



shameless

the chase duet

USA Today Bestselling Author

Kimberly Knight

SHAMELESS

THE CHASE DUET

BOOK 2

KIMBERLY KNIGHT



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SHAMELESS

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

The story you're about to read started before Blake and Stacey met. If you'd like to read what happened *that summer*, you can grab a copy of the short story for free [here](#). It's not required for you to read the prequel, but it might help you understand some of the references in *Shameless*.

I also want to mention that there are multiple S names in this. When I came up with these names in previous stories, I had no idea Blake would be waiting in line for me to write his.

Happy reading!



XOXO,
Kimberly

To Rachel,

Like so many who have supported me throughout my career, the Montgomery boys brought us together, but for us, it has led to an amazing friendship and writing partnership. I'm elated to be on this newfound journey with you and thank you for all your help with this duet.

BLAKE

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?” I ASKED, HOPING I’D MISUNDERSTOOD my brother.

“Stacey isn’t coming,” he repeated.

My gaze moved to Spencer’s. “What do you mean, she isn’t coming?”

My sister-in-law frowned. “She told me she couldn’t go through with the wedding. She and Molly left.”

“Why?” I growled. How could she leave without at least telling me why she couldn’t marry me? I thought things were perfect between us. Last night, we had talked about Cabo and everything we were going to do, which wasn’t much, considering we’d planned to be naked most of the time. How, in only a few hours, had it all turned to shit?

“She didn’t tell me,” Spencer replied.

“And you just let her leave?” I snapped. Spencer wasn’t the person I was angry with, but my blood was raging.

“Hey!” Brandon interjected. “This isn’t Spencer’s fault. I know you’re hurt, but don’t take it out on my wife.”

“I know,” I bit out and stalked to the door. When Stacey and I had toured the venue, we had been shown where the bridal suite was located; I headed there even though Spencer

had said Stacey left. I needed to see for myself because I didn't believe Stacey could cut me so deep.

Maybe in the time Spencer had been talking to us in the groom's suite, Stacey had come back.

Maybe she had forgotten something at home and ran back to get it.

Maybe it was all a joke.

Not bothering to knock, I flung the door open. The room was empty, and I knew damn well Stacey's mother and Molly should have been in the room getting ready.

I took my phone out of the pocket of my slacks and hit the button to call her, only for it to ring once and then go straight to voicemail. I called again, but it did the same thing. Over and over I tried to get through, but it was clear she'd turned off her phone.

In less than five minutes, my life had gone from damn near perfect, to spiraling out of control. How could Stacey leave me at the altar? We'd kept our fling going for years before making it official, and she was the first woman to work her way into my heart. There was only one other time I thought I'd loved someone, but even with Miranda, my high school girlfriend, it wasn't the same as my feelings for Stacey.

And now my heart was on the floor, flopping around like a dying fish.

With my phone still in my hand, I slid down the wall behind me and hung my head as I tried to make sense of it all. Except, nothing added up. What had changed her mind?

Unlocking my phone, I went to text her, only to stop when I read the last one from this morning:

Can't wait to marry you today!

I'd replied:

Not as much as me baby!

Clearly, that was the truth.

“Hey.” I looked up to see Brandon standing in front of me.
“She really left?”

“Seems so,” I whispered as I looked back down at my lap.

“You tried calling her?”

“Yeah.”

“And nothing?”

“Straight to voicemail.”

“What are you going to do?”

I looked up at him. “What can I do?”

He crouched down next to me. “I know you’re hurting, but you need to tell everyone waiting for the wedding to begin that it won’t.”

Another dagger twisted in my heart as I thought about standing in front of my family and friends and telling them. I knew they would have questions; since I didn’t have the answers, the mere thought of delivering the news turned my stomach.

“I can’t.” I got to my feet. “I need to get out of here.”

“You can’t leave,” Brandon stated.

“Why not? Stacey did!” I roared. Were her friends and family waiting or had she given them a heads up and we were the suckers in this charade?

My brother and I stared at each other for a few beats and then he said, “All right. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.” I moved to walk past him, but his words stopped me.

“Are you going to be okay?”

I blinked, not sure how to answer his question. “Would you be?”

“No,” he admitted and let go of me. “And that’s why I’m asking.”

“I just want answers.”

“I know. Go see what you can find out and I’ll handle the guests. Do nothing stupid, and call me if you need anything.” He drew me in for a hug. Having my brother’s arms around me and his support made me feel slightly better.

But I knew everything wasn’t okay.

STACEY

MY PHONE BUZZED IN THE PASSENGER SEAT NEXT TO ME AS I drove Molly's car. The poofy overskirt of my wedding dress made it hard to steer and see out the windshield. I knew immediately who was calling by his ring tone. Because I wasn't ready to answer any of his questions—and also because I was a coward—I declined the call and then shut off my phone.

A tear slid down my cheek and I let it drip onto the off-white gown. When I woke up that morning, I had no idea I wasn't going to marry Blake. It was supposed to be the happiest day of my life and now I felt as though I was in some sort of alternate dimension. The moment Molly joked I was pregnant changed everything.

“YOU NEED TO GO BUY ME A TEST,” I RUSHED OUT, MY EYES wide.

“Now?” Molly blinked. “The wedding is going to start soon.”

“I have to know before I walk down the aisle.”

“And what will you do if you are pregnant?”

I shook my head and sighed, not knowing the answer. “Just please go.”

“Okay.” She grabbed her purse.

“And hurry.”

“I will.”

A few minutes later, my mom returned to the room balancing three mimosas the best she could. As she came near, I shook my head.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I stared up at the ceiling, trying not to cry and ruin my makeup because if I wasn’t pregnant, I was going to marry Blake. If I was, I didn’t know what I was going to do. “Everything or nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

I looked back at her. “Well, Molls just left to get me a pregnancy test.”

Mom’s eyes widened, and she breathed, “Oh ...”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. A lot of women get pregnant on their wedding night or even before. So what if you are?”

I kept shaking my head; that was all I could do. “No, Mom.”

She set the champagne flutes down and wrapped me in a hug. “It’ll be okay.”

“It won’t be if I am.”

“Why’s that?”

I pulled back slightly. “Because if I’m pregnant, it’s not Blake’s.”

Her eyes widened again. “Whose is it?”

I closed my eyes and whispered, “Eddie’s.”

“Ian’s son?”

I nodded.

“Oh, wow.”

“Yeah...”

Mom was still dating Ian. They were living together again and would probably elope to Las Vegas soon. Since the 4th of July party, I hadn't seen Eddie and thought we'd go our separate ways and forget about what happened in my childhood room. I'd expected holidays to be awkward going forward, but I never could have imagined he knocked me up.

Except we had been reckless, and I only thought I could pretend it never happened.

Molly came rushing in a moment later, pulling a small rectangular box from her purse. “There was a drugstore on the corner.”

“Thank god.” I rushed to her and grabbed the box and went to the bathroom. Not wanting to take any chances, I peed on both tests to make sure and then set a timer on my phone. It was the longest three minutes of my life and when I turned them over and saw the two pink lines, I stumbled back and hit the wall.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked on the other side of the door.

“No.”

“Shit,” Molly breathed, and I knew she understood why I said no.

I had to get out of there.

Opening the door, I hurried to my bags, putting the tests in my purse and not caring there was pee on them. “I need to go.”

Both my mom and Molly opened their mouths to say something, but then there was a knock on the door.

“I'll get it,” Molly said.

She opened the door and Blake's sister-in-law, Spencer, was on the other side. My heart sank. What should I do? What should I tell her?

“I'm leaving,” I stated in a rush.

“What? Why?” Spencer questioned.

“Just ... I have to go.” I ran out of the building with Molly on my heels like the stereotypical runaway bride. “Give me your keys.”

Molly blinked. “What?”

“I need to go, please?”

“Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay.” She handed me her keys. “Theo and I will catch a ride with someone.”

“Can you ... Can you tell everyone for me?”

“Seeing as I’m your maid of honor, I guess this is one of my duties.”

It wasn’t, but I wasn’t going to argue with her.

“Thank you.”

I didn’t know where my mom was, but at that moment, I didn’t care. My only concern was getting out of there before I saw Blake, because there was no way I could tell him I was pregnant with another man’s baby.

BEFORE I REALIZED IT, I FOUND MYSELF ON INTERSTATE 45 heading north, a highway I knew all too well. Was I seriously going to show up wearing a wedding dress? A wedding dress that I was about to marry another guy in? I had nowhere else to go since I couldn’t go back to the apartment I shared with Blake, and I couldn’t go to Molly’s or my mom’s because he knew where they lived.

So, I drove three and a half hours and parked in front of Eddie’s condo. What was I doing? It wasn’t as though I thought he would take me back because I assumed I was pregnant with his baby, or that I even wanted him to take me back. I just felt lost and, honestly, scared. Still, as I sat in Molly’s car and stared up at the building, I knew a part of me still loved Eddie. Maybe the whole pregnancy thing was fate’s way of making sure I didn’t marry the wrong man?

Or it was karma for sleeping with Eddie when I was engaged to Blake.

Was I a horrible person for loving two men?

Taking a deep breath, I opened the driver's side door and got out. Straightening my dress, I made my way into Eddie's building and up the elevator to his floor. With each step toward his door, my heart rate increased, my palms became clammy, and my head felt dizzy as though I was going to pass out.

Before I could knock or turn to leave, the door opened and my stomach fell to the floor. "H ... Hi," I stammered.

He drew his head back and blinked. "What are you doing here?"

I swallowed. "Can we talk?"

BLAKE

I COULDN'T FIND HER.

I searched everywhere I thought Stacey would be, but it was as though she'd vanished. She wasn't at our apartment. She wasn't at the hotel where we'd reserved a room for the night, and she wasn't at her mom's or Molly's. They both swore up and down they had no idea where she had run off to, but she had run and that was a total punch in the gut. In the wee hours of the morning, as I lay in the bed we were supposed to spend our wedding night naked in, I sent her a text saying:

I'm staying at the hotel and I'll be at the airport for our flight in the morning. I won't be mad if you show and I hope we can talk it out in Mexico. Or if you want, call me and I'll come to you. Just please talk to me

I wasn't sure if I was angry or hurt or sad or embarrassed about her leaving me at the altar. Or maybe I was all the above because I didn't know what to think. It was like I was in a daze and not thinking clearly, or maybe I was living in some sort of nightmare.

By the time I needed to leave for the airport, Stacey still hadn't responded to me. I hadn't slept a wink, hadn't eaten, and instead, all night drank a bottle of Jack I got from a liquor

store down the street from the hotel to numb whatever the fuck I was feeling.

Still feeling a slight buzz from the whiskey, I grabbed my suitcase and dragged it behind me as I walked to the door. With each step, I wondered if Stacey was going to show up for our flight. Whatever had spooked her, I had to hope we could deal with it, even though she made me look like an ass in front of my family and friends.

The rideshare I'd ordered was waiting as I exited the front doors of the hotel. After I put my bag into the trunk of the car, I slid into the backseat and greeted the driver with a tip of my head.

“Airport, right?” he asked.

I buckled my seatbelt and rested my head on the headrest. “Yeah. International terminal, please.”

During the drive to the airport, I checked my phone countless times, hoping I missed a text, a call, an email, and praying I would hear from Stacey, but, of course, nothing. What the fuck was I doing? Who gets stood up at their wedding and still goes on their honeymoon? Who the fuck expects his runaway bride to show up and pretend nothing happened?

Me.

I was the idiot who held out hope, so I sent one more text to her as I waited at the gate:

Boarding in 42 minutes

Despite the amount of alcohol I consumed the night before, I headed to the bar for a drink before the flight took off. It no longer only numbed my confused state, but it also tamed the anger I knew would boil over if I sobered up and let myself *feel*.

Draining my drink, my phone dinged with an incoming text and I hurried to see if it was Stacey who had messaged.

I'm sorry

I'm sorry. That was all she could say?

My fingers itched to type out a response, but as I hovered over the letters on the screen, I knew no matter what I said, she wasn't coming, and we were over.

“Another?” the bartender asked.

I turned my gaze to him and I sighed. “Yeah, man, and make it a double.”

As he poured my Jack and Dr. Pepper, the gate attendant announced it was time to board. I quickly downed the drink, paid my tab, and made my way to the gate as a single man once again. I wasn't going to focus on how angry I was with Stacey—even though I was. Instead, I was going to go to Cabo to have the best fucking time I could. Fuck Stacey and her two-word text. I would deal with moving out of the apartment and all that shit when I got back after a week in Mexico.

I sent a text to my parents and Brandon letting them know I was leaving.

Still going to Mexico. Shutting off my phone for a week. I'll call when I get back. Love y'all.

Turning off my phone, I stuck it into my carry-on, and when it was time, I boarded the plane. I thought mine and Stacey's song was “Blurred Lines” by Robin Thicke featuring T.I. and Pharrell, but really our relationship was more like “The Dance” by Garth Brooks.

THE PLACE I'D BOOKED FOR THE HONEYMOON WAS AN ALL-inclusive resort on the water. Stacey and I had planned to stay on the property, swim, eat, drink, and fuck, and I was determined to do the exact same thing. My entire life, I never thought I would settle down, but then Stacey worked her way in over the years. I should have known better and stuck to my ways, the ones that didn't allow one woman to hurt me. Maybe her leaving me was a blessing in disguise.

A shuttle for the hotel took me and several couples from the airport to the resort. By the glances they kept giving me, I knew they wanted to ask why I was alone on vacation, but I wasn't ready to tell anyone my business. I had more pride than that.

Even the woman at the front desk was on the verge of asking—I was certain it was in her notes that I had booked a honeymoon suite—but she didn't. Instead, she handed me the keys and directed me to where a golf cart would drive me up a steep hill to my room.

Once in the suite, I changed into my swim trunks, and headed up to the pool closest to my room. It was packed with people, and I made my way up the bar and ordered a margarita. I wasn't much of a tequila man, but given I was in Mexico, I might as well partake in what the place was known for, especially at an all-inclusive resort.

As I watched the bartender make my drink, I realized it had been almost two days since I last ate. Grabbing the bar menu, I scanned what they had available, my stomach growling as I read each item. The bartender placed my cocktail in front of me.

“And let me get—”

“Blake?”

I turned to see a blonde in a smokin' hot bright orange bikini approaching—a blonde I hadn't seen in over ten years. I smiled. “Sarah?”

SARAH

AFTER THREE *LONG* YEARS OF MARRIAGE, I WAS FINALLY A single woman again. I never thought I would be a divorcee, but Trey had a wandering eye that led to him having wandering hands and a wandering dick. Luckily, I found out before we started a family, but that was only because he wanted to wait a few years until we were both established in our careers.

We met on our first day of veterinarian school. I had transferred to Cornell from Columbia University after obtaining a bachelor's degree in animal science. Becoming a vet had always been a dream of mine because of my love for animals. The people I went to school with assumed I had grown up on a farm because I was from Texas, but the only ranch in my family was the apple farm my Aunt Deb owned, and she had no animals. The truth was, I had grown up in San Antonio and still found plenty of hurt birds and stray dogs to bring home. I knew from when I was a little girl that I wanted to help them all.

Trey and I fell in love, got engaged right after we graduated from Cornell four years later, and married a year after that. We wanted to open our own practice, so we moved to Las Vegas where he was from a month after we became husband and wife. Since we'd had no money and student loans up the wazoo, we each found a job at local veterinary clinics.

While I was saving money and building my credit, Trey was spending his paychecks on an assistant at his work. He used to tell me he had to work late because of an emergency surgery, or to monitor a sick cat overnight, or that he was on call and needed to sleep at the clinic. I got suspicious and when I went to his clinic to take him dinner one night, I found him half-dressed and breathless with the assistant.

The day I filed for divorce, I called three of my friends from college who still lived in New York and told them we needed a girls' trip to Mexico to celebrate the dissolution of my marriage. Since a divorce takes less than a month in Nevada, we booked the trip for a month out. At first, I struggled with the fact that it would only take about three weeks legally to split from someone I had been in love with for over eight years. Nearly a decade of attachment was gone in the blink of an eye and I'd had no time to process the change.

Taylor, Josie, and Amanda booked a flight from JFK to Cabo that arrived ten minutes before mine from Vegas. Once we met up at the baggage claim, we took the resort's shuttle and then checked into our adjoining rooms.

"First order of business is getting drunk at the pool for happy hour," Josie announced as we wheeled our luggage into our rooms.

"Totally," I replied, and went to the connecting door to the room and opened it for Taylor and Amanda. They walked into our room.

"We are 100 percent all in for drinks by the pool," Taylor stated.

"Then let's change and enjoy what's left of this sun," I said.

"And then dinner?" Amanda asked. "I'm starving."

"We could get appetizers at the pool," Josie suggested. "I bet they have chips and salsa."

"And guac." I was ready to stuff myself with Mexican food and margaritas.

“And we need to find you a man.” Taylor winked.

I scoffed. “I just got divorced.”

“Yeah, but we’re here for your divorce trip and you need to get laid,” she argued.

All three of my friends were married, so it wasn’t as though any of them were looking to hook up with a stranger. Hell, I wasn’t either. That wasn’t what I wanted the trip to be about. I just wanted to have fun with my friends I hadn’t seen in forever and let loose, eat and drink.

“Yeah, okay.” I rolled my eyes and chuckled sarcastically. “We’ll see.”

We changed and then made our way to the pool closest to our room, finding four lounge chairs near each other. Off in the distance, I could see the ocean and it felt as though I was in heaven. The weather was a little on the humid side, but nothing a nice dip in the pool wouldn’t take care of. Although Vegas was dry and hot, humidity wasn’t anything new to me since I grew up thirty minutes west of San Antonio.

The four of us made ourselves comfortable, and a waiter came over to take our order. We each ordered margaritas and, to Amanda’s delight and mine, the server brought us chips, salsa, and guacamole.

“A girl could get used to this,” Josie admitted, her face tilted up to the evening sun. “No kids. No husband. Just cocktails and food by the pool.”

“We’ve been here like two hours and you already want to move here?” Taylor questioned.

“No, but I’m thinking I need to take more vacations,” Josie replied.

“Don’t we all?” I chuckled.

“Well, thank you to Trey and his slutty assistant.” Amanda raised her plastic cup.

We toasted by clinking our drinks together, and I scanned the pool area as more people arrived. I had heard August was considered off-season, but it still seemed a lot of people were

vacationing. The sun was starting to set when we received our second round of drinks, and I continued to people-watch as the tequila made me more relaxed.

“See any cute guys?” Taylor asked.

I glanced over at her and rolled my eyes behind my sunglasses. “Not looking.”

“Oh, come on. We’re all living vicariously through you now.”

“Fine,” I huffed, and leaned forward to get a better look at the entire area.

“Oo, what about him?”

I followed where Josie was pointing toward the bar and my eyes widened. “Oh, wow. I think I know him.”

“Seriously?” Amanda asked.

“I mean, it’s been like ten years, but yeah, I think I do.” I stared at the man I thought was Blake Montgomery as he looked out over the pool. What were the odds the cocky guy who had spent a summer on my aunt’s apple farm could be at the same resort? I hadn’t been around much that summer because I had spent my time with my friends and boyfriend at the time, but as I gawked more, I was almost certain it was him. Even though I had tried not to be affected by Blake back then, I had been. He had been easy on the eyes with his dark brown finger-length hair, piercing chocolate eyes, and panty-dropping smile.

That summer, I’d had to restrain myself from kissing him one night when he had leaned in as we soaked in my aunt’s hot tub under the Texas stars. The only reason I had pulled back was because I’d had a boyfriend at the time. Arkin and I hadn’t lasted much longer, and I sometimes wondered how things would have turned out if I had indulged in a summer fling with Blake.

“Go talk to him,” Josie urged.

“He’s probably here with his wife or something,” I guessed.

“He walked in alone and I see no wife with him,” Taylor stated.

“Just go talk to him,” Amanda pressed.

I considered going up to Blake. As I stared at the definition in his bare torso, my mouth watered and my heart rate increased. My ex-husband was fit, but not with hard muscles like the man I was gaping at.

“Think about how those muscular arms would feel lifting you against a wall and fucking you—”

“All right.” I held up my hand and cut Josie off. Standing, I said, “I’ll go say hi so you three can leave me alone.” I downed the rest of my drink, took a deep breath, and walked toward the bar where Blake was standing. When I got within earshot, I called out, “Blake?”

He turned and smiled. My belly dipped as I remembered how that grin made my insides tingle.

“Sarah?”

“Hey, how are you?” I glanced quickly at his bare left hand.

“Good.” He took a step toward me and we embraced. “Crazy running into you here.”

“I know.” I chuckled and hooked a thumb toward my friends. “I’m here with my friends for a little girls’ trip. What about you?”

“Ah.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m alone.”

I blinked. “You came to Mexico alone?”

“I ... ah ... yeah.”

“Wow,” I breathed. “That’s interesting.”

“Why’s that?” Blake grunted a small laugh.

I lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. I just assumed people went on vacation with other people.”

“Señor,” the bartender cut in. “Did you want to order food?”

“Oh, right.” Blake turned to grab the bar menu.

“We’re actually headed to the restaurant. You should come with us,” I found myself saying.

He glanced at me. “Nah, I can’t impose on a girls’ trip.”

“It’s totally cool. Promise.” Blake glanced over my shoulder and I turned to see my friends staring. I shook my head with a slight giggle and looked back at Blake. “Honestly, they won’t let me live it down if I tell them you said no.”

He grinned and my heart fluttered. The bartender moved away to help someone else. “Then I guess I can’t say no.”

I motioned for him to follow me back to my friends and then made the introductions. “Taylor, Amanda, Josie, this is Blake. He worked on my aunt’s apple farm one summer back when we were teenagers.”

Everyone waved hello and Josie said, “It’s nice to meet you. Sarah’s single.”

My eyes widened. “Josephine!”

“What? It’s the truth.” She smirked.

“Oh, my god. Okay, let’s go eat. Blake is joining us.” He fell into step with me as my friends stood and grabbed the stuff we’d brought to the pool. “Sorry about that.”

“Sounds like this is more than a girls’ trip.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“They’re trying to get you laid.”

I threw my head back and groaned. “Yeah. We’re here to celebrate my divorce.”

He stopped walking. “Oh wow. You just got divorced?”

I halted too. “Yep. Just finalized last week.”

“I would buy you a drink, but they’re free.” Blake winked.

“That they are.” I snorted, and we started walking again. “So are you going to tell me why you’re here alone?”

“Well ...” He paused for a moment and blew out a breath.
“Got stood up at the altar yesterday.”

STACEY

NIGHT OF BLAKE & STACEY'S WEDDING

EDDIE LET ME INTO HIS CONDO, AND AS I SAT ON HIS COUCH, still in my wedding dress, I felt as though I was going to throw up. My stomach was doing somersaults, and I was on the verge of passing out. He went to his kitchen and returned with a glass of water, handing it to me before sitting in the chair across from me.

I took a nervous sip. "So, I was going to get married today."

He grunted a laugh. "You don't say."

"But I didn't," I clarified, even though I had to assume it was obvious.

"Why not?"

I looked down at my lap and whispered, "Because I'm pregnant."

There were a few moments of silence before Eddie asked, "Okay? Why wouldn't you marry the father of your child?"

My head snapped up. "Because it's your baby."

Eddie balked. "My baby? What the fuck do you mean, my baby?"

“From the 4th of July.”

“You haven’t slept with your fiancé since?” he challenged.

My brow furrowed. “No, I have.”

He stood. “Then why couldn’t it be his?”

“I ... We use protection.”

He looked up at the vaulted ceiling. “Do you need a sex ed lesson, Stace? Nothing is 100 percent effective except not having sex.”

“I know that.”

“Then how do you know it’s mine?”

I opened and closed my mouth, trying to come up with more of a reason than he and I had unprotected sex, but that was all I had. “I guess I won’t know for sure until I get a paternity test.”

He scrubbed his hands down his face. “I can’t believe you showed up here fucking pregnant and in a wedding dress.”

A tear I had been holding back slid down my cheek, and I stood. “Sorry. I should go.”

Eddie said nothing as I walked to the door. Why did I think showing up at his home would go over well? I had been almost certain I was pregnant with his child, but he was right; it could be Blake’s. Had I messed everything up? What if I was having Blake’s baby, and we could be married and starting our family? I should have known the moment Eddie and I fucked in my childhood bedroom, everything would come crashing down. How stupid was I to think I could forget I had cheated on Blake?

More tears streamed down my face as I rode the elevator to the ground floor. Where could I go now? I could go to my mom’s and she could turn Blake away, but that would only make me feel worse because I was a coward and drowning in my own doings. Maybe I should use the ticket to Mexico I already had and never come back to the United States. I could start over in Cabo. Have a new name, a new job, a new place

to live. I had money in my bank account I could use to get on my feet, but was it enough to start over with a baby?

Exiting the building, I wiped my face and made my way back to Molly's car. My cell was still in the car and I didn't know what to do except call my mom. She was probably worried since it had been several hours and was now dark.

"Stace! Wait!"

I turned and looked over my shoulder to see Eddie jogging after me. "Yeah?"

"Shit." He ran his hand through his light brown hair. "Don't go."

I stopped and faced him. "Don't go?"

"I can't let you leave."

I blinked. "Why?"

"It's getting late and I don't want you to drive in the dark. Just stay here tonight. Okay?"

I hesitated for a moment and then nodded. "Okay."

After grabbing my phone from the car, we fell into step with each other and he asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

Once we got back up to Eddie's condo, he gave me a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt to wear instead of my wedding dress. He ordered us pizza and after it arrived, we sat on his couch and watched an Astros game while we ate. We didn't say much and didn't speak any more about the elephant in the room.

When I turned on my cell phone, text messages and more text messages dinged as though it was a race to see which one could be delivered the fastest. My parents and Molly had left multiple voicemail messages, but one text had me on the verge of tears again.

I'm staying at the hotel and I'll be at the airport for our flight in the morning. I won't be mad if you show and I hope we can talk it out in Mexico. Or if you want, call me and I'll come to you. Just please talk to me

I knew I should call Blake, tell him I was pregnant and scared, but I was three hours away in another man's home. Even though he said he wasn't mad, I knew hearing the truth would piss him off. So, I ignored him.

"He doesn't know?" Eddie asked.

I looked away from my phone. "What?"

"Blake. He doesn't know you're here?"

I shook my head and whispered, "No."

"When do you plan on telling him?"

I looked back down at the text from Blake. "When he gets back from Mexico."

Eddie hesitated for a moment and then asked, "Was that where you were going on your honeymoon?"

I nodded.

Was it bizarre that I was talking to my ex about where I was going to go on a honeymoon with someone else? All of it was strange, and I was trying to process how I had turned my life upside down in a blink of an eye.

"All right. I'm going to bed. Feel free to shower in the guest bath. I put some towels in the spare room for you."

Eddie left and a peculiar feeling washed over me. When we were dating, we went to bed together. I used the shower in his room and we slept together. It was silly of me to think it would be like that as I stood from the couch and made my way down the hall to the foreign room.

I slipped inside and texted my mom and Molly that everything was fine and where I was. Then I showered, crawled into the strange bed, and cried myself to sleep.

STARING UP AT THE WHITE CEILING, MY PHONE ON THE nightstand dinged with a text. Grabbing it, Blake's name popped up on the screen. My heart sank as I was once again hit by what my life had become.

Boarding in 42 minutes

Even if I wanted to go to Mexico and try to work out my mistake, I would never make the flight. So, I sent a reply text instead.

I'm sorry

BLAKE

PRESENT DAY

AN HOUR AFTER WE PARTED WAYS, I MADE MY WAY TO THE resort's restaurant where I was meeting Sarah and her friends. I had found a bag of peanuts in my bag to tie me over, but I was still starving. The peanuts weren't enough, so by the time I walked down to the cantina, I was certain I could eat an entire cow.

Even with her back to me, I spotted Sarah outside the double doors. She stood alone, dressed in a purple tank top and short jean shorts. As I neared, she turned and her smile seemed to wash away the last twenty-four hours. Or at least it distracted me from the hell my life had quickly turned out to be. I never expected to run into someone I knew at the resort, and while I hadn't seen Sarah since I was eighteen, I was happy about the diversion she provided, even if it was only for dinner.

"Hey," I greeted.

"Hey. So, it's just going to be you and me for dinner. Sorry, I would have texted or called you, but I didn't have your phone number or room number."

"Oh, okay. What happened?"

“Josie got sick and Amanda and Taylor didn’t want to leave her.”

“Oh, wow. That sucks. Hope she’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, we think she might have drunk some of the water or something.”

“Damn. That’s like the number one rule.”

“I know.” She snickered. “Maybe it was when she brushed her teeth, or maybe from the ice from her margaritas.”

“Geez.” I’d had a margarita but drank it before the ice melted, but didn’t resorts like we were at have filtered water for this reason? Hopefully, I was in the clear.

“Yeah. We have some activities planned, so I hope it’s just a little bug and she’ll be good in the morning.”

At the mention of having activities planned, I remembered Stacey and I had booked and paid for a couple’s massage, a private beach excursion, and horseback riding on the beach at sunset. Guess I would go alone. “Cool. So, you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Me too,” I admitted and opened the double doors to the restaurant.

Sarah walked in and I followed her inside.

“Buenas noches. Table for two?” the hostess asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Of course. May I have your room number?” I rattled off mine first, and the lady entered it into her tablet. “Si, Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery. Congratulations on your wedding.”

Sarah shook her head, and I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, winking as she looked up at me and arched a brow. “Yes. Thank you.” What was a little white lie? It seemed everyone in the hotel assumed I was celebrating getting married because when I’d booked the trip, I’d mentioned it was for my honeymoon.

The hostess motioned for us to follow and led us to a small table overlooking the ocean. “Your server will be right over. Congratulations again.”

“Thank you.” I beamed.

As soon as the lady was out of earshot, Sarah asked, “How do they know you’re supposed to be here on your honeymoon?”

I lifted a shoulder. “When I booked this place, I mentioned it.”

“Ah.” Sarah picked up her menu. “You don’t want to correct them?”

