



*Romancing*  
**STARLIGHT**  
*∞*

KATE ASTER

# ROMANCING STARLIGHT



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# PROLOGUE



~ FREYA ~

*As I shut the front door after saying our final goodbyes of the evening, I can't stop the sly grin that slides upward on my cheeks.*

*Mason eyes me. "I know that look."*

*Of course he does. In the years since we got married, he probably sees this look at least five or six times a year.*

*I hold up a finger to silence him. "Don't even think about trying to stop me," I warn him. "Besides, you kind of owe me after I whipped up a second batch of my famous dip for your friends during the fourth quarter of the game."*

*He tugs me toward him and plants a warm kiss to my lips. "You're right. I'll do anything for your crab and artichoke dip, you know."*

*I sigh in his arms. As much as I enjoy throwing a party every year for the Army-Navy game, I kind of like it when I have my family to myself again.*

*His lips leave mine, and within mere seconds, I'm already aching for their return. I would have thought the thrill of being enveloped in my husband's arms or that flutter in my belly at the pressure of his lips on mine would have dissipated after years of marriage and the stress of bringing a child into the world.*

*But it's still there, as predictably as ever.*

*Still holding me, he tucks his chin inward and raises a single eyebrow. "So which of my friends is getting set up this time? Let me guess. Schmitt."*

*"Schmitt?"*

*"The guy who finished off your first batch of dip."*

*"He's single?" My eyes widen, immediately scrolling through the list of unattached women I keep in my head, but finding no one who seems like the right fit for him. "I didn't get that vibe from him."*

*"Then who is it?" he asks over his shoulder as we head into the kitchen.*

*"Ryder," I say as though the answer is as plain as the nose on my face.*

*"Ryder?" Mason stoops to pick a crayon up off the floor and hands it back to our daughter, Astrid, who is perched on a seat at the counter, contently coloring a picture of a flamingo. "I actually thought he was dating some girl."*

*"Nope. Nothing serious." My brow lifts at his curious look. "I cornered him when he went into the kitchen for another beer," I say in explanation.*

*He shakes his head. "I just can't leave you alone when people come over from work."*

*"Not when they're single, you can't," Astrid pipes in.*

*I'd say it's a rather astute observation for a girl who's yet to start kindergarten, except that she's only echoing the exact words I often say to Mason.*

*I offer her a fist bump.*

*"Poor Ryder," Mason laments. "I barely even know the guy and now he's being targeted by my wife for her latest matchmaking attempt."*

*"How can I resist? He's perfect for her."*

*"Perfect for who?" he dares to ask.*

*"Maggie," I proclaim happily.*

*“Who’s Maggie, Mama?”*

*“Remember Harris, honey? He’s been here for a couple barbeques.”*

*“The one who gives airplane rides!” she answers gleefully.*

*“That’s the one.” I refill my daughter’s milk. “Maggie is one of his sisters.” I turn back to my husband. “Match made in heaven, right?”*

*Mason looks baffled. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why is it a match made in heaven?”*

*I sigh. “He knew the name of the composer for the song that was in the pizza commercial. Carl something. Didn’t you notice that?”*

*His face is deadpan. “I have no clue what you’re talking about.”*

*“That song. In the commercial at halftime. The dramatic one. When they’re about to drop the pizza on the floor and it’s in slo-mo and everyone’s yelling, ‘Nooooooo!’”*

*Astrid giggles at my imitation, but Mason still looks confused.*

*“Schmitt said the song was in some 1980s movie,” I add, hoping it will trigger a memory.*

*“Oh, yeah. From Excalibur. I remember. Trippy movie. Have you seen it?”*

*“Nope,” I answer.*

*“Can I see it, Daddy?” Astrid asks.*

*He shakes his head. “Maybe when you’re older. It’s violent.”*

*Astrid’s innocent eyes are saucer-like, and her lips form a small o. “Like when Bambi’s mom died?”*

*“Yeah. Kind of like that.”*

*“Then I don’t wanna see it,” she says adamantly.*

*“Good choice, kiddo. See? Our daughter is already showing good judgement,” Mason boasts, then tilts his head at*

me. "So why does knowing the name of that composer make Ryder a match for Maggie?"

I look at him as though he hasn't been paying attention. "Because Maggie's a composer. And it's obvious Ryder likes classical music if he knows the name of that Carl guy." I press my lips together for a moment then burst with, "Orff! That was it. The composer is Carl Orff."

"Carmina Burana," my four-year-old chirps.

Both of our heads whip around to look at our daughter who hasn't even glanced up from her coloring page.

"How do you know that?" Mason asks.

"They had it on Little Einsteins."

Mason and I share a look.

"And you said she doesn't learn anything from TV," I say smugly as I reach for my phone, not willing to waste a single minute more. A guy who looks like Ryder isn't going to stay on the market for long.

"If Maggie's smart, she'll ignore your call. Seeing as you set up her brother with his wife, and her younger sister with her husband, Maggie must know she's got a target on her back now."

I lift my eyebrows haughtily. "I actually have the perfect excuse to call her," I tout, and then listen to the phone ring.

"Hey, Freya? What's up?" she answers.

I smile at her warm greeting. Ignore my call, indeed. "Hey, Maggie! I saw something online I thought I should share with you."

"Really? What?" she asks.

"I remembered you had told me back at Harris's wedding that you were working on a symphony."

"Um, yeah."

"Well, the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra is having an open call for submissions for their next season. They're



*looking for works from Maryland composers.”*

*“Oh, wow. Thanks. But my symphony isn’t completed though.”*

*“Do you think you’ll finish it soon?”*

*“Nah. I have an entire movement I still need to write for it. And I’ve had what you’d call writer’s block.”*

*I suck in a breath at the dread condition. As a romance novelist, it’s easy for me to end up with writer’s block when I’m trying to write in a world that is so different from what I like to create on the page. It’s even the reason I enjoy setting up couples. It inspires me to imagine their happily ever afters.*

*“Nuts,” I tell her. “Are movements kind of like chapters in a book?”*

*“Kind of, yeah. Like sections. I envisioned this as a four-movement symphony. I only have three. If I submitted it the way it is, the damn thing would end with a thud rather than a bang, you know?”*

*“I kind of do.”*

*She sighs loudly enough for me to hear it through the phone. “Is that the only reason you called?” she asks, and her tone sounds differently from what I’d expect.*

*I nibble my bottom lip for a split second, wondering if I’ve been caught. “What do you mean?”*

*“I mean, I’ve been living in a dating wasteland since I moved here. I was kind of hoping you had someone you were going to set me up with.”*

*A smile erupts on my face, and I lift my eyebrows toward Mason as he loads the dirty dishes into the washer. Ha! I feel vindicated.*

*It’s high time I get a little respect for my matchmaking prowess.*

*I grin at my husband’s stunned expression, happy he apparently heard her. “You were?” I ask innocently enough,*

*leaning comfortably against the counter with a satisfied smirk.  
“Well, actually, I do have someone in mind...”*

# PART ONE

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## FIRST MOVEMENT

*ALLEGRO VIVACE*

# CHAPTER 1



~ MAGGIE ~

No regrets.

That's pretty much the way I feel as my hands splay against his back, pulling him closer as I savor the way his rock-hard chest feels pressed against me as he tastes me. His fingers thread deep into my hair, and the feel of the pads of his fingertips against my scalp sends tiny torches through my veins.

I can't imagine what those fingers could do to me if I stay in his apartment any longer.

And I'm ready to find out.

Yep, I'm *so* doing this.

Ryder's lips part and the slide of his tongue enters me. It's just a tease at first—a temptation, an offer of more to come that ratchets up my desire. I purr unconsciously, a lascivious sound that I'm not sure I've ever made before because I've never kissed a man who looks like Thor got a military buzz-cut.

You know that girl who can walk into any bar and turn heads? The one who only has to curl her finger at the hottest man she sees and he's ready to take her home?

Yeah... well, that's not me.

I am, in fact, usually the friend that the hot girl arrived with. I'm her wingman. Or, *wing-girl* as the case may be. I'm

the sidekick who usually goes home alone after the hot girl goes off with her conquest *du jour*.

So tonight? I'm just going to enjoy the moment because opportunity knocks once.

"Maggie..." Ryder whispers as I unbutton his uniform and pull his shirt off of him as if it is on fire, tossing it in a heap on the floor. Then I slide my hands against his bare chest, rewarded by the feel of his thick, corded muscles.

The perfectly formed lips where the sound emerges are every bit as luscious as the timbre of his deep voice as he says my name.

But why—why did he have to say my *name*?

I think that's why my parents named my sister and I after our grandmothers. It's hard to enjoy a mindless hookup with a man when he's calling you by your sainted grandmother's name.

Darn parents and their pesky mind games.

"Yes?"

"So I'm assuming you didn't really want coffee?" There's a tease in his voice.

Yes, coffee *was* the excuse I made to get myself invited up to his place, just a block from the restaurant where we met. But when I leaned in for that first kiss in the elevator coming up here, I couldn't very well stop at that. Not if he was willing.

And, as I brazenly unbuckle the belt of his uniform and slide my hand downward, I can confirm that he most definitely *is* willing.

"The only thing I want is right here." I dip my hand past the elastic on his briefs just as his pants fall to the floor, and I discover that pecs aren't the only thing that's huge on this guy.

My God. I'm really doing this.

In truth, I've wanted to do this since that first conversation we had on the phone.

It was that good.

He was so... *nice*. I loved how he listened to me as I geeked out talking about movie soundtracks and the neoromanticism in music of the 1930s.

And when he offered to power wash the memorial bench my family bought to honor my grandparents after I told him a seagull was using it as a toilet? Well, I knew right then that the only way I wanted to end this evening was just like this—with his lips leaving a moist trail from my mouth to my neck and then down to that point just above the scooped neckline of my blouse. Why else would I have suggested meeting at a restaurant so close to where he said he lived?

I knew *exactly* what I wanted from the moment I hung up that phone—to finally break free from the parched sexual desert I've been stranded in and quench my thirst in the oasis he offers me.

Yep. He could have looked like a Cro-Magnon, a computer nerd, or a hobbit, and I'd have *still* followed him up to his apartment based on personality alone.

And then I saw him. Deep, cerulean eyes that seem to penetrate my soul. Rugged, wide chin and pronounced cheekbones, the kind you see on the superheroes in those comics my brother used to read. And a smile that slices my heart open each time he flashes it at me or anyone else we've encountered.

*Mercy.*

I could see immediately why this guy comes with the Freya Adler Stamp of Approval. Her taste in men is impeccable.

And while I'm sure she's hoping this thing between Ryder and me might end up lasting—dedicated matchmaker that she is—the fact is, this won't go anywhere after tonight.

Ryder lives here in DC.

I, on the other hand, live in a little town on the Chesapeake Bay called North Beach, nearly an hour from here when there's no traffic.

Pro tip: *there's no such thing as no traffic in the DC area.*

Relationships simply don't work when they're geographically challenged like that.

Hell, in Manhattan, I could barely make something last with a guy if he was just over the river in Brooklyn.

So this? It won't last.

But right now, I'm fine with that. Right now, I'm just going to savor this rush of hormones that his presence brings, this heat simmering in my veins as his rough hands slide along the fabric of my shirt.

His devilish grin widens as I eagerly grip him, and he answers me in one of those gruff voices that makes a girl's heart skip a beat. "Oh, you want *that*, do you?"

"Yes."

And that one word I breathe out is laced with nothing but need. No questions. No hesitation. Just a basic, primal need that happens when a girl goes without sex for over a year and then comes into the presence of a guy like this.

No. Not a guy. A *man* like this.

Every square inch of his flesh is pure, unadulterated *man*... a man whose hands have just found the bottom edge of my blouse.

When I feel that first touch of his fingers on the bare skin at the small of my back, I pull my shirt so quickly over my head that you'd think I do this on a regular basis with a man.

For the record, I don't. I can't even remember the last time I had anything that came close to resembling the one-night stand that this is destined to be.

But, I admit to myself as I toss my shirt on his floor, I just couldn't wait a moment longer to feel the heat of his palms against me.

His moan is low and seductive as his mouth lowers to the tender flesh just above the lace of my bra. I wore the pretty one today, thank God, with the hopes that this would happen. The one that's pretty enough to hopefully distract from the fact that it's an A-cup.

“God, you’re beautiful, Maggie,” he says, music to my ears as he cups a breast with one hand just as his other hand moves to my back to release the tiny hook on my bra. And then I feel exactly what I needed so desperately—his lips on my breast as his fingers toy with the other one.

*Holy...* I wish I knew what I did to deserve this because I’d like to repeat it again and again.

“That feels so good,” I breathe out unabashedly.

I feel his lips on me curve upwards against my skin.

“I aim to please.”

And he’s got wicked aim, I realize as his tongue flicks against the hard pebble of my nipple, making me gasp.

“B-bedroom?” I somehow manage to utter out the single-word request. It’s all I can handle right now as his mouth ravishes me, making my brain short-circuit and my knees turn to Jell-O.

Just as I start to fall limp, he stoops ever so slightly and lifts me into his arms like in that romantic photo my sister Millie put on her Christmas card last year—just before she got engaged to a nauseatingly handsome man she now calls “husband.”

Lucky Millie.

*But it’s my turn now for a little romance,* I ponder as my Cheshire cat-style smile widens further.

The heat in my body rises just to the point where I’d swear I might ignite right here in his strong arms.

Until I hear the harsh ring of his phone.

His back straightens at the intrusion, and the muscles in his arms tense. “Dammit.” His curse comes out in a pained breath.

“Can you ignore it?”

“I can’t. That’s the ringtone for work. I’m so sorry. I have to see what’s up.”



He sets me down on my two wobbly legs and I want to burst into tears.

*It's okay*, I try to console myself. Patience. It won't take him long to check in with work and then we can get back to our unfinished business.

Painfully unfinished.

When he strides across the room to the heap of clothes on the floor to retrieve his phone from his pocket, I get a way-too-alluring view of the span of muscles on his back.

His shoulders slump in a sigh as he reads a text, and then he tosses his phone down on the sofa.

*Oh, no.*

He turns to me. "I'm sorry. I have to go. The admiral is giving a last-minute briefing tonight. I need to be there."

I literally deflate inside, and all my girl parts feel like they're ready to stage a mutiny. "Really?"

"Yeah, as his aide, I'm on call 24-7. I thought I was off the hook tonight though. I'm so sorry," he repeats.

I want to weep, but force the words, "It's okay. I get it. My brother's in the military, remember?"

"Yeah, but—the timing couldn't be worse. I'll make it up to you. I promise."

That gives me some measure of hope.

I mean, I doubt he'll ever haul himself all the way down to North Beach where I live after he sees how far it is; men who look like him generally aren't that desperate. But I'd certainly be willing to drive all the way up here even for a two a.m. booty call with a guy who looks like a Greek god and can actually name all the eras of classical music.

Men like this don't grow on trees.

Actually, up until I met him, I thought they didn't grow *anywhere*.

And I need to get this out of my system, having seen him like this—a nearly naked abundance of muscles packaging a shit-ton of charm.

Add to that the fact that the condoms I stashed in my purse are about to expire... which says *everything* about my sex life since I embraced my new, small-town life a couple years ago. Heck, I'm almost ready to camp out in my car until he gets back from this briefing he's headed to so that we can pick up where we left off.

"Don't worry about it." My eager gaze lowers, gulping up the sight of him before he gets dressed. "You better get ready."

He chuckles. "Yeah. Don't think a bunch of three-stars would appreciate me showing up like this."

Amused—and impressed at the same time—I see the hard ridge of him still jutting from his briefs. "Well, at least you're at attention."

He glances downward. "That'll disappear the moment I picture the admiral asking me why I'm late."

I reach down to hand him his shirt from where he had tossed it to the floor.

He shakes his head. "No. I've got a fresh uniform in my closet. This isn't one of those meetings where you show up wrinkled."

Appreciating the view again, I watch him walk by me toward his room.

*Nuts.* I grab my bra and blouse from the floor and put them on. Then I reach for my purse to check on traffic headed back to North Beach.

As I reach for it, I notice his phone still illuminated on the sofa next to my purse.

There's no avoiding the text I see on the display; it's lit up like freaking Vegas. It's not like I'm being nosy. It's not like I even need to touch his phone or stoop to see the words that await me.

They're just... there.

And it's a text from someone named Nychelle.

*"Party in 45 min. You coming?"* she had written.

And right under it is the thumbs-up he sent in reply.

*Son of a bitch.*

That sultry spark that was simmering in me only moments ago detonates into a raging fire. I'm fuming inside, tempted to take his phone and throw it at him when he walks back into his living room.

This guy is *Freya-approved*?

Wait. Let's back up a sec.

Freya sets my *brother* up with the love of his life and Harris gets an automatic bonus stepson in the deal.

Freya sets my *sister* up and Millie gets an Adonis who literally sweeps her off her damn feet every chance he gets.

And I get... *this guy*? Mr. Party-in-45? Or Lieutenant Commander Party-in-45, I guess I should call him.

What the hell, Freya?

Is this some kind of punishment for nearly hooking up with him after just one lovely date?

Or maybe it's a sign—even a blessing. That single, stupid text just saved me from sleeping with a guy who's so rude that he'd lie to me to go party with... Nychelle.

I'm no supermodel, I know. And maybe the guy felt a bit of a letdown when I took off my blouse to reveal my A-cup boobs when he can spend the night with Nychelle who is probably sporting some magnificent double Ds.

He walks back into the room, looking way too dashing in his neat-as-a-pin uniform.

But not nearly as appealing to me now that I know he's a first-rate bastard.

I sit on his sofa to slip my heels back on. "So, uh, work does this to you a lot?"

“Yeah. The job is great. But it kills my social life.” He glances at his watch.

*I couldn't hate this guy more right now.*

“I don't like to see you driving home this late, though. I won't get back for a while, but you're welcome to stay,” he dares to add.

I actually snort. He thinks I'm so desperate that I'd hang around here and play the role of sidepiece while he parties with this other girl? Does he think I'd actually care for his sloppy seconds?

“No. It's an easy drive, and it's not that late.”

“You're sure?”

“Yeah,” I say, fully dressed now and making a beeline toward his door.

“I'd love to call you if that's all right.”

I glance at my reflection in the glass of a photo he's got on his wall. Do I really look like I have so little self-respect that I'd want to hear from him again?

“You know, I'm a little busy this week. But how about I call you?” I tell him, enjoying the idea of him waiting endlessly for my phone call, even though in reality, he probably will forget me by the end of the night.

Because I saw that tiny profile picture next to Nychelle's text. I'll admit it. She's freaking hot.

“Uh, okay.” He looks surprised by my answer, as though usually when he turns down sex for a party elsewhere, women turn a blind eye to it. Figures.

“Maybe I could come down to North Beach sometime. I'd still love to help you power wash that memorial bench you mentioned. I mean, you said your grandpa was a SEAL. Can't have a fellow SEAL having a dirty memorial bench.”

“Right. Sure. I'll call you and we'll set something up sometime.” *When hell freezes over*, I add in my head. Because

even though this guy might have the power washer I need, I can buy one of those and do it myself.

Except that the idea of trying to figure out a power washer has prevented me from doing the job in the first place.

“Can I walk you to your car?” he asks.

“No, no. You have to get to... work.” I almost laugh at that last word.

“I really don’t mind. I’m headed to the metro station anyway.”

“Nope. But, uh, thanks for dinner,” I say since he at least did pick up the check, and just because he’s a rude a-hole doesn’t mean *I* have to be one.

Then I decide to give him a peck on the cheek, so that he’ll think I might actually be desperate enough to call him. Because I really *do* like the idea of him waiting for my call.

*I* want to reject *him*. Not the other way around.

But when my lips feel the warmth of his cheek—barely a whisper of a touch—I feel that same spark pass between us.

Dammit. Stupid spark.

Stupid spark that tells me that it’s been way too long since I’ve had sex. Because clearly living in a place like North Beach, where the single scene is limited, has caused me to lose all judgement when it comes to men.

I sure hope I get that job I interviewed for last week in California. Because if I don’t get a change of scene, I’ll be slapping my selfie up on Tinder or Bumble by the end of the month.

## CHAPTER 2



- RYDER -

My job is the perfect love-hate relationship.

I'm reminded of this as I walk through the bleak, windowless corridors of the Pentagon leading to the office I share with several others.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, I love it. Really, I do.

Most of the time, I barely even mind when work calls me away from a date like it did last Friday. I even *like* it sometimes, that reminder that the actions I take in my career are actually making an impact, shaping the world in some small way—keeping the country I love safe from harm.

Mission first. Always.

And I love the people too, I can't help thinking as I step through the doorway and am greeted by the usual Monday morning buzz of activity in our small piece of real estate here in the hub of our nation's defense.

"Hoo-ah," Matt, the Army guy in our office greets me first. He's a good guy even though he went to the wrong school... West Point. I went to their football rival, the Naval Academy, which means Matt and I are only friends 364 days a year. On that 365<sup>th</sup> day, we're enemies as our teams battle it out on the field.

I get a morning "Yo" from Julian, a fellow Navy guy standing next to him, and a "Hey, Ry," from Yvonne, the sole civilian on our team.

Then Nychelle, a Marine, spots me, and cocks her head in that knowing way she does.

“Hey, sir, how was the party Friday night?” she jokes.

Nychelle calls me “sir” only because I outrank her. In fact, I even have the duty of rating her during her evaluation, which always feels a little awkward because I’m a long-time friend of her former Marine husband and godfather to her twins.

“Party...” I grumble.

She lets out a half snort. “Thought the admiral might be flying solo with you out on a hot date.”

“A hot date that turned ice cold the moment you interrupted.” I narrow my eyes.

She snorts. “Just doing my job. Besides, I thought you appreciated all my early warnings.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter even though I really *am* grateful. As the Guns—the gunnery sergeant—Nychelle usually gets word that the admiral is being pulled into some meeting or trip about ten minutes before I do. And in this line of work, that ten minutes can be critical.

God knows I sure needed that extra time Friday night to get my head back in the game. Maggie had my body pumped up and ready for something a hell of a lot different than a closed-door meeting at the Pentagon.

Damn. I really liked Maggie. And not just the fact that she seemed eager to spend the night with me, though that was a helluva bonus. I’ve never dated a composer before, and honestly could listen to her talk about music all night.

Women generally don’t expect that from a guy like me. They see the SEAL trident on my uniform and assume I’m listening to Mudvayne or Five Finger Death Punch when I work out.

But their music isn’t nearly as intense as Khachaturian or Shostakovich. I was raised on pieces like that. If I had a test at school, my mom would kick off the day making me scrambled

eggs while she played something like Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*.

If I try explaining that to a woman, I usually receive a baffled look in return. Maggie was the exception. When I dropped a few names like that, her eyes lit like firecrackers.

I frown at the memory. I can't blame her for ghosting me, I suppose. If she's not the type to put up with my job, might as well cut the head off the snake and call it quits now because it's just going to be more of the same.

Julian saunters over. "You nuked another date, Ry? Dude, you're on a roll."

"The *job* nuked it," I rebut.

"The job never nukes *my* social life," he points out.

"You're not the aide to the J-3." I nod in the direction of the admiral's office, which seems to be empty right now. As his aide, I've got the cubicle closest to his door, keeping me pretty much at his arm's reach at all times.

He actually gives me a sympathetic frown. "Yeah. There's that. So did she forgive you yet?"

"Who?"

"Whatever girl you bolted on like you always do." He squints his eyes thoughtfully for a moment, as though the effort of thinking is causing too much strain on his brain. "You know, if you were a player, you'd have the perfect excuse to bail on a woman. Love 'em and leave 'em and blame the admiral."

"I'm a little old to be a player," I point out. I haven't self-identified as a "player" in at least five or so years. Maybe ten. In fact, I'm just old enough to look back on those "player" years and feel remorse for them.

Guys are generally assholes in their early twenties, and with three sisters telling me that, I really should have been better.

To that, Nychelle snorts loudly, making everyone's head turn in her direction.



“What?” I ask, my brow screwing up. “I’m serious. I’m 35. I want something a little more meaningful than a hookup.”

“Well, you *say* you’re not a player. But let me guess. She was already at your place when I texted.”

The lines on my forehead deepen. “Yeah. And...”

“*And...*” She lets her voice trail as though I should know what she’s going to say next. When I don’t say anything, she sighs. “And if the roles were reversed here, all you guys would be singing a different tune.”

Curiosity seems to have dragged everyone in the office over to where we are. Yvonne chimes in next. “You mean if he was a woman.”

“You know it,” she says in that sisterhood kind of way, as though she and Yvonne have some secret that we guys are incapable of comprehending.

She sighs again, more pained this time, as she sees the perplexed look on my face. “You have three sisters.”

I fake a look of shock. “I do? Thanks for the reminder.”

She plants a fist at her waist. “So, if one of them came to you and said that she keeps inviting guys back to her place on the first date, and the relationship doesn’t work out, what would you say to her?”

“Before or after I murdered the guys in question?”

She gives it serious thought. “After.”

I frown as I admit, “I’d tell her to get to know a guy before sleeping with him and maybe she’d find someone better.”

“Exactly.”

“Ahhh...” Julian begins. “So you’re telling Ryder to stop being such a man-whore and he might meet someone who’d stick.”

“Hey.” Nychelle holds up her hands slightly. “First off, I’d never call him a man-whore. He does my rating. But second, yeah. You’re always saying that you’re sick of superficial relationships. That you’re the last of your family to not be

married—and blah, blah, blah. Yet you keep doing the same thing. Meet a girl. She gets sucked into that hot SEAL thing you’ve got going on—”

“Aw, I never knew you noticed,” I interject.

“—and then she dumps you when she realizes what that SEAL thing really comes along with—a lot of worry and canceled plans and all that. I mean, you guys come with a heap ton of baggage.”

She looks at all of us in uniform on her last sentence, making me feel a little less targeted, and then says, “You should show her the baggage before you show her—”

“The package!” Julian finishes for her with a cackle. “Sorry, but we were all thinking it. And it nearly rhymes. Show her the baggage before you show her the package. That could catch on.”

Nychelle cocks her head to the side. “I was going to say his *apartment*.” She gives me an almost apologetic look. “But yeah. Maybe take things slower, for once.”

“It’s a total double standard, if you think about it,” Yvonne adds. “If a woman does the same thing, the world calls her out on it right away. Calls her names. Says she’s a fool. But with a guy, it’s just boys being boys.”

Matt gives a conciliatory shrug and admits, “Okay. Yeah. You’re right. And I did my fair share of the man-whore thing in my early twenties, too. But *I* grew out of it,” he adds, looking at me as though I somehow haven’t.

“So was it the Middle East or Russia this time?” Nychelle asks me, I’d bet shifting the topic out of guilt because I doubt she ever intended the entire office to be slut-shaming me before eight a.m. on a Monday morning.

I frown. Even though Nychelle has clearance, she knows I won’t give her details. Contrary to how Hollywood portrays these things, Top Secret information is only handed out on a need-to-know basis.

But, since she’ll be our point person when the admiral and I are out of the country, I can at least tell her, “Let’s just say

I'm booking the admiral and me a little time in Brussels followed by Eastern Europe later this month." I sit at my desk on the other side of her cubicle to do just that.

"Playing travel agent this morning?"

She says it with amusement in her tone. But that's really the crux of my job. I'm nothing but a glorified personal assistant/travel agent/chauffeur/secretary. As Admiral Shey's aide, I'd even be the one to take a bullet for him, for that matter—and proud to do it since he's a hell of a lot more important in the scheme of things than I am. And as J-3 of the Pentagon, he does get his share of threats from crazy m-f-ers the same way anyone in power does.

But I somehow can't quite picture Joe Shey ever needing anyone's help with security. If a bullet was ever headed in his direction, it probably would fall to the ground on its approach, apologizing to him as it did.

Admiral Shey is just that intimidating.

"Yep. That's me. The man-whore travel agent," I answer.

"I want it on the record that I never called you a man-whore. That was Julian."

"Oh, don't worry. I'll remember that." I narrow my eyes on Julian and he backs off, heading to his cubicle with a look of regret. I've got about fifteen pounds of muscle over Julian and, while I wouldn't punch a fellow officer in this particular situation, I have no problem letting him think that I might.

Nychelle laughs. "Maybe you can book the Admiral and you a couples massage and get a mani-pedi—" She falls silent as her eyes widen and divert to whomever just walked in the door behind me. "Sir."

"I could use a massage, but the mani-pedi is a hard no."

At the sound of my boss's voice, I stand and turn to see three-star admiral, Joe Shey, walking into the room with a slight grin on his face.

Despite what people assume about the tough-as-nails admiral, he actually *does* have a good sense of humor.

“Sir,” I greet him.

“Morning, everyone.” He pauses for a moment and turns to me, taking in his hands the packet I just handed him for the meeting we’ve got in ten minutes. “Sorry again I pulled you away from plans on Friday night, Ryder.”

“Nothing more important than the mission, sir.”

“He had a date, sir,” Nychelle volunteers.

“A date?” The admiral’s brow rises, glancing up from the packet momentarily.

“A good one,” Matt adds. “A legit composer, sir. He finally found someone who won’t roll her eyes when he talks about the fifteen years of piano lessons he had.”

“Ten years,” I correct out of habit.

The admiral spares us a slight smile. “I never roll my eyes about that one. Shows determination.”

“Or stubbornness in the face of my lack of talent,” I admit.

The admiral crosses the room to set down the packet and make himself some coffee. In the first days of this job, I’d always offer to make it for him. But I learned quickly that Admiral Shey prefers to do things himself. Given the choice, I think he’d probably also prefer to not even have an aide like me. But the way his schedule fills up, he needs me.

“Sounds like you might have met your match, Ryder. Marry the girl,” he tells me.

*Marry the girl* are words that guys like me hear often enough. The fact is, the military tends to push marriage on guys the way a missionary might push their religion. I find it ironic since marriage is, in general, incompatible with military life.

Case in point: my ex-fiancée.

Hell, even Admiral Shey has two failed marriages in his past. All reports say that his marriage now is rock solid. “*Three’s a charm*,” he often quips, even though he doesn’t strike me in any way as superstitious.

But when you look at the people up the food chain like him—the admirals and generals—you do start to see a pattern—one riddled with divorce.

“That would be a little hard, sir. I think Maggie’s ghosting me.”

“Ghosting you?”

“Yeah. When a woman doesn’t return your texts,” I explain.

He gives me a slight frown, but there’s humor in his eyes. “I know what ghosting is. I’m older than you, Ryder. But I haven’t completely lost touch.”

“Sorry, sir.”

He pours a couple sugars into his coffee. Again, it’s one of those things you don’t expect from a guy who looks like he could drink straight-up battery acid and it wouldn’t even phase his tough constitution. But Joe Shey is full of surprises.

“And don’t lose hope,” he adds. “My wife pretty much ghosted me after I met her at my brother-in-law’s wedding.”

My eyebrows hike up an inch on my face as we step out of the room and head toward our meeting. Well, *his* meeting. I’m just the fly on the wall sitting behind him, taking notes, handing him anything he needs, and learning. *Definitely* learning. There’s no greater job than trailing a military powerhouse like Admiral Joe Shey. For a guy like me, it’s the best thing that could have happened in my military career.

The man is, essentially, exactly what I want to be a couple decades from now. There’s even been talk about the President wanting to appoint him as the Chief of Naval Operations.

“Mrs. Owens-Shey *ghosted* you?” This is the type of thing I love about my job—getting to know the man behind the legend a bit more than anyone else.

“Yep. I didn’t hear from her again for months.”

“What made her finally call you?”

We turn a corner and head down another stark hallway toward our meeting. There's a sudden warmth I sense from him that almost seems incongruous with the hardened SEAL warrior he's known as.

"Let's just say she needed a favor."

I see a story behind his eyes—one I don't think he'll share with me. But I'm wishing he would.

I look at him now, as I have before, and can't help noting how his expression always changes at the mention of his wife, Vi Owens-Shey.

He doesn't just love her. He's still *in* love with her.

It gives me some hope that I might find someone compatible with my military career the way he did.

But it sure won't be Maggie.

"A favor..." I find myself repeating his words with a frown. "I tried the favor angle with Maggie already and she still won't talk to me, sir."

His brow creases, and he stops for a moment, eyes curious. "What favor did you try?"

"Well, she mentioned during our date that her family bought a memorial bench for her grandparents along the boardwalk in North Beach. And she said it was really dirty. So I power washed it for her last weekend."

"A memorial bench?" he ponders, walking again.

"Yeah, you know—when people donate some money so they can put a little plaque on a bench to honor someone," I tell him.

He nods. "I bought one for my brother-in-law years ago." As he says it, the sides of his mouth pinch slightly downward. "My sister's late husband. He fought in the Middle East. Didn't come home."

"Jesus, sir. I'm sorry. I never knew that."

"It was a long time ago. She's happily remarried now to another military guy."

“She’s a glutton for punishment?”

“Exactly.” His eyes narrow thoughtfully. “So you power washed the bench and she still won’t talk to you?”

I’m genuinely surprised that he’s taken this much interest in the topic.

“Yes, sir.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t envy you. I never want to be single again.”

I chuckle. “I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

The creases at the sides of his mouth deepen. “You’re right. But seeing as the government will have us pretty booked up for a couple months in Brussels and then Eastern Europe, I think I’ll head to California next week.”

“Consider my bags packed, sir. Are we going to Coronado?”

He gives a dismissive shake of his head. “No, no. Vi and I. You’re off the hook this time.”

“Personal leave?” I frown. “Is everything all right with the family?” I ask even though it’s not my business.

“Everything’s fine. But Vi and I are overdue for a vacation. And from the tone of that meeting Friday, this might be our last shot at getting away for a while. There’s a vineyard up for sale in Sonoma County. Thought we’d take a look.”

“Still wanting to retire on a vineyard, sir?”

“That’s the goal.”

“Yeah, but you’d have to retire first,” I point out.

“I might surprise you one day. We actually bid on one a few years back.”

“No way,” I reply, shocked that I didn’t already know this. I’m pretty well-versed on the life of Joe Shey. I kind of need to be in my job.

“A little one in Virginia. Mostly dessert wines come out of it.”

“But the sale didn’t go through?”

