening turquoise waters beyond.

This private island is a perfect location for the intimate beach wedding Cassie has been dreaming of since Luke, the love of her life, proposed only a few months ago.

Most of the guests will be arriving tomorrow by boat from Nassau but Luke, and two of his groomsmen, Blake and Scott, are due to arrive later today.

Till then, I plan on enjoying some girl time with my besties since we have the whole island to ourselves, except of course the small army of staff we met on arrival.

Lily carefully lifts out of the carrier bag our bridesmaid dresses, pale sea-green silk falling in soft folds from the hanger. I jump up to help her, so they don’t drag on the floor.

The dresses are stunning. “Cass, you really did select the most beautiful dresses for us to wear. I thought the deal was Bridezillas picked ugly meringue puffy dresses for the bridesmaids. Didn’t you read that part in your bridal magazines?”

Cassie turns to face me with hands on her hips. “Firstly, I am not a Bridezilla. Secondly, I could dress you girls in sacks, and you would still look stunning so why would I bother.”

Lily chimes in, “You forgot, thirdly, nobody could outshine you as the bride.”

“Oh, group hug time,” I announce, dragging my best friends into an embrace. They know how much I love group hugs, so they submit willingly. I grew up in a family of huggers and I don’t see any reason to stop now.

Cassie giggles. “You and your group hugs, Jas. I swear you will be dragging us into group hugs when we’re all old and gray.”

I laugh along with her as a funny image pops into my head. “I think I’m having a flash forward to us trying to group hug in our eighties with our walkers all getting tangled up. Maybe we’ll have to add a new rule to our girl code. No group hugs after the age of seventy.”

“Deal,” Cassie and Lily respond in unison.

Lily, the sensible organizer of our group, claps her hands together. “Come on, finish unpacking. I want to take a look

around while we have this little piece of paradise all to ourselves.”

“Bikini time, girls! Because we are definitely having a swim in those beautiful blue waters we spotted from the air.”

The arrival on the island by private helicopter from Nassau Airport was a real treat. We zipped down low over the ocean before spotting our tiny island destination. A lush green speck surrounded by clear turquoise reef waters, the ocean turning a darker blue as it deepened further out from the sandy shoreline.

The pilot did a short fly over of the island before coming into land, giving us a bird’s eye view of the whole resort area. About thirty separate bungalows are dotted amongst the tropical gardens with gravel paths crisscrossing the inhabited section of the island, linking each of the bungalows to the main resort buildings. At the far end a wooden deep-water jetty jutted out into the blue.

At the center of the main buildings is a large resort-style pool, shining like a precious sapphire jewel from the air. I remember from the website the pool has an infinity edge overlooking a small strip of white sandy beach. The perfect place for our planned sunset cocktails.

This island is an imagined paradise come to life.

Quickly we change into our new bikinis and shorts, grab a yellow striped beach towel, sun lotion, hats, and sunglasses, filling our beach totes with the essentials.

The sun is hot already but with the soft breeze cooling down the temperature we decide to explore on foot first.

Under a shady palm tree, we drop our bags in the soft white sand. I kick off my shorts and start applying sun lotion. My pale complexion needs protection from the blistering mid-morning sun, especially if I don't want to look like a lobster in the wedding photos.

Cassie looks over at me after swiping lotion up and down her arms. "Girl, you own that new bikini; the color really suits you. It makes your eyes even greener."

I smile at her compliment. I do love my new emerald-green skimpy bikini. It's my favorite color.

Glancing sideways, I see Cassie tug her shorts down her long slender legs. I notice she's wearing her new little white bikini which matches perfectly with her quintessential beach babe vibe of long blonde hair and blue eyes.

"Thanks, Cass, but you know of course you're smoking hot in your *virginal* white bikini."

Cassie laughs. "Hardly virginal, but I'll take the smoking hot part."

"Good point. How about bridal white bikini then? Either way, Luke is going to have a heart attack when he sees you in that bikini." She really does look stunning.

Lily, not to be outdone, is wearing an equally cute red bikini which with her curves is bordering on indecent. How is this girl without a man? Although I suspect there may be a certain

gym instructor who has caught her eye. I'm still trying to get the details out of her around what is going on with the steamy gym guy.

No time like the present. "Gee, Lil, if only your gym instructor could see you now. He wouldn't know where to look."

Lily's brow furrows as she tries to stretch the scrap of red fabric across her ample chest. "Is it too revealing? Maybe I should change into my black swimsuit."

"Don't you dare," Cassie pleads.

"Lil, you are a gorgeous woman with fantastic boobs which do not deserve to be hidden. I wish you could see how beautiful you are." I can't believe I have to say this to Lily again.

For years, Cassie and I have been trying to get her to see how beautiful she is inside and out. Somebody really did a number on her self-confidence when she was growing up.

It's crazy because when it comes to her amazing financial mind, she has no problems striding into boardrooms full of suited corporate types and taking control. But socially with guys, she hides in the background.

"Time for some exploring," Cassie suggests, deliberately trying to stop Lily from rushing back to the room to change.

I take hold of Lily's arm to add my encouragement. "Yes, come on, Lil, we have to do what the Bridezilla wants if we're going to be the best bridesmaids ever."

Cassie starts walking down the beach to the water, saying back over her shoulder, “Stop with the Bridezilla jokes. It’s not funny.”

“Uhm mm yes, it is,” I say, as Lily allows me to walk her down the beach to join Cassie at the water’s edge.

We set off in the direction of a rocky outcrop as we talk about the upcoming wedding. Not surprising really as it’s been the main focus of our conversations since Cassie’s engagement. We’ve covered guestlists, venues, dresses, then more recently the planned wedding events, our new outfits and which one we will wear to each island dinner.

This is what we love to do together; talk clothes, food, and cocktails. Probably in that order of priority too. Oh, and maybe somewhere further down the list comes men.

I can’t think of a more enjoyable way to spend a couple of hours in this idyllic location than strolling through the shallows and swimming in the tropical waters with my besties.

The midday heat chases us back toward the resort, feeling a little hungry from our walk and swim in the sea. The pool area encircled by shady palms is the perfect place for a leisurely lunch before we each recline back on a lounge to soak up the warmth from the early afternoon sun.

The noisy, dirty streets of the city feel a million miles away as I breathe in deeply the heady fragrance of the brilliant-colored flowers in the gardens which edge the pool area. The sweet soft scent of roses mixed with the summery smell of

yellow elder bushes. It's so peaceful and relaxing. I didn't realize how much I needed this break, till now.

The distant beat of a helicopter approaching has me turning my head lazily in the direction of the sound. Cassie jumps up excitedly, nearly knocking over the tray of drinks on the table between our loungers.

"That must be Luke and the boys," she shouts with the same excitement as a child on Christmas morning.

Laughing at her eagerness to see her man, I tease her, "Calm down, girl, it's only been a few days since you saw him. You do know you're going to have to restrain yourself from grabbing your man as soon as he walks in. Remember our deal to keep the loving in public to a minimum."

Cassie laughs. "I don't think I agreed to that deal. I can grab my man any time and any place I want. Our deal is null and void. It's my wedding so look away if you can't handle some serious loving."

Shaking my head with an exaggerated eye roll I plead my case, "Spare a thought for us girls who don't have a man mountain to climb. You and Luke are truly too loved up for my eyes."

Lily sighs. "Well, you'd hope they were loved up as they're getting married in two days."

Cassie's high-pitched squeal hurts my ears. "I'm so excited to see Luke and so excited to be getting married."

I roll my eyes again, in an *oh please* kind of way even though I'm truly happy for her.

Cassie and Luke dated in their teens till he broke her heart when he was deployed with his military unit, the 75th Ranger Regiment, to Afghanistan. Five years later, fate gave them a second chance. They're back together like they always should have been.

We all raise our eyes to the skies as the incoming helicopter buzzes low over us, hovers for a few seconds, and scoots off over the building to land on the island helipad. The helicopter hovered over the pool for only a few moments, but it was enough time to cause havoc, blowing cushions and towels everywhere. Crazy stupid pilot!

Cassie laughingly says, "Scotty is obviously flying today. Luke mentioned he was probably going to fly them over to the island."

Lily and I both know Luke well through Cassie, and we've met Blake, his best friend and business partner a few times too. However, the infamous Scotty, also known now as the crazy pilot, I've never met before, but have heard a bit about.

I know he's Australian, hence his nickname, and that he's a former pilot who Blake and Luke served with as part of the joint forces in Afghanistan. Blake and Luke were in the Rangers together at the time, and the stories they tell make Scotty sound wild and fun. I must admit I've been kind of looking forward to meeting him to see if he lives up to his

reputation. Shame they forgot to mention he was a bit of a dumbass.

Running my fingers through my hair to try to smooth it down after the free blow dry provided by the helicopter, I reposition my Ray-Bans over my eyes and lie back on my lounge.

Within moments, I'm settling back into some serious chill time by the pool when suddenly Cassie squeals again. At what point did this become a thing with her? Opening my eyes, I see her skip up the steps and launch herself into Luke's arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. Luckily, he catches her. Blake stands a safe distance behind him, looking on bemused.

I laugh at her over-the-top welcome for her fiancé. Yep, she's totally forgotten the deal we made of no public loving. Sedately, I walk over to join them. As Luke has his arms full of Cassie, I drop a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Geez, Luke, I'm glad to see you. I mean seriously will you hurry up and marry your woman before Bridezilla has us all squealing."

Luke can't respond as he is back to kissing his bride-to-be.

Blake strolls closer, bending down from his six-foot-five height to kiss my cheek. "Hey, Jas, it's good to see you again. But beware we have bought with us, Groomzilla and he's just as excited to marry his woman. Although I haven't heard him squeal yet."

I like Blake, he's a good guy and always happy to participate in a bit of my silly banter. Of course, like Luke he is also ridiculously handsome, but where Luke has dark hair, Blake is blond. He's the quintessential corporate city guy – in other words, not my type. I like my men a little rough around the edges with a dash of bad boy.

Besides, Blake is already taken by our friend Bec who he recently started dating. Bec works for Blake and Luke's company 'Cybersec' and for a little while their relationship was a not so closely kept secret. For some reason, Blake didn't want Luke to know he had a thing for their executive assistant.

Bec, along with her best friend, Trudy, started joining our Friday girls' night drinks gang a few months ago, so of course we all knew exactly what was going on.

Unfortunately, the girls won't be arriving till tomorrow, as according to Bec, someone needed to stay behind to run the company while the boys were off doing wedding things. Although I'm not sure what wedding things they have been doing in Florida.

Blake greets Lily, bending even lower to reach her cheek. "And how are you lovely ladies doing? You seem to be settling into island life." He gazes around the pool area, and I can't help thinking he's just taken an inventory of all the hazards and exit points.

Lily gestures toward our surroundings. "Look at this place. How can you not love island life? It's fantastic."

At that moment, another man strolls out onto the pool deck, demanding my attention, someone I've not met before. While he's dressed casually in shorts and T-shirt, similar to Luke and Blake, there's something different about him. I secretly rake my eyes over his body from behind my dark sunglasses.

He stands, one hand in his pocket, the other repeatedly tossing up a set of keys as he slowly scans the group gathered together. My guess is he's another military man, given his intense gaze, which defies his relaxed stance. He turns in my direction, then catches the keys one last time and straightens fully. Wow, this must be Scotty.

He's tall, not quite as tall as Blake, so I'm guessing around six-foot-three or four, my ideal man height. His muscular chest and matching broad shoulders are showcased perfectly in his fitted dark T-shirt.

Slowly, he removes his aviators to reveal smiling blue eyes. Today I'd call them Bahamian blue, as they match the cloudless blue of the sky above us. Sexy eyes which are currently running freely over my body. Fair enough, as I've given him a quick once over too.

He strides directly toward me, his hand outstretched in front of him and in a sexy deep voice, says, "Hi, I'm Scott, and you must be Jasmine."

I ignore his extended hand and instead lean in to kiss his cheek. "Nice to meet you, Scott," I murmur, pulling back to see the corners of his mouth twitch in amusement.

Maybe my bold move has backfired. I wanted to surprise him, and I certainly did that, but I didn't expect the fluttery reaction to the brief touch of my lips to the light stubble covering his jawline. There are shivers racing up my spine! Being near this man feels a little bit risky and a lot dangerous.

Scott turns to Lily, seemingly unaffected in the same way, and introduces himself to her as she takes his extended hand. While he's distracted, I have the perfect chance to check out his rear view and what a view. Broad shoulders and back, tapering to trim hips and a toned, tight butt, which fills out those cargo shorts perfectly. I lean slightly in his direction wanting to catch another breath of his spicy cologne. He smells delicious.

Reluctantly, I must admit, he is ticking all my hot man boxes, even if he is still a crazy pilot.

Introductions over, Scott looks directly at me and says, "The pool looks good. I think I might cool off. Anyone want to join me?" Strolling over to the nearest lounge he slips off his deck shoes and strips off his T-shirt.

Oh my god! What I would give to run my hands freely over his hot athletic physique. His chest and arms are tanned, sculpted, and best of all inked. Not too many tattoos but enough for that touch of bad boy I find so sexy. Trying not to drool embarrassingly, I glance over at Lily who is standing a little behind Scott, and nearly laugh out loud at the way her eyes are popping wide. She smiles back at me, fanning her face with her hand.

But Scott is not done with the striptease show as he unbuttons his shorts and drops them to reveal black Australian Speedos. Wow, Magic Mike has got nothing on this guy's body and moves. Normally, I'm not a fan of this style of swim trunks on men, but with the body Scott has, I am loving it. In the blink of an eye, he moves to the pool edge and performs a perfect dive into the sparkling blue water.

Dragging my gaze away from Scott, I glance over at Blake. He has removed his T-shirt too. I haven't seen this much bare-chested eye candy since last season's finale of *Love Island*. This luxury island is fast becoming more like paradise. Hot men stripping down. Yes please!

I'm in need of some cooling down too, after that display of delicious male bodies, so I walk to the pool edge and dive into the water.

CHAPTER 3

SCOTT

With a two-handed swipe at the water dripping from my face, I'm just in time to see Jasmine launch into a graceful, technically perfect dive.

She is *stunning*. The only word I can think of to describe the fiery auburn-haired beauty, my eyes keep pinging back to.

From the brief descriptions Luke had given me of his fiancée Cassie's best friends, I knew immediately Jasmine was the statuesque glamourzon and Lily, the cute little brunette standing beside her. Luke had also warned me on the flight over that both girls were single, and I was not to fuck with them.

Dutifully warned, I had planned on keeping my distance. However, all those pious thoughts have disappeared after meeting Jasmine. Luke had certainly failed to mention how breathtakingly beautiful she was, whether deliberately or not. I guess I can excuse him though as he only has eyes for Cassie, ever since they got back together.

Like a moth to a flame, I'm instantly drawn to Jasmine in her tiny green bikini. But when I introduced myself, and she pulled me in for a soft kiss on my cheek—fuck that was hot!

I wanted to pull her into my arms, touch her tempting curves, breathe in her sun-warmed skin, and suck on her provocative, teasing lips. Certainly, I wanted more than one chaste kiss on my cheek. But my mother raised me a gentleman, so I'd pulled back and schooled my features to hide my desire. Turning instead to introduce myself to Lily.

Luckily, there was no visceral reaction to the touch of Lily's hand. It's obvious my heated blood spikes only for Jasmine. I get the feeling she's not immune to me either. I know those beautiful green eyes were definitely checking me out as I dragged my T-shirt off over my head and dropped my cargo shorts down to my Speedos.

Growing up in Australia within spitting distance of some of the best beaches in the world, I've never been embarrassed to strip down to my Speedos. I love swimming, so wearing Speedos under my shorts is normal. Just because I live in Florida now, it doesn't mean I have to forgo some of my Aussie traditions.

Swimming a few strokes through the cooling water, I turn and lean back against the pool edge. And I'm just in time to hear Blake poking fun at my choice of swimwear, again. "Seriously, Scotty, are you still wearing those ridiculous Aussie swim trunks. When are you going to embrace the culture of your adopted country and wear boardshorts?"

A smile stretches my mouth as I've heard him say this many times before. I've copped some stick over the years from my American mates about my choice of swim trunks, but who cares—I grew up with Speedos and will continue to wear them.

“Blake, if you worked a bit harder in the gym, you could wear Speedos too.” The easiest way to piss Blake off is to bring up his fitness level. Stuck in an office most days means he doesn't get the time to work out like he did back in the military. There is an ongoing competition between us which usually involves a physical challenge and a bet.

Blake's only response is a bomb dive into the water, and being a big dude, the splash covers my head.

I wait till he resurfaces before complaining, “Gee thanks, mate ... or was that Moby Dick?”

Jasmine at the other end of the pool, managed to avoid the Blake-induced tsunami and is laughing at his childish behavior.

I swim to her end of the pool, stopping in the water beside Jasmine.

“You shouldn't encourage his bad behavior, or he'll never learn how to be an adult.”

Still chuckling, she says, “Blake reminds me so much of my big brothers.”

Good. I'm happy Jasmine sees Blake like a brother.

Lily cautiously enters the pool via the stairs, but Luke and Cassie are nowhere to be seen. I suspect Luke hasn't wasted any time in dragging his wife-to-be off somewhere private, so they can rip each other's clothes off. It's good to see Luke so happy, it's been way too long.

The four of us float about in the pool as the girls tell us about the parts of the island they discovered on their morning walk. I know I can't wait to do some snorkeling along the reef surrounding the island. As I flew my bird in low over the reef, I was already planning the first snorkeling trip.

Hoping for others to join me, I ask if anyone is interested. Lily begs off saying she's happy to laze around the pool reading her book. Blake and Jasmine sound keen and I'm sure Luke and Cassie will be up for it too. Of course, it depends on whether we can drag them out of their room.

Jasmine swims to the edge, exits the pool, and struts across to her towel, flinging the long damp strands of her hair over her shoulder. It's impossible to look away. I can't imagine there's a man alive who wouldn't take notice of her in that bikini. With a final dive under the cool water, I get out too, choosing to dry off on the spare lounge beside her.

Big mistake. Now, I'm stuck trying not to stare as she slathers sun lotion down her long arms then in slow wide strokes across her full cleavage. I inhale the coconut scent, wishing I could bury my nose in the flawless, smooth skin of her neck. It nearly has me groaning aloud.

It's not like I don't see my fair share of beautiful women, especially given I live in Florida and spend a good percentage of my time on the beach. But there's something about this particular woman.

Jas shifts on the lounge as she talks softly to Lily on her other side. I can't make out the words, but it doesn't matter as I'm enjoying the sound of her husky voice. I close my eyes imagining nights of hot island sex.

Geez, what's wrong with me? I need a distraction, so I fill my head with thoughts of business. I design and manufacture custom surfboards, selling them globally. I've been living my dream of creating unique boards for just over four years now, after leaving the Australian Defense Forces as a fighter pilot.

Peering up from where I'm resting my head on my arms, I notice Luke and Cassie return disheveled and flushed. Without a word, they dump their towels on a nearby lounge.

Luke strips off his shirt revealing a map of scar tissue across his back and Cassie casually strokes a hand over the puckered scars. I'm surprised by Luke's lack of reaction. I've known Luke about six years, ever since we served together in Afghanistan.

The guys and I are close, a tight bond forged through shared danger, horror, and fear. I was flying their team the night Luke was injured. A night none of us will ever forget no matter how hard we try.

It's been a long road to recovery for Luke and I'm glad to see he's now finally comfortable in his own skin. Cassie has

been the key to his healing. Since she came back into his life, he's been more like the old Luke I remember from before.

I blink away memories of my previous life and see Blake walking toward me with a plastic crate filled with snorkels, masks, and fins.

CHAPTER 4

JASMINE

Scott, Blake, and Luke grab some gear and strut toward the water like a group of schoolboys eager for an adventure. Cassie and I trail more sedately along behind as we follow them down the wide stone steps which lead onto the beach.

“What do you think of Scott?” Cassie whispers behind her hand, making sure the guys, a little ahead of us, can’t hear. “I saw you checking out his hot bod when he took his shirt off.”

I stop at the bottom of the stairs and look back up at her. “Undecided at this point. Sure, he has a hot bod that he’s not afraid to show off. I can appreciate the show, but he seems a bit ... I don’t know.” I shrug, not really able to put my finger on what bothers me about Scott. Then because she seems to be waiting for me to say something, I blurt out, “That stunt with the low flyover was not cool.”

Cassie giggles. “I thought it was funny.”

Barefoot, we continue to pick our way carefully across the crunchy shell-filled strip of beach onto the softer, finer grains at the edge of the clear water.

The boys are already standing in the shallows with their snorkeling gear waiting for us. Luke hands a set to Cassie and starts to help her put on her fins.

Scott moves to stand beside me, handing me a mask. “I’ve adjusted the strap for you, but if it needs more adjusting you just tug on this bit here.” He tugs on a section of plastic to demonstrate where I need to adjust it.

I go to take the mask from him, but he keeps a hold on it as he says, “I’ll just attach the snorkel into the loop at the side here.” I watch too closely as his nimble fingers adjust the fiddly straps.

Okay—now I’m starting to get a little annoyed as he explains the basics about the equipment. Geez, he’s not the first person to have ever been snorkeling.

I take the mask and snorkel from his hands. “Thanks, I got this.” I guess my tone is snappy as his head jolts up to look at me. I attempt a smile, but I know it’s weak and I think he knows it too.

I know I’m being unreasonable, but I hate being told what to do by bossy men, I had enough of that growing up with my two older, overprotective brothers, Rory and Jarrod.

To stop his hovering and prove I really have got this, I bend to pick out a pair of fins then silently step into the shallows to

slip one on. Easier said than done. I hop on one foot as I try to pull the unyielding sticky rubber onto my foot.

Scott offers, “You can lean on me if that helps.” Grrrr, I try to ignore him.

Why does he have to stand there watching me? I’m sure it’s making it harder for me to get the stupid thing on. A couple more hops and finally I do it.

I look up with a satisfied *I told you so* smile, and frustratingly his shoulders are shaking as he unsuccessfully attempts to hide his mirth.

Damn, I should have just sat on the beach to put the fins on, like a normal person would, instead of hopping about like a fool. The next fin in my hand poses another challenge as I contemplate how I’m going to get it on with a little more dignity.

Scott quirks his brow at me. “You sure you don’t want to lean on me to put that one on?” He nods in the direction of my hand.

“Fine,” I reply, and he closes the gap between us, offering his tanned muscled arm for me to lean on. I rest my hand lightly on his sun-warmed skin, ignoring the temptation to wrap my fingers around his flesh. As quickly as possible I pull on the second fin and pull my hand away from him.

Scott manages to put his own fins on like he’s attempting to break a world record, then looks up at me, saying, “Good,

we're all set. Now with the snorkel just breathe normally through ...”

I interrupt him, “Yes ... I have done this before.” My snappy tone is back. There is something about this man that unsettles me and makes my normal calm attitude to life desert me.

He smiles, looking away quickly. “Good, then let's catch up with the others.” I look out across the water to see our friends have already swum out a distance from shore.

I pull my mask down and wrap my lips around the mouthpiece then dive into the cool water. I need cooling down after my vigorous attempts to get the fins on ... and to ease my frazzled nerves.

Time stands still as we float in peace, occasionally diving below to the colder depths, shafts of sunlight filtering through the blue, to highlight one vibrant fish after another. Scott swims nearby, never too far away.

Salty water fills my mask, and treading water I stop to clear it. Before I can pull it back down over my eyes, Scott pops up beside me. “Everything okay?”

It's impossible for me to speak without first gritting my teeth. “Actually, I've had enough for one day, I'm heading back to shore.” Of course, what I want to say is I've had enough of one bossy man.

Surprisingly, he leaves me alone to swim back to the beach as he turns in the opposite direction to swim toward where the

others are.

I stomp up the beach no longer caring about the spiky bits of shell digging into my feet. At least till they start to really hurt, and I then walk more cautiously over to the steps.

Good, Lily is still by the pool so I can vent my frustrations to my friend. She looks up from the pages of her latest bestseller as I approach. “Hey, how was your swim?”

“The water and fish are lovely.” My voice trails off.

“But ... what happened? You’re usually the last one out of the water when we go to the beach.”

I lay my towel onto an empty lounge but remain standing with one hand on my hip. “I know ... but Scott is driving me crazy. Who says he knows everything about snorkeling in the Bahamas? From the moment I walked down on the beach he has taken over, loosening the strap on my mask, explaining how to breathe through a snorkel. Does he think he is the only person who has ever snorkeled before? I’m not useless.” I stop, choosing to block out the memory of me hopping about trying to put a fin on my stupid, damn foot.

Lily smiles as I finish my rant. “Wow, how outrageous. A man being polite, kind, and helpful ... not to mention ridiculously sexy.”

I tilt my head to the side as I look down at her. “Ridiculous is definitely a word for him.”

Lily giggles and I can’t help joining in. “Okay, maybe I’m overreacting, but you know how I hate men fussing around

me, treating me like I'm a helpless little girl." Lily nods in agreement as I drop down onto the lounge.

Why is this guy pushing my buttons?

I'm about to say the same to Lily when I notice a waiter coming our way, probably to take our drinks order. I need to let it go and one of those tasty cocktails on the menu might just do the trick.

CHAPTER 5

SCOTT

Cocktails, sunset, and beautiful women, all that's missing tonight is good food.

Blake throws another couple of steaks on the grill. The guys and I like hanging out together grilling, drinking beer, and having a laugh, which is why we offered to do the steaks tonight.

Though we're happy to leave the rest of the feast to Antonio, the celebrity chef, who flew in this afternoon from New York City along with a few of his staff.

Luke flips a couple of other steaks which are already perfectly browned. "Nice work, mate." The smell of the marinated juicy meat is making my mouth water. "But, fun as it is hanging out with you guys, I think I'll join the ladies."

Blake chuckles as he leans into Luke to say, "When he says ladies, he means one lady in particular, and with the way Jas batted away his approaches this afternoon, we have our entertainment sorted for the evening."

Blake's observation as always is spot on. Jas was definitely not interested in my offers of help on the beach.

It's an odd experience, as I'm used to women falling all over themselves to get my attention. Not Jas, she's uniquely unaffected and I'm intrigued.

"Blake, you're just envious of my obvious charms," I affirm as I pick up a fresh cold beer from the ice bucket, then deliberately ignoring the guy's laughter, I stroll across the lawn toward the girls.

They are standing, silhouetted at the beach end of the pool drinking fruity cocktails as the sun sinks below the horizon.

Jasmine is a little off to the side of the other two, leaning against a low stone wall as she gazes out at the ocean. The last of the sun's rays are catching her hair, making it glow like fiery flames falling in soft waves over her bare shoulders.

Tonight, she's wearing a tight, strapless red dress, which hugs her body. The mini hemline finishing only a couple of inches below her curvy butt cheeks.

I don't know if I prefer green bikini-clad Jasmine or red cocktail dress Jasmine. She's as vibrant and pretty as the exotic birdlife on the island, a vision, and I drink her in.

It's been a long while since a girl has grabbed me by the balls and dragged my attention around behind her in such a dramatic way.

I move to stand beside her. She turns her head slightly, the only acknowledgment before returning her gaze to the view.

The ensuing silence has me saying provocatively, “Did you wear that sexy red dress to match tonight’s sunset ... or is it to tempt me?” A comment that will either get me slapped or be the start of some fun banter. I hope it’s the latter.

She turns again, rolling her eyes at me. But this time instead of the expected smackdown, she tilts her head slightly and muses, “You think it’s sexy, interesting What if I said I wore this dress because I like to feel sexy for me?” I like her response.

“Then maybe I’m tempted even more,” I tell her. It’s the truth.

She knows she’s sexy, and I’m sure she knows I’m interested, so there’s no point denying it. A woman who is bold enough to do her own thing, not worry about what other people think or feel about her, is certainly interesting. Confident women do turn me on.

Even in her black strappy stilettos tonight, she looks up at me, eyes wide and a slight twitch of her pouty glossy lips. But instead of another witty retort, she clinks her cocktail glass to my beer.

Have I won this round?

She takes a sip from her frosted tall-stemmed glass, and it’s hard not to notice the way her ruby red lips leave a sexy imprint on the rim.

I quench my sudden thirst with a large gulp of my own drink, hoping it will cool me down from the inside out. But

when she puts her hand on her hip, licks those lips, and looks up at me through thick long lashes, no amount of cold beer is going to extinguish the fire building in my gut.

There has been a mood change with her since she swam to shore, obviously pissed at something I did. Maybe it's the cocktails that have made her mellow.

With a flick of her hair, she switches up the conversation again. "What is it about former military guys? You all seem to be super-sized?"

I nearly choke as I swallow my mouthful of beer. Only just managing to avoid spraying it everywhere. Not a good look. I'm learning that this woman likes to say the unexpected. It's making me dizzy, in a good way.

Bending so I can be closer to her, I whisper in her ear, "That's me—super-sized all over."

She surprises me again with the unexpected as she boldly looks down at the front of my cargo shorts, saying, "We'll see."

Wow, that's hot. Laughing, I gasp out, "You only need to say the word."

Her feisty replies to my comments make me wonder if she's leading me on ... or up for a little one-on-one time over the next few days. Sexual tension zaps like bolts of electricity between us, and it might be fun to find out how well it translates into the bedroom.

The head waiter interrupts us with an announcement that dinner is ready. The deep, mauve sky is quickly darkening to night, and we walk over together to join our friends.

A long table has been set out on the lawn and it's covered with a vibrant local batik tablecloth, candles, and an abundance of tropical flowers. Tall bamboo tiki torches planted into the grass surround the casual dining area, the flickering flames providing a warm glow as the sky darkens.

The caterers have also set up a buffet table in the nearby cabana which is piled with more food than the six of us could possibly eat. The grilled steaks along with a whole baked grouper fish, and a variety of tropical fruits and salads look delicious and my stomach rumbles appreciatively. I take up a plate and begin to fill it. All the swimming and sunshine this afternoon has given me an appetite. When there isn't a lot of space left on my plate, I wander over to the vacant seat beside Jasmine.

Politely, I ask, "Do you mind if I sit here?"

She waves her hand toward the chair nonchalantly. "Sure. Help yourself."

Jasmine certainly isn't falling all over me like I'm used to. In fact, I'm still not even sure she likes me.

Not easily put off, I take my seat, prepared to go another round with her flirty, sharp tongue and quick wit. Pushing her buttons and receiving another of her put downs is entertaining. But I also want to delve deeper.

Once I've settled into my seat, I attempt to learn more about her. "I heard you and Lily went to college with Cassie in Florida."

Raising an arched brow she quips, "Really? That's your best conversation opener? You disappoint me, Scott."

Wow, this woman is a ball breaker, and I need to up my game.

"What? You'd rather I said, I really want to take you to bed and do rude things with your gorgeous body?"

Jasmine looks amused by my response.

"I guess it would sound more honest, but maybe you're right, that's not really a suitable dinner conversation. So, I'll respond to your first statement. Yes, Cassie and I met on day one of college then a couple of weeks later we met Lily."

"You disappoint me, taking the safe option. I would have thought you were more a risk-taker." She twists her head sharply toward me, glaring. I continue casually, "But I'm willing to overlook this if you've got some good dirt to dish about you girls in college." Jas strikes me as a girl who lives in the moment.

She shakes her head, her humor already restored. "We certainly had some fun. But maybe the only dirt I have to dish would be on me."

That sounds about right and something I'd like to get the chance to explore further with her.

“I’m not surprised by that at all. In fact, I’d be shocked if you didn’t do anything dirty.”

“Ah, very clever. You do like to twist my words. What about you, where did you go to college?”

“Canberra in Australia where I did my pilot training. And before you ask the Air Force didn’t leave me much time for naughty misadventures, unfortunately.”

“Poor you. No stories of a misspent youth.”

Laughing at her summary, I reassure her, “Don’t feel too bad for me, I have plenty of stories of my misspent youth and I’ve made up for those lost years since I left the military.” The smile tugging on those glossy red lips, tells me she wants to know more but is not going to ask.

Over dinner, we continue to talk but this time about our work. Hers, as a New York real estate professional running the residential sales section of her father’s property development company and mine as CEO of my surfboard designing business in Florida. A business that has me increasingly traveling the globe.

Jas talks a little about her childhood growing up with two big brothers, in a large high-rise Manhattan apartment, a few blocks from 5th Avenue. And I share a bit about my upbringing in Sydney Australia, living in the family harborside home with my parents and younger sister.

It’s interesting how we have come from similar privileged, wealthy backgrounds but half a world away. Same, but

different. From our surprisingly easy conversation I gather we have another thing in common, working hard and playing harder.

Honestly, the more I learn about Jasmine the more I want to know. It's an unusual situation as I'm more of a casual dater. Some, like the media back home, even call me a playboy. I'd disagree.

My business is my focus, and it keeps me busy. Most of my time is spent designing new boards, working with my team of craftsmen making them, or the best bit, testing out new designs in the waves off West Palm Beach, about an hour drive north of Miami.

Jasmine's attention shifts to the general table conversation, which is probably a good thing as I'm becoming a bit too focused on this woman.

Blake is trying to organize us into a tennis tournament tomorrow morning after breakfast. It sounds like a fun idea. I don't mind a game of tennis. Growing up, I was always outdoors playing all kinds of sports—some competitively, some only for fun. And tennis was one of those sports I occasionally played with friends.

Cassie, grinning from ear to ear, throws down a challenge that is impossible to resist. Girls against boys, and each game will be the best of five. It's quickly agreed, Cassie will take on Luke, Blake will play Lily, and I can't wait to play Jasmine.

Predictably, Blake is all about establishing the wager, and it's soon agreed the losers will have to be the winner's

personal butler for the day. Not sure what that means but it sounds fun, and it reminds me a bit of the bets I had with my friends when I was a teen. And as was the case back then, I'm looking forward to winning. Yep, I'm really going to enjoy having Jasmine running after me.

Blake and I are very competitive by nature, Luke a little less so. He'll probably want to let his bride win so we'll give him a leave pass this time. It won't matter as Blake, and I are sure to win our games. Bring it on.

Once the rules of the challenge and game start time have been settled on, Luke and Cassie excuse themselves from the table on the pretext of needing an early night.

"You do realize it's only 9 o'clock?" I point out looking at my watch.

"Tomorrow is a big day with the tennis challenge in the morning and our guests arriving in the afternoon," Cassie insists.

I look around the table and nobody is buying her weak excuse. Especially since they haven't left each other alone all afternoon. The way she's been ogling Luke, it's obvious she can't wait to get him naked again. I'm just glad we've each got our own bungalow.

"Oh please, we're your best friends," Jas quips, "we know you're off to have crazy wild sex. Seriously, you guys will be worn out before you even get to the honeymoon."

I crack up laughing as Jas voices what the rest of us are thinking. She isn't afraid to call it as she sees it and I bet she'd be as forthright about what she likes in the bedroom.

Cassie is obviously used to Jasmine and responds quickly, "Jealous much." Then taking Luke's hand, she leads him away to the sounds of our laughter.

I don't know about Jas being jealous of them having crazy wild sex, but I sure am. I'd like to drag Jasmine away right now and live out a few new fantasies, which have been swirling around in my imagination ever since I met her.

Jasmine is rapidly ticking off several of my perfect woman boxes.

CHAPTER 6

JASMINE

Two Days Before

Another beautiful day in paradise.