“Would they care?”

“I just mean so they stop bringing it up. You have to be hurting, right?”

When we were exiting the pool area earlier, I hadn’t had a chance to tell Sarah anything about Stacey leaving me at the altar, only that she had. Sarah’s friends had caught up to us and then we went our separate ways after agreeing to meet up in an hour at the restaurant. I was sure Sarah had a few questions about what had happened. Of course, I still had questions too.

I gave a brief nod and smiled warmly. “I am, but happy you’re here to distract me.”

Sarah grinned, her cheeks turning a shade of pink. “I will try my best.”

Our waiter approached with glasses of water, took our drink and food order, and left.

“So, besides getting married, what have you been up to these past ten years?” The last time I’d seen Sarah was at her aunt’s apple farm where I’d stayed for the summer because I’d gotten a DUI and had to work off my community service hours. Sarah had had a boyfriend at the time, so nothing had happened between us, even though I’d tried. Something had happened with her Aunt Deb though, who was also my mother’s best friend.

Sarah took a sip of water that I prayed was filtered or we were both going to end up like her friend Josie. “Well, I finished school at Columbia and then transferred to Cornell for veterinary school.”

“No shit?” At that moment, I remembered back in the day she had mentioned she wanted to become a vet, and it was awesome she’d followed her dreams. She was certainly smart as hell, given she went to Columbia and Cornell. It made me a little uneasy since I’d taken online classes for my business degree. I might be a partner in a couple of nightclubs, but I hadn’t done it on my own as I’d wanted. It was fine, and I was happy with how things had turned out. Working with Brandon had brought us closer and also had made me get my shit together.

“Yeah. It took eight years of nothing except school, but I love my job.”

“That’s awesome. Don’t tell me you married that guy you were dating back then. What was his name? Arnold? Aaron?” *That summer*, I never met the guy, but I knew how much Sarah had liked him since she had fought to stay with him even while he was still in Texas and she had gone off to New York for school.

“Arkin.” Sarah giggled. “And no. We only lasted a few more months. I met my ex-husband when I transferred to Cornell. He’s a vet too.”

The waiter returned with our cocktails and placed a basket of chips and a bowl of salsa on the table before leaving again.

“Do you two work together?” I asked, assuming since they were both veterinarians, they worked at the same place.

“No.” Sarah shook her head. “Actually, if we had, then maybe we would still be married.”

“How so?” I dunked a tortilla chip into the red salsa.

“He cheated on me with one of his assistants.”

I quickly chewed and swallowed the chip I’d stuck in my mouth. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “Took him dinner one night when he was working late and caught him half naked with her.” She stuck a chip into her mouth, not seeming still to be affected by catching her husband with another woman.

“Wow,” I breathed. “That’s awful.”

Before Stacey, I had never been the one-woman kind. Didn’t dream of settling down until her. So even though I’d had my fair share of hookups—and hooking up on the job—the thought of Stacey cheating on me pricked my heart and made my chest ache. Had that been why she had left me? Had she met someone else? We had been together and planning our wedding for months. After every long shift at Club 24, I came home to her waiting for me. Had she been cheating on me while I was busting my ass to earn money for the wedding that hadn’t happened and the honeymoon trip I was on?

Or had she never loved me and realized it before it was too late?

“Yeah,” Sarah agreed. “But I have to imagine being stood up on my wedding day is equally as bad.”

I swallowed another bite of the chips and salsa and took a sip of my margarita. “Yeah, it’s not the best feeling in the world, that’s for sure.”

“I’m sorry.” Sarah’s lips formed a thin line. “I really can’t imagine. Do you know why?”

“Nope. That’s the million-dollar question.”

Her mouth fell open. “Seriously? She didn’t tell you why?”

“She didn’t tell me anything.”

She blinked. “What do you mean? How did you find out? She just didn’t show?”

“My sister-in-law told me.”

“How did she find out?”

“Stacey told her, I guess. I didn’t ask because I bolted to go find Stacey, but she wasn’t anywhere.”

“And she didn’t at least call or text you?”

“Only a text before I got on the flight that said she was sorry.”

“Wow,” she exhaled. “That’s fucked up.”

“Tell me about it.”

“And you have no clue why?”

I shook my head. “None. I thought everything was good. The night before the wedding, she’d texted me how excited she was to be marrying me.”

Sarah took a sip of her drink. “My mind is blown right now.”

“Yeah,” I exhaled.

She reached across the table and cupped my hand. “I’m so sorry.”

I smiled warmly. “Not your fault.”

“I know, but still.”

“Yeah,” I sighed.

She withdrew her hand, and we stared out the window at the setting sun. The waiter returned a few minutes later with our entrees and we dug in.

After some time, I finally asked the question that had been nagging me for forty-eight hours. “Why would one stand someone up at the altar?”

Sarah paused chewing, swallowed, and replied, “That, I don’t know.”

“What would make you not go through with it?”

She thought for a moment. “I guess realizing I was about to make the biggest mistake of my life, but clearly I didn’t have that premonition given I just got divorced.”

“Right.” I nodded and played with my food a little. Was that why Stacey decided not to go through with it? I hated not knowing even more than being left. Why couldn’t she have

just told me what happened? I would have settled for a text with more than an ‘I’m sorry’.

“I really can’t imagine what you’re going through. How long are you here for?”

“A week.”

“Us too. We have snorkeling, going to see Lands End, and pool days planned. You’re more than welcome to join us,” Sarah offered. “You know, maybe it will help to keep your mind off of things and just have fun.”

“Well, I have some things planned too. Maybe you’d like to join me then?”

“Such as?”

“Couple’s massage.” I wagged my eyebrows. “Private beach day, and horseback riding at sunset.”

She snickered. “All honeymoon stuff.”

Her giggle made me smile. “All honeymoon stuff. Everyone here assumes you’re Mrs. Montgomery. Might as well join me.”

“How can I say no to that?”

AFTER THE WAITER CLEARED OUR DISHES, HE RETURNED WITH a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries. We played up the fake honeymooners by feeding each other the dessert, both of us laughing at how ridiculous we were. If I hadn’t known Sarah from back in Texas, then I wouldn’t have been so open to spending more time with her and putting on the ruse. We hadn’t been super close *that summer*, but at least we weren’t total strangers, which made me more comfortable with her. If it had been some random chick at the pool who had approached me, I would be eating dinner alone and going back to my room to lick my wounds.

Instead, after we left the restaurant, it seemed neither of us were ready to say goodnight. We headed in the direction of the

beach and once we reached the sand, we both took off our shoes and walked toward the dark water. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore increased as we got closer.

“Want to get in?” I asked.

“Are you crazy? A shark might get us.”

“A shark won’t get us.”

“How can you know for sure?”

“I can’t, but we won’t go all the way in.”

“I don’t have my swimsuit.”

“I don’t either.” I tore off my T-shirt and threw it onto the sand. “But do you really need one?” I stepped out of my cargo shorts, leaving me in only my boxers.

“What are you doing?” Sarah laughed as my feet touched the cold water.

“Come on, chicken. Water is warm,” I lied.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Probably.” I chuckled. “But who’s going to stop us?”

She looked around, but no one was in sight because who the fuck goes swimming at night in the ocean? “I can’t believe I’m going to do this.”

I cracked a grin, backing up more in the chilly water. “You can do it.”

Sarah stripped off her tank top, her ample chest in her black bra highlighted by the moonlight. She had filled out in the last ten years, and I liked what I saw. She unbuttoned her shorts and stepped out of them and my mouth watered at the sight of her luscious ass.

“This is so crazy.”

“Let’s hope we don’t get arrested and sent to a Mexican prison. *That* would be crazy.”

“Oh, my god. Don’t say that.”

“I’m teasing. Just get in here.”

She walked to the water, and her toe got hit by a wave.
“You lied. The water is freezing.”

I moved toward her as I spoke. “It’s not that bad.”

“I’d rather be in a hot tub or a heated pool.”

“Then we can’t be half-dressed.” I picked Sarah up, making her shriek.

“What are you doing?” She tried to wiggle free as I waded deeper into the cold ocean.

“Gonna throw you in,” I teased.

“You better not.” She pushed at my shoulders, still trying to break out of my arms.

“Hey!” a man yelled from the sidewalk several yards away. I spun and saw a cop-looking dude with a flashlight.
“No swimming at night!”

“Oh, shit!” I gasped. “The policia.”

I jogged out of the water, put Sarah down near our clothes and once we both had our shit, I grabbed her hand and we took off, running away from the cop. When I turned to look over my shoulder, the guy hadn’t followed us.

“He’s not coming for us,” I said, and stopped running.

She looked behind us and then quit sprinting too. “Holy crap. You’re going to get me arrested.”

“I hope not, because I doubt they’ll let us work off community service hours at your aunt’s apple farm,” I teased.

“No, I don’t think they would.”

SARAH

“I HAD FUN TONIGHT. THANK YOU,” BLAKE SAID AS WE STOOD outside the door to my room.

“I did too, even though you almost got us arrested.”

“I doubt they would have carted us off to jail for swimming in the ocean. He was probably just a security guard.”

“Then why did we run?” I questioned.

“For the excitement?”

“Is that a question?” I chuckled.

Blake grinned and I had to look away from his lips that I wanted to kiss. Fuck, he was so hot. I seriously couldn't fathom why that Stacey chick left him at the altar. Granted, I once thought he was a bad boy, but the man I had dinner with tonight had matured since the last time I'd seen him. I suppose ten years does that to someone.

“Yeah, because you just said you had fun.” He grinned.

I closed my eyes briefly, shaking my head. “Sure, if you're into running from the cops.”

“All right, next time I'll just have them arrest us,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes. “There better not be a next time.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” he joked. “What are y’all’s plans?”

Y’all’s. I hadn’t heard that term since the last time I’d gone home to Texas for Christmas. “Lazy day at the pool. What about you?”

“The same, I think. I guess I need to see when I’ve booked all that shit for my honeymoon. Everything is on my phone, but I turned it off.”

I blinked. “You did?”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Didn’t want to field any calls. If Stacey decides she wants to talk, I don’t want to yet. I gave her a chance before I left.”

“Understandable.”

“Yeah, but I’ll go to the pool tomorrow and see if y’all are there.”

I smiled at his word again. “Still living in Texas, I take it?”

Blake cocked a brow. “Yeah, why?”

“Because you say ‘y’all’.”

“You aren’t in Texas anymore?”

I shook my head. “Las Vegas.”

“Ah, Sin City.”

Before anything else was said, the door to my room flew open. Amanda’s eyes widened. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Nothing to interrupt,” I said.

“Yeah, I should go get some beauty sleep.” Blake hooked his thumb toward where I assumed his room was located. “I’ll catch *y’all* at the pool tomorrow.”

“Goodnight.” I smiled and gave a little wave.

“Night.” He winked and walked away.

Amanda backed into the room as I entered.

“Thanks for that.” I narrowed my eyes.

“What?”

“I know you just wanted to butt in.”

“I was going to get some ice.”

“Where’s the ice bucket?” I challenged, looking at her empty hands. Peering around, I saw Amanda, Josie and Taylor sitting on the couch with the TV on. Three glasses of wine were lined up on the table in front of them. “Wait. What’s going on here?”

“What do you mean?” Taylor asked.

“You’re feeling better?” I inquired of Josie.

“I ... ah ...,” she hesitated.

Something was up with them, and I wasn’t sure what it was.

My three friends looked at each other and then Taylor said, “Josie wasn’t sick.”

I balked. “What?”

“We just wanted you to be alone with him,” Josie admitted.

“What? Why?”

Amanda wrapped an arm around me. “Because you just got divorced. We wanted you to have fun.”

“This was supposed to be a girls’ trip,” I countered.

“It still is, but we were hoping you would get laid.” Taylor wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“Did you?” Josie asked.

“You guys are ridiculous.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a yes or no.” Amanda smirked.

I groaned with a frustrated sigh. “It’s a no, and I’m going to shower.”

“He said he’ll meet us at the pool tomorrow. There’s still hope,” Amanda informed our friends.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed my pajamas from the top drawer of the dresser.

“Let’s come up with a plan while she’s in the shower,” Taylor said.

“He was supposed to get married two days ago. You really think he’s ready to sleep with someone?” I argued.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Josie grinned.

I shook my head, not saying anything further, and went into the bathroom. My friends were crazy. How could they assume a man who was supposed to marry someone else was going to want to have a crazy fling in Mexico? Because that’s what it would be. He lived in Texas and I was in Nevada. Despite my divorce, I’d made a home for myself there. I wasn’t going to move back to Texas.

But if Blake was looking to hook up, I wouldn’t turn him down.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE GIRLS AND I ORDERED ROOM SERVICE for breakfast and then headed to the same pool we’d gone to the day before. I tried to pretend I wasn’t searching for Blake, but I was. I hadn’t been able to get him out of my head since he had walked me to my room last night.

“Want to go into town later?” Taylor asked. “Maybe do a little shopping.”

“I could go for some shopping,” Josie agreed.

“Yeah, me t—” My words died off when I saw Blake enter the pool area wearing swim shorts and a blue tank top. He had on sunglasses and was seriously the hottest guy I’d ever seen.

Without a word, Amanda gathered her things and went to the other side of Taylor, leaving the lounge chair next to me open. I glared at her from behind my shades, knowing exactly what she was doing.

“Ladies,” Blake greeted. “Nice day for a swim.”

“Have a seat.” Josie motioned for him to sit next to me.

“I hope you’re feeling better?” he inquired.

“Much better. Thank you.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him they were big fat liars. But I didn’t want to have to explain why. He was nursing a heartbreak and the last thing he needed was to think my friends were trying to set us up.

Blake spread his towel on the chair and then gestured to the pool. “Have you been in?”

“Not yet,” I replied.

“It has to be warmer than the ocean last night.”

“For sure.”

“You two went into the ocean last night?” Amanda inquired.

“Technically, I didn’t,” I replied.

“I was trying to toss her in.” Blake grinned at me. Neither one of us mentioned we’d stripped down to our underwear. I hadn’t even been drunk and somehow Blake convinced me to almost go skinny dipping. How was that possible?

“Swimming in a pool is more my speed.” I stood and made my way to the blue water, not looking back to see if anyone followed. I climbed in and waded to the edge of the pool overlooking the ocean in the distance. A few moments later, the water sloshed around and I glanced next to me to see Blake had joined me.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, crossing his arms on the side of the pool to match me.

“I did, you?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure how I didn’t pass out at dinner. I didn’t sleep much the night before, so yeah, I crashed hard last night.”

“Good. Did you figure out all your honeymoon excursions?”

“I did. Horseback riding tomorrow evening, massages the next day and then the private beach day.”

“What is a private beach day?” I asked.

“A boating company is going to take us to a private beach where we will have lunch and hang out for a few hours.”

“We?” I grinned.

“You said last night you were game to go with me to all this shit. Change your mind?”

“Not at all. Just making sure you meant me.”

Blake turned and looked back at my friends. “I mean, I can ask each of your friends. Who should get the massage?”

I splashed water on him. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, but I can’t imagine doing them with anyone else.”

Except for your ex? I wanted to ask. Instead, I smiled and said, “Well, we’re going into town in a few hours, I think. You should come.”

“I don’t want to impose on your girls’ trip.”

“Trust me.” I looked at my friends as they chatted and soaked up the blazing sun. “They won’t mind.”

ONCE EVERYONE WAS READY, WE TOOK THE RESORT SHUTTLE into town. If someone had told me that the boy who helped my aunt on her apple farm would spend the day shopping with me ten years into the future, I would have laughed. I always thought he was cocky and only wanted to do what he wanted to do, but the man I was getting to know was showing me a different side. A side I was starting to really like.

At each store we went in, we tried on sombreros or played maracas like we knew what we were doing. The group laughed together, and I was having a fantastic time. Instead of going back to the resort, we ate at a taco place for a late lunch.

Once we ordered, Amanda quizzed Blake. “So, Blake. We hear you live in Texas. Did you grow up in San Antonio too?”

He glanced at me and furrowed his brow. “No. I’m from Houston, and that’s what? Four hours from San Antonio?”

“About three and a half,” I corrected.

“Ah,” Amanda continued her questioning. “And what do you do in Houston for work?”

Blake dunked a chip into the salsa we had on the table. “I own two nightclubs with my brother. One is in Houston and one is in San Francisco.”

Oh wow. I had no idea Blake was a businessman. I hadn’t thought about what he did for a living since the night before had been about our recent relationship failures.

“Really?” Josie cut in. “That’s awesome. Maybe if I’m ever in San Francisco, I can check it out.”

“Yeah, it’s actually a unique concept,” Blake stated. “The clubs are connected to the twenty-four-hour gyms my brother owns. We joke that people can spend all day and night at a Club 24 and not have to go home because each one has food, showers, and pretty much everything a person needs. Hell, some probably don’t go home.”

“Are there beds there?” Taylor wondered.

He shook his head and said around a mouthful of chip, “Nah, but he has everything else.”

Our waitress brought our lunch and my mouth watered as I stared down at the crispy shrimp and avocado tacos. I didn’t consider myself a taco connoisseur, but I knew a good taco when I found one. The best ones stood out usually because of the salsa, and as I took my first bite, the salsa verde popped in my mouth and instantly I wanted five more tacos. The salsa was citrusy and spicy and addicting.

“So, Blake. How’d you decide to have a nightclub attached to a gym?” Josie asked.

He grinned and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “I was a bartender for many years and always wanted to open my own

bar or club. When I lived in San Francisco with my brother, the idea came to me and we ran with it. It was so successful, we did the same in Houston.”

“Is that why you’re in Houston now?” I inquired. My aunt never spoke of Blake after that summer even though she was best friends with Blake’s mom. It wasn’t as though I’d asked either.

He looked away from my gaze. “Yeah. Houston is where we grew up, but also where my ex lived when we got together. Thought it was meant to be.”

The table fell quiet as a somber wave washed over us. Even though Blake was putting on a smile, I had to imagine his heart was breaking. If it had been me, I would probably have been at home with gallons of ice cream and jugs of vodka while I stayed in my pajamas and didn’t shower for three days. Not in Mexico and trying to have fun.

I swallowed my bite. “Well, I can tell you that when things don’t go as planned, it sucks. Now I need to look into opening a practice alone since Trey and I got divorced.”

“You’ll do it.” Taylor wrapped her arm around my shoulders and gave me a side hug.

“Maybe Blake can open a gym slash nightclub slash veterinary practice in Vegas,” Amanda teased.

“Yeah, I’ll put a dentist’s office there too. Maybe even a grocery store,” Blake replied.

“Can’t forget a movie theater too,” Josie joked, and we all laughed.

“In all seriousness, I had thought I needed to open my nightclub on my own,” Blake admitted. “But having my brother as a partner helped a lot. Maybe you can find someone else to start a practice with.”

While I knew that was an option, the more I thought about starting my own vet clinic, the more I realized I didn’t need to be a business owner. Trey and I had wanted to open one so we could work together and have something with our name on it, but really, I made decent money working for Bradford Animal

Hospital. Did I really need the headache of having my own business? I knew a lot of responsibilities came with being in charge. I'd have to hire and fire people. Being in charge would come with a lot of responsibilities, such as hiring and firing, accounting and compliance, supplies and maintenance—all of which would take me away from my true passion: taking care of animals. So, I simply gave Blake a warm smile and replied, "Yeah, maybe. I'll see what the future holds."

"I like that," Taylor stated. "And that goes for you too, Blake. Maybe Houston was where you needed to open a club at the time, but it could be time you look for a new location."

Blake nodded. "Not a bad idea."

AFTER LUNCH, WE VISITED A FEW MORE SHOPS BEFORE THE shuttle picked us up and took us back to the resort. I ended up buying a Cabo San Lucas tank top and baseball hat as mementos of the trip.

"I need a nap." Taylor yawned as we stepped off the small bus.

"I could go for one too," Amanda admitted. "Your snoring kept me up all night."

"I don't snore." Taylor scoffed.

"You do," Amanda pressed.

I smiled and shook my head as I followed behind my friends. Guess I was lucky to have Josie as a roommate because she didn't snore. Blake fell into step with me and I said to him, "Thanks for coming with us. It was fun."

"Shopping is never fun, but I enjoyed it."

"Good, I'm glad." I grinned.

"Blake! Oh my god, you have to do this," Josie exclaimed.

"Do what?" he asked.

She tugged on his arm and led him into the lobby. She pointed at a sign that read:

**DOS LOBOS 2ND ANNUAL COCKTAIL
COMPETITION**

1st Place: A trip for two to the Dos Lobos distillery - includes customization of 6 bottles of Mezcal of your creation

2nd Place: A bottle of Dos Lobos Mezcal Joven, a bottle of Dos Lobos Mezcal Reposado, and a bottle of Dos Lobos Mezcal Anejo

3rd Place: A bottle of Dos Lobos Mezcal of your choosing

I didn't finish reading the sign before she hauled Blake to a nearby table. "He'd like to sign up."

Blake glanced at me and I shrugged. My friends were apparently on some sort of mission and, no matter what I said or did, they were going to continue. I wasn't going to step in. Blake was a big boy and if he didn't want to participate in the contest, then he would tell her. But he didn't say no. Instead, he signed up to compete in the competition, which started in an hour at the lobby bar.

"What do you have to do?" I asked as he and Josie walked back toward me, Amanda, and Taylor.

"Come up with a drink featuring one of their Mezcals."

"That shouldn't be a problem, right?" Amanda inquired.

"Nope." He winked in my direction. "Already have a drink in mind."

BLAKE

IN ALL MY YEARS AS A BARTENDER, I'D NEVER ENTERED A cocktail contest. My time behind the bar, I'd made a lot of common drinks like Cosmopolitans, rum & Cokes, and Long Island Iced Teas. Still, every so often someone would say, "Surprise me" or "I don't know. Make me something delicious." When that happened, I'd come up with some shit they'd never heard of before, like a Crazy Banana, made of 99 Bananas schnapps, coconut rum, and pineapple juice. Or I would make them a Flaming Dr. Pepper. Customers got a kick out of watching me fill a shot glass with amaretto and float a layer of overproof rum on top before lighting it on fire and carefully dropping it into a pint glass filled halfway with beer.

But this wasn't like any time I was behind the bar. This was an opportunity to impress a woman. I wasn't sure why I wanted to, either. After we left Mexico, we wouldn't run into each other and start dating. No, Sarah would go home to Vegas, while I went home to Houston.

Yet, I wanted to make Sarah smile. Make her laugh, make her squeal, and more than anything, make her moan.

I wasn't about to revert to my old ways, where I slept with any woman I wanted. It was too soon. And yet, the more time I spent with Sarah, the more I wanted to have a brief fling with her. A fling was all it could be because of the miles between us.

Tequila wasn't my go-to liquor, but since arriving in Mexico, I had drunk more tequila than I had in my twenty-eight years prior, so at least I kind of knew what would taste cool with the Dos Lobos Mezcal, and I had an idea in mind if the organizers had all the ingredients I needed.

"You can use any ingredient here, but the only rule is the cocktails must use Dos Lobos Mezcal," some guy who seemed like the coordinator stated as he led the nine entrants over to the lobby bar.

Scanning the selection of items, I spotted everything I needed. One by one, the contestants made their cocktails and then took their drinks to the judges' table. I was too far away to see what they were making as I stood off to the side with Sarah and her friends while I waited my turn.

"What are you going to make?" Sarah whispered.

"It's a secret."

"Why?" Her brow furrowed.

"You'll see."

When it was my turn, I walked behind the bar and grabbed the Dos Lobos Reposado, a lemon, a bottle of agave, a stick of cinnamon, and apple juice. I was elated I could make something that highlighted the connection between me and Sarah, and it seemed the event stocked items you wouldn't normally see behind a bar.

After filling a cocktail shaker with ice, I then added all the ingredients except the cinnamon and shook it for several seconds. I grabbed a straw, dipped it into the mixture, and gave it a taste. The drink needed something more, and I wasn't sure what would make it better. Scanning the selection of items again, I spotted a bottle of walnut bitters amongst the various other bitters available, and I knew it would give the apple and Mezcal cocktail a nutty and woody flavor. I put a few dashes of the hundred-proof liquor into the shaker and shook the concoction again before grabbing three rocks glasses and adding a scoop of ice to each one. I strained the mixture over the ice and grated the fresh cinnamon on top.

Since most alcoholic beverages had a garnish, I cut three round slices of an apple and cut a slit in each before hooking them to the rims of the glasses. Then I took the drinks over to be judged.

“And your name for the cocktail?” one of the female judges inquired.

Glancing over my shoulder to where Sarah was standing, a name came to me and I rattled it off, the judge jotting it down. They each took sips and made some indication on cards and then moved on to the next person.

When I returned to the group to wait, Sarah looked up at me and asked, “Now, will you tell me what you made?”

Draping my arm across her shoulders, I replied, “The Reacquainted Apple.”

Even though my time at the apple farm had been mostly spent with Sarah’s aunt, it was how and where Sarah and I had met.

“Aw, I love it.” She beamed. “You’re going to have to make it for me.”

“Even if it doesn’t win?”

“Of course. I want to try it.”

“I can do that.” I smiled.

“I want to try it too,” Amanda stated.

“Me too,” Josie and Taylor said in unison.

“Then maybe I’ll get the hotel to send up the stuff I need and we can have a party in y’all’s room,” I suggested. It was an all-inclusive resort and we could order room service, so I could order all the ingredients, right?

We watched the last of the contestants prepare their drinks. After everyone finished, the three judges tallied their scoring cards.

“Are you nervous?” Taylor asked.

“Nah.” I shook my head. It would be one thing if I’d spent months perfecting the cocktail, but I’d had less than an hour to come up with something. Of course, I wanted to win, though. No matter what, I’d make sure Club 24 After Dark added it to the bar menu.

Once the judges decided on a winner, the other contestants and I stepped forward and waited for their announcement.

“In third place, Pamela V. with her Cabo Head margarita.” Everyone clapped as she made her way to stand next to the judges. “And in second place, Kitt J. with his Howling at the Moon martini.” He joined Pamela near the judges’ table. “And our 2nd Annual Dos Lobos Cocktail Competition winner is”—the judge paused as the anticipation built—“Blake M. with his creation, The Reacquainted Apple.”

Sarah and her friends cheered and everyone in the vicinity clapped as I joined the other winners. I was trying to take my victory in stride, but as I turned to peek at Sarah, she was smiling ear to ear. Her reaction made my insides warm and fuzzy, which wasn’t a feeling I was used to having except with one other woman.

After the other two contestants received their bottles of Mezcal, I stepped up to the judge’s table.

“Blake, your cocktail was what we assumed running through an apple orchard on a crisp autumn day would be like. It’s not common for us to have that kind of weather here in Cabo, nor know what an apple orchard is like, but it really felt like that to all of us. Perfect for the coming months,” the main female judge said.

“Thank you. I worked on an apple farm for a summer about ten years ago. Learned a lot about the fruit. And nothing beats apples and cinnamon.”

“You must tell us the recipe,” another judge stated.

I glanced at Sarah and each of her friends before turning back to the judges. “Only on one condition.”

“Okay,” the main female judge said. “What is that?”

“I’ll tell you all of the ingredients and measurements if you get me all of the ingredients so I can make it for my friends.” I pointed to my group.

The lady smiled. “I think that can be arranged.”

WE CARRIED THE REACQUAINTED APPLE INGREDIENTS TO Sarah’s room and then I made one for each of the ladies and myself. “So?” I asked after each one had a taste, but I only cared about Sarah’s thoughts.

After her friends said they enjoyed it, Sarah added her opinion. “It’s ...” She paused and took another sip. “It reminds me of Christmas on my aunt’s apple farm.”

I grinned, thinking of how Deb probably decorated the entire house and made it super festive, but then I realized Sarah wasn’t smiling and it looked as though she was on the verge of tears. “Is that bad?”

“No.” She shook her head and turned away from my stare. “Not at all. Just made me nostalgic is all.”

“That’s what I was going for,” I admitted. “Something that reminds me of when we first met.” I wrapped an arm across her shoulders and brought her to my side.

“I love it.”

“Really? Because—”

“Look what I found.” I turned my head to see Amanda holding up a deck of cards. “How about we order room service and play some poker?”

“Now you’re speaking my language.” I grabbed the cards from her. “Y’all know how to play Texas hold’em?”

“Of course, we do,” Sarah sassed.

When I’d decided to come to Mexico alone, I had been determined to make it a bachelor’s trip. At that moment, I realized my bachelor’s trip was turning into a girls’ trip. I was

okay with that because the women were awesome and it meant I got to spend more time with Sarah and get to know her.

After a couple hands of poker while we waited for our dinner to arrive, it became clear that Sarah sucked at bluffing. Every time she tried, her cheeks would turn pink and she would stare down at her cards as though not making eye contact would allow her to trick us. Well, maybe she had fooled the others, but I was a seasoned Texas hold'em player and I could see right through her.

“All in,” she stated and pushed her coins to the center of the dining room table. Because we didn't have any poker chips, we were using all the change we had scrounged up, including pesos we had acquired when we'd gone shopping in town.

I glanced at the pot, counting to see that she had gone all in with \$2.54. I counted my money and had \$3.72 and a few 2 peso coins. The flop had given us a king of spades, a four of diamonds, and a seven of clubs. In my hand, I had a king of clubs and a two of hearts. Normally, I would have folded my cards before the flop, but we were playing for pennies. Literally.

“I'm not calling.” Amanda tossed her cards down.

“Me either.” Taylor followed suit and folded.

“I only have a dollar left. I'm not going to chance it,” Josie said.

The women looked at me and I stared at Sarah. “Are you sure you want to go all in?”

“Yeah, why?” She averted her gaze, looking down at the cards in her hand.

“Because if you lose, you're out.”

“I'm not going to lose.” She stuck out her tongue.

I grinned and pushed my coins in. “All right. I call.”

We both turned our cards over. She had a pair of sevens in her hand which gave her a three-of-a-kind.

“Wow, I thought you were bluffing,” I teased.

She wrinkled her brow. “What? No.”