“Well, their counteroffer came in just as things started heating up in East Timor. It didn’t seem like the right timing, so we let it fall through.” He cocks his head and looks at me, curious. “You should take some time off while I’m gone, Ryder.”

I frown. “Nah, I’ll probably just catch up on some work around here. Besides, I don’t know what I’d do with vacation time. I’m out of practice.”

“Go on a date, for starters,” he adds, giving me a swift thump on the shoulder.

I frown at his words. You know you’ve reached an all-time low when a three-star admiral is ordering you to go on a date.

“In my defense, I tried to Friday night, sir.”

“That’s right.” He winces slightly at the reminder. “Get out of town then. You’ve probably got enough airline mileage points from this job to fly anywhere.”

I grin. “I could fly my entire hometown to Hawai‘i for free on my airline miles at this point, sir.” I laugh. “But I think I get my fill of travel just following you.”

“Hawai‘i...” His voice trails a moment as though that word has triggered a memory of some kind. He pulls out his phone. “You know, my wife and I have friends with a place on a beach there. They loan it out to military service members when it’s vacant.” He taps in a text.

“They rent it out?”

“No, they let people stay there for free. All three of the brothers were in the Army. So they know how much servicemembers need a break sometimes.”

His phone buzzes in his hand, reminding me that when a three-star admiral sends a text, he will almost always get a quick reply.

“Yep. They’ve still got the place,” he affirms, tapping in something and then sliding his phone back into his pocket just as the conference room where his meeting awaits comes into



view. “You’re as good as booked. Get yourself a flight when we’re done with this meeting. They said the keys will be waiting for you in the management office.”

“I’m sorry—*what*, sir?”

“You’re headed to paradise next Saturday. Get ready to relax.”

I literally cringe at the thought. I don’t mind vacations, contrary to the rumors going around the Pentagon because I haven’t taken a week off since I got here nearly two years ago. But I prefer the busy kind of vacation, the kind you take with a group of friends who won’t give you time to think.

I’ve seen just enough action in the SEALs to not like being alone with my own thoughts. “Relaxing has never been my thing, sir.”

“You’re no good to the Navy if you’re burned out. Take that girl you left high and dry last Friday. If you can get her to text you back, that is.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.” Perfect. I feel some measure of gratitude to Maggie now for ghosting me. It’s the best excuse I’ve got to not have to sit on a beach with a mai tai and give my brain the free time to second guess every decision I’ve ever made in action as a SEAL.

People think I stay in shape because of that trident I have on my uniform. The fact is, it’s because I spend nearly every moment when I’m alone either at the gym or running along the Capital Crescent Trail.

I don’t know how to relax the way other people seem to.

“So take a brother from your Team,” he suggests. “Or someone in your family.”

“I doubt any of them would be able to drop everything and fly to Hawai‘i for a week. I should just stay put. We’ve got a lot of travel to prepare for.”

“Michaels can forward anything that needs to be dealt with. You need this time away. Alone or with someone else.

I've been around the block, Ryder. I can tell when someone's overdue for a vacation."

The lines in my brow deepen, and I feel like I've just aged five years in the last five minutes. "Are you actually *ordering* me to go on a vacation, sir?"

He sends me a wry glance, his hand reaching for the door handle. "Do I have to?"

And without another word, he steps into the conference room, his commanding presence bringing all conversations in the room to an immediate halt.

And that's that, I suppose.

I'm going on vacation whether I want to or not.

## CHAPTER 3



~ MAGGIE ~

An amber sun peeks above the horizon, casting a narrow carpet of tiny sparkles onto the Chesapeake Bay just as I sit down at my desk with my coffee.

The equipment of my studio fills my living room, giving me the best view from my small bungalow-style home on North Beach's treasured boardwalk. I don't mind that all the flotsam and jetsam of my career—my MIDI, DAW, speakers, audio interface, and all the other gadgets I've collected—make it a little more difficult to entertain guests in my home. I don't really have many guests here. And from the moment I first stepped into this room with my real estate agent two years ago, I pictured it just this way—set up as a workspace where I could let the beauty of the rippling, brackish water inspire me to compose.

I pictured this very scene—me, gazing out at the water with my coffee, composing the Old School way, manuscript paper in front of me, its empty staves waiting for me to fill it with beautiful notes.

It's the same way I was told that John Williams composed his best works—sketching out notes on paper rather than using some computer app or software.

So of *course* I'd kick off an inspiring morning like this doing things his way. I credit John Williams entirely for the path I've taken in my life.

Or, as the first half-hour of sunlight drags on and my staves are still blank, perhaps I should say I *blame* him.

Maybe it's wrong to blame, in my opinion, the greatest modern day music icon—the man whose genius brought us soundtracks to blockbusters like *Star Wars* and *ET*.

But I do.

It was *his* music that made me want to be a composer.

I wanted to make people feel the way that I did when I'd listen to his music. I wanted them to hear my creations and feel that spray of goosebumps on their skin as their very souls seemed to be lifted up to some alternate, more beautiful plane of reality.

I felt like there was no higher calling in the world than the one I felt in my heart—the desire to simply make people *feel*.

Sadly, I discovered in my first couple years studying music at Julliard, I had the burden of a dream without the talent to make it a reality.

I frown briefly at the thought. Then, I set my empty manuscript paper to the side and trudge over to my computer and MIDI keyboard to compose something marketable.

Because *marketable* will pay my mortgage.

Giving a little nod to myself, I let the sunrise soothe me. It's epic this morning—its reflection in the water now widening boldly, looking like someone tossed a million diamonds onto the Bay. It's a symphony for the eyes.

The fleeting thought reminds me again of what Freya said a couple weeks ago—and the symphony I've been trying to finish since before I took my first legal drink.

The urge to finish it feels a little stronger with the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra accepting submissions from local composers. It's not a common occurrence. Unknown composers simply don't sell tickets like a tried-and-true Beethoven or Dvorak.

I only need to write one more movement. Just *one more*.

A sigh escapes me. It probably seems like such an easy feat to someone like Freya—or anyone really. Just whip up some little tune that pulls it all together and packs a final punch that will bring the audience to their feet.

But a movement of a symphony—all the various voices of the instruments flowing together—it’s different from the incidental music in second-tier TV romances, background music for YouTubers, or even the occasional tune for a commercial that I usually compose.

It needs inspiration.

I wish I could buy a bottle of inspiration on Amazon the same way I do a bottle of shampoo.

But I can’t. So instead, I spend the next two hours tapping away at the keys on my MIDI, and eventually, I record something.

It’s quite possibly the blandest thing I’ve ever created, and I’ll upload it to all my usual places where I’ll allow it to be used copyright-free, earning a little every time someone downloads it.

I only do this with the compositions that rate as no more than a shoulder shrug.

In fact... that’s what I’ll call it, I decide as I enter in the details on the online form.

“*Shrug*,” I type into the title line.

YouTubers love weird titles on music. The song I entitled “*Butt Scratch*” is my most downloaded song to date.

Hey, don’t judge. I have bills to pay.

After I hit “submit,” I glance at my half-empty coffee mug and dump it into my Thermos. I need to get out of here. I’ve been holed up in my studio composing since that disaster of a date on Friday, pouring my frustration into my work.

By some measures, I suppose I succeeded. I’ve written six completely mediocre but highly marketable pieces since I got home that Friday night.

Opening my back door, I suck in a lungful of refreshing Bay air as I step onto my porch that backs up directly to the boardwalk.

The slightly salty smell along with the sound of the seagulls reminds me why, even in the winter, I can understand why my grandparents thought this place was so special.

Just a few steps onto the boardwalk, and I already hear the sound of children playing on the beachfront playground close to my house, a small, one-level fixer-upper that I simply don't bother to fix up.

When I spot them, bundled up in their winter coats but playing as though it's a typical summer day, I can't resist smiling.

I've grown accustomed to the winters here in Maryland—so much milder than in New York City. We get snow here from time to time, but it usually melts away quickly.

Today, it's a balmy fifty degrees out, and I'm kicking myself for not getting out more when the weather is like this. There's no excuse to not be out here on the boardwalk just like half the North Beach population is every day.

I greet several regular dogwalkers, as is the custom here in my small town. In North Beach, if you don't greet someone as you pass them, they'll think you're a tourist. And while we don't mind tourists—they keep our smattering of restaurants, shops, and bars alive—we don't love them either. They tend to be a little too hasty and unfriendly, probably like I used to seem when I first moved here.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. There's this little jolt of awareness low in my belly, wondering if it might be Ryder apologizing again.

He texted twice since Friday. I've been ghosting him—justifiably in my book—even though I'm not getting nearly as much satisfaction from it as I thought I would.

Ghosting a guy is new to me. Usually, I'm on the other side of this process.

But when I see my sister's text pop up, the tiny fluttering of butterflies dissipates.

*"Hey! Guess what!"* Millie texted.

I tap in a simple question mark in reply.

*"I'm pregnant!"* she writes back.

My eyes widen slightly, even though I'm strangely not surprised. Millie and Dax do everything quickly. They even eloped, to the dismay of my mom who's been planning our weddings since we were in diapers.

My mouth curves downward. I'd swear to my dying day that it's not jealousy I feel.

I just feel this... letdown. To be told news this huge via text somehow just doesn't seem the way things should play out.

She and I barely ever talk, and I've gotten used to that over the past years. But doesn't a pregnancy merit at least a phone call?

*"Amazing! Congratulations!"* I say into my phone because the dictation tool in texting is a godsend for dyslexics like me.

Then I pause a moment and add a few thoughtful emojis. Because, alas, that's what our sisterly relationship is. A few words. An emoji or two. Perhaps even a tapback of a heart or a thumbs-up when the situation calls for it.

*"How many weeks?"* I add, and I almost feel like I'm intruding too much by asking.

*"12."*

Twelve weeks? She's been sitting on this news for twelve weeks without sharing it with me?

I've heard some couples do this—wait until that tricky first trimester is behind them before telling friends and family. I'd get that.

But the fact is, I'd bet my paycheck—if I *got* a regular paycheck like other hardworking people, that is—that all her friends down on Georgia's Tybee Island already know.

Sometimes I wonder what I did in high school that warranted this deep freeze that's lasted over fifteen years.

Maybe a few texts are all she needs from a sister.

I wish I felt the same way.

*"That's amazing,"* I say and hit send before I realize I've said *amazing* twice in this brief conversation. Words were never my forte which is perhaps why I create instrumental music rather than show tunes. *"Do you need anything?"* I add.

*"No. We're great. Some friends even helped Dax paint the extra room in the house. So all we really have left to do is furnish it."*

Ouch. Confirmation sucks sometimes. She *did* tell all her friends before telling me. I wonder if Mom and Dad and Harris know too.

*"How about I throw you a baby shower?"* I offer. *"I don't have much work in right now and can take some time off."*

*"Aw, that's so sweet. But Harriet is already doing one, plus Dax's commander's wife insists on throwing one too."*

I frown, seeing my sisterly duties usurped once again. But at least I get to go to two baby showers.

If I get invited, that is.

*"That's great. I'd love to help in any way,"* I dictate into my phone. Then I wait for anything else from her, only to see her tapback a thumbs-up in reply, her way of ending this conversation.

I slide my phone back into my pocket. I'm used to this.

Harris, Millie, and I were closer when we were little. Then Harris went off to the Naval Academy, and Millie and I just drifted apart in my final year of high school. She was so much smarter than I was, and people always liked her. Even after they finally—*finally*—figured out I was dyslexic and not just goofing off, I still struggled terribly in school. And, unlike my brother and sister, I was pretty introverted, always quietly listening to the tunes I'd imagine in my head.



I suppose us drifting apart was the result.

I walk past the beach and the playground... past that cotton-candy-pink building overlooking the water that's a bit of a landmark here... and toward the end of the half-mile boardwalk where my grandparents' memorial bench is. It was one of the first to be installed about ten years ago, and now it's one of at least a hundred or so, making our boardwalk an easy place to sit and relax.

Grandma and Grandpa would have loved seeing their bench here, just a stone's throw from the little house they used to rent some summers just after my grandpa got out of the Navy. North Beach was his favorite place, Grandma used to say. He needed to be near the water. Yet being by the ocean always made him feel like he should be out on it—on some frigate or battleship.

But here in North Beach, overlooking the usually tranquil waters of the Chesapeake Bay, he felt his calmest.

I pick up my pace as I approach their bench, anxious to sit for a while, sip the remains of my coffee, and enjoy the sight of the bay with the sun still low in the sky.

My brow furrows.

Their bench looks different today. The grey of the wood is a little lighter.

And a *lot* cleaner.

I stand in front of it for a moment and my eyes track to the next bench in the line of them along the boardwalk.

Comparing the two, I blink a few times. Hard.

Did someone *power wash* my grandparents' bench?

My eyes fixate on its almost pristine-looking wood, searching for any of the usual marks of dirt or seagull excrement that used to make me frown.

But there's none of it.

I wasn't here the day they installed it ten or so years ago. But this is about how I imagine it looked back then.

Did Ryder power wash my grandparents' bench?

No. Of course not. The guy ditched me for a party. That's not the kind of guy who does something like *this*.

Frowning, my mind darts around, trying to make some sense of this. I slide my phone out of my pocket and call my friend Lily. We've been friends since my second year at Julliard—the only other classmate I can kind of relate to since both of our dreams of music greatness were thwarted by reality.

Reality sucks.

"Hey, Mags!" she greets me. "I was just thinking about you. Did you hear from that California job yet?"

"No. Not a peep." I frown briefly at the reminder.

"Damn. Do you know how much I'd love it if you and I were on the same coast? It would be like the old days back in New York, except that I've got a kid, so we won't be partying at the latest hot spots." She snorts.

"Seeing as we were both broke when we lived in New York together, I don't remember much partying at hot spots anyway," I offer.

"So true, right?" she laughs a little more and then sighs as though lost momentarily in memories of our time at Julliard. Then she adds, "I really thought they'd offer you the job. I mean, they flew you all the way out here for your second interview. They wouldn't do that if they weren't serious."

I shrug internally. In reality, since my crash-and-burn date last Friday, I've barely given a second thought to the job interview I had a couple weeks before that. Sure, it stung a bit to not hear back from the gaming company because it sounded like a pretty cool job where I could be composing something a little more dramatic than my usual—maybe even get to write the soundtrack to the latest alien invasion or dystopian future game. I like the idea of composing something completely different from the stuff I currently get paid to write.

But after last Friday's date, I kind of moved on from it. I can only deal with one rejection at a time.

“It’s no big deal. I’m over it. But listen, remember the guy from Friday?”

“The turdwhistle who deserted you to party with some other woman? How could I forget?”

“Well, I’m just out for a walk today, and my grandparents’ bench was power washed.”

“And? I don’t see what that has to do with Lieutenant Commander Bumfuck.”

I cringe at her language before I remember that her daughter, Melody, is probably at school right now. “Remember how he had offered to power wash their bench when I mentioned it was filthy?”

There’s a beat of silence. “Wait a sec. You think *he* power washed it?”

“What else could it be? I mean, no other bench is this clean out here.”

“Wow. That’s... nice. But... confusing.”

“I know, right? He’s an hour away. That’s a long way to come to power wash a bench for a girl he ditched, you know?”

“Maybe he’s feeling guilty?” she offers, then following up with, “And he should! That guy’s a first rate asswipe.”

“You sure do have some good names for him.”

“Well, you *know* how I feel about military guys. I warned you not to go out with him.”

And she *did* warn me. So she can consider her bonus points awarded.

“Yeah. But what do I do now? Do I thank him or something? Or just drop it?”

“Stick with ghosting him. You don’t owe him a thank you. Besides, I told you military guys are like that. He probably struck out with that woman who texted him, and now he’s hoping for a second chance with a sure thing.”

I hate that I am the sure thing in that scenario.

“You know, not all military guys are like Melody’s dad,” I remind her.

“*All* of them are, minus your brother,” she amends.

“But this guy...” My voice trails for a brief moment. “Up until that text coming in, we really hit it off.”

“Hon, I hate to tell you, but if he felt the same way, he wouldn’t have walked out on you for a party.”

“I know, but—maybe I came on too strong. Scared him away. You know? I don’t know how to play that game—that whole ‘*Can I come up for coffee, and while I’m there, tear your clothes off?*’ thing. Maybe I played it wrong.”

“He’s a guy. There’s no way to play that wrong. They’ll always go for it.”

“But he was way out of my league.” I hate—absolutely hate—that I’m this desperate to give this guy the benefit of the doubt. “Maybe he just would have preferred us being friends.”

“Will you listen to yourself? Where’s that New Yorker self-confidence you used to have?”

“It’s gotten depleted since moving here. I’m literally the only single person I know. Well, except for a few widows and widowers I meet on the boardwalk.”

“You need a change of scene. Like that job at that gaming company here in California.”

“Well, they need to offer it to me first. I even called last week, just to follow up, and they still haven’t made a decision.”

“Then maybe a vacation somewhere. Distract yourself while you wait for word on that job. You don’t have much work in right now, right? Get away. Throw a bikini on and drink some margaritas. That sort of thing that *I* don’t get to do anymore,” she adds, a little on the glum side. “Hey, I gotta run. Melody’s class has a party this afternoon and I’m handling refreshments, God help me.”

“A party?” I screw up my face, wondering if I missed a holiday with all the working I’ve been doing the past several

days. “What for?”

She sighs. “Who knows? National Dog Day or Good Neighbor Day or Friend-of-my-Second-Cousin’s-College-Roommate Day. They’re always finding some reason to force us moms to come in with a car full of food and drinks. I swear they make this shit up sometimes.”

I snort. When her daughter is out of earshot, she really knows how to let the profanity fly.

“Just *don’t call him*,” she reiterates. “Promise me. Or you’ll find yourself pregnant and alone and moving in with your parents so you can survive.” She lets out a fake gasp. “Oh, wait! That’s *my* story... not yours!” Her giggle is almost absurd.

“Okay, okay. I promise I won’t call him.”

I end the call and find myself staring at my phone at a time when I should be sliding it back into my pocket.

But I keep it in my hand as I sit... on my grandparents’ utterly clean bench. A bench they’d be so proud to see. Especially my grandpa. As a Navy SEAL, he always liked to have things in “ship-shape” as he’d call it.

I touch Ryder’s name on my texts and stare again at the apologetic words he sent on two occasions, trying to muster up some more of that anger and rejection I felt on Friday night. The traffic was bad coming home that night, and it took me nearly ninety minutes to get home, all the while picturing him at some party with—what was her name?

*Nychelle. That was it.*

Even her name sounds sexier than mine.

I should still be angry. But somehow, sitting on this clean bench, I can’t seem to anymore. I give my head a shake.

I moved things along too quickly that night. Maybe he’s just coming off a relationship with Nychelle or something. Maybe we should have just been friends.

I stare at the texts. Maybe there’s more to the story and he’s wanting to share it now with me.

I promised Lily that I wouldn't call him.

I shouldn't.

But then again... I didn't say I wouldn't *text* him.

I bite my bottom lip nervously as I dictate into my texting app, "*You power washed my grandparents' bench?*"

My finger hovers for a moment, and then I hit send.

I don't even have time to put my phone back into my pocket before I see his reply come in.

*"I did the right bench? Worried about that. They had your last name and I saw that man on there was a SEAL."* And he added a laughing emoji.

*"It was theirs. Thank you,"* I say into my phone, finding myself warming up to the idea of seeing him again—giving him the chance to explain. Sure, he lied to me. But if he comes clean now, I'd really be fine with it.

Still jealous as hell of Nychelle. But fine with it.

Frankly, I could use some more friends in the area. Especially ones who don't mind when I prattle on about music like I tend to. I loved that I could talk to Ryder about Baroque music without him telling me that oft-repeated joke, "*If it ain't Baroque, don't fix it.*"

*"My pleasure,"* he writes back. "*Besides, ur G-pa was a SEAL. Couldn't have a fellow SEAL's bench b dirty.*"

I catch myself smiling.

*"How about dinner Friday? I'm going on leave, so I won't get pulled away,"* he writes.

There's this little explosion of butterflies again in my gut. I despise each and every one of them.

I hate that my body reacts this way at the mere thought of spending more time with him—a guy who ditched me for someone else. How pathetic am I?

Of course, all women probably react this way to him. Even Nychelle.

Do I really want to make myself vulnerable to his rejection again?

It's a battle inside of me—a tug of war between my pride and my hormones.

I find myself replying, “OK,”

Hormones win every time.

## CHAPTER 4



- RYDER -

*Man-whore.*

Even days after that enlightening conversation with my officemates, I find that word is still hovering over me like a dark cloud, making me question everything as I set out on my date with Maggie tonight.

I learned in my twenties that one of the benefits of wearing a Navy uniform is that I'm usually not lacking female company on any night of the week, if I'm looking for it, that is.

And let's face it. In my twenties, just after I got dumped by my ex-fiancée Natalie, I was *always* looking for it.

Hell, I was even briefly active on social media, posting a gazillion pics of me and my string of hot dates, just hoping that Natalie would get jealous.

For the record, I never heard from Natalie again, proving that yes, women are more mature than men. She moved on and, according to mutual friends, married a very successful real estate agent right around the time I was deploying for the second time.

So, yeah, I did have my share of mindless, hedonistic rebound sex for a while there.

But by the time I hit around twenty-six and my sisters started talking about marriage and babies, I was questioning



the “if she has a pulse, she’s fuckable” approach to relationships.

I was going to be an uncle soon. A role model. It was time to grow up.

Trouble is, when I’m in uniform, women tend to offer sex to me like the free candy they throw during Fourth of July parades.

And being a guy, well, maybe too often I *do* take them up on it.

But perhaps Nychelle is right. I do sort of play the victim card when a fling with a woman doesn’t turn into something that lasts.

The timing of this realization couldn’t be worse—just before I head off to my week of forced solitude in Hawai‘i. As I had suspected, I couldn’t find anyone who could drop everything and head to paradise with just five days of notice.

Even worse, by the envy I heard from everyone when I invited them along, I was reminded that I am *literally* the only human being on the planet who can’t seem to look forward to a week of relaxation on a tropical island.

I spot Maggie turning off the boardwalk and onto the sidewalk toward me.

I’m actually grateful for this date tonight. I needed something to distract me from the fact that I’ve got a plane to catch in the morning.

She offers me a tepid smile when she sees me. She looks different tonight, here in this wholesome, cheery little town, a place that reminds me of all those Thomas Kinkadee prints my mom hung up in the nineties and still won’t replace.

In DC last Friday, Maggie seemed more like how I imagine she looked during her New York City days, attending Julliard. Then, she had worn a sexy, silky blouse, a pencil skirt, and three-inch heels—the kind that make men like me salivate.

But now, she's in loose-fitting jeans and a short, navy blue winter coat that hits just below the waist. And in lieu of heels, she has lace-up, ankle-high boots, almost reminiscent of the combat boots I wear with my cammies.

I like the look on her. She looks more real to me. Attainable, and yet unattainable at the same time, if that even makes sense.

And without the mile-high heels that make her calves look positively lickable, I might actually be able to hold myself more accountable for my actions tonight.

Get to know her first, like Nychelle said.

Share my baggage before sharing my...

Oh, shit... Julian is right. It *is* kind of catchy.

The fact is, I really like what little I know about Maggie so far. I like how she practically lights up when she talks about music or her favorite movie soundtracks. I like how she's embraced an unusual and challenging career. I like that she cares enough about family that it upset her to see seagulls taking their daily dumps on her grandparents' bench.

I like a lot about her. And maybe when I know her well enough to name ten *more* things that I like about her, we might be able to make something real together. Something like every one of my four siblings seems to have found while I've been floundering, saying I'm ready to settle down while still acting like I'm in my twenties.

Time to walk the talk, as they say.

Approaching her, I decide to just offer her a friendly hug rather than a kiss like we had enjoyed half naked at my place. She *did* ghost me for a full four days. She might still be a little ticked off about me leaving her for the admiral's briefing. So I think that warrants a couple steps backward from where we were on Friday night.

But when her body stiffens in my grasp during our brief hug, I'm thinking I should have stepped back even further.

“You look beautiful,” I say and when she looks at me like I’m crazy, I add with all sincerity, “Casual looks good on you.”

Eyes still wary, she offers me a half-grin. “Thanks. And you look...” Her voice trails.

I’m still in my uniform. I didn’t have time to race home to change before coming down here.

“...ready for work.”

I grimace. I should have changed. Some women love the uniform on dates. Others swear we wear it to get laid.

(And sometimes, yeah, they’re right.)

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to be late, so came straight down from the Pentagon. I swear I’m not wearing this to earn some kind of points in my favor.”

She gives me an odd look, as though I just read her mind.

“So where is the restaurant you wanted to go?” I ask.

“Right here,” she says and reaches for the doorknob of the place right next to us.

I’m stunned for a moment—so stunned that I’m not even quick enough to open the door for her, which would earn looks of reproach from my mom and sisters.

The place she chose is a tiny, ranch-style home that at some point got converted into a small restaurant and bar, leaning heavier toward the bar aspect, I’m guessing.

“Hey, Maggie,” the hostess greets her when she walks in with me. Then her eyes divert to me, give me a quick up-and-down perusal, and then she sends Maggie an approving nod.

“Hi, Laine,” Maggie replies.

“Would you like dinner menus?” she asks.

I open my mouth to answer in the affirmative, but Maggie beats me to it.

“No. We’re just having a drink,” she answers her.

I frown slightly. Yep, apparently my quick departure on Friday night has shifted us right back into first date mode. It's like working on a project for an entire morning. But then, just as your computer crashes, you realize you forgot to save your work.

And you're back to square one.

So, taking her cue, I launch myself into the usual necessary small talk. "Nice place," I say, looking around.

She nods. "It's kind of a local watering hole on most weekdays."

"And on weekends?"

She sits in the chair that I've pulled out for her. "Thanks. On nights like tonight, it's all out of towners. I don't know anyone here."

"Except the hostess."

"Yeah." Her gaze moves around the room. "And the bartender. And the manager. And all the staff."

I chuckle. "So you know about *half* the people."

She grants me the gift of her first sincere smile of the evening. "It's a small town. You get to know people."

And then there's one of those awkward pauses you get on first dates—or *second* first dates in my case—reminding me why I hate them. Such a shift from that moment when she was half naked in my arms.

The waitress—Maryanne, apparently—takes our cocktail menus after Maggie orders a Manhattan and I order a beer, and I'm rifling through my list of typical first date questions trying to find one I didn't use last time.

"So... how did you end up living here in North Beach?" I ask, glancing around me. The town is cute, a perfect little waterfront town complete with a boardwalk and community pier. It's like someone took Ocean City, Maryland, and threw it into the dryer, shrinking it down to a more manageable size.

I've been stationed in the area a few times now. How did I not know this town even existed until I spent last Saturday power washing that bench?

"When my brother was getting married in Annapolis, I came a couple days early," she tells me. "I drove down here just to check on my grandparents' bench; we had all chipped in to get it a few years before that. But I had never seen it up until then."

"Was North Beach special to them?"

"Yeah. They used to vacation here. And my grandpa grew up near here. So when my brother saw something online about them putting memorial benches in back when he was first stationed in Annapolis, we got one for them."

"I bet it would have made them happy."

She looks serene for a moment. "It would. I see people sitting on it sometimes, just enjoying the view, and I know they're smiling somewhere because of it." She shrugs. "So anyway, when I came down here, I kind of just fell in love with the place."

"I don't blame you. The view is gorgeous."

"True. But it was the stars that did it for me."

"The stars?" My eyes widen. "I hate to be the first to inform you of this, but stars *aren't* exclusive to North Beach," I joke, liking that both of us seem to be easing back into that relaxed rapport that we enjoyed a week ago. I hope it stays that way this time.

"Well, you could have convinced me otherwise back then," she says. "It was winter—like it is now. So it was already pretty dark when I got here even though it was dinner time. I walked along the boardwalk and looked up and... *bam!* Stars. I barely ever saw stars back then, living in New York City. At least, not the kind of stars that we get down here."

I nod thoughtfully. "You know, you're right. I remember the same feeling after being stationed in Coronado and then ending up in a desert in the middle of nowhere for a while. I

remember looking up at the stars and thinking, ‘Hey, I forgot you guys were up there.’”

She looks as though she’s surprised that I understand. “Exactly. And there was something about that moment, sitting there on my grandparents’ bench. The sound of the water lapping up against the shore. People’s footsteps on the boardwalk. And those stars.” She shakes her head, seeming lost in a memory, and then gives a slight nod to the waitress as she puts her drink in front of her. “It made me feel inspired to compose something. It wasn’t anything great. But it was just for *me*. It felt good—to write music just for the sake of creating what was in my heart rather than for money.”

I watch her as she takes a long sip of her Manhattan, and I’m reminded why I was so damn attracted to her last week.

I’ve always admired creative people—artists, writers, musicians—probably because I don’t have a creative bone in my body. It’s like they hold some secret ability to tap into a part of the brain that, for me, is unreachable.

“I can understand why you moved down here then,” I say before sampling my beer.

“Yeah. I thought, *wow*—if this place can inspire me to write a song in just one night, then imagine what it would do for me if I lived here.”

“Did it work?”

She laughs a little. “For a while, it kind of did. But these days, the only stuff I seem to be able to write is the stuff that pays.”

“You say that as though it’s a bad thing.”

She makes a sound—kind of a *yech* sound you’d hear from a child after they just tasted Brussels sprouts for the first time. “The stuff I usually write isn’t anything that could sell tickets. It’s incidental music mostly. Background music. Even the movies I’ve scored are the types where you’d never even notice that there’s music playing in the background.”

I practically snort. “*Even the movies I’ve scored?*” I repeat her words back to her with a scoff. “Do you have any

idea how impressive that sounds to a guy like me?”

“A guy like you?” she giggles, seeming so much more relaxed than she did earlier. “You’re a SEAL. That’s a lot more impressive than a second-rate composer.”

“Not in my book. It doesn’t take talent to be a SEAL. Just a lot of fitness and determination. And maybe a small dose of stupid.”

“Stupid?” she repeats, confused.

“Yeah. When there’s a shit-ton of gunfire going off and you’re running *toward* it rather than *away* from it, you sometimes feel a little stupid.” I frown suddenly. “Oh, that’s right. I forgot your brother was a SEAL. I guess I wouldn’t earn any points from him for saying that.”

“He’d probably agree with you.”

“So, you can do all your work from North Beach?” I divert the topic back toward her because I’ve found talking about SEAL action often leads to bedroom action later. And I’m damn committed to this new approach I’m taking.

*Get to know her.*

*Let her get to know me.*

Fortunately, in this case, I genuinely find her interesting.

“Yeah,” she answers. “I have a home studio, and I got some good contacts during the years I lived in Manhattan. So long as I keep producing good work for them, it doesn’t really matter where I live.”

Right on cue, my ears perk up happily at the sound of that. A woman who can live anywhere is a boon to a military guy. I can’t help thinking of my ex-fiancée and all the other women in my twenties who didn’t have the ability to easily follow a guy like me as my career uprooted me time and again.

“That’s impressive,” I tell her. “I bet most composers can’t say that.”

“I guess you’re right.” She looks thoughtful for a moment, and then she squints a little as she looks at me, as though she’s

seeing something about me that she didn't expect. "Thanks," she says suddenly.

I cock my head in question.

"For making me feel good about my work," she clarifies. "When you graduate from Julliard, I think most people expect greatness from you. You know, your name in lights or something."

"Including you?" I ask.

"*Especially* me."

Her gaze on me is softer now, more... open. Less cautious. As though that wall she built between us after I quickly departed our date seems to be coming down, brick by brick.

"But I'm so tired of writing generic music," she breathes out in a rush, as though it's a confession she hates to admit. "Bland stuff, you know? I actually applied for a composer position at a gaming company—"

"A gaming company? Like *Call of Duty* sort of thing?"

"Exactly. I was kind of excited about the idea of it—writing something a little more theatrical for a change. I mean, it's not the soundtrack to the next *Star Wars*, but at least it would be dramatic."

"Wow," I say with an unintentional quizzical note to my tone. But I'm trying to picture Maggie in this quaint waterfront town on the Chesapeake Bay as she composes music appropriate for the slaying of dragons, car chases, or alien battles. The image just doesn't quite work.

"But I haven't heard back from them," she continues, "So I guess I'm just destined to stick with rom-coms." She punctuates the statement with a brief laugh.

"Well, you picked the right place to live for that. This town looks like a setting for one of those movies my sisters always watch."

"You're right. And now that I live here, no one is complaining to the building manager about the music coming from 14B. I love not sharing walls with anyone." Her eyes



smile at me. “So where did all this appreciation for music come from?” she asks.

“My mom was a music teacher, so there was music in our house 24-7. And she taught me and every other kid in my neighborhood how to play piano.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. But I kind of suck at it. I can play the notes I see on a page, but I can’t put any heart into it. So I’ve always admired people with genuine musical talent.”

“Maybe you just need to look up at the stars more.”

I chuckle, picturing it. Just me, alone, gazing up at the stars and... *relaxing* like I’m supposed to do on this damn trip I’m going on tomorrow.

I bristle at the thought.

“Sooo... can I hear your work sometime?” I dare to ask, desperately wanting to change the subject. Because tonight is definitely not the time to open up to her about the fact that I can’t seem to be alone with my own thoughts... stars or not.

Her expression is tentative. “Maybe if you can make it through an evening without bolting on me, you can.” There’s humor in her tone—just a measured dose of it.

But even with it, I hear enough lingering irritation that makes me think that this thing between us will never last. Not with my job.

Hell, after I get back from Hawai‘i, I’ll probably be traveling for the next month or two. And even after that, there will always be constant interruptions.

Clearly, Maggie isn’t the type to put up with the Pentagon way of life.

“Yeah. Again, I’m sorry about that. My job pulls me away from things a lot these days.”

Her face practically hardens when I say it—unusually so. Enough to make my back straighten.

“It’s not a big deal—needing to break away like that,” she says quickly. “I mean, I’m pretty easy-going. Just...” She pauses for a moment and then her gaze locks onto mine. “...be honest with me about it. That’s my only rule.”

“You’re right. Honesty is everything,” I say, feeling a little hopeful. I’m honest to a fault, so that should be points in my favor.