Breakfast this morning is in the dining room of the main building, where the large doors are opened wide to the lush tropical gardens beyond. Through the greenery, the turquoise waters sparkle invitingly in the early morning sunshine. This island is certainly perfect. I sigh happily as I pour a mug of black coffee from the machine. My go-to beverage to kick start every day, work or vacation.

Scott sidles up beside me as I wait for the machine to do its hissy, gurgling thing.

“You do know that stuff is bad for you, don’t you?” he suggests.

I throw him one of my looks, which would have a lesser man backing away, but only has him smiling back happily. I’m impressed to see him stand his ground.

But then as I notice his large hand wrapped around a glass filled with green-colored liquid, I can't believe he is daring to judge me. Eww, it's probably some kind of healthy juice.

I wrinkle my nose in disgust. "Did I ask for your opinion? No. Do I want your opinion? No. Do I judge you and your glass of green slime? No. You do you and I'll do me."

With as much dignity as I can muster this early in the morning, I stride over to join the girls at the table. Unfortunately, I don't miss his comment about me being "a little touchy in the morning." I groan, not caring if he hears me or not.

Flopping down into my chair at the table, Cassie muses, "What's wrong, hun? Did someone get between you and your coffee this morning?"

"Aargh! That cocky damn Aussie grinds my gears. Seriously, he needs to butt out of my business."

It's not hard to spot the look Cassie and Lily exchange. "You know I'm sitting right here, I can see that look, girls," I tell them still trying to get back my earlier happy mood.

Holding up her hands in surrender, Lily begs, "I'm not getting involved in whatever the hell you and Scott have going on."

I stare open-mouthed at my two best friends then between clenched teeth I grind out, "Let me be clear, Scott and I have nothing going on."

Lily shrugs her shoulders before biting into a slice of melon.

Before I can continue my defense, Blake and Luke arrive for breakfast and Cassie is jumping up to wrap herself around her man again.

Doing his best to ignore Cassie and Luke, Blake pulls up a chair beside me. “Is everyone ready for the tennis tournament?”

“So ready,” I tell him although looking across at Lily she doesn’t look quite as enthusiastic as me.

I grew up playing lots of tennis, one of my family’s favorite sports. Our vacation home in the Hamptons even had its own tennis court. Maybe all those tennis lessons and tough losses dished out by my big brothers, are finally going to pay off. I hope so, as seeing Scott, *Mister Know-it-all*, defeated would be golden.

Conversation around the breakfast table continues to focus on this morning’s tennis challenge. Wondering where Scott is, I ask Blake if he is still going to play.

Laughing, Blake confirms, “He’ll be there. Scotty loves a challenge. I think he’s checking on his helo. I mean helicopter. I swear he loves his bird more than people love their pets.” I’m glad he clarified as I had no idea what he meant by helo or bird.

After our light breakfast of granola, fresh fruit and yogurt, the girls and I follow the gravel path to the tennis court while Blake and Luke go off to the games locker to collect the rackets and balls.

As soon as we are out of earshot, Cassie starts in with our girls' team plan. I'm always amused by the teenage cheerleader in her and today is no exception. She is fit to pop or at least break into a chant with the merest mention of a team sport.

“Okay, girls, we've got this. Luke has no idea how much tennis we played together in college. He won't expect me to be able to play well, so he's bound to go easy on me. If that fails, I should still be able to get the win with some sexy bribery.”

She barely takes a breath before facing Lily. “Don't stress, you'll be fine. It'll be tough against Blake, he's super competitive and from what Luke tells me—hates to lose any bet. Give it your best shot.”

Then it's my turn to get the Cassie pep talk. “Jas, my girl, I have absolute faith you're going to own Scotty. Imagine he is one of your brothers, they always bring out your competitive spirit. He won't know what hit him.”

“Got it, Captain Cassie. I need to hit him,” I respond enthusiastically.

Laughing, Cassie exclaims, “No, don't hurt him. Or at least don't bruise him anywhere that it will show up in my wedding photos.”

“Nice. Play hard. Win harder. Someone needs to knock the smile off his handsome, smug face.” And I'm going to enjoy being the person to do that. Lily and Cassie both turn to look at me curiously.

Lily puts her hands on her hips. “You two need to rein in your competitive spirit.” Sweet, kind Lily as always is the voice of reason. But when have I ever listened to a voice of reason?

I link my arm through hers as I remind her, “Come on, you can’t tell me you don’t want a hunky man as your personal butler for the day. Making you cocktails on request. Rubbing sun lotion on your back. Whoa, I’m getting hot just thinking about it.” I wave my hand furiously in front of my face.

I can’t deny that as annoying as Scott can be, I wouldn’t mind having him rub his hands all over me.

Lily pretends to think about this for a moment before getting right onboard with the idea, “Okay—you’ve convinced me. We are going to take these dudes down with our girl-power skills.”

“That’s the spirit, Lil. They are going down,” I agree.

Pep talks over and we are ready for our tennis challenge, only one thing remains to be done.

“Group hug, girls,” I announce loudly, and we wrap our arms around each other.

And it’s how the guys find us as they come around the corner of the building carrying the tennis gear.

“Shit, that’s hot,” drawls Scott, “I wouldn’t mind being stuck in the middle of that circle.”

Before he gets any ideas, I say, “No boys allowed.” We move apart and walk over to select a racket.

Scott leans in toward me and whispers, “I’m a man, not a boy.”

Argh! Boy, man, whatever, he’s impossible. There is only one way to teach Scott a lesson and it’s on the court. Let the games begin.

Cassie and Luke are on court first, and as planned, Cassie hides her skills till the last moment. The look of surprise on Luke’s face was priceless as Cassie posted a win for the girls’ team.

Next up are Lily and Blake. Lily plays her heart out managing to win some points off Blake but unfortunately, he has a killer serve and along with his height and strength, he takes the win easily for the boys.

Now it’s my turn. Scott strolls confidently to the opposite end of the court. This is going to be fun.

And fun it is. Each of the first four games go to deuce with us both winning two. It’s close as we prepare for the decider game. I serve and Scott returns. Back and forth we battle, each drawing on all our skills. Sweat drips from my brow but pleasingly it’s the same for him.

It comes down to my last serve. I make him run wide. He makes me run to the net, big mistake. I smash the ball with all my might, and it bounces just inside the line. Scott tries to reach it but doesn’t quite make it. My brothers would have been so proud.

The girls and I chant loudly as we do a silly victory dance, much to the boy's disgust. To be fair, we are unbearable in our joy at winning the bet. A bet I plan to take full advantage of, after I've cooled down in the pool.

Exhausted, I walk back toward the resort, carried along by thoughts of diving into the refreshing water. My friends choose instead to return to the chilly air-conditioning of our bungalow. Thankfully, the pool area is deserted, even the staff aren't around, and after the noisy, energetic game it's nice to find an oasis of calm.

I sigh contentedly as I begin to peel the sticky t-shirt and shorts off my skin. Then stripped down to my bikini, I dive into the cool blue water. It's refreshing against my overheated skin as I swim several strokes underwater.

Ripples of another person diving into the pool disturb my tranquility and when we surface beside each other at the same time—I see it's Scott.

He is standing close in front of me, so close I can see the water droplets clinging to his thick eyelashes. I brush the water from my own eyes in an attempt to break the invisible connection between us.

“Well played,” he drawls in his deep Australian accent. “You are a woman full of surprises.”

Smiling up at him, I say, “I like to surprise; I'd hate to be predictable.”

“I would hate that too.”

The moment feels private, only inches of water separating our bodies, and I wonder if he's going to touch me or kiss me. I think I want him to.

But in the same way I've just surprised him, he surprises me too by pushing off from the edge beside me and swimming back up the length of the pool.

I do a few more laps before getting out, leaving Scott to continue his swim alone. Grabbing a towel, I dry myself off, watching his body slicing through the water with an easy, smooth swimming style.

By the time he pulls himself out of the water, I'm reclining in a lounge, pretending that I haven't been tracking every one of his laps. I roll over onto my stomach and close my eyes, blocking out the image of his wet muscular body.

"Would you like me to rub sun lotion on your back, Jasmine?" His offer delivered in his sexy deep voice startles me as he's standing right beside me. My body tingling in eagerness for his touch.

"Sure," I manage to squeak. The only word I think I'm capable of forming as he pulls his lounge closer to reach. Thankfully, he didn't decide to sit on mine, as there is some strong sexual chemistry going on between us, whether I like it or not.

I will myself to keep my eyes tightly closed, but that only makes me super-sensitive to the sounds of him picking up my bottle of sun lotion. The anticipation of his hands on my body intensified.

“Can I undo the bikini strap across your back?” he asks, his words sending an involuntary shiver up my spine.

No sooner have I agreed than the clasp is released by his deft fingers and cool lotion is trailed slowly across my heated skin. Firm, warm hands follow soon after massaging the lotion onto my bare back in slow circular motions. I’m melting and not from the heat of the sun.

An involuntary moan escapes my lips as his hands continue their sensual path over my body, not leaving any part of the skin on my back untouched. Dear God, it feels amazing as his hands move across my sensitive skin.

Damn, I hate how I want his hands to move lower and keep exploring, especially as I bite into the fringed edge of the beach towel to smother a moan.

His hands freeze then work quickly to clip my bikini strap back in place. “All done,” he croaks out, in a husky voice.

My eyes spring open. Scott’s fingers fumble to recap the lid on my lotion before dropping it onto the end of my towel. He then glances out to sea as he rubs his hands down the towel wrapped around his waist.

“Thanks, Scott,” I say softly as I turn over to lie on my back.

Staring back down at me, he smiles, “I probably should leave the front to you.”

His hungry eyes track over my body, lingering briefly on my peaked breasts, seem to be telling me something different

to his words. I'm a puddle of need and I want him to keep looking.

"Probably," I tease, smiling back up at him.

Standing up abruptly from the lounge he says, "I need to cool down again."

It's immediately obvious why as the beach towel wrapped around his waist does little to hide his semi-hard erection.

Not able to look away, I agree, "Yes, I think you do need to cool down. You're looking extremely hot."

With a shrug of his shoulders and a sexy smile, he drops his towel, leaving little to my imagination with his Speedos straining to contain his growing hotness. I was right, the man is very cocky.

Wow, his body should come with a too hot to handle warning.

CHAPTER 7

JASMINE

A personal butler is as good as it sounds. I lean back in my chair as Scott places a plate in front of me before he moves on to serve Lily and then Cassie. Following on close behind is Blake with a tray of cold fruit juices and Luke offering us condiments. The girls and I can't wipe the smiles off our faces. Winners are certainly grinners today.

Our lunch was a club sandwich Bahamian style, with flaky white fish instead of the traditional chicken and a pineapple salsa, delicious. Our personal butler service was flawless too.

The resort staff are busy clearing away our empty plates when Scott suggests another snorkeling trip for the afternoon. I'm quick to agree, as yesterday I really enjoyed seeing all the colorful fish. My feelings toward Scott are changing too, he isn't annoying me today.

Lucky, as none of the others are keen. Cassie and Luke have their families arriving later in the afternoon, along with Blake's girlfriend, Bec. Lily, as usual is happy lying by the

pool reading her latest book. She's always telling me the only time she gets to read for fun is on vacation.

Scott looks directly at me. "Looks like it might be just you and me, Jas. Is that okay?"

His words throw down a challenge and as usual I'm not about to back down. Even if he's expecting me to—and I probably should avoid spending more time alone with him after the episode by the pool.

But I love a challenge, so I say clearly and firmly, "Absolutely."

To be honest, sitting around the pool for hours at a time bores me. I like being active. While I wish the others were coming too, I can handle Scott for one afternoon. In fact, it might even be fun. Besides, we will have our faces in the water most of the time, which means no talking and no touching.

As we collect the gear, Scott says we should walk across the island today to the more sheltered reef on the other side. I clench my teeth but this time I'm determined to be more tolerant of his bossy ways, so I graciously agree. Besides, there is a slight onshore sea breeze this afternoon and it makes sense.

It's about a fifteen-minute walk along the winding gravel path, past bungalows that will soon be filled by wedding guests and through shady palm groves with a lush undergrowth of ferns and the occasional brilliant bunch of flowers. Small lizards sunning themselves on the path skitter

away into the gardens as we come across them. This island has an abundance of wildlife.

As we emerge onto a tiny, secluded beach, I can see Scott was right, the crystal-clear waveless waters of the reef lagoon are much calmer over here. The varying shades of blue turn darker further out until the horizon meets the sky in a line of fluffy white clouds. A perfect snorkeler's cove based on the partial and intact seashells strewn along the tideline.

Dropping our towels on the beach, I pretend not to notice as Scott removes his T-shirt displaying those toned, bronzed abs again. Instead, I try to busy myself by applying a liberal coating of sun lotion before we pick up our gear and stroll down to the water's edge.

In the shallows, I bend to rinse out my mask with seawater and Scott asks, "Would you like me to adjust the straps again?"

I glare back and he bursts out laughing. "Hey I get it, you're fine." My words from yesterday repeated back to me have me looking at him more closely. Of course, he's teasing me again.

"Seriously though, you can lean on me to put your fins on."

Yes, definite teasing. "Thank you, I think I will."

My fins go on surprisingly quickly when I'm not over-balanced.

Fins on, we bend to rinse out our masks and Scott asks, "How comfortable would you feel about going out a bit further to the reef edge?"

“Sure, that’s fine,” I reply readily. Swimming in deep water has never bothered me.

On the walk over, we talked about our previous reef experiences and finally he learned I know how to do this. When he told me he’s a qualified open water scuba diver, I admitted to him that I was too. Thanks again to my two older brothers who always included me in all their adventures, even if they bossed me about doing it. Family summer vacations were spent at our beach house or on some idyllic tropical island swimming, diving, or snorkeling.

“Great, but we need to stay close together. Do you agree?”

“Of course, no swimming off without letting you know.” While I may not appreciate Scott’s bossy words, I understand the safety message behind it. And this time he even asked for my opinion. This is progress.

“Let’s get amongst it then,” he says before adjusting his mask and diving in.

I follow close behind and soon I’m immersed in the wonder of the silent underwater world filled with an abundance of fish that are all the colors of the rainbow. My favorite are the baby fish that dart in and around the larger clumps of coral.

Scott and I swim together silently pointing out interesting fish to each other. Then when we reach deeper water, we dive down every so often for a close-up look at something interesting like a ray or an eel. I’m really enjoying myself and time slips by unnoticed.

It's a long while before we finally stop to pop our heads out of the water, bobbing about in the ocean swell quite a way from where we started. The distance from shore doesn't bother me much, but the ominous dark clouds spreading quickly across the sky certainly do.

A tropical storm is brewing, and I'm terrified of storms. I had a bad experience getting stuck out in the full force of an electrical storm when I was ten, and now the mere mention of a storm throws me into a panic. Not a full-blown panic attack ... unless of course I am bobbing about in deep water a long way from shore and a storm is imminent.

I imagine my face registers the fear I'm feeling as Scott asks, "Are you okay?"

Shaking my head, I manage to gasp out, "Not really. Storms scare me."

I'm having difficulty catching my breath, which is not a good thing when I have to swim back to the beach. Scott quickly assesses my panicked state and calmly takes control.

"Jas, we're going to swim back to shore together now. You can easily do this, you're an excellent swimmer. Now, listen to me carefully. You need to get your breathing under control and not let the fear overwhelm you. You got this and I'm right here beside you." His voice commands my attention, and it helps to reduce my fear a little.

Right now, I'm loving his bossy commanding voice as it penetrates through my fog of panic.

“Good. Now take my hand, put your snorkel in, and we’ll swim back together.”

I continue to tread water, eyes wide, glued to his face as I reach out to hold onto Scott’s large hand. Already it’s making me feel safer and soon my racing heart and rapid breathing slows enough for me to say, “I’m ready.”

We adjust our masks back into place and start to swim toward shore holding hands. My grip white knuckle tight on Scott’s hand. It feels like it is taking an eternity and I’m no longer looking at the fish but concentrating on keeping my breathing steady.

Eventually, the water beneath me becomes shallower. Scott stops and we stand up still holding hands.

“Are you okay?” he asks, a look of concern creasing his brow as he removes his fins, mask, and snorkel.

“Yes, thanks to you.” Oh my god, I’m grateful to be standing on the shoreline and even though my hands are still shaking, I’m able to remove my gear too.

Looking up, I notice the dark clouds have moved to completely block out the previously sunny afternoon. While standing in the shallows has lessened my fear to a more manageable level, it’s still there.

“Sorry, I panicked out there. I’ve been scared of storms for as long as I can remember and being so far out made it worse. It’s lightning and thunder which terrifies me more.” I shudder with the memory.

Scott steps forward to wrap me in his strong arms and I lean into him holding tight to the waistband of his boardshorts, accepting the reassurance he offers.

Not for the first time, I'm reminded of how tall he is, I don't usually feel petite standing next to a guy. I'm taller than most women, but Scott still towers over me. I like how protected it makes me feel.

Easing back, he bends his head down to kiss me gently on the lips. A featherlight kiss so soft it feels more imagined than real.

Lightning flashes across the sky accompanied by a loud rumble of thunder and out of nowhere torrential rain. Interrupting the moment and sending us running from the water to a nearby beach hut. Luckily the beach hut holds some clean towels so we can dry off as we plan to wait out the worst of the storm.

Sitting in a beach hut on an island in the middle of a storm watching lightning occasionally snake across the sky is a long way from my idea of fun. But I'm certainly not willing to make a run for it back to the resort so it will have to do for now.

I guess sitting huddled in Scott's strong arms does help the situation.

CHAPTER 8

SCOTT

The feel of Jasmine's warm, wet body pressed up close to my side gives me ideas of much naughtier things.

But what sort of a jerk would take advantage of a woman's fears? Probably me, my semi-hard cock announces loud and clear. It's not like she's panting with passion, she's probably hyperventilating.

My control has already slipped once as we stood in the shallows. Jasmine looking up at me with relief glistening in her emerald eyes, undid me. I had to comfort her. I wanted to ease her shivers, hold her close to me, make her feel safe. And then I needed to kiss her. Good thing mother nature intervened with some well-timed lightning and rain, otherwise who knows where the kiss may have led us.

No, I tell myself again, now is not the right time to make a move on this sexy woman. No matter how private the beach hut feels or how tempting she is in her skimpy bikini. A bikini that has a lot of her glorious naked skin pressed up close to mine, touching chest to chest as I hug her to me. Instead, I

need to try to make her feel safe till this tropical storm can blow back out to sea.

Jas trembles against my body as another rumble of thunder splits the air, louder than the continuous drum of torrential rain on the wooden decking extending from the front of the hut. I hold her a little closer.

Close to her ear, I whisper, “Hey, it’s okay, we’re safe here and the storm will pass soon.” Trying to reassure her as another flash of lightning streaks across the darkened sky makes her jump. Each flash a reminder that I should have checked the weather forecast before I suggested a snorkeling trip.

She quickly burrows her head into my shoulder, and I move to enclose her fully in my arms. Shit, she’s really freaked out. Remembering she said it’s the lightning that frightens her, I pull one of the towels tighter around us, shielding her view from the full force of the flashes lighting up the sky.

As we sit cocooned in beach towels, the storm subsides almost as quickly as it began. The wind drops, the torrential rain eases, and the rumble of thunder can only occasionally be heard in the distance.

Jasmine raises her head from my shoulder and the towel covering her head slips down. Her green eyes still filled with tears lock onto mine. I gently run my thumb under each eye, brushing away the residue of her fear. Her skin is soft and smooth beneath my touch, I wonder at how good touching other parts of her body would be.

My thumb trails down to follow the line of her lower lip as a sigh is released from Jasmine's mouth and her eyes flutter closed. She is breathtakingly beautiful in this moment, and I can no longer resist the urge to kiss her. I brush a light kiss across her brow to gauge her reaction and I'm pleased to feel her arms slide around my waist. Emboldened, I softly kiss first one closed eyelid then the other. Her lips part slightly on her released breath. Cupping her cheek in my palm, I raise her lips to meet mine in a sweet, gentle kiss.

Well sweet and gentle was the plan, till Jasmine's lips open beneath mine, demanding more from the kiss. Our kiss deepens quickly. Our tongues dueling with each other seeking pleasure. I'm willing to give her everything she wants.

Jasmine's sizzling response doesn't surprise me. I knew from the moment we met, and her lips touched my cheek, there was chemistry between us that would be exciting to explore.

The towel slips further, revealing her bare shoulder and giving me access to more of her gloriously soft skin. Moving from her lips, I trail hot wet kisses along her jawline and when she tilts her head exposing her neck to me, I continue my exploration. Jasmine's moans encourage me to nip and kiss my way across her neck and shoulder. I like how responsive she is to my touch.

Slowly stroking my hand up her back, I move her more fully onto my lap, where I'm sure she'll feel more than the

touch of my hands and lips. Yep, she certainly can as she wriggles her butt on top of me.

My arms are full of this sexy woman, and my hands are now free to explore. I cup one full breast in my palm. Her pebbled nipple pokes through the damp triangle of fabric, begging me to pinch its peak, and as I do, she moans.

I want to make her do more than moan. I want her screaming my name in ecstasy.

As I reach behind Jasmine to undo the clasp on her bikini top, I hear Cassie calling her name.

Jasmine leaps from my embrace as if scorched by my touch.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck it’s Cassie,” she mutters before grabbing up her towel where it was discarded on the ground and running from the shelter of the beach hut.

It all happens in the blink of an eye, and I’m left sitting stunned and alone in the hut. Slowly I stand, readjusting myself in my boardshorts hoping to make myself decent before collecting our snorkeling gear and following the sound of voices.

Jas is standing, wrapped in her towel with Luke and Cassie, at the end of the path which leads back to the resort. As I approach, I hear Cassie tell Jas how worried she was about her being caught out in the storm. She obviously knows all about Jas’s fear of storms.

Cassie takes Jasmine’s arm and leads her back along the path muttering something about her getting a nice hot shower

to make her feel better. If only Cassie knew I had already found the perfect way to make her feel better, but thanks to bad timing, those plans are not going to happen now.

Luke strolls over to me holding out his hands to take some of the gear I'm holding. "Hey, Scotty, sounds like things got a bit tricky out there with the storm." He gestures with a nod of his head toward the ocean which is again calm. The still waters showing little signs of the storm which raged not so long ago.

I nod in agreement. "Tricky is one word to describe it. Jas was pretty freaked out, but luckily she held it together long enough to get back to shore before the storm truly hit."

As we follow the same path taken by the girls, Luke says, "Cassie was really worried when you guys hadn't returned."

"We were fine," I say. Not wishing to elaborate as I step over a large palm frond lying across the path, one of the few signs of the storm.

"Ahh, we didn't interrupt anything did we?" Luke asks.

Huh! How does he know something was going on between me and Jas?

"No, mate, we were just waiting out the storm in the beach hut."

"Sure. Whatever you say." I pretend not to hear the disbelief coating his words as we continue our walk to the resort in silence.

Further along the path I ask if the other guests had arrived safely. Luke explains how the sudden storm delayed their arrival, and the boat won't be coming in now till a bit later in the afternoon.

Back at the main resort, I tell Luke I need to check on my helicopter for storm damage. He offers to help but I brush him off.

I want it to be a quick check before escaping to my room for a shower and a chance to deal with my blue balls.

It's nearing sunset by the time I leave my room again. Everyone is gathered around the pool for cocktails and based on the size of the group, all of Luke and Cassie's families have arrived. Luke spots my entrance above the heads of the crowd and walks over to take me through a round of introductions.

In one group are Cassie's parents, her younger sister Chloe, and older sister Alice standing beside her husband, their young twin girls are splashing about nearby in the shallow end of the pool. Moving onto the next group are aunts, uncles, and cousins, and already my head is spinning trying to remember all the names.

Finally, Luke and I wander over to his mom, who I greet with a warm hug. I love Luke's mom as she reminds me so much of my own. Over the years she's taken me under her

wing, extending invitations to Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings like I'm her adopted son.

Greetings done and she's excitedly telling me about the upcoming wedding plans and the part she played in bringing Cassie and Luke back together. It's hard not to smile.

Luke shuffles his feet looking down at the ground and I'm about to burst out laughing. What is it about moms and their unique ability to make their adult sons revert to little boys?

To save my mate from any further embarrassment, I ask him when our friends are due to arrive. He gratefully looks at his watch, confirming they should be here soon. They too were delayed by the earlier storm.

Reminded of the storm, I search the group for Jasmine. She's currently standing chatting with Cassie, and a group of friends.

Luke bumps my arm to get my attention. "Scotty, did you hear me?"

"No, sorry. What did you say?" I admit, completely distracted by the sight of Jasmine in her black strappy dress.

I wonder if she's wearing anything underneath the silky fabric which drapes across her gorgeous curves.

"I said did you want a cold beer?" Luke repeats.

Suddenly feeling hot and thirsty, I agree. I guess a cold beer will have to do, as Jasmine appears to be ignoring me. I guess my hopes of a do-over of this afternoon is looking unlikely.

Luke returns with Blake, Bec, and Cassie. A waiter carrying a tray with our drinks following behind.

Bec is Blake's new girlfriend. She works for the guy's cyber security company and while it took them a while to get together my friend seems happy in his new relationship. It never made sense to me why they waited so long to start dating as he obviously had a thing for her for years.

The way I see it, if you find a sexy woman who captures your interest, you need to go for it. Exactly my plan with Jasmine.

The distant sound of an approaching helicopter has me looking to the horizon. Years of flying has attuned my hearing to the unique sound of the spinning blades.

I tell Blake, "I can hear the guys coming. Come on, let's go be the welcoming party."

Excusing ourselves from the group we head to the helipad to await the arrival of our friends.

It's a good distraction for me. If I don't stop staring at Jasmine, it's going to become obvious to my friends there's something going on between us.

We don't have long to wait for the incoming helicopter to land, and once the blades have slowed, my mates climb down. I fist bump Parker and Tim before hugging Tim's pregnant wife, Belle. It's good to see them all as it's not often we can get together.

A couple of porters assist the guys to unload the luggage quickly, then the concierge steps forward to lead them to the check-in desk. Blake following along behind them.

I wait for my other mate Ben who is the pilot to finish shutting down the machine.

It's good having all the guys together again, just a shame our other close friend Will couldn't get time off too. He's the only one of our group of friends still on the clock with the US Army, but not for much longer I hear.

Ben, Parker, and Tim all served in the Rangers Regiment with Luke and Blake, which is how I know them. They all retired within about a year of each other, and I suspect the night their team was ambushed in Afghanistan had a lot to do with their decisions.

These days the guys are partners in their own private security business based in DC. It sees them traveling out of the country a lot of the time and usually to some war-torn hellhole, keeping people safe. Tim doesn't travel so much anymore with a baby on the way, but certainly Ben and Parker still seek out danger on a regular basis.

Me, I was glad to leave all the stress behind when I left the Australian Air Force. I'm much happier with my waves and board building in Florida. A heavy Atlantic swell is as much danger as I'm looking for in my new life.

Ben jumps down from the helo and I greet him with a bro hug. Then I get to work helping him tie down the rotor blades

in case we get hit with another tropical storm. Not that I'd mind if I was stuck alone again with Jasmine.

As we work, Ben asks about the island and the other guests. Ben is a bit of a player and always has been as long as I've known him, so I know he really only wants to hear about the single females.

I warn him off Cassie's single younger sister with the same threat Luke gave me, he will take him down if he goes anywhere near her. Then I give him the heads-up Blake will tear him apart if he so much as speaks to Bec.

But I struggle to think of an excuse to keep him away from Jasmine. I can't tell him she's mine when she isn't. I'll have to keep an eye on him and steer him toward the other single available ladies.

CHAPTER 9

JASMINE

Avoiding Scott is my plan tonight. How do I plan to do that? With the help of my friends of course.

The last thing I want is to be caught one on one with him again, as he's sure to mention what happened this afternoon. I don't need reminding of my meltdown over the storm. I try to limit myself to one embarrassing episode a day.

Damn astraphobia. It's annoying how easily lightning has me losing control and cowering like a baby. There's not much which frightens me, but storms sure do.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Scott walk away from the party with Blake. Good, I don't need the constant reminder of how things between us got completely out of hand in the beach hut. If it wasn't for Cassie calling out my name ... well, we could have been caught in a compromising situation. I cross my ankles trying to ease an ache as I think how exciting things could have become if Scott had continued to strip me naked.

Initially, I blamed my response to Scott as gratitude for how he coaxed me safely back to shore. But then that would ignore the physical response I felt to his touch, which was certainly not just relief.

While there is no doubt Scott is incredibly hot and following this afternoon's experience has all the right moves, doing anything about it could become messy. It's not like a regular vacation romance; we are friends of friends and there is every chance we will bump into each other in the future. In fact, I can't believe we hadn't previously met on one of his regular visits to Manhattan.

As I gaze out at another spectacular sunset in paradise, it's hard to imagine only hours ago I was huddling in a beach hut my face buried in Scott's shoulder as a storm seethed around us.

My thoughts are interrupted by a small commotion near the bar announcing the arrival of the final guests who just flew in by helicopter. Cassie drags Lily, Trudy another of our friends and I by our arms toward the group, then quickly runs through the names of Luke's friends. I guess she is trying to help out her single friends by introducing us to more hot men.

While Blake has returned with the new arrivals, I don't see Scott anywhere. I'm quickly scanning the small gathering of guests when unexpectedly he appears as if conjured up beside me. Except he's not alone, he is joined by another large, handsome man.

Trudy and I exchange a look that conveys our appreciation of the new guy joining the group. Seriously, is there a limit to the number of hunky men any one girl can ogle at once? If there is, we've just exceeded it.

We'd only just recovered from meeting Parker, a dark-haired Clark Kent type with glasses and all. Then the new guy, Ben arrives rocking more your brown-haired bearded, lumberjack mountain man vibe. All easy on the eyes, even if not quite my type. One thing's for sure, I was right, these military men all do seem to be supersized.

With our pre-dinner drinks still in our hands, the waiters slowly move us as a group toward the dining room in the main building which is where tonight's tropical-inspired rehearsal dinner will be held. When we are all standing gathered behind Cassie and Luke, the doors are flung open dramatically by the master of ceremonies. There is an audible gasp as we file in.

The large room has been transformed with potted palms, twinkling fairy lights, and swaths of greenery dripping down from the ceiling. It's like a tropical rainforest has sprouted inside. The glass doors at the opposite end of the room have been pulled back fully to open the room to the garden beyond.

Lined up down the room are two long tables covered in crisp white linen and festooned with vibrant fuchsia, orange, and yellow tropical flowers as if the flowers have dropped from the forest canopy above.

Along the length of each table are five towering arrangements made up of candles, ferns, flowers, and fresh

fruits. Each place setting is decorated with pink and orange striped napkins and palm leaf shaped place cards with a guest's name embossed in a gold fancy script. It's lavish, opulent, and entirely beautiful.

While tonight is officially being called the *Rehearsal Dinner* there is nothing traditional about the event. Of course, we don't really need to rehearse for tomorrow's late afternoon informal wedding on the lawn overlooking the beach, but Cassie was not going to let a little thing like that stop her from having a good party.

I spot Cassie standing at the head of one of the tables, glowing, her eyes sparkling in the candlelight with unshed tears as she looks up at Luke. I'm so happy for my friend I almost shed a tear of my own.

Lily grabs my arm, and we begin circling the tables, to find our place cards. For dinner, I'll be sitting next to Ben, the handsome bearded man who arrived late to the party with Scott. Lily and Parker are seated opposite us. Thankfully, Scott is sitting at the other side of the same long table, a little further along between Trudy and Bec.

I was introduced to Ben earlier, so we instantly begin chatting and he's a fun and interesting dinner companion. Along with Parker, the guys have Lily and I laughing uncontrollably before we've even finished the first course of a conch tropical salad.

As dinner progresses to the main course of baked fish, Ben's teasing becomes even more outrageous and highly entertaining

though I can't help noticing Scott doesn't look amused. In fact, Scott looks grumpy as he sits eating, only occasionally looking up, his eyes shooting daggers at Ben, or maybe me. I wonder if he thinks I'm interested in Ben.

Sure, Ben is good-looking, and it's obvious from the pull of his shirt across his back, he has the ripped body to match. But for me there isn't the same visceral attraction I feel with Scott.

Maybe another time and another place I would have been interested in a fling but not now—especially not after this afternoon's interlude. No, if there is any fling to be had then it will be with Scott.

As I drag my thoughts away from Scott again, I settle back to enjoy my delicious dinner, even better dessert, and the funny speeches from both Luke and Cassie that follow.

After dinner the guests slowly filter out of the forest room and into the sheltered gardens. Waiters weave between small groups of guests congregated on the lawn, handing out more chilled glasses of champagne as music floats out into the still, clear night.

Several glasses of champagne later with my gal pals and Cassie is looking a little tipsy. We made a pact that we'd all stop at four cocktails to be fresh tomorrow for Cassie's big day, and by my counting we've gone beyond our limit. I guess we forgot to factor in glasses of champagne. Oops.

Most of the other guests have already drifted off to their rooms, leaving my girl gang from Manhattan, still sipping on glasses of tepid champagne at one of the outdoor tables.

Cassie's sister, Chloe and high school friend, Madison, are sitting not far away on the loungers by the pool, while Luke and his friends are gathered around the bar.

Yes, I think it's time for our bride to call it a night. I give Lily the nod that says it's time to go, as Cassie looks ready to refill her glass.

Trudy catches on quick to our plan and wanders over to the bar, returning shortly after with bottles of water for everyone. I quickly finish off my glass of champagne then take several gulps of water before taking Cassie's right arm and signaling Lily to move in to take her left one.

"Hey, Cass, it's time we call it a night. Our princess bride needs her beauty sleep," Lily encourages gently.

"Really, already? It's still only early. Isn't it?" As I suspected she has completely lost track of time and probably the number of drinks she's had too.

"Come on, Cass. Let's find Luke so you can say goodnight to him for the last time as a single woman."

Saying a quick goodnight to the others we point and march her in the direction of Luke. And within feet of him she enthusiastically wraps her arms around her man, and they launch into a smoking hot kiss.

"Oh seriously, this is going to be the longest goodnight kiss ever. I need another drink," I complain as I try to get the barman's attention to the sounds of Scott and Ben's laughter.

Lily shakes her head. “I’m out. I’ll see you back at the room. Just don’t let Cassie out of your sight.”

“Gee, thanks for the support, Lil.”

Ben agrees with Lily as he laughingly tells us, “I’m out too. I don’t need to be seeing this,” before walking over to join the girls on the pool loungers. I’m not surprised Ben would rather flirt with the single ladies.

Scott stands his ground looking over at me. “I guess we’re immune to them after a couple of days.”

Luke breaks his kiss with Cassie long enough to say he’ll walk Cassie back to the bungalow. I make him promise not to keep her out too late then watch smiling as they leave arm in arm. Turning back to the bar I pick up my glass, realizing Scott and I are now left alone. So much for trying to avoid him.

“Do you mind if I stay and have a drink with you?” he asks as he leans his elbow on the bar looking sideways at me.

“Why would I mind?” I say although I know why he might be thinking that.

“I don’t know—maybe because I get the feeling you might be trying to avoid me after this afternoon.”

Damn, I guess tonight I wasn’t as subtle as I thought I was being.

“You mean like I’m avoiding you because I’m embarrassed by my reaction to the storm this afternoon.”