I grunted a laugh. “All right.” Since I was the dealer, I turned over the turn card. It was an ace of spades which did nothing for either of us. I needed a king, which I got when I flipped over the river card.

Sarah’s mouth fell open. “Wow. Seriously?”

I lifted a shoulder and bit my lower lip. “Sorry, sweet thing. That’s how the cards fall.”

“I’m going to go watch the sunset. Hopefully the food gets here soon.” She stood and made her way out to the balcony, closing the sliding glass door behind her.

“Is she okay?” I asked her friends. After I’d made the cocktail, it seemed as though Sarah had a lot on her mind.

They each looked toward the door and Josie said, “It’s not for us to say.”

I blinked, not expecting something to be wrong. We’d been having a great time. Or so I’d thought. “Is it about her ex?”

Josie shook her head.

I watched Sarah as she leaned on the railing, the sun setting in the distance. Before I knew it, I was pushing all of my coins to the center of the table before the next hand was dealt. “All in.” Not waiting to see if I’d won or if any of them called me, I stood and made my way outside. Without a word, I slid the door closed behind me and then leaned on the railing next to her.

“Sunset is my favorite color,” she whispered.

“Really?”

“I know a lot of people say blue or green or purple, but I’d always thought the mix of orange, red, and yellow was beautiful. Sometimes there’s even pinks or purples. By saying sunset is my favorite color, I’m not limited to just one.”

“Wow, I’ve never thought of it that way,” I admitted.

“And here”—she gestured at the water—“you can stare out at the ocean and watch the sun set into the horizon and it’s truly magical. You can just watch the sun until you can’t see it anymore. I love it.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, watching the sunset reflect in her green eyes. “It truly is magical.”

We gazed out at the ocean, both of us watching the sun as it went down. It looked as though it was going into the water when really it was moving to the other side of the world.

“She’s sick,” Sarah stated but didn’t elaborate.

“Who?” I asked.

“Aunt Deb.”

“Like, the flu sick?”

“No.” She shook her head. “She was diagnosed about a year ago with Parkinson’s.”

My breath caught. How had my mother not told me? They were best friends and spoke often. Or maybe, my mom didn’t know. Was that a possibility? I tried to rack my brain for anything I knew about the disease but it wasn’t much. “But people don’t die from it, right?”

“No,” she whispered. “But as the disease progresses, she’ll more than likely have difficulty walking and talking.”

“Fuck,” I groaned. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah. It’s just when I tasted your drink, it reminded me of her orchard and Christmas, as I said, but then I wondered how many more Christmases will she have?”

“That could be said for all of us. Tomorrow isn’t a promise, you know.”

“I know.” She sighed.

We continued to stare at the ocean until we could no longer see the sun, and all I wanted to do was wrap Sarah in my arms and not let go.

SARAH

I HADN'T MEANT TO TELL BLAKE ABOUT AUNT DEB. WHEN she was diagnosed with Parkinson's about a year ago, she had asked my dad not to tell anyone. A part of me thought Blake knew since his mom and my aunt were close friends, but his reaction made it clear he didn't know. Maybe his mom didn't know either. It was possible my aunt hadn't told anyone except my dad. She didn't want anyone else to know because she worried people would look or treat her like she was sick. She still managed her apple farm, and if a person didn't know she had the disease, it was easy to miss the slight tremors in her fingers.

After the sun set, Blake and I returned to the poker game, and he became the dealer. The food arrived shortly after. Once Taylor cleaned everyone out, we called it a night and Blake went back to his room. I showered, got in my jammies, and then headed to bed.

The next day, the girls and I went snorkeling, and later met up with Blake for happy hour at the pool, followed by dinner. The day after, he joined us for a trip out to Lands End and once we were back, we had our *couple's* massage. He was a total gentleman when I undressed. He got naked while I wasn't looking and slipped under the sheet on the table, keeping his head on the headrest while I stripped and climbed onto the table next to him. After our massage, we hung out at the pool

with my friends. It was seriously the best vacation I'd ever had, in no small part due to unexpectedly having Blake around.

The morning of the distillery tour, Blake and I toured the entire property before going to a room to infuse six bottles of Mezcal, which would be shipped to Blake.

"Have you decided on a flavor for your Mezcal?" Luis, our tour guide, asked as we slid on disposable plastic gloves.

Blake and I looked at each other, and he grinned. "We have to do apple."

I smiled back and repeated, "Yeah, we have to do apple."

"We thought you might say that, based on your winning cocktail, so we brought in some beautiful manzanas especial for you. Do you want cinnamon too?"

Blake shook his head. "Nah. Just apples, so we can make more than only apple and cinnamon cocktails with it."

"Sounds good to me." I beamed.

Luis handed us a bag of apples and gestured to the table where various items had been set up for us to use. "Go ahead and grate all of these apples. The peel is fine too. You will need at least twelve cups."

"Twelve cups?" Blake balked.

"Si. You need two or more cups per bottle," Luis informed us. "Más o menos, it doesn't need to be exact."

"Wow," I breathed. "We'll be here all day."

"It will go quick. But please take your time, you are guests here even though we put you to work." He chuckled. "You will use it to infuse the reposado, yes?"

"Yes," Blake replied.

"Perfecto. I'll be back with the six bottles."

Luis left, and Blake and I started to grate the bag of apples.

"I want them to ship the bottles to you," Blake stated.

"Me?" I asked. "Why me?"

“Well, I don’t know where I’ll live once I fly back home, since Stacey and I shared an apartment. And I’d rather you have it than me ship it to my folks or something.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you moving out of the apartment?” I asked as we continued to run the apples along the metal utensils.

“Our lease isn’t up for another three months. She doesn’t have family in the area, so I’ll just stay at my parents’ until I find something else.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask where her family lived, but did I care to know more about the woman who had broken his heart? “Then you should have the tequila shipped to your parents’ place if you’ll live there.”

“I don’t want to take any chances that I won’t still be there when it arrives, but if you don’t want it—”

“No, I do. Thank you. Maybe once it comes in, you can take a trip out to Las Vegas?”

“I’m always down for Vegas.”

To my surprise, each apple provided almost a cup of grated fruit and before long, we had our twelve cups. Luis returned with a box of the bottles of Mezcal and put it on the table next to us.

“Now, I will pour the Mezcal into this.” Luis opened the lid to a bucket. “Then you will add the grated apples and give it a little shake. I will store it for four days before straining the mixture into each bottle and shipping them to you.”

“We don’t get to taste it?” Blake inquired.

“Si, you can taste before I seal the bucket, but the flavor will only get better.”

“That works for me,” Blake replied.

After Luis poured the Mezcal into the bucket, Blake and I dumped our apple pieces and juice into the Mezcal. Once we

were done, Luis used a ladle to pour us each a shot of the concoction.

Blake held up his glass and said, “Fuck our exes.”

I snorted a laugh at his jab and clinked my glass with his. “Fuck our exes.”

“DO YOU THINK YOU TWO WILL KISS TONIGHT?” AMANDA asked as we laid by the pool and soaked up the sun after breakfast.

I turned my head toward her. “What?”

“You’re going to be riding horses at sunset. That’s like romantic and shit,” she clarified.

“A couple’s massage is supposed to be romantic too, and we didn’t kiss then,” I reminded her because they had asked about it as soon as I’d returned to the room.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t sneak a peek at his naked body,” Amanda scoffed. “I would have.”

I snorted. “I was being respectful.”

“You know damn well he knew you two would be naked together in that room,” Taylor joined in.

“And he didn’t make a move,” I stated. “He’s still heartbroken about Stacey. Geez, it hasn’t even been a week.”

“He doesn’t seem still to be hung up on her,” Amanda said.

“He’s a guy. Guys don’t show emotions.” That wasn’t entirely true. The first night we went to dinner, I could sense the heartbreak as he asked me why Stacey would leave him at the altar. It was obviously eating at him, but he’d also come on his honeymoon alone to forget about his ex—at least for a week. Given that he’d already decided to move in with his parents when he returned to Houston, I figured he was thinking about it more than he was letting on. And I was okay with that.

“I still think you two need to bang before you part ways.”
Josie took a sip of her water.

“They still have horseback riding and the private beach day,” Taylor reminded my friends. “No telling what will happen when they have an entire beach to themselves.”

I shook my head and laughed. “You three act like I’m going to be running around buck ass naked just because it’s a secluded beach. Have you forgotten there will be a boating company there? We won’t be alone.”

“Tell them to fuck off,” Amanda exclaimed.

“Look.” I sat up and faced the three lounge chairs beside me. “As I’ve said before, after being quizzed about what he and I did without you guys, if he makes a move, I’m not going to turn him away. But he’s the one who was engaged five days ago.”

Nothing else was said as the man in question walked into the pool area.

“HAVE YOU RIDDEN A HORSE BEFORE?” BLAKE ASKED AS WE rode in the shuttle bus to the horseback tour. They had picked us up at the resort and made stops at other hotels for people who were joining us.

I looked over at him and challenged, “Have you?”

He grinned. “I have not, but I grew up in the city.”

“I know my aunt owns a farm, but I didn’t grow up waking up with roosters as my alarm clock.”

He grunted a laugh. “I know. I was just wondering since Deb didn’t have horses on her farm when I was there.”

I thought for a moment. “She doesn’t have horses, but I think I rode one once when I was like four.”

“Then this should be interesting.”

“Great.” I hadn’t been nervous about our outing until Blake pointed out that neither of us had really ridden before. Surely the tour company had people all the time who weren’t expert riders, right?

“You know, this trip has been full of a lot of firsts for me.”

“Really?”

Blake nodded. “First vacation alone. First time in Mexico. First time winning a cocktail contest. First time having a couple’s massage, and now, first time riding a horse.”

“Wow,” I breathed. “That’s awesome. I think everyone should strive to do something new because life would be boring if you did the same stuff over and over.”

“That’s true. I’m really glad I came on this trip.”

“I’m happy too.” I beamed.

The small bus pulled up to a dirt parking lot with the beach in the distance. Once we got out, we made our way over to several horses lined up waiting for us. The tour guide gave us instructions and then helped us onto the horses. Even though I hadn’t ridden one in over two decades, I was still able to get onto mine without trouble. Blake even looked like a pro as he swung his leg over the back of his brown horse and got settled onto the saddle.

Once everyone was on their horses, the tour started and we were led up a dirt path away from the water. The sun was just going down, but it was nowhere near sunset, so I figured the tour wasn’t only going up and down the sandy beach. We rode up a hill, and once on top, we were treated to a breathtaking view of the water.

“This makes me want to live near the ocean.” I took pictures with my phone to capture the moment.

“This is much warmer than San Francisco,” Blake said.

“How was it living in California?”

“It was great when I wasn’t getting yelled at by my brother.”

I blinked. “Why did he yell at you?”

He waved me off. “I was young and dumb not that long ago.”

“You’re still young,” I snorted. “I’m the one who will be thirty in a few months.”

“That’s right. You’re a year older than me,” he reminded me.

“So, we’re both old then if you were ‘young and dumb not that long ago’.”

“All right. We’re still young, but I’d like to think I’ve gotten my shit together now.”

“I’d say so considering you co-own nightclubs.”

“Yeah, but it was one of his chastisements that made me change my life around.”

The tour continued, and we followed the pack.

“Why’s that?”

“He fired me. I needed to shape up, or I wasn’t going to live out my dream.”

“What did you do to get fired?”

He looked up at the sky. “It’s a nice day, isn’t it?”

“Are you avoiding the question?” I pressed.

“What? Me?” He grinned.

“So, I’m guessing you did something terrible?”

“Not terrible.”

“But bad enough to get you fired.”

“Yeah.” He blew out a breath.

“Just tell me. It’s not like you did something illegal and went to jail, right?”

“No.” He grunted a laugh and rode closer to me. “I fucked a member on my brother’s desk.”

Tilting my head back, I roared with laughter. “Of course you did.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. I can just picture it, is all.”

“And why’s that?”

“I don’t know.” I lifted a shoulder. “You just have this swagger about you.”

“Swagger?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised you haven’t met someone here in Mexico you wanted to hook up with.”

“Who says I haven’t?” he challenged.

“Have you?” Blake had been spending all of his time with me or me and my friends. Was he going to the bar after leaving us and taking chicks back to his room?

“There’s someone I’ve had my eye on.”

“Señores y señoritas, we’re going down to the water now. Feel free to stop and take pictures and then catch up to us. We’ll go slow,” the tour guide said.

I glanced over at Blake and he winked.

Wait. Did he mean me?

BLAKE

WHEN I'D BOOKED THE PRIVATE BEACH EXCURSION, I HAD expected to be alone with Stacey on the shore while the tour guide stayed on the boat. Of course, there was no Stacey, but Sarah did join me. That wasn't the only thing I didn't account for. The so-called private beach wasn't exclusive. It was isolated in the sense that the tour company had a deal with a hotel and we could spend our time at their beach, which was secluded, but certainly not *private*. It wasn't a busy beach, but appeared to be a sequestered stretch of shoreline for the exclusive use of the hotel we'd pulled up to.

"Your cabana for the afternoon is this way," the tour guide said. We anchored on the shore and waded through the water after jumping off the boat and followed him across the sand to an open cabana.

"We don't need to be guests of the hotel?" I questioned. This wasn't what I'd had in mind at all.

"No señor. Is this cabana okay?"

"Yeah, sure," I replied. What else were we going to do? I'd pre-paid for the trip and everything.

"They will bring you lunch shortly."

"Great, thanks."

"I'll return when it's time to leave."

“Sure, thing.”

The guy left, and Sarah and I placed our towels on the lounge chairs inside the open cabana. A bucket with snorkeling gear sat on the table between the two chairs.

“Show me how to snorkel?” I asked and gestured to the gear. I hadn’t gone with the ladies when they went on their snorkeling adventure. Instead, I had visited the resort’s business center and jumped on my email to check the time for all the activities I had booked. I could have easily booted up my cell, but I didn’t want to see how many texts or voicemails were waiting for me. I wasn’t prepared to see or not see Stacey’s name pop up either, so it was best I logged into my email on a computer and not have to worry about it.

“I mean, it’s pretty easy,” Sarah teased.

“Another first for me.” I grinned.

“We need to make a list and work on them all for you.”

“I like the sound of that.” I especially liked the sound of spending more time with her. When she suggested we meet up in Vegas when the Mezcal arrived at her place, I was all for it. Luis had mentioned it would be about four days before the infusion was done, and then they would ship it to us. Well, to her. I wasn’t sure how long it would take to ship, but I didn’t want to go days without seeing Sarah after the last six days we shared.

“All right, let’s go.” Sarah slipped off the sundress covering her bikini, and then grabbed the gear and handed me a face mask and snorkel. “I’m assuming you know how to put these on?”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “Of course, I do.”

“I wasn’t sure since we’re about to pop your snorkeling cherry.”

God, this chick. She had a way of busting my balls but also making me get all tingly at the same time. “Let’s not talk about popping cherries unless you want to help me with another first while we’re still in Mexico.”

“What’s that?”

“International sex.”

“I ... uh ...”

“I’m joking,” I lied. I wanted to taste her so badly, but I was trying to behave myself. But how much longer could I take it? Each day was getting harder and harder, and I was torn because I didn’t want to treat Sarah as a rebound. She was much more than some vacation hookup, but would she know that if I let myself give in to the temptation of having her? Did she want a vacation fling? Hell, maybe she did. It was our last day in Mexico. Maybe just for the night we could both forget about our recent relationships and have fun.

“Anyway.” She smiled. “Let’s get in the water.”

I followed her out to the lukewarm water and put on my mask and snorkel.

“So, it’s not rocket science. All you gotta do is open your eyes and swim facedown.”

“Okay, smart ass.”

“What?” She snickered. “You wanted me to show you.”

“Just shut up and start snorkeling before I dunk you.”

She stuck out her tongue, and I wanted to capture her cheeks between my palms and kiss the ever-loving hell out of her. Instead, I did as she’d instructed and swam facedown.

AFTER WE SWAM FOR A BIT, WE WENT BACK TO THE LOUNGE chairs and waited for our lunch.

“I’m not ready to go home tomorrow,” Sarah bemoaned.

“Me either.”

“Think we could move down here and start new lives?”

“That ain’t a bad idea.”

“But then we wouldn’t have free food and everything like we have back at the resort.”

“True, and I don’t know a lick of Spanish,” I admitted.

“You haven’t seemed to have any trouble.”

I lifted a shoulder. “Just the basic words.”

“I think you’d catch on, eventually.”

“Maybe. I’ll run it by my brother and see if he wants to go international with his gyms,” I joked. Visiting paradise was one thing. Once a place became home, I doubted it held the same appeal, the same level of escape. If I worked down here, it would just be a job in another location.

“I’m sure it would be more difficult to open a business in another country.”

“Probably,” I agreed.

A hotel staff member wearing a white polo approached, carrying a tray. “Your lunch.”

“Gracias.” I took the plates from him and then two bottles of mandarin-flavored Jarritos.

“See, you know some Spanish.”

“The basics,” I reminded her.

After handing her one, we opened the foil-wrapped chicken burrito, and both took a bite.

“Guess this is a beach picnic,” I teased.

“Too bad we aren’t part of that wedding.” Sarah hooked her thumb and pointed behind us.

I turned to see staffers setting up chairs on a lawn overlooking the water. “You think that’s a wedding?”

“Totally.” She scooped some of the corn salsa onto her burrito and took another bite.

“We could crash it,” I said.

She stopped mid-chew and then swallowed before questioning, “Seriously?”

I took a bite of my burrito. “Would it be a first for you?”

Her brow furrowed. “Um, yeah. You?”

I grinned. “Yep. This can be a first we pop together.”

“You seriously want to crash a wedding?”

“It will be fun. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Having to run from security again?” She chuckled.

“See, not that big of a deal.”

“We can’t,” she expressed.

“Are you chicken?” I challenged.

“No, but those people don’t know us.”

“Hence the crashing part.” I took another bite of my burrito.

Sarah stuck a tortilla chip into her mouth. As she chewed, she stared at me as though she were mulling over my proposal. “We don’t even have appropriate clothes.”

I looked behind me and then back at her. “It’s a beach wedding. Put your dress back on and we’re good.”

“It’s not a dress. It’s a cover-up.”

“Same thing.”

“You are seriously crazy. You know that, Blake Montgomery?”

“Just trying to make our lives less boring. You’re the one who said it’s important to do something new to keep some spark alive or something.”

“I didn’t mean to crash a wedding.” She snickered.

“All right. We don’t have to do it.”

She took another bite and then said, “Nah. Now we gotta do it.”

JUST AS WE WERE GATHERING OUR STUFF TO HEAD INSIDE THE hotel to freshen up, the guy from the tour company reappeared.

“Señor, are you ready to depart?”

“We ... ah. We’re gonna stay,” I replied.

The man blinked. “Stay? I don’t understand.”

“We’ll find a ride back to our resort. Thank you for everything.”

“You cannot stay. I must take you back.”

Sarah’s green eyes widened, and she shrugged.

Once I got an idea into my head, I went full speed ahead. I’d talked Sarah into crashing the wedding and now this dude was going to fuck it up. It was our last day together before we went our separate ways. I wanted to make the most of it because I didn’t know when or if I’d ever see her again. Sure, we’d talked about me going to Vegas once she received the bottles of Mezcal, but what if she was dating someone by then? Or what if I was busy with work and couldn’t find the time? There were so many what-ifs and I didn’t want some tour company to tell me what I could or couldn’t do.

“It’s cool, man. Your job here is done.”

He started speaking in Spanish and I had no idea what he was saying. Finally, he said, “You wait here. Un momento.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

He walked off to the side and got on his phone.

“It’s okay. We can just go back,” Sarah said.

“No.” I shook my head. “He shouldn’t be able to tell us we have to leave.”

“I’m sure it’s some liability issue.”

The man returned. “It’s okay. I need you to sign a paper, then I can leave you here.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

“Si. Right this way.”

“Sure.”

We followed him to a set of stone stairs and up a walkway to the hotel, passing the site for the wedding we were about to attend. Guests had started to arrive and even though we didn't know those people, I wanted to hurry so we could blend in. Like I had told Sarah, I'd never crashed a wedding before. I assumed most people hadn't, and the thought of going to something and pretending we fit in made my heart race.

Once inside the hotel, we headed over to the front desk. The tour guide spoke in Spanish again, and then the front desk clerk handed him a notepad and pen. He scribbled something on it and then handed it to me.

“Please sign.”

Every word was in Spanish and I had no idea what I was signing. “What does it say?”

“Let me see.” Sarah held out her hand.

I handed it to her. “You can read Spanish?”

“Some.” She looked over the paper. “It has the hotel's name on it, and it appears to say he left us at this hotel, per our request.”

“All right.” I grabbed the notepad back from her and scribbled my name. Did it matter what it said? He was the one who needed me to sign that I was staying at the hotel and not returning in his boat. I gave the man the paper and pen.

“Gracias, señor. Adios.”

“Adios,” I replied, slipping him some cash. I turned to Sarah. “All right. Let's get ready for a wedding.”

GIVEN THAT I HAD NOTHING EXCEPT THE T-SHIRT AND BOARD shorts I was wearing, I made my way to the lobby gift shop, purchased a white Guayabera button-down, then freshen up in the lobby restroom. I used water and my fingers to comb through my saltwater hair, and then I was done.

Waiting for Sarah to finish, I sat in a chair just outside the restrooms, my mind going back to almost a week ago when I was the one about to get married. Now, I was going to watch two strangers make lifelong promises to each other and pretend to be happy for them. Would I ever be happy enough to want to get married again? I had never thought marriage was in the cards for me, but Stacey had somehow worked her way in over the years. We hadn't been looking for a relationship, but once she came back into my life when I opened my first club, I had been reluctant to let her go.

Then she let me go.

What would happen when I arrived back at our apartment tomorrow night? The entire time I had been in Mexico, I'd tried not to think about what I would face after the trip, but now that it was ending in less than twenty-four hours, reality was getting harder to ignore. I still loved Stacey, but if she asked if I wanted to work on our relationship, would I want to get back together with her after she left me embarrassed and heartbroken? Did she regret her actions? It was one thing to break up with someone on a random day, but to leave someone at your wedding was unforgivable, right? And then there was Sarah. She had been a bright light in my darkness and we were about to go our separate ways. Would anything come of our time together? Would I find someone else back in Houston? Would I go to San Francisco? Somewhere else? Start over and find someone I had no history with? Or would I slip back into my old ways and not settle down with anyone ever again? Too many questions ran through my head as I watched the wedding guests in the distance take their seats.

Finally, Sarah emerged from the restroom, her long blonde hair in some sort of messy yet elegant bun on top of her head. Her flawless tanned skin seemed to glow, and another thought entered my head: I had to know what her kiss tasted like before we parted ways.

"Ready?" I asked and held out my elbow for her to take.

"I still can't believe we're doing this." She slipped her arm through mine and we walked toward the back doors.

“The worst thing that can happen is they kick us out and we go back to our resort. It’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “Are we going to have fake names or something?”

“Do you want to?”

“I mean, we could, but what’s the point?”

“True.”

“Plus, we’re already Mr. and Mrs. Blake Montgomery. We can just keep up that ruse,” I suggested, referring to the first night at dinner.

“That works.” She grinned.

We walked outside and, to blend in, we found middle seats on the groom’s side. It didn’t take long before all the seats filled up and the groom escorted the mothers up the aisle. I overheard a couple in front of us say how handsome Levi was, and then when the bride walked down the aisle on her father’s arm, the same woman gushed about how beautiful Katie was.

Maybe crashing a wedding wasn’t going to be that hard after all.

AFTER KATIE AND LEVI SAID THEIR VOWS, THE WEDDING guests moved into a banquet room for appetizers. There was no assigned seating, so Sarah and I grabbed a table and enjoyed shrimp and avocado ceviche, green chili and beef empanadas and the salsa bar with three different types of salsas and fresh tortilla chips. They had an open bar and who was I to turn away free booze? Sarah got the “Bride’s Choice,” which was a mojito made with Mezcal and I grabbed the “Groom’s Choice,” which was a Mexican Mule.

Once the DJ introduced the couple and they entered the reception, a buffet was opened and we piled our plates with fajitas, rice, beans, and returned to the table we had stolen. A few people said hello, and we waved and smiled and pretended

as though we belonged. It was quite thrilling, but once the dancing started, everything changed.

SARAH

WHO KNEW CRASHING A WEDDING WOULD BE SO MUCH FUN?

We ate, we drank and then, after the toasts, the dancing started. I went to the restroom and on the way back, I stood on the edge of the dance floor and motioned with a crook of my finger for Blake to join me.

Before he could stand, the groom approached Blake and stuck out his hand. I watched the men shake. I didn't know if I needed to make a beeline for the door or what. But as I watched the guys chat, they laughed and my body relaxed, my hips swaying to the beat of the music.

The song ended, and so did Blake's conversation with the groom. Taking one last sip of his drink, he set the glass on the table and made his way toward me. It was as though everything happened in slow motion as I continued to dance and Blake strode toward me. Without a word, he cupped my cheeks and his lips met mine. I didn't hesitate to reciprocate, opening my mouth and tasting the whiskey on his tongue.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked.

"Are we being kicked out?"

"No, but I want you all to myself right now."

"Okay." I squealed as he grabbed my hand and tugged me off the dance floor.

Since we didn't know a single person, we didn't say goodbye after grabbing my bag, and hightailed it out of the banquet room and straight to the valet, where Blake asked him to get us a taxi. While we waited for the cab to arrive, Blake spun me until our chests were flush and he returned his mouth to mine.

I'd been dreaming about kissing him and now we couldn't get enough. I wasn't much for PDA, but I couldn't stop. Didn't want to.

"My room," he said against my lips.

I nodded my reply as I draped my arms around his neck and kissed him some more.

When the car pulled up, we got in and fought to keep our hands off of each other the entire way. Once we arrived at our resort, Blake paid the driver, then grabbed my hand and led me to his room.

The little clothes we had on went flying as our mouths continued to explore. Blake walked me backward until my legs hit the end of the bed. I lay on my back and he followed, covering me with his hard body. He was all ripples and firm muscles, and my body was on fire with the need to be ravished.

"I don't know if I can go slow," he whispered in my ear as he caressed my breast.

My nipple hardened as the heel of his palm glided across it. "Then don't."

"I want to. I want to take my time discovering every inch of you." He moved lower, flicking his wet tongue on my other nipple and making it pucker too.

"I'd like that," I admitted, but I wasn't sure how long *I* could hold off because as he licked and sucked and kneaded my breasts, he rubbed his hard dick against my center, making me ache for him to slide inside.

Rolling slightly to the side, Blake slid his arm behind my neck. My hand found his as he kept his mouth on my breast and glided his free hand down my body, not stopping until he

found the bundle of nerves aching with need. A moan escaped my lips as he worked circles against my nub.

“That’s it,” he coaxed. “I fucking love that sound.”

Bending my knee, he angled his hips so I could rest my foot on him and he spread me open. I felt his stiff cock sliding against my ass as he gently rocked his hips in sync with his finger circling my clit and his tongue dancing with mine. Reaching between us, I fisted his shaft and pumped just as slowly as he was working me.

“I really don’t think I can wait another second to be inside of you.”

“Then don’t,” I panted.

He reached for the drawer of the nightstand and pulled a condom out. As he rolled the latex on, I gazed down at his impressive thickness, and my mouth watered with the need to take him into my mouth and taste him. I hoped I’d get my chance, but my body was aching and wanting a release, so I didn’t want to move—couldn’t move—because I needed him inside of me even more.

Rolling onto his side to face me again, he slipped his arm under my neck again and I moved my leg to hook behind his hips to spread me wider. Running his crown against my opening, I whimpered as he teased my nub again and again. My hands gripped his hair, pulling and tugging as he continued to coat his dick with my arousal by sliding it up and down my slit.

When he finally entered me, my back arched as a loud moan escaped my lips and the most delicious sensation filled me. His hand that wasn’t behind my head roamed across every inch of my body he could touch as he rocked his hips.

“Fuck,” he groaned before taking my mouth again with his.

The bed rocked with each thrust. The feel of his hand running across my hot, slick skin sent every nerve ending I had into overdrive. I couldn’t get enough. My hips lifted slightly and created circles on their own. I could feel him

hitting the spot and I knew at any second I was going to shatter around him. I braced myself against the headboard as Blake's thrusts went harder. His mouth clasped onto my nipple and he bit down. I gasped as I felt myself getting closer and closer to my release.

"Fuck me," he groaned against the side of my neck as he erupted.

I convulsed around him, the tremors making my body jerk as I clenched the bedsheets and rode out my orgasm.

As though he couldn't get enough of me, his mouth still licked and tasted my breasts, my neck, and my mouth as we caught our breaths.

"Shower?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

It was in the shower where I got my chance to taste him, his salty cum reminding me of our beach day. When we got out of the shower, we went another round before drifting off to sleep.

"I BETTER GET GOING," I SAID AS I LOOKED AT THE TIME ON the nightstand. Blake had fucked me as a wake-up call and then we cuddled and caressed for what felt like hours. I had no desire to leave his bed but knew I had to. "I need to pack and all that stuff before we have to head to the airport."

"Yeah, I should get my stuff together too." Blake pulled me closer and kissed my bare shoulder. "This week went by too fast."

"Yeah, it did." After a few more moments, I slid out of the bed and grabbed my bikini bottoms I had to use as panties.

"What time do y'all get into Vegas?" He sat up and leaned against the headboard.

"They're flying to New York," I reminded him and stepped into the bottoms. "And I land in Vegas around five."

“I’ll be in the air, I think.” He got out of bed and slipped on some boxers. “Can I give you my number?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” I grinned and pulled my phone from my beach bag.

“Can you text me and let me know it’s your number?” he asked after he rattled off his digits. “Not ready to look at my phone until I get home.”

“Yeah, sure. I totally understand.” I sent him a text that said:

Hey, it’s Sarah. I had a great time in Mexico with you. Don’t be a stranger. Let’s catch up soon in Vegas over some apple-infused Mezcal

After I slid the rest of my beach clothes on, Blake led me to the door. Before he opened it, he tilted my chin up and brought my lips to his. “I’m sorry I waited until the last night to bring you back here.”