But after I say it, I’d swear her eyes grow even colder.

Strange. I’m clearly not making any points here, and I’m not even sure what I’m doing wrong.

And there it is again. That damn awkward silence.

I glance around me, my eyes searching this place as though it might give me something to talk about.

The couple directly behind Maggie catches my eye. The woman looks bored, and the guy looks like he’s trying way too hard.

They met on a dating app, I’m betting. And I’m thinking the woman is regretting swiping right.

Or is it left you swipe when you want a date?

Hell, you couldn’t pay me to use a dating app, and looking at their misery confirms this for me. There’s a chill wafting off that woman that is even colder than what I’m feeling from Maggie right now.

As for the guy—there’s an annoying sense of entitlement rolling off of him. I’ve seen it plenty being stationed in the nation’s capital—that self-important “*I hang out with Senators*” or “*I’ve met the President*” attitude that seems to be unique to men in DC.

I frown, watching them as a strange awareness stirs in my gut.

“I see what you mean about out-of-towners,” I say, my eyes drifting from the couple back to Maggie. “But how did all these DC people find out about North Beach before I did?”

“You’ve never been here before?” Maggie asks.

“Not before I power washed that bench,” I answer, kind of hoping that the mention of the bench might soften her up again.

“It really was nice of you to do that.”

I shrug. “I owed you after leaving so quickly last Friday.”

“You didn’t owe me anything. Except honesty,” she tacks on, and I’m starting to think she’s a little hung up on the concept.

“I mean...” Her voice trails and her brow furrows as though she’s searching for words. “Maybe I came on too strong the other night. *I did*, actually. I really did.”

“Didn’t feel too strong for me,” I admit.

“Well, you say that, but... I wouldn’t have blamed you if you wanted to step away. For... *anything*. I mean...” She takes a measured, audible breath. “...maybe we’re just meant to be friends.”

Shit. The ultimate F bomb.

She wants to be friends.

Yeah, I definitely blew this one.

“Friends.” I force a nod. “You can never have too many of those,” I tell her, as I attempt to erase from my memory what she looked like half naked in my arms. Because I’m getting half-chubbed just remembering it.

“Exactly,” she says, with this odd trace of disappointment in her eyes. “I would only want the truth. That’s all I ask.”

“I’m actually glad to hear that.”

“So... if there’s ever anything you wanted to say, you can say it. It really would be okay with me. Just be honest.”

She looks at me expectantly after she says that, as though I’m supposed to follow up with something. But I’m at a loss, so I just respond, “Absolutely. Life is too short to spend your time trying to cover up lies, right?”

She frowns.

I suppress a sigh. I had dared to think this date was looking up, but it seems to be going in the completely opposite direction.

Not only have I officially been relegated to the dreaded *friends* category, I seem to have pissed her off further in the process.

We talk a little more while we finish our drinks, and I feel some regret that the rapport I felt with her before has shifted and the conversation now feels stilted and forced.

What the hell happened to the Maggie I talked to for two hours on the phone when we first came into contact? Or the Maggie from last Friday? It had literally been one of the top three best first dates of my life. Hell, it *had* to be great for her to end up at my place afterward. I'm not that easy of a guy, despite what Nychelle and the guys at work think of me.

Maggie and I had clicked—hard and fast. And I only realize just *how* hard and fast right now because it's such a stunning contrast from the Big Chill I'm experiencing with her now.

The waitress stops by and asks if we want another drink. I open my mouth to answer in the affirmative, still hopeful that I can get this date back on track.

But before I can say anything, I hear Maggie say, "No, thanks. Just the check when you have a chance."

Well, this is ending a little more quickly than I had hoped. And I suppose there's some kind of justice for her in that. Because I certainly cut our last date short for her. *Tit-for-tat*, as my grandma always says, a phrase which made me erupt in giggles when I was around seven years old, squealing, "*You said tit, Grandma!*"

Yeah. Maybe a kid like that was just destined to be called a man-whore at thirty-five.

"So what do you do in the Navy now that you're not on the Teams?" Her tone sounds as pained as I feel.

Yes, we've already kicked off the customary awkward conversation that plays out as we wait for the check. This date

is going to be shorter than the drive to get here.

“I’m the aide to the Pentagon’s J-3.”

“J-3?”

“The three-star admiral running operations for the Department of Defense. So, I go where he goes. I handle his schedule, make sure he has whatever support he needs. It’s a great learning experience, except when it messes with my plans. Which happens often, as you discovered.”

I swear her scowl deepens. Either that or she’s got the most intimidating Resting Bitch Face I’ve ever seen.

“Well, at least you’ve got a good excuse for getting out of doing things you don’t want to do,” she says flippantly.

“I’ve never really thought about it that way.”

Her eyes narrow, and I’d swear there are daggers in them. “Oh, you *must* have at some point,” she spits out between her teeth.

What the hell? My cheeks puff out slightly as things shift from awkward to downright uncomfortable. She’s definitely perfected the whole Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation.

“Not really,” I reply, bewildered by her insistence.

I glance over her shoulder at the apparent dating app couple I spotted earlier, feeling the need to not be alone in my misery. Because apart from them and us, everyone else in this bar seems to be having a great time.

“So, what’s it like being a composer?” I ask to change the subject again. It’s a question I even might have asked her on our last date. At this point, I don’t care. I know where this date is headed... straight to the finish line the moment the check arrives.

She answers me.

I can hear her talking about working freelance and how it means she’s pretty much *always* working in her free time. Then she diverts to something about having different streams of income as a composer.

But as interesting as it probably is, I'm not really listening.

Instead, I'm acutely aware of this prickling at the back of my neck that I usually only listen to when I'm on a mission.

Suddenly, I can't take my eyes off the dating app guy as I see him move from his chair across from his date to the chair directly next to her. Because absolutely nothing about this woman gives me the impression that she wants him closer.

My back straightens, a funny jolt shooting up my spine.

I've learned in my job to listen to my instincts.

There's something *off* about this guy, especially now. That earlier sense of entitlement I detected seems to be laced with tension.

Hang around in bars in your twenties enough, and you hear stories about the kinds of stunts that guys pull. So my radar goes on high alert when this guy moves his hand to his pocket.

Son of a bitch. Is he going to put something in her drink?

He's too far to be sure. But having some experience in this type of situation (experience that I really wish I could forget), I pull out my phone and zoom in to see better and I hit my *record* button because my gut says to.

I hold my phone down low, angling it inconspicuously, as though I'm checking my texts.

I watch and wait.

"Are you seriously reading your texts as I'm talking to you?"

I barely hear Maggie's words. I'm too focused on what I'm seeing on my phone to really acknowledge her.

Then I see something I wasn't expecting. Whatever he pulled out of his pocket, he's slipped into the side pocket of her purse, not her drink.

It's not a roofigie. It's an air tag. Bastard.

*Guys suck.*

I think it. Or at least I *thought* I was thinking it. It takes me another second before I realize that the words actually came out of Maggie's mouth.

"I can't believe that after walking out on me last Friday, you're now glued to your phone."

I'm still recording—a fact that Maggie is clearly unaware of.

"Let me guess," she continues. "The admiral is sending you an escape text now that I've actually started to bore you..."

With my phone still pointed toward the couple, I open my mouth to answer Maggie even as my brain replays what I just saw as though to confirm that I'm taking the right action.

Last time I did something like this, it didn't turn out so well.

But Maggie silences me with, "How can you seem like a nice guy one minute, and then turn into a phone-addicted shitbird?"

Yikes. She's pissed. But I can't deal with that right now. I hand her my phone. "Can you keep recording what happens please? I'll be right back."

Her aggravation quickly shifts to sheer bewilderment as I hand her my phone and she sees that it's been recording.

"Wha—?" I hear her say behind me. But I'm already at the other table, towering over the *real* shitbird in this restaurant who I'm pretty sure just turned entitlement into a criminal act.

"Excuse me," I ask the woman. "How well do you know this guy?"

The woman looks confused. "Uh, it's our first date."

"What do you want?" the guy asks quickly, suddenly looking flushed.

I flag down the waiter.

I address his date. Or should I say, his target. "I don't mean to alarm you, ma'am, but he put something in the side pocket

of your purse.”

“What?” she breathes out as she reaches for her purse.

“I did not,” he says quickly.

“It looked like an air tag. A tracking device,” I explain, even though, if she’s single, she’s probably heard about this type of situation when guys stick a tracker in a woman’s purse or car so that they can follow her.

Which is illegal as hell.

The waiter comes over just as she pulls something out of the side pocket of her purse. And there it is—a small metal disk.

Yep. SEAL instincts win out this time.

*This* time, I think with some measured relief.

“I didn’t put that there,” the guy, suddenly sheet-white, says to her. Then he turns to me. “*You* probably did.”

“Yeah, well, lucky I have it all on video.” I turn to the waiter, “Air tagging someone without their consent is illegal. Can you call the police for me?”

“Fuck you. This is bullshit,” the guy says, starting to rise from his chair.

I put my hands on his shoulders and push him back down—gently, I swear, because I’ve had the rules of engagement drummed into me just like any military guy has.

We’ve attracted plenty of attention now, and my gut says this is only going to get uglier.

And seeing as my gut was right once already tonight, I say, “Ma’am, if you wouldn’t mind, could you sit with my date over there?” She moves over to my table, clearly eager to get away from this guy. Can’t say I blame her.

“What the hell?” The guy shifts in his seat, and I can tell he’s going to make a run for it.

“Listen, here’s what’s going to happen, asshole. You’re going to sit there and wait politely for the police with me, or



I'll break your face into unrecognizable pieces. Got it?"

"You can't hold me here," he tries to stand again, and my hands move to his shoulders. Then he swings—actually swings at me. It's an almost comical right hook that is easy for me to duck from, telling me he's one of those guys who did just enough boxing to think he knows what he's doing, but not enough to knock out a guy who actually *does* know what he's doing.

I'm practically gleeful that he did because it gives me justification to plant my own right hook to his jaw in the name of every woman on the planet who has to deal with assholes like this.

This one's for you, womankind.

And I'm rewarded with the sound of a cracking jaw. Yep. He's not going to forget this anytime soon.

In this moment of satisfaction I feel, I suddenly remember my date, and I glance in her direction to see her still recording everything with my phone with a look on her face that I can only classify as complete horror.

Damn. I've blown another date with Maggie.

But this was *so* worth it.

## CHAPTER 5



~ MAGGIE ~

My life, undeniably, is incredibly boring.

So sitting here with Ryder as he airdrops the video to the sheriff—which I'm grateful to say is probably the *only* person I haven't met in our town until tonight—is just plain cool. So cool that if I truly *did* have a John Williams caliber of composing talent, right now I'd be whipping up an exciting soundtrack in my head to match this heroic moment.

Ryder saved her.

*Saved* her.

I'm not sure from *what* exactly, and my brain just doesn't even want to go there because the whole thing reeks of stalker psychopath to me.

When I lived in New York, stories about guys slipping roofies into drinks were so commonplace that women looked at me with shock when I'd tell them I hadn't yet dealt with that firsthand.

But air-tagging a woman? I shudder. It's like the world keeps throwing us more shit to look out for.

Ryder, however, is one of the good guys.

Sure, he ditched me for a party after I had stripped half my clothes off.

But I'm finding this superhero thing kind of cancels that out, no matter how much I want to fight it.

I glance over at Ryder as he shakes the sheriff's hand and tells him to feel free to pass along his information to the district attorney. Then I see the woman go over to him.

She hugs Ryder, tears in her eyes. "Thank you. I don't know what he was planning, but it couldn't have been good."

"No problem. Glad it looks like I got the evidence to hold him accountable."

She turns to me. "Your boyfriend is a real hero," she says, and I open my mouth to tell her that he's not my boyfriend at all.

He's just a second date. A guy I was actually saying some pretty insulting comments to as I thought he was dicking around on his phone while I talked.

How could I not?

I could picture it in my head at the time, him texting that Nychelle woman something like, "*Hey, want to hook up later tonight?*" Or reaching out to one of his Navy buds with, "*I need an escape call from this mega-dull date, brah.*"

But he *wasn't*. He was playing hero.

Literally.

And I insulted him. Thoroughly.

*Well done, Maggie.* My prowess at repelling the opposite sex continues to impress.

When all the fuss is over and the manager comes over to tell us he's comped our drinks, Ryder glances at his watch and then looks at me, eyebrows rising.

Dammit. He's going to say he has to go. And I can't even blame him.

But instead of announcing his impending departure from my life, he says, "Considering what happened tonight, would you mind if I walk you home? Think I'd sleep better if I knew you got home safely."

Damn, he's nice. And damn, I'm stupid.

“Thanks. I’m just a few blocks away.”

He stands and pulls my chair out for me, a gentlemanly thing to do that I’m not even sure how to respond to, which says a lot about the men I normally date.

“So, um, I’m dying to know—what made you start recording that guy?”

“I had my eye on them earlier. My instincts said something was going to happen—maybe a roofie or something like that. And I wanted to zoom in and see. Figured I may as well hit the record button in case it got ugly.”

“You have good instincts,” I reply as he opens the door for me and the chill of the winter air strikes me.

“Most of the time. I think it comes with being a SEAL. We’re always on alert. It’s hard to turn that off when you’re stateside.”

“It saved the day this time.”

He laughs. “*This* time. But not every time.”

I glance at him and a curious smile perks up one side of my mouth. “Why do I sense there’s a story there?”

“Because *you* have good instincts too. It was... maybe about eight or nine years ago. Me and some of my Team were in a bar in San Diego. We saw a guy put something in some girl’s drink. So of course, we barreled over there, all testosterone and ego. And we start yelling at the guy. Turns out it wasn’t a roofie in her drink.”

“What was it?”

“An engagement ring.”

My eyes widen. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yeah. SEAL senses were an epic fail on that day. We ruined the moment for that poor guy.”

“Well, you didn’t ruin anything tonight.”

“Except our date. And that’s the second date I’ve ruined with you. And I can’t even blame the admiral for this one.”

I frown at the reminder. That lie of his keeps bubbling back up like a burp after a can of Coke.

He's such a great guy. Why can't he just come clean about the other night? God knows I gave him every opportunity to tonight.

I take a deep breath. "Look, you're forgiven completely about last Friday. Really. Between power washing the bench and saving that woman, you've earned your *Get out of Jail Free* card."

"Good to know."

"But..." I hesitate, then give myself a slight nod. "...you don't have to lie about why you left."

"Lie about it?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not lying about it."

*Ugh.* My shoulders sag. *Please just give it up.* "I saw the text about the party. I wasn't being nosy—I swear. But your phone was right next to my purse. So..."

He looks perplexed. "What party?"

*Come on, dude. You're off the hook. Let's just be honest here.*

"The text you got. Telling you there was a party in 45 minutes."

He looks confused for a moment, as though he really can't remember leaving me and heading straight to a party. Then recognition lights his eyes, and he laughs. Not an awkward laugh as though he was caught in a lie. Not even a little laugh. But the kind of laugh that attracts the attention of everyone else on the boardwalk tonight.

"Oh, God, Maggie. Is *that* why you seemed so pissed off?"

"Well, yeah." Then I add, "And I get the party thing. I really do. I came on way too strong that night. Maybe you weren't as into me as I was you. Like I said, maybe some

people are just better off as friends. But I just would rather you be honest about it.”

He’s still laughing. “I *was* honest. That text was from Nychelle. *Gunnery Sergeant* Nychelle Michaels. As the Guns, she’s the first to find out when there’s some movement from the admiral.” He pulls out his phone and taps it. “‘*Party in 45*’ must be the one you saw.” He scrolls. “Here’s another. ‘*White House briefing room in 25. I’ll bring the keg. You bring the admiral!*’”

He thrusts it in front of me so that I’m forced to confirm it... and feel the ensuing shame.

“Oh my God.” I hear the despair in my voice. I’ve done my fair share of jumping to conclusions when it comes to men. But I’ve never jumped this far from the truth.

“That’s just Nychelle’s sense of humor. She’s happily married to one of my closest friends. I’m even godfather to their twins.”

Mortification settles into me. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Why be embarrassed? I would have thought the same thing, the way I bolted on you. If I had any idea you had seen that, I would have explained.”

“I should have just asked, I guess. It’s just that first dates are—”

“Awkward?”

“Yeah. So tonight, I kind of kept waiting for your phone to go off and you to disappear again.”

He nods, as though he’s understanding things now. “And then I pull out my phone...”

“...and saved a woman from being tracked by some stalker. Yeah, I kind of screwed up there too. I’m so sorry.”

He chuckles. “Let’s just—start over.” He extends his hand. “Hi. I’m Ryder. I’m in the Navy, love music, and won’t lie to you about anything except birthday gifts.”

I take his hand, feeling that same spark of electricity that I did on our first date when I did this. “Hi. I’m Maggie. I love the Navy, love music, and I’m definitely not expecting any kind of birthday gift from you at this rate.”

“Nice to meet you, Maggie.”

As his hand drops back to his side, the warmth I felt from it lingers, spreading up my arm and then to the very core of me.

I suppress a contented sigh, walking alongside North Beach’s hero *du jour*. Ryder may not know this right now, but by morning at least half the town will have heard the story of what happened at that bar and will be asking me about it.

And I can’t help wishing he’d still be here in the morning to see it for himself.

“I can see why you fell in love with North Beach,” he says, smiling at one of our old-fashioned clocks that tower over our boardwalk.

“Yeah. It was dark like this when I first came here.” I glance upward. “And see? Stars.”

“If I had any talent, a place like this would inspire me to compose music too.”

“Yeah, I thought so too, moving here. But now I’m just wishing it would give me enough inspiration to finish my symphony,” I find myself admitting.

He stops in his tracks. “You wrote a symphony?”

Practically wincing, I correct, “I’m *writing* a symphony.”

“Damn. I’m impressed.”

“It’s only impressive if I finish it. I’ve been writing it for over ten years,” I admit, confessional-style. “I think that must break a record or something.”

“So, tell me about it.”

My face screws up. “About what?”

“Your symphony.”

My eyes widen. I've dated a lot of guys—some seriously—in the years since I started working on my symphony. But not once did anyone ask me to tell him about it.

And I was just bitching at this guy only moments ago? Color me stupid.

“Oh, it's not that interesting.”

For a split second as we walk, I can feel the brush of his hand against mine. I wish he'd take it. Just hold my hand the way he did that first night when we were walking back to his place.

Just let my skin touch his long enough so that I can let the memory of how it felt to be held in his arms wash over me like this gentle breeze blowing in from the Bay.

But he doesn't take my hand. Of course, he wouldn't. Lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice.

“I'd really love to hear about it,” he insists. “Does it have that more constrained Haydn-type-of-feel to it, or is it ballsy like Beethoven?”

My jaw literally gapes. I can't decide right now whether I'm impressed or outright aroused by his words. “You really *do* know music.”

He shrugs. “I told you. My mom was a music teacher. How many movements does it have so far?”

I shake my head, stunned that I'm walking beside a man who knows what a *movement* even is. “Three so far. But I envision it as four movements.”

“Ah, like the Romantic era. So what's the first movement like?”

“Kind of starts like a classic *andante*. That's—”

“Moderately slow.”

“Yeah. Like a walking pace.” My grin spreads. Even if he *isn't* feeling an attraction for me any longer, I could certainly get used to having a guy-friend who knows this much about music. “And then its tempo increases, you know?” I tell him.



“To give the feeling of growing excitement. Hopefully, anyway.”

“*Più mosso*,” he says without skipping a beat.

“Exactly,” I breathe out the word and will deny to my dying day the heat I feel in my core simply from hearing him utter those words. This experience is going to ruin other men for me.

“And what was the inspiration behind that one?”

“Oh, it was sort of a tribute to that moment in my life when I knew I wanted to be a composer. Like that moment my soul seemed to say ‘Aha! *This* is your goal.’”

He nods approvingly. “I like that.”

“And then the second movement comes in slower—*largo*—almost sleepy. Its melody came to me one night out with friends in the upper West side of Manhattan near Lincoln Center. I loved watching how that part of the city slowly trickled to life in the evenings, as though after half the city went to sleep, it took a deep breath and then got its second wind.”

“Love it.”

I’m searching his eyes for any of the usual boredom I see from men when I talk in any kind of detail about music. But surprisingly, I see none. “The third movement I came up with when I moved here, one of the first mornings when I watched the sun rise over the Bay. I was out sitting on my grandparents’ bench, just watching the boardwalk slowly come to life. First a few dogwalkers and joggers. Then the beachgoers, dragging their umbrellas and chairs. The seagulls crying. The children laughing. It made me think of Gershwin, you know? The way he sometimes had each instrument seem to represent some new sound on the streets.”

“*An American in Paris*.”

This time, it’s me who is stopping in my tracks. “*Don’t* tell me you’ve seen that movie.”

He looks horrified. “God, no. I’m a SEAL,” he says as though to inject sufficient testosterone into the moment. “I don’t watch musicals. But Mom used to play Gershwin sometimes in the morning, especially on weekends. There was no escaping it.”

I smile. “I like your mom. That sounds like a great way to start the day.”

“Maybe, but you can see why I was drawn to the military. Kind of helps strike a healthy balance for a guy.”

“It certainly makes you unique. Did you like learning so much about music when you were a kid?”

“I didn’t even give it much thought. When you grow up around it, you kind of think all households wake up to Gershwin and go to sleep with Strauss or Brahms. I wasn’t the most observant kid. So it wasn’t really until high school or even the Academy that I realized I was the only guy I knew who could play piano. Outside of my brother, that is.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And at that point, I was finally smart enough to realize that it comes with some serious perks.”

Now I’m curious. “I’m listening,” I bait him to continue.

“Well, imagine a bunch of Navy guys headed out to a bar to get some action.”

I draw up a picture in my mind. “And I’m sure you got plenty if you did it in uniform.”

“Yeah, but we were *all* in uniform. So there was competition. But I’d walk up to the piano—and there are usually pianos stashed somewhere in those bars in Annapolis—and I’d start playing Chopin or Bach. And suddenly, I’m the sexiest guy in the bar.”

I find myself laughing uproariously. It feels good after all the drama of the evening. “If you had told that to my brother when he was younger, I bet he’d have signed up for piano lessons too.”

My face suddenly falls when I realize we've arrived at my house.

Dammit. I really don't want this evening to end.

"Well, this is me." I nod toward my door.

"This is yours?" His eyes widen. "Wow."

I frown. "Yeah, it kind of needs a little work."

"No, no—that's a good wow. Not a bad one. You're literally right on the water."

"Which can go either way," I point out. "Beautiful views, but if a storm surge from a hurricane comes up the Bay, I'll be wiped out."

"But what a way to go. I can see why you'd like this more than living in an apartment."

"No doubt. And with the housing costs in Manhattan, I got this entire house for less than I was paying for a one-bedroom condo."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope."

"That's another point in North Beach's favor."

"Well, you might change your mind if you saw the inside of the place." I nibble on my bottom lip for a moment, gathering courage.

The last time I extended a date with this man, it didn't turn out quite the way I was hoping. And I'm not getting the same feelings from him that I did a week ago.

This seems—too rated PG—as though everything that transpired since that moment I was topless in his apartment has now categorized me firmly in the Friend Zone.

I can't blame him, considering the way I've treated him. Hell, I jumped to the wrong conclusion about him, ghosted him, gave him my best RBF for half this night, and then lashed out with some rather creative verbal reprimands.

(In my defense, that was a strong Manhattan I was drinking.)

But I like this guy enough now that I'm willing to risk it.

"Would you... like to come in?" I try to keep the hope out of my tone. I don't want to seem desperate. I want to seem like... well, a friend simply asking another friend inside so that a conversation can continue.

Clothing optional.

No—wait. Scratch that last part.

But I can't deny that's what I want. If my computer had a superpowered delete button, I'd be tapping it furiously to undo the last seven days until I got back to that moment last Friday night—that moment I finally knew how it felt to have rock-solid arms cradling me.

*Delete, delete, delete!*

We stand outside my door for an uncomfortable beat, and I feel myself holding my breath as I watch his mouth open. Then he pauses for a brief moment.

"I'd love to..." he says.

Joy swells inside of me like a glorious *crescendo*... until I sense the oncoming *but*.

"But..." he begins.

*Damn. I knew that was coming.*

"I have a plane to catch in the morning."

I suppress a frown. "Really?"

"Yeah. Remember I mentioned I just went on leave? My boss is practically forcing me to take a vacation. *Really*, I'm not lying," he finishes pointedly.

I'm ashamed he even felt the need to say that last part.

I force a smile, attempting to hide my disappointment. "After tonight, I'll believe you from now until the end of time. Promise."

"But I'd love to see you when I get back."

Despite the cold breeze, my face warms with hope.

Until again, the hope falters when I see his brow furrow.

Another *but*? Seriously?

“But I’ll be out of the country for a while afterward,” he adds, right on cue. “So I’ll probably be out of comms.”

“Oh. I understand. How long will you be gone?”

“A month. Maybe two.”

A million silent curses threaten to bubble up in my throat. I tamp them down.

He must notice me visibly deflating because sympathy laces his tone as he says, “I told you it’s a lousy job for my social life. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I assure him with a slight shake of my head. “Well, thanks for tonight. It was definitely more excitement than we normally see around here in North Beach. And um... be safe, wherever you’re headed.” This part I can say with sincerity. As the sister of a former SEAL, I feel the weight of good-byes a little more heavily than most people.

“I will.” He leans in and brushes a light, innocuous kiss to my cheek, not unlike how I ended things between us on our first date.

Yet still, the pulses of electricity that seem to fire off in my body from the caress of his lips against me reminds me of how it felt that first night together, feeling his hands on me as his mouth devoured me.

“I’ll call you when things settle down at work,” he finishes, then stepping away. And my heart aches as his back turns to me.

I know in my gut that I simply won’t see him again.

*Don’t go*, the little voice in my head seems to shout. And then, when he stops on the bottom stoop of my porch, I actually worry for a moment that I might have said that out loud.

He turns. “You know... the thing is, with work, I really don’t know when I’m going to be able to see you again.”

*No, no, no.* He’s giving me the official brush-off. Probably to be nice to me. To put me out of my misery.

I stay silent, bracing myself. It’s okay. I’ve been on the receiving end of this before, and I’ve always survived.

But until now, when I’ve gotten a brush-off from a man, it wasn’t from one who knew the difference between *andante* and *largo*.

Yeah, this is going to hurt.

“I get it,” I say quickly, trying to keep at least a shred of pride. “I really do. It’s okay if I don’t hear from you.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” His brow pinches. “I mean, I guess that kind of *is* what I’m saying. Work... it’s... busy, and even when I’m not traveling, I’m stuck in last-minute meetings or briefings.”

“I totally understand.”

“But, well, this week I’m on leave and...”

There’s a measured pause.

“Well, this sounds crazy, since half the evening I think you kind of hated me, but... do you want to go to Hawai‘i tomorrow with me?”

My jaw gapes. I’m struck speechless until I manage to squeeze out one word. “What?”

He holds up his hands. “Sorry. Dumb idea.”

No, no. Not a dumb idea. But I’m still convinced I imagined this. “*Hawai‘i?*”

“Yeah. That’s where I’m headed. I’ve got more than enough mileage points to get you a ticket for tomorrow’s flight. And I’m staying in a condo right on the beach. I saw photos—it’s incredible. Three bedrooms. So you could have a room all to yourself. No pressure. And hell, if the stars in North Beach make you want to compose, imagine what the stars out there would do for you.”

I *can* imagine it. I've seen photos of Hawai'i with the Milky Way stretched out across the sky. I wonder what I could compose after looking at a spectacle like that.

Maybe I could find enough inspiration to finish my symphony in time to submit it to the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra like Freya suggested.

But rushing off to paradise with a guy I hardly know? Sure, he's the first guy I've ever known who didn't think that composer Carl Orff wasn't the name of a brand of German microbrew. But I've only been on two dates with him.

"Hawai'i?" I find myself repeating in disbelief. The logic that urges me to reject his offer gives way to curiosity. It makes no sense, really. After how I treated him, why would he want to offer such a thing to me?

And why would I even care to figure that out? I should just grab the opportunity while I can. Me, in paradise with a man who makes my body heat up like a blowtorch and...

*A room all to myself?*

I suddenly realize I said that out loud.

"Yeah. No pressure, like I said," he repeats.

No pressure? If he wants me to keep my hands off of him for an entire week, that's plenty of pressure in my book.

"Just as... friends," he seems to feel the need to specify at my utter, baffled silence. "You'd be doing me a favor actually." He gives me a grin. "I hate vacationing by myself. I tried to find someone to go with me, but not many people can drop everything and fly to Hawai'i spur of the moment like this."

But I could. Platonic or not, I totally could. Instead of sitting at home, writing boring incidental music as I wait for my official rejection from that gaming company, I could sit under Hawai'i's stars all night and find the inspiration to compose something I could be proud of.

"You're serious?" I ask.

"Yeah."

I hear the reprimand of my best friend echoing in my brain. *“Don’t you dare go to Hawai‘i with some military guy. I’ve told you, they can’t be trusted,”* Lily would say right now.

I shiver at the thought, but then realize it’s more from the cold wind blowing off the Bay rather than from the harsh voice in my head. The cold breeze that this man is offering to replace with a warm tropical sun and sand between my toes.

But as friends?

I see the swirl of steam coming from my gaping mouth as I breathe.

*Say it. Say yes. Even Lily says you need a change of scene. Do something crazy for once. Aren’t all great composers said to be at least a little eccentric?*

He gives a barely perceptible shake. “Sorry. Stupid idea,” he interrupts all the little voices in my head. “I’ll call you when I—”

“What time do we leave tomorrow?”

Wait. Did I just say that? Did I actually say I’ll fly to the other side of the world to a place I’ve never been with a man I barely know?

Damn right I did.

“Zero eight hundred hours.”

My heart skips a beat, anticipation already counting down the minutes.

I need this. I need an adventure. I need to see new things that might inspire me. I need... a dozen other things that this man could offer me, too. But if I’ve been friend-zoned, I’ll totally settle for an adventure.

“I’ll meet you at the airport.”



# PART TWO

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## SECOND MOVEMENT

*ANDANTE CON MOTO*

## CHAPTER 6



- RYDER -

*Three's a charm.*

I can't help thinking of Admiral Shey's often-repeated adage as I glance toward one of the plane's windows, managing to spot a sliver of the cold, dark blue ocean beneath us.

I hope he's right. Because my first date with Maggie ended with a misunderstanding. The second date climaxed with a police report.

If things keep progressing as they have been, it probably wasn't the brightest idea to have our third date on an airplane 40,000 feet above ground.

Of course, this isn't even a date.

"*Maybe some people are just better off as friends,*" she had said last night—words that continue to ring in my ears like a pesky mosquito.

So here we are: two friends sharing a vacation... not unlike if any of my other friends had been able to take the time off work to join me. And damn every one of them for saying no.

Only difference is, just a week ago, *this* friend I held half naked in my arms. Yeah, that's a memory I need to erase if I'm going all-in on this *friend* thing.

My eyes rest on Maggie's face, serene as she sleeps with her head propped up against the window, partially blocking the

view outside. “These first-class seats are so comfortable” were her last words before she drifted off with half a glass of complimentary champagne still sitting on the tray in front of her.

I can’t read Maggie as easily as I usually can read women. She’s like the showers back in Bancroft Hall at the Naval Academy—one moment the water is running blessedly hot and in the next, it’s so cold it’ll make your balls freeze.

“Good evening, passengers. This is your captain speaking. We’ve begun our descent into Kona-Kailua airport. Please make sure your seat back is straight up, stow your tray table, and fasten your seat belt. Thank you.”

I pull my iPad out of the seat compartment so that I won’t forget it. I’ve taken advantage of the complimentary Wi-Fi here in first class to read more about Hawai‘i online and scope out some things I’d like to see during my visit.

I glance from the view out the window to Maggie, still sound asleep.

I sprang for first class tickets because a.) the quicker I run out of mileage points, the less likely I’ll be forced to vacation again and b.) if I have to sit on a plane for fourteen hours, I’d like to at least have a little more legroom than I do when the government is paying for my flight.

Those small economy seats weren’t designed for guys like me.

But this? I find myself shifting a little and enjoying the simple fact that I can. First class is the bomb.

(Not that I’d ever say the word *bomb* on an airplane.)

I press the button to pull my seat out of recline and reach across Maggie to do the same for her.

She fidgets a little in her seat, and then I see her eyes flutter open as I hand her champagne glass and my protein bar wrapper to the passing flight attendant.

“Did I fall asleep?” Maggie looks bleary-eyed.

“Either that or you were faking it because I started to bore you.” I put her tray back up for her.

“It definitely wasn’t you. These seats are amazing. I don’t know how I’ll ever go back to flying economy.”

“You and me both.”

“You really didn’t have to spring for a first-class seat for me.”

“It’s no big deal. Like I said, I have more mileage points on this airline than I could ever go through.”

“Well, it’s beyond nice of you.” She looks out the window and nearly squeals. “Look at the water!”

I lean toward her to see how the darkness of the deep ocean gives way to a dozen nearly iridescent shades of blue along Hawai‘i’s coastline. I’ll admit, just looking at it, I feel my blood pressure drop a couple points. Jagged black lava rocks bump up against sandy beaches that look as pristine as you’d see on an undiscovered island.

*Paradise, indeed.*

Maybe Admiral Shey was right. Maybe I do need a vacation.

Of *course* he was right. He didn’t get to be admiral by being wrong.

And maybe *I* was right to invite Maggie along, I decide, pulling my eyes from the water to see pure joy spread across her face. She’s got the kind of enthusiasm that seems to rub off on me.

As the plane tracks along the coast, clusters of hotels, condos, and resort-style buildings spring up from the unusual landscape.

“I wonder if we’re staying anywhere near that beach down there,” Maggie ponders jutting her chin toward the window as she voices exactly what I was just thinking as I look at white sand beckoning me.

“The photos Camden sent me made it look like we’re right on a beach like that. But you never know.”

“Camden?”

“The guy the admiral put me in contact with.”

She cocks her head. “You don’t know him directly?”

“No. Never met the guy or his brothers who own the place with him. But the admiral knows him.”