He gives me a cute half-smile before saying, “I guess something like that,” then more seriously, “you know you don’t need to be embarrassed about your fear of storms. Lots of people have irrational fears.”

“Great, now I’m irrational,” I joke. “Not helping.”

Laughing out loud, he says, “Sorry—I’m not good at feelings or supportive stuff.”

I turn to face him, looking up into his eyes as I tell him honestly, “No, Scott, you are good at supportive stuff. After all, you got me back to shore this afternoon.”

As I tell him this, I realize I haven’t even thanked him. “I should have said this before now but thanks for helping me.” He shrugs as if it was nothing when it was something to me. I drink the last of my iced water and place the glass back on the bar. “I guess it’s now time for bed.”

“I’m assuming you aren’t saying this as an invitation ... but could I walk you to your room?”

This guy does make me laugh with his quick-witted responses, so I accept his offer to walk me to my bungalow.

We leave the bar following one of the many gravel paths which link the resort area to the bungalows. Garden lighting with some assistance from the brilliant full moon guides our way.

Scott breaks the silence of the night when he asks in his low rumbling drawl, “Do you want to talk about the other thing that happened this afternoon?”

My first instinct is to say no, but I don't want to make things between us more awkward, so instead, I respond casually, "Sure, what do you want to say about the *other thing*?" Emphasizing his use of words.

I agree there was certainly a thing between us this afternoon. A sexy enjoyable thing.

"I want to say ..." He takes a breath then hesitates maybe trying to choose his words carefully. "The kiss was fucking good, and I wouldn't mind another one."

Wow, those are some words and I like the sound of them. "Okay," I respond immediately, eager for a repeat of our earlier kiss. It was that good.

Scott abruptly stops walking surprised by my response. I think I might have even surprised myself too. I meant to keep those thoughts to myself instead of blurting them out. I blame the champagne for loosening my tongue.

"Really, Jas. I'm coming to expect surprises from you, but I didn't expect you to say that." In the dim light I can see he's smiling cheekily as he tentatively asks, "Is now good for you?"

"Only if you make it good," I purr seductively, even though I already know after this afternoon's thing he will make it good.

Scott takes my hand, directing me to a darker grassy area, just off the path. He wastes no time pulling me into his arms. Dizzy with the speed and eagerness of Scott's moves, my head

is spinning as his lips crush mine in a wild passionate kiss. And I like this kiss even more than I did the one this afternoon.

All rational thought takes flight as goosebumps ripple over my arms. The silky fabric of my dress slides over my bare skin, directed masterfully by his hand. All while his mouth devours mine. Teasing my lips apart, our tongues tangle in a sensual dance of power. Sometimes dominating, sometimes submitting.

Scott gathers my hair into his hand as his lips move to trail hot kisses down my neck and across my bare shoulder. Each kiss filled with raw emotion. I reach up to bury my fingers tightly into his hair, holding him close and bracing myself as his hungry mouth explores further, heating my blood.

Letting go of my hair, his fingers brush gently across my shoulder hooking the thin strap of my dress and dragging it down my arm. Revealing my naked breast. I'm glad I didn't wear a bra as I revel in his gaze and touch as his fingertips flick across my taught nipple.

I lean back against the strong arm encircling my waist and offer him complete access. He cups my breast in his hand before bending his head to kiss the sensitive peak. My mind floods with desire as his warm mouth sucks on my breast. Wanting more, I push my chest to him and meld my lower body to his, feeling his hard erection against my waist. I hike my leg up, hitching it over his hip, so his cock nestles firmer against my core.

Yes, it has been too long since I felt like this. Way too long since I had a lover this good.

“Hold on tight,” he murmurs, and I clasp his shirt in one hand and hold tight to his arm in the other. My hand doesn’t come close to encircling his muscled bicep. Clinging to him, he removes his bracing arm, to slide his hand up my bare thigh. Slipping it slowly up under the hem of my dress as the silk fabric falls away.

Amidst the haze of passion, I hear the voices of people coming along the path.

I whisper frantically, “Someone is coming, Scott,” dropping my leg back down. Scott is instantly on alert groaning as he replaces the strap of my dress back up on my shoulder before taking my hand and pulling us into the thicker foliage which surrounds the grassy area.

I giggle uncontrollably at the absurdity of us hiding in the bushes to avoid being caught in a compromising position. At the same time, he buries his face into my neck, both of us desperately trying to muffle any sound.

Blake and Bec pass by completely unaware of what they nearly interrupted. As their voices fade, Scott raises his head and helps me back out of the garden bed. My heels sticking briefly in the soft ground.

As we walk back onto the dimly lit path, he is still smiling. We stand facing each other holding hands, our bodies only inches apart.

Scott touches his forehead to mine in defeat. “I think everyone is conspiring against us, just as things start to get interesting.”

“Things were definitely getting interesting,” I agree.

“Jas, I really would like to pursue this. I think you’re very sexy, lots of fun, and obviously I can’t keep my hands off you.” To emphasize his point his warm hand strokes down over the curve of my hip, my body tingles.

“There’s certainly a fire between us which needs to be dealt with, but I guess tonight is not the night.”

He leans back to look down at me as he says, “Much as I hate to agree with you, I think you’re right. Not tonight, but soon.”

“Just so we’re clear though, this is only going to be a one-time thing.”

I want him or more precisely his body, but I don’t need the drama of anything more. I need the one-time to get this man out of my system then we can move on as nothing more than friends of Cassie and Luke.

“One-time sounds perfect,” he drawls back in his damn sexy accent.

Breaking apart I tell him it’s a deal as I reach out my hand to shake his.

He looks down at my outstretched hand laughing. “Seriously, I think we’re way beyond shaking hands to seal a deal.”

Instead, he takes my outstretched hand and pulls me into another hot, deep kiss.

This time we separate before the kiss gets out of hand. “Come on, are you going to finish walking me to my bungalow. It’s a big day tomorrow for our friends and I need my sleep.”

Silently, each caught up in our own thoughts, he walks me the remainder of the distance to my island bungalow.

CHAPTER 10

SCOTT

One Day Before

Lap after lap after lap, swimming laps was how I got to sleep last night.

After leaving Jas, I detoured back to the pool and finding it deserted, stripped down to my Speedos, dived in, and started stroking the first of many laps.

Following the black line on the bottom of the local public pool growing up got me through most of my teenage angst relatively unscathed. Back then I competed, so three mornings a week, Mom would wake me at five in the morning to drive me to swimming training. Then a few more afternoons after school I would be back in the pool for more laps. I swam six out of seven days, pushing my body to its limits. The discipline I learned in the pool set me up for the military.

These days, swimming calms my overactive mind, and last night I used it to calm my raging desire for a sexy woman.

Cock blocked for the second time in the same day, I was consumed by sexual frustration, my erection refusing to go down. She's by far the most exciting woman I've met in a long time and the sexual chemistry, or whatever the hell it is between us, is off the charts.

Finally, I fell into bed at around two in the morning, exhausted—and still this morning I'm awake early. It's a habit some days I wish I could break; I yawn and stretch broadly.

At least I have my deal with Jas to look forward to today. If I'm only going to have the one-time with Jas, then I'm going to make it one-time she'll never forget.

Today will be a busy day but in a good way, so I jump out of bed, stretching my arms wide again before getting ready for another head-clearing swim. A quick flick of the curtain from the window shows it's still early with the sun only edging over the horizon, my favorite time of the day. I expect I'll have the pool all to myself and that thought has me quickly changing, grabbing my goggles and a towel then leaving my bungalow for the short walk to the pool.

It looks like someone else had the same idea, and I shouldn't be surprised to see it's Jasmine. For a few moments, I stand watching her long-armed, graceful stroke cutting a waveless path through the clear water. Her toned athletic body shimmering like a mirage below the water as she turns to swim back. A smile spontaneously breaks out on my face as I wonder if she had an equally frustrating night.

I better not let my mind go there or I'll embarrass myself again when I strip down to my Speedos. One downside to wearing Speedos is they are bloody useless at hiding an erection as I'm rediscovering. Not something I've had to worry about since I was a horny teenage boy.

She turns again swimming back to my end of the pool, and as if sensing someone is watching her, Jasmine stops. She removes her goggles and rolls her eyes when she realizes it's me standing near the edge looking down at her.

"Seriously, are you stalking me or something? You seem to have an uncanny knack of popping up wherever I am," she complains half-heartedly as she wipes the water from her face.

"I could say the same about you."

I watch transfixed as water droplets run from her hair down onto her full rounded breasts, which are barely covered by tiny scraps of fabric again. Any hope of hiding my erection just flew out the window, especially after last night when I had the pleasure of ravishing those gorgeous tits.

I throw my towel on the nearest lounge, then swiftly removing my shorts send them the same way. The only option left to me is to get in the water quickly. I turn back around and step toward the edge of the pool.

"Oh please, can you do something about that?" asks Jas, pointing her finger at my cock, straining against the fabric.

"Are you offering to start our deal a little earlier than planned? Because I'm up for that."

I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively at her, but I don't think she noticed as she's still staring at my cock. "Now if you've finished checking me out, I'm going to dive into the pool," I tell her.

Tilting her head to the side, she says, "Just wanting to make sure you'll be able to fulfill your part of the deal."

"Have no doubt, pretty lady, I can fulfill every one of your needs," I reply before diving into the water to cool down. Surfacing, I swim back toward her.

"You, mister, can stop right there," she says, holding up her hand, indicating she doesn't want me entering her personal space.

"What? Don't you trust yourself around me?" I joke, keeping my distance. She's right if I get too close, I'll be tempted to touch her, and I'm over being nearly caught out again in public.

"Wow, your ego knows no bounds," she says with another eye roll.

I kind of like her eye rolls, I mean those alluring green eyes of hers are very expressive.

"Yes, I do have a big ego as you may have noticed, and I certainly don't have any boundaries." I catch a brief flash of passion across her face, which she tries to quickly mask with a laugh.

"Enough already, it's way too early in the morning for this kind of banter. My brain is still fuzzy from too much

champagne last night.”

Turning to the edge of the pool, she pulls herself from the water, providing me with a close-up view of her perfect curvy butt. Smothering a groan, I watch as she walks over to her towel, wringing the water from her hair. She really does have a spectacular body. She’s becoming my idea of the perfect package, sexy and intelligent. What a shame we’re going to have to wait till tonight for our one-time deal to be actioned.

I wonder again why she only wants it to be a one-time deal, it’s a question I tossed around in my head last night as I lay awake. There are a lot of questions I have for her, but now isn’t the right time to ask.

Wrapped in her beach towel, she looks back to me with a secretive smile tugging on her lips as she says, “I guess I’ll catch you later, Scott.”

“It’s unavoidable, Jasmine.” My comment stretches her smile wider before she turns and leaves.

Placing my goggles over my eyes, I push off from the side of the pool, stroking hard through the laps, all the while remembering my conversation with the beautiful woman who pushes all my buttons.

A little while later, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, I follow the path to the tiki hut where I’m meeting the boys for a

barbeque breakfast or grill out as they like to call it. I pull my aviators from my top pocket, the bright sun glistening on the water is blinding. It's another sunny, blue-sky day, perfect for Luke and Cassie's wedding.

The closer I get, the stronger the smell of grilling meat is carried on the already heavy humid air, and my stomach rumbles in appreciation. There are my friends, Luke, Blake, Parker, Ben, and Tim gathered under the thatched roof and as is typical whenever we have a cookout, fighting over the tongs. We do like to turn every occasion into a competition and today is no different.

"About time you got here," shouts Blake when he sees me approaching across the lawn.

"Sorry for being late, but some of us like to stay in shape. I was up early exercising," I respond with a standard dig about Blake's fitness levels. While Blake is certainly physically fit and by no means is letting himself go, I'm faster and fitter, mostly because I'm not desk bound like him.

"Hmm, I wonder what kind of exercising that involved," asks Blake, his eyes searching mine above his coffee cup. What's he on about?

Frowning, I hold his stare as I answer his cryptic comment, "Just swimming laps, nothing unusual there."

Nodding slowly, he wanders over to pour himself more coffee. Not willing to let it go, I follow him.

Lowering my voice so the others don't hear, I ask, "You got something you want to say to me, Blake?"

Giving me a sideways look, with an accompanying grin, he asks, "Just wondered if you were going to share with us what you were doing in the bushes with Jasmine last night."

Fuck, so he did hear us.

"Nothing, thanks to you coming along the path when you did," I tell him, still a little pissed that my heavy petting session with Jasmine was so rudely interrupted.

Blake's sudden bark of laughter attracts the attention of the guys at the grill and Luke asks, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, only Blake being an annoying fucker," I tell Luke, who knowing Blake the best, accepts my explanation without question.

Glaring at Blake, I drop my voice as I say, "I'd appreciate you keeping this to yourself because I'm sure Jasmine won't want word to get out that we were fooling around in the bushes."

Blake slaps me hard on the back before saying, "I'm sure she doesn't. Your secret's safe with me, mate."

If only he looked more convincing, I might have believed him. Instead, he has a shit-eating grin plastered across his face. I guess I'll have to tell Jasmine later how we were spotted.

Pouring myself a glass of juice, I follow Blake over to the grill, where it looks like all the arguing over who's the best cook has produced a damn good breakfast feast.

CHAPTER 11

JASMINE

Scott. Speedos. Sunshine. I can't get the images of Scott from this morning out of my head.

Last night as I lay in bed, I started to have second thoughts about the *one-time* deal I've made with Scott. But now, after getting a *close-up* of the impressive bulge in those ridiculous Speedos, I can't wait to seal the deal.

Why should I deprive myself of a chance to get my hands on a well-built sexy man?

After a messy breakup with my ex last year, I went through a self-imposed dry spell. Brad or *Asshole* as I like to refer to him, decided I wasn't enough and was hooking up with not just one other woman but two. Who knows if there were more? He was a player of the worse kind, the arrogant, cheating, lying bastard kind.

It took me a while to step back into the dating world, the casual dating world as I'm not looking for anything else now. And so far, it's been a disappointing, unfulfilling experience.

Most of the guys have been self-absorbed jerks, without a clue about a woman's needs. The major reason I haven't bothered with a second date and lately haven't even bothered with a first one.

I don't think Scott will be disappointing, and certainly not unfulfilling. Apart from my obvious attraction to his body, there's also a connection. A spark, which is uniquely different to anything I can remember feeling in the past. I can't see how we can avoid ending up in bed together. Besides, it's not like this can be anything other than a bit of fun on vacation.

With a mental shake, I discard lustful thoughts of Scott and concentrate on what today is supposed to be all about, Cassie's wedding day.

Through the open glass doors of our bungalow, a pretty bridal-inspired breakfast table has been set up for us on the lawn. The round table is filled with tiered fresh fruit platters, granola topped yogurt cups, and flaky croissants.

After taking our seats around the table, two waiters serve us each chilled mimosas in tall, delicate crystal glasses.

I tap a spoon gently on the side of my glass, the tinkling sound quietening the chatter around the table as I rise to make a toast to my beaming friend.

"Cassie, firstly I want to say thank you for choosing us to be your bridesmaids," there is a chorus of agreement around the table. "I know I speak for everyone when I say we are honored. You're a special friend ... and sister," I look over to Cassie's sisters sitting opposite, "with great taste, lucky for us.

The bridesmaid dresses are beautiful.” Everyone murmurs their agreement again.

“Secondly, thank you for choosing such an amazing location for your wedding, these last couple of days together on the island have added to our memory bank of special *girl time* spent with you. Finally, you deserve all the happiness today brings. We love you, hun,” I finish quickly, then raise my glass, gulping down the lump in my throat. “To Cassie, our beautiful bride.”

Cassie fans her face with her hand, trying unsuccessfully to hold back her tears of happiness as we each stretch out our glasses, meeting in the center of the table together in a toast.

Then before we can take our seats again, Madison adds, “Hey, Jas, you forgot to thank her for marrying a guy with hot single friends.” We all burst out laughing.

Madison is Cassie’s oldest friend from high school, who seems to be on the same wavelength as me as far as having a good time goes. I just hope she isn’t looking in Scott’s direction, I have plans for that man.

“So true, Mads, a very important point for us single ladies. Let’s toast again.”

Seated back down, we can finally do justice to the tasty array of food before us. I select a warm croissant from the offered plate, biting into the light buttery pastry. It’s not a chocolate-filled one like our local bakery makes back home but still incredibly good.

After another sip on my mimosa, I lean back in my chair to listen to the excited chat around the table about our plans for the day. It will be a late afternoon wedding, so we have plenty of time to enjoy our casual breakfast.

At eleven, we have our bookings for manicures and pedicures followed by a beach hut massage. A light lunch will be served at around one in the same garden before hair and makeup. It all sounds truly indulgent, and no one is more excited than Cassie.

Joy radiates from every one of her features, with no hint of stress or nerves. Weddings generally aren't my thing, but this one is different. It almost convinces me they're a good idea when the couple is as in love as Cassie and Luke.

Whoa. Where did that thought come from? No, weddings are still not a good idea. Not for me anyway. Especially not when my one long-term serious relationship ended so disastrously, no thank you. Just the thought of putting myself through that again has me breaking out in hives. It's much better to keep things casual, and nothing is more casual than a one-time vacation fling. Relationship avoidance works for me as even as a little girl, I never dreamed of my own wedding like my friends did.

Princesses and dressing up has never been my thing, much to my mom's disgust as a prominent socialite in the city. I was the total opposite. All I wanted to do was hang out with my big brothers, wearing baggy T-shirts and shorts, begging to be included in the same games they played.

It's only been in recent years when I've really understood the power behind the right clothes. Now I love dressing up, shopping for that perfect dress, which co-ordinates with those even more perfect shoes. It's especially rewarding when I find the right outfit, which gets me noticed, makes me feel sexy or makes a *take me seriously* statement in the boardroom.

My bulging suitcase for this trip is a testament to how much my attitude to clothes has changed. And of all the new clothes I packed my favorite is the bridesmaid dress I will wear today, standing proudly beside my best friend.

Cassie clicks her fingers in front of my face to get my attention. "Hey, are you ready for our nails and group massage? You seemed a million miles away just now."

I smile at my best friend and tell her honestly how I was thinking about my beautiful bridesmaid dress. Luckily, she didn't catch me out earlier daydreaming about Scott's impressive body, I might not have been able to answer quite so honestly.

"Come on then, let's go," she says, grabbing my arm and virtually dragging me from the chair.

"Wow, someone's a little bit eager," I tease as I happily link arms with her and Lily to walk toward the building which houses the island day spa.

An hour later and the nails on our fingers and toes are shaped, buffed, and coated in a pearly white. An amazing achievement as it took us all ages to settle on the exact tone of white. Who'd have thought it could be so hard?

As we leave the salon, I turn to Lily saying, “How many women does it take to choose a wedding nail polish?”

She smiles back at me. “Just one ... the bride.” I nod, wishing we had taken that approach instead of offering opinions when asked.

Giggling together, I add, “Correct, and five to nod their heads agreeably.”

Cassie overhearing laughs along to my lame joke. We follow the wedding planner back outside, across a trimmed lawn dotted with stray coconuts recently fallen from the surrounding tall palms. She leads us through an archway cut into a thick hedge of fuchsia hibiscus bushes and on the other side is a traditional beach hut, with more thick colorful shrubs on each side.

It’s a secret tropical garden that opens out to a private view of the blue-green ocean beyond. Six massage beds are lined up on the wooden platform under the thatched roof, an attendant in white standing beside each bed, friendly smiles lighting up their faces.

We each lie face down on a bed and the staff move efficiently around us heating the scented massage oils, the aroma mixing intoxicatingly with the surrounding native flowers.

Cassie turns her head toward me, whispering secretively, “What’s going on with you and Scott?”

I jump in surprise at her random question. It's a sneaky move waiting to ask me about Scott, when I'm relaxed by the massage, at my weakest. I try to recover my composure, but it's probably too late.

"I don't know what you mean," I reply in what I hope is an innocent-sounding voice. I don't really want to get into it today, not with Cass on her wedding day. Maybe tomorrow after the deed is done.

She smiles smugly at me. "Come on, Jas, I know you too well. Something was going on between you and Scotty, when Luke and I found you at the beach hut yesterday. You both had *guilty* written all over your faces." Obviously her curiosity is not easily deflected.

"Scott helped calm me down, that's all. I was bound to look a little uneasy," I explain, but even to my own ears, I don't sound convincing.

"Okay—I can wait till you're ready to spill on the details, like how exactly he calmed you down."

"I mean seriously, the man is arrogant, loud, and cocky ninety percent of the time."

"So, you keep saying, Jas, but I wonder about the remaining ten percent."

Her words make me realize I'm still trying to figure out the ten percent myself. Not that it should matter as I'm only planning a vacation fling, nothing more. And my plans include less talk and more action.

Just when I feel like she's finished asking me about Scott, it becomes obvious she was only taking a breath. "Hey, I say go for it, girl. Scotty is hot, not as hot as Luke, of course, but way hotter than the average guy in the street and on top of that he's a good guy."

I can't help but smile back at her. "Yeah, I get he's a good guy, he was amazing when I freaked out in the storm. And I certainly have noticed how hot he is but ... I'm still not sure it would be a good idea. It's not a normal situation where I'd never see him again. We're bound to bump into each other."

She ponders my words for a moment before saying, "I get it might be awkward in the future but is that really the reason? Are you sure your reluctance isn't because of your ex, Brad?"

"Stop. Don't say that lying, cheating man-child's name," I say half-joking and half-serious.

"Oops, sorry I forgot. Anyway, I think you shouldn't let old history stop you from moving forward. He was uniquely a douchebag, not all guys have the same whacked moral compass. C'mon, girl, you're the one who always goes after what she wants. Don't go overthinking it."

Cassie is right, which is why I intend to enjoy what's on offer. Especially when what's being offered looks pretty damn good.

"Thanks, Cass, but hey enough about me. Can we now concentrate on you and your special day?"

“Yes totally, today is all about me. I can’t believe I’m finally going to become Mrs. Luke Steele.”

In her excitement, she lets out a squeal that pierces my eardrums and has the other girls raising their sleepy heads from their massage tables.

Laughing at her, I joke, “I do hope that squealing stops when you become Mrs. Luke Steele.”

Later that afternoon when we’ve all been primped and preened, it’s finally time to slip on our beautiful sea-green bridesmaid dresses. The silky fabric is the same pale green for all of us and reminds me of the shallow reef waters we swam in yesterday. But then each dress has been uniquely designed for the girl wearing it, so we co-ordinate rather than all match exactly.

My dress has a high halter neckline at the front, plunging provocatively low at the back, and as I drop the dress over my head, the silk floats softly over my body, fitting to my curves like a second skin. I only hope it doesn’t get sticky in the humidity when we leave the cool protection of the air-conditioned bungalow.

We are all ready when Cassie’s twin nieces, in their pretty flower girl dresses come bounding through the doorway like spinning tops, followed closely behind by Cassie’s mom and dad, chaos ensues. Cassie’s sister with her magical mom

powers somehow convinces the twins to stop bouncing around her legs.

How she manages to keep her composure with all that activity surrounding her, is beyond me. Madison waits patiently beside them holding the baskets of rose petals the girls will carry.

The makeup artist puts the final brush of powder across Cassie's cheeks and the bride is ready too. She looks stunning in her white silk bridal gown, simple makeup, and golden hair falling in loose waves around her shoulders.

In the mirror I catch her wide, deep blue eyes brimming with joy and maybe some held back tears from her hug with her mom.

I move to stand behind her. "Remember, Cass, we made a pact, no tears." She nods back at me, smiling.

Lily beside me says, "Are you ready to do this, Cass?" She nods mutely again. "Let's go get you married then." Taking a hand each, we lead her over to her father, who stands proudly watching on from the edge of the room.

With a booming voice, Cassie's dad announces it's time to go, and we file out of the bungalow, along the path to the lawn, where the wedding guests are waiting.

CHAPTER 12

SCOTT

The five of us, Luke, Blake, Parker, Ben, and I, stand lined up in front of the guests, waiting for the music to start and Cassie to make her entrance.

It's way too hot and humid to be dressed up. I adjust the collar of my white button-down linen shirt again as a trickle of sweat runs down the center of my back, pooling at the band of my beige chino pants. You'd think by four in the afternoon the heat of the day would have lessened.

The ceremony is taking place on a lawn area overlooking the beach, but still there is no cooling breeze. A makeshift wooden platform has been set up under a flower-filled pergola, offering little shade, the surrounding palms doing a better job of keeping the wedding guests in their finery from melting into sweat puddles in their chairs.

The wedding officiant, Cassie's aunt, flutters a paper fan furiously at her red glowing cheeks. I hope the bride arrives soon before we all expire from heat exhaustion. Still, this informal beachside wedding is much better than a stuffy old

church filled with hundreds of people like the one my sister is planning in a few months.

Luke stands next to his mom, one hand in his pocket the other around her shoulders as he laughs at something Blake just said to him. He is the most relaxed of all of us, surprisingly not even breaking a sweat. Good on him, he deserves his happiness.

He's been through some tough years after he was seriously injured in Afghanistan. Luke endured a long, painful recovery both physically and mentally, but since Cassie moved in with him, he told me his old nightmares have disappeared.

I try not to relive the night the guy's team of Army Rangers was ambushed, ending with two of their friends not making it home, and Luke, Ben, and Tim injured. For me, it left behind an open wound in my memories and it's hard not to pick at it today. As I look at Luke, I remember how critical minutes made the difference between death and a life, which meant we could be here today, together. This is big, standing shoulder to shoulder with my friends, sharing in the next stage of Luke's future.

The acoustic guitarist begins to strum slowly. I don't recognize the tune, but it suits the informal setting. We all resume our places, standing up straighter as if we are all back in our military days on the parade grounds.

At the end of the red carpet that acts as an aisle, Cassie's little nieces begin to walk toward us. With a swallow to dislodge the lump in my throat, I focus on the cute little girls,

smiling and laughing as they drop pink flower petals from baskets. Behind the girls are Cassie's sisters, next is Madison, Lily, and finally Jas steps into view.

Jasmine looks gorgeous with her auburn hair cascading over her shoulders in soft waves. Her green eyes shining bright, a perfect match to the color of her dress and when her eye catches mine and those alluring pink lips turn up in a smile, I'm hooked.

Luckily my white shirt hangs loosely over my trousers covering my immediate reaction to her, or I would be standing here embarrassed right about now. It's knowing we have a deal that has ratcheted up my lust meter. I can't wait till later when I can make good on our *one-time*. Till then I'll have to restrain myself.

Ben leans sideways to say to Parker and me, "Check out Luke, he is so happy. Isn't it great?" I drag my gaze from Jasmine, back to Luke and smiling, nod my agreement. Ben, the hard-ass tough guy, is even affected by this moment.

Luke's smile is blinding as Cassie walks toward him on her dad's arm. When she reaches Luke, he takes her hand and the officiant asks in a low voice, "Are you ready to start?" The paper fan has been discarded and she is all business now.

An awkward silence ensues as the officiant waits for a response looking from Luke to Cassie, who are staring into each other's eyes, caught up in a world of their own.

Blake ends up having to nudge Luke to speak, and when he finally does, he says, "I do."

Lucky, his voice is so low that only those closest can hear. I struggle to hide my laugh behind a fake cough and looking over to Jas, I can see she's having the same trouble. The officiant smiles then repeats her question and this time Luke answers correctly.

The ceremony words are simple, but the vows spoken by Cassie and Luke to each other are truly moving and have the guests reaching for tissues. Not this tough guy though as I swallow past the lump in my throat, again. Geez, this is emotional shit.

When they get to the *I do* bit, Luke's voice is loud and strong, and he doesn't waste any time kissing his new wife. It's at least a minute before he finally comes up for air, and I clap him on the back congratulating him, along with the rest of the guys. Another stab of emotion surprising me as we all stand around him, brothers together.

Glancing back up, I'm snared by Jasmine's green gaze, and it pulls me to her. Unable to resist, I maneuver my way over to stand beside her as Luke and Cassie sign the marriage register.

"You take my breath away in that dress," I whisper for her ears only as my finger sneaks up her bare back, feeling her tremble beneath my touch.

Not distracted for long, she asks softly, "Are you okay? You seemed a little ... choked up during the ceremony."

Looking over her head toward the ocean, I admit, "I guess it was more emotional than I thought it would be."

Placing her hand on my sleeve, she smiles at me as she says, “I like how you aren’t afraid to admit that, and I agree it was a beautiful ceremony. It really touched me too.”

The photographer interrupts our moment with directions for us all to move toward the beach for photos. Luke and Cassie walk hand in hand back down the aisle as family and friends reach out to congratulate them. The official part of the ceremony is done.

Soon after, I’m seriously wondering who needs this many photos. Directed to stand this way or that by a darting, black-clad photographer, and his obedient assistant as they both flash a camera in our faces. Photos of all the girls together, next all the boys together then finally the full wedding party together. A piercing cry of *No again, again*, cutting through the peaceful setting as annoyingly as a squawking seagull.

When an hour later we are still doing photos, I’m about to lose my shit as I wade into the shallows for one more group photo. To cool my mood, I sidle up beside Jas like I’ve been trying to do all afternoon. I brush up closer, touching her with a stroke of her arm, trailing a finger up her back before sneakily placing my hand on her hip as the camera flashes in quick succession. Goosebumps coat her milky smooth skin. I think she’s enjoying our game as much as I am. Then her fingers brush against my thigh and with a wiggle of her butt she backs into my throbbing cock.

With a tilt of my head, I breathe her perfume in deep, it’s different to the one she wore last night, lighter and sweeter.

“You smell like summer and summer is my favorite season.”

Jas turns slightly, a faint smile teasing at her pink lips. It’s all the encouragement I need for now. A click of a camera nearby has us spinning to glare at the annoying assistant. But before I say anything, another squawk announces we are free to go, and as we escape back up the sand to the resort area, the girls go in one direction, and I follow the guys in the direction of the bar.

Ben keeps stride next to me as we race ahead of the others, our goal a cold beer. “I get they wanted to capture the best pictures but if that douchebag said *again* once more, I swear I was going to take that camera and ...”

“Chill, man.” I slap him on the back, laughing. “You do know we’re not done. We have the sunset pictures to do.”

“Fuck ... I need a beer to take the edge off.” Ben waves his hand to get the attention of a barman to take our order.

“Better make it two.” I have to agree I need mellowing out too, but maybe for a different reason following my recent interlude with Jas.

Ben leans back casually against the bar beside me, looking a lot happier with his cold beer bottle clutched in his hand.

I tap my beer to his then take several deep gulps. “Ahh ... I was dying for a coldy.”

A laugh bursts from his mouth. “Yeah, mate, I needed a *coldy* too,” he says in what he thinks is a good imitation of my

Aussie accent. But the way he says *coldy* with his American accent has me laughing along with him.

We continue to face out toward the guests, who are milling around with glasses of champagne, waiters moving amongst them with trays of appetizers.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s going on between you and Jasmine?” Ben asks.

I nearly drop the bottle in my hand; Blake has obviously been gossiping like a teenage girl. “What the hell has Blake been saying?”

Holding his hand up, he says, “Take it easy. Blake said nothing, although maybe I should have asked him instead. Seriously, dude, I got eyes and you’ve been following Jas around all afternoon. That’s without even mentioning the warning look you gave me last night during the dinner. I thought you were going to ask me to step outside to sort it out. If you got a thing for Jasmine, just tell me, man. You know I respect the bro code.”

I stare off into the distance for a moment before admitting, “Okay—I’ve got a thing for Jasmine, and I want you to stay away from her, well in a sexual way at least.”

“See, wasn’t so hard, you only have to say. Now good chat but I’ve got some other lovely ladies to go see.” He pushes away from the bar and saunters off in the direction of a pretty brunette, who I think is one of Luke’s cousins.

Jas hasn't returned from wherever the girls disappeared to with Cassie, so I remain at the bar enjoying my cold beer.

After another brilliant orange sunset, we all moved into the formal dining room.

Again, the setup is jaw-dropping, with greenery everywhere like the rehearsal dinner but this time instead of the colorful, vibrant flowers, tonight the theme is pure white and deep dark green.

Around the room, white sweet-scented roses trail throughout swathes of ivy and fern. On each linen-covered round table, centerpieces of fat white candles glow on tall golden pillars wrapped in more ivy and roses, seeming to sprout as if grown up from the forest floor. The whole effect is more opulent and extravagant than last night, and with a traditional layout of a bridal table and several guest tables, more formal.

Best bit, I'm seated at the bridal table next to Jasmine, which is positioned at the garden end of the room. And soon after taking our seats, a sumptuous plated full-service dinner begins. The celebrity chef proving to be worth every penny as the courses placed before us, all hit a new high as a unique tastebuds experience.

Each white plate placed in front of us looks more like a work of art rather than food. It's delicious food but what is

even more mouthwatering is the woman beside me. I'm captivated by Jas, maybe it's the prospect of later or maybe just her. It's not only her beauty that has me continually leaning sideways to speak to her, it's also her quick wit and naughty sense of humor.

All throughout the meal we pass jibes back and forth about the speeches, the antics of one of the uncles who has had a few too many and finally about each other. I'm really enjoying spending time with her.

She nudges me with her elbow again, drawing my attention to the photographer who is sneaking up on another table of guests, trying to catch them unaware with a blinding flash of light in their eyes and in some cases with a mouthful of food.

I move my chair closer so she can hear me over the infectious beat of the local Junkaroo band, and say into her ear, "The guy is *cruisin' for a bruisin'.*"

She bursts out laughing, turning her face to me. Her soft flowing hair falling across my face. I breathe in deeply wishing I could nuzzle my nose fully into the auburn curtain, where it meets the curve of her neck.

She takes another dig at my Aussie slang, "I have no idea what you just said, but I agree." We are leaning in close, our lips mere inches apart. I stare at her mouth and all I can think about is how good those soft lips would taste.

The music stops and we jump apart as if caught out doing something wrong, when in fact, it felt totally right.

The master of ceremonies announces the bride and groom's first dance will be in the courtyard. Slowly we stand to follow the other guest into the side courtyard.

Under a canopy of flickering white fairy lights, Cassie and Luke make their way to the center of the small makeshift dance floor, and as the slow melodic music fills the night air, they begin to sway as one. I move closer to Jasmine, who has taken up a position near the open doorway.

She seems to sense my presence beside her as she muses out loud, "They look so happy together, don't they?"

We continue to watch Cassie and Luke moving in sync with the music. "I didn't realize Luke had that much rhythm," I joke.

With a sideways glance, she says, "You're not particularly romantic, are you?"

I shrug. "I can be ... given the right setting." Holding out my hand to her, I ask, "Would you like me to show you?"

Without hesitation, Jas places her hand in mine, and we join Cassie and Luke, along with a number of the other guests on the dance floor. She willingly moves close into my arms as I continue to hold her hand, placing my other in the center of her bare back.

It feels good to have Jasmine back fully in my arms, even if I'd prefer it to be in a more private setting. In time to the music, we sway slowly together, and it doesn't surprise me to find our bodies melding perfectly.

I bend my head close to her ear and whisper, “Is this romantic enough for you?”

Slowly, I trail my fingers down her spine, then back up again. A soft moan escapes her lips as I apply slight pressure to fit her hips closer to mine. My semi-hard erection nestling between her thighs, and finally I’m making contact with her body like I’ve wanted to all day.

“Yes, but I want more,” Jas murmurs into my chest as I nuzzle her neck, placing a string of soft kisses a little below her ear.