I smiled warmly. “I wasn’t expecting it, so no worries.”

“I really want to come to Vegas when you get the Mezcal.”

“Good, because that’s what I texted you.”

“Text me when you get home.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to interrupt anything.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m sure it will be a welcome distraction if anything happens. If anything, I’m just going to go get some fresh clothes and then stay at my parents’ house.”

“Okay, but if I don’t hear anything, I totally understand.”

“Yeah.” He frowned and gazed down at the floor.

“Hey.” I cupped his cheeks, so he’d look at me again. “I know you have shit to deal with when you get home. I had a really good time with you this past week, and whatever happens, happens, okay?”

I tried to pretend I was cool with going our separate ways, but I also didn’t want him to go back to Houston and get back with Stacey even though they had more history together. Did

people get back with their exes who left them at the altar? I didn't even know how long they had been together before their wedding day. I knew nothing other than she left him, but there had to be a reason we were back in each other's lives after all these years.

"I'll call you when I get to my parents', but text me when you get home, so I know you're home safe."

"I will."

Blake pressed his lips to mine, a soft kiss that almost felt like a final goodbye.

Maybe it was.

Walking down the hall, I took the elevator to my floor and then made my way to my room. As soon as I used my key to unlock the door and pushed it open, all of my friends stood inside staring at me.

"What?" I raised a brow.

"Don't *what* us," Amanda stated. "We want details."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head with an exasperated sigh. "You're not getting details."

"But you two hooked up?" Taylor asked.

There was no point in denying it. I hadn't slept in my bed, and I was in the same clothes I had been wearing when I left for the boat trip. So, all I replied as I went to the bathroom for a shower was, "Three times."

BY THE TIME I WALKED INTO MY APARTMENT, I STILL DIDN'T have a text from Blake. He had asked me to text him, but I had hoped he would miss me so much that he had turned on his phone just to reply to me.

Wheeling my suitcase down the hall, I thought briefly about when I would come home to the house I used to live in with Trey. His dog, Brooklyn, a chocolate Labrador, would

greet me with her tail wagging and always insisted on licking my face. She'd follow me down the hall and the sound of clicking nails on the hardwood would follow me. I shook my head to dispel the memory and pulled out my cell to send the text Blake had asked for.

Just made it home to my quiet apartment. I need a dog. What veterinarian doesn't have a pet? LOL Anyway, hope you make it home soon too 😊

But Blake never called or texted.

STACEY

“READY?” MOM ASKED AS I WALKED OUT OF THE BEDROOM I’d shared with Blake.

I nodded and looked around the apartment. Most everything was staying because it was the stuff he had when I met him. Only a few things were mine besides my clothes.

With one last look, I spotted the picture of me and Blake in San Francisco when his nephew Kyle was born. We were at Baker Beach, kissing with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. It was my favorite picture of us, so I grabbed it, put my key in its place, and then locked the door from the inside and shut it behind me.

The past few days had been stressful, to say the least. I had left Eddie’s place the day after I’d arrived, dressed in the clothes he’d lent me. It was crazy of me to go to his condo in the first place, but I hadn’t been thinking clearly. A part of me had hoped he would ask me to stay again, but he didn’t run after me as I walked out of his home like he had while I was dressed in my wedding dress. It was for the best because I needed to figure out what to do instead of running from the issue I was facing.

From Dallas, I’d driven to my Mom’s house in San Antonio because I didn’t know what else to do. It felt weird to go back to the apartment I shared with Blake even though he

was in Mexico, and I needed more time to process everything. On the way to her place, I'd called Molly so she and Theo could meet me there for her car. Once I was at my Mom's, I ate an entire quart of butter pecan ice cream for dinner while staying in my childhood room. I also made a doctor's appointment the next day to see exactly how far along I was. I had to go by the 4th of July mishap as the date of conception and not anything related to Blake because of the whole not using a condom with Eddie thing.

As I looked up how to get a paternity test while pregnant, my stomach churned at the thought of a needle being stuck into my belly.

How was this my life?

Everything was bound to come crashing down since I *still* loved two men.

BLAKE

THE RIDESHARE PULLED UP TO MY APARTMENT, AND I NOTICED Stacey's car wasn't in her parking spot. I'd turned on my phone to order the car, but hadn't bothered to look at all the messages and voicemails blowing it up. If I were honest, I loved not being tethered to the world by my cell phone for the last few days. It felt as though I was free. But now I was home, and I knew it was time to face reality. Mexico had been the best time I'd had in a long time, and I had to thank Sarah for it. I wanted to turn on my phone and call her to hear her voice, but I knew I needed to deal with my shit first.

When I opened the door to my apartment, I never expected to find that Stacey had moved out. It wasn't noticeable right away, but the more I walked through the place, the more I noticed her things were gone. The flip-flops she kept by the door were gone. The umbrella she kept in case of a summer downpour was missing. Her necklace rack was no longer hanging on the wall in our bedroom, and when I opened the closet, all of her clothes were missing.

Anger bubbled inside of me and I pulled out my phone, wanting answers as I pulled up Stacey's name and pressed the call button. How could she just leave? She left the wedding venue. She left our apartment. She left *me*.

The call rang a few times before going to her voicemail. I seethed as I paced back and forth at the end of the bed. "So,

you're just going to move out and not even talk to me? I never expected that of you. Hell, I never expected any of this. The least you could do is tell me what the fuck I did wrong."

I ended the call and tossed the phone onto the bed. My fists clenched as I forced myself not to punch the wall. Not to rip our pictures down. Not to break everything in the entire apartment. I knew we were over, but I needed to know why.

My phone dinged with a text. I picked it up to see Stacey's name pop up on the screen.

We need to talk.

I didn't hesitate to reply.

Yeah, no shit.

Can I come over?

I stared at the four words on the screen. Could she come over? I'd expected to be the one to leave with my clothes, not her. But I didn't care anymore. I just wanted answers.

Yeah.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I backed out of her message and looked for the one from Sarah. I found the one she'd sent while in my hotel room and then realized she'd sent another one since then.

Just made it home to my quiet apartment. I need a dog. What veterinarian doesn't have a pet? LOL Anyway, hope you make it home soon too ☺

As I typed out a reply, the phone buzzed in my hand with a call from my brother. Taking a deep breath, I answered it. "Hello?"

There was a slight pause and then he said, "Oh, hey."

"Hey," I replied. "What's up?"

"You tell me."

I rolled my eyes. “Just got home.”

“Did you have a good time?”

I thought about Sarah and the way her green eyes sparkled in the sunlight. “I did.”

“That’s good. Wasn’t sure if you were home or not.”

“Did you know?” I asked as I brought myself back into the present.

“Know what?”

“That Stacey moved out.”

“Um ... no?”

I closed my eyes and blew out a breath. “She’s on her way over to talk.”

“Oh, well, call me if you need me.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” I hesitated for a moment and then asked, “Do you know why?”

I wasn’t sure if Spencer had talked to Stacey in the week I’d been gone. Maybe everyone knew why she’d left me and I was going to be the last to know.

“I don’t. Sorry.”

I stood and paced the bedroom. “All right.”

“Call me after or call me tomorrow. We need to talk.”

I stopped walking. “Talk?”

“It’s about Club 24, but it can wait.”

My stomach sank. “Did something happen while I was gone?”

“Yes, but nothing bad.”

“Then why are you trying to freak me out?”

“I’m not trying to freak you out, but now that you’re back, there are some things we need to discuss.”

“But good things?” I asked for clarification.

“I think so.”

“Just tell me now, Brandon. I’m done with secrets.”

“Jason and I are—” A knock at the front door interrupted his words.

“Shit. Stacey’s here. Can I call you back?”

“Yeah, of course. Let me know what happens with her.”

“I will.” I disconnected the call, threw my phone onto the bed, and made my way to the front door. Taking a deep breath, I swung it open.

“Hey,” Stacey greeted with a frown.

“Hey,” I replied curtly and stepped to the side so she could enter. It was then I noticed the key on the table near the door where a picture of us used to be. I didn’t bother to ask if she wanted anything to drink or whatever was the polite thing to do for guests, although that was what she was now.

“How was Mexico?”

I grunted a sarcastic laugh. “Yeah, not going to tell you how *our* honeymoon was.”

“I understand.” She sat on the couch, her hands folded in her lap.

I leaned against the wall across from her and crossed my arms. “You might as well just spit it out.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The ticking of the kitchen clock on the wall echoed in the room as I waited for her to say something.

“I’m pregnant.”

My legs gave way, and I slid down the wall. I stared at her a moment as she looked down at her lap, not making eye contact with me. “I don’t understand. We were getting married. I know we didn’t talk about kids, but wasn’t that in our future? So what if it was sooner than we’d thought?”

Her brown eyes lifted, and a tear slid down her cheek. “Because I don’t know if you’re the father.”

The ticking of the clock echoed in my ears as every second of the past eight months raced through my head. Had it all been a lie? “How?” I whispered.

“I slept with Eddie on the 4th of July.”

“You slept with Eddie on the 4th of July?” I asked, as though I didn’t understand her. Stacey nodded. I was fuming as I went on. “At the party you begged me to go to, but I couldn’t because I was bartending at my own club so I could get tips to pay for our fucking honeymoon that I just went on alone?”

She nodded again and wiped tears from her cheeks. “I didn’t plan for it to happen.”

“You didn’t plan for it to happen?” I snickered and stood. I was aware that I kept repeating what she was saying, but I just couldn’t believe the shit coming out of her mouth.

Stacey shook her head. “It just ... did.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Did you fall on his dick, toots?”

She cringed at the name I used to call her. I was being an ass, but so fucking what? I never suspected she’d cheat on me and get knocked up. Or just cheat on me in general. We were happy. She agreed to marry me and then went and fucked her ex five months later and never told me.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” I paced in front of her. “Did it never occur to you to fucking tell me *before* all of our friends and family showed up to watch us get married?”

“I didn’t know I was pregnant before that day.”

“You expect me to believe you found out minutes before saying I do?”

“I did,” she cried. “Molly mentioned it because of my period and bought me a couple of tests. Would you rather I had gone through with the wedding and then find out later it’s not yours?”

I stopped walking and glared at her. “I’d rather you didn’t fuck someone else.”

“I know, and like I said, I’m sorry.”

She could tell me she was sorry until she was blue in the face, but those two words weren’t going to make my anger simmer down. “I can’t fucking believe this.”

“Neither can I.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head slowly. “Well, good luck.”

She blinked. “What?”

“It’s obviously not mine since we always used a condom. So, bye.”

“We can’t know that for sure.”

I grunted. “99.9% sure.”

“Actually, I read condoms are only 87% effective because people aren’t perfect and—”

“Are you fucking serious right now?”

She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it. The clicking of the clock amplified the throbbing in my head. I strode toward it and yanked it off the wall, removed the battery, and threw both it into the trash can. Stacey stood and backed away as though my anger scared her.

“I know you’re upset—”

“Upset isn’t the word I’d use, toots.”

“Okay, well, while you were gone, I made a doctor’s appointment.” She moved toward the door. “I also looked up paternity tests while pregnant, and I’ll get you that info when I have it.”

“Great.” I clipped.

She opened the door and stepped outside. “For what it’s worth, I really am sorry.”

“Me too.” I shut the door and locked it.

I was furious and shaking and I knew the only thing that would calm me was a bottle of whiskey.

SARAH

WHEN MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, I FOUND MY BODY WAS STIFF and sore as though I'd slept for three days. How was it I'd spent a week on vacation but felt as though I needed another one?

Reaching for my phone, I sucked in a small breath when I saw I had a missed call from Blake. "Holy shit," I exhaled. "He called."

I quickly went to my voicemail, bummed I'd missed his call, and pressed play. He'd left a message around two in the morning while I was sound asleep and my phone was on silent.

"Hey, sweeeeet thing," he slurred into the phone. "Talked to Stacey when I got ... when I got hooome. You won't believe what she ... said. Well, you don't know her but, but, that's probably a good thing. Maaaaybeee you will get to know her 'cause of what she tooold me. Call me back. Byyyyyye."

The voicemail ended, and I played it again, trying to understand all his garbled words. From what I gathered, whatever bomb his ex had dropped was enough for him to get wasted. My curiosity piqued, I glanced at the time to see if it was too early to call him. Realizing it was almost noon in Houston, I texted in case he was still sleeping off his drunken state.

Hey! Got your message. Call me when you can

I lay back in bed, holding my phone, and waited for his call. After a while, I got up, made a cup of coffee, and turned on the TV to catch up on the shows I'd missed while I was away. Halfway through an episode of a murder mystery series I loved to watch, my phone rang. My heart rate increased as excitement ran through me at the thought of speaking to Blake again, except when I saw who was calling, I realized it wasn't Blake, but Aunt Deb. I was still happy to hear from her.

Growing up, I had spent most of my summers at her apple farm. At first, it had been a way for me to be out of my parents' hair for a few weeks, but then it evolved into me staying the entire summer because I had felt as though I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. I wasn't going to parties and getting drunk under her roof, but I didn't have a curfew and I could have my friends stay over to hang out at the lake on her property and just have fun. It was cool to be out from under the watchful eye of my parents, and it allowed me and Aunt Deb to grow closer. Despite being from different generations, she was my best friend.

"Hey, Aunt Deb. How are you?" I greeted.

"I'm good, honey, but I'm not calling to talk about me. How was your trip? Tell me everything."

"I had so much fun," I gushed. "But guess who I ran into."

"Could it be Blake Montgomery?"

I blinked. "How'd you know?"

"Spoke to his mom the other day. She called to tell me he didn't get married but still went to Cabo. Knew you went there as well and since you asked, I figured you ran into him."

Did a lot more than run into him, but I wasn't going to tell her that even though we were close. She didn't need the details of my sex life.

"Yeah. We were staying at the same resort."

"How was he? Heartbroken?"

“He was the first day, for sure. But he hung with me and the girls most of the time and seemed to have a good time.”

“Did he say what happened?”

“Just that she left him right before the wedding was supposed to start.”

“So, he didn’t know why?”

“No.” I shook my head. Given his voicemail, it seemed he had since learned why, but since I wasn’t privy to any of the details, I didn’t bother to tell her he’d called me while I was sleeping.

“Well, that boy was a smooth talker back in the day. I’m sure it won’t take him long to find someone else.”

“Yeah,” I sighed, thinking about him coming to visit and what might happen between the two of us. Maybe only friends with benefits, or maybe more. I was newly divorced. Did I want more?

“Enough about him. Tell me more about Mexico.”

“We mostly hung out at the pool and ate and drank,” I told her. I went on to fill her in on the trips and the laughs, but left out the one-on-one time I spent with Blake. After I was done, I asked, “But enough about me. How are you?”

“Oh, honey. You know me. Just piddling around the grounds with Roger and staying busy.” During my second year at Columbia, Aunt Deb met Roger and two years later, they married.

“And you’re feeling okay?” I pressed.

She sighed. “Yes, the medications are helping. You know that.”

“I know, but you know I worry about you.”

“And I worry about you. Have you heard from Trey?” Aunt Deb asked, clearly trying to change the subject to anything but her.

I rolled my eyes and chuckled slightly. “Hell no, and I wouldn’t answer if he called me.” There was no reason for

Trey ever to call me again, but I knew my aunt and knew she wanted to keep the focus off of herself.

“His loss.”

“Exactly.”

“When are you going to start dating again?”

“Who says I haven’t?” I deadpanned.

“Have you?” she questioned.

Blake and I weren’t dating, and I had worried he would never call, but since he had, I was also hopeful we’d see each other again and not just talk about seeing each other. However, I wasn’t ready to tell my aunt that either. “Not yet, but Mexico opened my eyes.”

“Good. It took some time for me to start dating after Jeff died. Blake actually helped with that.”

“He did?” I sat up straighter, intrigued by her admission.

“This will sound silly, but he took me on a practice date.”

I was speechless. Blake was eighteen that summer and he took my aunt on a date?

“I was scared because it had been so long since I’d dated anyone,” she continued. “We did a little practice run to help me prepare. He opened my car door, but then ...” she paused.

“Yeah?” I asked, needing more of the story.

It took her a few moments and then she said, “We ate pizza, and when we came home, you were crying on the couch. It was the night Arkin first broke up with you.”

“Oh,” I breathed and remembered that day and night all too well. I thought Arkin was the love of my life, but then he broke up with me because I was living in New York for school and he was still in Texas. We’d ended up getting back together, but that night, my heart had been shattered into a million pieces by the boy I first gave it to.

“Yeah, but anyway, the real date was horrible, but it got me back out there and now I have Roger. Don’t be scared to get

back in the saddle, honey.”

I smiled and thought about riding Blake. “I won’t.”

A FEW HOURS LATER, MY PHONE RANG AGAIN, BUT THIS TIME it was the man who I couldn’t stop thinking about.

“Well, hello there.”

“Hey, sweet thing,” Blake greeted with his slight Texas drawl. “What’s up?”

I smiled and replied, “Not much. I’m surprised you don’t sound hungover.”

He chuckled. “Why would I be hungover?”

“You sounded drunk when you called me and left a voicemail.”

“Oh, that,” he laughed slightly. “I just needed to get my mind off of shit, but I always bounce back.”

“That’s good.” I was dying to know what Stacey had said to him, but I wasn’t going to bring it up. “Did you have a good day?”

“I did, actually. You?”

“Absolutely. But after listening to your voicemail, I wasn’t sure you would.”

He exhaled on the other end of the line. “Yeah. Found out some shit.”

“Oh yeah?” I prompted.

“So ... Stacey’s ... pregnant,” he faltered.

My brain was racing. How was being pregnant by your fiancé a bad thing? Maybe they didn’t want kids, but how did that warrant breaking up with someone? If that were the case, Blake would have been the one to call things off if Stacey had trapped him or something, right?

Not knowing what else to say, I replied, “Okay?”

“And the baby is probably not mine.”

“Oh,” I gasped. “She cheated on you?”

“Yeah, with her ex.”

“Wow,” I breathed. I supposed getting knocked up by your ex was reason enough not to get married, but why not call the wedding off before going to the venue?

“Apparently, she found out right before the ceremony. Said her best friend bought her the tests, and they were positive. That’s why she fled.”

“That’s ... That’s crazy.”

“I know. Tell me about it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. She said some shit about doing a paternity test while still pregnant.”

I swallowed. “I mean, that would determine if you are the father. Are you getting back with her?”

“Fuck no,” Blake didn’t hesitate to reply. “She moved out too.”

I felt my body relax, but then it hit me he could still be the father. “Are you ready to be a dad?”

There was a slight pause before he answered, “Yes and no. I love being an uncle, but I know it would be different with my own kid. I’d like to be more financially stable, buy a house and all that, but if I am the father, I will be the best one I can be for that child.”

My heart melted. “That’s a really excellent answer, Blake Montgomery. I’ve learned a lot about you today that I really like.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Well.” I grinned. “I heard you went on a date with my aunt.”

It sounded as though he’d spit out something he was drinking. “What?”

“That’s what she said when I talked to her earlier.”

“Wow, I thought that was our secret.”

“Why? She said you helped her practice for an actual date.”

“I ... right. I just didn’t know she’d want people to know, is all.”

“I think it was sweet of you. I definitely pegged you wrong back then.”

“Listen here, sweet thing. There will be no pegging me ever.” I could hear the smile in his voice as he teased me.

I burst out into laughter. “Oh, come on. It might be fun.”

“You want to strap a dildo on and fuck me with it, sweet thing?”

Even though Blake couldn’t see me and I was alone in my apartment, my skin heated and I was certain my face was bright red, but I continued to tease him. “Yeah. Would you let me?”

His amusement matched mine. “Not my thing, but I’ll gladly be of service if you want to use my dick for your ass.”

“I’ll let you know if I ever see you again.”

“I thought we had plans to meet up in Vegas?”

A thrill raced through me. “We do. When are you coming?”

“Well, actually, that’s the reason I’m in a good mood.”

“Oh yeah?”

“While I was gone, my brother and his business partner decided they want to expand their gym empire to Las Vegas.”

“Oh really? That’s cool.”

“Yeah, and they want me to go scouting for locations.”

“When?”

“Not sure yet. Need to deal with this paternity mess.”

“Right.” I frowned. I couldn’t believe how much I was missing him, and wanted him to fly out to Vegas as soon as possible.

“But I promise it will be soon.”

BLAKE

BEFORE HE MET AND MARRIED SPENCER, MY BROTHER ONCE thought he was going to be a father. For some reason, he took his crazy ex's word for it instead of asking for a paternity test. I never thought I'd be in a similar situation where I might become a father before I was ready. I was always adamant about using protection, given I never wanted to settle down before Stacey. And even after we were engaged, I still made sure to wrap that shit up. But here I was, walking into a damn doctor's office to give them my DNA because the one woman I'd let into my heart had fucked it all up. I let my guard down with Stacey, and she took the rug and ripped it out from under me.

At the reception desk, I gave the woman my name and was asked to take a seat where a few pregnant women were waiting as well. For most of my adult life, being a father had been so far off my radar. I certainly never expected to learn what my future held from a cheek swab. If I was the father, I would do everything I could to be the best dad possible. If I wasn't, then Stacey leaving me was for the best, because knowing she cheated was reason enough for me to fall out of love with her.

I grabbed a magazine off the table in front of me, and flipped it open to an article about decorating a nursery. A nursery! It wasn't that long ago that I had a bachelor pad, but now I might need to turn my spare room into a nursery? The

glossy photos showed cartoon zoo animals on a pink wall, with the name Willow in wood letters hanging behind a crib. Would that be what the room would look like at my place? I pulled out my phone and texted Sarah.

If you had a daughter what would you name her?

It didn't take her long to reply:

Who is this and what have you done with Blake Montgomery?

I smiled and texted back:

LOL! I'm at the OB's office reading a fucking parenting magazine

I never in my life thought I'd ever send a text with those words.

Ohhh! Are you in a gown naked from the waist down?

Does the thought turn you on?

Oh yeah. Rates right up there with pegging you!

I grunted a laugh and typed back:

Then I will steal one and bring it with me

Can't wait 😊

I can't wait to see you ;)

It had been a few weeks since I'd gotten home from Mexico. When I spoke to my brother the day Stacey dropped the bomb she was pregnant, he explained he and Jason were looking into expanding to Las Vegas. Right away, I wanted to jump on the plane and go. I didn't care if it would technically be a work trip; I wanted to see Sarah again. Of course, I couldn't because of other obligations, like making sure the Houston club was still standing after my absence. Brandon had set up some locations for me to check out and once I had my

dates, I started counting down the days until I would get to see Sarah again.

We texted and chatted on the phone every free moment we got, but it wasn't the same. I wanted to see her green eyes shine as I stared into them. Feel her fingers in my hair as I kissed her lips. Smell the shampoo she used as I buried my face in her blonde locks. Touch every inch of her naked skin as I tasted a path across her body, and hear her moans as I made her come. I was tired of phone screens and miles between us.

"Blake Montgomery?" I looked up to see a nurse standing in the doorway and looking straight at me, since I was the only man in the room. I sent another text to Sarah as I walked toward the woman waiting for me.

Gotta go hand over my DNA now. Call you later

The nurse took me into an exam room. Once again, I felt out of place as I caught a glimpse of the female reproductive system and breast exam posters on the wall.

"We'll get you in and out," the nurse said as she shut the door and enclosed us in the room. "Just need to swab your cheek, and then you'll be on your way."

"All right. Cool."

She motioned to the chair instead of the exam table. "If you want to have a seat, you can, but I can get the sample while you're standing up too."

"This works," I replied and didn't sit.

The nurse took a long cotton swab from a tray. "Open up."

I did as instructed, and once she was done grabbing my DNA, she slid the swab into the tube, sealed it up and said, "All right. We'll get this to the lab ASAP. Once all samples are collected and the tests are run, you'll be emailed the results."

"Do you know how long that will take?" I asked.

"It can take anywhere between three and ten days."

I nodded. "All right. Thanks."

“Have a great day.”

I exited the room, and walked past the front desk on my way outside. The receptionist didn't stop me for payment or any of that crap and I didn't bother to ask. Maybe Stacey paid for it, since she was the one who got us into this mess.

I COULDN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I HAD BEEN SO EXCITED to be flying into Las Vegas. Actually, it was probably my twenty-first birthday. I was already drunk and looking for more booze by the time my friends and I landed at the airport. That was a trip I barely recalled because of all the alcohol we consumed, but this time, I was hoping for a different experience. One I would remember every second of.

I sent Sarah a text as soon as the wheels touched down on the tarmac.

Landed

A few moments later, my phone buzzed with a reply.

In the cell phone waiting area. Text me when you get to baggage claim. I'm in a blue Jeep Wrangler.

It felt as though it was taking the passengers in front of me hours to unload as I waited not so patiently to get off.

Since Sarah had to work most of the days I was in town and I needed to check out the potential locations for Club 24, I planned something special for when I arrived. I didn't want to waste a second. Thinking of her while lying in bed alone one night, I had searched on my phone for the best places to watch a sunset in Las Vegas. The thought of watching her take in the last few seconds of a day made me blissful. It was her happy place, and it was becoming mine too, and I'd caught myself watching the sun go down almost every night I could back home.

Once off the plane, I practically pushed my way through the people meandering up the jetway. I power walked through the airport, following the signs to baggage claim, and once I saw it, I sent her a text saying I was almost outside. All I had was my carry-on and didn't need to wait for anything. Once I was outside, I every car pass until I spotted the bright-blue Jeep Wrangler.

Sarah saw me and waved excitedly. She pulled up to where I stood on the curb, put the SUV in park, and jumped out, practically flying over the hood to throw her arms around my neck. I returned her embrace and, with no hesitation or care that a million people were around, pressed my lips to hers and devoured her mouth.

"I missed you," I admitted, pressing my forehead to hers as we broke apart after our kiss.

"I've missed you too."

"Let's get out of here."

We separated, and I put my bag into the back of her Jeep. Once we were inside and she drove toward the exit of the airport, I asked, "After we eat lunch, will you let me drive?"

She turned and gaped at me. "Why?"

"I want to take you somewhere."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you need to drive? Can't you just tell me where?"

"It's a surprise and I don't want you to know where we're going until we get there."

"Then I guess I can't argue with that."

SARAH TOOK ME TO ONE OF HER FAVORITE PLACES TO EAT IN Las Vegas for a late lunch since I had gotten in a little after

three in the afternoon. It was a New American bistro. I ordered the backyard burger, which came topped with a roasted jalapeño aioli, and she got the blue crab fondue with sourdough toast. Once we finished and I paid the bill, we walked outside and she tossed me her keys.

“Don’t get us lost.”

I grinned. “That’s what GPS is for.”

We climbed into the SUV. After I put the location into the GPS on my phone, I cranked the engine and pulled out of the parking lot. It took us almost an hour to get where we were going. Once we passed the canyon popular for hiking, I knew just another mile down the pavement was the dirt road where we’d pull off and find the place that had been recommended for watching the sunset from the car.

“Are you going to murder me?” she questioned as I pulled to a stop a little down the dirt road.

I grunted a laugh. “No, sweet thing. I’d miss you too much if I did.”

“Then what are we doing way out here where there are no people around?”

I grabbed her hand and brushed my lips against the back of it. “You’ll see.”

We got out of the vehicle and I went to the back where my suitcase was, and pulled out a blanket.

“You packed a blanket?”

“Wasn’t sure if you’d have one in your car.”

“You’re full of surprises, Blake Montgomery. I thought you’d have other plans for us.”

“Like what?” I questioned and closed the back of the Jeep.

“Something less outdoors.” She waved her hand at the desert surrounding us.

I knew where she was going with her line of thinking, and it turned me on to know she wanted to jump into bed. But while I couldn’t wait to be deep inside of her again, I didn’t

want our relationship to be focused on our physical connection. Especially since we'd gotten to know each other better in Mexico. Did that mean I was maturing? The first time we'd met when I had just turned eighteen, I had tried to kiss her. I would have gone all the way if she'd let me, but that was the old Blake, the one who was still a boy. I'd like to think the twenty-eight-year-old man I'd become could keep it in his pants. Hell, I did for almost an entire week in Mexico.

"Heard this is one of the best places to watch the sun go down."

She sighed. "I love sunsets."

"I know." I grinned. "And afterward, how about we go back to your place and I have you for an early dinner?" Given our late lunch, I wasn't sure when or if we'd eat dinner, but having her as my meal wasn't a bad idea.

"Well, how can I say no to that?" She kicked a rock in the dirt, not meeting my eyes.

"I hope you won't." I winked as she looked up, and then I moved to the front of her Jeep.

We still had about thirty minutes before the sun would descend behind the red rock mountains, which gave us enough time to get comfortable on the hood of her car. Or as relaxed as one could be, with only a thin blanket and no pillows or anything for comfort.

After spreading the blanket on the hood, I used the front bumper to hoist myself up and sat on the edge of the hood, which was still warm from the engine. Reaching out my hand, I helped Sarah sit next to me, and then I moved closer until we were touching. It had been weeks since I'd had her next to me and didn't want to waste any opportunity to have some part of me touching some part of her.

"No word on the Mezcal?" I asked as we looked out into the distance. The fall breeze was warm but not humid like Houston.

"Nope. Nothing."

"I hope it comes while I'm here."

“Me too. I can’t wait to taste how it turned out.”

“I can’t wait to do body shots of it off of you.”

Sarah threw her head back and laughed. “Is that what you fantasize about?”

“That and some other things.”

“Like what?” she challenged as we gazed into each other’s eyes.

“Well, for one”—I looked over my shoulder at the car —“I’ve thought about fucking you on your car since the moment I got this sunset watching idea a few days ago.”

“Oh yeah?” she bit her bottom lip.

Without hesitation, I cupped her cheek and went for her mouth. She moaned as I licked the seam of her lips, and then she opened for me. It wasn’t easy to maneuver, considering the surface we were sitting on wasn’t flat and had a ridge in the middle. That didn’t stop me from leaning her back and nibbling her bottom lip before going in for more with my tongue. Her fingers gripped my ass, pulling our centers together, as we faced each other, and she rubbed herself on me.