“Wow,” she breathes out, eyes still locked on the view. “Must be nice to have friends like that.” She turns to me suddenly. “Between staying in a waterfront condo and flying first class, you’re kind of raising the bar on what I expect from a vacation.”

I grin. “I aim to please.” And I’m suddenly struck by the memory of saying the same damn words to her a week ago as I was tasting the soft skin of her breasts for the first time.

Shit. Definitely not appropriate timing for that memory to resurface.

I swear she blushes before turning back to the window, and I wonder if she remembers that moment too.

“Flight attendants, please prepare for landing.” We hear the announcement from the captain.

Maggie beams as we descend, and when the plane finally touches the ground, she actually claps her hands like a little kid might—just for a brief instant before she seems to remember that she’s in public.

It makes me smile too. “A little excited?” I ask with a chuckle as the plane comes to a stop and people start to fidget, waiting for the seatbelt light to turn off.

“You have no idea. I didn’t even know how much I needed a vacation until you offered to take me.” Her expression softens a little, and her gaze on me shifts from gleeful to serious. “I really owe you for this, Ryder.”

*Oh, don’t say things like that to me, Maggie, I want to tell her. Or I’ll start to imagine all the ways I’d love for you to*

*offer to pay me back.*

When everyone starts to stand, I get our carryon luggage out of the overhead compartments, and we walk out of the plane directly into the warm, salt-scented Hawai‘i air.

The Kailua-Kona airport reminds me a little of military airports—the kind where you step from the plane and onto the tarmac rather than into an enclosed terminal.

It seems fitting here. More chill and low-key than other airports. I like it, I decide.

The sun, even though it’s disappeared for the night back home, is low in the sky here. As I glance toward the water which I can even see from the tarmac, I find myself hoping that we can make it to our condo in time to see the sunset.

To my left, Maggie is still smiling ear to ear, already chattering a mile a minute about all the sights and sounds and smells of Hawai‘i even though we’ve only been on the ground a few minutes. It’s as though she’s mentally taking notes—like she’s going to relive everything in her head again as she sits down to compose one day.

I like the idea of that.

“Aloha!”

At the exuberant greeting just as we step past security, my eyes track over to a bubbly woman holding a sign that reads “*Ryder and Maggie.*”

“Was someone meeting us?” Maggie whispers.

“I didn’t think so.”

The woman, a blonde with short, cropped hair with a wiggly toddler firmly lodged at her left hip, strides over to us as though on a mission. “You must be Ryder. You’ve got that military look. Am I right?” She extends her hand before I can even answer. “I’m Annie Sheridan. I know my husband said he’d leave the keys at the management office, but that just seemed so unfriendly.” She turns to Maggie. “And you’re Maggie?”

“I am,” Maggie, looking slightly bewildered, accepts a handshake as well. “Nice to meet you. And who is this princess?” she adds, smiling at the little girl.

“Kaila,” the girl replies in a voice as small as she is. “I’m two.”

“Two years old? Wow, I bet it’s a ton of fun being a two-year-old in Hawai‘i!”

With her free hand, Annie extends a gorgeous lei of flowers over Maggie’s head. “These are plumerias. They’re my favorites. You’ll find them all over the grounds where the condo is. And here, Ryder.”

She makes a motion with another lei, and I need to duck so she can put it over my head.

“A kukui nut lei for you because Cam tells me that no active-duty military guy will put up with flowers around his neck for more than fifteen minutes. There,” she says with some relief, looking at the two of us with a nod. “Now you look like you belong. Follow me. We’ll get your bags.”

Maggie lifts some of the plumerias—so fragrant that even I can smell them—to her nose. “This was so nice of you, Annie and Kaila. Thank you.”

There’s this weird side of me that loves to see her address the little girl as though she matters too. She likes kids, I decipher from it.

And I can’t deny that it makes me like *her* all the more, knowing that.

If she hadn’t made a point of saying we were destined to just be friends, I’d be feeling a lot of promise here.

“And it was so generous to let us stay in your—” I begin.

Cutting me off, Annie waves a hand. “Anything for friends of Joe and Vi Shey.”

“They must be good friends of yours,” Maggie says.

“You know,” she begins thoughtfully, “I’ve actually only met them once at a wedding. But they’re really tight with my

husband's cousins. So that means they're '*ohana*.'" She brightens even more. "And now you're '*ohana* too!"

"'*Ohana*?" I ask just as the little girl echoes the word as though it's one she hears a lot.

"Family. That's the Hawaiian word for family." Annie says it off-handedly as though by the end of our trip, we'll have a lot more Hawaiian words in our vocabulary.

"Cam is on O'ahu this week, so we left you his Jeep at the condo for you to use while you're here."

"Oh, no—that's really unnecessary. We were just going to rent a car," I say quickly.

Her face curls up. "No! Don't do that. You'll want to do some off-roading while you're here. It's the only way to see some of the best beaches. They won't let you do that in a rental."

"I really don't feel right—"

"I'm *insisting*. This is just how we do it here, Ryder. Like I said, you're '*ohana*.'"

"'*Ohana*,'" little Kaila echoes again from her perch on her mom's hip.

And who am I to argue with a two-year-old? Besides, the idea of doing some off-roading is too tempting to turn down. There aren't many opportunities for that living in the DC area.

"And you're going to love the condo," Annie continues. "We stocked it with some of our favorite local foods. I even put some fresh mahi-mahi in the fridge in case you want to grill it on the back patio. The seafood here is the best you'll ever have." She pauses thoughtfully, then adds, "Except I miss Maryland crabcakes. I'll admit that." She sighs for a moment as though lost in a memory of the East Coast's famed blue crabs, then gives herself a little shake. "And the views from the bedrooms are amazing. Ocean, garden, Mauna Kea. But you'll want to stay in the master bedroom. You can see whales from the balcony, and the night sky is incredible from there. So many stars."



My brow furrows. “Oh, well, we were hoping to use *two* of the bedrooms. Is that all right?”

Annie looks perplexed for a moment, then her eyes widen. “Oh! You’re just friends? I’m sorry. I had no idea. You two look so cute together, I just assumed. But yeah—you’ve got the whole place to yourself—three bedrooms and a separate office even. So you can spread out as much as you like. Be careful though.”

Maggie cocks her head. “Why?”

Grinning as we approach a conveyor belt that’s already packed with luggage, Annie lets out a slight giggle that almost sounds like it could have come from her daughter. “Cam and his two brothers all fell in love in that place,” she says, her tone warning. “So watch out!”

## CHAPTER 7



~ MAGGIE ~

I should be tired. I should be *exhausted*.

But between the view I'm enjoying now and the non-stop chatter from Annie during our drive to the condo, I feel nothing but exhilarated as I step onto the patio that extends from the main living area.

A shocking assault of every shade of blue from the ocean greets me, and my eyes almost hurt taking it all in.

The sun dips slowly, just barely touching the horizon, and I memorize this moment.

"A sunset," I breathe out the words not even knowing that Ryder stepped out here with me. I never want to forget my first Hawai'i sunset.

"You say that as though you've never seen one before."

Something about his voice warms me, almost calms me, even though it seems like it should make me feel unsettled. I'm about to share this place—this night—with a man I barely know. A man I spent much of last week hating.

Spontaneity has never been my thing. So finding myself here, on the other side of the world with Ryder, should worry me at least a little. And it does.

But then he speaks, and the gentle timbre of his voice puts me at ease.

“I haven’t seen *this* one,” I tell him, sitting on one of the seats on the back patio. Above us, a balcony protrudes, blocking the sky slightly above me, yet still making me smile, knowing that it’s the same balcony that extends from the master bedroom that Ryder insisted I take.

I can’t wait to wake up in the middle of the night and just stand there, taking in the sight of the stars above me. I can’t wait to feel the music—a new, fresh composition—bubble up inside of me like a miracle. A setting like this will surely inspire something amazing. Maybe even the final movement for my symphony.

“True,” he concurs. I love the way his voice rolls along the air toward me like the ocean waves I see in front of me.

This man... this place... this entire experience... it feels like I’m somehow reaping the benefit of some kindness that I did long ago. Yet I can’t imagine what I could have done that would make me deserve this. It’s as though destiny plucked me out of my reality back home and put me in a place that will tug inspiration from my heart again.

I can write beautiful music here this week. I will.

I *must*. Because if paradise doesn’t inspire me, then what will? I suddenly find myself nibbling my bottom lip nervously.

“And in North Beach,” I add, needing to steer my mind away from worry, “it’s the sunrises I see. My view is to the east.”

“Which do you like better? Sunrise or sunset?”

I think for a moment. “I love the feeling of newness that comes with sunrises. The idea that the day is totally fresh. Back home, sunsets were never really my thing. But it’s different here.”

“How is it different?”

Only now do I dare to pull my eyes from the view to see Ryder handing me a glass of wine.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Apparently, our hosts stocked the fridge with more than just food. This is some kind of white wine from a vineyard here on the island.”

“A vineyard on a volcano?” I take a tentative sip. “So sweet. I love it.”

He pops the cap on the beer in his hand. “Yeah. That one is made with macadamia nuts and honey, apparently. They have a pinot noir too. But something sweet somehow suited you.”

“Aw, you think I’m sweet?” I ask in an almost teasing tone.

“When you’re not calling me a phone-addicted shitbird, yeah.” He chuckles a moment, then gives his head a shake as though he’s remembering all the events of last night.

I wonder if it seems like a lifetime has passed since then to him. Because it does to me. It’s as though when that plane touched down, I’ve entered into a completely different life. And I’m loving it.

I cock my head. “What are you drinking?”

Sitting beside me, he extends the bottle closer to me and I see a surfboard on the label. “Kona Brewery. Hawai‘i beer. I’m getting into the spirit of things too.” He takes a long pull of it. “Damn. That’s good. I actually buy this stuff back home. But it tastes different here in paradise.”

I take a long sip of my drink as well and enjoy the way the sweetness blends with a slightly nutty taste. My eyes track back over to the sunset, the tangerine orb that is dissolving by the moment. I don’t want to miss a second of it.

The calming sound of the waves soothes my soul, and it’s peppered with the cooing of some birds that are hanging out in some nearby low-cut bushes that border this condominium property. “I love the birdsong here. I don’t hear anything like it back home.”

“Those are zebra doves you’re hearing.”

“Zebra doves? How did you know that?”

“I read a lot about Hawai‘i after I booked my ticket here. Wikipedia is my drug of choice. If you get really lucky, I might teach you a little about the types of fish here or Hawaiian words for different forms of lava.” He says it with a self-deprecating sarcasm.

“You’d be great company at a cocktail party.”

“I try.”

I smile, liking that he reads about things like Hawaiian birds and fish and lava. It’s not what I’d picture a military guy reading about in his free time.

Above us, I hear the whisper of the palm fronds as the ocean breeze rattles them, adding yet another dimension to the natural symphony of sounds I hear around me.

“I could retire in a place like this,” I breathe out contentedly.

“Not me,” he counters quickly, shifting in his seat. “Too peaceful.”

“That’s what I love about it.” I soak it all in silently for a few minutes, lapping it up contentedly like a cat who’s just been handed a bowl of fresh cream. I could sit here all day just looking at this view, doing nothing except counting my very ample blessings.

“So how is it different here?” Ryder asks, not seeming to enjoy the silence as much as I do.

I look at him, oblivious.

“You were saying something about the sunsets in Hawai‘i being different from back home,” he reminds me.

“Oh!” I’m actually surprised. I’m not used to a man listening to me as intently as Ryder does. “Well, yeah. At home, a sunset makes me think of all the things that I failed to get finished that day. But here... maybe it’s just the fact that I’m on vacation, but I feel like every sunset would just make me feel... gratitude, you know? Like I’ve been bles—”

I gasp, cutting off the word as all the oxygen leaves my lungs and I launch myself upward from my chair. “Oh my

God!”

“What?”

“You didn’t see it? A whale just jumped out of the water.” I almost stagger toward the ocean, feeling this need to get closer. I stop at the hedge and grin. Standing, I’m able to see more—more ocean, more waves, more sand of the beach just on the other side of the hedge—and my heart sings. It’s beauty unparalleled.

Ryder comes up behind me. I can’t hear his footsteps because of the sound of the waves. But I can feel his presence. His warmth. “I thought Annie must have been exaggerating when she said you can see whales from here,” I tell him.

“Apparently not.”

I press my lips together in thought for a moment, my eyes straining to take in as much of the view as I can.

A thought occurs to me. “You know, we should do something spectacular to repay Annie and her family.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll think of something good. I’m a pretty good gift giver.”

“You are?”

“Sure. I have a huge family. I have lots of practice at it.”

“Are you close to them?” I ask, curious.

“To my family? Oh, yeah. I kind of don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just... the way we are. When you’re one of five kids, there’s not really enough space in the house to be anything *but* close.”

“*Five kids?*” This makes me pull my eyes from the view.

“Didn’t I tell you that?”

“No. I mean, you talked about your big family a couple times. But *five* kids?”

“Yep. One brother and three sisters. So, my life lately has been nothing but engagement parties, weddings, and baptisms the past few years. I’m the only one who’s single now.”

“No pressure there, I’ll bet,” I say with a joking tone.

“No pressure at all,” he echoes the sentiment, thick with sarcasm. “And I’m the oldest, which makes it worse. According to my parents, I should have given them at least one grandchild to spoil by now. All I’ve given them is an engagement party to throw.”

“You were engaged?”

“Yeah. Way back. I was fresh out of the Naval Academy. She majored in pharmacy at the University of Maryland. But she gave me back the ring when she found out she’d have to get recertified as a pharmacist in every new state I dragged her to.”

“Ouch. I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time a—*Holy*... wait... Either this beer is really strong, or I saw a whale tail pop up just now.”

“I told you!” My eyes light, turning to the view again. “Where?”

He leans into me so that he can get my exact point of view and takes my hand, guiding it to the direction. “Riiiiight... there. There it is again!”

I can’t resist glancing from the whale tail to his smile. I love seeing it. It’s unapologetically wide and bright and welcoming. *Damn*. How did I get so lucky to be here on this island with this guy, separate bedrooms or not?

“Wouldn’t it be cool to see one of those up close?” he says, the question almost seeming rhetorical.

I open my mouth to tell him that we can. I even saw a bunch of whale watching boat tour brochures in one of those stands at the airport. But I snap my mouth shut again and make a mental note to book us one as a surprise. I’d love to do something nice for him.

Ohhh... the things I’d love to do for him. *With* him.

I shiver. Friends, I remind myself yet again. If those words he said to me on the boardwalk last night were fading in my memory, I'd only have to recall his quick response to Annie when she suggested we share the master bedroom.

I am nothing but a traveling companion for him this week. A friend.

My head tilts slightly looking at him now, curious, yet still enjoying the feel of his skin against mine as he points our joined hands toward where that whale tail disappeared into the ocean.

He shifts his gaze from the ocean to me, bringing my lips too, too close to his. So close that I can feel his warm breath against my mouth.

And I remember. I remember the taste of him on that night. And I want more.

Even if he doesn't.

My eyes locked on him, and feeling a boldness that I can only blame on the wine, I ask, "Why did you bring me here, Ryder?"

His eyebrows hike up his forehead about an inch as he drops my hand as though he had forgotten until now that he was holding it.

I hate the way my skin feels without his warm touch on me. It feels... like a loss, I guess. Like I had something wonderful for a moment, and now I don't.

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't I?" he asks.

"I mean, if you really couldn't find anyone else to come—which, by the way, I have a hard time believing after seeing your eight-pack—"

He laughs, interrupting me. "Well, in my defense, I didn't want just *anyone*. And this was pretty spontaneous."

"Yeah. But you could have just come alone."

To that, he shakes his head emphatically. "Like I said, I hate vacationing alone. Big family, remember? I need chaos



around me.”

“I don’t buy it.”

His expression slopes downward suddenly and I’m immediately regretting that I steered the conversation in this direction. I’m overstepping. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry. I’m just glad to tag along. And if you want chaos, I’m happy to fill the role.”

I retreat to my chair on the back patio, hoping it will shift the conversation. “Aren’t these the most comfortable patio chairs *ever*? I swear they’re made from memory foam or something,” I ramble, looking to change the topic.

He turns, and his gaze is a little wary. But he spares me a slight nod in reply. Silently, he sits next to me and takes a sip of his beer.

“You’re right, actually,” he finally says. “It’s not the big family thing. I mean, that’s part of it, I’m sure. But not all of it.”

I see the caution in his eyes. “You don’t have to talk about this. I was being too nosy. I’m really sorry.”

“No, it’s—not some dark secret, really. It’s just... a flaw I can’t seem to fix about myself.”

“From where I’m sitting, you’re looking pretty flawless, Ryder.” I give him a playful up-and-down appraisal.

He rewards me with one of those smiles of his, the ones that make my belly stir with a lovely mix of heat and butterflies. “It’s just that when I’m alone and supposed to be relaxing,” he begins, “my brain tends to go over every tiny decision I’ve made and second-guess each one.”

My eyes widen with surprise. “Oh! I do that too, Ryder. I think everyone does.”

“Yeah, but with me...” His voice trails as he shakes his head. “I think about every mission I’ve ever been on. Especially the ones when I was in command. And I play it all in my head, over and over. Monday night quarterbacking, like

they call it, except in my case, all those decisions—they could have cost one of my Team his life.”

“That must be hard.”

He shrugs, almost in denial. “I can deal with hard. Hell, I’ve seen guys come back from action with a lot worse than an overactive brain. This—it’s nothing. But I want to command more than a Team. I want to command a JSOTF at the Flag level. I want to follow Admiral Shey’s career path, essentially. It’s one of the reasons why this job as his aide is so good. But if I’m second guessing my decisions now...”

At his silence, I finish for him. “You wonder what it will be like later, with even more responsibility. More lives at stake.”

“Exactly. And the crazy thing is, no one’s even been injured under my command.”

Now I’m perplexed. “That should be good, though.”

“It is. But every one of those decisions—it could have turned out badly. Every damn one of them. It’s not like I was following some textbook that I can blame if something goes wrong. It’s like a coin flip out there sometimes. You’re in the moment. You need to go with your gut. So now, I keep thinking, shit, *what if...* right? One day, someone will get hurt or worse. One day, I’ll be the one having to tell his wife or kids that they’ll have an empty space at their dinner table for the rest of their lives.”

I release a low breath that comes out in a slight whistle. “That’s a lot to think about.”

He gives himself a shake. “It makes me wonder whether I’m cut out for this—even though it’s all I want. Does that make sense?”

I nod. It makes more sense to me than he probably realizes.

He takes another sip of beer. “So that’s it. That’s why you’re here.” There’s a sense of finality in his tone, as though he doesn’t want to talk about it anymore.

I get that.

So I cock my head somewhat coyly and say, “And here I thought you brought me along because you loved how I called you a shitbird last night.”

With humor in his eyes, he glances at his watch. “Technically, with the time difference, I’m not sure we can say it was last night anymore.”

“I guess you’re right.” I feel somehow honored and even comforted in the thought that he confided in me. It makes me feel less like I’m sharing this condo with a man I barely know. “So... I’m here to distract you,” I say quietly, looking over at him and thinking of a million ways I’d love to distract him.

But none seem appropriate, given the circumstances.

*Nuts.*

Resolute, I give a little nod. “I can totally nail this. So what do you want to do tomorrow? Maybe head to that active volcano you mentioned on the plane?” I suggest even though it was last on my agenda. But seeing as he’s the one who got us here, I’d like to check off his to-do list before mine.

He grins slightly. “Yeah? You want to?”

“You bet. And there’s no better way to distract ourselves than watching a heap-ton of molten lava headed in our direction.”

“If only we’re lucky enough to have that happen to us,” he says almost wistfully, and I’m wondering if he’s kidding.

“Besides, since we’re jet lagged, we’ll probably be up well before sunrise,” I add. “And Annie said it was a long drive.”

“If you’re really up for it, I’m game.” He tips his beer in my direction. “To molten lava!”

I hold up my finger, telling him to wait, and look something up quickly on my phone. Then I tap my wine glass against his beer bottle.

“*Hipahipa*,” I say, because if I’m in Hawai‘i, I better know how to toast in Hawaiian. “Here’s to a week of endless distractions.”

## CHAPTER 8



- RYDER -

It's zero-three-hundred hours when I finally give in and look at the time on my phone.

For the last half hour, I've been lying here in bed—alone, regrettably—wondering if I might be able to catch a little more sleep.

But it's just not happening.

I'm no stranger to jet lag. Not in my profession. So I know that I may as well give up and just get ready for the day.

The window in the bedroom I'm in offers a stunning view of Mauna Kea. I took this room so that Maggie could wake up in the night any time she likes and step onto her bedroom's balcony to let the stars inspire her. It seems the right thing to do, seeing as I'm in a career that requires zero inspiration.

Just the same, I could find plenty of inspiration looking at that mountain I see in the distance even in the dark. I stare for another moment or two, smiling at the sight of the stars and how they reveal the outline of the immense, gently sloping Mauna Kea. I imagine for a moment what all this looked like hundreds of thousands of years ago as lava sprang up from the ocean to create this island.

The vision I draw up in my mind makes me excited to get to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park today. I hope Maggie is still up for it.

I take care to be quiet as I step out of my room on the off-chance that Maggie isn't battling jet lag like I am. But when I smell coffee brewing downstairs, I know she's awake too.

I'm happy for it. There's nothing like sitting alone at oh-three-hundred to get my brain churning in all the directions I want to avoid.

I trot down the stairs, pondering how easily I was able to confide in Maggie last night. I don't normally talk to people about all the hang-ups I've got that come with my line of work. Not to the guys on my Team. Not to the head docs they make us see after a mission. Not even to my family.

It's not like I think there's any shame in it. It's just that I'd feel like I was stepping into a minefield, waiting for someone to tell me that maybe I should reconsider my career direction. That maybe command at the level of Admiral Shey isn't in the cards. That maybe men like him are able to disconnect themselves from past missions and move on in a way that my brain is unable to.

Those are the things I don't want to hear, because I'm saying them to myself already. I don't want those thoughts validated. So the safest way to avoid hearing any of that from someone other than myself is to simply not talk about it.

So why did I open up to Maggie like that?

I spot her, fully dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"You can't sleep either?" she asks brightly.

"Nope. Jet lag at its finest."

She grins. "Well then, here's some *coffee* at its finest." She hands me the cup that I thought she was preparing for herself. "Kona coffee. It's coffee the way God intended it. I can't believe I've lived this long without ever trying this before."

"Thank you," I say, taking her offered cup and drinking it black, not really caring about the taste. I've never been much of a coffee drinker.

But from the anticipatory look in Maggie's eyes, I'm thinking she's expecting a reaction from me.

"It's amazing, right?"

I glance down at the mug I just drank from. "It's good. But I'm not really a connoisseur."

"You don't drink coffee? How do you *live*?"

From the amount of energy she put into that statement, I'm thinking she's had at least two cups of this stuff already.

"Any addiction's not a good idea for me. I deploy too often."

She looks thoughtful. "Huh. I wonder if my brother is the same way."

"To some degree, probably. I don't want to wake up in the morning when I'm deployed and be distracted by coffee withdrawal."

"And that's a real thing," she remarks with an air of authority. "Annie said they give tours of some of the coffee farms here. I'd love to go on one."

"We'll make a day of it. Maybe we'll hit that local winery that makes that stuff you were drinking last night too. I'd love to pick up a bottle of it for the admiral."

"He likes wine?"

"Apparently. He and his wife want to live on a vineyard when they retire."

"What a cool plan. It's... not what you'd expect to hear from an admiral."

"He's not your typical Navy guy, that's for sure. Did you see any stars from your balcony yet?"

"I did." Her smile as she responds seems forced, and her eyes hint of disappointment somehow. But then she seems to rally. "You should go up there and see. You definitely gave me the best room in the place. Maybe we should alternate nights. Like tonight, you can have the master bedroom."

The idea of sleeping in the same sheets as she did somehow arouses me. What am I? A horny high school kid again?

“Nah,” I dismiss her suggestion quickly. “If I want to see the stars, I’ll go out on the beach. That’s where Annie said they’re best. You want to do that now? We’ve got a couple hours at least until the sun is up.”

“No. We should head to the volcano. If we head out now, maybe we can see the sunrise on that side of the island.”

I glance at my watch, finding the idea of that appealing. “You’re sure you’re up for that? It’s a long drive.”

She slices a hand through the air. “Are you kidding? I started my morning with Kona coffee. I can do anything right now.” She purses her lips together for a brief moment. “Except finish my symphony,” she adds, and I see that disappointment in her gaze return.

I open my mouth to ask for details, but she gives a little shake and suddenly says, “Come on. I need a distraction too.”

After we finish our coffees and I grab a couple of the Taro bagels that Annie left for us—I’ve never eaten a purple bagel before and can’t wait to try one—we step into the chilled air and I’m glad I thought to pack a couple sweatshirts for this trip.

Maggie’s wearing one of them and even though it’s huge on her, she looks cute wearing it. I’ve heard it gets cold here when you’re driving through the mountains because of the altitude changes. Hell, one of the things on my to-do list is to step into the snow at the top of Mauna Kea while I’m here and then follow up with a swim in the ocean. There aren’t too many places on the planet that you can do such a thing.

As we drive along the low-lit road, I can’t help letting my eyes track upward from time to time enjoying the sight of the Milky Way. I don’t even have to strain to see it, even when I’m looking through the windshield of the Jeep.

“So…” I dare begin, remembering the disappointment in Maggie’s eyes when I mentioned the stars this morning. “Why

do you need a distraction this morning?"

I look over at her when she is silent. She gives a slight frown.

"I mean, I thought *I* was the only one on this trip needing a distraction," I remind her with a joking tone. "That's my territory."

After a beat or two, she says, "I went out on that balcony the moment I woke up, you know? To see the stars. I just couldn't help feeling... I don't know. Like, in a magical place like this, I'd come up with something amazing. You know? Something epic."

"And nothing came to you?"

"Nothing epic, that's for sure. And certainly not a final movement for my symphony."

I shake my head dismissively. "You're tired. Jet lagged. You're just running on adrenaline."

"But it's so beautiful." She glances out her window. "If I can't be inspired by *that*, then why bother even trying anymore? Maybe it's time for me to give up the dream, you know?"

"Give up composing?"

"No. Not composing," she rebuts quickly. "It's all I really know how to do. But just give up the dream of... greatness."

"Maggie, I'm going to remind you that you have your name listed on the credits of movies. Real honest-to-God movies."

"TV rom-coms, Ryder. Hallmark channel sort of thing. Not the kind of movies I imagined myself scoring."

"What did you imagine?"

"Oh..." She pauses and toys with the bottom of the sweatshirt she's wearing, almost seeming nervous or maybe ashamed. "John Williams kind of stuff."

"Whoa... the composing elite."



“Yeah. It sucks having a dream without the talent to make it reality.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that,” I counter, fiddling with the radio to see if I can get something local, curious about what people listen to around here. I get a smattering of talk radio, along with plenty of “oldies but goodies” as my mom would call them. Then I leave it on a station that plays Hawaiian music—some ‘ukulele and slack key—because it seems appropriate given our surroundings. But as our elevation increases, so does the static, forcing me to change the station every fifteen minutes or so.

I glance her way, and notice her eyelids seem lazy, fluttering slightly as though that Kona coffee she loves is wearing off.

“Why the race to finish your symphony, anyway?” I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me.

She snorts adorably. “Can’t really call it a race when it’s been in the works for over a decade, Ryder.”

“Maybe. But you’ve waited this long. And you’re composing work that actually pays your bills. That’s really something, Maggie. Why pressure yourself? I can’t imagine there’s a huge market for symphonies anyway.”

She sighs, long and loud. “You are spot-on there. But the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra has an open call for submissions from local composers for their next season.”

“Really? Is that unusual?”

“Very. And they’re a good orchestra. It would be...” She shakes her head. “I don’t know. It would even be a longshot to submit anything. But wow... to hear my music played by an actual orchestra rather than just from the music notation software on my computer...”

“Wait—you can actually play your symphony on your computer?”

“You mean my *unfinished* symphony?” She gives me a pointed look, then laughs a little. “Sure. Of course. It’s just a normal mp3 file. I can play it anywhere. I just plug in the notes

and instruments on the software and then download it when I'm done. I can play it on my phone, my iPad... anything."

"That's incredible."

She gives a little shrug. "It's not as good as a real orchestra, of course. The instruments—they sound a little shallow. Fake—you know? Because, well, they are. That's what you're usually listening to when you're watching things on TV. It's not like anyone hires a full orchestra to score a low-budget TV rom-com."

"I never even thought about that." My brow furrows a moment as I find myself reaching for the dial on the radio as yet another station drops out of range. But then I pull my hand away. "Wait a second. We've been driving for—" I glance down at the car's clock. "—over an hour, and we could have been listening to your symphony on your phone all this time?"

I glance her way just in time to see her eyes roll.

"You don't have to listen to it."

"I don't have to. But I *want* to."

She looks at me, incredulous. "Really?"

"Of course. I told you, you're looking at the only living classical music junkie who wears a trident on his uniform."

She smiles. "I won't argue that point. Well, okay..." There's uncertainty in her tone as her voice trails. "But if you get bored, we can turn it off."

She plugs her phone into the car's USB and within moments, I'm hearing it.

Her first movement comes in *andante*—just like she had said when we were in North Beach—almost reminding me of Vivaldi symphonies.

I feel this sense of admiration as I listen to Maggie's composition. The way the music ebbs and flows almost mimics the winding road we're on as we slice our way through two sloping volcanoes, heading toward the opposite side of the island.

Each change in tempo, each instrument's vibrant tone that fills the Jeep, every pluck of strings or slide of a cello seems to accentuate something about our drive, as though if my life was a movie right now, this symphony would be its soundtrack.

When I have to stop twice for wild goats crossing the road, and once more for a bird that I'd swear looks like the endangered nēnē that I read about online, the music seems to punctuate my foot hitting the brakes. When we climb to higher altitudes and a thick fog swallows our Jeep, the music seems eerier, almost foreshadowing something oppressive yet to come.

Then, just as we emerge from the fog, the music shifts to hopeful, joyous even. Like a celebration as we can see the stars again.

As each movement ends, I find myself wanting more. *Waiting* for more. Hoping that she won't tap the display on her phone and tell me she's heard enough.

Because I haven't.

*Damn. She's brilliant.*

I can sense the approaching end of her symphony's third movement just as I see the sign for the turnoff for Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. Then, when I hear that last note, I feel this emptiness in my gut. Like the kind you get when you're watching a TV show and they give you a cliffhanger, making you wait months to hear what happens next.

Holy shit. I have chills. Literally.

"Maggie..." I shake my head.

"Ugh," she groans. "*Please* don't feel the need to compliment it."

"Maggie, it's—what's that word you're always using? Epic."

"Oh, come on," she says dismissively.

"I have chills. Look at me." I extend an arm her way. I've always been the kind of person who gets chills during some music or maybe at a climactic moment in a movie or book. I

hate that about myself. As a guy—especially as a SEAL—I generally like to keep my feelings to myself.

But this time, I'm grateful for the proof.

She glances at my forearm. "You really liked it?"

"I loved it," I say as I roll down the window as we arrive at the entry gate. I pull out my military ID. Active-duty military get free admission to national parks—one of the great benefits, in my opinion. Sure, I might get myself killed, but hey, I get to see a volcano for free.

After closing the window and pulling off to the side of the road to take a brief look at the map the park ranger gave us, I add, "I can see why you need a fourth movement though." I say it more to try to impress her than anything else. To prove I was really paying attention.

I don't know why I feel the need to prove anything to her. Yet I do, just the same.

She almost seems relieved at my words. "I know, right? So many people are like, 'Hey, just consider it done.' Three movements in a symphony are enough for a lot of composers. They say, 'What does it matter?'"

"Oh, it matters," I agree with her. "That last part of the third movement—it feels like, I don't know, like the orchestra was asking the audience an open-ended question. And there's this part of me that just wants to know the answer. Does that make sense?"

Her eyes light, practically gleeful. "Yes! That's what I was going for. But... I don't know. Maybe I should just change the ending and turn it into a three-movement symphony. It's been ten years. How long am I supposed to give it?"

"Don't change it." I sound defensive. "It's perfect. But now I'm dying to hear what comes next."

I pull my eyes from her and touch the car's interior light so that I can see the map better.

"Thanks, Ryder. I don't think anyone's ever really given me such detailed feedback like that, except my friend Lily. She

went to Julliard too.”

I glance back at her. “I’ll take that as a compliment to be in the company of someone who went to Julliard. You know, my mom would love to hear your symphony. God, if she knew I was—” *Dating a composer*, I nearly say, but cut myself off just in time.

Because I’m not dating her.

“—friends with a composer,” I finish. “Is there any way I could share it with her?”

She gives me a pained look. “I’d really rather wait till it’s done, if that’s okay. How old is she? Is she in good health?”

My brow screws up. “Almost sixty. And yes. Why?”

“Because she might be waiting a while,” she says, her tone joking.

I chuckle, turning off the interior light and pulling back onto the nearly empty road. There aren’t many people here at this hour, and it makes me even happier that we’re doing this now. All those must-see, highly trafficked sights at the park that I read about on the plane—like the Thurston Lava Tube or Chain of Craters Road—won’t be as crowded in these early hours. Afterward, I’m hoping I can entice Maggie into taking a hike with me to see if we can get any closer to a lava flow.

But first, we drive along Crater Rim Drive and stop at a viewing point near the Halema‘uma‘u Crater at the Kīlauea Caldera so that we can watch the sunrise.

As we get out of the car, my breath is stolen by the spectacle in front of us. I had hoped to see lava at some point today, but didn’t imagine I’d be so lucky as to see it first thing when we arrived. But in the near darkness of pre-dawn, the orange glow from the lava in the caldera is unmistakable.

We sit together in awed silence on the hood of the Jeep, anticipating the first light of the day and listening to the low murmur coming from the mouth of the volcano.

The sound of it in the distance is almost haunting. A hum... a hiss... a crackle... a strange, otherworldly

culmination of sounds that reminds me a little of a symphony, actually, the way they blend together. Taken separately, each sound is so different. So unique. But together, they sound even better. More complete.