“When you say more, how much more do you want?” I ask although I can probably guess by the way she clings to my body.

Raising her head slightly, she clearly states, “Everything and then some.”

Unable to stop myself, I say, “I want you, Jasmine. I want to taste you, be inside you, and fuck you like you’ve never been fucked before.”

I push my now fully aroused cock against her again, making sure she understands how prepared I am to deliver on my promises.

I hear her sharp intake of breath before she surprises me by saying, “Let’s get out of here.”

Grabbing my hand, she quickly leads me off the dance floor barely stopping to collect her purse from the table as we pass.

CHAPTER 13

JASMINE

Enough already! All day Scott has been tempting me, teasing me, touching me, generally invading my personal space and I've liked it, a lot.

Finally with the sexy whispering in my ear, I can't take it anymore. I need to get Scott naked over me, under me, or anyway he wants me. The important part is I need his body desperately now.

Striding from the wedding reception, my hand claspng Scott's larger one tightly, I demand, "My bungalow or yours?"

Scott doesn't need to be asked twice as he says in a strained voice, "Mine, as I sure as fuck don't want any more interruptions."

Taking over control of our exit strategy, he leads me so quickly along the path to his bungalow I struggle to keep up in my heels.

"Hey, slow down." He stops abruptly. "I can't keep up in these shoes."

“I can carry you,” he offers, and I must admit I’m tempted. Instead, I bend and take off the offending heels.

As I stand back up, I smile saying, “I can keep up now.” Scott laughingly takes my hand and sets off again quickly to his private bungalow. Thank God he isn’t sharing with the other guys.

He has the door open in record time. Once inside, he makes a show of locking the door before turning toward me.

“Now what?” he asks, breathing heavily.

Dropping my shoes to the floor I take a step toward him, saying, “Now, you fuck me, like I’ve wanted you to do since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

His pupils dilate as he stares wide-eyed at me. I take another step closer and begin to undo the buttons of his linen shirt. Slowly popping each button, the urgency gone from my movements now I have him alone, in private.

I want to savor the experience.

“Do you want me to help you with that? It’d be quicker,” he asks as he continues to watch my progress.

“No. All good.” Although I’m not sure who is being tortured the most with my slow striptease of his body.

“I don’t care if you rip the shirt,” he suggests as I undo another button.

“No. All good.”

I'm enjoying the tease especially the way the veins in his neck are bulging as he holds himself in check. I pop the last button on his shirt, and he exhales the breath he's been holding.

Scott's reactions are turning me on, but I'm enjoying the control he's handed me. I slide the shirt from his broad shoulders allowing it to drop to the floor while he works to kick off his deck shoes.

"I bet you're one of those people who take ages to open presents."

I smile up at him. "Yes ... I enjoy the suspense of wondering what gift is going to be inside."

Smoothing my hands over his naked, muscled chest, I allow myself a moment to enjoy the feel of him before my fingers move lower to unbuckle his belt.

"My gift will be worth waiting for, Jas." My hands still as I undo the button on his beige trousers.

"Oh my god, that sounded so cheesy."

Smiling broadly, he says, "Sorry, it sounded better in my head. Please ignore it and don't let it interrupt what you're doing."

A giggle escapes from me surprisingly easily as I'm beginning to like his cheesy lines. Slowly, I slide down his zipper and the bulge in his black boxer briefs is temptingly freed. I lick my lips in anticipation then slide his trousers from

his slim hips. As they drop to the floor, he steps awkwardly out of them.

His finger hooks below my chin lifting my gaze to him. “At what point do I get to remove your clothes?”

“Soon,” I tell him, and he bends to swipe a brief kiss across my lips, our first locking of lips today, sending a rush of goosebumps over my already heated skin.

“Now to the big reveal,” I announce, earning a chuckle from him.

Encouraged, I focus back on my task and hook a thumb on each side of his boxer briefs and slowly ease them down, revealing his long, hard cock as it springs free.

Wow, he’s even bigger than I imagined, and I’ve been imagining his dick a lot lately.

Scott’s fists clench tightly at his side, the only indication of tension in his body. My nipples pebble beneath the silky fabric of my dress as I continue to stare at his impressive shaft.

He asks in a deep gravelly voice, “Are you just going to stare at my cock? You know you can touch, I won’t bite, well not yet anyway.”

Pulling my eyes back up to his face, my cheeks flush under his smoldering gaze and instead of responding I turn my back to him, asking, “Could you please undo my zipper.” I peer over my shoulder to see his fingers release the zip, which runs from my lower back down over my butt. He bunches my hair

in his hand moving it to the side, exposing my neck. “And undo the clips at the top.” My voice sounds raspy, needy.

His fingers fumble with the delicate clasps that hold the halter neck of my dress, but eventually they release, and the silky fabric slips slowly from my body in a soft caress.

“You’re gorgeous,” Scott groans out as he lays his hands on my shoulders, slowly gliding them down my back and over my bare butt cheeks, thanks to the skimpy silk G-string I’m wearing. Silk which does nothing to hide the dampness between my thighs.

He turns me slowly around to face him, and I’m again overcome by a rush of desire for his body as he zeroes in on my bared tits. He pinches my nipples before bending his head to soothe the sting with his tongue.

This first sexual act is like an explosion going off in both of us.

My body is on fire as he nips and sucks my nipples into his heated mouth.

No more slow movements, it’s now a frenzy of passion. I grab at his head, bringing his face up with my palms so I can kiss him feverishly. He leans into me moving me backward till I’m braced against the closed door.

Ripping his lips from mine, he growls, “All day I’ve wanted to taste you ... everywhere.” Then dropping to the floor in front of me, he quickly strips the remaining piece of silk from my body.

He lifts my leg high, throwing it over his shoulder, exposing me fully to him, and then he is kissing the inside of my thigh. So close just not close enough. I slap my hands hard back against the solid door, bracing myself for the onslaught of this mouth, but still, he continues to tease as he nips the soft flesh around my pussy.

“Goddammit, Scott, I want you to eat me,” I demand, not happy with the whiny edge to my voice or the way my right hand just slapped the door behind me in a burst of frustration.

It doesn't help hearing his muffled, deep laugh as he nuzzles between my legs, so close to my clit I can feel a puff of his breath. “All in good time, baby. I promise it'll be worth the wait.”

I wriggle my hips trying to force his mouth to where I want him, but instead of giving in to me, he places his large hands on my hips, pinning me in place.

“Aarghhh Aahh.” His hot wet tongue flicks my nub and a million nerve endings in my body sit up and take notice. I'm sure he is chuckling again but then he licks me from back to front and I don't care as long as he keeps his hot mouth on me.

Another swipe of his tongue and my eyes flutter closed in delight. I peel one hand from beside me and reach for his head, pulling him closer to quench my need for more. I'm willing to get down on hands and knees, crawl across the floor, and beg for more.

Embedding my fingers deeper in his hair, I close my eyes, giving myself over to the touch of his tongue swirling across

my clit in one moment then back to light kisses. “If you don’t stop teasing me, I swear you’ll be the one screaming tonight as I pull the hair from your head.”

He looks up at me, grinning broadly. “I don’t mind a little rough play in the bedroom but tearing out my hair doesn’t really do it for me.”

I tug his head back to the task and he willingly dives in, this time with the enthusiasm my body demands. He flicks his tongue fast and firm over my clit as one long finger slips into my channel. Yes, finally this is what my body needs.

“Oh, fuck, Scott, I need more,” I gasp out as if possessed.

“Harder ...” And he fills me with a second finger.

“Faster ...” And his fingers pump inside me, my walls tightening around them as I soar higher.

Hard and fast pressure exactly where I need him.

Then he sucks down hard on my clit, and I have no words, only grunts and moans as I race toward an orgasm. My body is on fire, my voice incoherent, my brain shut down as pleasure floods my body in a tsunami of feelings.

I nearly collapse under the unrelenting intensity. My body exploding with a primal scream, a shower of light sparks behind my closed eyes and a rush of juices flooding from me, into his demanding mouth.

Through barely open, glazed eyes, I watch mesmerized as he swipes his tongue gently over me one more time. I shiver as he soothes the ultra-sensitive nerve endings.

Slowly he lifts his head, his gaze scorching. “You taste as amazing as I dreamed you would.”

I’d respond to him if I could speak, but at this point I’m barely able to catch my breath. I release my tight grip on his hair as our eyes remain locked on each other.

While continuing to hold me upright, he reaches to snag his trousers off the floor and from his wallet he pulls out a condom. Unhooking my leg from his shoulder, he places my foot firmly back on the floor, then stands up.

Quickly, he’s sheathed and leaning into me to extract a quick hard kiss from my parted lips.

With our lips locked, I’m lifted into his arms as he twists to brace my back against the door. Arms grasping at his shoulders and legs wrapped tightly around his waist. The sheer power in his body makes my head spin.

He holds me poised inches from his tip as he gasps out, “Can I fuck you now, Jas? Please?”

Smiling at him, I tilt my head and say in what I hope is my most seductive voice, “Yes, Scott, you can.” And he eases into me, slowly stretching my inner walls to accommodate his girth.

Till he has claimed me completely.

“Fuck, that feels so good,” he groans out. “Too good. I kind of need a moment here or this will be over way too soon.”

I like hearing I’m turning him on so much that he needs time to compose himself. I think I need a moment too as the

way he fills me is reigniting my body.

“You need a moment. The question is, should I let you have it, after the way you teased and taunted me just now.” Payback can be fun. I lean into him, lick his lower lip, then pull back before he can take the kiss further. My hand reaching down to squeeze his perfect, firm muscled butt cheek.

Another of his cute, crooked smiles creeps across his face. “I was only drawing out your pleasure, for your benefit. And taking a moment, will also be for your benefit.”

He cups his hand behind my head, holding me steady as he sucks my bottom lip between his teeth, reminding me of how his mouth felt moments ago, sucking on my clit in the same way.

Damn the cocky man and his talented mouth.

Searching for more, I fuse my mouth to his again, and soon as with every touch between us, the kiss turns desperate. Our tongues invading each other’s mouths as Scott begins to rock his hips. His shaft sliding in and out between my wet walls. Slowly at first, till he pushes, harder and faster into me. Our kisses turning to pants as we fuck each other desperately, my nails digging into his biceps, clawing, marking him.

“Come again for me, Jas,” he begs me. It feels so good, so right.

He reaches one hand between us, his thumb providing the needed friction and pressure against my clit. I’m climbing toward another release. He pumps into me again and again, my

back pounding against the door in time to the rapid beat of my heart. My body tenses, my muscles spasming as I spiral over the edge of another explosive orgasm.

“Fuck ... yes, yes, yessss,” I scream over and over as I ride the wave of sensations coursing through my body. Above the roar in my ears, I’m only vaguely aware of Scott loudly grunting out his own release.

We both slump against the wall, exhausted by the ferocity of our release. I drop my head to Scott’s solid shoulder, sucking air into my lungs as the muscles in my body begin to relax.

“Are you okay?” Scott mumbles with his face buried in my neck.

“I think so, given I was just fucked like never before.” My comment has him raising his head with a smug, self-satisfied look plastered across his face.

“I did warn you, but ... I think that was even more out of control than I expected.”

Slowly, he eases away from my body, and I drop my shaky legs to the floor. Not sure if they will hold me. I wobble, and unexpectedly he swings me into his arms, carrying me over to the bed. He lays me down reverently on top of the crisp white sheets then unhooks my arms from his neck and tells me he’ll be back in a minute before disappearing into the adjoining bathroom.

My eyes drop closed as I wait for him to return. My head is dizzily spinning from what just happened, undoubtedly the

best sex ever, or pretty damn close to it. Even my ex-boyfriend who I thought was good in bed can't compare to the masterclass in pleasure that Scott just gave me.

There is something special which ignites in me when Scott touches my body and it's like nothing I've ever felt before.

I'm kind of freaked out by it. This is meant to be a one-time-only thing and can never be anything more.

I don't want it to be anything more. Not only because long-distance relationships are bad news, but mostly because I don't think I'm completely over the breakup with my lying, cheating ex-boyfriend. The bastard ruined my trust, stomped all over it in the cruelest of ways when he jumped into bed with his work colleague. And not just once, multiple times. I didn't find out about the other affair until much later, after he had been kicked to the curb.

I shake my head, trying to dislodge those unhappy thoughts. I don't need to be thinking about the asshole from my past when my mind and body has just been blown away by a sexy Australian. No, it's best to just wallow in the aftermath of amazing sex. My eyes drift closed with the memory.

Somewhere in that half-awake, half-asleep zone, I feel Scott lie back down beside me, and tuck me gently into the crook of his arm. Snuggling into his body contentedly I drift off to sleep, choosing to ignore the little voice in my head, telling me to leave before sex with this man becomes addictive.

It feels like only moments later when I awaken to the feel of Scott's naked body moving against mine. I'm instantly alert

with a need for more as a shiver ripples across my skin. Moving back closer to the heat of his body, enjoying the way his strong muscled arm spoons me to his chest, I place his hand over my breast, encouraging more.

And again, Scott's slow, gentle touches turn quickly into a raging passion between us.

CHAPTER 14

SCOTT

Hmm! The best start to a day after a night of great sex is more of the same.

Memories of the beautiful auburn-haired woman still in the bed beside me are fresh in my mind. Man, she was wild and adventurous last night, taking and giving equally. Even more amazing than I could have imagined.

Everything about her luscious body was perfect. Everything about how she maneuvered her luscious body was perfect. I'm up and ready for more, I only hope Jasmine feels the same.

Lying naked, my eyes closed and my morning wood standing to attention, I get the feeling I'm being watched. Without moving a muscle, I open one eye, looking sideways. I knew it, Jasmine is lying there checking out my cock like she can't wait to get her hands on it again.

"You see anything you like?" I ask, surprising her and bringing a faint flush to her cheeks.

Her pretty, green eyes run up my body like a visual caress as she answers, “Maybe.” As always, her light teasing tone fires my interest.

Playing it cool, I turn my head slowly to smile casually at her. “I don’t think there is any maybe about it. I think you want me again ... and again.”

I’m desperately hoping I’m right.

“Oh, please—that’s a big ego you got there,” she says, but the desire shining in her eyes is telling me something different from her words. It’s okay, I’m a patient man, I can wait for her to make the first move. I laugh, thinking about how much I’ll enjoy reminding her of how big my ego is.

“You seemed to like my big ego last night.”

Closing her eyes briefly, she mutters softly, “You do realize this was a very bad idea.”

Maybe it was, but I don’t regret for one second our night together, and I don’t want her having regrets either.

I roll on my side, so we’re face to face and attempt to reassure Jasmine. “Probably, but bad ideas can sometimes be the most fun. Jasmine, we were inevitable.”

“That may be true, but it doesn’t mean we should repeat those bad ideas. This was a one-time-only thing between us.”

I’m not sure who Jas is trying to convince, me or herself. She is so temptingly close to me as we lie face to face, and unable to resist I reach out a finger to gently trace it down the flawless soft skin on her arm.

“Well, if this is a one-time-only thing, I think we blew that out the water last night. If memory serves me right, it was a couple of times for both of us.”

I suspect my memories of her coming apart in my arms will fill my dreams for weeks, maybe even months.

She’s quick to clarify, “Correction—it was definitely three times for me.”

This makes me smile as it confirms my suspicion, she’s remembering as clearly as me, how good we were together last night.

I plead my case. “Anyway, the way I see it, we are still in bed together, so the one-time is not officially over yet.” Hoping my final point will convince her, I continue to trail my finger lazily over the obvious goosebumps on her arm.

“But a one-night stand usually means one night, not one night plus a morning.”

I don’t like the idea of Jas seeing last night as only a one-night stand. One-night stands in my experience are anonymous casual hookups. Sure, they can be brief sexual encounters, which are mutually beneficial and enjoyable for the moment in time. But still not at all how I saw last night. Last night with Jas was unique and special.

“I never thought of us as a one-night stand, Jas. A one-night stand to me usually means a casual hookup, but I met you three days ago. Three days I’ve spent getting to know you, trading kisses, and seeing your ravishing flesh in skimpy

bikinis. I love your bikini body as much as I enjoy your quick wit.”

I stop speaking before I lay any more of my truths out there. I need to shut up, stop saying things that make me sound like I have a right to say them to her. Like a boyfriend or something.

Somewhere last night I lost sight of this being a casual one-time-only fling.

Trying to lighten the mood, I tease, “It’s been a hard three days, if you know what I mean.”

“It seems as though you’re still having a hard time,” she comments, and I groan loudly as her green eyes focus on my rock-hard shaft. Her smile encouraging my finger to explore further than the slow stroking of her arm.

“A painfully hard time and it’s not helping you staring like that at my cock,” I admit as I move my finger slowly around to hook on the sheet loosely covering her breasts. I hold Jasmine’s gaze to see if she wants me to continue and I soon have my answer as her green eyes darken with desire.

Slowly, I drag down the sheet covering her tits. “Now it’s fair I get to look at your gorgeous tits.”

“Personally, I think we deserve some amazing morning sex. Just like last night was amazing night-time sex. What do you think?” I ask, hoping desperately she is on the same page. She certainly seemed eager for more in the early hours of this morning.

“Maybe you’re right. If this is one-time only then it should be the full experience.” She wiggles closer within reach as my fingers trail softly across her nipples.

My desire for this woman can now be unleashed. “Now, where would the pretty lady like that full experience? In her mouth ... or down here ...” my finger traces across her lower lip before tracking a new path from her mouth slowly down the dips and curves of her body to slip between the heat of her thighs, “... or maybe you have somewhere else in mind?”

I hope she has lots of places in mind.

Later, after a long shower together, which included a spectacular deep throat blowjob that left me weak-kneed and literally sliding down the tiled wall, we’re both dressed.

Jas is looking particularly cute in my T-shirt and shorts, so she doesn’t have to wear her green dress on the walk back to her bungalow.

But now comes the awkward part as I stand in the doorway of my bungalow, feeling unsure of what happens next. Even after everything we’ve done together, I’m not sure if Jas will want more or if this is really it. I’m not ready for us to be done yet.

Deciding to jump feet first into the difficult questions, I ask, “Are you interested in a renegotiation of our one-time deal?”

With her hand on her hip and her perfectly shaped brow raised, she repeats, “A renegotiation of our one-time deal. What exactly did you have in mind?”

Surprisingly, she seems open to the idea and my ability to think quickly on my feet comes in handy as I suggest, “Maybe one more time tonight?”

Jas doesn’t need to know I had planned on leaving later this afternoon. I guess it’s one of the perks of having my own transport, I can change my travel plans at will. Unfortunately, I do have to leave tomorrow morning as I have an important meeting with a new client in Miami that afternoon.

Jas’s brow furrows as she thinks through my suggestion. Damn, I thought she would be a little more eager.

Clearing her throat, she admits, “I still think this isn’t going to be a good idea.”

“I believe you mentioned something like that earlier, but I feel I should point out, we still had fun. What about we meet at *our* beach hut on the other side of the island, say at two o’clock this afternoon. We can have another snorkel, close to shore this time, then take it from there.”

“It’s a tempting offer, let me think about it,” she tells me, and the sexy smile pulling at the corners of her mouth gives me hope.

Taking hold of her hand, I pull her gently toward me and say, “Sure, and maybe this will help you think about it ...” I then seal my lips to hers in a deep kiss.

A kiss that might end up being the last one we share.

CHAPTER 15

JASMINE

As I walk back to my bungalow, my heart is still racing from Scott's kiss. I touch my fingers to my still tingling lips. He certainly gave me something to think about.

Every step of the way, I toss around the idea of seeing Scott this afternoon. I know if I meet him this afternoon this thing between us won't end up being a one-time thing. Instead, it will turn into a two-time thing or maybe just a vacation fling. Either way it's becoming obvious I can't resist the man, especially now I know the wonderful things he can do to my body.

I let myself back into my bungalow quietly, hoping not to disturb Lily as it's still early. But any chance of sneaking past her is quickly dashed as she sits on the end of her bed, watching me with eyes wide open and a broad grin stretching across her mouth.

Damn.

“And what time do you call this, missy?” she jokes in her best imitation of my mom’s voice.

Laughing along with her, I respond, “Happy I got laid time.”

There is no way I’m going to pretend to regret what was the best sex in a long time, maybe ever. And there’s no way I’m going to hold back the juicy news from my friend.

“Ooh, tell me more, tell me more.”

“Of course. But can we do it over breakfast? I’m starving. Give me a few minutes to change then we can go.”

“Yes, I didn’t want to mention the interesting outfit you’re wearing. I mean, hey, this may be your new style, oversized T-shirt and guy shorts,” she jokes. “Not sure it’s going to catch on though.”

“Well, it was certainly better than wearing my bridesmaid dress, which would have been a little embarrassing if I’d run into any other guests.” Grabbing a bikini and dress, I go into the bathroom to change quickly.

Lily shouts through the door, “I’ll text Trudy to meet us at the pool in ten minutes. I’m sure she’s dying to hear about your night too.”

Mention of Trudy reminds me to ask Lily through the bathroom door, “Is Trudy okay? She seems a bit down since she arrived. You know she’s usually the life of the party, but yesterday she was so quiet, definitely not her usual self.”

Walking back into the bedroom, I pick up my sunglasses, pop them on my head, and throw sun lotion into my beach bag.

“Maybe weddings aren’t her thing. You know how she’s always saying she’s never going to get married,” Lily reminds me as she gets her beach things together.

“I guess, and I’m sure she’ll mention if there’s anything wrong.” I fling my bag over my shoulder and I’m ready to go. “Come on, let’s get some food.”

As Lily and I stroll along the gravel path toward the pool area, she asks, “Now just so we’re clear on who made you happy, it was Scott, wasn’t it?”

“Of course, it was,” I reply, slapping her arm playfully.

Holding up her hand, Lily teases, “Hey, I was only asking because last I heard, you thought he was cocky and arrogant.”

“Well, he is still cocky and arrogant ... but I kind of like his brand of cocky, now I know he has some hidden talents.” It’s hard to keep the smile off my face this morning as I talk about Scott.

I slip my sunglasses over my eyes to block out the already bright morning sun then hook my arm through hers as we stroll along the meandering path. “Wow, hidden talents. As I said before, tell me more.”

Laughing together, we continue toward the main resort building, where Trudy is waiting for us. She is staying in one

of the hotel-style rooms in a wing of the main building rather than the bungalows.

With a quick hello, we decide to skip the full buffet breakfast and instead order takeout coffees and croissants to eat by the pool.

Finding three loungers overlooking the ocean we sit cross-legged facing each other as I fill the girls in on what happened between Scott and me last night. I gloss over the intimate moments, but they get enough of an idea about my *one-time* deal with Scott to weigh in on the subject.

“Are you crazy? Why are you not jumping at the chance of one more time?” Trudy asks, astonished I would even consider not having another night of great sex. But this is the girl who is currently in some sort of *friends with benefits* relationship with Blake’s older brother Hunter, so it’s not surprising she sees it all in black and white.

“I mean, last night was earth-shatteringly good. Wouldn’t it be more sensible to tuck the memory away and move on as friends of friends?” I voice the question which has me wondering if it would be a good idea to have another hookup with Scott.

I tend to be a spur of the moment kind of girl and to hell with the consequences. But as I get older, I want to be wiser in my choices, especially when it comes to men. My sensible friends make a good sounding board for my crazier adventures.

Lily turns to look at me. “I guess, if you think you can’t handle another night.” Hah, she knows I can’t resist a challenge.

I laugh out loud with the memory of my handling of Scott last night ... and this morning. “He is a lot of man to handle that’s for sure,” I tell her, waggling my eyebrows.

Trudy takes a sip of coffee then says, “Jas, if it’s just a vacation fling, I say keep on flinging.”

“It’s definitely only a fun fling and I’m sure Scott feels the same.” Well, I think he sees this just as a bit of fun and nothing more once we leave the island. I like to keep my vacation flings, on vacation where they belong and a long way away from real life.

“Good, as I don’t want to see you get hurt.” The sadness clouding her eyes makes me wonder if she’s still talking about me and Scott or if things aren’t going so well between her and Hunter.

“Trudy, is everything okay between you and Hunter?” I ask, worried about my friend.

“Of course. All good,” she says quickly, dismissing my question with a casual wave of her hand. Lily and I exchange a look that says, she isn’t believing Trudy’s words either. But one thing is obvious, Trudy doesn’t want to talk about it, yet. When she’s ready she knows her girl support team is only a text away, we’ve got her back.

We continue talking quietly about yesterday's wedding, and as we're finishing our breakfast, Scott, Ben, and Parker walk out onto the pool deck like some pumped-up hunky models strutting across a stage.

Great, just what I don't need, Scott stripping down for a swim in the pool. As if I'm not having enough trouble already ignoring the images etched into my memory of his hot naked body.

The guys, led by Ben, walk over to the loungers right next to ours.

"Ladies, you don't mind if we join you?" Ben asks, dropping his things on a lounge, not waiting for a response.

I can't read Scott's eyes behind his aviators, but I get the impression he would have preferred to have taken a lounge further away, instead of the one he is forced to take closest to mine. Maybe he's struggling to forget our naughty sexy times too.

"Sure, please do," Lily says, looking at me warily. I shrug casually, there's no need for us to be tiptoeing around secretively with our friends, we're all consenting adults. Besides, Scott did tell me last night about his chat with Blake and Ben yesterday. So, I guess all our friends now know what we did last night.

One by one the guys strip off their shirts, capturing the attention of Lily, Trudy, and me. All three of them are impressively built men. Scott grins at me when he catches me

checking out his body for the second time today and all I can do is roll my eyes.

Thankfully, Scott keeps his boardshorts on today as he walks over to the pool and performs one of his perfect dives into the sparkling glassy water.

My eyes track his progress behind the cover of my sunglasses. The challenge now, will be keeping my hands off Scott in public until I meet him later this afternoon. And I'll certainly be meeting him this afternoon to continue my best ever vacation fling.

Ben and Parker follow Scott into the water with more splash than diving skill. Ben calls to us to join them.

I turn to the girls. "C'mon, girls, I need a cool down after that display of male hotness." Then start to remove my loose dress, revealing a black bikini. I can already feel Scott's eyes skimming my body as I walk to the edge of the pool. It's like I have a sixth sense where the man is concerned, instinctively knowing when his eyes are following me.

No sooner have I surfaced from my dive, than Scott is swimming over to me in the deeper end of the pool. Treading water within arm's length, he growls low for my ears only, "You have a nice dive."

"Really, and you are telling me this because ..." I taunt, although from the look in his eye I know exactly why he notices how I dive, and it's got nothing to do with skill and everything to do with form.

“Because I find your graceful movements in and out of the water very sexy, and I’d like to have another opportunity to show you how good our bodies can be together.”

Below the water I feel him run his hand down over my hip and a zap of reaction shoots through my veins. The touch of his hand on my skin is in no way diluted by the water. If anything, it’s more sensual.

“That’s not playing fair, I could still be thinking about your offer of one more time.” He laughs, closing the gap between us.

I can feel his erection brushing up against my thigh as he whispers in my ear, “I think we both know, one-time is never going to be enough.”

Releasing the breath I didn’t even realize I was holding, I tilt my head unconsciously, allowing him access to my neck as he trails kisses from my ear to my shoulder.

Mumbling to himself, I think I hear Scott say, “I want you,” and it’s a sentiment I agree with wholeheartedly as he squeezes my hip one more time before releasing me and swimming away.

Spinning around I see the open-mouthed stares of our friends, who are leaning up against the edge of the pool in the shallow end, watching the entire scene play out. Blushing profusely, I do the only thing I can think of, I start swimming laps like Scott.

Oh my god, how embarrassing. Seriously, Scott makes me forget everything when he touches me – that’s dangerous.

Shortly after two that afternoon, I follow the path to the other side of the island. Most of the wedding guests have just left on the boat back to Nassau and as I stood on the dock with Cassie and Luke, waving them goodbye, Scott was nowhere to be seen. Ben, Parker, Tim, and his wife all left in Ben’s helicopter late morning, leaving only a few of us to enjoy the island for the next couple of days.

After my experience with Scott in the pool this morning, I’m looking forward to seeing him again. One more night in his bed, exploring the sexual chemistry between us. What harm can come of it as Scott returns to Florida tomorrow morning, and I head back to New York a couple of days later. It’s not like we’re in the same city and anything more is an option.

Reaching the beach, I spot Scott right away, sitting in a deck chair under the shade of one of the palm trees which line the edge of the sandy cove. Scott watches me advance toward him.

“Hey, pretty lady. What brings you to this deserted side of the island?” Liking the teasing tone in his voice, I smile down at him as I drop my bag onto a second deck chair and remove my dress.

Pretending to ignore the way his Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he swallows hard, I reply suggestively, "I heard there was a hunk of an Aussie man hanging out on this beach." Scanning the beach, I look back at him. "But I don't see a Hemsworth brother anywhere here."

Springing from his deck chair, Scott swings me into his arms as if I weigh nothing and strides toward the water. I cling to his neck laughing as he attempts to deposit me in the turquoise waters. Instead, we fall clumsily into the water together.

Coming up, still holding tight to his neck, I wrap my legs around him. I hug him, holding him close like I wanted to do in the pool this morning. "Okay—I guess you'll do instead."

"You bet, I'm definitely an all-Aussie man." With a thrust of his hips, I can feel every bit of this Aussie man, and I want more. Having made the decision to go for it with Scott one more time, I'll be making sure our afternoon and night will be one neither of us will forget for a long time to come.

"Modest too by the sounds of it," I tease him with a wriggle of my hips, so his cock nestles between my thighs.

Tilting his head to the side, he places his hand on the back of my head as he slowly presses his lips to mine with a soft, lingering kiss, before gently teasing my lips apart with the tip of his tongue.

The sweetness of his kiss is as devastating as the plundering of his mouth on mine last night. He threads his fingers through

my hair, holding my head back giving him free access to my neck, shoulders, and the swell of my breasts.

His fingers now on the back of my neck, make quick work of releasing the tie of my bikini top and his head descends to take one of my bared nipples into his mouth. I clasp tighter to his head as he licks and sucks on the peak while his hand massages my other breast. With the ache building between my thighs, I beg Scott unashamedly for more.

He raises his head briefly from my chest as he brags, “Oh, baby, there is plenty more where that came from.” Then he reaches down to slide his fingers under the edge of my bikini pants, and into my pussy. Plunging two fingers deep inside me before returning to flick his tongue across my nipples, driving me wilder.

Unleashing a moan from deep within me, I plead again for him to give me more. And he gives me more, rubbing his thumb roughly across my clit. I’m so close as I feel my inner walls tensing and the orgasm start to take over my entire body. My hands clench his head as every other muscle in my body tenses in ecstasy.

And still, he continues, unrelenting to the point where I don’t think I can take any more of the pleasure pulsing through my body. I shout his name, along with a string of expletives.

Scott raises his head, and slowly releases his fingers from my body, pulling me back into his arms, to rest my head against his chest as my breathing slowly returns to normal.

“Oh my god, that was amazing,” I gasp out.

“Too right. And it was a good thing we were in the water because I just came in my shorts. I haven’t done that since I was sixteen.”

Giggling at his admission, I tell him, “I didn’t realize, so you could have kept that embarrassing little fact to yourself.”

“Why would I do that. I want you to know what you do to me. This may only be one more time, but I want you to know this thing between us, is honest and real.”

“Thanks, I feel the same way.”

“Do you have the energy for a snorkel still? I can run up and grab the gear off the beach.” Seeing the eagerness in his face, I happily agree, besides my muscles could do with a relaxing float.

CHAPTER 16

SCOTT

I'm way too lazy to move. And why would I, when I'm gently swaying in a hammock, naked apart from a large blanket and wrapped up with a beautiful similarly naked woman in my arms.

It's late afternoon and we're still at our private cove. The raucous buzzing of cicadas in the nearby tropical gardens filling the warm late afternoon air. I twirl another strand of Jasmine's hair through my fingers, watching it fall softly across my knuckles, and for the first time in a long time, a sense of well-being washes over me.

After a final snorkel through the clear reef waters this afternoon, Jas and I returned to the beach, collapsing on our towels to dry off. I guess it was inevitable that one thing would lead to another, with us secluded and wearing minimal clothing. Luckily, I'd had the forethought to put some condoms in my backpack.

Now I have new images of Jasmine, naked, straddling my hips and riding me with the wild abandon of a rodeo rider. Her

tantalizing breasts, bouncing to the rhythm of my thrusts as she took her pleasure from my body.

Maybe she was right, this thing between us could be a bad idea, as it'll be hard to erase the memory of her face as she came undone, her inner walls squeezing out an equally dramatic climax in me.

“Are you warm enough,” I ask as I feel Jas shiver against my side. With a tug on a corner of the blanket, I pull it up over her shoulder, squeezing her tighter into the heat of my body. I'm enjoying lying here with her as the balmy island night closes in around us. It's like we're cocooned in our own private world.

“Hmm, I'm warm now,” she murmurs from my shoulder, her breath a soft tickle on my skin. A contented sigh escapes me from deep in my gut. This moment encapsulates my life motto, *Live, Love, Surf*, and I realize somewhere along the way I've lost track of it. I need to get back to thinking about what's important to me.

Jas moves position, raising her head to rest her chin on the hand she has splayed across my chest, and peers up at me with her intoxicating emerald green gaze. This close I can see the vibrant irises are rimmed in a deep forest green, her almond-shaped eyes fringed in thick dark lashes, and currently they are focused intently on me. I shift a little, not moving away but hoping to break the intensity of her scrutiny. The hammock sways again as I wait for her to say something, but when she

remains silent, I ask, “Are you checking me out again? Seriously, woman, you’re insatiable.”

“And there it is again your cocky attitude ruining the moment. No, I wasn’t checking you out, I’m just trying to figure you out.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping to suppress the usual heavy feeling of dread come over me. I’ve been here before with women who think sex means commitment. A commitment I’m not willing to give, not till I can get my shit together with the business.

She giggles and tapping my chest lightly, says, “Hey, settle down I’m not about to get all heavy on you. Seriously you should have seen the look on your face then.”

As Jas’s soft laugh continues to vibrate against my chest, I ask cautiously, “Okay—what did you mean then?”

“Scott,” she says in a firm tone that reminds me of last night when she was begging for more, “I mean I want to know more about you ... as in a friendly kind of way, nothing more.” The muscles in my neck and shoulders relax as I lay my head back down.

“Fine—but first I’d like to point out, I don’t usually lie naked in a hammock with my friends after fucking them senseless.”

I love how she feels the need to again roll her pretty eyes at me. “Neither do I, but it’s where we find ourselves on this island.”

I guess I hadn't thought too much about seeing Jasmine away from the island. Strangely the idea doesn't concern me like it normally would, in fact I'd like to see her again, maybe in New York.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure ... but I get to ask one back." I smile at her sassy response, I like it.

"Deal, and I promise to answer it." With my free hand, I draw a cross over my heart like we did as kids when we made promises. Then not missing a beat, I ask, "I wanted to know, why just one-time? You really surprised me that night you agreed to our deal. Don't get me wrong I'm very glad you did. But I've wondered since why you insisted it should be only once." By the afternoon of the first day we met, I could have told her once would never be enough for us.

She clears her throat. "It's simple, I don't want the complication of more." She sighs heavily, her breasts brushing seductively against my chest. Damn she feels good, but I'm pulled from more dirty thoughts as she starts speaking again. "Last year I had a nasty breakup with a guy I'd been dating about eight months. He was my longest relationship and turned out to be a cheating, lying asshole. He broke my trust, and my heart a little. No major damage but it's made me more cautious."