“Want to know a fantasy of mine?” Sarah asked against my lips.

“Always.”

“Fuck me right here.”

I leaned my head back and looked down into her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“No one is around.”

“Then take off your shorts.” I hopped off the Jeep, went back to where my suitcase was, and grabbed a condom. Sarah was stripping out of her jean shorts as I came back around, and at the sight of her bare ass, my dick hardened so I quickly went to work on my cargo shorts. “How does your fantasy play out?”

“With me on top.”

I groaned at the thought and, keeping my shorts on, I hopped back onto the hood of the Jeep. I wouldn't have minded bending her over the front of the vehicle and taking her from behind but if she wanted to ride me, I was all for it.

Laying in the center of the roof's ridge, which was wide enough for my torso, I bent my legs and rested my feet on the front bumper for support. Pulling my cock out, I sheathed myself with the latex, and Sarah hoisted herself onto the car. She straddled my hips, and without a care in the world, she sank onto me. My hands went to her waist, hers braced on my chest, and she slid up and down my shaft.

With the sun falling behind the red rock over her shoulder, I lost myself in the moment. Another car could have pulled up and I wouldn't have cared. All I saw was Sarah and how the pink and purple sky accented her beauty. I didn't know how it was possible but circumstances were lining up for us to be together, and I was going to do my damndest to find a place in Las Vegas for Club 24 because I was falling for her.

"It's mine too," I admitted as I stared up at her.

"Yours too?" she asked, breathless.

"Sunsets. They're now my favorite color."

SARAH

THE LAST TIME I HAD A MAN IN MY BED, IT HAD BEEN MY husband. The man I thought I was going to have babies with and grow old with while we enjoyed our house full of dogs and cats. Now I lay next to a new man, no animals running around, and no house—just an apartment.

When I was married, Trey and I lived in a four-bedroom house in Henderson with *his* chocolate lab, Brooklyn. He'd gotten the dog when we were still attending Cornell. Since it was technically his dog, I let him have her during the divorce. It had been hard because I'd grown used to waking up in the morning to her wagging tail as she begged for food before I brewed my first cup of coffee. We had been cuddle buddies while I watched 80s rom-coms movies like I had frequently done with Aunt Deb during my summers with her. And while I was over Trey and the pain he'd caused me, I missed Brooklyn terribly.

“Are you ready to go be the tourist you are?” I asked as I nuzzled closer to Blake's warm naked body post multiple morning orgasms.

“Or we can stay in bed all day instead.” He rolled me so he was on top of me, his cock hardening against my bare thigh.

“You know this is the only day we can sightsee since I have work.”

“I’ve been to The Strip,” he argued and kissed my throat.

“So, you’d rather stay in bed and watch sappy movies all day?”

He raised his head and met my stare. “Um, no. Let’s watch football.”

“I’m not watching football all day.” I rolled my eyes. I didn’t mind watching Dallas play since I’d grown up watching the Cowboys when I lived in Texas, but watching hours of men ramming into each other and trying to get a ball wasn’t something I wanted to do.

“It’s Sunday.”

“Then how about you stay here and watch football and I’ll go do something else?”

He shook his head. “No, sweet thing. I’m just teasing you. I’m a gambler at heart and itching to check out the casinos.”

“You mean lose your money?”

“Hell no. I bet there’s some hold’em tournaments. I’ll run the tables.”

“Will you buy me something pretty then?” I batted my eyes playfully. I didn’t mind if he wanted to play cards because I too liked to gamble. It was one of the reasons I stayed away from The Strip, but since Blake was in town for only a few days, I figured he’d want the Vegas experience. I would play some slots while he played in a tournament.

“I’d buy you the moon if I could.”

My heart melted. “There you go again.”

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Making me all giddy with your words.”

“They’re only the truth.”

I swallowed, wanting to confess how much I liked him but also scared that whatever we had was just a fling in some way. I wanted to believe it wasn’t, given that he’d come to Las Vegas and was staying with me, but he also had to come

because of his company. But then, he'd gone out of his way to plan the perfect afternoon where we could be alone and watch the sunset within only a few hours of him getting to town.

Before I could say anything, he rolled onto his side and faced me. He said, "I'll be honest with you. I never expected to want to be in a relationship with someone so soon after being engaged and almost getting married. Hell, I wasn't looking, that's for damn sure, but the weeks we were apart, all I could do was think about you." He trailed his finger along my cheek. "Wondered what you were doing at that exact moment, or what you had for breakfast. I know we talked a lot over the phone, but it's not the same."

"So, what are you saying?" I wondered.

"I'm really hoping I can find a good location for Club 24 and it works out so I can move here and see where our relationship goes."

"Like boyfriend and girlfriend?"

His finger trailed down my neck. "Yeah, if you want to put a label on it."

I sat up and wrapped the sheet around my chest. "Are you ready to be in an exclusive relationship again?"

"I think if it were anyone else, I would say no, that I want to keep just being friends with benefits."

"Then why me?"

"Your laughter, your wit, your charm, your sweet sexy ass." He grinned and I snickered. "In all seriousness, you're an amazing woman who I want to learn more about each and every day. I think things happen for a reason. Everything in my past has led me to this day, this time, this place. If there is an opportunity here, I don't want to let it pass by without seizing it and seeing what happens."

"Wow," I breathed, not sure what else to say. Banging on the front door startled me. "What the hell?"

"Expecting someone?"

"Uh ... No."

“Want me to go see who it is?”

“Sure.”

Blake got out of bed and stepped into his basketball shorts before leaving the bedroom. I hurried to put clothes on and, listening to hear who could possibly be at my door. Not many people knew where I lived. Trey did because of divorce stuff and a few friends from work, but that was it. None of them should be banging on my door.

Stepping to the threshold of my bedroom, I peered down the hall to see Blake looking through the peephole. He turned and said, “I can’t see the person’s face, but I think it’s a dude.”

“Don’t answer it. There’s no one who should be trying to beat down my door.” My heart was hammering in my chest.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded as the knocking continued. “Open up!” a man shouted from the other side.

“What do we do?” I asked nervously.

“I can find out who he is and what he wants.” He turned back to the door.

“Wait!” I hissed. “What if he has a weapon?”

Blake balked. “Do you normally have men with weapons beating down your door?”

“No.” I shook my head. “But this is so unusual that it’s scary to think of who is on the other side.” I didn’t live in a bad part of Las Vegas, and I’d felt nothing but safe while living alone.

Until now.

“What do you want?” Blake shouted at the door.

“Ricky, open up.”

“You’ve got the wrong apartment, dude,” Blake replied.

“What?”

“There’s no Ricky here.” There was silence on the other side and Blake looked in the peephole again. “He’s gone.”

“Well, that was scary.”

“Yeah. Wish you didn’t live alone.”

I nodded slowly and then a thought came to me. “Actually, I’ve been wanting to get a dog.”

BLAKE

I WAS IN LOVE.

The blue American Staffordshire Terrier Sarah had rescued was so fucking adorable. I couldn't stand it.

"What are you going to name her?" I asked. The dog sat on my lap in the passenger seat as Sarah drove.

"I'm not sure yet." She reached over and rubbed the dog's head. "Need to see how she acts once we're home. I'm sure a name will come to me."

"It's cool you can have dogs in your apartment. A lot of places don't allow that."

"Yeah, but I don't know if I want to live there anymore."

"Because of earlier?" Sarah nodded. "But now you have this little lady to protect you." I scratched the dog's chin.

"Yeah, but still. Having someone bang on the door like that was scary. I'm not sure what I would have done if you weren't there or if they'd broken in."

"Well, since I'm going to scout locations for the club tomorrow, I hope that means I'll be here more often and you won't be alone."

"Yeah, but won't it take a while to start the construction process and get the place up and running?"

“We had a quick turnaround time with the Houston location. It all depends on the location and what work needs to be done. Plus, I’ll tell my brother I need to be here to oversee things. That’s what I did with Houston.”

“And where do you plan on staying?”

I glanced over at her and winked. “With you, of course.”

She grinned. “I’m just teasing, but we just made it official this morning and now you’re already moving in?”

She had a point, but I didn’t think of it as moving in. More just being with her. That was all I wanted and couldn’t stop thinking about it. “I work fast when I want something, sweet thing.”

“Okay, but what will happen after the club is open?”

I lifted a shoulder. “We’ll see. My brother has several clubs open, and he lives in San Francisco. I’m sure it won’t be a problem if I move here permanently if we decide to get more serious by then.”

“Then I guess maybe shopping for a dog isn’t the only thing we should do.”

“You mean to find you a new apartment?”

“Maybe?” She grimaced. “I just can’t imagine being alone now once you go back to Houston. Even if it’s only temporary.”

“Hey.” I reached over and grabbed her hand. “Like I said, you have this little lady now. Plus, call the cops if anything happens, but I will try not to be gone long. If I have to, I’ll make quick twenty-four-hour trips to Houston or something.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah, or maybe you can come with me sometimes too. Check out the club and all that.”

“See Aunt Deb,” Sarah added.

“Yeah. We can take a road trip to Texas with Smokey here and stop at Deb’s place on the way to Houston.”

“Smokey?” She chuckled. “You think a girl dog should be named Smokey?”

“I don’t know. You want to name her Bella or Twilight?” I teased. Sarah’s dog was blue but could also pass as silvery-gray. She also had white on her chest and all four feet, as though she was wearing socks. “Or Socks.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow and pulled into the parking lot of a pet store. “I’m not naming her after a vampire movie, nor footwear.”

“Okay, just trying to help,” I sassed playfully.

“But I am leaning toward Skye.”

I smiled as she pulled into a parking spot. “You love your sunsets in the sky.”

“And since Sunset doesn’t really fit, I think Skye works.”

“I like it.”

“Then that’s what it will be.” She leaned over and kissed the top of Skye’s head. “Let’s go get you a name tag.”

AFTER WE BOUGHT EVERYTHING SKYE NEEDED AND MADE HER at home in Sarah’s apartment, we ordered Chinese. Once it was delivered and our plates were filled with yummy goodness, we settled on the couch in front of the TV. I hadn’t asked because I didn’t want to pry, but Sarah’s apartment was on the minimal side. She had a couch and coffee table, but no dining room table or a place to eat other than in front of the TV. She, of course, had her bed, but if I had to guess, her ex-husband had kept most of everything.

After being fed, walked, and played with, Skye lay in her doggie bed chewing on a puppy toy shaped like a bone. Sarah flipped on the TV and asked, “Want to watch a movie?”

“Sooo, football is out?” We’d been gone all day, and I hadn’t watched any football, but that was fine because the moment Sarah spotted Skye, I could see the instant love Sarah

had for her, and that made me happy. Even though Skye was only nine weeks old, it put me somewhat at ease that Sarah wouldn't be home alone when I went back to Houston.

She glared at me. "Yeah. Football is out." She turned back to the TV and scrolled through the guide. "Yesssss!" she cheered.

"What?"

"So ... " She turned to me. "I have this rule."

I arched a brow. "A rule?"

"Yeah." She nodded excitedly. "Whenever there's an 80s romantic movie on, I have to watch it."

"Oh, god," I groaned. "Why do you have this rule?"

"It started when I would spend the summers with Aunt Deb."

"Oh," I replied. I couldn't recall watching any rom-coms with Sarah and Deb when I had been there that summer. Then again, I usually went to my room early because I had to get up at the ass-crack of dawn to pick fucking apples. "Okay?"

"Well." Sarah's grin widened. "*Say Anything* is on and we have to watch it."

"That one with the guy holding the boombox over his head?"

"That's the one." Sarah was beaming, and it surprised me to learn she was so into 80s movies.

I enjoyed seeing her happy, but I couldn't believe I was going to watch some cheesy rom-com that she probably had seen a hundred times. But it was her TV and her rule, and I wanted to do anything she wanted to do. "Well, let's do it." I popped a pork potsticker into my mouth.

"How many times have you seen it?" she asked as she selected the channel it was on.

"Can't say that I have. I don't recall specifics other than the guy with the stereo in the air trying to win back the girl or some shit."

“Oh, well, I hope you like it because you might be watching it a lot with me.”

“Is it your favorite 80s movie?”

“Um, no. That would be *Dirty Dancing*. Hands down,” she gushed.

“That one I’ve seen for sure.”

“You know what would be fun? We should go on an 80s movie binge to make sure you’ve seen them all.”

What had I gotten myself into? Was I about to agree to watch rom-coms from the 80s for the foreseeable future? Yes. Yes, I was. But I had a counteroffer for her. “How about for every movie of your choice that we watch, we watch a sporting event of my choice?”

“Only football?” Sarah asked.

I shook my head. “No. I like all sports: football, baseball, hockey ...”

“And you watch them all?”

“When I can.”

She thought for a moment before sticking out her hand. “Okay, deal.”

We shook on it and Skye barked as though she agreed too.

Even though I watched sports as often as I could, I didn’t catch a lot of the games because of work obligations. Maybe that would change because I was eager to spend as much time as I could with my arms wrapped around Sarah, and a movie on the TV would suit my purposes. Besides, baseball had a 162-game season.

A good thirty minutes into the film, we’d polished off a container of honey walnut shrimp, most of the Mongolian beef, and a good amount of fried rice. We paused the movie, cleaned up, and then returned to the couch, where Sarah snuggled against my side. Skye already seemed at home because she jumped up onto the other side of Sarah and got comfortable as Sarah pressed play and the movie continued.

Once the iconic scene played out where John Cusack held the radio above his head, Sarah wiped a tear from her cheek. Would I ever be that guy willing to put his ego aside, lay it all on the line, and proclaim his love for the woman he wanted more than anything? I knew I was falling for Sarah, but I wondered if what I felt was love. A part of me thought it was too soon, but I'd never felt this way for a woman before.

Even Stacey.

She and I had had an on-and-off relationship, one where we would go months without seeing each other. In the end, I tried to make it work with her because I'd thought that was what I'd wanted after observing firsthand how Brandon and Spencer were so in love. But what I felt for Stacey didn't come close to how much I yearned to be with Sarah every day. I couldn't imagine going one, two, or three months without being next to her. Without kissing her. Without holding her. So, maybe it was too soon, but did love and feelings have a timeframe?

AFTER A FEW DAYS OF VISITING SEVERAL INDUSTRIAL AND commercial locations for Club 24, I narrowed it down to a few options for Brandon and Jason to consider. Sadly that meant my days with Sarah were ending, at least until I could come back. But I didn't know when exactly that would be because it depended on the close of escrow and when the construction would start.

With Sarah sound asleep next to me in bed, I grabbed my phone to check my emails. I was still on Texas time and didn't want to wake her or the sleeping dog curled at her feet, but as I opened the email app, I saw the one I'd been trying not to think about.

"Holy shit!" I gasped and sat up, causing both Sarah and Skye to startle.

"What's wrong?" Sarah asked.

"I got the paternity results."

“And?” she probed.

My finger hovered over the email. “I don’t know. I didn’t open it yet.”

“Oh.” She pulled the sheet around her.

I took a deep breath, set my phone down, and grabbed her hand. “I hadn’t expected the results to come while I was here because the office said it could take up to ten days, but I want you to know that whatever it says, I want nothing to change between us.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll understand if you don’t want to be with me if I’m the father.” *If I was the father.* Holy shit. Was my world about to change? Was another little Montgomery going to be running around?

“Hey”—Sarah cupped my cheek—“I don’t want this to come between us. You’ve already told me you don’t want to get back with Stacey, and while I was trying not to think about you becoming a father, I have considered it. It’s not a picture-perfect storyline, but neither is my life. I’m divorced for Christ’s sake, and I don’t have a good track record with exes either.”

“Yeah, but you’re also not pregnant with his baby.”

“I know, but I really like you, Blake. If you’re going to be a dad, then I’m prepared to have that child in my life too.”

Damn, was this woman perfect or what?

“Okay.” I grabbed my phone. “Well, let’s do this then.”

I clicked on the email and immediately the words “excluded as the biological father” caught my eye. I scanned the email again and read aloud the entire sentence. “The alleged father is excluded as the biological father of the tested child. Based on the analysis of STR loci listed above, the probability of paternity is 0%.”

A weird sensation washed over me. It was a mix of joy and disappointment and one I’d never experienced before. Now

that I knew I wasn't going to be a father, I felt at ease, but the results also cracked my heart a little.

Sarah wrapped her arms around my neck. "I'm so happy for you."

"Yeah," I breathed. "Dodged that bullet."

She pulled back. "Yeah, and now you can move on with your life and not have the drama that comes with baby mamas and all that."

"Right. It's just ..."

She lifted a brow. "It's what?"

"I don't know why I'm feeling this way, but a part of me is bummed."

"Oh." She backed up as though the words hurt her.

I reached out my hand for hers. "Not because I want a kid with Stacey, but the thought of being a father isn't so off-putting."

"To be honest, I thought I'd be a mother by now. I'm almost thirty and my friends you met in Mexico all have kids. I'm the last one, so I get what you're saying, but like you said yesterday morning, I think things happen for a reason too and our pasts have led us here. I'm not saying I want you to knock me up, but I want you to know that eventually, I will want kids too."

"You have a kid." I nudged my head toward Skye as she chewed on one of Sarah's shoes.

"Oh my god!" Sarah screeched and hopped out of bed to deal with her puppy.

Even though I wasn't ready to be a father just yet, it made me feel good to know that our paths could potentially lead us to be a family, but for now, I needed to celebrate not being a parent with the woman who had cheated on me and revel in how amazing Sarah was.

STACEY

I SHOULDN'T HAVE CHECKED MY PERSONAL EMAIL WHILE AT work, but I couldn't help wondering if the paternity results were in. And now, I stared at the email and hesitated to read the answers I needed. Everything was so discombobulated in my life that I wasn't sure who I wanted to be the father.

After a meltdown at my mom's and moving out of the apartment I shared with Blake, I moved in with Molly and Theo because my job was in Houston and not San Antonio, where my mother lived. It felt as though I was going backward rather than toward the future I had been working so hard for.

Living with Molly and Theo would only be temporary because once I learned who the father was, that information would decide where I needed to live. If the father was Blake, I'd find my own place in Houston. If Eddie was the dad, then I would probably relocate to Dallas, because having to share custody with someone who lived almost four hours away wasn't ideal for anyone.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the email and read the results confirming Eddie was the father. In my gut, I'd known that would be the case, but still, seeing it on the screen made my heart race and my stomach knot because I didn't know how he'd react. As far as Blake went, the results sealed the deal that we were officially over. I had known we were the moment I raced away from our wedding, but now, knowing

without a doubt that he wasn't the father meant there was no reason for him to want to be with me anymore. Would Eddie?

I was still in love with both men, but in my heart, it was always Eddie who I loved more. Maybe it was because of our connection from when we were younger, or how we'd spent so much time together even when I was on tour with Maze. With Blake, we had gone months without seeing each other, and I didn't necessarily miss him. Maybe I should have never said yes to him when he'd asked me to marry him, but Eddie had no longer been in the picture, and I'd thought he'd moved on.

Maybe he had.

When I last reached out to him, it was only about the paternity test. I'd called, left a message, and then followed up with a text about how and where to get it done, just like I had with Blake. He had replied with just an "Okay" to my text.

Grabbing my cell, I sent a text to him.

The paternity results came in. Can we talk?

I hadn't heard from him by the time it was time to head home, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. I got into my car and drove to the apartment. When I pulled up, I realized Eddie had responded while I was driving, but it was just a simple:

Yes

He had to have gotten the results. For reassurance, he'd wanted to take the test too. What did his one-word reply mean? Was he upset? Happy?

Grabbing my purse, I got out of the car and headed toward the apartment. As I rounded the corner, I found Eddie sitting on the steps that led up to Molly's. My steps faltered, and he stood. He looked as handsome as ever dressed in a white button-up, blue tie, and black pants. If I had to guess, he'd come straight from work.

"Hi," I greeted timidly.

"Hey."

“Wow, you’re here.”

He blew out a breath. “Figured it was better to talk in person.”

I nodded. “Probably.”

“Do you want to go somewhere?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “You know, to talk in private.”

“Molly and Theo won’t be home for a while. Theo is at practice with Maze, and Molly works for another hour or so. We can go upstairs if you’d like.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” He motioned for me to lead the way.

After unlocking the door, we stepped inside and I turned on the lamp next to the couch. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Water is fine. Thanks.”

I set my purse on the dining room table and went to the kitchen for a bottle of water from the fridge. Grabbing two, I headed back toward Eddie and handed him one. I sat on the opposite end of the couch and faced him with my leg bent underneath the other.

“Can I go first?” Eddie asked after taking a swig from the bottle.

“Please,” I whispered. The vibe between us was awkward, to say the least, and I didn’t know how to start the conversation we needed to have.

“Are you keeping it?”

I balked at the question. Never would I have thought that would be the first thing he’d ask. “Yes, of course.”

“And you plan to stay here in Houston?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I was waiting to see what the results were.”

He arched a brow. “Why?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“You’ve lived in Houston this whole time. Where else would you live?”

“I might go back to San Antonio, or maybe even to Dallas, considering you’re the father.”

Eddie blinked. “You’d move to Dallas?”

“Yeah, I mean, that’s where you are and it’s your baby. If you want to be in the child’s life, then I’d move to Dallas. If not, then I need to go where my mom is.” And his dad. Our parents were still together. How were they going to react when they learned Eddie was the father?

“What about your job?”

“I’ll have to find another one wherever I end up.”

“You know”—he stood up and began pacing—“I’ve thought about this a lot. Been wondering if it would change things between us if I was the father.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ve loved you since I was seventeen, Stacey, and now you’re having my baby and not married to someone else. It’s fucking with my head, my heart, my entire being.” He ran his hand through his short brown hair. “It’s like a crazy twist of fate or some shit and I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t really know what to do either,” I cried. “You’re the one who broke up with me and left me in San Francisco.”

“We already tried to hash that out and look where it put us.” He waved in the direction of my stomach. When we had talked about him leaving me in California because he thought I had cheated on him with Blake, he’d asked me if I still loved him. When I told him I did, that had been all it took for him to kiss me and then one thing led to another, resulting in me carrying his child.

“I know, and you said it was water under the bridge.”

He stared up at the ceiling. “I need to know ...”

“Yeah?” I prompted.

He took a deep breath and met my gaze. “It was only a few months ago you admitted you still loved me. Is that still the case?”

“Yes,” I admitted softly.

Eddie dropped to his knee in front of me. “Then marry me,” he begged, and hit his chest where his heart was. “I’ve loved you most of my life, and somehow I fucked it all up with you. But I don’t want to go another day without you. I don’t want to have to go through the agony of you dating someone else—of you marrying someone else. I’m so madly in love with you and I want us to do this right. To be a family. To be together forever. I’ve been giving this a lot of thought, and even if there was no baby in the picture, I still need you in my life. So, will you? Will you marry me, sunshine?”

“I ... wow ...” Stunned, I was unable to find any words except one. “Yes.”

SARAH

GRABBING SKYE'S LEASH, I PLACED HER ON THE GROUND after getting out of my Jeep and headed toward my apartment. I'd taken her to work with me so she could get her shots and meet my co-workers. Everyone fell in love with her, and it made me feel good to have a dog again. I'd missed having a cuddle buddy, and she was already turning into one.

I let Skye go potty before walking up the stairs to my apartment, all while keeping my eyes on my surroundings. The man who had banged on my door hadn't been back as far as I knew, and I'd hoped he truly was just at the wrong apartment and wouldn't be back. Whatever the case may be, it still freaked me out, and I couldn't wait for Skye to get bigger and more protective. It was the first time I'd ever lived alone, and maybe that was why I was eager for Blake to stay. Not that I needed him, but more that without him, I felt lonely.

After unlocking the door, Skye ran in before me and I dropped her leash as she went straight to Blake. He was standing at the stove, and something smelled delicious.

"Whatcha cookin', good lookin'?" I placed my keys and purse down on the breakfast bar next to a big cardboard box.

"Tacos. Figured they would go good with apple Mezcal."

My eyes widened, and I sucked in a breath. "It came?"

Blake grinned as he held Skye in his arms and removed her leash. "It came."

I went to the box that was still taped shut. "You didn't open it?"

"Waited for you."

"Well, let's see them." Elated, I grabbed a pair of scissors from my junk drawer and sliced open the box. My smile widened as I pulled out one of the Mezcal bottles, and took in the white label with two black wolves drawn almost like a tribal tattoo. They were howling on both sides of a black crescent moon above the words DOS LOBOS in fancy lettering.

"See them? Let's taste some." Blake set Skye down and went to the cabinet where I had my glasses. It felt as though this was his home too since he knew his way around the apartment and was making dinner. And I didn't mind one bit.

"Since you were the one who made the winning cocktail, I'll let you open the first bottle and pour us some." I handed the bottle to him. Since I didn't have shot glasses, he grabbed two short drinking glasses instead.

He twisted the cap off the bottle and lifted it to his nose. "Smells like apples and tequila. Or in this case, Mezcal." He let me smell it and I nodded my agreement, then he poured us each a sip and handed me the glass. "Should we toast?"

"Sure." I smiled.

"All right. I've got one." He winked. "May all your ups and downs come only in the bedroom."

I snorted a laugh and then we clicked the glasses together. "I can agree to that."

We each took a sip. The Mezcal was smooth, slightly sweet, and somewhat tart as it went down. It wasn't like taking a shot where I needed to chase it with something. It was almost like a sipping tequila.

"Not bad," Blake stated.

"I like," I agreed.

“Then I will make us some margaritas to go with the tacos.”

“Sounds like a plan. Do I have time to shower?”

“I’d rather shower with you.”

I glanced at the skillet with the ground beef simmering. “Do we have time?”

He followed my gaze to the stove. “You know, I take that back. I have other plans for you after dinner.”

WHEN I GOT OUT OF THE SHOWER AND DRESSED IN MY PJs, Blake had made us apple margaritas and they were waiting at the breakfast bar. We each made our own tacos and then sat on my couch to chow down. I still ate on the sofa since I had yet to buy a new dining room table after my divorce.

I took a sip of the margarita, loving the crisp apple flavor we’d come up with. “This is delicious.”

“I really like it too.”

“Good thing, since we have six bottles of it.”

“Yeah. I’ll come up with more cocktails than just your classic margarita. Figured it was best to have them with tacos, though.”

“For sure. Tacos and margaritas are life.” I took a bite of the ground beef yumminess. “You know, I could get used to you cooking for me.”

“I can if you want me to make you, like, four things.”

“What are those four things?”

“Scrambled eggs, ground beef tacos, spaghetti, and my dad’s bomb chili he gave me the recipe for.”

“Then I need to get you some cookbooks for Christmas or something,” I teased.

“That will work too.”

“But you need to make me that chili.”

“For sure.”

We finished our tacos and margaritas and I cleaned up the kitchen while Blake took Skye outside to potty.

“Now, sweet thing, are you ready for the real fun?” Blake wrapped his arms around my waist, hugging me from behind and kissing the side of my neck.

“Real fun?”

“I told you I had plans for you for after dinner.”

I spun in his arms. “Oh yeah. What do you have in mind?”

“Let’s just say your clean kitchen may get dirty again.” He reached for the hem of my T-shirt and pulled it over my head. My boobs bounced since I wasn’t wearing a bra. “We should probably take your pants off too.” He bent and slid my pajama bottoms down my legs, along with my panties.

“And what about you?” I challenged. He was still fully clothed minus the shoes he’d removed after coming inside with Skye.

Blake quickly took off his T-shirt. “I’ll get there, but first, I’m having you for dessert.”

He picked me up and placed my ass on the counter that overlooked the open living room and then grabbed the bottle of apple Mezcal and salt shaker.

“What are you going to do?”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head with the details, sweet thing. You just enjoy the ride. Now lean back.”

I leaned back onto my hands as instructed and moaned as he licked my collarbone. He sprinkled some salt onto my skin and then opened the Mezcal bottle. The smell of apples and alcohol hit my nose and before I realized what was happening, Blake tilted the clear bottle and poured a stream down the center of my body.

It was cold as it cascaded down my skin and between my legs, pooling on the counter I was sitting on. I shivered and

then drew in a breath as he licked the salt and continued with his tongue the same path as the alcohol had traveled. When he got to my pussy, he sucked and my hips jerked.

Spreading my legs wide, he ran his tongue around my clit and then through my slit before fucking me with his tongue. My body came alive. I tried to hold myself up while he worked me with his mouth, but the way he was devouring me as though I was really a dessert made it impossible to keep myself up on trembling arms.

The slick counter was cold against my hot skin as I lay back, the added chill sending a shiver through my body. I moaned as Blake continued to bring me closer and closer to coming apart.

“I need to be inside you,” he said against my center.

“Yes,” I breathed, raising up onto an elbow to watch him remove his pants and boxers.

He pulled a condom from his jeans and tore it open with his teeth. As I watched him roll it on, my mouth watered to taste him, but my body ached with the need to come. I needed him inside of me too. Needed to feel his hard cock stretch me and work me until I fell over the edge and came around his shaft.

I lay back again, and he moved my hips to the edge of the counter before teasing my opening with his tip and then slowly entering me. He brought my legs up to rest against his shoulder, and the new position made it so he could go in deeper. My back arched as he hit the spot that made me see stars.

“Fuck,” he groaned and picked up his pace.

“Oh, god,” I panted and held onto the lip of the counter as he pumped into me as deep as he could go.

Over and over he hit *the* spot, taking me higher. When he cupped my breasts, squeezing and caressing each one, I came, my pussy pulsing around him and my cries of ecstasy echoing in the small apartment.

“That’s it,” he groaned and pumped a few more times until he followed me into pure bliss.

After we caught our breath, Blake took a step back, just enough to slide out of me. I sat up, wrapped my arms around his neck, and kissed him.

“Now, my turn.” I jumped off the counter and did my own Mezcal shot off his chiseled body.