“I feel like I’m listening to the earth breathing,” Maggie whispers reverently.

I couldn’t have worded it better. “I guess we kind of are. I’m not sure how we’re going to top this experience tomorrow.”

“Actually...” Her voice trails enough for me to glance over and see her ensuing smile. “I have a little surprise planned for you tomorrow.”

“You didn’t have to do anything for me.”

“Of course I do. And it’s just a little something. It probably can’t beat a sunrise on an active volcano, but...” She pauses a moment, as though for dramatic effect, her smile spreading. “...it might.”

Then, just as the first rays of dawn peek above the horizon, turning the sky the exact shade of orange that matches the lava in the caldera, I realize that for all the amazement I feel at the marvel in front of me, my mind keeps flitting backward to the music I listened to on the drive here and the woman who created it.

And in that moment when the fullness of the sun breaks free of the horizon and sends us its warmth, I hear the whisper of a memory in my head.

“*Maybe some people are just better off as friends,*” Maggie had said to me the other night, shutting the door on the possibility for anything more, I had thought.

But this time, I’m hung up on that *first* word a little more and wondering if it offers some hope that I hadn’t considered before.

“*Maybe...*”

## CHAPTER 9



~ MAGGIE ~

“Whaa—!”

Words cannot properly describe the collective gasp I hear from the five other people who share this small boat with Ryder and me. I’m not even sure if I joined in with their exclamation until I feel the soreness in my throat from shouting so loudly.

But I guess that’s simply how people react when a massive humpback whale propels itself from the ocean and smacks down on the water only a stone’s throw away from us, drenching our boat with the ensuing splash.

The other night, when I saw that first whale breach from the ocean in the distance, I couldn’t have imagined a more impressive sight. But this? I feel like everything I see in my life will always be compared to this moment.

Milky Way... lava... whales. Yes, I definitely came to the right place for creative inspiration.

“That was so close!” I hear myself shriek right along with all the other excited exclamations from our small band of tourists. “So close to the boat!” I’m breathless as I say it, dizzy with excitement.

We’re on board a Zodiac raft, and all of us are sitting along the sides, a little too precariously for my taste. When I booked our tickets after seeing their website on my phone that first night when we arrived, I liked the idea of being so close to the

water. Ryder *had* said he wanted to see whales up close, after all.

But now, the tiny boat next to something as big as a whale makes me feel nothing but vulnerable.

Our boat rocks when the wave the whale created drifts our way and Ryder's hand touches my back, as though to ensure that I won't fall in.

If I was feeling breathless before, I certainly am now simply from the sensation of his palm against me.

Breathless... and safe. He makes me feel safe in a way I hadn't expected from any man.

I pull my eyes from where the whale disappeared into the water and glance briefly at Ryder behind me on the side of the raft. I don't know what it is about his presence that makes me feel so secure inside. Maybe it's the sheer size of him, just knowing that those strong arms of his could wrap around me and shield me from anything. Or maybe it's the fact that we're on the water, so a SEAL like him is in his element. If I *did* fall in that water, I couldn't ask for a more appropriate rescuer than a guy like Ryder.

But these past couple days in paradise, I'm starting to feel like it's just the fact that it's *him* by my side—Ryder—this man who makes me feel like I'm ready for any adventure that life sends me.

Or maybe it's Hawai'i that's doing that.

“And here's the money shot! Get your cameras ready,” the tour guide tells us.

I point my phone in the direction of the dorsal fin on the whale's back which is just above the water. And his back curves as the whale gets deeper until I see its perfect tail emerge—that quintessential photo that I've seen so often of whales.

*Money shot, indeed.*

I tap on my phone, getting a good handful of photos as the tail slowly slips down into the depths and disappears.



“He’s taken the deep dive now and won’t be up again for a while,” the tour guide says. “But you all sure got your money’s worth,” he adds as he starts up the motor again and points the boat in the direction of the marina.

It’s pretty evident from the smiles on everyone’s faces that we all agree with him.

It’s hard to talk on the ride back to shore with the motor revved up to max. With all of us perched on the inflatable sides of the Zodiac, we cling to ropes as we bounce along. I probably feel safer than other people on this boat with Ryder’s hand still at my back, as though if I start to slip to the side at any moment, he’ll make sure I don’t fall in.

This day—zipping along the ocean as we search for whales—seems like an entirely different vacation than we experienced just yesterday. I feel like Hawai‘i is several different vacations all bundled into one.

And with each new adventure, I am becoming closer to Ryder. No... it’s more than that. It’s more like with each new *breath*, I become closer to him, as though the air here is magical, making me feel more connected to him and to the world around me.

Even better, I feel this excitement stirring in me, making me want to race back to the condo and see what notes I’ll choose to sketch onto my empty manuscript paper.

After we’re at the dock, Ryder gets off the boat first and reaches out his hand to help me off. I love the feel of my hand in his. It makes me want to think up a million excuses to feel the sensation again and again.

“Maggie, thank you. That was the best surprise I’ve had in my life.”

“Really?”

“Hell, yeah. I’m a military guy. Most of the surprises I get are the bad kind.”

I laugh.

“And I’ve always wanted to see whales up close,” he adds. “How did you know?”

“You mentioned something that first night we arrived.”

“Really? I don’t even remember that.” He gives me an amused look. “I’ve finally met a woman who listens to me, and she only thinks of me as a friend. I’m not sure whether I should be grateful or angry about that.”

*Wait... what?* As we walk toward the Jeep, I replay that last sentence in my head.

*He’s* the one who wanted to be just friends. Not me. *I’m* the one who was tearing my clothes off within three hours of coming face to face with him.

Granted, I’m happy to consider him a friend. Grateful, even. But I’d most certainly prefer something more than that. Doesn’t he know that?

I open my mouth to say something—even though I’m not sure what. But I snap it shut again when he continues, “I’ve seen a lot of whales at sea in the Navy. But I’ve always been on some mission or another. So we’d see whales in the distance but not be able to steer off course and get any closer.”

“That makes sense.”

“So, for me, whales always symbolized—I don’t know—something I wanted to see but was always being pulled away from for work.”

I laugh. “Sounds like our first date.”

“You’re right.” His eyes spark with humor. “There is a pattern there. No wonder I’m still single.”

“Don’t feel badly. I’m right there with you. And now that my sister’s having a baby, I’ll probably be getting as much pressure from my parents as you get from yours.”

“Your sister’s having a baby?”

“Yeah. She told me in a text the other day.” I pause a moment, pondering. “Doesn’t that seem a little odd?” I am compelled to ask him. As a guy who’s been made an uncle a

couple times, maybe he'll have some input. "That the news came in a text, I mean."

"I *wish* the next baby announcement in my family would come in a text. In my family, there's always some huge party. And since they're all only about an hour from DC, I'm expected to be there for everything, now that I'm stationed at the Pentagon."

"But I thought you loved it."

"I love *them*. But... well, they think that every engagement, wedding, or birth announcement has to be bigger than the last one. It gets pretty tiring just witnessing it. So a text announcement sounds pretty refreshing to me."

My phone rings in my pocket. It's Monday in the real world—so different from here where I'd swear it's eternally the weekend.

I see Lily's name on my display.

Oh boy. This is a conversation I've been dreading.

I suck in a breath. "I should take this. Do you mind?"

"Considering how our first date ended, it would be pretty hypocritical if I did mind." He nods in the direction of a gift shop. "I'm going to see if that place sells postcards. Want me to pick up some for you?"

"No, thanks," I say, smiling because I've never known a guy who sends postcards.

As he steps away, I answer the phone with an admittedly uneasy tone. "Hey, Lily."

"What's the matter?" she says, already wary. "You sound weird."

"I'm fine. *Great*, actually."

"Really? Did you hear from that job or something?"

"No. I really don't think they're interested anymore."

"They *have* to be. Do you know how much I'd love it if you moved to my coast? Melody and I could take day trips to

visit you.”

“I’d love that too.”

“So if it’s not the job, what is it? You totally sound off.”

That’s the problem with having a friend who knows me better than I know myself. There’s no hiding anything from her. “I, uh, I’m just maybe a little unsteady on my feet. I just got off a boat.”

“Isn’t it a little cold to be out on the Chesapeake?”

“Uh, no. I was... on the ocean. In—” Oh, God. This is going to get a lecture. “—Hawai‘i.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah.” I brace myself. “Um, look, don’t yell at me, but Ryder invited me to Hawai‘i.”

“You went to Hawai‘i with that asshole? Are you insane?”

“No. And he’s not an asshole,” I say way too defensively of him. “He actually *did* go to work that night when Nychelle texted him.”

“No way.”

I bite the bullet a little and tell her everything, sparing no detail.

I even tell her about my cringe-worthy rebuke of him as he saved some woman from God knows what.

“He’s a good guy, really,” I finish. “And we’re just here as friends. That’s it. Though I’m honestly regretting that last part.”

There’s dead silence on the other end.

“Lily? Are you there?”

“So...” Her voice sounds hesitant. “You’re saying that you went on another date with this guy, and then flew to the other side of the world with him, and I’m only hearing this now?”

“Well, I know how you feel about military guys. I’m sorry.”

“No. *I’m* sorry,” she says, surprising me. “What kind of a best friend am I if I’ve made you feel like you couldn’t share this until now?”

“You’re the *best* kind of best friend.” I spot Ryder stepping out of the souvenir shop with a small bag in his hand. “You won’t yell at me about him being in the Navy?”

“Nah. If a guy ever offered to take *me* to Hawai‘i for our third date, I’d probably overlook the uniform too.” She sighs. “Right after I called you to see if you could babysit while I was gone,” she adds with a giggle.

“You know I’d do it for you. But hey—he’s headed this way now. I should go.”

“Send me photos, okay?”

I feel relief, grateful to have this conversation behind me so that I *can* send photos. This is the first time I’ve taken so many selfies without sharing at least one of them with Lily.

“I will.”

“And be careful with your heart, Maggie. Those military guys can be—”

“I will,” I cut her off. “Promise,” I finish just as Ryder has returned to my side.

“And if you have sex with him, use protect—”

I end the call before she can finish that sentence. I don’t want Ryder hearing my best friend’s predictable reminder to use a condom. There’s nothing like having a friend who got knocked up during a one-night stand to remind a girl to be cautious.

“Sorry,” I tell Ryder. “That was my friend Lily.”

“The one you mentioned from Julliard?”

“Yeah. Did you get some postcards?” I ask, glancing at the small bag in his hand as he opens the Jeep door for me.

“Yep,” he answers briefly, and then continues after he climbs into his side of the Jeep. “They’re just for my niece and nephew. I always send them postcards from wherever I am.”

“I’ll bet they like that.”

“They’re too young to even read them yet.”

I give him a quizzical look. “So why send postcards?”

“In my last job before becoming the admiral’s aide, I deployed a lot. And I always thought that, if the worst happened, they wouldn’t even know me. They wouldn’t know—you know—that they were important to me.” He starts the car and we pull out onto a bumpy road that leads toward what locals call the Queen K Highway. “The idea of that kind of pissed me off. So I’d send postcards to them anytime I could find some—which was actually pretty hard since postcards aren’t really easy to find in the places I was.”

“I imagine not.”

“So they’d get lots of them from layovers in Germany or Belgium. Some were generic cards that I’d get postmarked on an aircraft carrier. It was probably a stupid idea. But I just wanted them to know, no matter what, that I cared.”

“That’s a nice tradition, Ryder.”

He shrugs. “When they get older, they’ll probably look at their stack of old postcards and think it’s lame. But you do what you can, right?”

*You do what you can.* I chew on his words as we head back to the condo. I think about my sister, pregnant and already with two baby showers being planned by people other than me. This is her first child, and she’s doing it all while running her own business and dealing with the stress of being married to an Army Ranger.

I want to do what *I* can. She’s my only sister.

I bite my bottom lip for a moment. “Do you mind if I steal your postcard idea for my niece or nephew?” I ask.

“Not in the slightest.” He chuckles.

I love the sound of his laugh. It calms me somehow, the same way I feel about all the sounds I hear in Hawai‘i.

“How about we watch the sunset from the beach this time?” Ryder suggests when we pull back into the condo’s parking lot. “Maybe even stick our feet in the water?”

He sure doesn’t have to ask twice.

That sounds like music to my ears. I only have five sunsets left here in paradise, and I’m determined not to miss a single one.

“You read my mind,” I tell him.

We leave our things inside the condo and head straight to the opening in the hedge that Annie showed us, and I tug my sneakers off my feet the first moment I can, already anticipating the feel of the sand between my toes.

My feet sink into gloriously soft white sand.

It’s completely different from sand back in North Beach, finer than back home, and almost pillowy soft as we walk, shoes in hand, toward the water.

Ryder makes it to the shoreline first, tugging off his shirt and chucking it along the water’s edge along with his shoes.

*Mercy.* It’s the first time I’ve seen the full glory of those abs since our first date, and the sight of him like this makes me suck in a breath.

He’s already knee-high in the water when I first feel the chill of the saltwater on my toes. I almost squeal from the shock of it. It’s probably not even that cold, but it’s such a contrast from the hot sand.

When I’m ankle deep, I cringe a little at the sight of how the incoming waves are already soaking the bottom of Ryder’s shorts. “Watch out. You don’t want to get too wet,” I warn him.

He looks over his shoulder at me with a single raised eyebrow. “Oh, don’t I?”

Then he takes too large strides toward deeper water and dives headfirst into a wave as though he’s Poseidon returning to his home.

*Well now...*

He swims deeper, then disappears just long enough for the tiny hairs on my arms to prickle with worry, before his body springs upward from the water.

Back on his feet again, walking toward me as though it's perfectly normal to have a swim in the ocean while half clothed, the water shimmers on his body making his pecs and abs gloriously highlighted by the reflections of the setting sun.

Yes, some bodies were just meant to be wet.

“That was refreshing. Want to jump in?”

“Uh... I'm not exactly dressed for it.”

His grin teases me. “Didn't stop me.”

I brace myself in the sand as a wave strikes my feet. He takes a long stride toward me and reaches his hand out as though I'm supposed to take it.

I look at it warily. “You're not going to tug me in deeper, are you?”

His smile on me is warm. “No. Just making sure you don't —” He grabs my hand firmly just as I start to teeter as a wave rolls outward back to the ocean, tugging me along with it.

“—fall in,” he finishes as he steadies me.

I feel an adrenaline surge—whether it's from nearly losing my balance or from the feel of my hand in his, I'm not sure. But I enjoy it.

And I don't want him to let go. I really, really don't.

I know that after all the craziness since we first met, he just thinks of me as a friend. Even when his simple touch makes emotions and heat swirl together inside of me, I can't even find any regret in my heart over that because I'm discovering that being his friend is so damn wonderful.

But I don't want to let go.

“Maybe I should keep holding onto you,” I suggest. “You're really steady on your feet in water.”



“We do a ton of training in water.”

“Of course. I should have guessed that.” When his grip loosens slightly and I fear he’ll let go, I grip tighter. “Here comes another wave,” I say in explanation.

“I’ve got you,” he assures me.

*Yeah*, I realize as my eyes drift back to the sunset with my hand still warm in his hold.

*You’ve got me, all right.*

## CHAPTER 10



- RYDER -

My phone rings at zero-four-hundred hours, and my head lurches up from the downy pillow, tugged from a glorious dream of surf and sand and...

Maggie.

Yeah, she was right there in the dream, and her warm skin, heated by the Hawaiian sun, was as soft as I remember it.

And I'm rock hard as though I'm eleven years old and still trying to figure out what to do with all my hormones.

*Shit.*

I reach over quickly to my phone, not wanting it to wake Maggie, and my raging hard-on deflates at the sight of Nychelle's name on my display.

"What the hell, Nychelle? It's oh-four here."

"Sorry. I waited as long as I could. Federov's assistant has been up my ass all morning about the meeting with the admiral next week. They want to switch to Thursday, but you'll be flying out of Brussels that day, headed east, right?"

"That's what's on the schedule. Did you call the admiral yet?"

"No way. I'm leaving that to you."

"Coward," I grumble, not wanting to disturb the admiral on a much-needed vacation any more than she does. "See if Federov can meet us at oh-seven, and then we'll have an

excuse to cut the meeting short. He always gets chattier than the admiral likes, anyway. I'll send him a text later today to let him know. I'm not waking him up over this."

"I'm on it. How are you liking Hawai'i?"

"It's blissful when you're not waking me up," I grumble, rising from my bed when my eyes are drawn to my window where I see the silhouette of Mauna Kea against the stars.

"So you're actually relaxing? My God. I thought you'd be climbing the walls by now."

"Well, I brought some company, so that helps." Immediately, I regret saying anything.

"Reeeally?" she draws out the word. "Who?" she asks, nosy as ever.

I almost groan, but since I'm sure it will come out later, I may as well fess up now. "Maggie."

There's dead silence on the other end for a couple beats. Then I hear a disappointed sigh—the kind my mother used to give me when I'd pick on my younger brother.

"So much for my advice about taking it slow," she mutters.

"Actually, we're just here as friends."

She snorts. "Friends with benefits is *so* last decade."

"No benefits. Well, just the benefit of her company. Separate bedrooms even."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope. And I have to admit, it's kind of nice trying out this getting-to-know-you thing on a woman."

"It's great, right?" She sounds proud of herself.

It *was*, I can't help thinking. Up until I started realizing how much I wanted something more with Maggie. Spending time with her, I can't deny that my brain is checking off the tiny boxes alongside each characteristic of my perfect woman.

Smart? Check.

Talented? Check.

Passionate about her work? Loves adventure? Doesn't think I sound like an old man in a young body when she learns that I listen to classical music, read Wikipedia, and send postcards to kids who can't even read yet? Check, check, and check.

Outside of the fact that she came with me under the pretense of being only friends, Maggie is pretty much perfect for me.

But there's no way in hell I'll admit that to Nychelle now, knowing that there are at least four people in nearby cubicles who are listening to her end of the conversation.

"Absolutely," I say with mock confidence, as though she hadn't just awakened me from a rated-X dream starring my travel companion who I keep defining as just a friend.

"I'm so happy you're having fun. Who said single men and women can't be friends, right?"

That would be *me*, actually. But I don't admit that.

"And sorry about having to call so early," she adds.

"It's okay. I appreciate you holding down the fort."

"You bet. I'll text as soon as I get confirmation from Federov. Cheers," she says in closing, and I end the call.

I take another look at the time displayed on my phone before I set it back down on my nightstand. The sun is still hours from emerging, yet I feel like I just got caught sleeping in.

I wonder if Maggie is up too.

I rise from my bed, not wanting to just lie around and let my brain ponder life. And when I open my bedroom door, I'm greeted with the familiar smell of coffee brewing. She sure does like that Kona coffee.

I step downstairs and, not finding her there, I go right back upstairs again and tap on her door when I see her light is on.

"You okay?" I ask through the door.

I hear a shuffling of papers before she opens her door.

“Oh, no, did I wake you?” she asks. She looks adorable in the morning, still in a nightshirt, with some serious bed-head going on.

“Nah. My phone rang. Did *I* wake *you* is the real question?”

“No. I’ve been up for about an hour.”

I glance at her bed and see a scattered pile of papers with music staves on them. On a few of the staves, I see notes jotted down in pencil. “Oh, wow—you’re composing.” I step back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your process.”

She sighs. “Not much of a process at all going on, unfortunately.”

Curiosity has me eyeing all the papers on her bed. I’ve never seen music in this stage of its creation before. “Can I see?”

She opens her door wider. “Not much to see, really.”

I pick up one of the sheets and my finger traces along the up and down pattern of the notes. “This is so cool,” I say at the risk of sounding like a music nerd.

Because hey, I *am* a music nerd. I might as well own it.

“Thanks. I’m trying to force myself to write *something* for the final movement. *Anything*, you know?”

My earlier awe turns to concern when I see the disappointment in her eyes. “So the stars aren’t inspiring you like I’d hoped?”

She glances down at the papers I hold in my hand. “As you can see from that mostly empty manuscript paper, no.” The sudden smile she offers me is forced. “But the stars *are* gorgeous from the balcony. Want to check them out?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” I step out onto the balcony, and she shuts off the lamp on her nightstand so that I can see the night sky better.

“Wow,” I breathe out at the sight of the Milky Way stretched out above me. “Annie wasn’t kidding about the stars

from the balcony.”

“I know, right? I see this and think John Williams must have been looking at something similar when he came up with the theme to *E.T.* or *Close Encounters*, you know?”

“Agreed. Maybe it won’t be the stars that do it for you, though. You mentioned you get inspiration from lots of different things. So you just need to find your next inspiration. Your *next* starlight.”

She sighs. “Yeah, but if stars, whales, and lava don’t do it... what will?”

As she gives a slight shrug, she glances downward and only now do I recall that my shirt is off when her eyes linger a beat too long on my pecs.

With a hint of a grin, she gives a dismissive wave of her hands. “First world problems, Ryder. I’m here in paradise for free with a guy whose body should be on a billboard in Times Square. I definitely am not going to be crying in my beer over my unfinished symphony.”

She winces as I chuckle at her comment.

“Geez, does that make me a reverse chauvinist that I said that?” she adds.

“I’ll take it as a compliment, thanks. It’s a double-edged sword—being a SEAL. It gives you the body women like, but not the stability they need,” I admit a little ruefully.

“Like your ex-fiancée?”

“And several other relationships that followed. It’s hard finding someone who can uproot their career every few years to follow you around.”

She snorts adorably. “You should date a freelance composer.”

I can’t resist laughing. “I did once. She told me we’d be better off as friends.”

Her brow furrows as her eyes meet mine directly.

“Wait—you mean *me*? I never said that,” she says, her tone incredulous.

I cock my head. “Sure, you did. You said—” I pause, thinking for a moment. “—almost those exact words, I think.”

She looks unconvinced. “I did?” Then, her eyes light like the stars above us. “Oh, wait! You mean when I was still thinking you had ditched me for Nychelle?”

I retrace our earlier conversation in my head. “I guess so.”

She lifts her shoulders casually. “I was just trying to save face a little, you know? I thought you had ditched me for another woman. Saying that we’d be better off as friends, well, that kind of preserves a little dignity.”

Sighing, she smiles innocently and her gaze on me moves toward the ocean and the tiny sparkles of light that crowd the sky.

But my eyes are still on her, her words rolling around in my head. She didn’t want to be just friends?

After a moment, I see her face contort strangely—as though a realization just occurred to her.

And I’m immediately wondering whether it’s the same realization that I’ve just made.

“Wait. I thought *you* were the one who just wanted to be friends,” she says then. “I mean, that’s what you said when you invited me here.”

“I only said that because I thought that’s what *you* wanted.”

She tucks her chin in. “So hold on a sec. You *don’t* want to just be my friend.”

I pause as though it’s a trick question. Because, well, it kind of is. If I answer in the affirmative, I could make this thing awkward between us just at the point that I’ve realized how much I enjoy spending time with her. I don’t want to risk losing this connection we’ve developed, even if I’ve only defined it as friendship.

But if I answer in the negative, I'm outright lying.

Because I *do* want more with her.

If there were any questions about that, all I'd have to do is remember that dream I just had.

My eyes rest on hers for a moment. She looks as perplexed as I feel right now.

I should take the safe road and just tell her I'm content with things as they are. It's the only way to ensure I can finish out this week with her as comfortably as it's been for the first half of our trip together.

But I suddenly remember the way she was looking at me a moment ago as her gaze had shifted to my bare chest. So I decide to take the risk.

"Maggie, I enjoy your friendship," I start cautiously. "But these past days have required more control than I ever learned in 24 weeks of BUD/S and nine years on the Teams."

She opens her mouth as if to answer, then it snaps back shut for a beat.

I watch her chest rise and fall, and I wait for her to say something. But instead, my silence is rewarded by the sudden press of her lips on mine.

And every cell in my body wants to do a fist pump to every star that shines down on us.



## CHAPTER 11



~ MAGGIE ~

*No regrets.*

I can't help thinking it again as goosebumps cascade over my arms at the sumptuous feel of his lips on mine.

Wasn't that the thought I had with this man over a week ago as I had stripped off my blouse so eagerly, desperate to feel his hands on me, before even taking the customary glance around his apartment?

Yet ironically, I've felt so many regrets since that moment when it came to Ryder. I regretted not asking him about the text from Nychelle. I regretted those several days when I didn't reply to him. I regretted playing Ice Queen for most of our second date, and then lashing out when he reached for his phone that night.

I *definitely* am *not* going to add another regret to that list right now.

No more wasting time or bottling up my feelings or second-guessing myself.

Right now, all I want to do is savor this moment. Relish in the pure enjoyment of sensation—his lips against me, his scent consuming me, and the low moan I hear from him that ratchets up my desire. I couldn't be happier, just hearing it. Just knowing that apparently, he feels the same way—that his need reflects my own. Because if he told me that I couldn't have

him at this point—that he was content just keeping things as friends—I might literally weep.

My lips part, and the gentle, tentative slide of his tongue enters me. The taste is every bit as masculine as I remember from before, and coupled with the pressure of such soft lips on me, it's pure perfection.

As my mouth yields to his, all I can think is how much the rest of my body wants to yield to him as well.

I feel my heart skip a beat or two, I'd swear it. And the flutter in my chest makes me nearly dizzy. But with his arms around me, with his hands on me, I feel steadier than I've ever felt in my life as though him being next to me strengthens me somehow, even grounds me.

All this from just a kiss? I remember sharing the same thing with him over a week ago in his apartment. But now, it feels so different. So next level. Is it because I know him so much better now, or is it simply the idea that everything truly *is* better in paradise?

Then, it was all recklessness and need. Then, my heart was locked up tightly in my chest and the connection we had shared was as fragile as a thread.

Now, after sharing so much, my heart feels open and vulnerable. And even though I know instinctively that later I'll wish I had left emotions out of this, right now, I'm adoring how it magnifies every sensation he offers me.

I won't hold back my heart. Even when logic demands that I remember that when we leave paradise, these precious moments together will be scarcer, more difficult to coordinate... I simply don't care.

Right now is all that matters to me. Now... with the music of the palm fronds and ocean waves and the hesitant bird song that beckons the sun to rise.

He lifts his hands to my head and threads his fingers through my hair. The salt-scented breeze chills me, its coolness so shocking to me, contrasting to the feverish heat

that emanates from my core. My arms wrap around him tighter, stealing the warmth of his naked chest.

When I feel the hard ridge of his erection against me, I glory in it, hoping—*no—knowing* that soon I'll feel more of him in me than just the simple slide of his tongue.

His lips move to my neck, and I moan just as his hand slides downward, cupping my ass and pulling me closer so that there is no mistaking just what he wants from me right now.

“Take me back to bed,” I dare to murmur, my tone thick with need when the warmth of his mouth leaves my skin.

He curves a finger at my chin before pressing a light kiss to my lips and then whisking me into his strong arms just like he did that night that seems like it was a lifetime ago.

Because it *was* a lifetime ago. I can't help believing that—as though these moments we've shared together in Hawai'i are an entirely separate life from the one I've known before.

He carries me to my bed and lowers me onto the cool sheets, leaving the door behind us open so that the ocean breeze can continue to fill our senses.

With me stretched out beneath his warm body, my fingers splay against the expanse of muscles on his back and instinctively, my hips arch toward him, needing the press of him against my core.

My tongue lashes against him when I part his lips and I taste him again eagerly. His low, wanton moan mirrors my own, as though these past days and nights have been as tempting to him as they have been to me.

I slide my hands from his wide shoulders downward, my mind memorizing the sensation of my fingertips against his muscles—from his pecs to his abs and then to that tantalizing V of muscles that tempts me just above the low waist of his shorts.

I fumble with the button and zipper and then tug downward taking his shorts and briefs off in one sharp tug until he's gloriously naked above me. He's impressive in every

way, I think as my fingers wrap around the girth of his cock and all I want is him inside of me.

It's my turn next, I realize gratefully as he lifts my nightshirt upward, exposing my breasts so easily to him.

Only now do I even realize I had let him into my room with so little clothing on. I almost giggle at the realization of it—this strange comfort level that I've developed with him. Ordinarily, I would have thought that I might have thrown on a bra and a pair of shorts or *something* before telling him he could enter my room.

Ordinarily.

But nothing about this experience is ordinary.

And now, as I savor the feel of his hands on my breasts, I'm glad that the thought hadn't even occurred to me when he had knocked, as though this time we've shared has brought a level of closeness that I simply didn't expect—a familiarity that crept up on me so silently that I didn't even notice it was there.

And I like it. I like it even more, because now, when his hand kneads one breast as he takes the other with his mouth, it feels so natural to me, as though this was the predestined ending to some symphony we've been writing together since we first met.

His other hand moves downward to my panties and his finger slips past the fabric to enter me. The jolt of sensation that comes from within me surprises me; I wouldn't have expected it so quickly. My pelvis arches and I cry out, pressing up against his palm for more... more of this. More of the scrape of his teeth against my nipple. More stirring in a part of my body that has been neglected for too long. More of the pressure of his hand against the core of me.

My heart thunders behind my ribcage.

"That's it, baby," his low voice urges. "Ride it out. I'll get you to come a few more times before breakfast, I promise."

And I'll bet he could.

His kisses leave a damp trail from my ear back down to my breast and I thrill as his tongue toys with my nipple again.

It's almost too much, and yet still not enough. I want him deeper, harder, more complete. Even as the orgasm slowly lets me out of its clutches, I still find myself teetering on the brink of another one.

I cry out his name, bucking and gasping at the rhythm of the slide of his finger in and out of me, letting me savor the swell of desire without even considering what he might need from me right now. He's made it impossible for me to be anything but greedy... so I enjoy it, crying out as the orgasm spills from me, finally leaving me limp beneath him.

As his mouth moves back to my lips, his finger slides out of me. And already, I'm finding myself aching for more from him, even as I struggle to catch my breath.

My eyes are glazed over; I can feel it. And a grin eases upward on his face as he pulls his head back from me.

“Do you want to take this slowly, Maggie?”

If I had enough energy, I'd scoff at the question. “We've taken things slowly enough. Now please tell me you have a condom handy.”

His laugh is a low rumble that vibrates against me with him so close. The sound of it thrills me and tempts me at the same time. He moves to retrieve his shorts from the floor and pulls out his wallet.

“I'm a SEAL. I'm always ready for anything,” he says as he slides the foil wrapper out of his wallet and opens it with his teeth.

Thank heaven.

My legs open instinctively, and I feel the tip of him at my entry. Then, just as his lips meet mine again, he enters me in a thrust that makes me gasp.

He's long and thick inside me, stretching me out in a way I haven't experienced before. The tip of his cock presses against my womb and when my pelvis arches instinctively to

accommodate his size, he starts to slide outward, making the need inside of me ache. Then he thrusts again, setting a rhythm in perfect synchrony with what my body needs, an ebb and flow, sliding deep in me at the moment when need feels like a weight on my heart, and then withdrawing just enough to make me want to weep, as though to tease me and tempt me and make me beg for more.

Each movement of him inside me makes my breath stagger and my hips thrust. My channel grips him hard, wanting this in so many ways. And when he's deep in my body, I grind against him instinctively, tugging me upward toward a crest of passion.

I hear myself respond in pants and moans and gasping one-word commands.

*More.*

*Harder.*

*Deeper.*

All the words that swirl in my head slip past my lips, my voice raspy, not sounding like myself at all.

And then that one word—*yes!* It expels from me just as my eyes slam shut and stars form behind my eyelids. Starlight—not the kind in the skies formed by some higher power—but the ones I see as the orgasm consumes me with him still hard inside me.

My body isn't my own now. All my instinctive actions aren't driven by my mind or even by my heart. It's as though there's something else at work here—as if my very soul is imprinting on him with each arch of my pelvis or thrust upward from my hips.

God, I've missed sex. I knew this before. I wouldn't have followed him back to his place on a first date if the need in me hadn't been already pressed to the limit.

But this? This is so much more. So much that I should feel some worry or doubt or even be second guessing myself right now because a connection like this could shatter me if what

we're experiencing in paradise doesn't last in our real lives back home.

But my mind isn't in control here, so the threat of worry or doubt slips away from me easily with the next thrust of him into my body.

His tongue traces along the outer edge of my ear and I shiver gloriously when he whispers, "You feel so good when you come."

He watches me as my eyes move from his face downward, soaking up the sight of his pecs, his abs, and then down to the point where we are joined together. I lock onto the sight of it as he slides outward, his thick cock revealing itself just enough to make me want more, and then sliding back in with a possessiveness that I can't mistake, as though his body is claiming mine as his own.

"You like to see that?" he whispers, watching me watch him.

I simply nod in reply... and then gasp when his next thrust is more powerful.

"Good. Because I like watching you as you watch us."

*Us*. That one simple word seems to echo in me, unleashing a warmth that I can't deny. Until he said it, I could almost distance myself slightly from this experience as though I'm simply in a glorious dream. But that tiny, two-letter word suddenly makes me feel so present in the moment.

I want more of *us*. I realize it now. In just a matter of days when we return from paradise, I'll want more of us, no matter how difficult it might be with an hour's drive between us and him being tugged away from me at any point.

For more of this I would drive any highway, wait any number of hours. I would put up with cancelled plans and postponed dinners and *anything* just for the slightest chance to be able to experience this same amount of passion back home.

But I won't dare to wonder if he's feeling the same thing, even in the slightest.

Right now is what I'll focus on—the sheer enjoyment of the joining of our bodies.

Through the balcony door, the first rays of dawn touch us, and only then do I realize how much time has passed, with him so patient, letting my body simply enjoy the feeling of him in me.

I could stay like this forever, I decide.

His rhythm has lulled me into a glorious stupor, but when my hands slide against his skin, I can feel the vibration of his heartbeat against the palm of my hand. It's quicker even than my own, reminding me that he's been holding back while I chase my own pleasure.

And suddenly all I want is to feel him give in to the same passion that's brought me to completion twice already. I want him to see those stars pulse behind his eyelids and know that I can drive him toward the same splendid climax.

So my body arches more sharply upward with each thrust of his, and my rhythm picks up in pace, letting him know what I want. Inside me, the shaft of him—already rock hard—seems to grow even harder, pulsing with need.