"What a fucking idiot," I blurt out, unable to hold in my immediate reaction.

She pulls away from me slightly, a faint smile on her lips, then continues, “Casual like this is perfect.” She taps one fingernail on my chest then points it at herself. “This thing we have happening here, allows us to indulge in each other’s bodies, knowing this is where it ends. Off the island we’ll go our separate ways, back to our real lives, and maybe in the future we’ll meet up again as friends of friends.” I guess Jas is right, this is perfect, we can enjoy the moment with no expectations.

Another intense green-eyed stare is focused on me. “Now it’s your turn. Tell me something about you that only your closest friends know.”

Bringing her body back flush with mine, I begin to tell her some of my history. “As a young kid all I dreamed of doing was designing and making surfboards. But then randomly on my sixteenth birthday, Dad gave me a helicopter flying lesson as a present, and from that day on, flying became my new obsession.”

Just saying this stuff out loud has me thinking about where I am now in my life plan.

“Then what happened?” Jasmine prompts, and I realize I’d stopped abruptly caught up in my internal thoughts.

“Well, after high school, the Australian Air Force seemed the next logical step for a fit eighteen-year-old, with a helicopter license and a desire to fly other aircraft, so I signed up. Ten years in the Air Force gave me everything I wanted to do as a pilot.”

I stop again, not sure about how much I want to share. There was a lot that happened in those ten years, most of it was good. It was only really at the end when things went off the rails. “Ahh ... I retired about five years ago and got the chance to follow my earlier dreams, to establish my own custom surfboard company.”

My grandparents provided my sister and me, with a substantial trust fund. More than enough for me to start my company, buy a luxury condo in Florida, and still have plenty left over.

“Why Florida and not Australia with all those surfing beaches?” Jasmine asks, digging a little deeper, and I decide to open up a bit more, even though it feels uncomfortable. After all, she shared something private about herself.

I clear my throat. “My family are a bit of a big deal in Australia and as you’re probably aware, that makes the children in the family a social media target. Here nobody knows my background. Also, my mom is American, it’s my dad who’s Australian, and I have extended family in Florida.”

Jas has probably learned more about me in the last ten minutes, than most who’ve known me for a few years, but still, I don’t feel comfortable sharing more.

With raised eyebrows, she asks, “Did you google me?”

Damn, caught out by my own admission. It’s a habit of mine to check out the backgrounds of women as I’ve been a victim of enough honeytraps to make me wary. Turns out Jasmine’s

family probably has more money than mine, they are big in New York, in the same way mine are in Australian society.

I smile sheepishly at her through half-closed eyes. “Umm ... I might have done. Does that mean you didn’t google me? I think I’m offended.”

With another cute giggle, she slaps me lightly on my chest then says, “Don’t worry, I’ll be getting straight onto it, when I can be bothered to move my lazy body from this hammock.”

We continue to chat some more in the same comfortable way with both of us sharing more about our families. She talks about her work, and I tell her about my business, I’m proud of my company and the team of board builders I employ from around the world.

What I don’t mention is that lately my booming business has been sucking up all of my time and energy. Most days in the office are too long, spent in meetings with clients instead of making boards, surfing or even flying.

Being here on the island spending time with friends or the beautiful lady beside me, has made me see clearly how things need to change. What’s the point of all the money and success if I’ve no time to enjoy any of it?

Before Jasmine asks the next question her stomach rumbles loudly and I can’t hold back a laugh. She is so refreshingly without pretense.

“I guess that’s our queue to go. We’ve probably missed dinner with the others but I’m sure we can get room service at

my bungalow.” I hope that this isn’t going to be it for the night. I want to spend another night pleasuring this beautiful woman and I’m pretty sure she’ll be happy with that idea too.

“Is that your way of inviting me back to your place?” she teases.

Grinning, I tell her, “Yes, I’m concerned for your wellbeing. I need to make sure you eat, especially given all the vigorous exercise we did this afternoon.” I shift reluctantly away from her body and carefully remove myself from the hammock. Then standing beside her I hold it steady for her to get up too. As I grasp the rope sides in both hands, I look down at her, admiring the way her soft milky skin glows with the final rays of the day.

She smiles up at me, not remotely self-conscious about her nakedness. “Lucky for you I’m all about my well-being too, so let’s go back to your bungalow.”

Jasmine places a hand in the center of my chest to help herself up, and my cock twitches in response to her touch. It’s like there are invisible strings linking her hand to parts of my body, like a marionette controlling a puppet. I can’t resist pulling her in for a brief hug and kiss, but refrain from letting our lower bodies touch, as it’s bound to delay food for even longer. Anyway, there is plenty of time for that after we’ve eaten. We have all night together.

We dress quickly, then make our way hand in hand, along the now dark path.

The next day, I finish running my final checks over my bird and I'm ready to go. All that's left now is to say goodbye to Jasmine. Yesterday afternoon and last night with my island sea goddess will live on in my dreams for many months.

Time spent with other women now pales in comparison to those hours yesterday. Maybe they were the wrong women as the mere mention of a day on the beach or a swim in the ocean would generally have them screwing up their faces in disgust. I heard enough complaints about the saltwater ruining their hair or sand sticking to their skin that I stopped suggesting the beach as a date location.

For some reason in recent years, I've attracted the type of woman who is happier lounging seductively by the pool in the latest fashions with no intention of getting that designer bathing suit wet. If I'm going to spend time with a woman, I want it to be a woman of substance, one who is independent with her own goals and ambition, who challenges my mind with interesting conversation and challenges my body in the bedroom.

Jasmine certainly challenges me, and her beauty could rival the top swimsuit models. She also could out swim and out play most women and then when it comes to the bedroom, well, she's in a class of her own. Basically, she's the perfect woman.

Yep, saying goodbye is going to be tough but it's probably all for the best. Jas made it very clear yesterday afternoon, she isn't interested in anything more, thanks to her idiot ex.

I wander back through the resort lobby and spot Jasmine with her friends at the far end of the pool. The girls are reclining in the early morning sunshine, and I wish I could join them instead of heading back to work.

Lily leans over to say something to Jas, which has her raising her head in my direction. I move toward her as she stands and removes her sunglasses. Her green eyes uncovered now capturing and holding my blue ones, so many unspoken words communicated in that one look. Words which can't be spoken as we had a deal.

I say goodbye to Trudy and Lily, then ask Jas if she'll walk with me a minute. She nods so I take her hand, leading her silently along a path till we have some privacy. Stopping I turn to face her, for once short of any jokey comments to lower the drama and knowing a simple thanks for the memories won't do.

"Jas, I wanted to say thank you for the time we spent together over the last couple of days. You've left me with some special memories."

Jas's lips curve up gently in a smile which I hope means my words came out right. "It has certainly been a few fun days together and maybe you're not as arrogant, cocky, or frustrating as I originally thought."

“High praise indeed, but I think the arrogant callout was probably well deserved.” I smile back at her as I slip my arms around her waist for a last hug and one last taste of her sweet lips.

Reluctantly, I pull back from the brief kiss, and we both drop our arms from each other.

“Goodbye, take care,” I tell her, then shoving my hands into my short’s pockets, I turn and leave. Her soft goodbye, drifting to me on the salty breeze.

Unfortunately, our deal is done. She lives in New York, and I live in Florida, so anything more would be impossible.

CHAPTER 17

JASMINE

The sound of a helicopter taking off has me letting out a sigh of relief ... or is it a sigh of regret? It's hard to know.

I need to forget about Scott, now he's gone, and compartmentalize the memories of the last few days as a fun vacation fling. Behind my sunglasses, I watch the helicopter rise from behind the resort then fly off over the ocean till it's no more than a small dot in the clear blue sky.

Flopping back onto the lounge, I tell myself it's time to get back to real life, well almost as I still have a couple more days on this island paradise with Lily and Trudy. Cassie and Luke are still here too, but we don't see them much, which is expected given they are officially on their honeymoon.

Saying goodbye to Scott was harder than I expected, but I'm not going to let it get me down. I'm not going to let the departure of one sexy Australian man ruin my last precious days of vacation.

Soon enough, I'll be back in the city, buried up to my neck in profit and loss spreadsheets, new marketing campaigns, and the usual cutthroat world of residential sales in Manhattan. I expect already there are plenty of issues piling up on my desk. I love the pressure and demands of my role in the family business, it's an adrenalin rush but boy did I need this break.

Lily asks from behind the current romance novel she's reading, "Are you okay, Jas? That was a heavy sigh."

I hadn't even realized I'd sighed. I give myself a mental shake and say, "Sure, I'll be fine now Scott's gone. The man was a constant distraction to my planned relaxation. Mind you, I'm going to miss the spectacular sex. I was very relaxed after that."

Lily giggles softly and buries her head back behind her book, seemingly satisfied with my response.

Trudy huffs, "Damn men. Why can't they leave it at excellent sex? Why do they have to upset it all by asking for more?" She throws her cell into her beach tote in disgust and pulls her sunglasses back down over her eyes.

Swinging my legs to the side, I sit up and face her lounge, on the other side of Lily. I think our girl needs us, and I'm happy to have the chance to talk about something other than Scott and me. Lily peers at me over her book, we've both been wondering what was going on with Trudy the last couple of days but figured she would tell us when she was ready. Maybe it's time for an intervention.

“C’mon, girl, talk to us. I know your last comment wasn’t about Scott and me. What has been going on with you and Hunter? Ever since you arrived on the island you’ve not been your usual bouncy self.” Lily closes her book and like me looks to Trudy to respond.

Trudy sits up facing toward us, sunglasses firmly in place. “Hunter wants more than I can give,” she confesses sadly. “I mean everything was going really well, casual and friendly with lots of big sex benefits. But last week he asked me on a proper date.” Lily and I exchange a frown but don’t say anything.

“Girls ... you know I don’t date. It’s not my thing,” she grumbles, clearly exasperated with us or maybe Hunter, it’s not clear.

I’ve no idea why Trudy is so averse to dating, other than the dating pool is as shallow as a dried-up creek bed. I kind of get it as I’m not a huge fan either. However, I still date occasionally through my dating app, dip my toe in the water, to see who’s out there.

“Trudy, can I ask why you don’t want to date Hunter. You guys have been hooking up for a while now.”

“Five months. For five months we’ve been happily meeting up for amazing no strings attached sex. And now he wants to ruin it all by asking me on a date.” Her brows crease together.

“Where does he want to take you?” Lily asks.

Trudy sighs loudly again. “The family beach house in the Hamptons for a weekend.”

Cassie and Bec have both raved about how great the Carlson family beach house is when they’ve been there for dirty weekends away. I suspect Trudy is getting a little more invested in her relationship with Hunter, than she wants or even realizes.

“Maybe you could see it not as a date, Trudy, but instead as an extended hookup. I mean, who doesn’t need a whole weekend of amazing sex every so often,” I tell her, feeling like I can speak authoritatively from my own recent experience.

Trudy sits frowning silently for a few moments before saying, “Maybe you’re right. Thanks, Jas. I like the way that sounds. It’s just a whole weekend of amazing sex.”

“Exactly, my wonderful, carefree, non-dating friend.”

Trudy laughs, all traces of her frown gone in a flash as she stands up, announcing, “All this talk about sexy hookups, and I need to cool down in the pool. Who’s joining me?”

Lily jumps up to join Trudy at the pool as I continue to sit on the lounge, thinking about what I just said to Trudy. The words resonate with me as I begin to see the last couple of days with Scott as every so often amazing sex too.

Three Days Later

Traveling back to Manhattan was depressing, I mean any end to a vacation is depressing. Who hasn't wanted to stamp their foot and say, I'm not leaving? But as responsible adults, Lily, Trudy, and I dutifully packed our bags, boarded the boat to Nassau, and then the plane back to Newark airport.

Cassie and Luke are remaining on the island for a few more days alone before jetting off to France for a three-week extended honeymoon. Lucky things.

As Lily and I drag our bags through the door of our apartment it already feels like we never left. An island paradise in the Bahamas is fast becoming a distant memory, especially on a gray, wet, miserable day in Manhattan.

Splitting off into our rooms, I can't help thinking how it always feels a bit weird returning home, but this time especially so. I dump my bag on the bed and unlock it.

The smell of sun lotion lingers on my clothes, wafting up as I begin to sort the dirty ones into piles of darks and lights. My green bikini lays lifeless on the floor a physical reminder of my last afternoon on the beach with Scott.

Quickly, I gather up the first bundle of light-colored clothes and the offending bikini and go dump them in the washing machine, removing the visual reminder of my vacation. Then having dealt with that, I return to my bedroom and flop onto my bed, staring up at the ceiling, unsure of what next.

I need to give myself a good shake, it's time to stop thinking about some guy. With all my big talk of Scott being just a vacation fling, the reality is I missed him when he left the

island. Memories of Scott are adding to the air of melancholy surrounding me. Here back in Manhattan, those memories don't belong.

Lily comes to lean on my bedroom doorframe with a loud heavy sigh, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Are you as depressed as me about being home,” she complains, coming over to sit on the edge of my bed.

“Totally, it sucks to be back. I miss our sunset cocktails already.” It's reassuring that she's feeling the same, so maybe my mood has nothing to do with Scott.

Lily jumps up with an idea. “Hey, we can still do cocktails. Let's leave our unpacking and instead go get one of Benny's special cocktails. We can ask him to make us a post-vacation blues cocktail.”

“Now that sounds like a great idea. Give me a few minutes to change.”

“Me too,” she throws over her shoulder as she bounces out of the room, much happier.

Benny's Bar is only a short walk around the corner from my apartment in the Village. This is the place where the girls and I usually meet on a Friday night for a cocktail and a weekly catchup. Many disastrous dates, boyfriend breakups, and sexy hookups have been discussed at Benny's. Lately, it's been where we gathered to help Cassie plan her wedding.

Tonight, as we step through the door, Benny the bar owner greets us, wrapping us up in one of his bear hugs. He calls out

to Maria in his booming voice, telling his adored wife that his girls are back from the wedding. Maria comes bustling out to give us an equally warm hug, firing questions at us about Cassie and the wedding, begging to see our photos.

Benny, with his booming voice, redirects us away from the wooden stools at the bar to a nearby table. “Maria, you settle down with the girls and catch up on all wedding things while I make you all a special cocktail.” There is nothing subtle about Benny and Maria, but it’s part of the charm of coming here, they embrace us as part of their family.

“Hey, Benny, we need a back from vacation blues cocktail please.” I shout to be heard above the TV on the wall in the corner, which is replaying last night’s Knicks game, probably more for Benny’s benefit than the other patrons who are in tonight.

Benny grins broadly back at me. “Coming right up.”

Maria oohs and aahs over the wedding pictures as Lily and I scroll through the photos on our phones. We tell her about the island, the food, and the wedding ceremony.

A stab of sadness hits me as a photo of Scott and me laughing by the pool pops up. It’s probably too soon for me to look at photos of us without the memories of the nights I spent in his arms coming flooding back. My face flushes as heat spreads up from my chest, sex with Scott was too good to forget.

A little later, when we’re onto our second *island blues* cocktail of the night, and Maria has returned to the kitchen to

get us a plate of hot wings to share, Lily asks tentatively, “Are you okay? You looked sad scrolling through the photos with Maria. Do you miss him?”

“Scott? I’m not sure but sex with him, absolutely. I guess I’m realizing that it might take a little time to get over my vacation fling. But I’ll be fine, once I’m back at work and in the routine.”

I’m glad I don’t have to pretend with Lily, and I can tell her truthfully how much I’m struggling to push the memories to the back of my mind.

I try to explain, “I think it’s being home, which is making me fully realize my time with Scott is done. He’s gone back to his life and I’m back in mine now too.”

Lily reaches out to pat my hand. “Sweetie, it will take time. Scott was as unexpected as being hit by a tsunami.”

“And as devastating, I suspect. But I’m home now and back to living my real life rather than a fantasy.”

Lily continues to look at me with worry etched into her brow, so it’s a relief when Maria interrupts with a large plate piled high with hot wings dripping in her special spicy sauce, on the side celery, and a dish of blue cheese dressing. The smell makes my taste buds water and sets my stomach rumbling. We thank Maria, and neither of us wastes any time in diving into the home-cooked goodness.

Smiling up at Lily after my initial hunger has been satiated, I say, “This is certainly one of the things that makes it good to

be home.” She grins broadly back at me, a smear of sauce on her cheek.

We don’t stay long at Benny’s, just long enough to return home with a full stomach and a slight alcohol buzz from the two cocktails. I feel much better. My head has been eased back into the reality of city life.

A bundle of dirty washing at the doorway to my bedroom trips me up, reminding me that I need to deal with that first, then finish my unpacking. Finally, when all vestiges of my vacation have been dealt with, I decide a long soak in my tub will further relax me before bed.

The bathroom adjoining my bedroom was renovated a few years ago to include a freestanding, luxuriously deep bathtub, which wouldn’t look amiss in an expensive day spa. I pour a generous amount of my special bubble bath into the warm water, swishing it about with my hand before stepping in and sinking up to my chin in the foaming bliss. The last traces of sun lotion washing away from my skin and hair.

I wish it was as easy to wash away memories of Scott.

CHAPTER 18

SCOTT

One Month Later

After another hectic day spent chained to my desk in my Florida office, it's hard to imagine it's already been a month since I returned from the island. Luke's wedding was the last real break I've had from the never-ending pile of new custom orders filling up my inbox.

I shouldn't be grumbling about the abundance of work, but damn this is not the stress-free life I planned when I left the Australian military. I've become a victim of my own success.

Loudly dropping my pen to the desk, I stretch my arms up and rotate my shoulders. Hunched behind this desk all day, every day, is making my neck ache and I'm sure it's the source of the pounding headache which has been getting steadily worse as the afternoon has dragged on.

I'm going for a surf. I need to forget about the stack of contracts in front of me demanding my attention, the backlog

of designs I still need to work on, and the ever-increasing count of unread emails I still need to respond to. I swipe my keys and wallet from my desk and stride out of the office and as I pass the workshop, I shout to Jamie my head surfboard shaper, *I'm off for the rest of the day.*

Thankfully, only a short while later, I'm sitting on my board in the late afternoon sun, allowing the slight ripple of the ocean underneath me, to drain the earlier tension from my neck and shoulders.

This is what I love, and somewhere along the way things changed. I've allowed the business to take over my life and this became crystal clear when I spent those days relaxing with my friends and Jasmine on the island.

I'm thirty-four years old, and I still don't feel like someone who has got their shit together. I'm sick of the long hours of work, the revolving door of women, the constant travel, and hotel rooms. But how do I slow this treadmill down? How do I get back to living the life I planned?

By the time I left the Australian Air Force, I was cooked. The strain of mercy dashes through the night skies, avoiding enemy fire to safely bring injured soldiers back to base, had taken its toll. The constant reel of war images seared into my memories, impossible to erase.

Some events became more deeply carved into my mind than others, like the body bags being unloaded from my chinook, young, fit healthy men whose lives were cut short, or the night Luke was injured. The gut-wrenching screams coming from

him were barely human, the stench of burned flesh seeping through to the cockpit. Every time I had to block out the horror of war, I lost a little bit more of my humanity.

Today, I can't help feeling that I've traded my stressful career as a combat pilot in war-ravaged far-flung places, for a different kind of stress. Sure, it's not as life-threatening, but it's not how I envisioned things would be when I established my business in Florida.

And there's no time like the present to make some changes, I think looking out to sea for the beginnings of the perfect wave to lift me up and carry me to the shore. It's like flying on water.

After an hour spent catching wave after wave, I'm back standing on the sand looking out at the Atlantic and I'm reminded of my time on the island. More than anything else about my work-life balance, I need to get back to having time to do the things I love with the people I love, my friends and family.

Yesterday when I spoke to Luke, he mentioned that Cassie had organized a dinner party at their Manhattan apartment this Sunday night. It sounds like such a grownup, adult thing to do, so obviously not his idea.

Luke, the least sociable of my friends is having dinner parties. Blake is now living with his girlfriend Bec, and I'm still carrying on like a sad fucking playboy. Maybe some of those changes I'm thinking about, need to extend to my sex life too.

If spending time with Jasmine showed me anything, it was that even occasional sex with the right woman is far better than regular sex with all the wrong women. Jasmine was certainly the right woman.

I may not have been a relationship kind of guy in the past, but the idea of one special woman in my life is becoming more appealing. No more one-night stands that leave me feeling lonelier than I did before, or dates with women who are more interested in my bank balance than getting to know me.

The problem is every time I think about one special woman, Jasmine's gorgeous face pops into my mind and I end up having to jack off in the shower.

With all these thoughts swirling through my head, I figure it's time I wrangled myself an invite to my friend's first dinner party.

Sunday night sees me standing in front of the bathroom mirror in my Manhattan hotel room, dressed and ready to attend my friend's dinner party. Not that I've completely wrapped my head around the idea, but it's where my friends and Jasmine will also be, so I can put up with some dinner party chat.

I've been doing some serious life re-evaluation over the last twenty-four hours and checking into the hotel this afternoon even had me thinking I could set up a base in Manhattan.

I travel here at least once a month and soon it may be even more frequently as orders come in from more clients based along the east coast. New York makes travel to the UK or Europe much easier too. I'm sick of living out of a suitcase moving from one hotel room to the next, even the luxury five-star ones like I'm standing in now.

Lucky for me I know someone who can help me find the perfect place. Smiling to myself, I formulate my new plan to ask Jasmine tonight to help me find a convenient two-bedroom apartment right here in Manhattan. I'm hoping we can start property hunting tomorrow.

It's time to go, I notice as I put my Gucci dive watch on my wrist. It's a short three-block walk from the hotel to Luke and Cassie's place, and I don't want to be late for my friend's first-ever dinner party. I grab my phone and the bottle of French champagne I bought for tonight as I head out the door.

It's a surprisingly warm night for late summer in the city, so it should be an enjoyable walk, except for the fact that I'm feeling nervous about seeing Jasmine again. Well, I think it's nerves, but it could be excitement. It's hard to tell as I haven't felt this way about seeing a girl in a long time, years in fact. Thoughts of Jasmine have plagued me for the last month, which is why I guess I'm all messed up about seeing her again.

As I walk briskly along the still busy sidewalk, this is one thing about Manhattan I'll probably never really get used to, the number of people out and about at all hours of the day. Businessmen in suits even on a Sunday, push by on their way

to meet friends or clients, late shoppers rush to catch the subway, and a constant stream of slow-moving traffic fills the street to the sounds of honking horns and distant sirens. Growing up I thought Sydney was a big city but when I started traveling, I realized it's like a country town compared to London, Paris, and New York.

A short walk later, I enter the lobby of Luke's Upper East Side apartment block, the doorman welcomes me before calling up to Luke to let me in. As I travel up the nine floors, I start making a list in my head of the things I'm looking for in an apartment as Jasmine is bound to ask me.

A doorman will provide good security, especially with me being away a lot. I need a pool and gym too, or at least one nearby. I know it'll be hard to find a place with as nice a setup as my condo down in Florida, but as long as it's better than a hotel I don't care.

Exiting the elevator, I spot Luke standing at the open door to his apartment, a cold beer for me in his hand. My mate knows me well.

"Good to see you, Scotty," he says as he hands me my beer and I give him the champagne.

"You too, mate, though this is a bit different to the usual billiards hall catch up."

Luke throws back his head laughing. "Yep, as you can imagine a dinner party was not my choice, but don't tell Cassie I said that."

Slapping Luke on the back, I say, “Look at you all domesticated and married. It suits you. I’m really happy for you, mate.”

Luke looks away uncomfortable with my comment. “Thanks, man, I’m happier than I could have imagined.” He slaps me on the back as he directs me toward the living room. “C’mon, Blake and Bec are here already.”

The hall opens to a large living area. Blake is standing in front of a set of windows that run almost the full length of the far wall and the girls are in the kitchen area of the modern open plan space. Walking first toward Cassie and Bec, I say hello and give them a hug before making my way over to Blake, who gets the usual bro slap on the back and shake of the hand.

We’ve only just started catching up when I hear Cassie talking to the doorman about more arrivals. Then confirming my suspicion, she excitedly tells us that the other girls have arrived.

I stare unseeing out the window, bracing for the arrival of Jasmine. I can’t stop worrying about what she’ll say when she sees me here in Manhattan. Hopefully, Cassie has already given her a heads-up.

Cassie races off down the hallway to the door of the apartment, and soon I can hear the voices of the girls and the sound of their heels clicking along the wooden floor as they get closer. With one deep composing breath, I turn to face the room and my eyes lock immediately onto Jasmine. There she

is standing in the same room again, looking as gorgeous as I remember. My memories have not exaggerated her beauty.

Moving slowly over to the girls, I kiss the cheeks of Lily and Trudy, then lean into Jasmine, the intoxicating scent of her perfume teases my senses. My lips touch her cheek softly, lingering when I hear her sharp intake of breath.

Our eyes meet as I draw back, my blue locking with her green ones. “It’s good to see you again, Jasmine,” I say quietly for her ears only. Then reluctantly I turn back to the room and looking up notice all our friends staring at us. Seriously, Jasmine and I are the worst kept secret.

Cassie saves us from further embarrassment by encouraging us all to move further into the living room. Luke offers a round of drinks while I continue to stand awkward and mute beside Jasmine. Thankfully, the others are soon distracted giving Luke their drink order and it gives me a moment to lean down and ask, “Are you doing okay?”

“Oh, good thanks, although that then was a uniquely awkward moment.” Her hand flutters about in space.

I smile down at her, loving her honesty and happy to no longer be feeling nervous or awkward around her.

“I think it’s safe to say that all of our friends know what we did in the Bahamas. I’m okay about that, are you?”

She shrugs her shoulders as she says, “Doesn’t bother me either.” It sounds like she has no regrets about us, which is

great, and I find it impossible to hide the broad grin spreading across my face.

Before we can say anymore, Cassie is leading us all over to the large dining table to take our seats. Thankfully I'm sitting next to Jasmine, although I suspect it would be poor etiquette if I made a move on her under the table. It may even earn me a slap.

Luke pops the cork on the first bottle of champagne, then begins filling everyone's glasses as Cassie deposits a plate in front of each of us, telling us it is a salmon terrine. Nice, maybe I could get into this dinner party thing. Good food, good friends, and a gorgeous woman who I want back in my bed, sitting to my right.

As the meal progresses from our salmon starters to a beef wellington with roasted vegetables, it becomes apparent that Cassie is a great cook and Jasmine is determined to keep me on a friend-only level. Each time I lean into her and hint at something more, I'm quickly smacked down, figuratively speaking.

While in the Bahamas, she was fully on board with trading sexually laced banter back and forth, tonight she is having none of it. I guess it was stupid of me to think she'd be happy to pick up where we left off a month ago. I'm going to have to work a lot harder to win her over, and probably even harder to convince her back into my bed.

With the eating part of the evening finished, we leave the table, and all move into the living area, giving me another

chance to speak privately with Jasmine. I need to speak to her about looking for an apartment for me before the night is over. It's my only guaranteed chance of seeing her again over the next week. It's not like I even have her number to call her.

I stroll across the room to where Jasmine is currently talking to Blake and ask, "Jas, can I have a private word." Blake looks confused, but takes the hint and disappears, leaving us alone. She frowns at me so hard two little creases have formed between her eyebrows.

"A private word with me, really? Are you forgetting we had a deal? What happened in the Bahamas stays in the Bahamas. I'm not jumping back into your bed again. We're now just friends of friends," she hisses. Wow, she couldn't have been any clearer.

Masking my disappointment at her words, I pretend indifference, saying, "That's not the private word I planned to have with you. I wanted to ask you about the New York property market." I notice a flush creep across her cheeks as I continue, "I'm wanting to invest in a two-bedroom apartment and thought you might be able to help me find something."

I'm impressed with how quickly she recovers her composure as she clears her throat and launches into a professional summary about prices, and availability of real estate. I only half-listen to the words as I'm too distracted by the pretty mouth the words are flowing from. I'm able to concentrate enough to answer the questions she fires at me about what I'm looking for. Luckily, I thought of some things

in the elevator earlier or she'd have seen straight through my sudden decision to buy an apartment.

When she's finished asking her questions, she tells me she should be able to send some options through to me next week.

Smiling, I say, "I think you've misunderstood, I wanted to start looking at properties tomorrow, while I'm here. I had hoped you would be able to fit me in for viewings, given I'm a friend of a friend." I emphasize the last part, taunting her with the same words she just used on me.

Her open-mouthed, wide-eyed stare tells me I've hit the mark and thrown her off-balance.

"That's impossible," she stutters, shaking her head as she continues, "I don't have anyone available this week."

"Jas, I want you to deal with me personally. I'm a cashed-up buyer and I want to move quickly on this."

She physically stiffens her stance as she says, "Well then, I guess that's how it will be. But I'll still need twenty-four hours to pull together some options and have them ready for you to view the day after tomorrow."

The fire flashing in her green eyes is almost scorching me. That's my girl, tough, strong-willed, and always up for a challenge.

"Great, I really appreciate the effort. Now I probably should be going. I guess I'll speak to you soon."

As I turn to go, I remember I don't have her number, so I spin back toward her, making her jump at the suddenness.

“Sorry I forgot to ask—can I have your cell number? You know, in case I think of anything else I might need to add to the list of requirements.”

I quickly type in the number as she recites it, then send her a text, so she has my number too.

“All sorted. We now have each other’s numbers so you can contact me any time day or night. I’ll see you soon.”

Leaning in close to her body, I place my hand on the small of her back as I give her cheek a quick kiss, wishing I could capture her lips instead. Then turning away again, I say goodbye to the rest of our friends and leave with the promise of meeting Blake and Luke later in the week for a beer.

On the short walk back to my hotel, I congratulate myself on a job well done. I managed to add Jasmine’s name as the newest contact in my phone and secure another chance to see her.

CHAPTER 19

JASMINE

When Scott leaves the apartment, I feel for the first time that I can finally relax. Ever since Cassie warned me yesterday that Scott was coming to New York and would be at the dinner, I've been on edge.

His arrival in Manhattan yesterday was a lot sooner than I thought. I figured I had at least a few months before we would have to face each other again.

As I finish off my glass of champagne, which is now flat and too warm, I catch Cassie's eye from across the room. She mouths the words *are you okay*, and I nod in response. Well, at least for the moment I'm okay.

Till I next have to see Scott, and show him around Manhattan apartments, pretending that I don't want to sleep with him again.

More sex with Scott would be dangerous to my heart. I don't need another playboy type messing up my life. The next guy I date seriously, is going to be stable, sensitive, attentive,

and not someone who collects women like trophies on a mantelpiece. Not that Scott said anything along those lines, but when I finally got around to googling him, it was obvious he has an active social life in Florida. Lots of beautiful women, no two pictures showing the same woman.

Cassie joins me at the window with a fresh glass of chilled champagne.

I smile gratefully then taking the glass, I drink it down in one delicious series of bubbly gulps. “Thanks, I needed that and maybe even something stronger.”

“What happened with Scotty? If he has said something to upset you, this will be the last dinner party of mine he’ll ever be invited to.”

My friends are the best, and I feel a wave of gratitude wash over me.

“It’s okay, Cass, he didn’t say anything to upset me. Honestly, he was really nice to me all night, nicer than I was to him.”

I look out the window at the city beyond, feeling guilty about how snappy I was with him over dinner and when he asked me to help him find an apartment.

“So why do you look upset?” she asks.

A good question that I don’t really have an answer to at this point. So instead of answering, I begin to tell her about Scott wanting to buy an apartment in Manhattan and how he wants

me to show him around. It's obvious this is exciting news to her as she calls Luke over and tells him.

From the look on Luke and Blake's faces, this is a surprise to them too. That's interesting as I would have thought Scott would have discussed this with his two best friends before asking me to help him.

Two Days Later

Everything is organized for Scott's property viewings today. Now I just wish we were done already.

I think my team has come up with a good selection of two-bedroom apartments for him. Normally this search would take at least a week to prepare for viewings, but Scott was adamant he was only here for five days this visit and needed to move quickly.

His list of requirements wasn't huge but made the search a little more challenging and narrowed down the possibilities. I texted him a few times to confirm the must-haves and as he promised he was quick to respond, almost as if he was waiting for my text.

I flick back through the four listings I plan to show Scott today, and one more time run through the pros and cons of each. There is the two-bedroom high-rise condo on the west side with expansive views of the Hudson River. I think Scott

will love the pool and gym in the building and the view from the apartment as on paper it sounds a bit like his condo in Florida, but I think it's probably too far from his friends.

The second apartment in a thirty-five-story Upper east side residential tower is close to Luke's place, but all the rooms are a bit on the small side. In particular, the kitchen is tight. I don't know if Scott likes to cook or not, but either way, he's a big guy who needs space.

Number three is in a Midtown modern building. A large, beautiful apartment handy to everything, including Blake's place, but there's no green space nearby. It's probably a bit too industrial for Scott, who loves being outdoors and isn't really used to living in big cities. Something he mentioned to me in the Bahamas.

Apartment number four is my favorite, but then I'm biased as it's only a couple of blocks from my place in the Village. Of course, this is the biggest negative for me as I don't really want Scott living in the same neighborhood. However, my professionalism prevents me from leaving it off the viewing list. As Dad always tells me, don't mix business with pleasure. The apartment is a block from Washington Square Park and is spacious and light. But the thing I think he'll love the most is it comes with outdoor space. In fact, this was the only apartment I could find with outdoor space, and my team spent a couple of hours checking. I can only hope Scott will like one of the first three apartments and I won't even have to show him this one.

This morning I took extra special care in choosing an outfit as I want to portray myself as professional, not the vacation fling girl. My tight black skirt and cream jacket over a silk shirt ticks all the power dressing boxes. So why am I so nervous?

As I wait outside the west side apartment, my fingers clutch the first set of keys so tightly, they've formed an imprint on the palm of my hand. My stomach is so full of butterflies, I couldn't eat breakfast this morning and I'm even regretting the Americano coffee I had earlier.

I don't think I've been this nervous about meeting a guy since I was a teenage girl going on my first date. Not that this is a date or even close to being one. No this is strictly business.

For the third time in five minutes, I check my cell. It still hasn't reached ten o'clock, the hour we agreed to meet. I need to pull myself together and calm down.

Looking up from my cell, I see Scott exiting an Uber a short distance away. Why does he have to look so good in his dress pants, shirt, and blazer? It's obvious getting over our strong physical attraction on the island is not going to be easy.

As he approaches, I stretch out my hand to him, but choosing to ignore it, he instead pulls me into his arms, brushing his lips across my cheek. No, no, no, this is totally inappropriate for a professional business meeting, but I don't say a word.

Still holding me close, he mutters, "Good morning." His deep low voice reminding me of how he would whisper dirty

words into my ear as he plunged into my body.

Rapidly blinking, I push away from him, increasing the distance between our bodies. The dangerous double impact of his warm hands on my skin and intoxicating scent, pure alpha male mixed with expensive cologne, is destroying my carefully built personal barriers.

It's a slightly awkward moment, and I look down at the electronic notepad clutched in my hand, searching for something to say, something that will bring us back to neutral ground. With a deep breath my composure shifts back in place, and I launch into a speech about the local area, the building facilities, and the apartment I'm about to show him.

I lead him through the lobby toward the bank of elevators and the more I talk about the property, the easier it becomes to slip into work mode.