A SENSE OF FAMILIARITY HIT ME AS I WOKE UP THE NEXT morning. It felt like the last morning in Cabo all over again, but this time, I wasn’t getting on a plane.

“Do you really have to leave?” I curled into Blake.

“I would stay if I could, sweet thing.”

“I know, but I hate not knowing when I’ll see you again.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Two weeks tops.”

I twirled my finger near his belly button absentmindedly until a thought came to me. “What if”—I sat up and looked at him—“I fly out to Houston this weekend, and you can show me the club and everything?”

“Really?”

“I mean, if that’s okay with you.” We’d talked about road tripping with Skye to see Aunt Deb and then his club, so I wasn’t sure how he’d feel about the change of plans.

“Hell yeah, it’s okay with me.”

“Really?” I smiled.

“Yeah, but what about Skye?”

I looked down at my puppy curled at our feet. “I’m sure I can get one of the girls at work to dog sit.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll find out, but really, I don’t think it will be a problem.”

“Okay.” He kissed me softly. “Let me know your flight info and I’ll pick you up at the airport.”

“Of course. I’ll also send you the hotel information.” I wasn’t sure how he would feel about me staying with him in the apartment he had once shared with his ex-fiancée, or how I would feel sleeping in the same bed he once shared with her, so I had to offer to stay at a more neutral location.

He blinked. “Hotel? You’re not staying in a hotel.”

I lifted a brow. “Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent.”

I would get over any issues about his ex. She was an ex for a reason, right?

BEFORE HEADING TO THE AIRPORT, WE TOOK SKYE FOR A WALK around the canyon that was a mile away from where we had watched the sunset the first night Blake was in town. Of course, I had only caught glimpses of the sky that night, but it was still memorable, to say the least.

“You’ll call me when you land?” I asked when I pulled up at the departure terminal. Blake had to go to the club straight from the airport, which sucked. He said he wouldn’t have to stay there long, given it was a Tuesday, but since he had been away again, he needed to make sure everything was in order before he headed home for the night.

“I will.”

He reached for Skye in the backseat of my Jeep, grabbing her and putting her on his lap. He gave her a hug and a kiss on the head. “I know you’re just a kid, but take care of your mommy. Okay, little one?” Skye wagged her little tail excitedly and licked his cheek. She was going to miss him too. Once Blake put Skye back into the backseat, he turned to me and pulled my head toward him, kissing me hard. As if he had to prove something to me and his tongue was the only way he

could convey it. Like every time before, he stole my breath away. “Three days apart is going to be excruciating.”

“I know.” I hadn’t booked my flight to Houston yet, but I planned to arrive Friday after work. He’d said it wouldn’t be a problem for him to pick me up, but we would probably have to stay at the club until it closed. I didn’t care; I just wanted to be with him and didn’t want to wait two or more weeks to see him again.

Blake kissed me again and then stepped out of the vehicle. “Until Friday, sweet thing.”

I grinned. “Until Friday.”

BLAKE

WHILE WAITING FOR MY FLIGHT TO LEAVE, I CALLED MY brother. I wanted to get the ball rolling on the Las Vegas location as soon as possible so I could be with Sarah. It was crazy how my world had turned around in such a short amount of time, but I truly felt as though she was where I needed to be. It all made sense the more I thought about it. I'd heard people say things like, "When you know, you know," and I finally understood what they meant.

"Hey," Brandon answered on the second ring. "What's up?"

"Waiting for my flight to head back to Houston," I replied as I looked out the floor-to-ceiling window and watched an airplane ascend into the sky. "Did you look over my email?"

"I did."

"And?" I prompted. I'd sent him an email that listed, which locations I thought would be the best for the new location.

"Jason and I were just discussing it, actually."

"Oh, yeah?"

"We're going to put in an offer on your top pick and work our way down if needed. We're happy with what you found."

“Good.” I smiled, and a sense of pride washed over me. It always felt good when my brother trusted my input. I’d looked up to him for so long that it was nice he finally saw me as someone other than a fuck up.

“I was hoping you’d let me oversee Vegas like I did with Houston,” I stated.

Brandon paused for a moment. “You want to travel back and forth?”

“Yeah, but maybe I’d live in Vegas.”

“Do you think that’s smart?” He didn’t need to elaborate; I knew he was thinking about who I used to be. The one who partied, got DUIs, and just wanted to have a good time.

“I’ll be on my best behavior, Dad,” I said cheekily. “No partying and no fucking around.”

“Is this because of a woman?”

“Isn’t it always?” I deadpanned.

“You want to move to Las Vegas for some chick you just met?”

It was fair for Brandon to assume I’d just met Sarah while in Vegas scouting locations. I hadn’t told him or anyone else about running into her in Cabo, or that we had spent that entire week together. Hadn’t bothered to tell him she lived in Vegas, or that she was the reason I had worked extra hard to find the next home for Club 24 in Sin City.

“I met her when I was eighteen,” I replied, matter-of-factly.

“Who?”

“Sarah Watson,” I answered, using her maiden name and not her married one, even though she still went by Turner.

“Sarah Watson?” Brandon questioned. “You mean Deb’s niece?”

“Yep.”

“You’re fucking Mom’s best friend’s niece?”

“Bro, I’m better than that. We’re actually dating,” I advised.

“Since when?”

“Well, if you must know. We crossed paths in Cabo when I was there on what should have been my honeymoon and we’ve been seeing each other ever since.”

He laughed. “Only you. Blake. Fuck, only you.”

“What does that mean?”

“No one else would start a relationship hours after being dumped at the altar.”

I took a deep breath so I didn’t go off on my brother. He had no idea what he was talking about. Sure, he would probably never do it, but he also said he was going to marry Spencer the moment he saw her at his gym. So, it wasn’t like he followed some dating rule book either. “Look. If it was some random chick, yeah, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, but are you forgetting I spent a summer with her back when I had to stay at Deb’s?”

“So, you rekindled some old spark or something?”

“No, but we’ve gotten to know each other over the last several weeks, and I really like her. Is that such a bad thing?”

“No, especially considering Stacey is engaged again.”

“What?” I barked, leaning forward in the chair I was relaxing in.

“You didn’t know?”

“How was I supposed to know that shit?”

“I don’t know. Figured you’d talk with her after you found out the baby isn’t yours.”

“There was nothing else for us to discuss. I’m assuming you know because she told your wife?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Stacey’s not my problem anymore, and I’ve moved on.”

“But are you happy?”

“Very,” I replied, not hesitating one bit.

“Then that’s all that matters.”

That, and I was falling in love with Sarah.

BY THE TIME I LANDED IN HOUSTON AFTER THE THREE-HOUR flight, it was after 10 p.m. I didn’t expect the club to be a madhouse when I’d arrived given it was a Tuesday night, but there was still a good amount of people in line waiting to get in as the rideshare dropped me off.

Taking my small suitcase, I went around the building to the backdoor and used my key to enter. I headed toward my small office, which I let the managers use when they weren’t on the floor. As I walked in, Frodi sat at my desk, staring at his cell phone.

“Playing that mafia game again?”

He looked up and tried to hide his phone as though I hadn’t caught him playing a game on it. “Sorry. There’s this raid—”

I held up my hand. “Everything good here?”

“Yeah. Nash is out with the flu,” he replied in his danish accent. He was a long way from home, and I had to imagine Houston was much different from the Faroe Islands where he was from. “Had to get Lilly to cover for him.”

“Hope Nash feels better soon. How long has he been out?”

“Just tonight so far.”

I nodded. “All right. Why don’t you go out to the floor and make sure everything is running smoothly?”

“Sure thing.” He stood.

“And stay off your phone until your dinner break.”

“Will do.”

As soon as he left, I grabbed my phone to send a text to Sarah. I know, I was a hypocrite. I was also the boss.

At Club 24 After Dark. You're probably snuggled on the couch with Skye. Wish I was there

I set my phone down and worked my way through orders and whatnot that had piled up in my absence. I paid some invoices and checked my emails and still hadn't heard from Sarah. It wasn't like her to not text me back and I immediately worried that something was wrong. Maybe the man who was at her door had come back. Maybe he'd broken in. Maybe he'd ...

Grabbing my phone, I dialed her number instead of texting again. It rang a few times and then went to voicemail. I tried again and the same thing. I sent another text.

Please call me. I'm a little worried

The phone on my desk rang and not my cell. Blowing out a breath, I picked it up, seeing the call was coming from the club's front entrance.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Hey, Boss. There's someone here to see you," Lilly, the door girl, replied. She was more of a bouncer too, making sure everyone stayed in check as they waited to enter the club. She was a badass and I wouldn't want to cross the chicken-raising Puerto Rican in a dark alley, that was for sure.

"Who?" I questioned.

"Said her name is Sarah."

I balked, confused about how that could be possible. "I'll be right up."

I hung up the phone. Even though I wasn't dressed to go out onto the floor since I was in a sweater and jeans, I made my way through the sea of people as I headed toward the front door.

When I got closer, I saw Sarah standing next to Lilly. She too was in a sweater and jeans, but the way the sweater slipped off one shoulder looked sexy as fuck. She grinned excitedly when she saw me, and I smiled back.

“How?” I asked, pulling her into my arms and kissing the top of her head.

“I couldn’t wait.”

I glanced down and saw her suitcase and a dog carrier and chuckled. “Well, if this isn’t some rom-com shit.”

“Yeah. I didn’t expect to race through an airport to catch a flight to follow my love interest, but here I am. With a dog. In a nightclub.”

“Next time, let’s just get you on the same flight,” I said with a wink. I wanted to kiss her, but instead, I picked up the pet carrier and suitcase so we could go somewhere private. “Come on.”

Sarah followed me through the club and back to my office. Once inside, I set her luggage down next to mine, shut the door, and locked it.

“I hope you don’t min—”

I silenced her with my mouth as I grabbed her face and pulled her against me. It had only been a few hours since I’d last kissed her, but that was too long. “I don’t mind, but you know what this means?”

“What?” She raised a brow.

“We’re about to turn this rom-com into a porno.”

SARAH

I COULDN'T BELIEVE I'D GOTTEN ON A PLANE ON A WHIM—and for some guy. But Blake wasn't just *some guy*; I was in love with him. Watching him walk into the airport after he'd said goodbye had made my heart hurt, and the entire drive home, I had tried to talk myself out of chasing after him, but I had not succeeded.

Once back at my apartment, I had looked up flights on my phone, found one that left two hours after Blake's, and booked it before throwing clothes into my suitcase. I packed in a rush, but I figured I could always buy what I needed in Houston. Afterward, I packed a bag for Skye, grabbed her carrier, and bolted out the door.

The only issue with my crazy plan was my job. Since I'd used my vacation time for Mexico, I didn't have the time off. I figured I'd call in sick for the rest of the week. They didn't know I was dating a new man, or that he had come to Vegas and stayed with me for a few days. I was walking a fine line with my career—all for a man! If something were to happen and I lost my job, I wasn't sure what I would do. I had followed Trey to Las Vegas, and now I was risking it all for Blake.

But Blake was like a drug, and I couldn't stop feeding the addiction I had to him.

That was why the next morning I woke him with my mouth.

I dragged the covers down his torso, exposing his naked, chiseled body. My mouth watered with anticipation as his perfect cock lay heavy against his thigh. Lying on my side, I reached for his shaft and leaned forward to lick his crown.

“Christ, sweet thing,” he groaned, threading his fingers through my blonde locks. “I’m so fucking happy you got on a plane.”

I smiled against his dick and then hollowed my cheeks and sucked him into my mouth. He hardened more, and I bobbed up and down his length. Swirling my tongue around the tip, I licked up the pre-cum pooling there. The saltiness reminded me of Cabo and all the time we had spent there together, laughing and having a blast getting to know each other. How putting our pasts behind us had allowed us to forget the pain we had been in. I never dreamt I would fall so hard and fast for this man, but I had.

Moving my head back, I replaced it with my hand, pumping as I adjusted to straddle his legs. I bent forward, taking him into my mouth again, licking and sucking and running my tongue down his manhood and taking his balls into my mouth before wrapping my lips around him again.

“Yeah, just like that,” he rasped.

His groans of pleasure urged me to take him deeper, engulfing almost his entire length.

“You want me to come in your mouth?” he asked. I nodded, my mouth still around his cock. My pussy throbbed with the need to be filled by him. To have him deep inside of me. To be one with him.

Blake grabbed a hold of my head with both hands, stilling me as he shot his cum down my throat. Once he was done, I sat up and wiped my lips.

“On your knees,” he ordered.

I didn’t hesitate to comply as he reached over and grabbed a condom from his drawer. Once he rolled the latex on, I

moved to the edge of the bed and he stood behind me. He spread my ass cheeks and licked my slit, causing me to let out a whimper.

“So good,” he praised and then lined up behind me. He ran the head of his dick through my arousal and slowly sank into me.

He stretched me and I moaned, clenching the bedspread beneath me and holding on as he slowly rocked his hips until he was all the way in. The throbbing of my pussy continued, needing more, needing him to go faster and deeper, and he did. Blake grabbed ahold of my hips and fucked me hard and fast, my cries of pleasure echoing in the room.

His hand ran up my back, pushing until I rested my head on the bed with my ass in the air. He leaned forward, hooking his arm around my hip to my center and finding my clit. While his finger rubbed circles against the bud, his mouth found my ear and nibbled before whispering, “I’m so madly in love with you, Sarah Watson.”

My breath hitched at his words, and my body trembled as I came. I wasn’t sure if I’d heard him right, and before I had time to question what he’d said, he slid out of me and flipped me over. Once on my back, he didn’t hesitate to slide back inside of me, spreading my legs wide and holding on to them as he pumped into me.

“You do?” I whispered.

We locked eyes, and he smiled and nodded. “Yeah, sweet thing. So much.”

“I love you too,” I said back.

He leaned forward and captured my lips with his. As he continued to rock into me, we kissed until we both came again.

Still inside of me, he rested against my chest as we caught our breath.

“Have I told you how happy I am that you got on a plane?” Blake asked.

I grinned. “About thirty minutes ago.”

ONCE WE CLEANED UP, I WENT OUT TO THE LIVING ROOM TO check on Skye in her crate. “I’m going to take her outside. Mind cooking breakfast?” I asked.

“Not at all, but first I have something to ask you.”

“Oh?” My brow furrowed.

Blake leaned against the kitchen counter and faced me as I hooked Skye’s leash onto her collar. “Would you want to go to my parents’ place for dinner tonight?”

“Oh, wow,” I breathed. I was not expecting that question.

“If it’s too soon—”

“No, it’s fine.” While Aunt Deb was best friends with Blake’s mom, I’d never met his parents before. That summer, I hadn’t been at Deb’s when they dropped Blake off, nor when they picked him up. “Do they know about us?”

“No.” He shook his head. “But my brother does. Do your parents know? Does Deb?”

“No, I haven’t had a chance to tell them yet, but I did tell my aunt that we hung out in Mexico.”

“Like I said, if it’s too soon—”

“No, I just didn’t realize this would be a ‘meet the parents’ trip’.”

“Hey.” He moved toward me and reached out his hand for mine. I took it and wrapped his arms around me. “I want you to be the last woman I bring home to meet my folks. If that’s not during this trip, then it’s okay.”

I looked up into his brown eyes. “What you said earlier was true?”

He cocked his head slightly. “You mean ‘I love you’?” I nodded, and he cupped my cheeks. Looking directly into my eyes, he said, “I love you. I love you. I love *you*.”

“I love you too, but I wasn’t sure if it was some heat-of-the-moment type thing.”

He shook his head. “Hell no. I’ve been wanting to tell you for days now, but wasn’t sure if it was too soon for you. So, maybe me telling you when I did was a heat-of-the-moment thing, but only because I couldn’t contain how I feel about you any longer.”

“I’ve been wanting to tell you for a few days too.”

“You have no idea how incredibly happy that makes me.” Blake pressed his lips to mine and Skye barked.

We stepped apart. “I better take her outside.”

“Do that and I’ll make you coffee and breakfast.”

“How did I get so lucky?”

“No, sweet thing. I’m the lucky one.”

IT HAD BEEN YEARS SINCE I’D HAD TO DO THE WHOLE “MEET the parents” thing, and I was nervous. I supposed it was normal because people didn’t want the parents of the person they were dating to think poorly of them. I didn’t assume Blake’s parents wouldn’t like me, but I still wanted to make a good impression, so I hoped I didn’t say or do anything stupid.

“I’m so nervous.” My leg bounced up and down as Blake drove us toward his parents’ place. Skye sat in the backseat of his Chevy Silverado double-cab, staring out the window at everything.

“Why are you nervous?”

“I don’t know. I mean, what are they going to think since you were supposed to marry someone else two months ago?”

“I’m sure my brother already told them we’re dating.”

I blinked. “Why would he do that?”

He shrugged. “My family probably assume I’ve gone back to my old ways and Brandon told them otherwise.”

“What old ways?”

“Partying, being irresponsible, never taking anything seriously. Shit like that.” The Blake I knew was nothing like he described. Sure, we’d had a few drinks in Cabo and Vegas, but he had never gotten drunk and acted recklessly. “And they think you’re still that way?”

He shrugged. “No, but let me tell you this. The last girl I brought home to meet my folks was Stacey.”

“I kinda figured that.”

“But ...”—he held up his finger—“that was five years ago, and I told them she was my girlfriend when she wasn’t.”

I blinked. “Why would you lie to them?”

“It was stupid. I even lied to them about her wanting to be an actress when really, she was in school for dance.”

“Seriously?” Blake came across as such a genuine guy, and everything he’d ever told me, I had believed. But hearing him tell me he lied to his parents about his relationship with his ex was a little disconcerting and made little sense. “I don’t understand.”

“I was a different person back then, and I didn’t think she and I would be anything except a hookup.”

“So why not tell them she was just a friend?”

“Looking back, I should have, but I was young and dumb. Hell, it all happened only five years after you and I met, and I still had a lot of growing up to do. I envied what Brandon had with his gyms and just wanted them to think things were good for me too. Somehow, I thought that meant lying about our relationship and what Stacey was going to school for.” He grunted a laugh. “Didn’t know she’d be a cheater, or I wouldn’t have bothered.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I never thought Trey would be a cheater, either.”

He reached over and grabbed my hand and kissed the back. “But I’m telling you all of this because I finally get to be truthful with my parents. I can tell them you’re my girl and really mean it. You’ll be the first.”

“And the last?” I winked.

“Hell, yeah.”

Once we arrived at Blake’s parents’ house, he laced our fingers together with one hand and grabbed Skye’s leash with the other and led us up the long driveway. Not bothering to knock, he let himself in and we stepped into the entry that overlooked a sunken living room. After taking off my coat, he steered me toward the kitchen, where deliciousness filled the air.

“Mom, Dad.” They turned and before he could say anything else, his mom’s eyes widened and she opened her arms.

“Sarah!” She beamed. “I’m so happy to finally meet you.”

His mom, Aimee, engulfed me in a hug and I replied, “Me too.”

Me too? Was that the right response? I was second-guessing myself as my stomach churned with my nervous energy. I wasn’t sure what to make of the conversation Blake and I had on the way over, but I kept telling myself that everything he had with Stacey was in the past. Wasn’t there some song about ‘she got the boy’ or something? Whatever it was, I hoped I got the man.

“I feel like I already know you by how much Deb talks about you,” Aimee gushed.

“Really?” We pulled apart. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Blake let Skye into the backyard and then hug his father.

“She talks about you all the time.”

“She’s the best.” I smiled at Blake, who wore a look of blissfulness as he watched me interact with his mother.

“She is and I know she isn’t feeling well, which makes me worry,” Aimee said.

“Isn’t feeling well?” I asked. When I spoke with her after Mexico, she seemed to be doing fine and said her medication was working.

“Oh, you don’t know?”

Blake draped his arm across my shoulders and brought me against his side.

“Don’t know what?” I asked, still not sure she knew my aunt had Parkinson’s. I wasn’t going to spill the beans if Deb hadn’t told her.

“She came down with the flu,” Aimee replied. “Last I spoke with her, she had the chills and everything else. Roger was doing everything he could, but she said nothing was helping.”

“She didn’t mention anything when we talked on the phone,” I replied.

“Something must be going around,” Blake interjected. “A guy at the club has the flu too.”

“Deb is a strong woman. This won’t keep her down,” Blake’s father, Robert, said and then stuck out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Sarah.”

“Likewise.” I smiled and took his hand.

“So, what’s for dinner?” Blake asked.

“Deb told me you love Greek chicken tacos. I found a recipe online and, well, I hope it’s good.” She smiled meekly.

“I’m sure it will be. Is there anything I can help with?”

“Not at all. Would you like some iced tea?” Aimee turned toward the fridge.

“I would love some.”

WE WERE ALMOST FINISHED EATING THE DELICIOUS TACOS with chicken, a whipped feta spread, and fresh onion,

tomatoes, and cucumbers when my cell rang. Usually, I wouldn't answer the call because I never want to be rude, but it was my aunt's ringtone and I figured she'd like to say hello to her friend. Plus, I was a bit worried after learning she'd been ill.

"It's my aunt," I announced, looking at Aimee.

She smiled. "Answer it."

"Hey, Aunt Deb," I answered.

"Sarah, it's Roger."

"Oh, hi, Roger."

Aimee's brow furrowed and she must have been just as confused as I was about why he was calling from Aunt Deb's phone.

"I'm sorry to have to call you, but I had to bring your aunt to the ER in San Antonio today. She's not doing too well," he advised.

"What happened?"

"She got the flu and doctors say she now has pneumonia. It's not looking good."

"Not looking good?" I repeated, not fully understanding. "What do you mean, not looking good?"

Aimee gasped, and Robert grabbed her hand. Blake reached under the table and squeezed my knee. I felt like I was going to throw up.

"I think you need to fly out here."

"I'm in Houston. I can be in San Antonio in about three hours."

"Two." Blake stood.

"Okay, sweetie. Hurry."

Hurry? Was there a chance I wouldn't make it in time? How quickly could someone die from pneumonia? I thought most people recovered from it. But then maybe her Parkinson's made it more dire.

“What’s happening?” Aimee questioned as soon as I hung up the call.

“Roger took Aunt Deb to the ER. Doctors say she has pneumonia, and Roger said to hurry.”

“Hurry? Why?” Blake asked.

“He said it doesn’t look good.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I think he means for me to say goodbye.”

He pulled me into his arms, wrapping himself around me and holding me tight. “I’m so sorry.”

“We better go,” Robert stated.

“Leave everything on the table and let’s go. I’ll make hotel reservations on the way.” Aimee walked out of the room.

Blake went to get Skye as I made my way to the front door and put my jacket on. I felt as though I was living in someone else’s body as I tried to process what was happening.

“I should call my dad,” I whispered. “You know, just in case Roger didn’t.”

“Let’s get in the car and you can call while we’re on the road,” Blake urged.

“Thank you for dinner.” I turned to Blake’s parents.

“Oh, honey.” Aimee wrapped me in her arms. “You’re welcome here any time.”

Aimee and Robert climbed into their car while Blake, Skye, and I got into Blake’s truck. None of us had a change of clothes or anything. We were just driving toward Aunt Deb.

And fast.

VISITING HOURS WERE LONG OVER BY THE TIME WE ARRIVED IN San Antonio. Roger texted me which hospital they were at and her room number.

“What if they don’t let me see her tonight?” I cried as Blake parked.

“I’ll make sure you get to see her.”

On the way, I’d called my dad, who had received a call from Roger too. He and my mom were already on the road and should have beaten us by at least an hour and a half. True to his word, Blake got us to San Antonio in two hours, breaking a few laws in the process. I didn’t care. All I could think about was the possibility of not being able to say goodbye. I hated the thought that we would arrive too late and Aunt Deb would no longer be with us.

We rushed to the entrance, leaving Skye asleep in the cab, and searched for where to go. Finally, we found the correct wing. As we approached the room number, Roger was standing in the hall. His gaze met mine, and he gave me a tight smile.

“How is she?” I asked, trying to hold back my tears.

“She’s sleeping.”

“Can I see her?”

“Of course. Your mom and dad are in there now.”

No one stopped me as I stepped into the room. Maybe that was because when someone was dying, they let you say your last goodbyes, despite the time. Would this be our goodbye? Would the woman who I had spent countless hours watching rom-coms with really be dying? Would we not have Christmas morning spiced apple cider while watching the parade on TV?

Rushing into my father’s arms, I absorbed the comfort he offered without a word. I peered into the bed where my aunt slept. She looked peaceful, and I still couldn’t believe she might be leaving us. I wished more than anything that I could make her better.

“Sir,” Blake greeted my father as I stepped over to my mom and hugged her. It hit me this was the first time Blake was meeting my parents, and it hurt my heart even more that it was under these circumstances.

“Mom, Dad, this is Blake, my boyfriend—”

“Blake?” We all looked at Aunt Deb. Her eyes were open, and she stared at my boyfriend.

“Hey, Debs.” He moved toward her and picked up her hand.

Her gaze turned to me and she gave me a small smile. I realized her lips had a bluish tint to them. “Hey, honey.”

I fought back the stinging in my eyes and the tightness in my throat as I grabbed her hand. “Hey, Aunt Deb.”

Blake’s mom came into the room as my parents stepped into the hallway. “Hey, Deb.”

“You’re all here,” Aunt Deb whispered. “This can’t be good.”

“Just came to say hi, is all,” Aimee lied. “Heard you weren’t feeling well.”

“I’ve been better.” Aunt Deb coughed, her lungs wheezing, and she moaned as though it hurt. She gasped for air, her hand clenching in mine.

“It’s okay,” I said. “You don’t need to speak.”

She turned her head to me, a tear sliding down her cheek as though she knew this was goodbye.

Blake came over to my side and placed a hand on my shoulder as I continued to fight my own tears. I was trying my hardest not to let my aunt see me fall apart because I didn’t want her to be in any more pain than she already was.

Her eyes moved up to Blake’s and she wheezed as she spoke. “Please take care of her.”

“I will,” he promised.

“I’ve always known you were a good kid,” she said. “Make her happy.”

“I plan to.” He set his hand on top of mine, which was still holding hers.

She closed her eyes and I continued to hold her hand. I watched as the gasps between her breaths became longer and longer. My parents came back into the room and my dad held her other hand. As my aunt drifted off into the afterlife, she was surrounded by those who loved her the most.

BLAKE

WHEN SARAH HAD SHOWED UP AT THE CLUB TO SURPRISE ME, I couldn't have predicted what was in store for us. Never would I have thought we'd race off to San Antonio and barely make it in time for her to say goodbye to Deb.

Deb and I had shared a special bond, one we had formed *that summer* and I'd told no one about. I hadn't seen her since my last day on the farm that summer when I'd said goodbye and thanked her for taking me in. Who knew that the next time I saw her, it would be in a hospital room, watching as she took her last breath. I wished more than anything I could have changed what had happened. Sarah's and my mom's hearts were breaking and there was nothing I could do except hold Sarah and let her cry against my tear-soaked T-shirt. My father did the same for my mom as we left the hospital in a daze.

Before we left the hospital, we told Roger we would give him some alone time at the house he shared with Deb. Then the four of us went to a department store and bought the necessities to get through the night, since we had left Houston without anything. We'd also picked up puppy food for Skye and made sure she had everything she needed as well.

The entire night, I held Sarah in my arms as she cried. I didn't get any sleep, and I wasn't sure she did either. When it came time for us to head to Deb's house, I knew in my heart it was going to be difficult to walk inside now that she wasn't

there, but we had offered to help Roger with whatever he needed while we were still in the area, and I'd do what I could. Sarah's parents were also going to come and help once we had to go back to Houston.

Pulling down the dirt road to Deb's behind my folks was surreal. Even though Sarah and I were dating, it never crossed my mind I'd be back at the farm.

"We should have stopped and got Roger some food," Sarah said, peering down the road in front of us.

"I can run out and grab some lunch."

"Thanks, but I think we should make him a bunch of meals and freeze them."

"Oh. Okay." I pulled to a stop next to my parents.

"You know, because he'll probably be dealing with a lot and—"

"Hey." I reached over and grabbed her hand. "I'll go to the store. Don't worry. How about you and my mom figure out what to cook and my dad and I will go get whatever you need?"

She nodded. "I should offer to help him with all the arrangements too."

"There will be time for that, sweet thing. Let's check on Roger and get him stocked with food. He probably hasn't had time to think about everything that needs to be done yet." I had no idea how long they'd been married. In fact, I hadn't known Deb had remarried until we were at the hospital and he introduced himself to me after Sarah went into Deb's room. No matter how long they had been together, I had no doubt this was difficult for him.

"Okay." She reached for the handle to get out. "Shit. I need to call work and change my flight and—"

"Let my mom help you when my dad and I go to the store."

"I don't know if she can do either."

“What I’m getting at is you’re not alone. Everything will be okay.”

“It’s not okay, Blake. Aunt Deb died,” Sarah bawled.

Shit. I hadn’t meant everything would be fine, but that she didn’t need to worry and shit. I wanted her to let me deal with what needed to be done. To be her strength and her soft place to land.

I reached across the console and wrapped my arms around her the best I could. “I know. That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry.”

“I just don’t know what to do,” she cried.

“I don’t think any of us do.” I pulled back and wiped a tear from her cheek. “Let’s just take it one step at a time.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

We got out of my truck; Sarah grabbed Skye on her leash. Deb’s place hadn’t changed much in the ten years I’d been gone. The apple trees stood across from the driveway with the barn that stored the harvest, and I steered clear as it made my hands hurt just looking at the fruit. Don’t get me wrong, I had a memorable summer with Deb all those years ago, but I wasn’t wanting to pick any apples, that was for damn sure.

Rounding the hood, I walked next to Sarah, draping an arm across her shoulders. My parents came up next to us and we made our way to the front door. As we got closer, the door opened, revealing a distressed Roger. It was clear he hadn’t slept by the redness of his eyes, his disheveled blond hair, and his wrinkled clothes. I couldn’t imagine the pain of losing the person I loved most in the world, and without thinking, I pulled Sarah tighter against my side.

“Hey, y’all,” he greeted solemnly. “Please come in.”