Intense heat pools again at my core and I feel myself climbing upwards, reaching for something that I didn't even think I had the energy to feel again. Yet here I am, clawing my way toward another peak and hoping beyond hope that this time, I'll leap from the precipice of it at the same time as he does.

Desperate becomes *more* desperate as we chase desire together, approaching completion. And I can feel the moment that he's certain to let go—and I give into the sensation too, savoring the thrust of him into me one last time.

And for all the music I've heard in my life, I don't think I've ever heard anything so wonderful as my name on his lips as he shatters above me.

After the last aftershock has quaked through my body, he rolls off of me to my side.



“Until now, I was pretty happy just kicking off my mornings here looking at the sunrise over the mountain,” he tells me.

A contented smile eases upward on my face. “And now?”

He kisses my mouth, my neck, my breasts. “What do *you* think I’d rather look at?” His hand slides downward, toying with me in a way that I’d usually shy away from right now, as sensitive as my body feels after three orgasms in close succession.

Yet I’m still savoring it.

And as his lips start to make a path downward to where his fingers are already playing with me, my legs open instinctively even as the dawn illuminates our room, beckoning us to get ready for another adventure in Hawai‘i.

But the only adventure I want right now is here in this bed as his tongue reaches the core of me and I whimper.

Yes. Hawai‘i will have to wait.

## CHAPTER 12



- RYDER -

My eyes open to the bright, midday sun, and as its light warms me, I feel the urge to stretch like a contented cat.

Up until now, I'd awaken here in Hawai'i and want to immediately set out to see what the day would hold for me.

But today, all I feel is the pull to stay right here in bed.

All.

Day.

Long.

In my mind, I struggle to even remember what day it *is*. Tuesday? Or Wednesday, maybe? I'm stunned that I'm not sure. The idea of losing track of time is that foreign to me.

I roll onto my side and enjoy the sight of Maggie next to me as I listen to the waves outside. The sound is like a pulse—the heartbeat of the ocean. It makes me think of a couple days ago when we were listening to the caldera on the other side of the island. Both the ocean and the volcano are powerful—more powerful than me. So I find it odd that their sounds are so calming here in paradise.

If I lived here, I'd never care about pinning some admiral stars on my uniform. Given enough time, I'd probably rethink all my goals. Here, I could simply exist and feel satisfaction from it.

I almost shiver at the thought. Because I don't live here. I live inside the pressure cooker of the DC area. And in just a matter of days, I'll be right back there, dropping everything when the phone rings to race off to a meeting or another trip.

I wonder where that will leave Maggie and me. As I watch her sleep, my mind drifts back to how good she felt. Hell, it only took my body a few minutes to recover from our first round before I was rock hard and ready for round two.

Ditto for round three that wore both of us out just enough for a late morning nap.

I'm a guy. Sex is always great. We're pretty basic that way.

But with her? It was even better. I wonder if it was because it was her or because we're smack dab in the middle of paradise.

Regardless, I'd be blind if I didn't see this as having a shit-ton of potential.

I've never quite enjoyed simply *being* with someone as much as Maggie.

Well, except for sex. I definitely enjoyed the sex more than simply *being* with her.

Toss in the perk that she can work from anywhere, and I can't help thinking that this has the markings of a relationship that might survive even my career. It's nice to look at a woman on the official "morning after" and not think about an expiration date. Because relationships with me often don't outlast the milk in my fridge.

Her eyes, still shut, flit back and forth and it makes me wonder what composers dream about. Do they sometimes dream in music the same way other people dream with words and images?

Her eyes open and she smiles lazily.

"I guess you wore me out," she murmurs.

"We wore each other out." My brow rises.

“Hope it’s not permanent.” She tugs me on top of her, and her grin widens when she feels the hard ridge of me against her.

“Obviously, it’s not,” I say. She reaches over to where I left a few unopened condoms and nudges me onto my back.

And I’m already liking where this is heading.

She slips the condom onto my already hard cock and then slides down onto me so easily—so naturally—it’s as though we’re simply meant to be joined together like this.

My eyelids fall to half mast, taking in the sensation, and enjoying the sight of her body sliding up and down me. It makes me think of all the other ways I want to take her in these last days of our vacation together, all the other ways I want to make her scream and buck and beg for me.

I reach up and massage her breasts. I love the way the small mounds of flesh feel beneath my fingertips. They’re just the right size, I’m discovering. I know that society might think that men always prefer bigger boobs, but damn—I’ll take Maggie’s over anyone’s right now. And her nipples... my mouth practically salivates wanting to feel the tiny pebbles against my tongue.

My hands move to her upper arms and I tug her downward toward me, stretching my neck so that I can suck on her. When my teeth graze against a nipple, she whimpers in that way I’m already becoming familiar with—a sound that drips with need.

Wet becomes wetter even as her channel tightens up around me, telling me she doesn’t want it slow this time. Ordinarily that would work fine for me. Back home, I’d take what she offered. But here, something inside me—a primitive urge—makes me want to prolong this as though nothing in paradise should be rushed. So I let her use my body the way she wants, her rhythm quickening as she slides up and down me until just that point that I know she’s poised to come.

Then my hands move to her hips, stilling her body with the tip of me just inside her entry.

“What are you doing?” she practically gasps.

My grin is sly. “I’m not that easy,” I say, almost laughing at the slightly insidious tone that I’m not even trying for. Then I pull out completely and roll her over so that her gorgeous ass is toward me.

She giggles. “You’re wicked.”

I watch how her hips are still moving—all instinct—grinding slightly against the sheets beneath her until I lift her upward and then slide into her moisture as I reach around and play with her clit.

“You’ll thank me later.”

“Oh my God,” she cries out when she discovers I can take her even deeper this way.

I’m a big guy and I know it, so I’m compelled to ask, “Too much?”

“Don’t stop,” are the words she rewards me with, her arms bending and face falling into the pillow as I take her from behind.

She looks so fucking sexy like this, the primitive side of me notices as I enjoy her from a new angle. Nearly every urge in me wants to just take her, thrust hard and fast until I explode... except for that one part of me that just wants to soak in every aspect of this in a way that only patience can allow—to listen to her pant, to knead her skin with my hands, to toy with the tiny nub that makes her whimper even more.

I *did* want her to beg, after all.

And when she does, I enjoy her words all the more.

“Now! Now, please.” Her tone drips with need.

*If you insist.* I’m not even sure whether I said it out loud. But my body obeys her command, and I quicken my rhythm until she shudders as she cries out, and I give in right along with her.

With one final gasp, she sinks into the sheets, and I pull myself out, hating that I feel this strange sense of loss as I do—as though being joined with her in that way means something more than it usually does.

It's just sex, I tell myself. This is way too early for me to feel any surge of emotions.

Yet I do. Is this some damn side effect of becoming her friend first? Because I'd be ready to swear that if we had hooked up after that first date together, I wouldn't be feeling this tug of emotions.

Shit. I hope that it's just paradise doing this to me. Because when we get home, life will play itself out a hell of a lot differently than it does here.

She rolls over to face me as I stretch out next to her, resting my hand on her belly just in time to feel it rumble.

"You're hungry," I notice.

"You worked up my appetite. And, well, we *have* spent half the day in bed. What time is it?" She asks as she reaches over to her phone to see. Her eyes widen at the time. "I think this is the longest I've ever gone without my morning coffee."

"You had some around oh-four-hundred," I remind her.

"You're right. That *was* this morning. We sure get a lot accomplished in the morning here in Hawai'i, don't we?"

"Must be that ocean air."

Then, just as she looks like she might roll on top of me for round four, my phone chirps with a text from the other room—the other room I'm hoping I won't need any longer.

She smirks at the sound. "Let me guess. You need to get that."

Sitting up from the bed, my shoulders sag. I do need to get that. It's a lot later in the day back home and I better make sure nothing needs to get taken care of before closing time. "I'm hating my job these days."

"You won't be saying that when it puts you in a better position to be an admiral one day," she replies, and I love how she *gets* it. She gets *me*. And again, it feels like this connection we're enjoying might even survive after we return from paradise.

But I shake myself free of the thought. Right now, I just want to enjoy what we have.

I retrieve my phone and walk back into her room to see her looking at her own phone, frowning as she does.

“Bad news?”

She gives a little shake. “Not quite bad. Just not good either.” She sets her phone back down and slips on some shorts and a t-shirt as she talks. “I’m still waiting to hear back from that job I told you about.”

“The gaming company?”

“Yeah. I don’t think I’m going to get the job and the news will sting a lot less if I hear it here in paradise.”

Taking her cue, I slip on my briefs and shorts. “Why should it sting at all? You already have a damn impressive résumé. So what if some gaming company doesn’t want you?”

A grin spreads across her face. “Oh, think of it, though, Ryder. Writing the next *Star Wars* soundtrack is probably not in my future. Games might be the closest thing I get to writing music for epic battles between good and evil.”

I chuckle. “There’s that word you love again. Epic.”

“Well, *epic* is not exactly what I get to write when someone wants me to score a Hallmark movie or a laxative commercial.”

“You scored a laxative commercial? You didn’t tell me that.”

Her eyebrows rise. “And *why* would I boast about that?”

“Because commercials are cool. I mean, you could leave the laxative part out of it.”

“I’ve done a couple commercials actually,” she says, impressing me more. “I did one for a prescription drug that ran for three years. I wrote the perky music they always play while they’re reading all the fine print.”

“Like, ‘Taking this drug might cause your head to spin and your dick to fall off,’” I offer.

“Exactly. They even ran it during the Super Bowl. That’s how I bought my condo in Manhattan, actually. I never could have afforded it otherwise.”

“The Super Bowl? Now *that’s* epic. Why’d they stop running the commercial?”

She sighs. “They took the drug off the market. It probably caused someone’s dick to fall off,” she finishes with a note of sarcasm.

“Did you tell that gaming company you scored a Super Bowl ad?” I ask. “I’d bet they’d be impressed by that.”

“Yeah, they know. I have all my samples up on my website.” She shrugs as we head downstairs toward the faint smell of the coffee she brewed hours ago.

“Is your symphony on your website?”

“Oh, no,” she replies quickly. “It’s not done yet.”

“Yeah. But it’s epic.”

“You think?”

“Yeah,” I say without reservation. “That third movement even sounded like it could be the score of some alien invasion or whatever. Perfect to impress a gaming company.”

She cocks her head, reaching for a mug from the cabinet. “Even *you* said that my symphony needs an ending.”

“Sure. As a symphony. But just think of them as individual pieces. Give them unrelated titles. Something dramatic. Something that will make them want to click them.”

She looks like she’s considering it. “You really think they’re good enough to stand alone?”

“Maggie, they’re amazing. And they’ll make an amazing symphony one day. But today, they could get you that job that you want.” I smile, liking that she seems to be considering my suggestion.

Selfishly, if she starts that new job, it might make it even harder to see more of her when we return home. I can picture her, holed up in that house of hers, avoiding the peaceful little



town she lives in just so that she can create some otherworldly soundtrack for the next *Halo* or *Legend of Zelda* game.

She might not have much time to see me or meld her schedule into my hectic one.

But I'll put up with her career if she puts up with mine. In fact, it might even put us on equal footing. I've grown tired of being the one who always drags down a relationship with interruptions and last-minute cancellations.

Besides, she really seems to want this job.

Her lips form a tight line as she pours the coffee into her mug and adds some of the creamer from the fridge. She takes a long sip.

"Maybe you're right," she finally says. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Besides, it would give me an excuse to touch base with them, you know? I could write them an email letting them know I have new samples on my website."

"Exactly. It can't hurt, right?"

Her eyes flit toward the sunny day that awaits us through the windows. "Do you mind if I update my website this afternoon?"

"Can you do that from here?"

"Yeah, I always pack my laptop. It's my orchestra, remember?"

"Perfect, I'll go for a swim and hang out with the fish while you hang out with your orchestra." I tug her close to me and my body responds to the feel of her. Damn, I should be spent and here I am, ready to go again. "How about afterward, I take you out to dinner at one of those places Annie recommended to celebrate?"

Her eyes look hesitant. "You don't mind if we spend the afternoon apart?" Then she grins. "You know, after what we've been doing all morning, I'm not sure if I should take that as an insult."

I give her my most seductive look. "Oh, I'll let you have the afternoon away from me. And you can make it up to me

tonight and tomorrow.”

*Tomorrow.*

And what day is that again? I wonder it, realizing that even when I checked my phone this morning, the thought didn't occur to me to check the date.

Or maybe I'm avoiding it. Because while a week seemed long enough for a Hawai'i vacation before, now I'm starting to realize it's not nearly enough.

## CHAPTER 13



~ MAGGIE ~

“*Hipahipa!*” I raise my salt-frosted margarita glass just as a warm breeze blows in from the ocean.

Above me, the palm fronds rattle from the wind, and the music—*oh, the music*—is an island blend of ‘ukulele and slack key guitar, its gentle sounds making every muscle in my body relax.

This sunset in paradise feels different from the others I’ve enjoyed here. Tonight, my body and mind seem to be working in perfect synchrony. Or rather, not working at all.

Instead, they’re lulled into a peaceful bliss by all the sights and sounds around me. And the company.

Definitely the company.

I gaze at Ryder, soaking up the sight of him, and my skin aches with longing for his touch—a glorious ache now that I know tonight, I’ll be able to cuddle up against him again for hours on end.

“*Hipahipa!* Here’s to you getting that job!” he replies and clinks his beer bottle to my glass.

As proud as it made me to put the movements of my symphony up on my website, my excitement was more from the idea of having someone in my life who believed in my music—who saw such value in it.

*That’s* what I feel the need to celebrate tonight. Outside of my parents, I’ve never really had anyone who believed in my

dreams like Ryder seems to.

And I get to have sex with him for the rest of the week?

Just what lucky star did I wish on for this to happen? Because I want to search the sky for the same one every night for the rest of my life to keep this going.

After taking a sip of my drink, I hear myself sigh, long and contented as my gaze drifts toward the water as the sun descends, marking the end of another day. The sunset is always different here, I'm discovering. With the changing clouds and waves, it seems to be a brand-new feast for my eyes every evening.

"You know," I ponder as the alcohol of a very strong margarita seeps into my veins, "I came here looking for inspiration. But maybe what I really needed is to just *stop* looking for it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, all the things that I see here... they make my dreams of greatness seem... silly. That sunset wouldn't be any more spectacular if I had gotten that job, or if I could finish my symphony, or even if I got tapped to write the soundtrack for the next *Star Wars*." I glance over at him and watch his eyebrows rise in disbelief. "Okay, maybe scratch that last one. But... don't you just feel like if you lived in a place like this, all your priorities would change?"

"I've been thinking the same thing. Me—always chasing those admiral stars. Then you look up at the *real* stars here, and that goal seems small somehow."

"In the grand scheme of things, maybe even the music of John Williams will be lost to time one day," I say, then pause, and finally share a conspiratorial look with Ryder.

His eyes sparkle, right on cue and in unison we say, "Nahhh..."

I laugh along with him, enjoying how I seem to have found the one man on the face of the earth who knew exactly what I was going to say just then.

This... this will make every relationship after Ryder pale in comparison.

“So what made you want to be him anyway? To be the next John Williams?”

I ponder the answer that I usually give people about my urge to create something that could make other people feel the way I do when I listen to his movie soundtracks.

But the answer that forms for Ryder is different. More honest. “Well, I’m dyslexic.”

His brow furrows. “You are?”

“Yeah.” I grin sheepishly. “It’s why I’m the only millennial who hates texting.”

“I never would have guessed.”

“Most people wouldn’t notice anymore now that I’m not in school. I can read and write. It just takes me a while longer, especially if I’m stressed.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“But I struggled in school. My parents got me the best doctors, therapists, tutors. Nothing helped. My grades were horrible. Then in third grade music class, we learned how to play the recorder.”

He nods. “Ah, we did that too. I nailed *Hot Cross Buns*,” he adds with mock pride.

“Me too. But then, I nailed everything else too. And that was new to me. I’d look down at music, and I could actually read it without any kind of struggle. The notes didn’t dance around like letters do. It was like a miracle—to see something written for exactly what it was.”

“That’s—fascinating, actually. Are all dyslexics like that with music?”

“I have no idea. I’m the only dyslexic I know.” I shrug a little. “Then I wrote my first song within a month of learning to read music. It wasn’t much, but I felt so empowered by it. I could finally put something that was in my head onto a piece

of paper, and it made sense not just to me, but to other people too.”

“You’re amazing, Maggie.”

I can’t stop the amused snort that escapes me, grateful for the compliment, but not taking it too much to heart. “So, there I was at eight years old thinking that my talent for music was some kind of gift from God, you know? Because that’s how it felt to me. Like it saved me. And I guess along with that comes some delusions of grandeur. Like I was going to be the best—to really move people with my music. To transform lives or whatever. So of course I’d want to be the next John Williams. I mean, I know you think I overuse the word *epic*... but is there any other way to describe his music?”

“Agreed. What’s your favorite score of his? *Star Wars*? *Raiders of the Lost Ark*?”

“Oh, no. Actually, it’s *Empire of the Sun*.”

“Huh. I never saw that.”

“Yeah. First time I heard it, I was sick in bed. High fever. And the TV was on while I slept. Then I woke up and heard music. It was a piece called *Cadillac of the Skies* from the soundtrack. It’s in this scene when these fighter pilots are shooting down at this kid. I didn’t even watch it. But I just laid there, eyes shut, listening. It gave me chills, you know?”

“Like the chills I got when I heard your symphony, remember?”

I giggle awkwardly. Probably not the best reaction, but I’ve never been good at taking compliments.

“You know,” he adds, “Not everyone can get chills from music. It’s called frisson. I looked it up.”

“I never knew that. I can’t imagine my life without it.” I take a bite of the best coconut shrimp I’ve ever had. “I think I’m getting frisson from this shrimp. Is that possible?”

“I have no idea.”

Taking another bite, I look at him thoughtfully. “So, what about you? When did you first figure out you wanted to be the

next Admiral Shey? Did you learn about him when you were a kid or something?”

“No, it was much later than that. I applied to the Naval Academy just so I could get my college degree. When your parents have five kids, paying for college is always on your mind. So that seemed like a good path for me. Back then, I just wanted to get my degree, serve my required five years, and move on to a civilian job after that.”

“But then you met Admiral Shey,” I guess.

“Yeah. Well, I didn’t really *meet* him. And he wasn’t an admiral yet, back then. He was a SEAL commander, though. He came to talk to us mids when I was at the Academy. And damn, that man can hold an audience in the palm of his hand.”

“He gave you chills?” I ask with a teasing grin.

“Damn right, he did. I knew I wanted to follow his path. To be a SEAL. To stay in the Navy for the duration. Until then, I had seen the military as a means to an end. But he challenged my way of thinking. It made me really see the Navy—to see my country and my duty—totally differently.”

“Wow. I’d love to hear him talk,” I admit.

“I can probably find a few speeches online that he’s given. I’ll send you the links.” He takes a bite of his mahi-mahi and looks pleasantly distracted by its taste for a moment, as though his fish is as good as my shrimp. Then he continues. “And I think I needed the Navy in my life, or at least the admiral’s brand of it.”

“Why did you need it?”

He chuckles. “Five kids, remember? My parents were amazing—don’t get me wrong. Everything I learned about hard work and love of family—that came from them. But when you have five kids, well, there wasn’t a ton of structure or discipline in my house.”

“You got away with a lot?”

“We *all* did. When there are that many kids, we could always pass the blame for something onto someone else. And

even during my first couple years at the Naval Academy, I was still that same kid trying to get away with things. Then I hear this man—a SEAL commander—standing behind a podium talking to me about duty, honor, integrity. Holy shit...” He shakes his head.

I glance down at the goosebumps on my arms. I extend one to him. “Admiral Shey must be amazing. I got chills just hearing you *tell* me about him. How weird is that?”

“They should pin that fourth star on him, just for that alone.”

“If he doesn’t retire to a vineyard first,” I counter.

He shakes his head. “Yeah, I can’t really picture that. As well as I’ve gotten to know the man behind the legend, I just can’t see him being satisfied chilling out, surrounded by a bunch of grapes.” After a beat, he adds, “That must be his wife’s idea.”

“You don’t like the idea of serenity much, do you?”

“If I couldn’t imagine myself here alone in paradise for a *week*, do you really think I could handle my golden years on a quiet vineyard?”

I find myself frowning, thinking about how Ryder always seems to know the right thing to say to me. I wish I could dig deep enough in me to find the words that could fix his urge to rethink everything when he’s alone.

“Well, if it helps to know this...” I admit, “....selfishly, I’m glad that you didn’t want to be alone in paradise. Because if you did, then you wouldn’t have invited me to tag along.”

He smiles. “It *is* pretty convenient having you under the same roof. Geography usually kills my relationships. This time, it’s finally working in my favor.”

I laugh even though his words somehow unsettle me—as though they’ve jostled free a memory of me back home, thinking the same thing.

He’s right. Geography is a relationship killer. Isn’t that exactly why I had thrown myself at him that first night when I



met him? I knew even then that with an hourlong drive between us, we'd never have a chance at building something that could last.

Here in paradise, it's easy, sharing the same condo.

But how will things play themselves out back in reality?

He invited me here as his friend. No matter what, I need to ensure that at the end of this week, we'll still have that friendship between us. I've become too accustomed to this feeling of knowing a man who understands me and my thirst for music as well as he does. I'm so accustomed to it that I'd willingly accept whatever role he allows me to play in his life just so that I won't have to say goodbye to him completely after we leave paradise.

"I wonder if we'll see the green flash tonight." His words tug me back to reality... a spectacular reality, I might add. One that I'll simply relish, rather than wallow in forethought. Whatever happens, will happen. But right now, I'll be grateful for today.

"Green flash?" I ask, my eyes watching him as he looks out to the sunset.

"Yeah. Sometimes, when conditions are right, you can see a green flash of light just as the sun sinks into the ocean."

Skeptical, my brow screws up. "Sounds like one of those urban legends."

"I would have thought that too," he answers. "But I've seen it a couple times when I was at sea."

"Huh. I wonder what causes it."

"Well, I looked it up online—"

I find myself chuckling.

"What?"

I grin at him. "Frisson. Green flashes. You weren't kidding the other day about Wikipedia being your drug of choice."

"From your tone, I think I'm supposed to take that as an insult." His deep voice is thick with feigned offense.

“Take it as a compliment. Most guys I’ve dated are only curious about football or batting averages,” I assure him quickly. But then I somehow feel awkward from my words. I don’t know if I’m really *dating* Ryder.

I don’t know how to define this thing between us. Being whisked away to Hawai‘i under the pretense of friendship—then following that up with mind-blowing sex—isn’t exactly an experience I’ve ever had before. “Besides,” I tack on, “what kind of a person would I be if I insulted the guy who took me to Hawai‘i?”

“Well, you *did* call me a shitbird on our second date.”

I wince. “Can you please forget I ever said that?” I shake my head as though to break free of the memory. “So, you were saying, about the green flash?” I add to change the subject. Besides, I’ve discovered I enjoy listening to him rattle off factoids in that low, soothing baritone of his.

“Oh, yeah. It’s from the way the frequencies of light interact with the earth’s atmosphere...” he begins, and then continues in greater depth as we watch the sun melt into the ocean.

And just as the bright sun’s light is overtaken by the horizon, the sight of an unmistakable green flash rewards me with... frisson.

## CHAPTER 14



- RYDER -

*Yes, Admiral. You were right.*

It's my primary thought as we swim out to the rocky area off to the right of Mauna Kea Beach.

I really *did* need a vacation.

I scoped out this snorkeling area yesterday on my own while Maggie was updating her website, since I wanted to make sure it was a swim she could handle. But the water is deliciously calm today, making the fish below easy to view.

Damselfish. Blenny. Goatfish. Coris. We even spot a humuhumunukunukuāpua'a, Hawai'i's official state fish with its distinct stripes of blue and black across its eyes. Their names pop into my head as I see each one of them, making me glad that I read more about marine wildlife here in Hawai'i before I arrived. It's always more enjoyable when you know the names of what you're seeing.

And it's a lot more enjoyable sharing it with someone else, I'm reminded.

I've always known this. As much as I complain about my family, the fact is, experiencing life with my brother and sisters at my side always made me happy for the company. It's part of the reason why I want a wife and kids of my own one day. When I deploy, I've seen enough things in this world that I *wouldn't* want to share, that it makes me better appreciate the things that I *would* want to share.

The thought triggers the memory of the relief that washed over me that evening when Maggie agreed to come with me on vacation. In retrospect, I'm surprised I stood there like an idiot on the boardwalk, basically confessing to some woman I barely knew that I essentially need a damn babysitter.

If I'd had more than one beer, I could have blamed the alcohol. But I was stone sober.

Right now, though, I'm just grateful for whatever impulse that urged me to do it. And it's not just because I prefer her company over solitude. It's because sharing Hawai'i is making it twice as incredible.

I hear a squeal from Maggie, muffled by the snorkeling mask we rented, as she points in the direction of a turtle swimming near us. Funny how even turtles look different here under the waves—the details and hints of color in their shells seeming magnified by the water.

As we stop swimming to let him pass, I reach out for Maggie's hand to make sure the current doesn't tug her too close to the jagged rocks along the shore. I'm stunned by the feeling of protectiveness that swells in me. Maybe it's magnified by the water too.

Funny, that. We've only been on this island for five days. And for most of the time, she was nothing more than a friend.

Yet I feel a strong connection between us. I wonder if she feels the same way.

After about an hour in deeper water, we take our time as we swim toward the beach, and the larger, more colorful fish give way to smaller, almost translucent ones, the kind whose lack of color provides them with camouflage from the sand, protecting them from the hungry birds that fly along the shore.

When we stand, I'm not immune to how tempting Maggie looks in a wet bathing suit. It's one of those less revealing ones, with bottoms that look more like shorts and a top that could almost be worn into just about any casual restaurant. I liked the way she looked in it earlier—sporty, no nonsense.

Like she's ready for action rather than just a day soaking up the rays.

But now, with it dripping wet and clinging to her, revealing every soft curve that I had the opportunity to caress last night, I have to school my body to not respond.

*Down, boy.*

"That was incredible," she says, stretching out on one of our towels without even bothering to dry off.

"We kicked off our day up the mountain, putting our hands in honest-to-God snow, and now we're ending the day on the beach." I shake my head, somehow unable to even put into words how lucky I feel to be here right now. "It really doesn't get any better than this."

"Agreed. And Mauna Kea Beach just officially became my favorite beach in the world."

"I think its real name is Kauna'oa Beach, as I recall."

"Why does everyone call it Mauna Kea Beach?"

I lift my brow. "Maybe because they don't read Wikipedia while they're running on the treadmill at the gym?"

I join her, lying in the sand.

And strangely, I have this urge to do... nothing.

How refreshing.

"I could lie here all day," I admit.

She giggles. "Who are you and what have you done with the Ryder who had to stay busy one hundred percent of the time?"

"I think I left *that* Ryder behind on the airplane. He's probably flying over Omaha, Nebraska, right now." A lazy grin slides upwards on my cheeks. "Just listen to those waves. So calming. Makes me think I should get one of those white noise apps on my phone so I can listen to it all day."

"I don't think it would be the same."

“True. But it might silence that little voice that second guesses myself,” I consider.

“Maybe, but...” Her voice trails for a moment, as though the words are still forming in her mind. “Maybe you shouldn’t silence it.”

I scoff. So much for thinking I might have found a woman who understands me. “You wouldn’t say that if you lived in my head. I feel like my brain is always running on a hamster wheel. Exhausting myself, but getting nowhere.”

“Or nowhere you can see right now.”

I roll my head to the side to look at her. “I don’t follow you.”

“Well, a hamster gets stronger by running on that wheel. Maybe all those scenes you play over and over in your head are a good thing. Good for your job, you know?”

I tuck my chin inward. “I can’t see anything good about them.”

“Maybe that’s what will make you a better leader. A better admiral one day. I mean, we all have things about ourselves that we hate, but they make us who we are. Like my dyslexia. I hated that about myself.”

My brow furrows. “You shouldn’t hate that about yourself. Besides, if your brain wasn’t wired up the way it is, you might not be able to compose.”

She gives me a look that reeks of I-told-you-so. “My point exactly. Just like yours is wired up differently. Just like everyone’s is. Okay, so... your brain second guesses all your decisions. Maybe that makes you a better SEAL. Most people think it’s a good thing to learn from *mistakes*. But you? You learn not just from mistakes, but also from things that *didn’t* turn out to be mistakes.”

“Huh.” My brain chews on her words.

“Like—well, there was this time in New York when I was late for something. And I was running for the subway. It had

just rained and some of the steps were wet. But I was still running down them, two at a time like a fool.”

“Did you fall?”

“Nope. And I even got to the train before they shut the doors. So it worked out, right? The mission went perfectly, as you might say. But then I sat there on that train thinking, damn, that was stupid. Some of those steps were slick. I could have cracked my skull. Would that have been worth it, you know? Ending up in the emergency room just because I didn’t want to be late for... geez, I don’t even remember what I was late for. Yet here I am, more than ten years later, and I still remember that. And I never ran for the subway again.”

“Okay...” I draw the word out, not quite understanding how this is supposed to make me feel better about rethinking every potentially deadly decision I’ve made on SEAL missions.

“Don’t you see?” she asks. “Nothing went wrong. But I still learned a lesson from it. And maybe that prevented me from getting hurt in the future.”

*Huh.* The moral of her story settles into me, and it actually makes sense.

“You should just think of that as your superpower,” she continues. “You play decisions over in your head, running different scenarios and outcomes. You weigh the benefits and costs of each one. You learn from *all* experiences. Doesn’t that sound more like an *asset*? Especially in the military.”

“I never thought about it that way,” I admit.

“If you stopped fighting it, just embraced it, maybe it wouldn’t bother you so much.”

In her ensuing silence, the sun warms me as I think about what she said.

“Have you ever talked to the admiral about it?” she asks suddenly.

I laugh at the thought. “God, no. Too personal.”

“But didn’t you say that one of the benefits of your job as his aide is that you get to learn from him?”

“Yeah. And I do. But this is different.”

“Not different at all.” She shakes her head. “Geez... what I wouldn’t give to have had the opportunity to learn from John Williams at some point in my career!?”

I smile at the idea of it. “And you would have asked him about things that you’ve always considered to be your worst faults?”

She lets out a *pfft* sound. “Absolutely. I’d ask him everything. Like does he write well under pressure? Because I don’t. I mean, over ten years on a symphony? What’s up with that, right? I’d ask him what room does he do his composing in? What’s his thermostat turned to because maybe I need to keep my house warmer or colder, you know? Does he compose in his pjs, in street clothes, or in the nude?”

I cringe. “There’s an image I didn’t need next time I watch a *Star Wars* movie.”

“I’d have asked him questions until his ears bled. Seriously, Ryder, you’ve got the chance to tap into the greatness of Admiral Shey. Why wouldn’t you ask him anything? I mean, maybe he’s got the same superpower as you do. Maybe that’s a trademark of all great leaders, you know?”

I chuckle again at the thought of the thing I hate most about myself being any form of superpower.

But in some way, I wonder if she’s right. Looking back, the thing that bothered me most about my tendency to replay events in my head was thinking that it might hold me back in my career.

What if I started thinking of it as something that could push me forward instead?

My head flops to the side and I take in the sight of her. “You know, if you weren’t such a good composer, I’d tell you to become a therapist.”



## CHAPTER 15



~ MAGGIE ~

Of all the thrills I've enjoyed here in Hawai'i, teetering near the edge of a cliff as our Jeep rumbles and sloshes along a path that I'm told is the epitome of off-roading is the one thrill I don't think I'll ever want to replicate.

Ryder, on the other hand, is in his element.

"I find myself revisiting your idea about retiring here one day." Grinning broadly from his seat behind the wheel of our Jeep, his head jostles on his wide shoulders each time we hit another pit in the path.

"Oh yeah? Not scared of relaxing anymore?" I push the words past my lips as my hands clutch the tops of my thighs nervously.

He laughs. "You call this relaxing?" He glances over at me and looks momentarily concerned. "Have you ever been off-roading before?"

"Nope. And I don't think I ever will again."

"You can't deny that the view of Waipi'o Valley from down there by the water made it worth it. And that black sand?" He gives his head a shake.

"I'll tell you if it was worth it when we're on a normal road again and not just inches from death." My eyes glance toward the cliff. It's easier going up this road than it was going down, I'll admit. "Remember our talk about learning from your mistakes?"

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t let this be a mistake.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve off-roaded in conditions worse than this while people were shooting at me.”

I know the words were meant to make me feel better. But they only make me uneasy. I remember too clearly those days back when my brother Harris would deploy with the SEALs, and that horrible time for him and my family following his injury. I hate to think of Ryder going through the same thing ever.

It makes me think of my sister and what she must be going through, being married to an Army Ranger.

“Just don’t look over the side,” Ryder instructs. “You get greener every time you do.”

My eyes widen and I look at him sharply. “And *you* should be watching the road and not watching *me*.”

“It’s hard to resist.” He reaches over and gives a reassuring squeeze to my thigh.

Despite loving the feel of his hand against my leg, I peel his fingers away. “Eyes on the road. Hands on the wheel, Ryder.” I remind him. “So, you’d really retire on an island?” I ask, desperate to distract myself.

“*This* island, yeah. Definitely. I’d be doing something new every day. And at night, I think I’d get a hammock and just sleep out under those stars.”

“With the price of real estate here, I think a hammock is all I could afford,” I joke.

I dare to picture it too, sleeping on a hammock nestled next to him as the stars shine down on us with all their glory. I’ve tried hard not to think of the future while I’ve been here, and to simply enjoy my present. But it’s too tempting, just drawing up the image in my mind. And I love the possibility of it.

If we survive this off-roading experience, that is.

“And the good thing about retiring someplace like Hawai‘i is that my future kids will actually want to come visit me, you know?”

“Do you want to have kids?” I ask.

“Hell, yeah. If I ever manage to make a relationship stick, I’d love to. And I’m sure as hell not making them wait until they’re thirty-five to see Hawai‘i. I’d want to share all this with them while they’re young.” He shrugs. “But it’s easy saying all that now, as a single guy. The Navy doesn’t exactly make it simple to juggle a family and a career, especially if your goal is to be an admiral.”