Soon after entering the apartment, I can tell this one is not for him. He is being polite asking all the right questions, but I've been doing this long enough to know when the client isn't really interested.

Smiling, I ask him straight up, "This isn't the one, is it?"

"Not really, we should skip to apartment number two. I assume there is an apartment number two to look at."

I glare at him. "Of course. In fact, I have four for you to see, although the list would have been longer if I'd had more time." I can't help having a dig at him about not giving me

enough time, but his crooked smile tells me he's not feeling any guilt over the situation.

Striding from the apartment, I throw over my shoulder, "C'mon, my driver is downstairs waiting to take us to the next one. It's close to Luke's place."

A couple of hours later and we have viewed apartment two and apartment three. Apartment two is a no-go, way too cramped as I predicted, and apartment three is only a maybe.

At least we have one maybe before I have to show him the apartment in the Village.

CHAPTER 20

SCOTT

Apartment hunting with Jasmine is not turning out to be as much fun as I thought it would be. It's time I did something to mix it up.

As we leave the lobby of the apartment three building, I notice a small Italian restaurant across the street. Pointing it out to Jas, I suggest we take a break for some lunch and a debrief. Her earlier frosty mood seems to have mellowed over the last couple of hours, and I can see a small window of opportunity to build on our fledgling friendship.

Still, she hesitates to accept my invitation. Without thinking, I grab her hand, announce I'm hungry, then virtually drag her across the street, and through the doors of the restaurant. The Maitre'd greets us in a cheery Italian accent, then with a couple of menus in his hand, leads us past tables filled with a lunchtime crowd, to a quiet table tucked away in a back corner.

Seated with the menus still closed in front of us, I worry that I've taken over again, I know Jas hates bossy men. "Sorry to

race you off to lunch like that without asking. My only defense is I can't concentrate when I'm hungry. I'm much more pliable when I'm fed and watered." I offer her what I hope is a cheeky grin.

She smiles back at me. "You're forgiven. To be honest, I'm hungry too." Then as if to prove her point her stomach rumbles. Her hands fly up to cover her face but not enough for me to miss the flush of embarrassment.

Laughing, I unpeel her fingers and draw her hands back down to the table. "Don't be embarrassed, Jas, I like how your stomach announces when it's hungry." What I don't add is that I like how it reminds me of our afternoon interlude at the beach.

"Also, it makes me feel better now for having bundled you into this restaurant. Let's order before your stomach complains again to me."

Jas picks up the menu and starts flicking through the pages then having chosen in less than a minute, she closes it back up. Looking up at me, she says, "You know my mother would be appalled at my bad manners. I doubt I'll ever live up to her standards of being a lady." I'm confused till I realize she's referring to her stomach rumbles. Sometimes it's hard to keep up with the speed she moves between conversations.

"I think you're a lady. A sexy, gorgeous lady." I'm ridiculously pleased when I catch her eye roll, it's damn cute.

"Scott, stop with the flirting, you know that we left all that behind on the island. Seriously, friends don't say things like

that to each other.”

“It’s nice to hear you acknowledge that we’ve moved from friends of friends to just friends. And you’re right I don’t say things like that to Luke and Blake, but then I don’t find them sexy or gorgeous. With you however, I call it as I see it.”

Shaking her head, Jas looks back down at her menu and changing the subject tells me she’s going to have the mushroom risotto. Okay—I’ll play along with the change in topic.

Once we’ve placed our order, I take a closer look around the restaurant. It has a rustic casual décor, tables with red and white check tablecloths, and a small bar with glass shelves filled with colorful jars of pickled vegetables, dried pasta spirals, and bottles of red wine in wicker baskets. A chalkboard at one end has the specials for today on it, and at the top in big, bold writing it says, *Benvenuti Amici*, welcome friends.

Overall, the place does feel friendly, and an appropriate choice for lunch, when friendship is all Jas seems to want from me. If things are to change then I’ll need to earn her trust. I get why she’s skittish. I don’t exactly come to her with a stellar reputation, and she told me about what happened with her asshole ex.

I need to prove to her I’m not just here for the sex. I want to date her, get to know more about her and her life in the city. There is something special between us that is worth exploring and my job is to show her we can be more than just friends.

It's a solid plan, the problem is when I'm with her I just want to drag her into my arms and relive the nights we spent in my bungalow. Today has been a constant battle fighting temptation, like now when I want to reach out and run my fingers through her glossy hair, touch her smooth, flawless cheek, and kiss her pink lips.

The waiter pours us each a glass of red wine from one of the wicker bottles, and we settle back into our chairs. Our conversation feels comfortable and fun like it was on the island. I try to cut down on the sexual innuendos, but I still slip a few in and each one earns me one of her cute eye rolls.

An hour later, we walk out into the afternoon sunshine, and I'm feeling pretty damn good.

The town car pulls up to the curb, and I hold the door open for Jas to slide in. The drive to the last apartment in the Village is short, past residential buildings, restaurants, cafes, and bars. Jasmine points out a park up ahead and as we pass by a tall ornate stone archway, I can see it's a popular place for families to walk and play. Yep, I like the look of this area as we stop in front of a building which according to a placard above the entrance was built in 1928.

I've been to Manhattan so many times I've lost count, but in all those visits I've never been to this area, so it's a complete surprise. I hope the apartment lives up to my initial good impressions as I follow Jas out of the town car. She leans in through the car window, to talk to the driver and I have to drag my eyes away as her black skirt stretches tight over her

curvaceous butt. I don't want to be caught checking her out, not when we've made so much progress today.

Turning my head left then right, I try to concentrate on my surroundings, till Jas steps up to stand beside me, and the town car drives off. "What are your thoughts so far?" she asks cautiously.

I expect she's hoping that this will be the one as it's the last property to see. Slowly I turn in a complete three-sixty, then say, "I like it. This area has a cool vibe." She nods, for once not running through the list of local features and amenities.

"Come on then, let's see if the apartment can live up to your ... *cool vibe*." Her tone is snappy, and I turn my head sharply to look at her, but she's already striding ahead. I follow her through the modern lobby toward the elevators as she again waves a *hello* to the friendly doorman. She seems to know them all, based on what I've seen today.

On the twelfth floor, the doors of the small square box open and we walk along a short hallway to an apartment door. Jas rattles the keys as she tries to insert, first one key, then another in the lock, jiggling each one unsuccessfully to make it fit. Finally, her shaky hand selects the right key, and it slips in easily, unlocking the door.

I'm not sure what happened between us leaving the restaurant and our arriving at the apartment, but something is bothering her.

"You might need to get the locks replaced," she mumbles behind a curtain of auburn hair. I raise my hand to brush it

back, but thinking better of it, drop it back down to my side.

Slowly Jas places her hand on the door, then eases the door open. As the gap expands light floods the space. Afternoon sun filters through from the living room into the wide hallway, bouncing off the warm wood of the parquet flooring and reaching to what I expect are the doorways of bedrooms at the other end.

Jas turns toward the living room, and I follow, walking directly over to the expansive windows and door which lead outside. “Wow, I never imagined I could find a place with an outdoor terrace within my budget.”

“Your budget was very generous, but you’re right outdoor terraces are very hard to come by. This only came on the market yesterday and you’re the first to see it. I expect it will be snapped up pretty quickly.”

I open the glass door and step outside, walking the perimeter of the area then looking down over the railing, in the distance is the local park we drove past earlier. Already I can imagine my friends and I grilling on this terrace in the summer. This place is exactly what I wanted.

Turning back to look at the apartment, I can see Jas still standing in the middle of the empty living room, she doesn’t look happy. I step back inside to join her.

Not even looking at me, she says, “Do you want to wander around and check out the rest of the apartment? The bedrooms are large, and the bathroom has a separate bath and large shower.”

“Jas, this place is great.” I throw over my shoulder as I eagerly walk down the hallway to check out the rest of the apartment’s rooms.

CHAPTER 21

JASMINE

Knew it! Scott loves the apartment and he's going to end up living in the same square mile as me.

I glance around the living room again, it's a great apartment. From the tall ceilings and painted stark white walls which make it feel spacious, to the fireplace built into the far end exposed brick wall which adds warmth. This room will be amazing when it's furnished, with a large plump sectional and plush rug.

I can hear Scott moving between the rooms down the hallway, opening and closing the built-in closet doors. He's certainly checking this apartment out more thoroughly than the others.

Walking over to the large windows to look out onto the empty terrace, I can already imagine us all gathered there in the summer. Scott, Blake, and Luke grilling while us girls sit in casual outdoor chairs sipping cocktails. I shake my head to clear the image.

“Scott is just another client,” I mumble to myself. Now, if only I could erase the memory of what we did on the island. I’m finding it’s becoming increasingly difficult to stay detached the more time I spend in his presence.

Personal boundaries are not something he abides by. I’ve tried to keep a safe distance between us, which was impossible in some of the smaller rooms. Then after the first apartment I stopped going with him to view bedrooms and bathrooms as it only conjured up memories of us in bed together or sharing a steamy shower.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, he insisted on an intimate lunch, where he reminded me again how funny and entertaining he is, all the things I was attracted to before. Well ... maybe not all the things.

Why can’t he go back to being bossy, cocky, and annoying? Lucky, I only need to get through this one last viewing.

Bending forward over the windowsill, I try to see the view of the park from this angle. Yes, I can even see the tops of the trees. I know from my visit to this apartment yesterday, the view is much better from outside on the terrace, but it’s too cold out there for me today.

I almost jump when I feel Scott’s hands on my hips, I didn’t even hear him walk back into the room. Looking up at the reflection in the window, his eyes capture mine in a heated, intense stare, clearly expressing his desire.

Oh my god, this is what I feared, his intimate touch on my body. I’m powerless to resist. All thoughts of keeping my

distance, fly out of my head.

I don't move or speak as I hold his reflected blue gaze and he takes another step closer to me, his hips aligning perfectly with mine. I can feel his hard erection pressed up against me and closing my eyes on a moan, I'm unable to resist the feel of his desire, pushing up against my ass.

His body bends over mine, so his mouth is close to my ear as he murmurs low, "Jas, I want you so badly."

My body craves his touch too, there's no point denying the fire coursing through my blood. I want him to fuck me, possess me like he did on the island.

Without responding, I place my hand over one of his and guide it down my side to the hem of my skirt. Understanding my intent, Scott takes over sliding his hand up underneath, while his other large hand reaches around to massage my breast through my silk shirt.

Another moan escapes unwillingly from my lips as the hand up my skirt snags on my lace panties and drags them down my body. His gravelly whisper breathes into my ear, "You won't be needing these." Then he tugs on my shirt to gain better access to my breasts, I feel a button ping off, so I reach up with one hand to quickly undo the remaining ones before I have none left.

With my shirt now open he reaches into my bra, scooping out my tits so he can pinch and pull on their peaks in the most erotic way. My pussy weeps as I finally find a thin panting voice to beg for more.

Pushing up the hem on my skirt so it bunches around my waist, giving him complete access, Scott strokes his hand down over my bare ass. Nudging my knees apart with his leg, so his hand can continue its journey to my inner thighs. I hear him groan as his fingers feel the slickness now coating my folds.

With both hands now back on my hips, my eyes startle open when I realize he is now on his knees, behind me. His face lined up with the gap between my ass cheeks. I'm fully exposed to his searing gaze, and I love it.

"Bend over further," he demands in a voice barely recognizable, and I eagerly drop to resting my elbows on the windowsill, spreading my legs wider so he can ease the ache which is pulsing between my thighs.

"Your pussy is so fucking beautiful," he says before his tongue is occupied, lapping at my juices. As he continues to feast on me, his finger slides into my heat. My inner walls already clamping tighter as I edge closer to an orgasm.

Adding a second, then third finger to fill me, he licks and sucks on my clit as my hips buck uncontrollably under the overwhelming pleasure pulsing through my body. Then, when I think I can't take anymore, his fingers curl inside me and his mouth clamps down onto my nub. I explode in a flash of lights behind my tightly closed eyelids and a shout of release.

Before I can fully recover, Scott is back up standing, unzipping his jeans, then, with a crinkle of foil, putting on a condom. He pulls my hips roughly back toward him and I feel

the tip of his shaft nudge at my entrance before he plunges into my still tight walls. The invasion finally fulfilling a deep-seeded need that had been building all day in me.

“That’s so ggg–ood,” I groan loudly.

“Fill me up, Scott,” I beg even louder as he begins to move, pumping harder and faster into my body. His hands gripping the flesh of my ass as he rises to his own climax.

“Come again for me, baby,” he gasps out as he jerks forward, pulsing deeper into my stretched body.

“Fuck–y-essss, yyyes, yes,” I shout as my back arches and my body convulses in another explosive orgasm. A final thrust and he is grunting out his own release as his hands dig deeper into my flesh.

Partially collapsing onto my back, his breathing still ragged, he pants out, “Jas, you wreck me.”

I’m glad it’s not only me who loses complete control when our bodies touch. I open my eyes and look at him through the window reflection again and his eyes now hold a hint of concern.

Scott eases away from my body and I stand up straight, rolling my skirt back down. He turns away, mumbling he’ll be back in a minute.

Well, that’s a minute I don’t have.

As soon as he’s disappeared down the hall toward the bathroom to dispose of the condom, I snatch up my bag and jacket, racing silently on my toes to the door. I need to leave.

Quietly closing the door behind me, I run as fast as I can in heels to the elevator, hitting the button several times, willing it to come before Scott realizes I've gone.

Thank God it does. When I'm safely inside, I finish buttoning up my shirt, tucking it back in and closing my jacket around me. I glance at my disheveled reflection in the smoky glass interior walls, quickly running my fingers through my hair in an attempt at respectable before stepping out.

Briefly stopping at the doorman's front desk, I let him know that Scott is staying back to look around a bit longer and ask him to lock up when he leaves. Then, I'm back out on the sidewalk, covering the two blocks to my apartment as quickly as I can, aiming to put as much distance as possible between Scott and me. Thank God I live close by.

Minutes later, I rush through my front door into my own living room as if being chased by a pack of hounds. Lily looks up from the pile of work papers in her hand, mouth wide open. Not sure what to do next, I flop down onto the nearest chair, and try to catch my breath.

My cell buzzes again demanding my attention.

It's been vibrating frantically for the last five minutes and only now safely inside my apartment do I take it out of my bag to look at the messages. Of course, they're all from Scott, asking where I am.

I reply to his last message saying simply, *I had to leave urgently*. I don't elaborate and I don't need to.

He knows I'm running away.

Lily clears her throat loudly, then waving her hand in my direction says, "Is there an explanation for your dramatic entry or are you going to sit there texting, leaving me guessing."

Looking up sheepishly, I wrinkle my nose. "Maybe I've done a bad, bad thing."

Lily drops the pile of papers to the coffee table and leaning forward says, "Oh, this sounds good and certainly more interesting than a damn financial report. Do we need wine?"

"Definitely. But first let me get changed. Be back in a sec." I jump up and start down the hallway to my bedroom to quickly change into my track pants and a sweatshirt. Yes, I need to be comfortable to tell Lily this story.

My phone buzzes again and I don't know what I expected Scott's response to be to my text, but it certainly isn't the photo I receive of my white lace panties and missing button from my shirt. I read the message, *I'll just hang onto these, till I see you next time.*

Smiling at his funny reply and the absurdity of the situation, I'm already regretting my speedy exit. I don't even want to think about how awkward the *next time* I see him will be.

More comfortably dressed, I return to Lily in the living room where she's sitting cross-legged on the sofa with two large glasses of red wine, ready and waiting on the coffee table in front of her. Again, I take the chair opposite her and pick up a glass of wine, taking a big gulp. That feels better.

Like pulling off a Band-Aid, I dive straight in, starting at the end where I took apartment viewing to a whole new level, then telling her snippets about the rest of my day with Scott including our Italian lunch together.

Obviously, from Lily's unblinking round eyes, I've shocked her. Wow, maybe this afternoon's antics are appalling, even by my usual standards.

Looking down into my glass of wine, I finally own up to running away after doing the deed.

"No way. You didn't," she says, then dropping her face into her hands starts laughing. Not just a little bit, a lot. Shoulder shaking laughter ... and it's hard not to join in.

Trying to explain proves to be difficult, through my tears of laughter. "Lily, I know what I did was bad. Probably even stupid."

"You think?" She's still snickering as she looks at me between her fingers. "But which part, the sex or the running."

"Both. I couldn't resist the offer of great sex. There's just something about Scott ... he makes my normal common sense fly out the window." I drop my chin to my hands, then add, "I know I'm pathetic and weak."

Lily laughs again. "Never feel bad about having great sex. Lucky you. I'm borderline becoming a second-time virgin. But ... why did you run?"

With a shrug of my shoulders, I admit, "I think it was just my protective instincts kicking in. I'm not sure."

“Maybe when you figure out why, you’ll be able to sort out your feelings toward Scott.”

My clever friend makes a good point and I raise my glass of wine to her.

CHAPTER 22

SCOTT

Two Days Later

Two days it's been since I saw Jas. Since I lost control and fucked her. Since she ran away.

I really blew it, all my plans to take it slow, then in one crazy moment of passion, I ruined everything. Now I'm back to square one trying to find a way to fix things.

There has been plenty of email chat and text messages back and forth between us, but no face-to-face and no chance to find out why she left. I aim to get to the bottom of why she keeps running, hopefully today.

My Uber pulls up outside Jasmine's office building, where I'm due to sign on the dotted line for the purchase of my new apartment. It's been a rush, but as a cash buyer the usual delay in sorting out finance can be skipped. It'll still be a couple of weeks before I can take possession, but at least I'll know it's mine before I fly home to Florida.

The large glass doors slide open as I approach, leading into a modern, stylish lobby with various seating areas. At the front desk, I give my name to the receptionist and tell her I'm here to visit NY State Real Estate. Fluffing up her hair, she babbles on about the weather, trying to keep me at the desk longer than necessary as she takes her time looking up the floor number for me. Finally, I get the information I need, along with the offer of a drink sometime, which I decline politely.

Exiting the elevator on the twenty-fifth floor, I know I'm at the right place, thanks to the oversized gold lettering on the dark wall in the company foyer. I'm greeted by another receptionist sitting behind a massive black marble desk, but this time she's totally professional as she walks me to a nearby conference room.

While I'm still standing at the large wall of windows, which provide a panoramic view over Lower Manhattan, a dark-haired man strides into the room. Addressing me by name, he reaches out to shake my hand introducing himself as Jarrod Richards, Jasmine's brother. Now I can see the family resemblance.

"I'm sorry, but Jasmine has been called away at the last minute to another client and she asked me to step in and walk you through the contract papers."

Huh! I'm calling bullshit, she's avoiding me again.

We sit in two chairs at the end of a long conference table, and he begins to walk me through the purchase contract. I

focus on the job at hand, pushing to the back of my mind the conversation I want to have with Jasmine.

An hour later, Jarrod finally has all the signatures he needs. It was a drawn-out process with a couple of calls to my real estate attorney confirming certain clauses in the contract. But it's done now and all that is left is for the papers to be filed.

Thanking Jarrod, I leave the offices, and as soon as I'm in the elevator, I take out my cell and text Jas.

Scott: I hear you were too busy to meet me. Avoiding me?

Within minutes my phone vibrates with a reply.

Jasmine: Why would I be avoiding you? I had to meet another client and I left you in good hands with Jarrod.

Scott: Yeah. I met your brother. He seems like a good guy.

Jasmine: Only because he doesn't know what you've been doing with his little sister.... :)

Scott: True. I guess we didn't discuss how I sealed the deal on my new apartment with you bent over the windowsill.

This time instead of a text the only response I get is an unamused face emoji, which has me laughing out loud as I

stand on the sidewalk.

Scott: Anyway, I wanted you to know all the paperwork has been signed, neighbor.

I can see Jasmine is typing but it takes a while for the next text to come through. I suspect my use of the word neighbor has thrown her.

Jasmine: Sounds like you two gossiped plenty if you now know I live nearby.

And I was right, she didn't want me to know the little nugget of information Jarrod let slip about her living only a couple of blocks away from my new place.

Scott: Two blocks away, I believe he said. I wonder why you didn't mention that the other day.

Jasmine: Slipped my mind. It's not that important.

Scott: Nice try. I'll be seeing you around then. BTW, I'm in Manhattan till Sunday.

Jasmine: Bye.

A couple of hours later, I walk into the Irish pub opposite Luke and Blake's office building. It's a regular drinking spot of theirs so I've been here a couple of times before. When my eyes have adjusted to the dim lighting, I see them sitting on a couple of stools at the end of the bar. Blake waves me over.

This is the first chance we've really had to catch up since Luke's wedding. Sure, I saw them the other night at the dinner party, but it wasn't the same as a beer with the boys at the pub. Pulling up another stool, I gesture to the barman to get the guys another Guinness and one for me.

"What's the occasion?" Blake asks.

"Yeah, you never offer to buy the beers, so it must be good," adds Luke.

I glare at them; I mean seriously, don't these guys ever get tired of busting my balls. "Shut up, I'm always buying you miserable bastards a beer."

"Only when you lose a bet," Blake points out.

"If I remember correctly, I've won the last two bets we made, and you had to buy ME a beer."

"Whatever," Blake grumbles, waving his hand in front of my face like he's shooing away an irritating bug.

The barman places three tall glasses of the bittersweet black beer in front of us. I propose a toast, "To living in Manhattan.

Though I've no idea why I want to see your ugly mugs more than I already do."

Laughing at my toast they happily drink to it.

Luke raises an eyebrow. "Are you really serious about moving to Manhattan?" He can't hide his disbelief, and I don't miss Blake's smirk either.

"Certainly am. Not full time but I plan on spending more time here, especially as this afternoon I signed the contract on an apartment in the Village."

"What? That was quick. Does this have anything to do with your real estate agent?" Blake asks.

"Yes, in fact it does. But only because Jasmine is good at her job and knew exactly what I wanted. The place in the Village is perfect."

Under his breath, Blake mumbles, "I bet she knows what you want, you two spent plenty of time on the island working that out."

The guy can be an asshole sometimes.

"Shut up. We're just ... friends now." I wish I felt surer of my position with Jasmine. If she was willing to speak to me, I'm sure we could work it out.

"Sorry, man, I thought you and Jas were going to become a thing. My bad," Blake says, holding his hands up.

Luke slaps me on the back. "Well, I'm glad you've decided to spend more time in the city. During the summer we can

have surfing weekends in the Hamptons. Cass and I are looking to get a place out there near Blake's beach house."

"Never know, now that I'm expanding my property portfolio, I might buy out there too."

Blake joins in, "That would be cool. Bec and I plan to spend most weekends there in the summer and it would be good having you guys around."

"Not another dinner party please. It makes me feel like I've turned into my parents," I joke.

Blake agrees, "Deal, only grilling allowed. Beach houses are dinner party free zones."

The evening continues with jokes and our usual banter while we drink one more beer.

CHAPTER 23

JASMINE

One Day Later

Shit! These days it feels like I'm always running late. I push through the doors of Benny's Bar on Friday night and I'm not only late to meet the girls, but I'm also soaked.

It's pouring rain outside, and my umbrella couldn't stand up to the challenge of keeping me dry. I close the useless damn thing then run my hands down the arms of my jacket. It's a futile attempt to remove the surface water as I can already feel it soaking through.

At least I'm here now, and there are my gal pals sitting at our usual table. The dampness of my clothes is instantly forgotten when I see my friends, Cassie, Lily, Bec, and Trudy. Great! Everyone could make it tonight.

Lily looks up and starts animatedly tossing her head in the direction of the bar. What is wrong with her? Does she want another drink? As I walk toward them, her movements become

jerkier and more pronounced, so I turn to the bar ... and stop dead in my tracks.

On a barstool is Scott, sitting there like he hasn't a care in the world. And he's staring straight at me. Then to make matters worse he tilts his beer in greeting and smiles. What the hell! Why is he sitting in my bar? My Friday night drinks bar.

Stomping up to him, I whisper fiercely, "What are you doing here?"

Scott quirks an eyebrow and says, "Having a beer. Would you like one too?"

I try to ignore how damn sexy he looks when he does his eyebrow thing.

Through gritted teeth, I growl, "No, I don't want a beer. I'm here to meet my friends like I do every Friday night for a cocktail."

Just then Benny walks out from the kitchen with his usual cheery greeting, delivered in his strong Italian accent, "Hello, sweet Jasmine. Would you like the same cocktail as I gave the girls?"

With enormous effort I dial back on my annoyance at seeing Scott in my bar and beam a smile at Benny.

"Hi, Benny. Can I have a double of whatever the girls are having? It's been a long week with difficult clients."

My last comment along with a glare, is aimed directly at Scott who is leaning relaxed against the bar with an amused grin on his face. How I'd like to rub that grin right off his

mouth. I ignore the little voice in my head, telling me it would be much more fun kissing it off his mouth instead.

Benny turns away to make my cocktail and I bend close to Scott so only he can hear me. “Why are you here in my bar?” I hiss, regretting instantly my close proximity to Scott as the usual electricity buzzes between us.

“Really, I didn’t realize you owned a bar.” Now he’s deliberately trying to wind me up, and it’s working.

Waving my hand frantically at him, I say, “I don’t. You know this is Benny’s bar, it says it on the door. What I mean is this is *my* local bar, where I meet the girls every Friday night for cocktails. You shouldn’t be here, not tonight.”

“Benny has been very welcoming, telling me all about the area, given I’m going to be a resident soon.”

The man in question, moves back along the bar, placing my cocktail down with his usual flourish. “Your drink, sweet Jasmine.”

“Thanks.” I take a long sip of the drink and the cool, tangy taste hits my tastebuds. “Excellent as always.”

“And for your friend Scott, another beer or can I make you a cocktail too?” asks Benny, directing his question more to Scott than me.

“He doesn’t drink cocktails. Besides, Scott said he was just leaving.” Benny looks between us, then nodding quickly moves to the other end of the bar.

“Nice one, now you’ve made Benny feel awkward,” Scott admonishes, making me feel worse than I already do as it wasn’t my intention.

Exasperated, I sigh heavily. “Look, I know you showing up in this bar tonight is no coincidence, so answer my question truthfully this time. Why are you here?” His low chuckle does nothing to ease the tension between us.

He leans in close to me again and keeping his voice low, says, “Jas, I just wanted to speak to you in person and it seems like this was going to be the only way. I’ll leave *your* bar when I finish my drink, but will you please meet me tomorrow afternoon. I fly out on Sunday night, and I’d like to talk over some business with you.”

Raising my eyebrows, I ask, “What kind of business?”

“Apartment type business, not sexy business, if that’s what you’re thinking.” I can’t imagine what additional business he needs to speak to me about, the contract for the apartment is all signed.

Rolling my eyes at him, I agree. “Strictly business, fine. I can meet you at six tomorrow night, but not in your hotel room. It has to be somewhere public.”

He smiles smugly, then says, “I get you can’t resist me when we’re alone, so how about the bar in my hotel ... then if you change your mind ...” I roll my eyes at him again.

Seriously this man makes my eyes roll more than the Wheel of Fortune slot machines in Vegas. I get that we need to

discuss what happened the other day, but not tonight, not here. I'm not usually someone who avoids a difficult chat or for that matter runs away pantyless after sex.

But there is something about Scott and the feelings he elicits in me that cracks wide open the fortification I've built around my heart. In the beginning Scott reminded me of Brad, a smooth-talking, sexy flirt just out for a good time. Now when I look at Scott, I struggle to see how I ever thought he was anything like my ex.

Scott is smooth-talking, cocky, sexy, funny, and a flirt but he also has more depth of character in his little finger than Brad had in his whole hulking damn body. Scott is loyal, protective, and caring, nothing like my ex. Maybe opening up to him tomorrow, without an audience of friends will help me to stop running from him.

“Text me the hotel name and address and I'll see you in the bar tomorrow. And don't get your hopes up, I won't be changing my mind about visiting your room. Now, have a good evening somewhere else and I'll see you tomorrow.” He clinks his nearly empty beer glass against my cocktail before I walk away to join my friends.

Every one of the girls is doing a bad job at pretending to have not watched every second of the interaction between Scott and me.

Taking an empty seat beside Cassie, and with my back to the bar, I tell the girls, “That man makes my head explode.”

“From what you’ve told us in the past, he makes other parts of you explode too,” Trudy adds, and a ripple of laughter runs around the table.

Cassie tilts her head sideways, then whispers, “Exploding head or not, he seriously has the hots for you. His tongue was almost dragging on the ground as he watched you walk to the table just now. Tell me, what’s been going on between you two this week?”

“We’ve been apartment hunting,” I tell her, not wanting to elaborate further when the man in question is sitting on the other side of the bar.

“Is *apartment hunting* code for something else? ‘Cause it sure doesn’t look like you’ve been spending time wandering around old buildings.” I turn my head sharply in her direction. Maybe I’m not very convincing, but it will have to do as I can’t say what really happened, not yet anyway.

“Did he find anything he liked?” Trudy asks innocently, not realizing Scott and I found something in one of the apartments that we both liked very much.

I try to block the mental image I just conjured up from my mind as I tell them, “Yes, in fact he chose one not far from here.”

“Really, so you’re going to be like neighbors ... you better get used to bumping into Scott then,” Trudy comments, clearly trying to suppress her amusement.

“I certainly didn’t expect him to turn up at Benny’s.”

“Although, it could be a good thing,” Trudy suggests with a wink.

Maybe I am being a little unfair to him. I’m only upset over seeing Scott because I’m embarrassed about the other day. Running away was a stupid thing to do.

Cassie leans toward me again, saying quietly, “I can call Luke to come and take Scott somewhere else. Luke understands the sanctity of Friday night drinks with the girls. Scott doesn’t know the rules yet, so go easy on him.”

“No, hun, it’s all right ... as Trudy said, I need to get used to seeing Scott around. Anyway, he said he was leaving when he finishes his drink.”

Cassie smiles, satisfied by my response. “Luke and Blake were pleased to hear Scotty had found somewhere in the city, they all met up for a drink at the Irish pub last night.”

Hmm interesting, I suspect the guys were the ones who mentioned to him that we were meeting here tonight.

Cassie taps me on the arm. “Hey, looks like you’re right, he’s leaving.”

I spin around in my chair, in time to see Scott standing at the bar saying good night to Benny. Then he turns to look straight at me. I guess I’ve been caught staring again. With a smile that speaks volumes, and a nod in my direction, he leaves the bar.

A held breath eases from my chest as I turn back to the table.

Cassie fans her face, saying, “Wow, you guys are hot together.”

I wish I could disagree with her, but Scott’s look was scorching.

CHAPTER 24

SCOTT

It's ten minutes past six, and I'm starting to wonder if Jas is coming to meet me.

I take another sip of my whiskey on the rocks, then look up to see a flash of green bounding through the door, and as predictable as day turns to night, I'm horny again.

Standing up as she comes toward me, I try to discreetly adjust myself through my jeans pocket. Jas raises her eyebrow then looks directly at my bulge, with a smirk pulling on her cherry red lips. Her checking me out does not help my situation.

“You seem happy to see me,” she teases.

Pulling her into my arms I briefly kiss her cheek while deliberately rubbing up against her thigh. “What do you think?”

The slight gasp from her lips, tells me I've won this round.

Jas focuses her eyes on pulling out the bar stool next to me, allowing her hair to fall in a curtain, shielding her face. No

matter how many times Jas tells me otherwise, she's as affected by the chemistry between us as I am.

When she has settled onto the stool, and no longer looking flustered, she orders a glass of red wine then turns to face me. "Okay—so I'm here, you said you wanted to speak to me in person about something business-related."

She comes at me green eyes blazing and I love the way she's throwing my words back at me. "I'm happy to get straight down to business, then we can talk about personal things."

"Whoa, you never said anything about personal talk." I tilt my head at her, not saying a word.

She holds up her hand. "Stop with that look. I get it we need to talk."

I place my hand lightly on top of hers, saying, "Thank you. But first business, I'm not going to be able to return to Manhattan for about six weeks and Jarrod said the purchase should be complete in a little under four. Could you keep the keys for me till then?"

"Of course," she replies immediately, "it's part of our service."

"In addition, I'd like you to arrange for my apartment to be fitted out with furniture, linen, plates, and cutlery. Pretty much everything I'll need to live there when I return next time."

Jasmine's brow furrows as she considers my request. "I think there are some companies who do that kind of thing. We

don't usually offer that service, but I can probably arrange for someone to come in and do it for you."

I explain, "Jas, I want you to do it for me. I trust you to know what I'd like and what I wouldn't. I don't want some stranger doing it." She stares at me open-mouthed.

When it's obvious she isn't going to say anything, I continue to plead my case, "I want my place to feel casual and comfortable, somewhere I can chill out and relax. Not a cold show home like the hotel rooms, I'm trying to get away from."

Clearing her throat, she says, "But I don't know you well enough to choose furniture, or other personal items. I've no idea what you'd like."

"Yes, you do. I like you." Reaching out I tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, gently gliding my fingers across her cheek as I force my hand back to my glass of whiskey.

A few moments of silence follows before she finally says, "Okay— I'll do it." Not wanting to look me in the eye, she continues, "I get what you mean, your home is important. I hate those places that look like nobody lives there too. It's a beautiful apartment and it deserves beautiful furniture." I'm grinning so wide my cheeks hurt. I was so worried she wouldn't agree, and she has. I like the idea of Jas selecting furniture for me but mostly I hope it will make her want to spend some time with me, in my new place.

"Great, I really appreciate you helping." I open my wallet and pull out an AMEX black card, sliding it across the bar to

her. "Please use this for everything." With the business done, now comes the tough talk.

Placing my glass back on the table, I link my fingers together to stop me from fidgeting. "Why did you run away?"

Silently she looks down into her glass as if she'll find the answer swirling in the ruby red liquid, then with a slight shrug of her shoulders, she begins, "Scott, it's hard to say why I ran in that moment. It was more instinct than a coherent thought." Her voice is barely above a whisper, and I have to lean down close to catch the words. "I've tried to work out why every night since and all I can come up with is, I'm scared. Scared of being lied to again. Scared of being hurt again."

Placing my hand over hers, I give it a slight squeeze. "I don't want to hurt you."

Turning her head to look at me, her eyes are watery green pools. "I know you don't. It's just ... I feel so much with you. It's almost too intense. I don't know what to do with all those feelings."

"I feel it too. It's special, which is why I'd like to spend more time with you."

"This week has been a whirlwind. I thought it would be months before I saw you again, then out of nowhere you were here. I need some time to think ... while you're away." Her frown deepens. "Scott, just to be clear, I don't want to be your sex buddy, available whenever you fly into town. It's not my thing."

“That’s not what I was suggesting,” I’m quick to protest. I should shut up as I don’t want to ruin the remainder of our evening together.

The atmosphere shifts. And Jasmine in her usual way, changes the subject unexpectedly.

“I just thought, do you cook or are you a takeout only person,” she asks as we order another drink and settle into a chat about what type of things I’d like in my home.

It surprises us both when next we look at our phones, nearly two hours have passed with us chatting comfortably about anything and everything.

I ask her if she’d like to do dinner with me, but unfortunately, she has plans with Lily. This time I believe her and don’t think she’s brushing me off, given the last couple of hours we’ve spent together.

I stand up to say goodbye and feel comfortable enough lingering over the hug as I drop a brief kiss on the corner of her still bright red lips.