We walked inside, and Sarah let Skye off her leash.

“We’ve come to lend a hand with whatever you need,” Mom stated.

“No, please. Don’t worry about me.”

“It’s not a bother,” Dad assured him. “Let us help while we’re here.”

“Yeah,” I interjected. “Dad and I can go to the store and get food for Mom to cook.” I grinned at my mother because I hadn’t asked her if that would be okay.

“Yes, let’s do that,” my mom agreed.

Sarah said nothing, and that was okay. She was in her own world and I was going to give her time to process what had happened in the last few hours and try my best to help in any way I could.

MOM WROTE OUT A GROCERY LIST AND DAD AND I HOPPED IN my truck. I vaguely remembered where the store was and headed in that direction.

“You’re different with her,” Dad said.

I turned my head and questioned, “Who?”

“Sarah.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not quite sure, but something is different. I see it on your face and how you act toward her.”

Something was definitely different. I’d felt it when we first spent time together in Mexico. “She’s different.”

“I have to be honest, son. After that shitshow at your wedding—or what would have been your wedding—I thought you’d spiral. Start drinking heavily again. Maybe even get on a plane and leave without a goodbye like you did when you went to San Francisco.”

I lifted a shoulder and turned onto the main road that led into town. “I could have, but I think there was a reason I ran into Sarah in Cabo.”

“Because she’s the one?”

I glanced at him and nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

BESIDES THE STUFF ON THE LIST, DAD AND I GOT THE ingredients for him to make a big pot of chili. Just like the delicacies he cooked on the grill, my father’s chili was the bomb. It would also freeze well, and that was what Roger needed.

When we returned to the house, Roger and my mom were sitting at the dining room table with coffee cups in front of them. Sarah and Skye were nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Sarah?” I asked as I set a brown bag of groceries onto the island.

“She’s in *our* room ...” Roger swallowed, and closed his eyes briefly. “She insisted on picking out the perfect outfit for Deb.”

“You already planned her service?” Dad asked.

Mom shook her head. “No, but Sarah wanted something to do while y’all were gone.”

“I’ll go check on her.” I walked down the hall toward the bedroom I knew was Deb’s. It was right across the hall from the one I had stayed in that summer. I peeked into the small room and saw it had been converted into an office. Maybe Roger worked from home or Deb needed it for her apple business. When I walked in, I saw the closet door open. Stepping inside, I noticed Sarah sitting on the floor cross-legged and sniffing as she stared down at a book. “Hey—”

She looked up at me with a tear-stained face. “How could you?”

I balked. “How could I what?”

“Sleep with my aunt!” She stood and thrust the book at me.

I grabbed it and started skimming over the handwritten text and finally realizing it was a diary entry addressed to her late

husband a month after I'd left the farm ...

Dear Jeff,

I haven't been able to bring myself to tell you this yet, but I can't stop thinking about that Saturday in late July. The Saturday before the apple festival when the power went out? Remember my friend's son had to help me with the generator?

Well, more happened that night.

So much more.

You see, I haven't been with anyone since you. Didn't think I was ready, even though it's been over two years since you left. But Blake sparked something in me. He offered to help me prepare to enter the dating world again, which resulted in a bad first date with a guy who was a bird watcher. It was horrible.

After my date, everything changed between me and Blake. Sarah was gone and Blake and I decided to watch a few movies while the

rainstorm passed. The storm knocked the power out and when we got back in the house, we were drenched. He took off his shirt and ... I wanted to feel good again. To remember what it was like to be pleased. To feel lips against mine one more time. To have strong arms hold me. To not be lonely anymore ...

I STOPPED READING, KNOWING EXACTLY WHAT SARAH NOW knew, but when I looked up from the pages, she was gone.

Closing the book, I tossed it onto the floor and rushed out into the living room where everyone was. Everyone except Sarah.

“Where is she?” I questioned.

“She left out the front door. Why? What’s going on?” Mom asked.

I didn’t answer her, as I felt there was no time. The longer Sarah thought about Deb and me fucking, the worse things would get.

“Sarah, wait!” I shouted when I spotted her running down the long dirt driveway. Without hesitating, I took off after her. By the time I caught up to her and managed to grab her wrist to stop her, I was breathing hard. I took a deep breath and begged, “Stop. Please.”

“How could you?” She shoved at my chest.

“That was ten fucking years ago!” I clipped back.

“But it was my aunt,” she yelled. “How could you sleep with my aunt?”

“I didn’t plan to.” I wasn’t going to add fuel to the fire and tell Sarah that after she turned me down that first night, I got the hots for Deb. Deb and I ended up formed a friendship, but it wasn’t romantic. Like Deb wrote, our night together was to make her feel good.

“No? You just stuck your dick in her!”

“I don’t understand why you’re so mad.”

Her green eyes widened and her face turned bright red. “You don’t know why I’m so mad? You slept with my aunt and didn’t bother to tell me!”

“And what would that have done besides lead us to exactly what we’re doing right now?” I questioned. “That happened so long ago. I didn’t think it mattered.”

“It fucking matters, Blake.” She started for the house.

“Where are you going?” I threw my hands in the air.

“Just leave. You’re not welcome here anymore.”

“Are you fucking serious right now?” I argued.

Sarah spun on her heels and glared at me. “Yes, I’m fucking serious. Leave. I need time.”

“Time for what?”

She turned back around and walked toward the house again. “To think. Just leave me alone.”

I couldn’t believe what was happening. She was so angry. It wasn’t as though Deb had told her, either. But Deb was no longer with us, so I was the only one Sarah could be mad at.

Not bothering to say goodbye, I got in my truck and left just like Sarah had asked.

ON THE DRIVE BACK TO HOUSTON, IT SEEMED NO MATTER what song came on the radio, each one reminded me of my relationship with Sarah in some way. One was about a woman

asking her man if he ever missed being single or if with her was where he belonged. He told her she was the one for him. That was how I felt about Sarah; she was everything I'd ever need or want. I had no regrets about going so quickly from one relationship to another. Maybe the young and dumb Blake would have wanted to enjoy being single for a while, but that wasn't the man I'd become. As the song continued, I became even more confident that the old me—the man I had been before I fell for Sarah—belonged in the past.

When “Shameless” by Garth Brooks came on, I realized what I needed to do. I had always been able to walk away from anyone, but Sarah was worth fighting for. And I wasn't going to let something I couldn't change impact our future.

I just needed to find my old boombox at my parents' house first.

SARAH

RUSHING BACK INTO THE HOUSE, I MADE A BEELINE FOR THE room I used to call mine during the summers. It was next to the one Blake had stayed in and still looked the same, with a full-size bed and farmhouse décor. It wasn't the first time I'd hurried inside, locked the door for privacy, and cried into the pillows on the bed. I'd done it a few times during my summers here, and just like back then, I felt as though I'd been stabbed in the heart as my chest ached with the feeling of betrayal. How could Blake and Deb not tell me they had slept together? They'd both had the opportunity. I wasn't sure if I was more hurt that they kept it from me, or that they'd slept together in the first place.

The more I sobbed into the pillow, the more I kept coming back to being hurt because no one had bothered to tell me. As details from the past twenty-four hours flitted through my head, I recalled that, in the hospital, my aunt had addressed Blake first. Was there more to their relationship than what had happened ten years ago? I wanted to believe Blake when he told me what had happened between them didn't matter now, but I also remembered how he had told me he'd lied to his parents about Stacey when they had first met her. I'd thought he had matured from the boy I had known as a teenager, but maybe it was true that a leopard couldn't change his spots.

“Sarah, honey.” Aimee knocked on the door. “Is there anything I can get you?”

“No.” I sniffled.

“I fed Skye. Hope that was all right.”

“Yes, thank you. I just need some time to myself.”

“Okay, honey. We are having tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. Can I make you one?”

“No, thank you.”

“Okay. Please let me know if you change your mind.”

Did she know about her son and best friend? Did everyone know except me? Was it agreed upon to never tell me? So many thoughts raced through my head, and the one I kept going back to was wishing Blake was there with me so I could talk to him about it. He’d shared things with me about Stacey and now I wanted him to be my shoulder to cry on, but he was also the reason I had mascara running down my cheeks and staining the pillow black.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep because when I glanced through the blinds overlooking the driveway, the sky was streaked with gold and purple. I didn’t know how long Blake had been gone, but it had to have been several hours. Were we over? I’d asked him to give me time to think, but a part of me wished he had been stubborn and refused to leave. That he had fought for me, unlike he had with his ex. But Blake was good at running, so perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised.

I couldn’t bring myself to watch the sunset, so I closed the blinds and lay back down on the bed. My tears had crusted over and my eyes hurt. My heart still felt as though it had been brutally split open, leaving a jagged wound that spread anguish through my entire rib cage.

A few minutes later, I heard a vehicle on the dirt driveway outside my window. I hurried to peek through the blinds and saw that it was Blake’s Chevy Silverado, my pulse picked up. “He came back,” I whispered to myself.

Not wanting him to notice me looking at him, I pulled back from the blinds and waited, wondering if he would come to the door and ask to talk. Even though I'd sent him away, I knew getting answers to my questions was the only way to move forward. Maybe after listening to Blake, we would go our separate ways. Maybe I would forgive him. It had been only a few hours, but I loved him, and if he came back to fight for us, that meant something.

Right?

I could hear Blake's parents and Roger chatter from down the hall, and I listened closely to see if I could catch the sound of Blake entering the house. Instead, a familiar melody filled my ears.

When I heard Garth Brooks sing the words to his hit "Shameless," I sucked in a breath. I knew the country song well because it was one of my favorites.

I raised the blinds and opened the window so I could see Blake and hear the song better. As the crisp autumn air hit my face, I saw Blake standing next to his truck and holding a stereo above his head like in the iconic scene from *Say Anything*. In the movie, Lloyd Dobler had made the gesture to remind Diane Court how strong their love was, and I knew Blake was doing the same. He wasn't professing his love for me—he'd already done that—but he was using the words of the song to tell me how he felt. Knowing the song and the lyrics already, my heart began to meld back together.

He let the song play as we stared at each other. I was certain everyone in the house could hear the music blasting, but I didn't care. Garth sang about doing anything for love, and even though he valued his pride, he'd toss it aside and be shameless if necessary to prove his love. Blake was fighting for us and not letting his pride get in the way of love. He had come back here with a grand romantic gesture to show me how he truly felt.

And it was working.

When Garth sang about seeing *me* standing there and he would go down to his knees as though to beg, Blake dropped

to his, and fresh tears ran down my cheek. I tried to hold them back, because I wanted to see Blake clearly and not through watery eyes. When the chorus began about in all *his* life, he could walk away from anyone he'd ever known, but he couldn't walk away from *me*, I couldn't stop the tears from rolling down my face. The song had never impacted me as much as it did at that moment, even though I'd heard it a thousand times at least.

Blake continued to hold the stereo up and the words of the song sang about never having so much to lose and how it should be easy for a strong man to say he was sorry or admit he's wrong. That he'd never lost anything he would ever miss, but he hadn't been in love like *this*.

Even though I wanted to watch Blake the entire time he held up the radio, I also had an overwhelming desire to run into his arms.

Leaving the room, I sprinted down the hall and bolted out the front door, running straight for him. When he saw me, he placed the stereo on the hood of his truck, and a few seconds later, I jumped into his muscular arms.

The song continued to play as we kissed with the sky tinted my favorite color behind us. Once again I felt like I was living in an 80s rom-com. It was a testament to how much Blake knew about me. If he had waited a day or more and called, his grand gesture wouldn't have had the same impact because doing it right away showed me how much he really loved me.

"I'm sorry," I said against his lips.

"No, I'm sorry," he replied. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"Does your mom know?" I looked over my shoulder to see we had an audience by the front door. When they saw me looking, they quickly scurried back into the house.

"Not that I know of."

I slid down his body and onto my feet. "Come on. I want to take you to my favorite place before it gets dark."

“Will there be food? I’m fucking starving.”

I was hungry too. “Your mom said they were having grilled cheese sandwiches. We can make a couple and take them with us.”

“All right.”

Blake shut off the radio. He put it back into his truck, locked the doors, and then grabbed my hand. As we entered the house, everyone turned from the dining room table in the open living space.

“Everything all right?” Aimee asked.

“It will be,” Blake replied. “But we came for something to eat and then we’re gonna talk.”

His mom stood. “Let me make you some sandwiches, then.”

“No, I can do it,” I insisted.

“It’s not a bother, honey.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Three grilled cheeses coming right up.”

I eyed Blake with a raise of my brow.

He lifted a shoulder. “She knows I can eat at least two.”

“Okay.” I gave him a small smile. “Let me go see if there are any jackets in the spare room.”

“There should be,” Roger said.

“I have one in the truck,” Blake advised. “I’ll go grab it.”

“Okay.” Skye followed me down the hall. I picked her up, kissed her on the top of her head, and scratched behind her ears. “I can’t take you this time, but maybe tomorrow I will.”

I set her down and found a jacket for me, plus a flashlight in the closet. We might need it on the way back, depending on how long it took us to have our talk.

By the time I got back to the kitchen, Aimee was making the second sandwich. Blake came back, and we slipped on the

jackets. Once Aimee had wrapped the sandwiches in foil for us, we headed outside. The air was chilly, causing me to zip up my coat as we walked toward the barn.

“Where’re we going?” Blake asked and unwrapped one of his sandwiches.

“Have you been to the creek?”

“There’s a creek?” he questioned.

“I guess that’s a no.” I chuckled.

“I had no idea. I only knew about the lake.”

“It’s just a little fishing hole of sorts. I would go there to be alone sometimes.”

“I would have loved to fish back then in my downtime.”

“Did you have downtime?” I snorted, remembering he would wake up with the sun and go to bed way before I did.

“You were off with your boyfriend.” He stuck out his tongue and I wrinkled my nose at his teasing.

I opened the side door of the barn and we walked inside. Usually, such a space would house animals, but not Aunt Deb’s barn. She had all her apples stored in the insulated barn. “I wasn’t gone that often.”

“Pretty much,” he retorted.

I grabbed the keys to the four-wheeler. “All right. Fine. I was, but I was on summer break. Do you blame me?”

“Not at all.” He shook his head and took a bite of his sandwich. “I mean, I wonder what would have happened if you were single.”

“Maybe we would have had a summer fling.” I grimaced, thinking about that scenario.

“Or maybe it would have been more than a fling and we would be married with a million kids running around.”

“Whoa. Let’s not get crazy about the kid thing. We can start with o—” I stopped, realizing what I was about to say.

Jesus. We hadn't been dating that long, and I was already talking about kids. What was wrong with me?

Blake smirked and followed me to another door of the barn where the generator and tools were kept, as well as the four-wheeler. "We can start with one."

"Really?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Because you just had a baby scare with your ex-fiancée."

"Only because the baby wasn't planned and there was a possibility I wasn't the father."

I turned from the ATV and faced him. "You want to start having kids?"

He grabbed my hand. "I want to do whatever you want to do, sweet thing. Don't you get it?"

"Do you want to be married first, or should we try right now?" I teased.

He slowly grinned. "I'm all for practicing."

Even though we'd gotten into a massive fight that very day, we were already back to being us. However, I still had lingering questions I needed him to answer. "First, I want to talk, and then we can discuss practicing."

"All right. Are you going to let me drive?"

"Do you know where we are going?" I knew he didn't, and that was why I'd asked.

"No."

"Then no." I winked and climbed onto the four-wheeler. "Hop on."

Blake shoved the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and then sat behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I put the key in and started it up, and then drove us through the woods until we reached the creek.

The creek wasn't wide, maybe about fifty feet across, and I wasn't sure where it led. A tire swing hung over the water's

edge capable of launching a person into the water, but I'd never been brave enough to try it.

"Whenever I would come here, no one else would show up. I would think no one knows about it except someone put that tire swing here."

We stayed on the ATV, and I turned to face Blake. Taking my sandwich out of my jacket, I took a bite.

He brushed a piece of my hair out of my face. "I'm sorry you found out the way you did."

I stopped chewing for a second. He had started the conversation we needed to have, and yet I'd been caught off guard. I'd thought for sure I would have to bring it up, given the flirty banter we were having.

"Yeah." I looked down and finished my bite. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He lifted my chin so we could lock eyes. "I was worried it would cause problems between you and Deb. It was so long ago that I really didn't think it was a big deal."

"How could you not?"

He dropped his hand and shrugged. "Because of who I was back then. Hell, I tried to kiss you on the first night. I was full of teenage hormones and after not getting any for several weeks, your aunt and I just ... you know."

"So, it meant nothing to you?"

He blew out a long breath and I swallowed, suddenly not hungry. "It meant nothing in the sense you're talking about. Debs and I really connected *that summer* because I had no one else to talk to. She was going through a hard time getting back into the dating world. I was a horny eighteen-year-old, and when the time came, I went for it. Before yesterday at the hospital, the last time I had seen or spoken with her was the day I left this farm and went back to Houston."

"I understand, but you said we should take a road trip to visit her. Did you plan to just pretend it didn't happen?"

"Yeah," he said right away.

I blinked. “Really?”

“Because it was so long ago and no romantic feelings were involved. I really didn’t think it was an issue.”

“Just another notch on your belt?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It wasn’t like that either. She ...”

“She?” I prompted after he didn’t continue for several moments.

He swallowed and then blew out another long exhale. “She wanted to feel good and, well ... I helped her do that.”

I stared off into the distance, contemplating what I needed to do. I had two choices: forgive him for not telling me and move on, or continue to be mad about something that happened long ago and couldn’t be changed. It wasn’t ideal to know that the man I loved had slept with someone I held in high regard. Someone I loved like a mother. But it happened over a decade ago before Blake and I meant anything to each other.

“Okay.”

He raised a brow. “Okay?”

“I want us to move on from this.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I can’t change it and I kinda understand why you never told me. It was just a hard pill to swallow, made worse by the way I found out, and the timing of it all.”

“I know.” He reached under me, picking me up with his powerful arms and moving me so I was straddling him. “I truly am sorry for withholding this, and I promise you that I will try never to make you cry again.” He placed a soft kiss against my lips, then I leaned on his chest until the dark settled in around us.

“We better head back,” I said.

“Yeah. I’m sure my mom is worried sick.”

“Probably.” I stood on the foot railings of the ATV and turned back around to drive us back to the farm. “Oh, and how do you think your mom will handle the news that you slept with her best friend?”

“I’m not going to tell her. That would be horrible.”

“What if she sees the journal?”

“Then I guess I’ll deal with it *if* that happens.”

When we got back to the house, no one said anything about Blake sleeping with my aunt. It made me wonder if Roger had found the journal and hid it so Aimee wouldn’t see and know her best friend had betrayed her trust. Nothing was ever said and the memory of how awesome my aunt was lived on.

BLAKE

ABOUT A MONTH LATER ...

WE'D DRIVEN TO SAN FRANCISCO FROM VEGAS TO CELEBRATE Thanksgiving with my brother and his family. My parents had flown in and were staying at Brandon and Spencer's while Sarah and I had booked a dog-friendly hotel in the city.

It seemed like forever ago that I had been chasing my dreams of owning a nightclub and now, with the help of my brother and Jason, I was co-owner of three Club 24 locations. Well, the third was waiting for escrow to close on a building Club 24 had purchased in Las Vegas. I was also packing up my shit and moving in with Sarah.

Wanting to show Sarah the first club I opened, we headed to Club 24 after having dinner in Chinatown. Having been a bartender for most of my adult life, I knew the day before Thanksgiving was the busiest. Also called Black Wednesday, it was widely known that bars would be swamped with an influx of out-of-towners and the start of a four-day weekend.

"Are you ready to get your dance on?" I asked as I drove Sarah's Jeep toward the club.

"I'm excited to see your club."

Vegas was going to be different and wasn't going to have a nightclub at all. After a long chat with Brandon and Jason, we decided that location would be their signature gym only. Las Vegas was famous for its party spots, and we didn't want to compete. After realizing I wanted to be a part of the Vegas location because of Sarah, Brandon and Jason decided to let me get it off the ground alone. I'd more or less done that with Houston, but they had overseen the gym aspect of that location. This time, I would be making most of the decisions and my role would have nothing to do with being a nightclub owner.

“And I can't wait to see you out on that dance floor. Remember what happened last time I watched you dance?” I asked and kissed the back of her hand I was holding.

I was referring to when we were in Cabo and crashed the wedding. When the groom had approached me, I'd thought the jig was up. It was, but he also didn't give a shit. He'd asked my name, where I was from, and when I explained I was a club owner, he told me he'd hit me up if we ever opened a location in New Mexico.

As Levi and I had been shooting the shit, I'd glanced over at Sarah and my world had changed.

I wasn't sure if it was because we only had a few hours left in Mexico and I didn't want to miss my chance to be with her or what, but at that moment, I had to have her. Had to know what her mouth felt like against my lips. What her kisses tasted like. What her moans sounded like. How she looked naked and spread out beneath me. What her hair smelled like as I buried my face in the crook of her neck before kissing my way across her entire body.

And starting that night, I'd experienced everything and then some. Repeatedly.

“How can I forget?” Sarah asked. “It was the best sex of my life.”

“Damn straight.” With my ego inflated, I continued toward the club. Until I realized ... “Wait. Are you saying sex hasn't been that good since?”

“Meh.” She shrugged.

“You better take that back.”

“Maybe.” She stuck out her tongue.

I was seconds away from telling her where she could stick her tongue when her eyes widened. Before I could ask what was wrong, I was jolted in my seat. The sound of metal on metal pierced my ears, and a sharp pain exploded in my head before everything went black.

SARAH

ONCE MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, I STARED UP AT THE STARK white ceiling. Tilting my head, I noticed an IV stuck in my hand, and an oxygen probe on my finger. It took a moment for me to recall what had happened.

In and out of a daze, I remembered help coming and pulling me from my Jeep. When I looked over at Blake, he was slumped against the airbag and covered in blood.

So much blood.

I had tried to fight, to go back to the car and help him, but resilient arms held me back. The next thing I remembered was waking up in the hospital room.

Glancing to the door, I saw Aimee standing just outside, talking to another woman I didn't know. They were whispering, and it looked as though they both had been crying.

My heart sank.

Where was Blake?

“Aimee,” I whispered, but it was barely audible to my own ears. My throat was scratchy and sore. I swallowed as much saliva as I could and tried again. “Aimee.”

She turned my way, and when she saw me looking at her, her eyes widened and then she rushed toward me and grabbed my hand. “Honey, you're awake.”

“Where’s Blake?” I continued to speak softly.

Fresh tears slid down her face as her lips quivered. My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach and tears pricked my eyes as I assumed the worst.

“No,” I exhaled.

She shook her head and covered her mouth with a trembling hand as she looked away.

The lady beside her spoke. “Hi, Sarah. I’m Spencer. Brandon’s wife.” I glanced down at her obvious baby belly, and recognition hit me. I hadn’t met Brandon and Spencer yet since we hadn’t planned to go to their house until the following day. “I’d hoped we would meet under better circumstances.”

“Me too.” I gave a tight smile.

“But, unfortunately, Blake is ...” I waited for her to continue, as it seemed she had trouble saying the words. “He’s in a coma.”

“What?” I gasped.

“He lost a lot of blood in the accident and he had swelling in his brain. The doctors put him in a medically induced coma to give his brain time to heal.”

“Will he be okay?” Tears spilled over my lids and down my cheeks.

“They aren’t sure.”

“They aren’t sure?” I repeated.

“From what they told us, they will know more when he wakes up.”

“So, he will wake up, then?”

“We hope so.”

They hoped so? I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. How could Blake not be okay? He was strong and fit and the love of my life, but in an instant, he might be taken from me?

I wiped at my tears and Aimee spoke again. “Let me go find your doctor, honey. I’m sure she wants to know you’re awake.”

“How long was I sleeping?”

“It’s been about twelve hours,” she replied.

My eyes widened. “Twelve hours?”

“I’m sure it’s the pain medication, honey.”

“Yeah, but Skye. I need to go get her.”

Aimee patted my leg. “Brandon took care of her.”

“How?” How did his family know where we were staying? How did they get into the hotel room?

“Blake had told us which hotel y’all were staying at. Brandon went and checked y’all out of the hotel and took Skye to his house.”

“Niner loves her,” Spencer added.

“Niner?” I asked.

Spencer smiled warmly. “Our golden retriever.”

“Oh,” I breathed. Skye had made her first friend, and I hadn’t been there to see it. “Thank you.”

“Let me get your doctor.” Aimee turned and walked out of the room.

“Can I get you anything?” Spencer inquired.

“Water, please.” I tried to sit up and Spencer used the buttons to raise the back of the bed and then adjusted the pillows to help prop me up before grabbing the water pitcher off the rolling tray and filling a cup with water. I took a sip of the cool liquid from a straw and it instantly soothed my throat. “Do you know anything about the accident?”

Spencer sat in the chair beside my bed. “The police didn’t tell us much other than an apparent drunk driver ran a red light and hit your vehicle on Blake’s side.”

“How bad is he really?” Since Aimee was out of the room, I hoped Spencer would be honest with me if they had more

details on Blake's condition.

"We really don't know," she answered. "But he'll pull through."

"I hope you're right." I frowned.

"Me too."

A moment later, Aimee walked in with a nurse. "Hello, Sarah. I'm going to check your vitals, and Dr. Ames is on her way."

"I'll step out into the hall with Aimee. Do you need anything?" Spencer asked.

I shook my head. "I'm okay. Thank you."

She left, and the nurse did as she said and entered the data into the computer. A few minutes later, a woman in a white doctor's coat entered.

"Good afternoon, Sarah. I'm Dr. Ames. How are you feeling?"

"Surprisingly, not too bad."

"That's the morphine." She looked at the computer, and then turned back to me.

"Oh, that makes sense."

"So, we wanted to admit you to make sure that the baby was okay—"

"Baby?" I blinked.

The doctor paused. "You didn't know?" My eyes widened and I slowly shook my head. "When you were brought into the ED, we ran blood tests to determine if you were pregnant or not before we worked on you."

I stared at her, not sure what to say. Blake and I had used condoms every time we'd had sex. How was I pregnant? Was one defective and we didn't know? Had one broken and we hadn't realized? I knew they weren't 100% effective, but hearing I was pregnant threw me for a loop.

“But like I was saying, everything seems fine with your pregnancy. There’s no internal bleeding and your vitals are perfect. We only kept you for observation, so let me get your discharge papers going and we can get you out of here. You should expect some aches and a little pain, but we’ll prescribe you a non-opioid to help that is safe for you and your baby. We don’t want you on the morphine any longer since you are doing so well.”

“Okay. Can I see my boyfriend?”

“Yes, of course. I can have a nurse take you to ICU.”

“Can I stay with him?”

She cupped my shoulder. “I think that can be arranged.”

ONCE I WAS DISCHARGED, A NURSE HELPED ME INTO A wheelchair and took me to Blake’s room. He was lying in bed, hooked up to several machines and had a breathing tube in his mouth. My heart ached as I took in the man I loved. He was always strong to me, but now he looked fragile, as though the slightest touch could shatter him into a million pieces. His head was wrapped in a white bandage, and cuts and bruises covered his face and every inch of skin I could see of his neck and arms.

“You can sit here,” the nurse said as she scooted a chair next to Blake’s bed. “I’ll need to take the wheelchair back.”

“Yes, of course.”

She helped me transfer seats. “Can I get you anything before I leave?”

“I’m okay, thank you.”

“I’ll ask the nurse to order a lunch tray for you. You probably don’t feel like eating, but you should. For you and the baby.”

Right. I was eating for two. “Thank you.”

She left, and I moved the chair closer to Blake so I could grab his hand. I held on tight as I spoke to him, believing he could hear me. “You need to pull through this, baby. I can’t lose you.” I paused as tears stung my eyes. “Our baby can’t lose you.”

I laid my head on the bed and held his hand for what felt like several hours. Before visiting hours ended, I traded off with his parents and brother, who I finally met. The hospital would only allow one visitor at a time, and once his family saw him, I was able to make a bed on the small pull-out couch. I slept on it for three days, refusing to leave Blake’s side.

Spencer brought me clothes to change into, as well as toiletries and my phone. I called my parents and told them I was okay, but Blake was in a coma. They offered to fly out to California, but I explained it was okay because there was nothing they could do. I promised to keep them updated. A nurse let me shower in a family locker room of sorts. When Blake’s family came to visit, they brought Skye with them, so I could visit with her outside. She appeared happy and each time would lick my face to show me she missed me as much as I missed her. I bet she missed Blake too.

I did.

I missed his smile that always made my stomach do somersaults, and the flirty banter we always seemed to have. I longed to snuggle with him on the couch and watch movies or even something sports related. But most of all, I missed his touch. I wanted him to wrap me in a hug and never let go.

During his morning rounds, Blake’s doctor came in as he did every morning I’d been sleeping at the hospital. “Good morning, Sarah. How are you today?”

“I’m okay.”

“I wanted to let you know we’re going to try to bring Blake out of his coma—”

“Really?” I perked up.

“Yes, the swelling has reduced dramatically and we’re going to stop the sedative and take the respirator out. I can’t

make promises, but we are confident in his prognosis and feel this is the best course of action to allow his body to heal on its own.”

“How long will it take for him to wake up?” I sat up straighter.

“Anywhere between twelve to seventy-two hours.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

“I wanted to advise you, and please let the Montgomerys know this too. Given he suffered trauma to his brain, he might be confused at first. He might not remember certain things or even people for some time.”

“Amnesia?” I whispered.

“Yes.” He nodded. “There’s a chance.”

“What if he remembers nothing?”

“Let’s wait and see how he does once he wakes. I just wanted you to be aware of it so you wouldn’t be alarmed at first. Initial confusion is to be expected given that he has been unconscious for a few days and will still be on some pretty strong pain medication.”

“Thank you.”

“Great. The anesthesiologist will be here soon to get started on reversing the sedation.”

AFTER THE DOCTORS STOPPED THE MEDICATION KEEPING BLAKE in a coma, there was nothing to do but wait. One hour passed, then two, then five. I stared at the clock, watching the minutes tick by, but I wouldn’t leave because I didn’t want to miss the moment when his eyes opened.