“Does Admiral Shey have kids?”

“Nope. And he’s on his third wife. So that’s the one way I *don’t* want to follow in his footsteps.”

“It’s hard, I’ll bet. Juggling a military career with family. My brother went through that when he fell in love.”

“Oh yeah? She couldn’t follow him where his career took him?”

“Well, *she* could. But her son couldn’t. He’s got some health issues. They have to stay in the DC area—close to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. He gets the best cardiac care there.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry. Is he going to be okay?”

“He’s doing great now. Growing stronger every day. But he’s definitely Harris’s top priority. And Harris’s career has suffered for it.”

“Yeah, that’s the military for you.” He frowns.

“But he just doesn’t seem to mind,” I feel the need to add. “He takes being a stepfather really seriously. He couldn’t love that kid any more if he were his own blood.”

“What about you?”

My eyes widen. “Me? Oh, I love the kid. He and his mom come down to North Beach a lot to visit, so I get to spoil him a

bit. But I'm excited about Millie having a child I can spoil from the get-go." *If she lets me*, I add in my head ruefully.

"No, I mean, do you want to have kids? Maybe a miniature Maggie to share your love of music with?"

I tilt my head and look at him wryly. "You *know* they'd end up hating music."

"True. That's always the way it goes."

I press my lips together for a moment, thinking. "But for me, it's not so much sharing with them what *I* like. I want to explore the things that *they* like."

"Huh," he says as though the idea is settling into him for a moment. "I never thought about it that way."

"Like with my parents. There couldn't be two less musical people in the world. I'm even convinced that my dad is tone deaf. But once I showed interest in music, they dove right in. Driving me to music lessons. Taking me to symphonies and musicals and just about every kind of concert they could find. And I think sometimes—wouldn't that be neat? To dive into something that you wouldn't ordinarily be drawn toward. To experience something that you never would have if you didn't have kids. It's almost like you get to have this second life. I like the idea of that."

He glances over to me. "You'd be a good mom, with an attitude like that."

"Eyes on the road, Ryder," I say quickly as the so-called "road" curves, and I see the sharp drop that we're narrowly avoiding.

"See? You even have that mom-tone already," he points out.

My mind drifting, I sigh.

"What's the sigh for?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Just thinking of Millie pregnant."

"And that's a bad thing?"

“No-no. It’s good. Of course. But I just wish I could do something for her. Be more involved, you know?”

“Why can’t you?”

“Our relationship is so... distant. I feel more like her cousin-twice-removed than her sister. She’ll text here or there, but that’s it. We never talk or really share what other sisters seem to share. Does that make sense?”

“I have three sisters who *overshare*. I’m at the opposite side of the spectrum.”

I envy him a little for that. Inwardly, I shrug. “She’s always had lots of friends. She probably doesn’t feel like she’s missing anything. Maybe a text here or there is enough for her. But it’s not enough for me, you know? Does that sound selfish?”

“Not at all. Have you talked to her about it?”

“Yeah. I texted her a couple times about it. But nothing changed.”

His eyes narrow thoughtfully. “So, wait a sec. You complain that your sister only texts you. But then when you want to fix that, you reach out to her via text?”

I frown. Damn. I guess that does sound stupid.

“You think I should call her and talk to her about it?”

He gives his head a decisive shake. “Actually, no. Look, I know women love to talk about things. But I say, don’t.”

“Don’t talk to her?”

“No. Just take action. If you want a better relationship with your sister, you build a better relationship. And if you still get the cold shoulder, oh well. At least you tried.”

I find myself thinking back to that day we went whale watching when he picked up those postcards for his niece and nephew. “Like you with those postcards. Do what you can.”

“Exactly. She’s pregnant? Throw her a baby shower. That’s what my sisters are always doing for each other.”

I shake my head. “I offered. But some friend is throwing one and the wife of her fiancé’s commander is throwing another.”

He shrugs. “Then see if she’ll let you host a gender reveal party.”

“A gender reveal party?”

“Yeah. One of those parties where they slice into the cake and it’s blue or pink.”

I frown. “I hate those. It seems like something always goes wrong—like they set off a bunch of pink fireworks and burn down their house or dump blue dye into a local pond killing all the fish.”

“Yeah. I guess they do make some viral moments. But if you threw one, it could be tasteful. And... well, lacking tragedy. A friend of my sister’s threw her a gender reveal party and she even managed to do it without being told whether the baby was a boy or girl. She just got a lot of food and decorations and then my sister ordered a cake that had pink inside of it. Hey—you could do a Hawai‘i themed party and buy a bunch of stuff for it while you’re here. Then she can’t turn you down when you offer.”

“A Hawai‘i themed party?”

“Sure. Decorate with palm fronds and tiki torches. Serve that spam musubi and loco moco that we had at lunch today. Chocolate covered macadamia nuts. Drinks in coconuts. You can see if there’s a florist here that can ship you fresh leis for everyone.”

I feel my face light up, remembering the sweet scent of the flowers around my neck earlier in our stay here. “Maybe we could even get leis to match the color of the gender—like get them in pink or blue. Don’t orchids come in blue?”

“You’re asking the wrong guy.”

I love this idea—so much that I’ve almost completely forgotten that we’re driving alongside a cliff on a bumpy road that looks like it might give way to a landslide at any moment. “That’s a really good idea, Ryder.”

“I told you I’m good with ideas like that. I even thought of the perfect gift for Camden and Annie to thank them for letting us stay in their condo here.”

“Really? What?”

“Remember how Annie said she missed real Maryland crabcakes? There’s a place I used to get them when I was at the Academy. I called them today and asked if they’d ship some to them overnight, packed with dry ice, you know?”

“That’s brilliant. I was just thinking we’d get them something from here. But you’re right—we should get them something that they miss from the mainland.”

“What can I say? I’m good,” he says boastfully. “In fact, I’m so good that I’ve managed to distract you enough that you didn’t even notice we’re back on the main road again.”

Relief washes over me as I pull my eyes from him to the view out my window.

Safe, solid ground.

“I feel like getting out of this Jeep and kissing the asphalt,” I breathe out, not even exaggerating.

“So, was it worth it?”

I ponder a moment, remembering how it felt to swim in the warm, clear waters of the protected cove at the end of that path, with black sand between our toes and a stunning waterfall in the distance. But as always seems to be the case here, the conversation and developing connection I feel between Ryder and me as we experience Hawai‘i seems to even eclipse the views of paradise.

So, yeah. Any time with Ryder is always worth it.

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” I answer. “But I’m pretty happy here on solid ground.” My phone chirps and I smile. “We even have a signal again.”

He pulls to the side of the road. “Why don’t you take advantage and call your sister about the party? I wanted to take a few photos of the valley from up here, anyway.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I should probably think about what I’m going to say.”

“You shouldn’t have to rehearse a conversation with your sister. And there’s no time like the present.” He grabs his phone and opens the door. “Besides, you should offer before anyone else does.” He juts his chin in the direction of a lookout point. “I’ll be over there if you need me.”

When he shuts the door of the Jeep, I can’t help thinking he’s right. With all the friends she has in that tight-knit community she lives in, I wouldn’t be surprised if people were already lining up to throw her a gender reveal party.

I pick up my phone and see four bars on it, telling me that the cell signal is high. No excuses to fall back on.

I touch her name in my contacts list and fight the urge to just text her. He’s right. Texting her is a cop-out.

I tap the phone symbol next to her name and am embarrassed that I feel this nervous about talking to my only sister.

“Hey, Maggie!” her cheery voice greets me. It’s a voice I feel like I should find more familiar. Ryder is right. I should call more often.

“Hey! How’s that little niece or nephew of mine?”

“Great. We’re going in for an ultrasound tomorrow. Want me to send you some pictures?”

“Are you kidding? Of course.”

“So, what’s up? Is everything okay? You don’t call that often,” she points out.

I frown a little, tempted to remind her that *she* doesn’t call often either. But I press my lips together, holding back. “Everything’s great,” I say instead. “I, uh, I was just thinking, and umm, I know that you’ve already got people planning baby showers for you. But I was wondering if you and Dax would let me host a gender reveal party for you.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. But you don’t have to do that.”



“I want to. I mean... well, did someone else already say they wanted to do that or something?”

“No. We haven’t even thought about that yet. I mean, even *we* don’t know the sex yet. We’re hoping to find out tomorrow. But you’re busy with work and all. You don’t have to do that.”

I scoff. “If I was busy with work, I wouldn’t be in Hawai‘i right now, Millie.”

“You’re in Hawai‘i? Alone?”

“No—uh, with a guy named Ryder.”

“Really? I didn’t even know you were seeing anyone.”

“Well, we’re... kind of a new thing. But being here in Hawai‘i—it’s beautiful, Millie. And I thought—if you liked the idea, anyway—that maybe I could throw you a Hawai‘i themed gender reveal party.” I rattle off some of the ideas that Ryder threw my way and toss in a few of my own.

There’s a distinct pause. “That’s so sweet of you to offer, and I love the idea, but you really don’t have to do that,” she finally says.

Frustration bubbles up inside me. “Well, then, what *can* I do for you, Millie? I mean, I’m your sister. And I want to be there for you during this. To support you in some way. But you just don’t let me.”

“You support me fine.”

“A few text exchanges every year isn’t support. I want to be there for you the same way all those friends you always talk about are.”

She pauses. “You’ve always been... busy though. I mean, you’re freaking famous, Maggie. You’re my famous big sister composer. And Harris is my SEAL hero brother. You guys... I—I can’t even relate to your world.”

I tuck my chin inward, perplexed. “Is that why you barely ever talk to me? Because I compose for cheesy romances?”

I hear her sigh.

“Maggie, you’ve always had the talent in the family. And me? I was average.”

“You have an MBA from Stanford,” I remind her.

“It’s just the result of a lot of hard work. That’s my thing. You’re the talent. Harris is the hero. And I’m the worker bee. And it’s okay. I’m fine with our relationship. You know I love you, and I know you love me. We’re just different.”

My simmer of irritation shifts to a full-blown boil. “Well, I’m *not* fine with it, Millie. I’m sorry, but I’m not. I mean, thanks for the compliment of thinking for all these years that I was such a mega-talent that I didn’t need you in my life more. But I do. I’d give up my flailing music career completely if it meant that I could have a better relationship with my sister.”

“You’re flailing music career? Your name is in real movies. You scored a Super Bowl commercial.”

“And meanwhile, you quit a six-figure job in Atlanta and own a restaurant that’s now becoming a successful franchise.” Sarcasm trickles into my tone, hiding the admiration I’ve always felt for her.

“I didn’t quit that job in Atlanta.”

“What?”

“I got fired from it.”

My brow knits together. “Wait—what are you talking about?”

“All those years ago. I screwed up a presentation at work. And I got fired.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“Of course not. I didn’t tell Harris either. You two—you’ve always been so successful. Especially you. Any time we’d text, there was always some new movie or commercial you were working on. I’d turn on the TV after a day waiting tables just to pay my bills, and there was your name. I mean, I had my pride, you know?”

I'm struck speechless. I always thought it was Millie who was slamming the door on me. Could she have thought that I was the one who was inaccessible?

*Apparently*, since she had gotten fired from her dream job and not even felt comfortable enough to tell me about it.

"God, Millie. I didn't know any of this. I always thought you just didn't like me or something. We're different, like you said. You were smart in school, and I got horrible grades. You were always surrounded by friends. And I mean, Stanford? Who the hell thinks an MBA from Stanford is less impressive than some jingle I compose for a laxative commercial?"

"That would be me, actually."

I'm speechless for a beat or two. "I'm really sorry that I made you feel like you couldn't talk to me about stuff."

"*I'm* really sorry that I made *you* feel like you couldn't talk to me about stuff," she counters back with humor in her tone.

"Well, how about you make it up to me today by letting me throw you an amazing gender reveal party when I get back? You name the date. I'll make it work with my very, very successful composing career," I add with exaggerated loftiness.

"Okay, I guess so—if I can manage to fit it into my very busy restaurant owner schedule. And maybe we can even convince our sainted brother to break away from his superhero status and attend the party."

I laugh. "I know, right? Hasn't it been hell living with a SEAL as a brother? Every Christmas, I think I should buy him a cape," I add, a comment that launches us into an entirely different conversation as we commiserate about having a SEAL for a brother.

And I feel like it's a conversation we should have had a long time ago.

## CHAPTER 16



- RYDER -

I love waking up next to Maggie. I've only had the pleasure of doing this a handful of times here on the Big Island. But even though this place is paradise, I can't help thinking that waking up with her at my side would feel just as good anywhere.

Anywhere... including wherever the Navy might send me next.

We barely know each other. I try to remind myself that. I didn't even know she *existed* a month ago, and it's only been two weeks since our first date. Yet she knows me better than any other woman I've dated recently... maybe even ever. That one time I was engaged, it was when I was too young to even really know myself, much less share myself with someone else.

This... it's not real. This connection we share could just be a side effect of being in Hawai'i—a place where the sunshine seems endless. Here, it's hard to picture storm clouds—either the real kind or the metaphorical ones life sends us at times.

It's difficult to even consider reality when I can hear the ocean waves outside and fill my lungs with the salty breeze that blows through the open window.

Eyes still shut, Maggie whimpers something unintelligible. She does that a lot, I've noticed these past nights. And it makes me smile every time, the gibberish that escapes her lips. I guess I should find it annoying; she's woken me up a few times, muttering like this. But I only find it amusing.

I wonder if I would put the same positive spin on any quirks I might find about Maggie in the future.

*The future...*

The thought of it makes me picture us back home, struggling to find time together to keep our relationship going as I follow the admiral wherever the mission demands we go.

As though on cue, my phone rings next to me with the ringtone I set for the admiral—a bullhorn that is impossible to avoid. I cringe at the sound of it and snatch it off the nightstand, touching the button quickly so it won't wake Maggie.

“Good morning, Admiral,” I whisper, climbing out of bed as Maggie stirs, but surprisingly doesn't awaken.

“Morning, Ryder. I saw your text about the Federov meeting.”

“Yes, sir.” I grab my shorts and slip outside of the bedroom to head downstairs to the kitchen. “But he knows you're flying out immediately after, so he'll keep it short.”

“Kills two birds with one stone. He tends to drag meetings out longer than they should be. Good idea. How is Hawai'i?”

“It's incredible,” I say, switching to speaker so that I can at least get half-dressed since it seems disrespectful to talk to a three-star when you're standing buck naked in someone else's kitchen. “I can't thank you enough for putting me in touch with Camden and Annie.”

“How are they?”

“Good. Camden was out of town all week. But Annie even picked us up at the airport.”

“Us? So you were able to find someone to go with you, after all?”

I find myself grinning. “I was. Maggie, sir.”

“The woman who ghosted you?”

“Yeah. I guess we're having our third date in Hawai'i as we speak,” I tell him.

“Three’s a charm,” he replies predictably. “You’ll have to save that story for the flight to Brussels.”

“I will. How’s the vineyard? Worth buying?” I try to sound serious as I say it, but it’s a struggle.

“It’s beautiful. But too far from family for Vi and I, we’ve decided. We’re holding out for something in Maryland.”

“I hope she’s not too disappointed.”

“Her? Oh, hell, son, she could care less about it. The vineyard’s my idea, not hers.”

“Really, sir?”

“Absolutely. When I retire, I want nothing but peace and quiet with my wife, surrounded by a couple hundred acres of grapevines to buffer us from reality.” He chuckles.

Peace and quiet—a phrase that never sounded attractive to me. I feel a little like I’ve been punched in the gut, discovering that the man whose path I’ve been trying to follow apparently has an ability that I simply can’t seem to attain.

Shit. I hate this feeling. It must be like how Maggie feels, unable to find the inspiration to finish her symphony. Like the finish line is always just out of reach.

The thought of Maggie makes me remember what she had told me that day we were at the beach. “*Have you ever talked to the admiral about it?*” she had asked me, a notion that seemed absurd to me at the time.

Yet today I find myself too curious to remain silent. “So, you like peace and quiet, sir?”

“Of course. We get so little of it in this job.”

“But how do you unplug and just relax? When I’m trying to do that, the voice in my head starts yelling at me.” I add a slight laugh so it sounds like I might be joking. I mean, I’d like to pick his brain on this like Maggie suggested, but I sure as hell don’t need the admiral signing me up for a psych eval.

“You’ll learn to turn that off eventually, Ryder. Or at least turn down the volume.”

“Do you ever... rethink decisions you’ve made, sir?” I’m emboldened to ask.

“You mean on missions or in life? Because that’s a trick question to a guy who’s been divorced twice.”

I laugh for real this time. “On missions, sir.”

“Of course. You can’t avoid rethinking everything you do in our line of work. Playing it over in your head like an old record with a skip in it.” He pauses and then his tone changes. “That’s *my* generation’s equivalent of *your* generation’s mp3.”

I smile. “I actually own some vinyl myself.”

“Good man. Always knew I liked you.”

“So how do you handle it? When that old record skips and you’re hearing the same tune over and over?”

“You listen to it. Learn from it.”

I remember what Maggie told me earlier this week. Learn from it. Like it’s my superpower.

His voice softens slightly. “And you trust in the training, Ryder. You’re a SEAL, son. You’re a machine that’s been programmed by the U.S. Navy. And sometimes that programming—that training—will lead to decisions you might rethink or even regret. But trust it. Trust that you did your best with the training you received.”

Trust the training. I never thought about it that way. “Thank you, sir. Sorry to... get too personal,” I feel the need to add.

“That was a professional question, not a personal one. Besides, that’s what your aide position is about. I suck every bit of energy out of your day and give you a little advice along the way so you can play admiral one day, God help you.”

“That’s the hope,” I admit.

“So, you’re flying back Sunday, I assume?”

“No, sir. Tomorrow. With the time difference, we’ll be home Sunday morning.”

“Just enough time so you can pack for your next trip,” he says with a wry tone. “Well, I don’t want to take up any more of your last full day there. Just thought I’d check on that meeting before Vi and I head out for the day. We’re driving the coast and the signal could be spotty.”

“Enjoy the rest of your vacation, sir. And give your wife my regards.”

After we end the call, I stand in the kitchen, watching the warm light of morning fill the room.

*Trust in the training.*

Of all the things I’ve learned from the admiral over the time I’ve been his aide, this lesson resonates the most with me. And I wouldn’t have heard it if it hadn’t been for Maggie’s influence on me.

I almost feel a laugh threatening.

I can’t believe I asked the admiral that. Before this trip, before Maggie, I never would have. And I never would have thought to trust that the decisions I’ve made, no matter what their outcome, are because of the training I’ve received.

And somehow that brings me this sense of relief. It won’t silence those thoughts that enter my brain. It won’t stop that little voice in my head that Maggie calls my superpower. But it will remind me that something outside of myself—years of training from SEALs like Joe Shey—is the drive behind every decision I make.

A feeling of comfort settles into me at the thought.

I press my lips together thoughtfully as I pour some Kona coffee grounds into the coffeemaker like I’ve seen Maggie do. It’s Friday, and I can’t resist wishing I could rewind time so that I could be the one making this coffee for Maggie every morning.

I wish I could rewind time for a multitude of other reasons too.

It makes me wonder. For all the short-term, crash-and-burn relationships I’ve had in my life since my engagement broke



off in my early twenties, I've always blamed my job.

But maybe the real fault lies with me—with not sharing myself. Without sharing my baggage before...

*Ugh, there's that phrase in my head again.*

Damn those fools in my office. I'd bet good money that for Christmas at least one of them will get me a t-shirt emblazoned with those words.

The kitchen fills with that scent Maggie loves, and I'll admit, it's kind of growing on me even though I still don't care much for the taste of it.

I hear the floor creak behind me, and I turn. The sight of Maggie fills me up in a way that warms me... at the same time it makes me feel vulnerable.

I like the first part of that. Not sure I'm enjoying the latter part though.

"You made me coffee?" she asks. Her eyes flash with hunger at the mug in my hands.

"Well, this sure isn't for me."

"You're heaven-sent," she murmurs, taking the mug from me eagerly. Her smile spreads after she gulps at least a third of it down. "I need to buy some Kona coffee beans before we leave here."

"Sounds smart. Is that the only thing on your agenda today?"

After taking another sip, she puts the mug on the counter. Then she tugs me closer and just from the feel of her warmth against my skin, I'm already hard.

Taking my hand, she guides my fingers underneath the bottom of her nightshirt and I get to grip her ass—her completely bare ass, I might add.

Her eyes spark with invitation. "Definitely not," she purrs as her lips meet mine.

I massage her skin as I savor the taste of her—a mix of coffee and creamer and something else that I can only define

as Maggie. But it's not the only taste I want this morning.

I lift her up onto the counter and raise her shirt just enough so that I can bury my face in between her legs. I want to make her feel *everything* this morning, as though I owe her something. Because I feel like I do.

I'm not the man I was when I came here. There is less uncertainty inside of me. I feel less like the things I thought were shortcomings have any power over me.

She makes me feel more human, yet stronger for it in a way I can't even explain.

So yeah, as I devour her, letting the moan that forms on my lips vibrate against her, giving her even more sensation, the mission's objective is only her complete satisfaction.

I hear the thump against the cabinet as she rolls her head backward, gasping at the feel of my tongue drawing tiny circles around her clit. Then I nibble her gently making her cry out a passionate "Yes!"

I love how wet she gets for me, even at this hour of the morning. I love knowing that I can get her this way at any time of the day. My tongue ventures downward, my fingers toying with her... kneading her breasts, sliding along her belly, grabbing her ass as I arch her more sharply so that she can feel the deep slide of my tongue penetrating her.

As I feel her body responding, I can tell when she is reaching her apex. So I shift my attention to the tiny nub that brings her over the edge every time.

Just like it does now... as I hear her cry out and her hips thrust, almost nudging herself off the counter. But I grab ahold of her hips, keeping her secure as her moisture spills into my mouth.

When the last shudder leaves her body, I pull my face away, desperate to slide my cock inside her. But I use my last measure of sanity to pull a condom out of my pocket, hating that I need to.

Because what I want—what I'd give anything for right now—is to be inside of her without anything between us.

*I want that.* I want a relationship with her—with all the worries and responsibilities and the satisfaction of making love to her and knowing that I'll be there with her for any risks that come our way.

As I slide the damn condom onto me, I resist the urge to tear it right back off. Because I have yet to know whether she's on the same page.

I'll talk to her about it.

But not now. Not when desire is making me feverish, and not even afterward when the wrong conversation might make our final day here any less than perfect.

*At the airport.* I'll talk to her then. If it goes well, then it will make going home a lot easier. And if it goes poorly, I'll still be able to look back on this as the best damn vacation of my life.

I ease her body off the counter and slide her sweet entry down onto me. Her legs around my waist, I carry her across the room as I'm joined with her, and then lower her onto the sofa. The realization that I want more than just a vacation with this woman should bring me enough control to take her back upstairs and make love to her in the bedroom.

But I'm greedy now, wanting to claim her as my own without delay.

And she seems eager to comply, her moans and gasps with each hard thrust into her growing louder even as her slick channel grabs me, as though to tug me in deeper.

Joined with her like this, I feel like I've just started an addiction that I simply refuse to end.

The revelation surges through me just at the moment of our release together.

Contented, I roll to the side of her and watch a lazy smile slide up her face.

"That's the best way to kick off our official last day in paradise," she murmurs.

“We still have tomorrow morning,” I’m quick to point out, my mind calculating the hours I have left with her.

“Maybe. But just the same, I’m turning off my phone. I don’t want any interruptions from the outside world today.” She nibbles her bottom lip. “Can I tempt you to do the same?”

I grin. “Is that your way of saying the admiral’s call woke you this morning?”

“He did. And I was in the middle of a really good dream.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. This is a rare occasion when my reality far eclipses any dream I could have.” She snuggles into my chest. “So, you never turn your phone off?” she asks, sounding more like a curious question rather than a suggestion.

“Not in this job.”

“What about in other jobs in the Navy?”

I chuckle.

“What?”

“I’m just trying to remember the last time I had a job where I actually got to turn my phone off.”

“It’s that hard?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “When I deployed with the SEALs, I didn’t even carry a phone a lot of the time. Does that count?”

“Why didn’t you have a phone?”

“It can be too easily tracked. We have to go in dark.”

Her cheeks puff out and then she releases a breath. “I never really thought about that.”

“Even when your brother was on the Teams?”

“Even then. I knew we couldn’t call him. But I tried really hard to skip over all the details.”

“I don’t blame you.”

Tracing a finger up my chest, she cocks her head. “So, are you... going dark on this next trip?”

“Not for the first week. We’re just going to Brussels for some meetings. After that, I won’t be able to be in touch for a while though.”

“When do you leave?”

“For Brussels? We’ve got a flight out of BWI at 9:15 Monday.”

And that’s the most I think we’ve talked about the future on this trip, I realize. I search her eyes, looking for any hints of how she feels. But she’s pokerfaced.

“So, what do you want to do today?” she asks me.

My hand slides up her torso, settling on a breast. “Well, more of this, for starters. How about you?”

“Other than book my next trip to Hawai‘i?” she says with a laugh.

*My thoughts exactly*, I can’t help thinking. “I *would* like to pick up some of that wine for the admiral and his wife after we find some of those Kona coffee beans for you. And maybe we can find some things for that party you’re throwing for your sister.”

She gasps in an exaggerated fashion. “I met a man who actually *wants* to go shopping?”

“Damn right. I want one of those Hawaiian shirts that everyone’s wearing around here too. Then maybe we’ll go back to that restaurant on the water for our final sunset here.”

She sucks in a breath. “I hate the idea of that.”

“The restaurant or the part about it being our last sunset?”

She gives me a coy look. “What do you think?”

## CHAPTER 17



~ MAGGIE ~

For all the magnificent sunsets we've enjoyed here in Hawai'i, this last one I'm finding to be outright painful.

As the sun slowly inches its way toward the horizon, I can barely bear to watch. Even the mixed drink I'm indulging in—a sweet blend of vodka and tropical fruit juices—doesn't seem to make the view of it more palatable.

I'll come back here, I keep telling myself. But it won't be the same. Unless I come back with Ryder.

I watch him as he signs the check for our meal, wondering if he's thought at all about the future while he's been here. It's so early in this thing between us. And given the unique circumstances, I'm not even sure how to begin the conversation.

Or whether I even should.

At 9:15 Monday morning, he'll be on a flight to Brussels, he said. We don't have much time left together.

But I can't think about that now. Not now, as the last fragment of sunshine dissolves into the blue horizon and I feel an ache inside that I didn't even see the green flash.

"No green flash tonight," he says with a slight sigh, and somehow I'm comforted that his mind seems to work the same way that mine does.

"No green flash," I repeat, the words soft and unconsciously hinting of sadness. "Maybe it's a sign that we

shouldn't leave," I suggest, my tone joking even though I meant every word.

"I wish I could." His voice is quiet as he says it, then glancing at my drink as I finish it off. "How was your drink?"

I'm grateful for a reason to force a smile. It almost makes me feel better. "Delicious. I've never had a *Sex on the Beach* before. And this seemed like the right place to try it."

"Except that if you ever drink one at home, it probably won't taste as good as it did here."

No, I ponder. It might actually taste *better* at home—at a point in my life when I can swallow it without feeling the lump in my throat.

I turn to search his eyes as he pulls my chair out for me when we leave. I wonder if he's feeling the same way I am—this sense of an inappropriate melancholy while we're still in paradise. As well as I think I know him now, I can't figure out how he feels about heading home tomorrow to a life that will pull us apart.

As we step into the parking lot, his gentle hand is at my back as though to guide me. I find myself shutting my eyes for a brief moment longer than I should, remembering the way it felt to have his hand against my back like this as we bounced along the waves on the ocean a few days ago.

If I concentrate hard enough on that moment, can I turn back time and experience it all again? In a place as magical as this, it almost feels like I might be able to. But when my eyes snap open just two beats later, I'm still here walking away from my last Hawai'i sunset.

It's dark when we get back to the condo, and even as the horizon still has a slight hint of rose near where the sun disappeared, I can already see the Milky Way above us.

"Want to go to the beach to see the stars? That's the one thing that Annie recommended that we haven't yet done."

"Sounds like the perfect plan," I say.

We leave our things in the condo and head to the beach. It's deserted now, just like Annie said it would be. Ryder carries two blankets, one to stretch out on and the other to cover up in case the nighttime chill strikes.

It makes me hopeful that he might want to stay out here for a good long time, just like I do, watching all the planets and tiny galaxies reveal themselves and remind me that all of this is nothing in comparison to the wonders of the universe.

We stretch out and gaze upward, hand in hand.

"It's so beautiful, isn't it, Ryder?"

"Stunning." He tilts his head to the side to look at me. "I'm sorry it didn't bring you the inspiration to finish your symphony though."

I shake my head. "I got so much more out of this trip than just that."

"Me too. It put a lot of things in perspective for me. Or gave me a *new* perspective, really. Does that make sense?"

"To me, yeah. Even if I'm just composing for TV romances rather than action blockbusters, who cares? I got to experience this. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"What's so different about writing for TV romances?" he rolls halfway over to face me fully. "I mean, I know you said you want to—how'd you put it? Uplift people? Transform lives through your music or something. Right? But how does what you write transform lives less than some sci-fi or action thriller that doesn't even *resemble* real life?"

My lips form a tight line for a moment. "I guess... well, it's because my music needs to be a beige sofa." I turn to him just in time to see his brow rise.

"Beige sofa?"

I breathe out a sardonic half-laugh. "Yeah. That's how a director once described it to me. It was my first low-budget TV rom-com I had ever composed for. And what I had written... well, it got rejected. It was too bold. Too memorable, I guess. They didn't want music that leaped off



the screen. They wanted a beige sofa, as he put it. Something that's *in* the scene but not drawing attention."

"A beige sofa," he finishes for me. "Huh. I never thought about it that way."

"Yeah. Neither had I at the time."

"But that doesn't mean that you're not a part of something that uplifts people. I mean, I've got three sisters, remember? I know how much they love watching those types of movies. And the reason there are so many TV romances and rom-coms are because people *watch* them, Maggie. And people watch them, because they need them—they *need* to see something that they can relate to, something that has an ending that gives them hope for their own lives. Your music is a part of that. You should be proud of it."

"You're right," I admit, then giggle. "But how else could I react? No one wants to be a beige sofa."

He leans closer to me, his hand resting on my belly. "Believe me when I say there is nothing beige sofa about you."

Then his lips touch mine.

My eyes flicker shut, letting the taste and feel and presence of him fill me up inside like it always does when he kisses me. Heat culminates in my core along with a moisture that begs for him.

I could do this, I ponder as my hand slides down his chest toward the zipper of his shorts. I could slip him inside of me here in the dark with the blanket shielding us. No one is even around us. Why wouldn't I take advantage on this last night with him, to do something I'd never do back home?

Although back home, I'm starting to think I'd do anything with this man, if I could just keep him in my life.

My hand pulls him out of his shorts. His length is hard and ready for me. I feel him pulsate in my hand and I grow wetter just remembering how it feels when he's deep inside me.

“*Sex on the Beach* is more than a drink for you?” he asks, his tone playful.

“I’m hoping so.” It’s dark, but even in the mere starlight, I’ll bet he can see the need in my gaze on him.

“You don’t have to convince *me*,” he says, nudging me onto my back. His fingers push aside the thin fabric of the panties beneath my skirt. “You’re so wet, baby.”

“Take that as a compliment,” I reply as he reaches into his pocket for a condom.

Then, after slipping it on, he thrusts into me, filling me up in a way that only he could, and I gasp when I feel the tip of him at my womb.

My eyes want to shut, want to block out everything but the way he makes me feel. But I force them to stay open, knowing that I might never see something as amazing as this again—Ryder above me as he claims me with each thrust, and the stars spread out above us in a way they just don’t reveal themselves back home.

His rhythm is slow and patient tonight, so different from this morning.

His hands touch me in a way that contrasts from this morning too. There’s no sense of possessiveness from either of us now. There’s no lack of control—no frenzied rush to satiate our most primal urges. Instead, the gentle slide of his fingertips along my skin feels almost reverent in nature, as though he’s memorizing the way I feel the same way I am for him—as though this is a moment, a feeling, that cannot be surpassed.

And I don’t want to give this up. How could I?

Destiny has sent me a man who understands me, who respects me, who listens... a man who whisks me away from my reality, but then strengthens me in ways that will make it easier for me to *face* reality.

It’s a gift, and I refuse to let go of it.

I want to fight for us. No matter where his job might take him. No matter how little time we can share. I'd give up a lifetime spent with any other man to have just a *moment* with this one.

I want to try to make this work—not just here in Hawai'i, but back home where all the challenges of reality await us.

I'll tell him this, I decide. I need to tell him and then accept whatever comes my way afterward.

Tomorrow.

I'll do it when our vacation is already at its end, so that whatever happens, I will never look back on this idyllic place and feel anything but joy in my heart.

I slide my fingertips into his hair and pull him down for another kiss just at that moment that the need in my core has been pressed to its limits.

When I taste him again, I give in just as he does, letting the wave of passion consume us on this perfect beach in paradise.

## CHAPTER 18



- RYDER -

In an almost bewildered silence, Maggie and I sit at our gate, eating some of the papaya chips and chocolate covered Kona coffee beans that Annie gave us when she drove us to the airport.

As if she hadn't already given us so much.

Annie might not know it now, but her family will be up to their eyeballs in Maryland crabcakes for the foreseeable future.

It was a rush to get here in time. After a night of making love to Maggie, on the beach, in the bed, and on nearly any horizontal surface available to us, we finally—*finally*—seemed to free ourselves from jet lag and sleep in.

Just in time for us to go home.

The irony of that doesn't escape me.

Maggie sits across from me in the barely padded seats of the open-air terminal. I can't even reach over and hold her hand; there were no two empty seats available next to each other. And it makes me feel like there's already a huge chasm between us—not just a physical one, but a symbolic one as well—as though the six feet that separate us are a reminder that by the end of the day Monday, we won't even share the same hemisphere at a time in our relationship when couples are usually inseparable.