She doesn’t pull away as I continue to hold her loosely. “I’ll see you in about six weeks then—aah hang on, I nearly forgot.” Reaching into my jacket pocket I pull out the small, folded gift bag I have for her, saying, “This is for you.”

She looks down at the bag and when I hand it to her, she tries to pass it back to me saying, “No, Scott—I don’t want a gift.”

“Just, look in the bag, Jas,” I tell her, refusing to take the gift bag back.

As she peers inside a blush suffuses her cheeks, the bag contains her freshly laundered panties and shirt button.

Still giggling along with me, Jas manages to gasp out, “Nicely played.”

Finally composing herself she says, “Let’s keep in touch through email and text and don’t forget to send me the photos of your condo in Florida so I can get an idea of your style.”

Then surprisingly she reaches up to kiss me hard on the lips before quickly saying goodbye and walking away.

Leaving me standing stunned and again in need of an adjustment of my jeans.

Seven Weeks Later

It’s been seven weeks since I last saw Jas. Longer than I originally thought or wanted it to be, but finally I’m back in Manhattan and looking forward to seeing her again in my new apartment.

The town car pulls up outside my new building, and as I jump out, I notice there is a chill to the air, which wasn’t here last visit. It’s the start of Autumn now, so it may be a while before I can use the new grill Jas promised has been installed on my terrace.

Walking through the doors of the lobby, I say hello to the doorman, introducing myself as the new owner. He smiles then tells me Jasmine is waiting upstairs for me. Thanking him, I hoist my Gucci black leather bag to my shoulder and make my way to the bank of elevators.

Pressing the button for the twelfth floor, I wonder what sort of reception I'm going to get from Jas this time. Our texts and emails have all been friendly, but I guess that's the problem, they have all been friendly and nothing more. The more time I've been away from Jas, the more I've been thinking I want more than only friends with her.

I can't wait to see her again, especially when the last time we were alone together was in this same apartment with her bent over the windowsill while I pumped into her. An image as clear today in my memory as it was seven weeks ago when it occurred.

Exiting the elevator, I walk to my new front door and knock. I can hear Jas's heels on the parquet wood flooring as she walks toward the door, giving me some warning before the door opens and she's standing in front of me.

A huge smile on her lips as she says, "Welcome to your new home, Scott." My new keys dangling from her fingertips.

I chuckle at her dramatic presentation as I step inside snagging the keys from her fingertips before dropping a kiss on her red lips. And it doesn't escape my notice the gasp which escapes those same lips as I release them.

"This is the kind of welcome I could get used to."

She chooses to ignore my comment and instead grabs my hand, saying enthusiastically, “Come on, I’m dying to show you around.”

“And I’m dying to be shown around,” I tell her, captivated by Jas all over again.

My memories of her being quickly replaced by the flesh and blood gorgeous woman, who is eagerly dragging me toward the living area. I slip my bag off my shoulder, dropping it to the floor in the hall as I follow her. Then passing a solid wood hall table, I throw my new keys into the waiting bowl on top.

Jas leads me into the large living area, and I look around me, my mouth dropping open. Shit, the place is unrecognizable from the empty shell of a room I saw the first time I was here.

It’s now a warm cozy space, with heavy curtains pulled back at the windows, two large man-sized sofas, a wood coffee table and matching side tables with lamps, all arranged on a massive plush rug. The sort you can really sink your toes into. Through the windows I can make out the outline of my new grill, covered to protect it from the weather. Beside it are more similarly covered items, which I guess is the outdoor furniture.

“Wow, this is fantastic,” I manage to say as I take in the refurbished fireplace and the huge flatscreen TV to the side of it. My eyes are drawn to the windowsill, which I’m glad to see has been left free of furniture. I walk over to the exact spot where Jas was bent over last time, and turning around to face her, I lean back against it.

“I really can’t believe this is the same room. It’s been transformed, and I love it.”

Jas continues to smile broadly looking around the room, anywhere but at me. She hasn’t been able to hold my gaze ever since I leaned back against the windowsill. I want her to remember how good we can be together.

Point made, I push off from the window and stroll toward the kitchen, where Jas is now standing at the island counter. I’m a bit confused. I don’t remember an island counter being there before and the countertops were certainly not granite.

Checking out the cupboards that line the back wall, and to the left what I’d call a butler’s pantry, I say, “This looks like a new kitchen. I don’t understand.”

“Do you like it?” she asks, her smile slipping slightly.

“I love it, particularly the wine fridge,” I tell her, brushing a kiss on her cheek as I pass by, on my way to investigate the pantry further with its built-in wine fridge.

She smiles broadly again as she says, “It’s not a wine fridge, it’s a beer fridge. Isn’t that what you Aussie guys need. Beer fridges are colder than wine fridges.”

“Clever girl. This is amazing. Thank you so much, Jas.” As I walk back toward her, she slips around to the other side of the counter.

Then sounding a little flustered, she asks quickly, “Do you want a drink to celebrate, I filled the fridge with both beer and champagne? Or would you prefer to finish the tour?”

“Let’s finish the tour,” I tell her, although I’m not happy at the way she just sidestepped me. “I’ve been looking forward to seeing what you’ve done with my bed?”

And there it is, her trademark eye roll. I’ve missed her eye roll.

She leads the way down the hallway to the bedrooms and bathrooms. “Unfortunately, I didn’t have enough time to redo the bathrooms too, but I’ll show you some plans I had drawn up. Next time you’re away, I can arrange for the work to be done. If you want to, of course.”

We reach the second bedroom first which has been set up as a home study. The room is large enough to comfortably hold a built-in desk with shelves above and a double sofa bed, handy for guests to stay over, she tells me.

We move onto the main bedroom and when the door opens. I’m not surprised to see the huge king-size bed I selected dominating the room. My eyebrows do rise though as I take in the large carved mirror that fills the wall on the lefthand side of the bed. I like the look of that.

“Do you like the room?” Jas asks, hovering in the doorway watching for my reaction as I investigate the room further.

“Definitely, my only comment, too many pillows. I only need two.”

She laughs. “Spoken like a typical guy. I get it’s probably a girl thing. Easily fixed, we can store them in the cupboard.”

“How many pillows do you have, then?” I ask, intrigued, and nearly choke on my laughter when she tells me six.

“Seriously, is there any space in the bed for you, with so many pillows?” My only answer is a shrug of her shoulders. I think she’s right pillows are a girl thing, so I’ll not even try to understand it.

Again, as I walk toward her, she spins on her heels and heads back toward the living room.

“Hey, Jas, will you join me for my first dinner in my new apartment, as a thank you for everything you’ve done, setting it up,” I ask almost desperately. I don’t want her rushing off now she’s finished showing me around the apartment.

“It’s been fun doing it. You know—all part of the service,” she jokes, not confirming one way or the other on my dinner invitation.

Walking toward her my arms outstretched, I ask, “Can I give you a hug?”

She smiles accepting my hug but it’s brief. “Dinner sounds great. I know a great burger place that delivers.”

I’m happy she’s staying for dinner, but I can’t help thinking her walls are back up, again.

CHAPTER 25

JASMINE

Don't fall for his lines, I tell myself as I try to remain detached from Scott's considerable charm as we share a takeout meal of gourmet burgers, fries, and beers.

Scott spins around on his stool at the new kitchen counter, and after a few minutes of looking around the living room, he admits, "There's so much to take in. Is that print on the wall a Florida beach? It looks familiar."

I'm so pleased he's noticed the large print on the living room wall as I specially selected it so he would have a little bit of Florida here in the city.

"Well spotted, you know your beaches," I tell him. "And the set of prints in the hallway are famous Sydney beaches, Bondi, Manly, and Cronulla. Is that how you say it?"

"Yep, Cronulla. It's a bit further south of Bondi and I spent a lot of time surfing with my mates there as a teenager. Do you surf, Jas?"

“No. Never tried. Growing up with older brothers, I spent a lot of time in the ocean on summer vacations and tried lots of sports, but never surfing. “

“I’ll have to teach you sometime,” he offers casually, like we hang out together all the time, then swiveling on his stool to face me, he adds, “I knew you would know what I like.”

His comment sounds harmless enough but there is something in his tone, which makes me think we’re no longer talking about the surfing prints on the walls.

When he looks at me that way, I know I’m heading for trouble. But not this time, I tell myself. I’ve decided over the last seven weeks, there will be no more impromptu sex with Scott as it’s bad for my emotional health. Not to mention the sleepless nights which follow.

He always leaves me wanting him more. And more sex could lead to more serious things, like a relationship, and I’m still not ready to take that leap. Even for Scott.

Too much of a good thing can turn into a bad thing.

I’m probably jumping way ahead of the situation anyway as Scott gives off the impression, he’s not ready for commitment either. Why would someone who flies around the world on a regular basis want to be tied down to one woman? He can’t even be tied down to one city.

I jump up from my stool with the excuse of cleaning up from our takeout and Scott says, “Leave that, I can do it later. How about instead we have another beer over on the sofa?”

I know I should leave but I'm enjoying learning more about Scott and his business plans for a Manhattan office which he's been telling me about over dinner.

"Sure, but it will only take me a minute to clean up while you get the beers." By the time I've rinsed and stacked our dishes in the dishwasher, Scott has our beers opened and is back in the living area. He has noticed the photos on the shelf near the fireplace.

Cassie gave me copies of a couple of photos from the wedding, one of all of us and one of Scott with the guys. She also gave me a copy of one of Luke's photos, which was taken years ago in Afghanistan. It's a black and white photo of Blake, Luke, Scott, and another guy I don't recognize, posed in front of a chinook.

Blake and Luke in their military uniforms looking so different compared to the suited businessmen I know these days. Scott too in his camouflage flight suit, his helmet tucked under his right arm grinning broadly, familiar but again so different to now.

As I move to stand beside him, I ask, "Do you like the photos? Cassie had them printed and framed."

When Scott doesn't respond, I look up to see he is staring at the black and white picture with a look of such sadness.

Oh my god, what have I done? I wanted the military photo to be a cool reminder of the camaraderie between the guys.

“Scott, what’s wrong. I’m so sorry if the photo upsets you. I didn’t mean for it to make you sad.” I pick up the offending photo, and Scott’s hand darts out to stop me.

“No, leave it,” he demands. “I want you to leave it there. It’s time.”

Confused by his comments, I place the photo carefully back on the shelf where it was, then taking his hand he allows me to lead him over to the sofa, where we sit together.

“Would you like to talk about the photo?” I ask him gently, not sure what has happened to cause such a reaction in him. He’s no longer the carefree, smiling, cocky guy I know. Instead, he leans forward, his hands rubbing roughly over his face as if he’s trying to erase a memory.

After a few moments of silence, he answers me tentatively, “Maybe.”

Okay—that’s a start. Picking up our beers from the coffee table, I hand him one and we both take a long sip from our bottles.

“You’ve never really talked to me about your time in the military. Why is that?” He continues to stare down at the floor, sipping his beer, so I press on, “I get it may bring back bad memories, but I want you to know, you can talk to me. If you want.” He turns back toward me, clears his throat, and begins speaking, softly.

“It’s hard to talk about that time because all my memories include my best friend, Johnno. Johnno was my co-pilot, and we

were a team in everything we did. When your life depends on your mate, you become close.” He stops abruptly, his jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck pulled tight, his whole body tense.

I place a hand on his arm, encouraging him to continue and he does after a deep audible breath. “Johno died in an accident a little over six months ago. It’s all still a bit raw. Seeing the photo of him hit me hard, but it’s time I stopped mourning the loss of my mate and instead remember the good times we shared together. We had a lot of good times flying the chinook together.” Scott takes another sip of his beer, and I can’t resist leaning forward to hug him tightly.

“I’m sorry about you losing your best friend, Scott. I remember Cassie speaking about it at the time, but I didn’t know that was him in the photo. I don’t think Cassie knew either. We thought you guys looked so happy in the picture and that it would be a nice reminder.”

Nodding, he squeezes me to his chest, saying, “You’re right the day the photo was taken was one of the good times.”

Settling back into the sofa, Scott wraps his arms around me as I lean back against him, before he continues, “Ben took the photo after we’d finished a training exercise with Blake, Luke, and their Ranger team. War is serious, but that day we joked and laughed like I hadn’t done for months. I can remember feeling relaxed and happy that day. Honestly, the day was probably the start of my close friendship with the guys.”

It feels comfortable lying back on the sofa, sipping our beers as Scott tells me more about his time in the military. From the time he joined the Australian Defense Force Academy at nineteen to do a university degree with specialist military officer training, through to his seven years of flying. Then after he qualified the deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other places around the world.

As he talks, I realize I want to delve deeper into this side of his personality. There are so many hidden layers to this man which I haven't even begun to discover. I ask him questions about each of the countries he visited, but mostly I want to know more about his time as a Flight Lieutenant flying chinooks in Afghanistan with Blake and Luke.

Cassie has told me bits of the stories of how they all met, and then how Luke was injured. She told me how Scott came back for them that night, saving their lives, but I want to hear about the night from him, in his own words.

“Will you tell me about the night Luke was injured?”

Scott's deep drawl rumbles from his chest behind me as he begins. “Before a mission, a big mission like it was, we would all train together for days sometimes weeks, to make sure nothing is left to chance. And that night everything was going to plan. It was an hour to the drop zone, and the guys were pumped, we all were. It was a textbook drop, no drama. Blake, the platoon leader, was to lead the guys through a canyon and down into a village in a valley on the other side. Some Taliban leaders were meant to be meeting there that night. The guys

were providing cover for a SEAL team which had been embedded in the area for a couple of days.”

Shifting behind me, Scott lies back against the armrest completely wrapping me in his arms before continuing, “About twenty minutes after we’d dropped the guys, Johno heard Blake call in a medivac over the comms. They’d been ambushed exiting the canyon. It was a rocket attack. Two of their team were killed, Luke was seriously injured, Ben and Tim less so. There was no one in the area, so Johno and I went back for them.” I’m sure he’s downplaying his role in the rescue, according to what little Cassie has told me in the past.

Scott takes in a short, sharp breath and races on as if he needs to get the story out quickly before he can breathe easily again. “They were coming under heavy fire, pinned down and in serious shit, till the SEAL team and Apache gunships got to them, providing extra cover. Anyway, they made it to the landing zone, and we extracted all of them including the SEAL team, amid a full-on firefight.”

Scott drops his head down onto my shoulder and when he speaks again his voice is muffled. “It was the toughest extraction I’ve ever had to do. The chinook took several rounds. Lucky for us, none of them caused any major damage, thanks to my aircrewmen on the guns. There was so much going on and all the while, I could hear Parker the medic, shouting commands to the guys as he tried to keep Luke alive on the way back to our Kandahar base.”

For a moment we sit in silence, Scott lost in his memories. I have no words that could even begin to help ease the obvious pain which leached through his words as he relived those horrific hours.

These last minutes have made me realize, Scott is good at blocking out this damaged side from who he is today, hiding the depth of his pain and I feel terrible for bringing it all up to the surface.

I'm surprised when he starts to talk again, "You know I've only ever talked openly about that night with Johno. He was the one person who understood. I haven't even really spoken to Blake and Luke about it. Blake has his own tortured memories of the night to deal with, and Luke ..." He stops mid-sentence, takes a deep breath then continues, "I don't know how much you know, but Luke suffers from PTSD. Debilitating nightmares, flashbacks and panic attacks all stemming from the ambush and the loss of his friends. Thankfully, since he has reconnected with Cassie, he's been much better."

"Aah the love of a good woman," I tease, hoping to lighten the mood.

"Are you offering up some loving to me, Jas?"

Ignoring his tempting suggestion, I slap his arm which is still wrapped around me. "You seem to be under the wrong impression of me being a good woman. I'm bad."

He chuckles and it feels good to hear the sound. "I like your kind of bad."

I smile at his flirtatious words which are typical Scott. But now after hearing his stories tonight I wonder at what really lies beneath the surface. “Scott, can I ask you one more thing?”

“Sure, ask away, I’m mostly an open book.”

“How did you cope with war? All that pressure, all that suffering around you? I can’t imagine how anyone can walk away from those experiences unscathed.”

I realize once the words are out, I shouldn’t be probing him like this, after all we are supposed to be just friends. “Sorry, I don’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable talking about this with me. Forget I asked,” I quickly add.

I feel him drop a light kiss on the top of my head, before saying, “It’s okay, I feel surprisingly comfortable talking to you about this stuff.” His chest rises behind me as he draws in a deep breath. “At the time I was okay with what happened that night, and the part we played in it. Adrenalin can get you through some serious shit and block out a lot. But I found it harder to cope when I returned home to Australia. Going back to so-called normal life after an experience like that is not easy. I went a bit off the rails, drinking, womanizing, living life too close to the edge. But my family stepped in and got me back on track.”

“Is that the bad publicity you spoke about on the island?”

“Yes, most of it was around that time, but the media have always been there following my family. I wasn’t always the charming, well-adjusted man you see before you today.”

Smiling as his description of himself, I add, “You mean the arrogant, cocky, frustrating man.” I like hearing him chuckle again in my ear. The sound has the ability to spread warmth through my veins. Dangerous levels of warmth, spreading all over my body not only where we are touching.

And that’s my cue to move, it’s getting late. I don’t want our new friendship to be tested by us ending up in bed having wild, crazy, exceptionally satisfying sex. I move to sit up and put some distance between us, then turn to look down at Scott saying, “I really should be going home, it’s getting late.”

“Sure, let me walk you,” he says, jumping up from the sofa.

“No, Scott. It’s fine. It’s not far to my place.”

“Jas, I’m not going to let you walk home by yourself at night. I don’t care how far it is or isn’t.”

I like his response. “C’mon, then I can point out some local restaurants and bars you might like.”

“Would that be so I don’t turn up at your bar again, spoiling your girls’ night out? It’s okay. Luke has warned me now, Friday girls’ night at Benny’s is not to be gatecrashed, unless invited.”

“Absolutely. Luke and Blake understand the drill and if you’re good and you follow the rules, you might even get invited to join us occasionally, the same as them.”

“Wow, I feel privileged,” Scott says as he stands watching me put on my previously discarded heels. Then picking up my

bag, I'm ready to go as Scott grabs his keys from the hall table and we leave the apartment.

Ten minutes later, we are outside my apartment building after strolling the two blocks, still busy with people visiting the many local eateries and bars. I show Scott my favorite bakery around the corner from my apartment, telling him they do the best chocolate croissants and further along on the opposite side of the street my favorite Italian restaurant, Papa Gio's.

"So, this is you. Good to know," Scott says, looking up at my building.

"Yes, this is me," I say, feeling awkward for the first time this evening. "I guess I'll see you around."

"Yep, and thanks again for everything you did with the apartment. It really is fantastic."

Smiling under his praise, I say goodnight and Scott bends to kiss me lightly on the lips, not the cheek. My heart rate races, even though his touch is featherlight.

All night, I've been trying to keep this thing between Scott and me on a friendship level, but this kiss is not a kiss between friends. It hints at so much more.

Turning quickly, I run up the steps into my building before I decide to throw caution to the wind and drag Scott inside with me.

No, it's much better if we remain friends for the moment.

CHAPTER 26

JASMINE

Three Days Later

News alerts flash across my TV screen, warning of the impending storm as I sit on my sofa, glued to cable news.

I've been closely tracking the progress of the storm over the last twenty-four hours and up till a couple of hours ago I thought I could handle it, but now I'm not so sure. Panic is starting to seep into every cell of my body my heart rate beginning to race. I run through some breathing exercises.

In the past, Lily or Cassie have been with me, keeping my stress levels under control, but tonight I'm alone. Lily is away this week with work and earlier today when Cassie offered to come over, stupid me said I'd be fine. The reality is now hitting me hard. I am far from fine, and it's too late. The storm is here based on the gusts of wind rattling my windows.

I stare wide-eyed at my flatscreen TV as if knowing what's coming will help. It's not an exaggeration to admit I'm terrified. I picked the wrong damn storm to test out my newly held belief that I could pull on my big girl panties and tough out the storm by myself. Foolishly, I thought the experience in the Bahamas had somehow cured me. Damn astraphobia.

I huddle further under my favorite fluffy blanket as I sit terrified on my sofa, hoping the damn stupid blanket will make me feel safer. A fluffy blanket is not going to protect me from the dire warnings of the cable news anchor coming to me via another weather alert flashing on the screen. A text pings on my cell, which is clasped tightly in my hand. I peel back my fingers to check the screen, it's from Scott.

Scott: Hey, Jas, just wanted to check you're okay with the storm coming?

Jasmine: Not really.

I'm so pathetic. I can barely text my hand is shaking.

Scott: Where are you?

Jasmine: At home.

Scott: With Lily?

Jasmine: No, alone.

Scott: I'm on my way.

I nearly cry with relief. Thank God, I tell myself, even though a part of me wishes Scott didn't have to see me have another meltdown over a storm. To be honest at this point I don't care who sees me. I don't want to be alone through this storm.

Then it hits me, how the hell is Scott going to get to me. It's not safe for Scott to be out in the storm. I know he's only two blocks away, but the news anchor said only moments ago, nobody should be out in this. I send another text.

Jasmine: Please be careful.

Suddenly, I'm no longer thinking about me sitting here relatively safe inside my apartment having a panic attack, instead I'm worrying about Scott trying to get to me.

I check my cell for the third time in less than five minutes. Trying to estimate how long it will take from Scott's apartment to mine, walking, running, factoring in the storm. Aargh, I'm driving myself crazy with worry for Scott.

A massive flash of lightning bleeds through the cracks in the closed curtains over the windows, followed moments later by a loud crack of thunder that reverberates through my body. The windows rattling in their frames. Quickly, I hit the remote

switching off the TV with its constant stream of alerts then pull the blanket fully over my head. My chest constricts painfully, and my hands are so sweaty I need to wipe them dry on the blanket.

Switching on my cell, the light from the screen provides some small comfort. I jump as a text comes through.

Scott: I'm downstairs can you ask your doorman to let me up.

The relief has me sinking deeper into my sofa as I quickly send a message to the front desk asking them to let Scott come up. I wait huddled under my blanket, listening for the knock at my door, too scared to move till Scott is here.

Minutes later, a faint knock at my door filters through the fluffy fabric over my head. Before I can even take one step from the sofa, another bright flash of lightning has me running to the door, flinging it open, and throwing myself into the tall, warm, wet body of Scott.

“Hey, Jas, it's okay I'm here now. Come on let's get inside your apartment,” he soothes as tears of relief stream down my face. I'm so far gone with my panic, I'm not able to move, let alone speak. All I can do is blubber all over him.

Scott doesn't hesitate to lift me into his arms, kicking the door shut behind him. Then walks me back into the living room, placing me on the sofa. He strips off his wet coat, sits and drags me onto his lap, blanket and all.

Snuggling into his body, I bury my head into his shoulder. Slowly the heat of his body works its magic, calming the freezing fear which had engulfed me. My heart is no longer racing, instead it beats to a different rhythm which has nothing to do with the storm and everything to do with the hard male body my cheek is resting against.

The storm rages on outside my apartment, but the thunder is less loud and the lightning less bright. Finally, I feel safe in Scott's arms.

"Hey, Jas, are you okay now?" he asks, his head bent low to mine, allowing a whisper of space between his lips and my ear.

I raise my head and cautiously mutter, "I think so." Peering up at him from beneath my blanket. "Thank you so much for coming, Scott. I was so scared you would be hurt."

He swipes strands of my hair from my face as he smiles down at me. "Were you worried about me?" He leans down holding my chin between his thumb and forefinger as he touches his soft lips to mine, sending tingles racing up my spine. "I like that."

I let myself melt into him as his lips caress mine, our tongues exploring tentatively, seeking permission for more as the kiss elevates to the next level. I give myself over to the delicious feelings of lust flooding my body, making me ache for more. Sounds of the storm recede from my conscious mind as I'm overwhelmed by a strong desire to feel Scott's naked body again, under me, over me, and inside me.

Deep down I knew I wouldn't be able to resist him. Our bodies together feel too good.

Moving positions I straddle his hips as he inches his hands up over my ribs to explore under my sweatshirt. His large hands cup my braless breasts and I moan into his mouth. I need more so I reach down to remove the sweatshirt which is preventing him full access. He swiftly removes his T-shirt and hoodie in one movement. It is pure heaven as our bare skin touches. Chest to chest.

"I want more," I gasp out. "I need to feel all of you naked, Scott." Finally, the power of speech has returned to me, when I need it the most.

"Hop up for a second and you'll get your wish, sweetheart."

I jump up eagerly discarding my track pants and panties in about the same time it takes for him to kick his shoes off, remove his jeans and boxer briefs. He reaches for his wallet to pull out a condom, handing it to me before lounging back on my sofa. His legs and arms splayed offering his body to me.

I smile down at him, my eyes running over every inch of his naked body, enjoying the fact that his eyes are checking out every detail of my body, in the same way.

"What now, Jas? You've got all the control to do what you want," he encourages.

Leaning down, I kiss him briefly before sinking to my knees between his legs. His piercing blue eyes darken as he realizes my intent. I lean in to run my tongue softly along his firm

cock, from base to tip. He groans loudly as I lick my lips and trace the same path again.

Scott entwines his hands in my hair, then throws back his head. “Jas, you’re seriously so bloody hot.”

Scott’s eyes widen in surprise as he grumbles, “You’re playing with fire, baby.”

Oh, this is good. I have him in my grips and I love it. I slide a hand between his legs, trailing my finger from his anus to his balls.

Cupping them gently in my hand. I feel his cock pulse in my mouth.

“Fuck, Jas, it’s too much. I want to be inside you when I come. It’s been too long since,” he begs and because I like the sound of his idea, I relent and drawing back I allow his dick to pop out of my mouth.

From the floor I pick up the condom and slide it on.

As I stand to straddle him, I allow him the chance to suckle one nipple then the other into his mouth, simply because it feels amazing. He licks and sucks on my tits till I’m so wet, my legs shake as I hover above him. My need for him to fill me, now desperate.

Scott’s hand reaches between us, holding his cock at the base as I ease down onto him. Sucking air into my lungs as he fills me completely.

He buries his head into my tits again, mumbling, “You feel fucking amazing.”

I cradle his head to my chest, and he nips and sucks on my taught peaks as I tease and taunt his cock. With each stroke of his tongue, I slowly slide up then down, panting breathlessly as I draw closer to the edge. Scott's finger slides once over my clit, and my insides contract. Nearly there, my pleasure builds within me.

Our rhythm increases as I pump down hard onto Scott and he pushes up into me further, deeper. I feel the beginnings of my orgasm flutter through me as together we rise to new heights. Reaching for the moment of release.

Scott's thumb rubs roughly once across my nub and I explode, in a shout of unintelligible sounds.

When I'm drained of my pleasure, I collapse into his arms seeking the closeness of his warm, naked body. He wraps his arms around me, holding me tighter. As a flash of lightning streaks across the room and the ensuing thunder rumbles shortly after. I don't even flinch this time.

Maybe sex with Scott has cured me of my storm phobia. Certainly, any storm from now on, will remind me of this.

The next morning, I come awake slowly, smiling with the memory of last night. This time there are no regrets about sleeping with Scott, the sex was magnificent. I do appreciate the consistency of the sexy Aussie man. I fear he is becoming habit-forming.

I peek my eyes open to see the now-familiar naked man in the bed beside me. I run my eyes down over the hard muscles of his chest, which I know he keeps toned by swimming and working out at the gym.

Then further down to his arms and the wave tattoo which I also now know he got when he was nineteen and trying to figure out what to do with his life. The decision he made of course was to join the air force.

Yes, it's a jolt to the system waking up in bed next to Scott again, but this time is different. This time he's not the groomsman I barely knew. This time I know so much more about the man in the bed beside him.

One of those things I've learned is he likes to kick off the covers in his sleep. My eyes trail lower over his ripped abs and down to the temptation between his legs, standing predictably proud.

"What is it about you checking me out while I sleep?" Scott's deep voice rumbles, making me smile. Yet again, I've been caught ogling his sexy torso and other bits.

I reluctantly drag my eyes slowly back up his body to meet his deep blue eyes. "It does seem to be a habit I've picked up."

"Do you see anything you're tempted by?" he asks, "Or do we need to negotiate a deal like the first time we slept together." I smile at the memory of the first morning on the island and how we ended up having sex again in the morning.

“No need for a deal. This time I think I’ll just take what I want,” I tell him, and his eyes widen as I reach over to cup his balls, leaving him in no doubt as to what I want this morning.

A groan of pleasure rumbles from him as I massage his balls gently.

At the same time, Scott’s hand inches down the sheet covering me, slowly revealing my naked body to his hungry gaze.

He mutters the single word, “Gorgeous,” as his hand goes on its own exploratory path of my body.

The luxury of lying in bed, touching, and being touched, is an experience that only comes with time. Time spent learning about another person intimately. Scott and I have reached this point quickly. These feelings are unfamiliar to me, and the unknown is scary.

I don’t know how or when things got serious, but they have, for me at least.

CHAPTER 27

SCOTT

A morning shower shared with a beautiful woman could be addictive. Now sipping coffee, we are back on her sofa watching cable news. The storm has caused major flooding across the city due to record rainfall, something like a month's rainfall in twenty-four hours. Luckily no one has been hurt.

Jasmine received a text message from her dad, saying the office will be closed for the day and she's currently passing the message on to her staff, her lip caught in her teeth as she concentrates on the text messages.

Finally, she looks up, saying, "Cassie just texted to check I'm okay. I hope you don't mind that I said you came to my rescue last night, and you're still here."

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask, frowning. I was hoping she'd be happy for me to stay a little longer. I like spending time with Jasmine in and out of the bedroom.

She reaches across the gap between us and places her hand on my arm. “No, no ... not at all, unless you need to go. It’s nice having you here.” She squeezes my arm as if emphasizing her words. “I just wanted to tell you that Cassie and now probably Luke knows you stayed last night.”

“If that’s all, I’m good to stay. Not much else we can do when the city is such a mess.” I nod toward the images of destruction still flicking through on the news. I’m not at all bothered that our friends know about Jas and me spending time together.

I’m reminded of my upcoming weekend with them at the beach house.

“Hey, Jas, next weekend I’m going to Blake’s family beach house with Blake, Luke, and the girls. Would you like to come? You could save me from a weekend of having to watch all that couple stuff. I love the guys and girls, but seriously it can get a bit awkward around them, when I’m by myself.”

“Cass and Bec have told me about the beach house, it sounds great for a weekend. But wouldn’t it make us as bad. You know like a couple too.” Her brow crinkles in a frown and makes me stop and think.

I squint at her over my glass of juice. “You do remember what we did last night and this morning, as it was the kind of thing a couple does. I mean I’m not having sex with anyone else. In fact, I haven’t had sex with anyone else since we were together on the island.”

I hold my breath waiting for Jas to confirm the same and not too sure how I'm going to feel if she says she's slept with someone else.

"Same for me," she confirms, and I release my breath, relieved more than I could have imagined. My relief is so complete I want to pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless but then she says, "I know we do have some amazing sex together, but I don't really see us as a couple."

In the blink of an eye, my happy bubble bursts. I'm disappointed by her words. This revelation doesn't sit well with me as I like the thought of us as a couple. But I guess she has a different idea.

Maybe it's time for another deal.

"Hey, we haven't only had some amazing sex, we've had loads of amazing sex and there's plenty more where that came from."

I put my juice down on the coffee table so I can trail my hand down her arm. Then tilting her chin toward me I place a lingering kiss on her coffee-infused lips. She doesn't resist my kiss or touch, so I imagine she can be convinced to spend a weekend at the beach with me.

"We have all day free of work. Any ideas of what we could possibly do to amuse ourselves over the next few hours?"

Smiling back at me, she jokes, "I can't think of anything. Do you have any ideas?"

“One or two,” I tell her, taking her coffee cup from her hands then putting it next to my glass on the coffee table, I begin to show her what I have in mind.

“You’re insatiable,” she says as my hand cups her breast over her T-shirt.

“And is that an issue for you?” I ask. She shakes her head before whipping off her T-shirt. We’ve been here before, and I know where we’re headed next. More amazing sex.

Five Days Later

Finally, after trying all week, I was able to convince Jas late last night to come with me to the beach house for the weekend. I’ve hired an SUV and I’m currently parked outside her apartment, waiting. I’m a bit worried she’s going to back out at the last minute as I send her a text saying, *I’m here*.

But when my cell buzzes shortly after with her reply, telling me she’s on her way down, I can’t hold back a broad grin from stretching across my face. A whole weekend with Jasmine sounds damn good.

Especially as I haven’t seen her since I left her apartment the day after the storm. I really did think our sexy night and day together would have changed things between us, but I guess it wasn’t to be, in her mind at least. She still seems to be keeping me at a distance, insisting on us being friends only

now with occasional benefits. I want more. I want people to know she's mine like a proper relationship. I couldn't have imagined ever feeling this strongly about a single woman, but Jas is not just some woman, she's truly special and unique to me.

The sun is rising as the doors of the apartment building open and Jas skips out with her overnight bag slung casually over her shoulder and there's no stopping the instant hardening of my cock.

"Good morning, sunshine," I tease as the first rays of light catch in her glossy auburn hair which falls loosely across her shoulders.

Man, she's gorgeous, any time of day, in any setting. Her smile beams up at me, encouraging me to follow through from my hug to a kiss on her luscious lips. Her emerald eyes sparkle and give me hope that this weekend I'll be getting more than a hug and a kiss.

"You don't seem to be the same woman who has taken a week of convincing to come away with me for a weekend at the beach." I continue to hold her within the circle of my arms, happy she's willing enough to stay there. Maybe I got it wrong and things between us did change the night of the storm.

She laughs. "Well, let's just say when I decide to do something I'm all in. Besides look at the sunrise, it's going to be a beautiful day. Maybe even warmer than usual for late September."

I continue to grin down at her like an idiot. “Well, thanks for the weather update and I agree this should be a fun weekend, so let’s get to it. Climb in while I throw your bag in the back. She peers into the back of the SUV and her eyes widen when she sees how full it is of boards, cardboard boxes, and bags.

“Wow, are you moving into the beach house,” she asks.

“I guess it kind of looks that way. But no, I promised I’d leave some stuff at Blake’s beach house for his family to use. It’s all my company’s gear and I like sharing it with friends. His family are cool with letting me stay at the beach house whenever so it’s the least I can do.”

“Finally, I’ll get to see your merchandise,” Jas declares as she settles into the passenger seat.

I can’t help but respond, “Jas, you have seen my merchandise plenty of times. You only need to say the word and I’ll whip it out for another private viewing.” I wink at her, grinning from ear to ear.

With a playful slap on my leg, she does one of her cute eye rolls. This weekend is already looking promising.

CHAPTER 28

JASMINE

Arriving at the Southampton beach house a couple of hours later, my real estate brain can't help but envy the location and style of the house. It's one of the original shingle-style beach houses which I've always loved. They have so much more character than the modern architectural buildings which have been popping up in recent years along the coastline.

As I jump down from the SUV, Scott is already grabbing our overnight bags from the back, leaving the rest of the gear to bring in later.

Walking up to the large wooden door, Scott rings the bell and within moments the door swings open with Cassie on the other side. She envelopes me in a tight hug as if we hadn't seen each other for months rather than the reality of only a week ago at Friday drinks.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me till this morning, that you were coming for the weekend," she reprimands me. Little does she know I only finally decided to come, last night.

Over drinks with Lily and Trudy, I shared my worry about going all in with Scott. I like him, maybe even more than like, and talking through my feelings with the girls made me see clearly I need to stop running scared.