That night, I slept hunched on the edge of his bed, my hand in his as I waited, and waited, and waited.

I’d lost track of how many hours it had been when, finally, I felt his hand twitch in mine.

I leaned up, my heart racing as I waited for his brown eyes to open. When they did, I smiled at him and he grinned.

“Hi,” I whispered.

“Hi,” he choked out.

I sucked in a small breath as I realized his throat was probably sore, so I stood to get him the ice chips a nurse had left. “Suck on this,” I said, and slid an ice cube into his mouth. After a moment, I asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Confused.”

“Confused?” I questioned.

“Yeah. Who are you?” He looked me up and down, arching a brow.

My heart stopped, and I swallowed, remembering the doctor had mentioned Blake might have some *temporary* memory loss. I grabbed my phone and pulled up my pictures. The first one was taken the night of the accident. It was of us in the hotel room taking a selfie in the hotel’s mirror.

“I’m Sarah. Your girlfriend.”

“Sarah? As in Deb’s niece?”

So, he remembered my aunt. I knew his long-term memory was better than his short-term memory, so since we didn’t have a relationship ten years ago, I wasn’t mad that he remembered my aunt over me. He had spent way more time with her then. “Yes.”

“And we’re dating?”

“We’re more than dating.” I grinned.

“What do you mean?”

“Let me get a nurse and tell them you’re awake, and then I’ll tell you a story about how you’re going to be a father.”

EPILOGUE

BLAKE

ABOUT EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER ...

WAKING UP FROM A COMA WAS WEIRD.

I had a smokin' hot chick tending to me as though I was in some sort of dream. I didn't know who she was until she told me her name, and even then, I didn't recognize the woman she had become. When she said we were dating, I knew I had to be dreaming. Never in my life would I have thought I would date Sarah Watson.

And then she explained how that came to be.

And that we were going to have a baby.

Me, Blake Montgomery, the guy who thought he'd never get married and have kids, was going to be a father.

But the more she told me of our story, the more I recalled. It took some time, but after a few months of therapy, I remembered it all—the good, the bad, the unforgettable. Today would become another remarkable moment because that beautiful goddess who had stayed at my bedside after I woke from my coma was going to become my wife.

“I can't believe Blake Montgomery is getting married!” Jason boomed as he entered the guest house at Sunset Farms.

About a month after the accident, Sarah received a call from a probate attorney who wanted to go over her aunt's will with her. Deb had given Sarah her farm. After a few more months, we made a deal with Dos Lobos to provide them with apples for their new infused Mezcal brand. We renamed the farming business Sunset Farms.

Roger wasn't homeless, though. Sarah offered to let him stay in the house while everyone figured their shit out and, in the end, Roger moved back to San Antonio where Deb had met him. Sarah quit her job in Vegas. The new Club 24 there opened, but instead of living in Sin City, we moved to the farm and Sarah opened a veterinary hospital in the small town we now called home. I still traveled between San Francisco, Las Vegas, and Houston, but I was never gone longer than a few days because the thought of being away from Sarah and our son killed me.

The kicker to my entire story was that our son arrived on the 4th of July. I never told anyone the significance of that date because, in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter. But a part of me found it comical that the same holiday that drove Stacey out of my life was the same one that made my world complete.

Well, at least until I put a few more babies in Sarah.

"You said that before," I deadpanned as he sat on the couch.

"Yeah, but this time, it's really going to fucking happen."

"It sure the fuck is," I agreed.

A knock sounded on the front door, and Brandon opened it. Spencer was on the other side, and even though I knew I wasn't in a déjà vu moment, I still held my breath as I waited for her to speak.

"Sarah is ready."

I walked toward the door. "Then let's go."

OUT BY THE MANMADE LAKE, WE'D SET UP THE WEDDING SPOT. Rows of cross-backed chairs lined a white carpeted walkway that ran toward an arbor with pink roses and the lake in the background. By the time I made it down to the shore, the sun was turning the perfect shades of orange and pink with a touch of blue. My mother held our son, Maverick in the front row. Before I took my place to wait for my bride, I grabbed him and kissed the top of my ten-month-old's head.

"He's doing okay?" I asked and hugged her with one arm.

"Perfect."

"Are you ready for a fifth grandchild?" I grinned.

Brandon and Spencer had their twin girls, Kendall and Kira last summer. They had their hands full with their three kids, but it didn't steer me away from wanting to have more of my own.

"Is Sarah pregnant again?" Mom gasped and then rubbed a hand over Maverick's head.

"Not yet." I winked.

Skye raced over from where my father had been holding onto her leash and nudged my leg. I bent down and patted her head, picking up her leash so she wouldn't run off. She was a great big sister, always making sure Maverick had a cuddle buddy since I stole their mom for my own. She, too, loved living on the farm where she got to run around looking for trouble. We didn't let her wander alone, but she still had a sense of freedom.

I hugged my father, and he said, "Today's the day."

I smiled. "Today *is* the day."

Through the difficulties of chasing my dreams, I never realized all roads would lead to the girl who was the first woman ever to reject me. Once the wedding started and Sarah walked down the aisle on her father's arm, I knew the chase was worth it.

The End.

Want Brandon and Spencer's story? Grab *Where I Need to Be* now. You can also keep reading for sneak peek.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kimberly Knight is a USA Today Bestselling author who lives in the Central Valley of California with her loving husband, who is a great *research* assistant, and young daughter, who keeps Kimberly on her toes. Kimberly writes in a variety of genres including romantic suspense, contemporary romance, erotic romance, and paranormal romance. Her books will make you laugh, cry, swoon, and fall in love before she throws you curve balls you never see coming.

When Kimberly isn't writing, you can find her watching her favorite reality TV shows, including cooking competitions, binge-watching true crime documentaries, and going to San Francisco Giants games. She's also a two-time desmoid tumor/cancer fighter, which has made her stronger and an inspiration to her fans.



WHERE I NEED TO BE

CLUB 24, #1

CHAPTER 1

WHEN LIFE HANDS YOU LEMONS, THEY SAY TO MAKE lemonade. Well, life just handed me a whole lemon tree.

Three weeks ago, I felt as though nothing in my life could go wrong. I was in Hawaii with my best friend—and roommate—Ryan, her boyfriend, Max, and Travis, the man who I'd thought was the love of my life.

Travis and I met almost two years before at a New Year's Eve party. Max had just made partner at his law firm, so he threw a huge party at his house to celebrate his promotion and ring in the New Year. Travis was an attorney at the firm as well, and I would like to say it was love at first sight, but looking back, it was never love. I was instantly attracted to Travis. He had short brown hair, green eyes, and a sweet, innocent, charming side to him. A side that opened doors for me, pulled out my chair, and even cooked and cleaned up after himself. It had taken us a few dates to actually click, and I thought I had met the one.

Wrong.

Little did I know that when Travis said on our vacation that he was getting texts from work, he really meant texts from Misty about what she couldn't wait to do to him when he was back home. A week after we got home, I'd discovered TravAss having a nooner with his secretary, Misty when I brought him a surprise lunch.

“All right, Spence, it is time to get your *ass* off the couch and start acting like you have a life again,” Ryan boomed as

she stormed into our house stomping on the hardwood floors with her heels. Ryan's parents owned the home and rented it to us because living in San Francisco was expensive, especially a two bedroom house and Ryan nor I could afford to do so on our salaries without them giving us a deal on rent. It was our graduation present for graduating from USC.

She stopped walking when she reached the couch—the couch which was growing accustomed to my daily and nightly ritual of sulking and had formed the perfect indentation of my butt.

“You've been moping around here for two weeks, and I'm no longer going to let my best friend waste her life away over a guy.”

“Go away!” I shouted at her as I stuffed my face with a spoonful of mint chocolate chip ice cream. “I'm fine.”

“Really?” she questioned and crossed her arms.

I rolled my brown eyes that I knew were rimmed red from my nightly tears. “Yes, really. Tomorrow night I won't be here. I'm going to scope out Club 24, that new gym that opened near my office. My boss is writing a story about it for our website, and she asked me to use the free two-week membership pass we got to do research and get the low-down so she can use it in her article.”

For the past year, I'd worked as an executive assistant to the CEO of a start-up internet company based out of San Francisco called Better Keep Jogging, Baby or BKJB for short. Our company was dedicated to providing fitness and nutrition information to the world. Hence, why we were doing a story on the new gym in town.

“Spence, you better or I will kick your ass when you get home and drag you to the gym with me on Tuesday morning. You need to get out of this house and more than only going to work.”

Ryan was right. I needed to stop moping. I needed to stop caring that Travis broke my heart and I needed to do it after I finished my ice cream. My mom always told me that no man

was worth my tears. But, after dating someone for almost two years, aren't you allowed a few tears and sulking after you walk into his office and find him banging his secretary on his desk? I had just wanted to surprise him and take him to lunch. I didn't realize he had a surprise for me, too.

And I knew Ryan's threats of waking me up early and dragging me to the gym were true because we'd known each other forever. We met our freshman year of college at UC Santa Cruz nine years ago when we were eighteen and had been each other's ride or die ever since. I'd learned the hard way that her threats were really promises because the first time during our freshman year when I didn't believe her, she told Evan Connor that I had a crush on him. Since that day, I realized if she threatened to do something, she meant it.

"All right, all right, I'll go pack my gym bag, *after* I finish this bowl of ice cream."

MY MONDAY WORKDAY DRAGGED ON AND ON, AND ALL I wanted to do was go home, get in my pj's, and watch a reality singing competition. When five o'clock rolled around, I had half a mind to bypass the gym and do precisely that, but I remembered Ryan's threat, and I sure as shit didn't want her waking me up at five in the morning to go to the gym before work. Regardless, it was part of my job, and at least my boss had promised me extra vacation hours for doing this for her.

I needed a new gym anyway because I used to go to the gym with my ex, Travis, or as Ryan liked to call him now, TravAss. There was no way I was going to step foot in that gym because I never wanted to see him again. Thankfully, Club 24 was an up and coming chain that had opened over a month ago and was close to both my work and home.

After I signed in, changed and made it to the floor, the gym was packed with the usual after-work crowd. I scanned the area, and somehow there were two treadmills open next to each other. Claiming one of them for myself, I popped in my

earbuds and started to walk briskly for my warm-up. Listening to music while running always seemed to clear my head, and right now I needed to let my mind go numb. I needed to forget TravAss and his cheating ways and start getting my life in order. My mom and Ryan were right, I didn't *need* a man. I just wanted one because ...

Well, because a girl has needs, and her battery operated boyfriend doesn't give hugs.

After running for five minutes, I thought I was going to pass out. I envisioned myself rolling off the treadmill as I had seen a few times on reality workout shows. That was all I needed with this packed gym.

I slowed the treadmill back down to walk for a few minutes to catch my breath. Shortly afterward, I noticed that someone had stepped onto the treadmill next to me. I glanced to my right to give a polite smile, and that was when I noticed *him* for the first time.

Trying not to get caught staring, I eyed him as I pretended to look around the gym, but really I was trying to get a better look at what the *gym* had to offer. The fine drink of water was about six feet tall, appeared to be around my own age of twenty-seven, had chestnut brown hair that was just long enough to have a messy spiky look, broad shoulders, and—*oh wow*. He had a smile that made my heart skip a beat.

Of course, he caught me staring, but I quickly reached for my phone and texted Ryan: *OMFG, I have my very own Gideon Cross at the gym. Hot guy running on the treadmill next to me! :)*

Ryan: *Jealous! I want all the details TONIGHT.*

When I looked into the mirror in front of me, I noticed that my face was bright red either from being exhausted on the treadmill or from being caught checking *him* out—probably a mixture of the two. My breathing had returned to normal, so I increased the speed on the treadmill back up to what I considered an energetic pace and started jogging again.

After fifteen minutes of jogging—and a few covert glances to my right—I couldn't take anymore. I stopped the treadmill and wiped it down. When I backed off the machine, I couldn't help myself. I peeked at *his* ass. *What a perfect ass.*

Taking a few steps toward the locker room, I glanced over my shoulder to find him staring at me. *Holy shit.* Our gazes met, and he gave me that heart-stopping smile he'd flashed when he first got onto the treadmill. More a smirk than a smile, but it still made my heart skip a beat.

I had a feeling I was going to like this gym.

RYAN WAS SITTING ON THE COUCH WAITING FOR ME WHEN I walked into our house. “I ordered Chinese. It will be here in ten. Go shower and then we can veg, and you can tell me all about this hottie.”

“There isn't really much to tell,” I replied as I kicked off my shoes by the front door.

“Anything is better than nothing. I've been with Max for three years. I need to live the single life vicariously through you now.”

“Gee thanks.” I rolled my eyes.

“Hurry and go shower,” she shooed.

I hurried to do just that because I had to admit, I was excited to gush about the hottie at *my* new gym.

AFTER GETTING OUT OF THE SHOWER, I SMELLED THE AROMA of the Chinese takeout Ryan had ordered coming from the kitchen. “What's on the menu tonight?” I asked as I rounded the corner and started opening the Chinese take-out boxes on the breakfast bar.

“Only our favorites—Kung Pao chicken, broccoli beef, fried rice and cream cheese wontons with sweet and sour sauce.”

“You know the way to my heart,” I teased.

After I scooped everything onto my plate, I turned to grab two wine glasses from the cabinet behind me. I poured us each a glass of wine and then we retreated to the living room where we sat down on the floor next to the coffee table. Ryan forked a piece of broccoli and bit into it with a crunch. “All right, spill.”

I paused to dip a wonton into the sweet and sour sauce before stuffing it in my mouth. Savoring the creamy filling with a bit of tangy sweetness, I licked my fingers and sighed in contentment. “Like I said, there isn’t much to say other than he’s hot as fuck. I was dreading my time there while running on the treadmill until I looked into the mirror ahead of me and saw *him* running beside me.”

“What does he look like?”

“Well, I’d say he’s about six foot, around our age, with kind of short light brown hair. You know, enough to hold onto while he’s between your legs. And a smile ... Man, that smile makes me melt. I couldn’t stare long enough to get a good look, though. I just hope he’s there again tomorrow.”

Ryan continued to quiz me, but as I had told her repeatedly, I had been at the gym for less than an hour and hadn’t even spoken to the guy.

After polishing off all of the food, and watching a two-hour episode of our favorite reality singing competition that was on three nights a week, I was beat. I walked into the kitchen and put our dishes into the dishwasher before returning to the living room to say goodnight. “All right, I’m going to call it a night. I’ll see you tomorrow when I get home from the gym.”

“Wait, we forgot about our fortunes.” Ryan tossed a fortune cookie to me.

Not only did we sometimes play the lotto numbers on the fortunes, but it was also tradition to add in bed at the end and giggle like little girls.

“What does yours say?” I asked after reading mine.

“Courtesy is contagious ... in bed.”

“I bet Max agrees,” I teased.

“Yeah, he does.” She nodded with a smirk. “What does yours say?”

“Be prepared to receive something special ... in bed.”

Ryan snatched the fortune out of my hand. “I bet that hottie at the gym has something to do with this.”

“Yeah right, I’m sure I will never get up the courage to talk to him *if* I ever see him there again.”

“Uh huh. If you don’t talk to him by the end of the week, I’m going down there.”

Knowing Ryan and her threats, I hoped something did happen before she took control because I didn’t need her embarrassing me—again.

TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY, I DIDN’T SEE *HIM*. I WAS STARTING to think that I would never see him again, but when I walked into the kickboxing class on Thursday night, *he* was in the second row.

I was running a little late, so I stayed in the back of the class, which gave me the opportunity to stare at this perfect ass in his basketball shorts. During our cool down, the instructor asked us to partner up so we could work on our abs by doing crunches.

When I glanced around the room, *he* was looking at me with that smile I remembered from Monday. He didn’t make a move toward me, and I didn’t move toward him, though I badly wanted the guts to say something. Before either of us

could, the woman next to me offered to be my partner, and I'd lost my chance.

After the class ended, I headed to the locker room to grab my things. Just as I was about to enter, I heard a man's voice say, "Excuse me," and my heart stopped. But when I turned around, it wasn't him.

"I think you forgot your towel."

Disappointed that it wasn't my hottie who had stopped me, I thanked the guy, then hurried into the locker room to change and head home.

FRIDAY NIGHT I HEADED STRAIGHT HOME AFTER WORK. IT HAD BEEN a long day, and all I wanted was to take a long bath, heat up a Lean Cuisine, and watch a chick flick.

I was halfway through *Serendipity*—one of my go-to movies—when Ryan stormed through the front door. She and Max always made Friday night date nights, and she'd spend the entire weekend at his place.

"Hey, what are you doing home?"

She didn't answer as she started taking off her shoes. I looked at her more closely and noticed that she had been crying, so I quickly jumped up to give her a hug. "Oh my God, Ryan! What's wrong?"

She accepted my hug and took a minute to collect herself. Sitting down with me on the couch, she hugged her knees to her chest and tried her best to talk through her tears, her breath hitching every few words.

"Max and I went out to dinner, and we started talking about eventually getting married—you know I've been hinting at a ring for months now. We were talking about what kind of house we'd buy together and how many rooms we'd need, and I said we'd need at least four bedrooms. Then he asked why we would need four bedrooms because it's not like we were going to have kids or anything." I knew Ryan had always

pictured a life living in the suburbs with a white picket fence, a loving husband, a dog, and at least two kids. Like me.

“And I said, ‘What do you mean we’re not having kids?’ Then he said that he works sixty-hour weeks and there was no way in hell he’d have time for babies. He just wants to spend his spare time with me, and he’d rather be relaxing in Cabo than changing dirty diapers.”

“I thought you and Max already talked about this and that he’d told you that he did want kids?” I asked, rubbing her back lightly to comfort her. “But hold that thought for just a sec. I’m grabbing some mint chocolate chip ice cream.” I jumped up to grab the carton from the freezer and a spoon for each of us. We always kept the fridge stocked just in case we had a stressful day as this was our go-to ritual for moments of crisis like this.

Ryan shoved a big bite of ice cream into her mouth before replying. “Well, apparently he changed his mind. Maybe he was just saying that to get me into bed. I don’t know. He said that he can’t ever see himself being tied down with *rugrats*.”

“I’m so sorry, Ry. I know how much you really want kids. Maybe he’ll come around in time?”

“Fuck that, Spence. I broke up with him,” she snapped.

“You did what?” My mouth dropped open in shock.

“Why should I waste any more time on someone who doesn’t want what I want?”

She was right, but she had just broken up with him, what, thirty minutes ago? I knew she was madly in love with him, so no way had she given this decision enough thought.

“Don’t you think that was maybe a little hasty? I mean, I know how much you love him. Maybe he just needs a little time to get used to the idea that it’s a deal breaker for you if he doesn’t want to have kids. Give him a chance to change his mind or think about it more seriously. Maybe you could try going to counseling together?”

Ryan’s shoulders slumped, and she bit her lip uncertainly. “I don’t know, Spence. Do you think I fucked up by breaking

up with him?”

I took another bite of ice cream and sighed. “I just know how good you guys are together, and I think you could have put more effort into trying to work it out first.”

“Maybe, but I was just so mad. It felt like he’s just been lying to me all this time.” Fresh tears burst into her eyes as she tossed her spoon on the coffee table.

Putting the spoon in the container, I hugged her tightly again and then pulled her off the couch to march her to the bathroom. “What you need is a long, hot shower then crawl into bed and sleep on it. You’ll think more rationally and feel better in the morning after a good night’s rest.”

“Like I can sleep,” she muttered, but she did as I suggested and turned the shower on.

“You know I’m here for you if you need me,” I replied and closed the bathroom door.

After my movie was over, I headed to my room, but first, stopped at Ryan’s door, wanting to check on her. As I leaned my ear close to the door and heard her crying, my heart ached for her. Ryan had always been tough, but even tough people needed hugs. I wanted to go comfort her but decided I would let her have some alone time so she could process everything. In the morning, I would start my best friend therapy for her like she had for me when *TravAss* broke my heart.

Ryan and Max were perfect for each other. Max could deal with Ryan’s crazy and Ryan understood how much time he needed to flourish in his career. Plus, they were super cute together. Now I just needed to figure out how to get them on the same page about taking the next step in life.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE UP EARLY SO I COULD COOK Ryan’s favorites for breakfast: chocolate chip pancakes and bacon. Just as the bacon finished, Ryan walked into the kitchen with puffy eyes from obviously crying all night. It

reminded me of how I was two weeks prior. Maybe there was something in the water at the law firm Max worked at?

“Sit, I’m making your favorites.” I motioned the kitchen tongs I was holding in the direction of the breakfast bar.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Too bad. I got up early just to make you a special breakfast.”

“Fine, you know I can’t pass up bacon.”

“That’s my girl.” Setting her plate on the breakfast bar I added, “You know what? No more moping around thinking of the men in our life. Let’s go to Vegas on Friday and enjoy a girl’s trip.”

Her brown eyes widened. “Oh my God, Spence, let’s do it.” Ryan was always up for Vegas. I knew I wouldn’t need to ask her twice.

It was just the thing we both needed—a mini-vacation to process everything that had happened over the last month. If Ryan still wanted Max back when we got home from Vegas, then operation Get Max Back would be in full force.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEXT WEEK FLEW BY. AT THE GYM, I SAW MY HOTTIE A few times, but he just smiled at me, same as he did every time he saw me. Maybe he was just being polite. I had already given up any hope that he would ask me out, and I was too chicken to say anything to him. Call me old-fashioned, but I believed the guy should make the first move. Besides, I'd given him plenty of flirtatious smiles to let him know I was interested, and thankfully, Ryan had forgotten her threat of taking control of my dating life because of her own.

On Friday after work, Ryan and I headed to the airport. "I can't wait—long drunken nights followed by tanning by the pool during the day. This is going to be a blast." I took a sip of my iced latte as we walked toward our gate.

"I know. What do you want to do first?"

"I don't know ... Let's see what clubs we can get into tonight with those free passes they give out on the Strip."

Ryan and I were no Vegas virgins. With it being only an hour and a half flight from SFO, we usually went to Vegas at least once or twice a year, or maybe more.

As we approached our gate, I noticed *him*. My free arm and hand had a mind of their own as they launched out and grabbed Ryan's arm.

"Ow! What the hell, Spence?"

"Holy shit, the guy from the gym is sitting over there," I hissed quietly.

“Shut up. Oh my God, are you serious? Where? Which one?” Her head swung around to look for him.

“Dude, don’t make it so obvious.” I pinched her arm to make her stop looking. “Look casually. He’s by the window between the guy and girl.” I nudged my head in their direction. Of course, at that moment *he* decided to look up and caught me staring at him. Without skipping a beat, he flashed me that heart-stopping smile. I felt as if my legs were going to give out on me at any moment.

“*Damn,*” she said, dragging out the word. “He is hot, Spence. And I think he’s going to Vegas, too.”

“Seriously?” My pulse jumped as I thought of the possibility of us seating next to each other on the plane.

“Well, it looks like he’s sitting at our gate.”

I was starting to feel giddy, but then I saw him smile and dip his head to listen to something the girl next to him was saying. *Please tell me that’s not his girlfriend.*

My heart began to sink, but I couldn’t sit at the gate with him and kill myself wondering if he was taken for the next hour.

Sighing, I tugged on Ryan’s arm. “Let’s go grab a drink at the bar.”

I needed more than coffee to get me through the night.

WHEN WE BOARDED THE PLANE, I SAW *HIM*, BUT I WASN’T sure if he noticed me because Ryan and I sat in the back of the plane and he was toward the front. If I wasn’t so shy, I might have approached him and struck up a conversation. *Yeah, right.* Who was I kidding? During the flight, I wondered where he was staying and why he was going to Vegas, but also scolded myself for wondering because none of that mattered if he had a girlfriend.

We landed in Vegas around eight. *He* and his friends got off, and by the time Ryan and I exited the plane, I didn't see them. Once Ryan and I made it to our hotel, we spent the next thirty minutes getting ready to go out by changing our clothes and freshening up our makeup. We decided to change into short skirts with sparkly tops and strappy high-heeled sandals that were sure to make our feet hurt from all the dancing, but we didn't care. We were in Vegas to party.

When we were finally ready to head out to the Strip, we set out to find a club to let loose in. We knew if we showed some skin, we would get a lot of attention from guys and hopefully score some free drinks. It's not like we were looking to hook up with random men, but we wanted to have a good time and dance, and buying drinks in Vegas clubs was the fastest way to empty a girl's bank account.

We walked down the Strip soaking in what some people called Disneyland for adults. It had been a few months since Ryan and I had last been to Vegas and it felt good being back, soaking in the lights, the heat, and being in a sea of people all wanting to have a good time.

Ryan and I finally found a guy who was passing out club passes, and he handed us two for Lavo at The Palazzo. Thankfully, we were able to skip the long line and get in for free. When we made it into the club.

The bar was packed, but I was able to nudge my way between people and ordered two redheaded sluts. "I'm going to need at least one more of these before I'm able to get on the dance floor," I yelled so Ryan could hear me over the loud music, and she nodded in agreement.

We quickly drank our shots, and then I turned around to order another round. Instead, the bartender handed me two more before I said a word. "This is from the gentleman over there." He nodded toward the other end of the bar. "The one in the black shirt."

I quickly turned my head to see what nice guy had bought us a drink. My eyes widened when I realized they were from

him. I turned back to Ryan, slapping her arm to get her attention. “Holy shit, Mr. Hottie just bought us a drink.”

“Who?” she said as she scanned the room.

“The guy from the gym. What do I do? Oh my God, what do I say? Maybe he doesn’t have a girlfriend after all.” I was starting to freak out a little. He bought me a drink which meant that I had to make the first move to talk to him.

“He obviously has a thing for you. Go thank him for the drinks.”

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and turned to go over and thank him, but he was gone. *What the fuck?* He was there one second and gone the next. I could have sworn he was standing there. I scanned the room that was packed to the brim, but I didn’t see him.

My face fell. “Ahh, Ryan, he left.”

She shrugged. “Weird. Oh well, drink up so we can dance.”

We clicked our glasses with a quick cheer, threw our shots back and made our way onto the dance floor. It was lit with colorful strobe lights surrounded by cushioned booths on the outside edges and bodies moving to the beat of the music that pumped through the speakers.

We had been dancing for at least half an hour with different people, and I was just about to leave the dance floor for a quick break to rest my tired feet when I felt someone start dancing with me from behind, placing his hands on my hips. Ryan turned and opened her mouth as though she was about to say something to me, but instead, her eyes widened. At that moment, I knew who I was dancing with, and desire overtook my emotions. I had waited almost two weeks for *his* touch. Fantasized about it when all I could do was think of him and his smile when I tried to fall asleep at night.

The music pounded in my head as his arms wrapped around my waist from behind, pulling me against him, the hard muscles of his chest pressed against my back. His hips

moved against mine, and with his hard length pressing into my ass, I could feel how much he wanted me.

I wanted him just as badly.

Jeremih's hit *Down on Me* featuring 50 Cent played as our bodies moved with the music. I reached up with my hand, held onto the back of his neck, and slid my fingers through his hair. He pulled me harder against his erection, and all I could do was close my eyes and enjoy the ride.

Our hips rocked and swayed to the song, as I ground my ass into him. He felt good. Real good. Better than I thought he'd feel and I wasn't only talking about his hardness against me. The reality was better than my fantasies too.

As we continued to move to the beat of the song, I felt his face bury in my hair as his lips press against my neck lightly sending tingles down my entire body. Moisture starting to build between my legs, my heart started beating faster, and my breath caught.

The strobe lights flashed over the dance floor, reflecting off a rotating disco ball, the bass of the music thumped in my ears. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion as I focused on the words being sung and the way this guy was dancing behind me.

Just as the song ended, the DJ started playing the next song. It was one of my favorites: a remix of Alex Clare's song, *Too Close*.

It was slower than the song before and instead of staying the way we were, he spun me around so that his leg fit snug between mine. As he looked down on me, his mocha colored eyes locked with my brown ones and I realized I still didn't know his name, but I didn't care. The guy I'd been fantasizing about had me in his embrace and was giving me the *ride* of my life.

I'd heard once that you can tell how a person is in bed by the way they dance and if the way we were dancing was any indication, I knew he'd rock my world.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I ran my fingers through his silky hair again and then left them around his shoulders as we moved to the beat. His hands slowly slid down my back and cupped my ass as we rocked, swayed, and gyrated to the pounding music. The friction caused my *very* short skirt to rise up my thighs and give the front of my panties contact with his jean-clad leg. I didn't care because it was still only him and I in my lust haze.

His fingers tightened against my ass as he pulled me even harder against him, causing my clit to rub in the perfect spot. My heart raced, my back was covered in sweat, and my panties dampened more while my center throbbed with an almost painful need for more pressure. I couldn't believe the intensity of the feelings I was experiencing there in public with him, surrounded by what I knew was a club full of people. I didn't want the song to ever end as I was lost in the moment of imagining it was only us on the dance floor. There was no Ryan or anyone else for that matter next to us. Just him and I in our own bubble knowing that at any moment, I was going to come apart on his leg.

And I did.

Before I realized it, my pussy spasmed and I came, jerking forward to lean my head against his chest to muffle the moan that escaped my lips as I climaxed. His hands grasped my ass tighter, and he kept me pressed hard against his leg. Our bodies continued to sway to the music while the sensation raced through me and I tried not to collapse in the middle of the dance floor.

If he had asked me to go up to his room at that moment, I would have said yes. I had never hooked up with a stranger, let alone in Vegas at a club. I had never had sex in public, never had an orgasm in public for that matter.

I didn't care.

At last, we slowly stopped dancing. He was still pulling me hard onto his leg and his eyes locked with mine. He gave me his smile I remembered so well. I was trying to relax and let my heart return to normal, but looking into his eyes only

made it race more. I still couldn't speak—could barely breathe. A few seconds later, the song ended. He bent down, nuzzled my neck, and I could feel his warm breath against my skin as he whispered, “Thank you,” and then walked away.

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