*One week in Hawai'i.* Why did I resist the idea of it that morning when the admiral had essentially ordered me to take a vacation? My eyes move to Maggie, and I remember why.

At the time, I didn't know I'd be sharing my week with someone who opened up a part of me that I didn't even know was there. And as much as I don't want this trip to end, I'm hating even more the idea that *we* might be at an end too.

I need to talk to her.

Yesterday, it had made perfect sense to delay this conversation. Why mess with perfection while we were still in the bubble of paradise?

But now, surrounded by mobs of other weary travelers who don't like leaving Hawai'i any more than we do, the ambience is kind of a mood killer.

"Maggie, I—" I pause, seeing an elderly woman approach, her eyes searching for somewhere to sit. Automatically, I stand, giving a glare to a couple other guys who had quickly pulled out their phones to pretend they didn't see her.

"Ma'am, please, take my seat," I offer.

"Oh, no, dear. I couldn't," she replies.

"Please, I insist," I say, stepping aside and then giving a deadly glare to a teenager who's making a beeline for the seat that I just emptied. *Don't even think about it, kid.*

The woman sits down. "Thank you. You're very kind."

"Not a problem." Now, I can at least be closer to Maggie, even if I am towering over her. Great, I'll look back on this moment and wonder if I was inadvertently using intimidation to get her to stick things out with me.

With that thought in mind, I stack our two carry-on bags on top of each other and build myself a seat right in front of her.

She's smiling at me. Either it's because she just put more of those chocolate covered coffee beans in her mouth—she really does love those Kona beans—or it's because I gave my

seat to that woman. I don't know which. I don't care. I'm just grateful to see that smile of hers.

"Maggie, I wanted to talk to you about something."

She sucks in her lower lip and nibbles it in that way she does. "Me too, actually."

My eyes widen. "Oh. Ladies first, then."

"Um, no. You go first. I probably need to be more awake to form complete sentences anyway," she jokes.

I hesitate, wondering if I should wait. Maybe this conversation would be better on the plane, sitting in those first-class seats she loved.

*Coward*, I scold myself. So I bolster my courage. Funny how that SEAL training the admiral said I should trust hasn't quite prepared me for this moment, the mission of simply asking a woman to be my girlfriend.

I feel like I'm back in high school.

"Maggie, I'll be headed out of the country for a—"

"Attention, passengers. Flight 2954 has been temporarily delayed due to weather conditions. Our new estimated departure time is 11:20. We apologize for any inconvenience."

My brow rises, glancing at the perfectly clear skies here on Hawai'i's Kona coast.

"Must not be sunny and eighty degrees where we're headed," Maggie says, voicing my exact thoughts as she has often on this trip. "A reminder that it's winter back home. You sure you don't want to stay?"

There's humor in her voice. Though in her eyes, I see a trace of seriousness in the question, as if, like me, there's this part of her that just wants to break free from all the responsibilities of home and stay right here in this dream.

I can't even dare be tempted though. I'm an officer. The admiral relies on me. And my duties, my job, actually *do* matter to the country I love.

I can't stay in paradise. But if I could come home to Maggie after my next trip, it would be all the paradise I'd need.

"Maggie, I—" My phone chirps in my pocket and I let out a salty curse. Is fate trying to tell me something here? "Sorry. I better read this before I have to put it on airplane mode." I reach into my pocket for my phone.

"My phone!" she breathes out. "I forgot that I turned it off yesterday." She opens her purse to retrieve it.

I glance down and see that it was just an email from the airline, telling me that my flight's been delayed.

*Uh, yeah. Thanks.*

I frown, then begin again. "Maggie—"

"Oh my God." The shocked look on Maggie's face as she stares at her phone is enough to put me just on the brink of SEAL crisis mode.

"What's wrong?" I say quickly.

"I—I got an email from them yesterday. From that gaming job." She shakes her head. "On the one day I turned my phone off. Doesn't that figure?"

"What does it say?" I search her expression for answers, hoping for good news for her. She deserves that job. And selfishly, I can't help thinking that if she gets that job, it will only help our situation. She'll be so busy with her new workload down in North Beach that she might put up with a man who is just as busy as she is.

She's shaking her head, but the hope in her eyes doesn't tell me she's looking at a rejection. "I—I can't read it."

"Come on. It's the only way to find out."

"No, I mean *literally*. Remember how I said letters dance around when I'm stressed?"

"Oh, shit. Of course. Want me to read it for you?"

"Would you? It's that or I'll need a shot of whiskey. And I don't think they've got that in this airport."

“Too early for that, anyway,” I reply, even though I could totally use a shot myself, given all the swirling thoughts that are culminating in my brain. I take her phone from her.

“Thank you for calling our attention to your recent uploads to your website,” I begin reading aloud. “They are a stark contrast to the music we’d heard previously from you and show a breadth to your work that is impressive.”

“They liked them. The movements...” Her voice is barely a whisper as she says it, almost as though she hadn’t intended to say it out loud.

“We’d like to offer you the—” My heart races and I have some of those damn chills on my arms. “—composing position on a full-time basis with terms we’ve set forth in the contract we’ve attached to this email.”

She squeals.

“You’ll see the terms reflect what we had discussed in our last interview. We’d appreciate your response within five business days.”

I stop to watch her reaction, enjoying this swell of emotion inside of me as her face brightens. “Maggie, you got it. You got the job!”

She tosses her head backward and stamps her feet elatedly the way a little kid might. Her excitement takes me back to that moment when our plane first touched down here in Hawai‘i. And something about seeing her this way fills me with hope not just for her future in this new job, but a future for *us*—as though that level of exhilaration can only herald a new, exciting chapter for us.

I give a little shake, trying to bring myself back down to earth and return to reading. I’ve never felt like I had such a great stake in someone else’s career as I do now. “As you’ll see in the attachment,” I continue, “we can arrange for temporary housing for you for eight weeks until you find a permanent place of residence here in San Mateo.”

And just like that, I feel the wind knocked out of me.



San Mateo? My mind flips back the pages in my head to that night she had told me about this job. It couldn't have been long after she told me that she does all her composing work from home—just minutes after, probably. I just assumed this job would be no different.

Dammit. San Mateo is in California. We'll have an entire continent between us. How am I supposed to see her in California while I'm on call 24-7?

My eyes meet hers. She's not looking at me—her gaze is glued on the phone I hold in my hand, waiting for me to keep reading. But now, the letters seem to be dancing around for *me*.

The hope inside me withers, but I force a smile. I refuse to ruin this moment for her. If she wants this job on the West Coast, then by God, I want it for her, even if it kills any chance that this might work between us.

Yet even so—even with the fake grin I slap on my face—I can hear an unwanted hint of frustration in my tone when I ask, “San Mateo?”

# PART THREE

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## THIRD MOVEMENT

*MODERATO*

## CHAPTER 19



~ MAGGIE ~

I've sat at my desk so many times like this, looking out at the way the winter's low sun reflects on the ripples of the Chesapeake Bay as though the sight of it is supposed to give me what I need.

I'm back in North Beach, Maryland, nearly five thousand miles away from the place where I left my heart yesterday.

I should be asleep now. I rolled into town, fueled by coffee alone, around ten a.m. this morning after a brutal night of travel. Unlike when Ryder and I were flying in the opposite direction, even the comfy seats of first class didn't help me sleep this time.

My mind kept churning, playing those moments Ryder and I shared in the airport together, trying to read into the change I saw in him when he realized that this job would move me to California.

I thought I had told him that at some point during that evening we shared in North Beach. Or at least I assumed that he knew it would move me *somewhere*.

I shake my head, remembering our flight home. It seemed as awkward as when we were going on vacation as two people who barely knew each other.

Looking at the water in front of me now, my mind flits back to that moment as I gazed through the window of the plane and saw Hawai'i slip from my view, somehow knowing

that the news I just received about the job had made a future with Ryder impossible. I could sense it from him in the cautious way he looked at me. I could see it in the strain of his smile. And I could feel it in those moments that I knew he would have ordinarily reached for my hand, but instead my hand was left cold and aching for his touch.

Yeah, it's no wonder I didn't sleep a wink on any of the flights as we headed home.

I stare out at the view of the Bay, seeking answers rather than inspiration this time.

Before Hawai'i, I wouldn't have even hesitated to embrace this career change. Even just a few days ago, I was so anxious to put my symphony movements up on my website at Ryder's suggestion, thinking it might sway them to offer me the job.

But something inside me shifted in those final days of our trip—too brief a time to really take seriously, I consider.

Yet I can't deny the feelings. They live and breathe inside me even now.

I try to picture myself, accepting the job.

I wouldn't have to hold back in a job at a gaming company. No more tepid background music. No more beige sofa.

I could smack people in the face with my music, the same way those first notes of the *Star Wars* theme once stunned audiences with their boldness. In gaming, I wouldn't get comments back from producers saying, "We need the score to be more subtle. Can you rein it in a bit?"

I'd pay good money to never hear those words again.

And I'd be busy... too busy to ruminate about my inability to complete my symphony.

Would that be a good or bad thing?

My phone chirps with a text, and I reach for it, hoping that it's from Ryder.

“*Yay! I can’t wait to hear all the deets when you’ve caught up on sleep.*” Lily wrote—a response to my earlier text to her saying that I was home, safe and sound.

I didn’t tell her I got the job yet. Does that say something right there?

I frown, glancing downward at the nearly empty manuscript paper that I brought back from Hawai‘i. Just a few notes scribbled here and there. Not the breathtaking music that I had hoped I’d create on this vacation.

When I was packing to leave, I even pondered leaving these pages behind.

I’m glad I didn’t. I touch the top sheet gently, recalling that morning I had written on it after gazing out at the pre-dawn sky, looking for inspiration to start my day.

But what I received instead was so much better.

That was the morning when I had first made love with Ryder.

And it *was* love, dammit. I refuse to believe that it wasn’t. Even though we never dared to utter the word, he had taken such tender care of me that morning that I simply can’t categorize what we shared as just sex.

And in the days that followed, you could fill that beautiful Waipi‘o Valley with the emotions that stirred in me.

Sighing, I take the top sheet of the manuscript paper and set it aside for safekeeping, my most cherished memento of a perfect week.

I feel the pull of the phone in front of me. I wonder what Ryder is doing right now. Probably trying to catch some sleep.

He had me call him when I got home, wanting to know that I made the drive back from the airport safely. And in that conversation, just after he said he planned to take a nap before tackling laundry and packing for his next trip, he had told me he’d call me when he got back to the States, whenever that may be.

If I take this job, I'll probably be settling into a new home or apartment in California by the time he comes back. I won't have vacation time to come visit him for a while. And with his difficult work schedule, I doubt he'll be able to visit me.

No wonder he was acting so differently toward me after I received that email.

How long will it be before I stop hearing from him? I can't bear the idea of it.

*I love him.*

As the unwanted, poorly timed words swell inside of me, I can't deny them. Even so far from paradise... even in the light of day when I should be thinking logically, not emotionally...

*I love him.*

And in the moment when I accept that, this wave of emotion takes over as though logic was holding it at bay all along.

I let it consume me, shutting my eyes and lifting my pencil.

And when I open them again, I'd swear I don't see the Chesapeake in front of me any longer. I see only him.

A surge inside of me drives my hand to move across the paper, sketching out notes on my staves that begin with softness, an innocence of gentle strings that gives way to an explosion of percussion as shocking as the realization that just formed inside of me.

My hand moves swiftly, drawing up the musical score for *my* romance—not the light-hearted ones I compose for that always end with a happily-ever-after kiss and then fade to black. I create a score for *real* love, the messy kind that brings ups and downs and thrills and challenges. The kind that twists and turns yet somehow has the strength to endure whatever is around the bend.

There's nothing generic or "beige sofa" about what pours from my soul and onto my paper.

And I love the sound of it as I hear the instruments in my head, even clearer than when I compose on my computer. I hear a real strings section; I hear the longing in the woodwinds, the boldness of the brass, and the tremor of percussions. I can even see myself in the audience listening to what I'm creating.

Then I sketch out the ache, the moments in love when heartbreak and worry consume. It's mellow at first, so subtle that a person would barely even take notice until it wraps its fingers around the heart and grips so tightly that I'd swear I feel it right now, just thinking about Ryder traveling so far away from me.

The turbulence, the ever-changing roller coaster of love takes shape on page after page on my staves. The good, the bad, the terrifying. The feverish passion that heralds vulnerability, but then shifts into something stable that brings nothing but certainty and peace.

The music curves into glorious shapes and colors in my soul and I share them on my pages in the only way I can, using the only written language that I never struggled with.

I feel the sting of tears in my eyes as I hear it inside of me, each note that I write, each instrument that gives it voice, each person in the audience that I picture in my mind somehow being transformed by my music the way I've always dreamed.

I write what I want to tell them desperately. I write about not just my love for Ryder, but the *awakening* of it. That moment when all those tumultuous emotions inside of me suddenly culminated into something that I refuse to let go.

That moment when I realized that the symphony I've been writing these past years was never anything more than a metaphor for my own life—and that this love I have for Ryder is the only way to bring it closure.

Because this love I feel is *epic*.

And just as I write my final notes after several hours have passed, I realize that he is my inspiration.

He is my *next* starlight, as he once put it. He is the one who awakened my soul—not the span of the Milky Way above me those nights in Hawai‘i. Not the glorious breach of a whale or the flow of lava reshaping our world. Not even the sunset that stretched out in front of us giving way to a green flash that seemed otherworldly.

I gaze down at the pages and pages I’ve filled, then flip backward through them to number them because in all my years of composing, I’ve never written so much in one sitting.

Only then do I glance again outside and see that the entire day has slipped by.

I expel a sigh from somewhere deep inside of me. Of relief... sweet relief as I look out to where a low moon is now reflecting in the Bay.

Exhaustion consumes me. Not just from the jet lag or the long trip or a night on a plane with no sleep.

No, it’s stronger than that—as though completing this symphony was the final stretch of a marathon that I’ve been running since I first began composing.

*I need to talk to him.*

No. I need to *see* him. I need to tell him what I feel inside and be able to see in his eyes whether he feels the same way. I want to extend my hand and see if he takes it. And when I lean in for a kiss, I want to see if he lets me taste him again.

I need to tell him that regardless of any job—his or mine—I want to make this work somehow.

My eyes flicker as I sit at my desk, trying to summon the energy to drive to him.

But I find myself giving in—just for a moment.

I cross my arms on my desk, then I settle my head atop them.

*I’ll just catch my breath and then head out,* I decide as I shut my eyes.



Just a few minutes of rest and then I'll grab some of that Kona coffee I brought home and let it work its magic, giving me the spurt of energy to drive up to his apartment.

Just a moment is all I need... to listen to the faint sound of the waves through the glass of my windows and picture Hawai'i again.

Just a moment... until sleep tugs me downward into a dream, and I'm there again, with Ryder, in paradise.

## CHAPTER 20



- RYDER -

I'm in the airport. *Again.*

Retrieving my phone from the tray after I pass through the scanner in airport security, I can't help glancing at it before I slip it back into my pocket.

Still no contact from Maggie.

It's only been twenty-four hours since I last heard from her. And unlike me, she didn't have a trip to pack for yesterday, so I'm hoping she was able to catch up on sleep. Coming home from Hawai'i seems like an even longer trip than getting there, probably because we didn't have paradise waiting for us on the other end.

I feel like things ended awkwardly between us—such a contrast from the comfort level we had been enjoying throughout our vacation.

But I suppose she's wondering the same thing I am. What happens now, exactly?

Sure, I feel closer to Maggie than I ever have to any woman, outside of family. But we barely had more than a week together.

And now, she's moving to the other side of the continent at the same time I'm flying to another part of the world.

We don't stand a chance.

On the flight home, I pondered whether we should at least maintain a friendship. After all that we've shared, it seems like we should at least walk away with that intact.

But then I imagine it—her moving on with her life there in California. How long would it be before she started talking about some guy who's stolen her heart? And would I be able to resist the urge to fly there and punch his lights out merely for existing?

I *do* still have a lot of airline mileage points to use up, after all.

No. Even though I hate the idea of cutting things off with her, I'm just territorial enough to not be able to stand by idly while the woman I love falls for someone else.

*The woman I love?*

*Shit.*

I let those words roll around in my head as I walk down the long passageway, looking for my gate. I really do love her. And I want the best for her, even if it means her taking that job that pulls her far away from me, far away from the chance of an *us*.

I arrive over an hour early to the gate, just as I usually do. And just like always, the admiral beat me here.

"Sir, you're early," I say.

"You know those long lines at security never work in my favor." A hint of a grin perks up his face, despite the early hour. "Well, except one time."

I notice his curious expression. "From that smile on your face, I'm thinking that one time has something to do with your wife, sir."

He chuckles. "You're getting to know me a little too well, Ryder. So, do I get to see some photos while we wait for our flight? I could use a Hawai'i fix right about now." He shifts the conversation smoothly, like the pro he is.

"I've got more than you'll need for that." I hand him my phone and let him scroll through them.

“Damn. Look at that lava.” He shakes his head. “Vi and I need to get out there sometime.”

“You’ve never been?”

“Just to Kaua‘i and O‘ahu. Not the Big Island yet. How’d Maggie like it?” he asks as he comes across a photo of her and me at Volcanoes National Park.

“Loved it.”

“Is she settling in back home all right? It’s hard to return to reality after paradise. And you headed out of town today can’t help.”

I fight the frown that threatens. “She’s probably busy packing.”

“Packing?”

“She got a job offer in California. She’ll be settled on the West Coast by the time I get back.”

He tucks in his chin. “Really? That’s a shame. Hope you didn’t blow through all those airline mileage points getting to Hawai‘i.”

“Sir?”

“So you can visit her,” he says as though I should have known exactly what he meant.

My brow rises. “Oh, yeah. I... don’t know if things have really gotten to that point where we’d try to keep this thing going.”

“You don’t?”

“I’ve always found geography kills relationships.”

Eyes widening, he angles a look at me. “Geography? Well, hell, that’s the easiest challenge you’ll face as a couple. Do you love her?” he tacks on as though it’s a perfectly normal question for an admiral to ask on a Monday morning.

My back stiffens. “We really had barely more than a week together,” I feel the need to point out in answer, as if this is a question on an exam and logic is the only way I can be correct.

“That’s not what I asked you, Ryder. Do you love her? If you have to think about it, then that generally means—”

“Yes, sir,” I interject, likely the only time I’ll ever interrupt him. “I love her.”

The answer is all instinct; no thought is involved. No pondering whether it can even work with my job and her job, and nearly three thousand miles in between us after she moves. No weighing whether or not it can even be real, since most of the time we’ve spent together was in a place so different from our real lives.

I simply love her. I love listening to her, talking with her. I love feeling like I can lift her up when she needs it and I love how her presence in my life brings me a new kind of strength that I can’t get in the gym or by hauling a rucksack on my back, headed to a mission.

And I love how just saying those three simple words suddenly brings clarity to my life.

Why the hell didn’t I tell her this before we parted?

“Then it sounds to me that you should make it work, Lieutenant Commander,” he tells me in his most formal tone.

Another order from the admiral. And I’m more than willing to comply.

I glance at my watch. “I’ll call her when we’re on layover in JFK.”

He cocks his head a moment, his eyes drifting slightly. “Or you could talk to her now.”

I give my head a shake. “I’m hoping she’s sleeping off jet lag right now.”

His brow furrows, looking over my shoulder. “Ryder, I… don’t think she is. In fact—”

“Ryder?”

I hear Maggie’s voice behind me. My head whips around to see her, and I’d swear for a moment that the lack of sleep

now has me hallucinating. *Damn.* A poorly timed hallucination as I sit with a three-star admiral.

But then she looks at Admiral Shey as he stands in greeting. “Admiral, I’m sorry to interrupt. I’m Maggie,” she extends her hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, Maggie. Ryder, I think I’ll go buy myself something to read for the flight.” And he disappears so smoothly it’s as though a fast exit is something they teach a guy when they pin that first star on his uniform.

Still dumbfounded, I manage to get to my feet. “Maggie, is everything okay? What are you doing here?”

She shrugs sheepishly. “I’m flying to Cincinnati, apparently.”

“What? Why?”

“They wouldn’t let me past security without buying a ticket to someplace. So I got the cheapest one they had. I needed to talk to you before you left, Ryder. In person.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask again, my mind searching for reasons why she’d show up here, but coming up dry.

*Unless...*

I dare to dredge up some hope.

“No. I mean, yes. I mean...” She shakes her head. “I—I needed to tell you that I’m turning down that job.”

“You are?”

“I know this might sound crazy. And I don’t want to scare you away by saying this, but even though we haven’t had much time together, it’s been the best time of my life.”

Warmth swells inside of me. “Maggie, I feel the same way.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I want to try to make this work between us.”

“Me too ...” she breathes out in a rush, extending both of her hands toward me.

I take them in my grasp, and just feeling her skin against mine again makes me never want to let go.

“But you don’t have to turn down that job,” I tell her quickly. “We can make things work even with a continent between us. Geography is life’s easiest challenge,” I paraphrase the admiral.

“I’m still going to turn it down.” She squeezes my hands. “I finished the fourth movement, Ryder. And it’s the best thing that I ever composed. I’m calling my symphony, *Awakening*.”

“*Awakening*?”

“Yes. Because the first movement was inspired by the awakening of my dream, my goal to compose—remember? And the second movement is the awakening of the city at night.”

I grin, remembering that chilly, starlit night, walking along the boardwalk in North Beach as she told me about her symphony. “And the third is the awakening of North Beach at dawn. I remember. And the fourth movement?”

“The awakening...” She pauses, a hint of uncertainty in her eyes. “... of my love for you, Ryder. I love you, Ryder. And I know it’s probably too early for me to say that. But I can’t help it. I kept looking *outside* of myself for things to inspire me. A place, a thing, an experience. But you—you made me look inward—to find inspiration in what I feel rather than what I see. And I feel... like this is a turning point for me, for my composing. I don’t want that job because I want to write more of the things that are in my heart.” She cringes a little. “Did I scare you away? I was afraid of that.”

I laugh, cupping her face in my hands. “No. I just didn’t hear a word you said past the *I love you* part. Because I love you too, Maggie.”

Then I dip my lips to hers and it seems like a relief, as though I haven’t felt her against me like this in a lifetime. Joy trickles out from my heart, filling me up completely.

I breathe her in, grateful that I can. Grateful that this won’t be the last time I get to kiss her like this. And that’s the only

reason I'm willing to let her lips leave mine now as she breaks away from me to ask, "You do?"

"I do. Completely, Maggie."

Her eyes sparkle with happiness even as her brow creases, looking perplexed. "So, what do we do now? You're leaving town."

"And apparently, you're heading to Cincinnati."

She smiles and glances at her watch. "Well, we do have about an hour before your plane leaves. And I saw a coffee shop down the hall from here."

I extend my bended arm in her direction. "I'm not sure I can top Hawai'i with a cup of coffee. But I'm up for the challenge. Care to have a *fourth* date with me, Maggie?"

She slips her hand in the crook of my elbow. "I thought you'd never ask."



# PART FOUR

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## FOURTH MOVEMENT

*FINALE: PRESTO*

## CHAPTER 21



*One year later*

~ MAGGIE ~

I can still hear the applause.

My ears positively ring from it—even an hour later, after Ryder has whisked me away from the concert hall to a nearby Annapolis pub where he’s throwing a party in my honor. It’s a celebration that I don’t even need because my heart is already filled to overflowing.

It’s closing night for a ten-performance run of my symphony, *Awakening*.

For six evenings and four matinees, I sat beside Ryder and had the honor of hearing the music I had created over much of my adult life be performed by a live orchestra. And I’m convinced that anything I might experience for the rest of my days will pale in comparison.

Ryder opens the door to the historic pub and I hear thundering applause again, this time from family and friends who have gathered to celebrate with me. It’s not a surprise party like Ryder had initially wanted for me. One thing we’re discovering in our relationship this past year is that when a couple gets limited time together, surprises tend to get replaced by meticulously planned events—whether it’s a party like this or even an uninterrupted pizza delivery night.

But I love our life together, just the same.

I'm pulled into one embrace after another. My brother, his wife and stepson... my sister, her husband, and their precious baby... my parents and aunts and uncles... even the admiral and his wife came tonight.

Most importantly, Ryder is here. He, along with the help of the admiral and all his coworkers at the Pentagon, pretty much moved heaven and earth to make sure that Ryder was able to attend all of the performances. And it was the best gift he ever could have given me, because I simply can't imagine this without him.

I spot Freya and Mason and immediately get pulled into another hug.

"You know, I'm kind of taking some credit for that amazing performance I just saw, Maggie," Freya says with a wide grin.

Mason chuckles at his wife's comment. "Yeah, she saw what you wrote in the program about finding the inspiration to write the fourth movement from Ryder—"

"—and I *am* the one who set you two up!" she finishes for him.

Mason shakes his head. "She's going to be relentless after this."

Ryder comes up from behind me and gives Mason the customary handshake/half-hug that I've noticed military men seem to have perfected. "Hey, man. From what you've told me, she was relentless long before I came along."

"Mason!" Freya scolds giving him a gentle swat of rebuke on his shoulder.

Ryder tugs me away from them and we disappear into a side hall where he pulls me into his arms. Then he kisses me, the gentle pressure of his lips setting a million butterflies loose in my belly.

I should be used to his kisses by now. But each one feels like a treasure.

"I was so proud of you tonight," he murmurs in my ear.

“The orchestra sounded amazing, didn’t they?” I admit, unable to even be humble tonight.

“Of course they did. The music they were playing was extraordinary. No, wait—” he pauses thoughtfully. “It was epic,” he finishes and gives me a twirl as though we’re dancing together.

And I *feel* like I’m dancing. I feel like I’m anywhere but here, being spun around and then embraced again by this man I love completely.

We’re unable to escape the crowd for long before we’re pulled into a dizzying number of conversations. The air around me is thick with congratulations and I have to remind myself that they’re being said for me.

But it’s *Ryder’s* opinion that matters most to me. Not the lavish praise from family and friends. Not the approval from the conductor or the orchestra. Not even the stellar reviews that came after the first night’s performance.

It’s Ryder—whose confidence in me is shown in so much more than just words. It’s his actions—the way he squeezes my hand when I need it, the way he holds me tight when I want to be shielded from doubt, and even the way he makes a point to call me any moment he can when the miles separate us, as they so often have this past year.

Success or fail, win or lose, here or on the other side of the world, Ryder is my bedrock... and my starlight.

This night couldn’t get any better.

I hear champagne bottle corks pop, and the restaurant staff passes around flutes as Ryder takes me by the hand and leads me to a microphone.

“Oh, Ryder.” I shake my head adamantly. “You know I hate giving speeches.”

“I know. I’m going to do the talking,” he whispers in my ear after flicking the microphone on.

My eyes dart warily from him to the crowd. *What is he up to?*

“Everyone, I’d like to make a toast,” he announces, and the chatter around us dissipates. “In the military, we’re all about toasts. To our brethren. To our loved ones who bolster us when we’re away. To our country and the ideals that it stands for. And to the fallen.” He gives a nod in the direction of some of his military friends.

“But tonight, I’d like to do a completely different kind of toast.” He lifts his glass. “To music. To the way it makes us feel inside. The way it lifts us up. The way it gives us chills,” he says with deeper meaning as his eyes meet mine.

*Frisson*, I remember him calling it once, as the crowds seems to fall away from us. It’s just him and me in Hawai‘i again, gazing out at the sunset.

“And to the woman who brought it to us tonight—a woman I love with all my heart. To Maggie.” He lifts his glass higher.

“To Maggie,” the crowd echoes, their voices in unison pulling me back to the present.

He takes a sip and then hands his glass to the admiral.

“I don’t think that a military guy has ever toasted about music before, has he, Admiral?” Ryder continues, still speaking into the microphone.

Admiral Shey gives him a knowing look as he shakes his head.

“Well,” Ryder continues, “so long as I’m breaking protocol tonight in front of a three-star, I might as well go for broke.” He offers me a sly smile...

... and drops to one knee.

The breath in my lungs escapes me.

*Oh my goodness.*

“Maggie, I’ve wanted to do this for a while now. I didn’t want to steal your moment in the spotlight. But the curtain is down now, the reviews are in, and all I keep thinking is that I want to be there with you not just on the big nights, but for the *always*. The good days, the challenging ones. The

extraordinary ones—but especially the ordinary ones. The always,” he says again.

And when he pauses after that last word, images form in my mind of him and me—a wedding, a house, children. Birthdays and holidays. Carpools and plumbing problems. Celebrations and frustrations. And through it all, love.

Eyes locked on my gaze, his grin widens as though he’s picturing the same things.

“A wise man once told me that I needed to trust in the training I’ve received as a SEAL,” he continues. “That it would help me make the best decisions I possibly can, no matter what I’m facing. Well, right now, I’m facing only you, Maggie. And that training along with every piece of my soul is telling me that you are the only one for me.”

He pulls out a box from his pocket and opens it. The diamond he reveals reflects the pub’s lights, making the room sparkle.

“Maggie, will you marry me?”

The air stills, and I memorize this moment, wanting to recreate it on my staves one day.

In music composition, timing is everything. So, after he’s shared poetic words from his heart like this, I should slow the tempo to build anticipation. Shift to an instrumental break. Pause with a semibreve rest or *something*, the composer in me demands.

But right now, I’m not a composer. I’m just a woman in love who’s not willing to wait another second.

So I don’t hesitate. “Yes, Ryder. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

The room around us rings out with a military whoop, and when Ryder stands, he lifts me into his arms, pressing his lips to mine as applause erupts around us.

And I know in my heart that *this* closing night is really our beginning.

## EPILOGUE



*Two months later*

*~ FREYA ~*

*With it not appearing as more than a blur to me, Mason tosses something on top of my desk just as I tap in the final words for my latest happily ever after.*

*I glance upward at him, slightly annoyed that he's pulled me from the other world I live in, deep in my imagination.*

*"What? I was just at the ending, Mason," I scold, even though his timing actually couldn't have been more perfect as I quickly hit save on my computer.*

*"I knew you'd want to see that right away," he says innocently, nodding toward what he put on my desk.*

*Only now do I glance down at the envelope to the right of my keyboard.*

*I gasp, somewhat playfully. "Is that what I think it is?"*

*He shrugs. "I'm not saying a word. I know you love these moments."*

*I nibble on my bottom lip. He's right. My heart rate quickens as I eye it—a lovely nearly square-shaped envelope tinted with the slightest hint of blue. Which, for the record, would be very appropriate for a Navy wedding.*

*On it, our name and address is written in the kind of calligraphy that I hope to teach our daughter one day.*

*I dare to touch it, and my grin spreads when I feel the high-quality, textured paper against the pads of my fingertips.*

*Yes, this is definitely what I think it is.*

*“Now, don’t get too excited. Remember what happened with Millie and Dax,” Mason warns.*

*Oof. His words are a sucker punch to my gut.*

*How could I forget that day when I received an announcement that Millie and Dax—one of my greatest matchmaking success stories—had eloped?*

*I squeeze the envelope and shake my head. “No way. It’s too thick, Mason. There’s definitely a return envelope in there.”*

*And a return envelope can only mean...*

*“Rip it open, Mommy!” Astrid comes up from behind me and crawls onto my lap. I beam up at my husband, enjoying the feel of her little body squeezed in between my desk and me. I don’t have many more years in which she’ll enjoy sitting on my lap like this. I set aside the envelope for a moment to simply enjoy it.*

*“You don’t want to rip a wedding invitation open. They’re like little works of art, honey,” I tell her gently.*

*“Like the fingerpainting I brought back from school?” she asks.*

*“Oh, not nearly as precious as that,” I answer. “But they’re still pretty. Want to see this one?”*

*“If it’s an invitation,” Mason cautions me.*

*Carefully, I guide my daughter’s tiny fingers to the seal, helping her open it with the least amount of damage.*

*She beams as we slide it out together—a beautifully embossed card with an intricate border that looks like fine lace even though it’s just paper.*

*“Ohhh. Pretty!” Astrid whispers.*



*Mason pulls up a chair next to us as I read the welcome words printed in lovely flowery letters. My heart fills at the message it brings us.*

*“So, are we going to a wedding?” he asks.*

*My face lights. “Better. We’re going to a wedding in Hawai‘i.”*

*He furrows his brow. “What?”*

*Excitement billows up inside me. “They’re doing a destination wedding in Hawai‘i, Mason. We have to go.”*

*“We have to go,” Astrid echoes.*

*He takes the card from me and reads it. “Well, I’ve got enough leave time, so how could I deny my girls an event like this?”*

*Astrid lets out a squeal, and I lean over to kiss my husband.*

*As I do, I feel a mischievous grin curve his lips upward. I tuck my chin in to look at him, curious. “What?”*

*His smile is smug. “Well, now that Harris and both of his sisters are taken care of, at least you won’t be playing matchmaker while we’re there.”*

*Quickly, I kiss him again, long and hard this time—earning a giggle from the little girl on my lap—so that he won’t see the sudden smirk on my face that threatens to give me away.*

*Not play matchmaker on the island of aloha?*

*Aloha means love. So, how could I possibly resist?*

## FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *Romancing Starlight* and letting me take you to the places I love and share characters who are inspired by the people I've had the honor of knowing as the wife of an Army Ranger.

**[I hope you will continue this series by clicking here to pre-order Romancing Paradise!](#)**

If you enjoyed this book, please consider doing me the tremendous favor of writing a review anywhere you purchased it. **Five-star reviews *literally* help me sell books, bringing me closer to the day when I might be able to quit my “day job” and do this full-time. So I’m deeply grateful!**

I also hope you’ll sign up to be the first to hear when I have a new book release ready by clicking on the link below:

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For readers who are curious about the places I take you in my books, I’ve started a YouTube channel to show you some of my favorite locations for scenes. Check it out at:

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I hope you'll also take a look at my other books in the following pages... each with its own happily ever after. For those of you who like Admiral Shey, you might want to read more about him in the *Special Ops: Homefront* series, where you'll meet him as a captain. Or, for those of you who want more of Camden and Annie in paradise, check out the *Homefront: Aloha, Sheridans* series.

Thank you so much for bringing my characters and stories into your life.

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