They encouraged me to take a leap and accept Scott's weekend invitation with lots of 'hot Aussie sex'. Trudy's words not mine. I guess I didn't need much convincing after the way Scott came to my rescue the other day during the storm and distracted me in the most delicious way. I did however need some reassurance that I wasn't opening myself up to future heartache as this weekend away together was always going to be a turning point for us.

Cassie whispers meaningfully for my ears only, "We need to talk," then louder for Scott's benefit she tells us, everyone is out on the back deck. "Come on through."

Scott drops our overnight bags inside the door, saying, "Hey, Cass, can you send the guys out to help me unpack the rest of the gear." I offer to help but he insists the guys can do it.

Shrugging, I follow Cass through to the open plan kitchen and living room with large glass doors spanning the back wall. Wow, this room would be fantastic in summer with those doors all pulled back open, expanding the living space. She leads me straight out onto the deck and quickly sends Luke and Blake off to help Scott.

The wide wooden deck spans the length of the house, and even though it is tucked into the protection of the grass-topped

dunes, it offers a panoramic view of the beach. It appears to be a quiet beach. Only a few walkers down by the water's edge stroll by, some with children trailing behind or dogs bouncing about at their feet. Still, they are a distance away with the strip of dunes between the house and the beach, then the expanse of sand down to the water.

Hugging Bec, the three of us settle down into deck chairs, turning them around to face each other instead of out to the view. And as soon as the guys are out of earshot, Cassie begins her interrogation.

“What the heck, Jas? You never told me you and Scott were a thing. I know you've been a one-time, two-time, I've lost count kind of thing, but not a real-life thing. I'm one of your besties. How could you hold out on me like this?” Bec snickers into her coffee cup, choosing to leave all the quizzing to Cassie.

Pouring myself a coffee, I explain, “We're not a ‘thing’ really. No scrub that, I don't know what you'd call Scott and me, but I guess our relationship kind of changed the other night when he came over and stayed with me during the storm.”

Cassie sits bolt upright in her chair, “Whoa, back up there. You never said Scott was with you when I checked in to see if you were okay.”

Looking down into my coffee cup, I explain, “Well, he wasn't, at that point. I was going to try to ride out the storm by myself, like an adult but it turned out when the storm hit, I was

one big baby.” I grimace. “Pathetic really. But by that time, it was too late for you to come. Scott texted, realized I was alone, and ran straight over.”

“Ahh, that’s so sweet,” chimes in Bec. She is a bit of a romantic at heart, well more so than any of my other friends.

“Yeah, it was.” I sigh, remembering how safe he made me feel. When I think about how quickly Scott ran to my rescue, putting himself in danger, I get a bit mushy inside.

At that moment the guys return carrying surfboard bags and cardboard boxes. Scott glances my way and my smile beams back at him. He answers silently with one of his crooked, sexy smiles and a quirk of his brow. I know I confuse him a lot of the time with my crazy mood swings.

The guys place the bags and boxes up against the wood railing of the deck. Wow, Scott really did bring a lot of gear, now that I can see it all clearly lined up.

Cassie springs up from her seat like a child on Christmas morning. Having grown up in Daytona Beach, Florida, she has been surfing most of her life and is clearly excited to see new boards.

Scott passes one of the board bags to her, saying, “Here, Cassie—this one is especially for you.”

Her wide-eyed stare shows her surprise, followed by a squeal of delight as she pulls out a beautiful sleek board with a wave design in purple fading to pale pink. Not knowing anything about surfing, I can only assume from Cassie’s

reaction, it's a good board. The one thing I can tell, looking at the board is it looks pretty and is so Cassie's style.

She throws her arms around Scott enthusiastically. "Oh my god, this is the best surprise ever."

"Much as I'm enjoying the thanks, I must confess it was your husband's idea," Scott admits.

Cassie discards Scott instantly as she runs into Luke's arms announcing loudly, "Best husband ever." He smiles lovingly down at her. They are kind of cute together.

Blake unzips the other boards from their bags, propping them up against the railing. "Hey, Scott, these are awesome." Blake's right, the boards do look awesome, not that I have a clue. The shapes are streamlined and sleek. The artwork unique and beautiful. It doesn't take an expert to see the quality in the craftsmanship.

A flush suffuses Scott's cheeks all the way up and over his chiseled cheekbones as he looks at the lineup of his boards. With an appreciative audience he explains each one, the last being the new board he will be releasing next spring. I watch enthralled by his passion and enthusiasm for the boards he designed and crafted.

This is a side of Scott I've not seen before, the successful businessman.

"C'mon, Luke, let's go try these beauties out," Cassie insists as she drags Luke toward the glass doors.

Scott turns to me. “Hey, Jas, I’ve included a longboard if you want to have your first surfing lesson like I promised. You too, Bec, if you’re interested. There are a couple of wetsuits in the cardboard boxes.”

I jump up from my chair, nearly knocking it over. “I’m game. Are you coming, Bec?”

“Totally, I’ve always wanted to try it,” agrees Bec.

Blake shows Scott and me to our bedroom upstairs and the first thing I notice is the large picture window on the far wall with a panoramic view of the Atlantic. Wow, waking up to a view like that is going to be awesome.

We take turns to change in the adjoining bathroom. An unspoken agreement to guarantee no sexy distractions and as a result we are back on the deck soon after.

Cassie and Luke already have their wetsuits on and are ready to go. “Don’t start any girl talk without me,” Cassie begs Bec and me before following Luke to the beach, her new board tucked tightly under her arm. I’ve not seen Cassie look so happy since her wedding as she follows Luke to the ocean.

Scott passes me a wetsuit, while Blake assists Bec into hers. I didn’t realize putting a wetsuit on required so much intimate touching.

Scott catches me watching them and leans into me, “Do you want me to help you in to your wetsuit?”

With a grin, I tell him I’m all good. If he starts touching me like Blake is doing to Bec, there will be no surfing for us

today. And I want to give this surfing thing a go now I've half squeezed my body into the black neoprene torture chamber called a wetsuit.

With some wriggling and writhing, much to Scott's amusement and apparent enjoyment I manage to finally drag the wetsuit up my arms and over my shoulders unaided. Although Scott does help with the zipper. Not even a contortionist could do that up without assistance. I'm exhausted and I'm not even in the water yet.

Scott takes my hand and leads me down to the beach, explaining how to stand up on the board as we trudge across the strip of golden sand to the water's edge. Then with a few practices on the sand, we head into the water.

In the waist-high water, where the waves are small, he holds the board steady as I lie down on it like he showed me on the beach. "Now, put your legs together, Jas."

Laughing, I reply, "Wow, never thought I'd hear you say those words to me."

Scott grins at me and with a couple of taps on my butt which have my blood stirring hotly, he demands, "No backchat to your instructor." If that's the sort of discipline Scott is dishing out, maybe he'll be getting a lot more.

Scott encourages me to paddle toward the whitewash break of the waves. When we are on the other side of the small break, he turns me around, pointed toward the beach. Then, dropping a quick kiss to my lips he reminds me of how to pop up to stand on the board.

It's not a long wait for what Scott considers to be the perfect wave for me. Remembering all of his instructions, I push up to stand for the first time on a surfboard.

Sure, it was only for seconds but I'm elated nonetheless by my early achievement. Hopping back on the board I paddle back to where Scott is waiting for me in the water, with a quick victory kiss. The perfect incentive. A few more attempts and I'm able to ride a small wave all the way to the beach, with a lot of hooting and hollering from my personal cheer squad, Scott.

Learning to surf is the most fun I've had since ... I snorkeled with Scott in the Bahamas. Really spending any time with him is fun.

A few more successful rides to shore, and my arm and leg muscles are screaming with the strain of a new physical activity. I let Scott know I'm going to have to take a break on the beach, and he scoops me into a hug for a lingering kiss, then pops onto the board like a pro to paddle out to join Cassie and Luke.

Watching him disappear under a breaking wave, I hope one day I'll be able to join him out where the big break is.

Oh my god, I'm falling so deep, I'm already planning future weekends away for us, and I wonder if it's something he wants too.

CHAPTER 29

SCOTT

As the sun sets, I lay back contented on a lounge on the deck and think how much I've enjoyed today hanging out with my mates and in particular, Jasmine. It reminds me of growing up in Australia. Sure, different group of guys and girls, different brand of beer, different beach, and it was a bloody lot warmer in Sydney, but the same kind of strong friendships.

Bec and Blake have wandered off to the now dark beach and Cassie and Luke have just gone up to their room, leaving Jas and me alone on the deck.

Looking sideways to the lounge beside me where Jas is lying back relaxing, my eyes skim over her gorgeous reclining figure.

She turns her head to look at me as if she can sense my eyes drinking in her body. "Thanks for teaching me to surf today. It was so much fun." Her voice is like a warm breeze disturbing the silence of the still night.

“You were a natural and it was my pleasure ... and speaking of pleasure, would you like to shift your cute little ass over here onto my much more comfortable lounge. It’s not a hammock but I’m sure we can make it just as good.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she replies with a mischievous grin as she moves to join me. I turn on my side to give her more room as she scooches in close to me.

“So, you think I have a cute ass?” she asks, still grinning.

Wrapping my arms around her, I run my hand down over the peachy cheeks in question. “Baby, you have a deliciously cute ass. I especially like seeing your gorgeous ass barely covered in your green bikini. Man, that drives me crazy.”

Gently I pull her close, so she is flush up against me. “Can you feel how much I love talking about your cute ass?” I’m loving the way my hardening shaft nestles between her thighs, like our bodies were made to go together.

Laughing, she admits, “I like driving you crazy. It definitely has its benefits.” Snuggling her in closer so the warmth of my body melts into hers, has me thinking of a lot more things about Jas’s body which drive me crazy.

I nuzzle into her neck, one of my favorite places, smiling as she trembles in my arms. Then, placing my lips to her ear, I murmur, “Hmm, you smell good too ... irresistible. I don’t ever want to let you go.” The words have popped out of my mouth without thought and I have no plans to take them back.

Her pretty glossy lips drop open, and I take the opportunity to steal a kiss, a deep, lingering kiss. My first proper taste of her lips today, lips which more and more I see as belonging to me.

When we are both a little breathless and before things get out of hand, I pull back and say, “I’ve been waiting to do that all day.” I’m rewarded with one of her special *just for me* smiles.

“You only had to ask,” she teases. Good to know, next time I won’t wait a whole day for a proper kiss, I’ll ask straight up at the start. Especially now I know the answer is likely to be yes.

With her head burrowed into my chest, Jas mumbles almost to herself, “You were right about this weekend—it’s like a couples retreat.”

“Yep, we are surrounded. If you can’t beat them, join them.” I throw the words out there, hoping to start a conversation about us. I need to tell her how I feel. And I need to know how she feels about us.

“I think you’ve had too much wine. At what point did you decide you wanted to be a *couple*?” She lifts her head from my chest, and looks me directly in the eye, waiting for my response.

“Excuse me, but I wasn’t the one who needed convincing to come away for the weekend,” I remind her.

She chuckles softly, dropping her head back onto my chest. “Fair point.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say, for torturing me for a week.” I pinch her gently on the butt, eliciting a giggle.

Then more seriously I say, “Jas, what made you change your mind about coming with me? I thought the night of the storm, things had moved forward for us.”

She shifts against me and as I feel her silence becoming uncomfortable, she murmurs, “I agree ... things did change between us that night. I could no longer fool myself into thinking we were just friends, it felt like so much more. It scared me a little.”

“Why?” I push for more, feeling that we have reached a critical point in defining *us* into the future.

Again, another extended silence follows before she finally answers, “I don’t want to get hurt again.” Her voice is low and soft.

There is a real vulnerability behind her words, which shocks me. She’s got it all wrong, I would never want to hurt her. I’ve not wanted relationships in the past but now with Jas, it’s exactly what I do want, a serious long-term commitment.

“I’d never do anything to hurt you. I’m not a cheater. You can trust me. I want to be with you, only you, for as long as you’ll have me ... which hopefully is a very long time.” Ignoring my racing heart, I plow on, terrified I may never get another chance to tell her how I feel. “I’m sorry if that freaks

you out but it's the truth, and if you need time to get used to the idea, then I'm okay with that too. Just please don't make me wait too long. It's torture trying to remain just friends."

My words tumble out, surprising me almost as much as I think they surprise her. I've never been one to pour my heart out, or even felt the urge to do so in the past.

"Really!" she gasps out. "What brought this change about?" she asks breathlessly, her sweet lips slightly open. My hope soars along with the pounding of my heart. I wonder if she can hear it. I wonder if she recognizes how pivotal this moment is. This could be everything.

Placing my hand under her chin I tilt her face toward me and tell her honestly, "You, Jasmine. You made me rethink my view on relationships. In fact you've made me reassess my whole life. I'm falling in love with you."

Her eyes widen, so I continue in what I hope is a reassuring tone, "If you don't want to call us a couple, it's fine with me, but in all other ways we are."

She lifts her head again to make eye contact. "Does this mean we're ... dating now?" Her words are cautious as she tries to put a label on our change in relationship status. I gently rub my thumb over her bottom lip which is currently caught between her teeth.

Relief washing over me, with the realization that she wants this too. "Jas, we are so far beyond dating. I don't mean to scare you, but this thing between us is a full-on adult relationship."

“What the heck? When did that happen?” she jokes and I’m encouraged to say more.

“It was probably the last night in the Bahamas when I realized I was falling for you. Isn’t it crazy how you go through life avoiding relationships? Then out of nowhere the right woman comes along and ... BAM.”

I think I’ve rendered her speechless as instead of speaking she reaches up to pull my face down to meet hers and begins to kiss the living daylights out of me.

When we finally surface for some much-needed air, she gasps out, “I agree. Bam, and there’s no going back.”

Leaning back in, she captures my lips again, and it feels like we’re both pouring all of our emotions into the deep, passionate kiss.

Finally, when we drag our lips apart for the second time, she exclaims, “I can’t believe it ... I have a new boyfriend. Does that mean I can demand you fuck me whenever I want? As often as I want?” I almost choke on the laugh which bursts from deep in my chest.

“Absolutely, baby. Are you demanding my attention right now?”

“Yes—take me to bed, Scott,” she says in what she probably thinks is her demanding voice but sounds to me like the siren call of a sex goddess.

CHAPTER 30

JASMINE

It's early dawn. A pale sliver of light is breaking through the shutters. The house is quiet with only the sounds of waves rolling gently up to the shore. Last night was perfect following a perfect day spent with Scott and my friends.

I'd been so worried about coming away this weekend. Worried I was getting in deeper, risking my heart to a man who possibly didn't want it.

Lucky for me, I took the chance. He wants my heart and I want him to have it.

Right from the beginning Scott's been different. He's open, honest, and loyal. He wants to take care of me, sometimes in a bit of a bossy way, but I'm okay with that. I know it comes from his deep-seeded need to protect.

Last night after we made love, we talked some more about us. It's like a dam wall had burst for both of us and our thoughts and feelings came spilling out. We were lovers and

friends, speaking truths to each other, sharing in a way I've never been able to do with a guy.

I turn my head to the side and look my fill at the fine specimen of a naked man, lying next to me in the bed. My new boyfriend. I run my eyes over every single inch of his tanned skin, especially his carved and sculpted abs, which are temptingly within reach.

I can't believe I get to run my fingers over each one of the ridges which ripple across his washboard stomach, anytime I want. His physique, or 'rig' as he calls it, is impressive.

Curling my fingers tight into my palm, to resist the temptation for now, my eyes travel lower down to my favorite part, the hard jutting seven inches of his body, which I'm desperate to enjoy again. I mean it's been at least five hours since he was inside me.

"You see anything you like?" Scott rumbles in his sexy Australian drawl, which I'm learning is even deeper and lust-inducing, first thing in the morning.

"Definitely," I admit as I drag my eyes slowly back up to meet his deep blue ones, chiseled features, and messy blond hair.

He turns his head to face me, and whispers, "I'll let you in on a secret. I like waking up to you checking out my rig too." I giggle at his words, which mirror exactly where my thoughts went moments ago.

No longer needing to hold back, I trace the tip of my finger over the wave design inked on the inside of his impressive, muscled arm. “Have I ever told you I love your tattoo? *Live, Love, Surf*. It’s such a cool motto, so you.”

“I’m kind of counting on you loving other things about me too.” Not wanting to stroke his ego, I instead trail my finger down over his abs on my way to stroking something else.

“Oh, don’t worry I love lots of things about you. Your cockiness, your Australian accent, and ... your crazy flying.”

His jaw clenches, the only sign of discomfort as my finger inches closer to my goal.

“You haven’t even been flying with me,” he grinds out. “When you come to Florida, I’ll take you ... up.” I smile at the way his voice squeaked on the last word, as my finger deliberately brushed against his dick.

“Was that an invitation to go to Florida with you? Because if so, it sucked,” I tell him, at the same time as moving my finger back up to his stomach.

“As my girlfriend, I guess I thought you’d like to see my other life. My condo, my factory, my bird, my big comfy bed overlooking the ocean.” He shifts his body, allowing me better access to run my finger across the tip of his cock. He groans.

“Okay, you’ve convinced me. I’d love to see the other half of your life. And you can give me some more surfing lessons. I want to be able to go hang out in the ocean with you.”

“Deal or maybe I should say it’s a date, now we’re dating. Let’s do it soon. Now back to the things you love about me. I think your list is a bit short. Don’t you love my wit, and charm?”

I laugh at further evidence of his arrogance. “Oh please. I’ll concede you can be charming sometimes, but witty is a bit of a stretch.”

Scott tweaks my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, sending a shaft of desire instantly to my core.

“Hey, that’s a little naughty.” And my finger this time draws circles around his tip. His cock jerks in response.

Bending his head, he licks the same nipple, then says, “Don’t pretend to be upset, you love naughty.” I nod vigorously in agreement.

I also love the way his large warm hand has reached around to cup my butt cheek, then begins to gently massage it. My whole body tingles with want. “I can be very naughty.” I roll my eyes at another of his silly innuendos.

I think it’s time for some teasing payback. Scott’s eyes widen as I start to slide down in the bed and he realizes my intent.

“Are you sure you want to go there? You know first thing in the morning I’m always on the edge.” I smile up at him angelically, then continue to slide down.

I waste no time in wrapping my hand around his fully erect cock and lick the pre-cum from his tip as Scott watches on

through hooded eyes.

With a definite wobble in his voice he pleads, “Fuck that feels good. But really, I don’t think I can hold on long.” *That’s the plan*, I think to myself.

Ignoring his growled-out warning, I lovingly cup his balls, rolling them gently in my hand, massaging them as with my other hand I stroke up and down his shaft. Then suck him into my mouth.

Hollowing my cheeks, I take him deeper. In then, nearly all the way back out. Stroking, massaging as his groans get louder, his hand moving to the back of my head, setting the pace.

His groans merging into desperate grunts, encouraging me to move faster. I relax my throat muscles to accommodate his length. His fingers snag in my hair, pulling desperately.

I’m loving the power I wield over this large man.

“Fuck ... Jas ... sss,” he grunts out. “Fuck I’m close,” he growls a warning.

I want to devour him. I want all of him. And I increase the rhythm, humming against his dick.

“Oh, fuck ...” he cries out as he releases down my throat, giving me everything. I swallow every last drop.

Crawling back up his body, he pulls me to him, nuzzling into my neck as his hands travel over my sensitized skin. “You’re fucking amazing. And so damn sexy,” Scott whispers into my ear.

Grinning proudly, I kiss him deeply so he can taste himself on my tongue.

When we break apart from the kiss, he tells me, “I think it’s now only fair I return the pleasure,” and he begins to trail hot kisses down my breasts, across my stomach and further still. My eyes close as I melt beneath his touch.

Later lying back satiated in Scott’s arms after some seriously good loving, I sigh contentedly. “I think I love having a boyfriend.” Then realizing I haven’t yet told him exactly how strong my feelings for him are, I say, “No, let me rephrase that ... I know I love my boyfriend.”

Scott squeezes me tighter in his arms, then drops a kiss on my forehead before saying, “I love you too, baby.”

My heart soars. I never would have imagined my one-time deal with Scott could be the beginning of so many more times and ultimately a one-time only love.

EPILOGUE JASMINE

Three Months Later

We've finally landed in Sydney, Australia. I mean seriously I'm in Australia, way the heck on the other side of the world. Mind you I feel a mess, but who wouldn't after being stuck in a flying tin can for over twenty-two hours. Even if it was in first class.

I've always wanted to visit Australia, so this is a dream come true. But who'd have thought I would be making the trip with my Aussie boyfriend beside me, certainly not me. In fact, a year ago I would have laughed if someone had suggested I would be in a proper relationship, forget the idea of a serious boyfriend. But the last three months have proved I can be happy and extremely satisfied with one guy, when the guy in question is Scott.

I twist in my window seat as I try to see more of the harbor Sydney is famous for, stretching below. I can hear Scott

chuckling beside me, and I suspect it's about my childlike excitement at arriving in his home city.

I turn back around to face him and ask, "What exactly are you laughing about?" My voice is laced with a pretended sternness I'm far from feeling. Besides one look at the sexy man beside me and it's hard to feel anything other than a desire to jump his bones. Right here, right now.

In fact, in the last twenty-two hours when the cabin lights were dimmed, we did get a little naughty beneath the blankets. Let's just say we are both now members of the mile-high club, thanks to the privacy of first class.

Scott drops a brief kiss on my lips before saying, "It makes me happy to see your excitement in arriving in my hometown. But I thought you were a seasoned global traveler."

"I am but this is different. This is bucket list stuff."

He lets another chuckle escape and I'm not in the least bit bothered when he says heatedly, "You are bucket list stuff."

With a jabbing punch into the firm muscle of his arm, I tell him, "You know we've talked about your silly pickup lines in the past. They don't work."

"I don't know, seemed to work pretty damn well last night when I was pumping into you, thousands of miles above the Pacific Ocean." He leans forward to nuzzle my neck sending sparks shooting through my veins.

"Stop it, I don't need reminding and neither do you. We're about to land and that means you getting up and walking

through a busy airport terminal with this” Reaching down into his lap, I gently squeeze his hard cock straining behind the zipper of his jeans. As he groans into my ear I smile and think, now who’s not laughing.

This is how Scott and I are as a couple, constantly challenging each other, the sexual chemistry never far below the surface. I love it. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier than I have in the last three months.

Luckily for us, the plane landing and taxiing to the terminal building takes another fifteen minutes, enough time for Scott to ensure his erection has reduced in size.

Another of the perks of first-class is we get to disembark first, so we are quickly ushered from the plane through passport control then baggage collection.

Once we’ve passed through the security doors into the main terminal building, we make our way through the gathered crowd, who are waiting for the return of their loved ones. Our driver is standing patiently to the side, waving us over as he recognizes Scott amongst the arrivals.

My nerves are starting to kick in as I settle into the back seat of the car and Scott climbs in beside me. The moment of truth I’m on my way to meet Scott’s family.

Not being a big relationship kind of girl makes this a unique experience and for the first time in my life I worry what they will think of me.

Feeling Scott's eyes on me, I turn to look at him as he reaches for my hand.

"Hey, it's okay they'll love you," he says as if he's telepathic and can read my thoughts. It surprises me still, even after a couple of months together, how in tune with each other we really are.

A short while later the driver turns into a wide driveway and the large electronic metal gate slides open, allowing us to pass through. From this view it's hard to get an impression of the house beyond as we drive almost immediately into a garage area large enough to hold three cars. This is the family home where Scott grew up and I try to imagine him on his pushbike coming through the same gateway.

Getting out of the car, Scott takes my hand again and asks, "Are you okay?" He looks down at me with concern etched across his brow. I guess I'm not doing as good a job as I thought at hiding my nerves.

"Kiss me," I say, knowing one of Scott's kisses makes me forget almost everything else around me.

Of course, I don't need to ask him twice as he instantly wraps his arms around me, capturing my lips in a long hard kiss that takes my breath away.

The sound of running feet on wooden floorboards has us breaking apart, just in time for Scott to catch the woman flying into his arms. I'm guessing this is Scott's sister, Gemma, based on the enthusiastic welcome home. He's told me before how close they were growing up. Their closeness also probably has

something to do with her being set to marry Scott's best friend in five days' time.

Finally breaking her hold on her big brother, Gemma turns around and embraces me with almost as much enthusiasm. "I can't believe Scotty has finally brought a girl home. It's so good to meet you, Jasmine."

Already, I like Scott's sister and my earlier nerves have completely disappeared. Hooking us on each side of her, she leads us through the doorway into a wide hallway that opens to a large open plan living area.

It's now clear to see this is an impressive harborside mansion with the living area providing views across the famous sparkling blue harbor, which is laid out before me in all its expansive glory. Wow, now that is a million-dollar view.

Gemma moves us further into the room, as an older blonde woman walks briskly across the marble floors throwing herself into Scott's waiting arms. A huge loving smile on her face and if I'm not mistaken a few tears in her eyes. Scott releases her and drags me forward by the hand to introduce me to his mom. Like the welcome from his sister, his mom pulls me into a warm hug, telling me how much she's been looking forward to meeting me.

When his mom steps back from the hug, Scott is beaming, in a way I've never seen him look before.

"I'm so happy to welcome you to our home, Jasmine. We've waited a long time for Scott to bring a girl home to meet us." I raise an eyebrow at Scott as his sister and mother have now

both made similar comments. I'll need to quiz him about that later as it's obvious from the slight embarrassed flush on his scruff-covered jawline there is a story behind the comments.

"I'm really pleased to meet you all too," I respond, and his mom's smile broadens.

"Oh, I've missed hearing a New York accent, I don't know if Scott told you but I'm originally from Boston." Scott had mentioned it, but I never would have guessed as any remnants of her American accent are only detectable if you know to listen for them.

"But let me get you kids settled in the pool house before I start bombarding you with questions. I'm so excited to have you finally here but I'm sure you're feeling tired after the long flight. Gemma, can you please show them where they'll be staying."

"Mom, I think I can still find my own way to the pool house, unless you moved it in the last two years," Scott jokes.

"I only want to make sure Jasmine knows where everything is."

"I do know how to look after my girlfriend," Scott mutters almost to himself.

But like mom's the world over she hears him, and clutching her hand to her heart, says, "Oh, Scott, I'm so glad to see you finally settling down. I never thought this day would come. It makes me so happy."

Scott again looks uncomfortable as he says, “Come on, Gemma, lead the way before Mom embarrasses me anymore.”

Gemma giggles as she takes us out through a large glass door, throwing back over her shoulder to me, “Ignore my mother, she has wanted us married and churning out grandbabies since we reached our mid-twenties.”

I’m a little startled by the comment, but I kind of get it as my mother shares a similar sentiment.

Scott doesn’t even attempt to hide his groan. “I thought with you getting married, Gem, the pressure would be off me.”

“No such luck, brother dear. You are still a target, especially now you have a girlfriend. I think she feels like she is coming off a win with me and Matty, so you guys are next.”

Walking past the tempting blue pool, Scott is momentarily distracted and leans down to whisper, “I hope you remembered to pack my favorite green bikini. Or maybe the red one.”

I let out a laugh at his ridiculous comment and roll my eyes at him but secretly I love how obsessed he is at seeing me in my bikini. Wait till he gets a look at my new white one.

The pool house is separate from the main house and down closer to the water. It includes a self-contained studio apartment with a balcony that is suspended over the harbor. I’m looking forward to waking up tomorrow in bed next to Scott with those uninterrupted water views.

After quickly showing us around, Gemma skips out the front door saying she’ll catch us later at lunch. Our luggage is

already lined up neatly against the wall beside the front door, deposited by the driver earlier. Great, I'll be able to freshen up before lunch.

Finally alone, Scott pulls me into his arms with the whispered promise of more naked closeness in the shower. Oh yes, I need a shower to wash away the long-haul plane journey feeling and even better if it's a shared shower with Scott.

But first I have to ask him, "What were your mom and sister talking about? They made it sound like I was the first girl you've ever brought home."

Scott buries his face into my neck mumbling, "Maybe you are."

I pull back sharply grinning at him. "Seriously, and you didn't think to mention it? Like no pressure or anything."

"Jas, don't worry, they can't help but love you as much as I do."

Scott's sweet words as always have me melting back into his arms

EPILOGUE SCOTT

Five Days Later

I can't believe that today my little sister, Gemma, is marrying my best mate from school, Matty Jones. How did I not see this day coming all those years ago when Matt and I hung out at Bondi with the local girls, Gemma tagging along on the excuse of wanting to surf with us.

It feels a world away now as I stand proudly watching Gemma and Matty exchange wedding vows. Jasmine by my side holding my hand and looking beautiful in a dark green dress that matches her eyes.

Mom and Dad on my other side, both trying to hold back tears of joy. Matty always felt like another child to them, he was around our place so often and I guess today they feel it's become official.

I glance down at Jasmine, and as if she feels my eyes on her she looks up at me smiling. It hits me again how much I love

this woman beside me. I want her always beside me. Commitment no longer feels like a dreaded disease to be avoided at all costs. Instead, when I think of a commitment with Jasmine, it feels right.

A silent question creases Jasmine's brow and I squeeze her hand briefly before looking back to where Gemma and Matty are exchanging rings.

It's late and thankfully quiet with the loud wedding celebrations of the day still ringing in my ears. We arrived back at my parent's house a short while ago and we're now finally alone on the balcony of the pool house.

I'm lying back on the daybed cushions, with Jasmine tucked tightly against my chest as we look out at the boats bobbing on the velvety blackness of the harbor water, illuminated only by tonight's bright moonlight. There is only a slight breeze tonight, enough to occasionally ding the rigging on the nearby moored yachts as they sway back and forth.

I drop another kiss to the top of Jas's head as we sit in comfortable silence, and I can't think of a more perfect ending to the day than lying here with the woman I love.

Although maybe there is one way, I can make a more perfect ending to today and for once it doesn't involve sex.

I take Jasmine's hand in mine. "Today watching my little sister so happy marrying my best friend was special but what was even more special, Jas, was having you there beside me. I always want you beside me."

She tilts her face up to mine, and Jasmine's beautiful green eyes sparkle in the moonlight.

I swallow past the lump in my throat before asking, "Is that something you want too, Jas? Us together always?"

"Yes, I want that too, Scott. Are you suggesting a new one-time deal?" she whispers tentatively.

Shifting from behind her, I stand to move around the daybed to her side.

"Yes, so I better do this right then," I tell her before bending down on one knee and saying, "Jasmine, I love you so much. Will you please always be beside me as my wife, lover, and friend?"

"Oh, Scott, yes always and forever. I love you too." Tears well in her eyes, as I lean forward to kiss her waiting lips lightly.

"I think we've got ourselves a new deal then," I say before sealing the deal with another deeper, more lingering kiss.

But in case she has any doubts about my feelings, I drag my lips away and whisper in her ear, "I love you, Jasmine."

My words bring our lips together again as I begin to show her just how deep my love goes.

The End

If you missed Cassie and Luke's second chance love story, then click [here](#) for their story, Broken Lovers.

If you'd like to read how Blake and Bec break some rules, then click [here](#) for their story, Forbidden Lovers.

And if you love a Christmas novella, then December 2022 you can catch up for the holidays with your favorite couples and a new sexy meet cute between Madison and Jarrod, Jasmine's moody brother. Click [here](#) to pre-order now.

Coming Late October 2022

Book 1 in a new series trilogy The Carlson Dynasty. Hunter and Trudy, a friends with benefits story. Click [here](#) to pre-order now.

BENNY'S ISLAND BLUES COCKTAIL

1 measure Citron Vodka

1 measure Blue Curacao

1/4 cup of Pineapple juice

1/2 measure fresh Lime juice

4-5 Ice Cubes

Put Vodka, Curacao, Pineapple juice and Lime juice into a cocktail shaker. Add the ice cubes. Shake vigorously for 10 seconds then strain into the cocktail glass. Decorate with fruit and of course a cocktail umbrella.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Finally, I have to thank my new virtual friends, Julia and Mary, my fellow newbie authors. I'm grateful to share my exciting writing indie author journey with them, as we navigate our way through new technologies, newsletters and bonus content.

ABOUT CATE LANE

Cate loves books and beaches, even better when she can combine these favorite things.

Living in Sydney, Australia with her husband and three children, she is lucky to be able to spend plenty of time on beautiful beaches reading books or dreaming up new stories.

Introduced as a teenager to romance novels by a spinster aunt, she is now an avid reader of all kinds of fiction. She particularly loves a steamy sexy romance especially one with a billionaire or military backdrop. She also loves the challenge to the mind and nerves of an exciting suspenseful murder mystery.

She has recently ticked off a bucket list item to write her own sexy romantic stories about billionaire former military alphas finding their HEA with strong sassy women. She has even managed to weave lots of steamy romantic beach scenes into those stories.

This is her debut series, an interconnected trilogy, and she has plenty of plans for future linked series.

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ALSO BY CATE LANE

Broken Lovers

Everyone deserves a second chance.

Cassie

Luke Steele was my first love, my first everything. But then he chose the life of a soldier over loving me. Smashing my young heart into a thousand pieces. *Leaving me broken.* He moved on so easily, I needed to move on, too.

First step was landing a corporate job in Manhattan, second step was moving in with my best friends Jasmine and Lily and third step was dating again.

Until fate had other plans.

Luke

I can never forget the look on Cassie's face when I left for the Army after graduation. *But I had to go.* Not once, through all those years did I ever forget her. Her face was the only thing keeping me going, as I lived through the hell of a war that

broke me. Now I'm back in civilization running my own cyber security company, in Manhattan and the last person I ever thought I would see again, was her.

Fate has given me a second chance and I'll stop at nothing to get her back.

One meeting and everything between us comes flashing back, our chemistry burning as brightly as ever.

Released February 2022.

Click [here](#) to download now.

Forbidden Lovers

Some rules are meant to be broken.

Bec

For two years Blake Carlson has been my boss, my friend, and my forbidden obsession. But now, I'm not waiting any longer for him to notice me. It's time I made myself impossible to miss.

The plan seems to be working until he calls a halt to us, because of a company rule about office romances. A rule that he can ignore as the owner of the company. Rules are meant to be broken and I'm up for the challenge.

Blake

I'm not a rule breaker, I'm a rule follower. I have been ever since my days in the Army, where breaking rules can get you

or your buddies killed. Until her. Bec Kelly is my executive assistant, the one woman that makes me want to forget all the rules. But I can't. Now if only my mouth and hands would get the message.

Released April 2022.

Click [here](#) to download now.

Snowbound Lovers

A Christmas Novella.

An Aspen Christmas Holiday with Friends.

Some old and some new.

One year later and there is fun and surprises in store for each of our favorite *Lovers in the City* couples.

A new couple are introduced. Fireworks go off and it's not even New Year's Eve.

Love is in the cold mountain air of Aspen.

Coming December 2022.

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Satisfying the Billionaire

The Carlson Dynasty Book One

Carlson Publishing has a new CEO, Hunter Carlson.

The family legacy passed down from my grandfather, a Danish immigrant to the United States, to my father and now to me, as the oldest. It's a big responsibility, and I don't want it to consume me like it did my dad. So, when Trudy, a much younger, feisty petite blond, drops into my world offering a *friends with benefits* arrangement, I jump at the chance.

It's never smooth sailing in the Carlson family, especially when everyone brings their problems to me.

But who can I go to when my arrangement starts to become so much more?

Coming October 2022.

Click [here](#) to pre-order now.